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The Racialized Welfare Discourse on Refugees and Asylum Seekers: The Example of “Scroungers” in Italy

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Abstract: The rise of anti-immigrant racism over the past two decades has taken place through multiple mechanisms and processes, including the resurgence of welfare racism, which has been re-functionalized towards refugees and asylum seekers. As a key weapon of today’s sovereignism and white supremacism, the “return” of welfare racism is intrinsic to the rise of neo-liberal racism and is an integral part of a global process of erosion of social rights, weakening of social citizenship, and dismantling of the welfare state. Welfare racism—a combination of racial discrimination in the welfare system and racialized welfare discourse—operates through discriminatory laws and measures related to social benefits and through public discourses depicting refugees, immigrants, and people of color as parasites and scroungers sponging off the welfare state. The resurgence of welfare racism in the last decade has seen the specific spread of welfare racism against refugees and asylum seekers as part of the dual war on asylum and on the welfare state. This article examines the ideological-discursive dimension of welfare racism (that is, the public discourses, rhetoric, and images), first analyzing the development, dimensions, and characteristics of racialized welfare discourse more generally, then focusing on racialized welfare discourses about refugees and asylum seekers in contemporary Italy. It explores the arguments and conceptual metaphors of the racialized welfare discourse on asylum seekers, revealing the devices and dynamics at play in the construction of the refugee as a “scrounger” and welfare abuser. Furthermore, it highlights the consequences of racialized welfare discourse on public policies (particularly on social policies and welfare controls), on migration policies (particularly on immigration controls and internal controls), and on the relationship between citizens and migrants, receiving societies, and newcomers.

Keywords: welfare racism; discrimination; migration; refugees and asylum seekers



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1. Introduction

The last decade has seen an increase in the numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Europe, alongside a strong resurgence in racism. This resurgence, which began more than twenty years ago, has taken place in several forms according to the contexts and circumstances, but is mainly characterized by bitter anti-immigrant racism.

The rhetoric and targets of anti-immigrant racism are manifold (Eastern Europeans, young “second-generation” immigrants, migrant care-workers, Chinese people, foreign school students, and so on), but it has three main forms and objects: Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism; Romaphobia and anti-Roma racism; the criminalization of undocumented people, particularly of refugees and asylum seekers—on the basis of Afrophobia.

The spread of anti-asylum seeker racism has taken place in the context of harshening of migration policies, of a “war on migrants” and a “war on asylum”, enacted through multiple mechanisms, including the re-functioning and re-directing of welfare racism against refugees and asylum seekers. As a key weapon of sovereignism and white supremacism, the sharpening of welfare racism is intrinsic to the rise of neo-liberal racism and is an integral part of a global process of weakening social rights, erosion of social citizenship,

and dismantling and privatizing the welfare state. Alongside such a “return” of welfare racism, in the last decade, welfare racism against refugees and asylum seekers was forged and has been particularly widespread—as an essential part of the dual “war on asylum” and “war on the welfare state” (Burnett 2015).

Welfare racism has a practical, material dimension related to the discrimination and differentiation produced by state provisions and an ideological-discursive dimension concerning public rhetoric, discourse, and images. This article¹ examines the latter through the targeted literature review supplemented with empirical evidence linking historical and modern discourses. The article first explores welfare racism and racialized welfare discourse more generally and then focuses on racialized welfare discourse on refugees and asylum seekers in Italy through analyzing state provisions, public speeches, and comments posted online under newspaper articles.

Materials and Methods

For this study, we used two research methods and various types of documentation. The first method was the literature review on welfare racism and racialized welfare discourse to search for publications in the main bibliographic databases (Scopus, WoS, and SSCI) and information in the gray literature (reports and administrative documents). The second was an analysis of articles and posts published in Italy in 2015 (during the “crisis of migrants”) in both traditional and digital media that contain racialized welfare discourses. These articles were collected by scouring the web without setting objectives in terms of exhaustiveness and representativeness, using keywords such as “Migrants”, “Refugees”, “Asylum Seekers”, “Reception System”, “Welfare”, and “Assistance”.

2. Understanding Welfare Racism and Racialized Welfare Discourse

2.1. Welfare Racism

Welfare racism—a combination of racial discrimination in the welfare system and racialized welfare discourses—operates through discriminatory laws and measures related to social benefits at the national or local level, practices enacted by public bodies and officers, and public discourses by representatives of institutions, political parties, and social groups depicting refugees, immigrants, and people of color as parasites, leeches, and scroungers sponging off the welfare state².

Welfare racism has a long history, being present at the birth and throughout the development of a number of Western welfare systems in the 20th century (Fox 2012; Perocco 2022; Ward 2005; Williams 1989). Among the welfare state’s many roots are those of colonialism, racism, and sexism, which have continuously conditioned welfare policies towards refugees, immigrants, and people of color. Together with the welfare state’s imperialist premises, it has influenced the welfare state’s establishment and development (Balibar 1991; Ginsburg 2004; Lewis 2000; Solomos 1988).

To take a closer look at welfare racism, we focus on the United Kingdom³, where the welfare state was first founded. The first signs of welfare racism emerged at the beginning of the 20th century (particularly against refugees), although it should be noted that the initial poor laws were much more focused on class than race and made little distinction between the internal or external “undeserving” (Humphris 2022). Bearing in mind the specificities of the case, this analysis allows us to outline the general features of welfare racism, also with respect to the two aforementioned dimensions.

For Williams (1987), the link between racism and social policy was inherent to the formation of the welfare state, which developed in a context of imperialism that “places racist ideology and practice as an unsurprising outcome of the dominant characteristics of the welfare state” (p. 4). This link was forged through two channels: social imperialism (Semmel 1968) and immigration control. In relation to the latter, for Cohen (1985, pp. 88, 89) in the early 20th century, racism, nationalism, and imperialism influenced public policies towards refugees and immigrants through a two-pronged approach: immigration policy characterized by the restriction of arrivals and internal controls; and social policy

characterized by welfare reforms to the benefit of citizens and welfare restrictions to the detriment of immigrants.

The author underlines that the 1905 Aliens Act introduced a selective and punitive migration policy aimed particularly against Jewish immigrants, who were largely refugees. The social policy and public discourse at the time defined them as destitute and needy, burdensome, socially costly, and, above all, “undesirable”. Those who lacked the economic autonomy and financial resources to look after themselves and their families were considered undesirable, and in the case of illness or infirmity, they were seen as a burden on state finances and public resources. In addition to refusing entry to these undesirables and denying them access to the welfare system, the Aliens Act granted the Home Secretary the power to deport or repatriate those without means of subsistence who were housed in unsanitary and overcrowded conditions⁴.

In addition to these draconian immigration rules, there were also restrictive welfare rules. Social reforms in 1906 restricted refugee and immigrant access to social benefits, declaring them ineligible on the basis of various immigration and nationality criteria. Establishing the link between immigration status and welfare entitlement, these reforms led to the exclusion of the aforementioned groups from the 1908 Old Age Pensions Act and the 1911 National Insurance Act—the two pillars of early 20th-century British social reform. The former required the beneficiary to be a British citizen and to have been resident in the country for at least twenty years; the latter (in the part related to health insurance) initially required British citizenship and residence in the country for at least five years (Cohen 1985, pp. 84–85).

In the inter-war period, the government enlarged and strengthened the welfare system, but only for white British people. In the name of efficiency, eugenics, and the nation, the link between a person’s immigration status and their benefits entitlement was reinforced, becoming a central element of social legislation at both local and national levels. At the same time, there was also a tightening of the link between immigration controls and internal controls (Cohen 1985, p. 87). Examples of these include: the 1919 Old Age Pensions Act introduced the distinction between British-born citizens (who had to have been residents for at least 12 years) and naturalized citizens (who had to have been residents for at least 20 years); in 1919, some of the unemployment benefits of the National Insurance are linked to the British citizenship, thus excluding immigrants; in 1921, the Minister of Labor extended the unemployment benefit by 6 weeks (in addition to the original 16) but only to British nationals; the 1925 Widows, Orphans, and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act introduced the criterion of continuous residence; and in 1919, the London City Council refused to give scholarships to foreign-born children and in 1925 proposed excluding foreigners from public housing.

The progressive restriction of citizenship and/or residence, the basic criteria for benefiting from the welfare system, added to the exclusion of refugees and immigrants. This process of exclusion—based on combining punitive migration policies, selective social reforms, and welfare racism—was accompanied by tight controls on the requirements and status of foreign applicants, who were systematically suspected of fraud and of being ineligible for support without entitlement.

Therefore, in the first decades of the 20th century, welfare racism was a structured element. It was principally based on the link between immigration control, immigration status, and welfare entitlement (Hayes 2002). Such a link was a key feature of British immigration control throughout the 20th century—so much so that policy of immigration control was often enacted in the name of defending the welfare system (Gordon 1986; Mynott 2002).

This link persisted after the Second World War, particularly to the detriment of Black people, who were subjected to a discriminatory social security system (Gordon 1986). For example, Jacobs (1985) points to systematic racial discrimination in the public housing sector, resulting from a mixing of politics on race, empire, and the welfare state. The initial arrival of migrants to the country in the 1950s coincided with serious housing shortages

as a result of the war, and soon these shortages were blamed on the migrants. The focus of the media and parliament was on controlling the immigration of black people, despite there being a much greater number of European immigrants. The two main themes were revising the 1948 Nationality Act to curb the immigration of black people and the idea that problems in housing, welfare, employment, and crime were being caused by “too many Black immigrants”. The main popular images of the time were that black immigrants did not work but relied on benefits, that they were unfairly given housing at the expense of white people, and that they were guilty of sexual misbehavior. Here we see the link between colonialism and new racism towards black immigrants transferred onto the welfare state: Caribbean and African people arrived in Britain from countries that had been colonized by it. The racial doctrine, which was a crutch of colonialism, officially declared the inequality of races and black people’s inferiority. The process of the racialization and social construction of “inferior races” was based on painting them as lazy, stupid, and childish, thus in need of Western intervention (Basso 2016; Fanon 1956; Gliozzi 2000; Mosse 1978; Stannard 1992). These same discourses were translated into welfare racism that labeled black migrants as “slackers” and “backwards”.

In the decades following WWII, immigration rules were aimed at preventing the arrival of immigrants who were potential beneficiaries of public funds. Public discourse and political debates on immigration focused on the (alleged) abuse of the social benefits by black people, while social policies disadvantaged them in accessing the welfare system. The early 20th century idea of repatriating immigrants who relied on National Assistance remained. For example, in 1950, the government considered the possibility of deporting immigrants who were involved in industrial unrest, convicted of serious crimes, or were claiming National Assistance, thus equating social struggles and criminal offences with claiming benefits (Gordon 1986, p. 25). Here we see a reciprocal process: immigration control mechanisms allowed social benefits to be refused, while the welfare benefits system itself was also a form of immigration control (Gordon 1986, p. 31).

Discourses on welfare fraud committed by refugees and immigrants were quickly formalized into immigration and internal controls. From 1949 onwards, the government issued numerous restrictive measures concerning access to the National Health Service and National Assistance (Cohen 1985, p. 88). The debate leading to the 1962 Commonwealth Act focused on the supposed abuse of the welfare system by immigrants from the Commonwealth and the colonies and the consequent need to protect the health system and deny them National Assistance. This meant that those who were potential beneficiaries of the welfare system were denied entry to the country. The 1971 Immigration Act stated that dependents applying for entry had to prove that they would have no recourse to public funds (Gordon 1986, p. 25). The 1985 Immigration Rules reinforced this, particularly affecting overstayers, undocumented migrants, and engaged couples that had come to the country to marry. In 1988, the government introduced a further requirement to the 1981 Nationality Act: those who wanted to enter the country to reunite with their spouse had to prove that they did not need state benefits. This complex of laws, orders, regulations, and administrative practices—relating to both immigration rules and welfare rules—meant that black people’s experience of the welfare state is essentially negative, showing how their oppression was embodied in welfare policy (Williams 1987, pp. 11, 26).

In the 1990s, asylum seekers became the next target of welfare racism. They were subject to an aggressive press campaign portraying them as scroungers. The media contributed to the image of the bogus asylum seeker entering Britain to abuse the welfare system (Lynn and Lea 2003; Sales 2002). Based on the argument that welfare provisions represent a pull-factor attracting asylum seekers to Britain, in the 1990s, a number of legislative and policy measures were aimed at making Britain unattractive to them. The 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act was the first in a series of measures to limit asylum seekers’ rights to social benefits, including housing and employment. The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act introduced further restrictive measures, including the elimination of (cash) subsidies

for housing and living costs through the introduction of weekly food vouchers. Similar policies were implemented in the following decades and are still in place to this day.

2.2. *The Racialized Welfare Discourse on Migrants and Refugees*

The racialized welfare discourse (Brown 2013) is an essential component of welfare racism, constituting the ideological-discursive dimension fundamental for justifying and legitimizing punitive measures or creating the enemy. Although the benefits and social groups at which racialized welfare discourse is targeted have changed over the years, its leitmotifs have remained more or less constant. Above all, there has always been an element at its core: the suspicion of welfare abuse, at the basis of an ideology of suspicion, and a corresponding pedagogy of suspicion.

We can group racialized welfare discourse's most common arguments and statements into certain thematic strands, including: *worklessness* ("these people ask for assistance and are living in poverty because they are slackers and backwards"); *abuse of the welfare system* ("they are professionals in receiving welfare and in victimhood, getting much more than they are entitled to"); *taking advantage of the West* ("they prefer to laze about on state subsidies and live off us thanks to our do-gooding and humanitarian values"); *protecting the welfare system* ("we must protect the welfare state from these predatory animals and safeguard the state coffers"); *protecting citizens* ("restrictive measures against immigrants are needed to protect our citizens so that they are not discriminated against and do not go hungry—the latter are the real victims of those ravenous wolves"); and *links with the securitarian discourse on immigration—law and order* ("they keep coming because the controls are too lax"). Racialized welfare discourse and securitarian discourse often go hand in hand, supporting each other by calling for punitive migration policies and welfare restrictions.

These statements are like old wine in a new barrel, good for all seasons: they could have been made by a British politician in the early 20th century, an Australian official in the 1990s, or a Polish sovereignist today. However, the fundamental refrain of yesterday's and today's racialized welfare discourse, which coincides with the core of colonial ideology, has remained unchanged: the laziness and fecklessness of the colonized (yesterday) and asylum seekers (today).

However, today's racialized welfare discourse is in some ways different from the past. These include the strong link with neo-liberal ideology, which has a marked anti-welfare stance and whose rise has been a key factor in the revival of welfare racism (Grdešić 2019; Kundnani 2021). The re-functionalization of racism in the new global context has rekindled welfare racism, and the rise of neo-liberal racism has relaunched and renewed racialized welfare discourses—which do not present themselves as racist discourses; indeed, sometimes they disguise themselves as anti-racist.)

In addition, these include an increasing fear that the welfare system could collapse and that public resources are insufficient for citizens—in a time of economic crisis and general dismantling of welfare systems. This fear concerning the sustainability of the welfare state, knowingly fueled by the entrepreneurs of racism, has taken hold in the working classes, in a context of exponential growth in poverty, inequality, and social polarization; this fear refers to the link of racialized welfare discourse with the rise of the paradigms of fear (Furedi 1997; Glassner 1999; Wodak 2015) and structural precariousness in contemporary society.

Another common claim is that the social expenditure for immigration is higher than the economic contribution made by immigrants—that is, that immigrants take more than they give in terms of public resources. The unconditional acceptance of this argument, which is anyway false,⁵ is often used to propose and implement welfare restrictions, as well as to set citizens against immigrants, who are blamed for reductions in their social rights and the erosion of welfare systems, despite the fact that this process has been going on for at least three decades.

By turning reality on its head, the racialized welfare discourse hides the social roots of social insecurity and mass impoverishment by blaming them on asylum seekers and migrants. In this context, governments feel legitimized in enacting anti-migrant measures.

They even claim that they are forced to adopt such restrictive measures because “the people ask us because they feel insecure”. Through adopting measures of exclusion and social control, securitarian policies channel the unease produced by the growth of social insecurity into the (false) idea that insecurity comes from below, thus directing it against migrants. Using that slogan—where people have been made insecure by neoliberal policies—this situation is translated into measures that trick the national citizens with the conviction that they enjoy privileged treatment by the state.

Thus, racialized welfare discourse draws its arguments from doctrinal racism, translates them into institutional racism, and spreads among the population in the form of popular racism. Under the banner of “locals first”, institutional racism translates into popular racism, which attacks the use of social support and public resources by immigrants, defining them as welfare scroungers. Within these processes, there is a dark game at play: the racialized welfare discourse—through the use of keywords such as “laziness”, “immorality”, “misuse”, “abuse”, and “fraud”—appeals to the working class and its material interests, calling on them to lash out at immigrants for undermining the welfare state. The racialized welfare discourse urges the native population to keep immigrants away and keep a close watch on them. However, as well as targeting immigrants, the racialized welfare discourse also targets the mass of the population (which is understood as a wild rabble guided by base instincts) as well as the welfare state itself (which is considered to be a poorly functioning behemoth that needs to be shrunk if not destroyed).

Last, but not least, another key theme of the contemporary racialized asylum seeker discourse is the link with securitization discourses in the name of protection against terrorism, with the suspicion that terrorists use asylum as a cover to enter Western countries. Duffield (2007, p. 214) noted that after 9/11 there was a fusion between external discourses on military interventions and internal discourses and discussions on multiculturalism and citizenship, creating an overlap of issues related to international security architecture, immigration, and internal social cohesion.

As a result, the racialized welfare discourse has a huge influence on public policies, in particular on social policies and welfare systems, but also on migration policies, contributing to their tightening⁶. We will now look at these issues in relation to the contemporary Italian context.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. The Italian Example

In the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, Italy transposed international asylum legislation into national law but only vaguely defined the legal status of refugees and asylum seekers.

According to international and national legislation, in Italy, anyone fleeing (in fear of) persecution, torture, or war can ask for protection from the Italian state, even if they have entered the country irregularly, also without documents. In other words, the legality or not of a migrant’s entry into the country does not affect their application for international protection. Furthermore, there is no time limit within which the application has to be made; applications for international protection can also be presented several days after the manifestation of the will and cannot be rejected or excluded from being considered simply because they were not submitted promptly. The request for protection can be made anywhere: at sea, at the border, on a ship, in an immigration center, or at the police station. After requesting to apply for international protection, the relevant police station issues a document certifying the request and the date of the appointment for the application. From that moment on, the asylum seeker is administratively and legally present on Italian (and/or European) soil.

The aforementioned procedure refers to the formal legal framework on asylum, but in reality the concrete application of the legislation on asylum takes place in a different way, in which arbitrariness, discrimination, and a downward trend prevail—phenomena that are accompanied and legitimized by racist and anti-refugee discourses of politicians,

mass media, and “entrepreneurs of racism”. Below we summarize the Italian legislation on asylum produced at the time, showing its increasingly restrictive tendency.

Law 563/1995 institutionalized the administrative detention of migrants arriving on Italian shores without clarifying the legal basis, duration, and conditions of detention. It also created a model of first reception based on large centers near disembarkation areas. Law 189/2002 contravened the right to asylum and, through the “Regulation on Procedures for the Recognition of Refugee Status” (Presidential Decree 303/2004), established seven “Centers for Identification” in which asylum seekers are detained.

In this context, two reception models for refugees and asylum seekers emerged (Della Puppa and Sanò 2021): (1) a securitarian and segregationist model, based mainly on control, physical and social separation, and concentration in large, mostly isolated centers; and (2) a widespread model characterized by the relocation of asylum seekers in small numbers in local areas, with the involvement of municipalities and the non-profit sector, and social inclusion projects. The first model is based on “Extraordinary Reception Centers” (CAS), which are the standard way in which migrant reception is organized. The CAS are managed by private entities that access funds allocated by the Ministry of the Interior through public tenders. The CAS are required to spend about EUR 35 on each guest per day, of which they directly receive EUR 2.50 in the form of an allowance. The concentration of large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in huge reception centers isolated from local areas does nothing to aid their inclusion. The second model is implemented through the “Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees” (SPRAR), which is made up of a network of local authorities and is financed by a national fund for asylum policies and services. Although it has shortcomings and challenges, it provides a minimum level of social inclusion.

Law 94/2009 further restricted access to international protection and sanctioned the Italy–Libya “friendship treaty”, which was a prelude to pushbacks. Subsequently, Law 46/2017 contravened asylum seekers’ rights (for example, the abolition of the second degree of judgment in the appeals process—provided for in the Italian Constitution—in the case of denial), increased pushbacks at sea (which became a standard tool for controlling entry), and criminalized the work of NGOs engaged in rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

It should be emphasized that, until 2018, there were three forms of international protection in Italy: political asylum (provided for by the Geneva Convention), subsidiary protection (provided for by the European Union), and humanitarian protection (adopted at the discretion of individual states communities). The latter was the main regularization channel for asylum seekers in Italy, but Law 132/2018 abolished humanitarian protection, effectively increasing the number of undocumented migrants and substantially limiting access to international protection. This law also restricted the right to registration in the municipal office registers (municipal registered residency), dismantled the SPRAR system, extended detention periods in hotspots (the “adequately equipped disembarkation areas” that had recently been set up close to disembarkation points), and in repatriation centers, shifted financial resources from assistance to expulsions, reduced the cost of reception from EUR 35 to EUR 20 per person per day, and cut resources for social inclusion. This led to a reduction in the quality of reception and the number of social workers and facilitated the monopolization of the “reception market” by large third-sector entities. Law 77/2019 penalized sea rescues carried out by NGOs through imposing administrative sanctions and allowing for the confiscation of ships.

These legislative and political devices favor the proliferation of borders (Aradau and Tazzioli 2020), hierarchize the subjects who intend to cross borders by attributing to them more or less broad spectrums of rights, and force migrants into hypermobility (Myambo and Frassinelli 2019). Furthermore, all of this forced refugees and asylum seekers into a position of irregularity, thus fomenting fear and racism, making them invisible and extremely vulnerable in the labor market, and hampering their access to social and health services.

3.2. Racial Discrimination in Social Benefits

In this section, we will examine discrimination against foreigners in the area of social benefits⁷ (Biondi Dal Monte 2013; Chiaromonte 2017; Guariso 2012, 2021; Sobrino 2017), with particular reference to refugees and asylum seekers.

The state, the regions, and the municipalities are all players in what should properly be described as a system of racial discrimination in welfare benefits, as demonstrated below by our research on welfare rules. This is mainly based on rules concerning citizenship (having Italian or European citizenship), the length of a residence permit (whether or not a person possesses a long-term residence permit, that is, an EU residence permit), territorial rootedness (residence in the national, regional, or municipal territory for a certain number of years), and municipally registered residency (the possession of certain requirements to obtain it).

Except in cases involving regulations that directly protect them, refugees and asylum seekers have often been affected by discriminatory rules because they are foreigners. Sometimes, however, regulations have also affected them insofar as they are refugees and asylum seekers, mostly through indirect discrimination. Until the first five years of the 2000s, they were sometimes not included in the categories listed as eligible for certain social benefits because they had been “forgotten” by the legislator (probably due to the fact that at that point the number of asylum seekers was limited and they were not very much in the public eye). Then, up until 2010, there was a gradual, though non-linear, widening of access to social benefits for them. Since then, there has been an ambivalent trend in which concessionary and restrictive elements have coexisted and alternated, although the latter has prevailed.

In Italy, access by foreigners to social benefits was regulated by the 1998 Consolidated Immigration Act (Art. 41), which established the equal treatment of nationals and foreigners in possession of a residence card or a residence permit lasting at least one year⁸. In theory, the social protection system is universalistic, with no differentiation between nationals and foreigners on the basis of their legal status. However, this is not the case in practice. In 2000, the Budget Law (no. 388, art. 80) restricted foreigners’ access to social benefits, limiting them to: European citizens and non-EU citizens holding a long-term residence card (from 2007 there has been a EU residence permit for long-term residents); holders of a long-term residence card for EU family members; and those with refugee or stateless status⁹.

In addition to this general limitation, there were some more specific restrictions concerning individual social benefits. Law 448/1998 (Art. 65) reserves the “Allowance for low-income families with at least three minor children” to those composed of resident Italian citizens. In 2010, the allowance was extended, *inter alia*, to those with international protection (INPS Circular 9/2010).

The “Basic maternity allowance” (Legislative Decree 151/2001, Art. 74), given by municipalities at the birth of a child or at the entry of a child into a family through adoption or pre-adoptive foster care, was limited to mothers with a residence card. In 2010, it was extended to those with refugee status or subsidiary protection (INPS Circular 9/2010).

The “Maternity allowance for atypical workers” (Legislative Decree 151/2001, Art. 75), paid to precarious workers or workers with a vertical part-time contract that does not give them access to the basic maternity allowance, is granted to EU citizens and residence card holders, excluding, *inter alia*, those with international protection (in compliance with Art. 29 of European Directive 95/2011).

These provisions mark the beginning of a phase of introducing restrictions to the detriment of foreigners. The central government has played a leading role in this by introducing the “European Community/European non-Community” distinction and, within the “European non-Community” category, a distinction based on residence permits (either short-term or long-term). At a time when there is mounting propaganda on the “invasion” of migrants, the state has introduced rules whereby foreigners applying for social benefits have to have a long-term residence card, which in turn can only be obtained if they have a minimum income that matches or is above the annual social allowance (but if they wish to

access certain benefits their income cannot be too high), and a residence permit for at least five years—thus excluding the most vulnerable.

Since 2007, discrimination in social benefits has widened and deepened. The core of the discrimination is found in the double distinction linked to citizenship (EU citizen versus non-EU citizen) and residency (short-term permit versus EU residence permit), to which other elements such as prolonged residence in the national territory are added.

The “Basic Spending Card” (Law 133/08), an allowance for families in conditions of economic hardship in which there is an over-65-year-old or a minor under 3 years of age, was reserved for Italian citizens. It was later extended, *inter alia*, to those with international protection, who are not mentioned in INPS circulars but are included on the application form.

The “Baby Bonus” (Law 190/14, Art. 1; Prime Minister Decree, 27.2.15 for children born up to 31 December 2017 and Law 205/17 Art. 1 for those born after 31 December 2017) was reserved for Italian citizens and foreigners with an EU residence permit. In 2015, it was extended to holders of international protection (INPS circular 93/2015).

The “Family Card” (Law 208/2015, Art. 1), which gives support to low-income families to buy goods at reduced prices from affiliated shops or organizations, had its income limit abolished in 2018, but only Italian and EU citizens were eligible for it, thus excluding, *inter alia*, those with international protection.

The “Support for active inclusion” (Ministerial Decree 26.5.2016), a benefit to help combat poverty through the purchase of necessities, excluding, *inter alia*, those with international protection.

The “Nursery Bonus” (Law 232/16, Art. 1) was initially aimed at everyone, then limited to Italian citizens, EU citizens, and EU residence permit holders, and then extended to non-EU family members of EU citizens and international protection holders (INPS Circular 88/2017).

The “Inclusion Income” (Legislative Decree 147/17), an economic benefit to help combat poverty, is aimed at citizens who have been residents for two years in Italy and foreigners who have been residents for two years in Italy and hold an EU residence permit.

The “Citizenship Income” (Legislative Decree, 4/2019), an economic benefit to help combat poverty, requires the claimant to have been a resident in Italy for at least ten years, the last two of which must have been immediately prior to the application, and excludes foreigners holding a single work permit, refugees, and those with subsidiary protection. However, although those with an international protection permit (refugees and holders of subsidiary protection) were not explicitly included, the INPS and Ministry of Labor websites included these two categories among those eligible, creating a lot of confusion that has still not been resolved at the time of writing.

The “COVID-19 emergency vouchers” (Civil Protection Ordinance 658/2020), a food support measure provided by municipalities to everyone, was limited by some municipalities (e.g., Bonate Sopra and Ferrara) with the introduction of restrictive requirements for foreigners such as an EU residence permit and official registration in the municipality—thus excluding homeless people, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, and people with international protection.

The “Universal Basic Income” (Delegated Act 46/21), which replaced several different social benefits, excluded those with international protection (refugees and those with subsidiary protection) in compliance with Art. 29 of Directive 95/2011, as well as those with a permit for special protection.

At the same time, national laws are flanked by regional laws, municipal resolutions, and mayoral ordinances, which are particularly widespread in Northern Italy. Regions and municipalities have introduced elements of differentiation into their local interventions that make social benefits conditional on Italian citizenship, European citizenship, or possession of an EU residence permit. Several municipalities and regions have also introduced further elements of differentiation, including: stricter requirements for registration in the municipal registry office; adding the condition of continuous residency in the regional

or municipal territory; additional documentation to be attached to the application; and awarding additional points in the rankings for public houses if the applicant has Italian citizenship (Gargiulo 2011, 2014; Guariso 2012; Manconi and Resta 2010; Usai 2009, 2011).

One of the key fronts of welfare racism that particularly affects asylum seekers is municipally registered residency. In Italy, the exercise of certain fundamental rights is linked to legal residence in the municipality following registration in the municipal registry office. It is required for being issued a residence certificate and an identity card, which are both indispensable for the use of public services (such as job centers, social benefits, public housing, tax benefits, the national health service, the school system, nurseries, voting, and obtaining citizenship) and the provision of services and benefits by private entities (employment contracts, rental contracts, registration with a driving school, opening a bank account and becoming self-employed, registration with professional associations). The lack or denial of municipally registered residency can be very damaging, since this right (which is a subjective right guaranteed by the legal system) gives the holder access to other rights (Gargiulo 2015, 2019).

When interpreted restrictively, Art. 13 of Law 138/2018 excludes asylum seekers from the right to municipally registered residency: pursuant to Presidential Decree 223/1989 and Legislative Decree 286/1998 (Consolidated Immigration Act, Art. 6, c. 7), it establishes that the asylum seeker residence permit, despite being valid as an identity document, does not allow the holder to obtain municipally registered residency. This rule, which in 2020 was declared illegitimate (and therefore lapsed) by the Constitutional Court, affected a specific category of people and a specific subjective condition, namely asylum seekers hosted in reception centers.

Another front of welfare racism, which also has serious repercussions on asylum seekers, are the requirements for long-term residence and territorial rootedness, with welfare services in Italy often being refused (Corvaja 2011, 2020; Gargiulo 2021). Numerous municipalities, regions, and national laws have introduced the requirement of long-term residence in Italy, in the region, or in the municipality (5, 8, 10, or 12 years) to access social services, public housing, social benefits, various types of allowances, and pensions (disability pension and attendance allowance for the totally blind, general attendance allowance, disability allowance, and attendance allowance for disabled minors), with serious consequences for those who have been in the national or local territory for a shorter time, such as those with international protection and asylum seekers.

We conclude this section with a specific case related to access to agricultural unemployment benefits. In 2018, INPS refused applications for agricultural unemployment benefits submitted by temporary laborers who had the status of applicants for international protection (residence permits for asylum seekers provided for by Legislative Decree 142/2015), arguing that that residence permit was equivalent to a residence permit for seasonal work. In 2021 and 2022, the Court of Foggia (in judgments of 8 September 2021 and 23 February 2022)¹⁰ established that asylum seekers were entitled to agricultural unemployment benefit even if their residence permit was “short term”, arguing that INPS was wrong to equate seasonal work permits with residence permits lasting less than nine months (including residence permits for asylum applications, also considered “short term permits”).

These norms have contributed to the exclusion and precarization of asylum seekers. In particular, they have slowed down or blocked their social inclusion, sending people to the labor market on bended knees, forced to accept the unacceptable. The municipally registered residency, the territorial rootedness, and the long-term residence are applied by state institutions in an uneven manner, using different combinations, resulting in a shifting geometry of social rights that puts asylum seekers in an insecure and vulnerable position.

At the same time, these measures send a clear message to asylum seekers (“you are barely tolerated, the Italian state has no commitment to you”), to long-term resident immigrants (“be careful and play it straight, we are watching you, your condition can get worse at any time”), and to Italians (“you are different, we assure you that you will be protected, the important thing is that you do not mix with these people”).

This system of stratified welfare benefits is based on restricted rights for foreigners and the privileging of autochthony (Gjergji 2014; Morris 2002) and is strongly intertwined with a complex of rhetoric and discourse that portrays asylum seekers as privileged people living in the lap of luxury and native Italians as victims living in poverty. This shows how punitive public policies, discriminatory measures, and racialized welfare discourses feed off and support each other.

3.3. *The Key Themes of Racialized Welfare Discourses on Asylum Seekers*

The restrictive, selective, and repressive character of Italian migration policies (Basso 2010; Giovannetti and Zorzella 2020) and the web of racial discrimination in the welfare system are accompanied, supported, and legitimized by a public discourse on immigration characterized by the stigmatization and inferiorization of migrants (Binotto and Martino 2004; Binotto et al. 2016; Musarò and Parmiggiani 2022). The elements that have characterized this public discourse for more than three decades are the following: immigrants as backward and culturally inferior, as a threat to national culture and identity, as a criminal and security concern, as well as the issue of migrants arriving on Italy's shores, for which words such as "invasion" are used. However, a constant element is the abuse of the benefits system.

Refugees and migrants are portrayed as cynically robbing benefits and services, not only daring to ask even though they have fewer rights than Italians, but also getting privileged treatment because they have more rights than Italians and even using fraud to take advantage of the welfare system. Related to this persistent rhetoric is the repeated leitmotif of the burden of immigration on the Italian welfare system.

In recent decades, the racialized welfare discourse has rarely occupied first place in the public discourse on immigration, yet it has been a constant background presence, a continuous baseline. For example, the widespread assertion that immigration has deleterious effects on the Italian welfare system and reduces social benefits for Italians is due to the longevity, repetition, and entrenchment of these refrains. The conceptual metaphor (Charteris-Black 2006) of immigration as a ballast on the welfare system draining public resources from Italians has supported the several anti-immigrant propaganda and rhetoric that have followed in the national public sphere over the decades, whether they be of a miserabilist, securitarian, culturalist, or emergency type.

For about a decade, as part of the wider public discourse on immigration, which is strongly focused on African refugees "invading Italy", the racialized welfare discourse has been very focused on asylum: the new folk devil (the "scrounger refugee" identified by Cohen 2002, p. XXIV) who "is already here or is coming here to take something from us", whether that be our public services, housing, social benefits, or pensions. Refugees and asylum seekers are depicted as hungry wolves prowling within and across borders, ready to import all kinds of evils and to expropriate Italians of all kinds of goods, starting with welfare guarantees. Within the immigration frame, characterized by emergency, fear, and invasion (Binotto 2015; Quassoli 2013), we thus find the internal frame of "anti-asylum seekers welfare sovereignty", whose recurring terms include "layabouts", "slackers", "35 euros pocket money", and a "threat to our welfare".

In data from the 2017 Eurobarometer on European citizens' perceptions of immigration, 62% of Italians surveyed believed that migrants were a burden on national welfare (compared to a European average of 59%, Valbruzzi 2018, p. 8). This was confirmed by the 2018 Censis Report on Italy's social situation (Censis 2018, online), in which 52% of respondents said they believed that more was carried out for migrants than for Italians. However, in the PASTEL-REScEU 2018 pre-electoral survey, 57.7% of Italians interviewed said they believed that social security benefits should be allocated to all foreigners, 16.7% said they should only be allocated to European citizens, and 15.1% only to Italians (Pellegatta and Visconti 2021, p. 65).

In their analysis of the migration crisis-invasion discourse, Dimitriadis et al. (2020, p. 9) point out that the discursive strategies of various stakeholders rest "on appeal to emotions,

that is, fear (by predicting threats in the future) and anger (by depicting asylum seekers as bogus and welfare scroungers)". A study of the content of the front pages of five Italian newspapers between January 2015 and October 2018 (*Avvenire, La Stampa, Il Giornale, La Repubblica, and Corriere della Sera*) found a prevalence of headlines implying that the threat and emergency of immigration were out-of-control, with the use of terms such as "immigration chaos", "immigration emergency", "continuous invasion", "security alert", and "illegals who commit crime", often accompanied by references to a welfare system in crisis due to the reception of migrants, with expressions such as "free care for illegals" (Milazzo 2018, p. 26). Musarò and Parmiggiani (2022, p. 55) make similar observations: both the traditional and digital media portray immigration as a perennial crisis and migrants as (false) asylum seekers who, in addition to stealing jobs from Italians, demand social assistance, unfairly burdening the welfare system.

A study of the comments on the Facebook pages of the newspapers *La Repubblica* and *Il Giornale* dedicated to the celebration of World Refugee Day on 20 June 2016 revealed many comments—within a discourse characterized by an economic frame—emphasizing the abuse of welfare by migrants at the expense of Italians. In some extreme cases, even people rescued from shipwrecks in the Mediterranean were considered a national disgrace: "The real tragedy is the tens of thousands we fish out and keep. If some idiot goes to sea in unsafe conditions... that's their problem" (Lucchesi 2017, p. 121).

Thus, the racialized welfare discourse constructs asylum seekers as parasites that systematically drain public resources and threaten the financial security of the welfare system. According to this discourse, they—who are usually poor and hungry themselves—impoverish and starve Italians, and so in order to guarantee the preservation of the welfare system, they must be eliminated either by refusing them entry or repatriating them or by excluding them from services by means of a selective welfare system based on limited support provided on a national-racial basis. That is, as unwanted and uninvited newcomers, they cannot and must not have or claim rights.

The racialized welfare discourse on asylum argues that the reception of asylum seekers penalizes natives, who are its main victims in times of economic crisis. Italians are second-class citizens, mistreated and discriminated against, misunderstood and unrecognized in comparison to privileged asylum seekers. Thus, spending on the reception system, besides being a waste, is also a bad investment: it blocks a way out of the crisis and steals resources from Italians both in the present and in the future. Additionally, what about those who support the reception of asylum seekers, the volunteers, and the social workers? They are traitors, defeatists, the starvers of the people, an anti-Italian fifth column that gives "intelligence to the enemy".

The racialized welfare discourse on asylum seekers is fueled by "entrepreneurs of racism" through the extensive use of social media (Ferrini and Paris 2019, pp. 98, 100). One of the main political protagonists of racialized welfare discourse is the party "The League" (Lega), both at a national and local level. Initially championing national identity, the League subsequently presented itself as the defender of Italian social rights endangered by migrants. In doing so, it consciously and publicly promoted populist racism, legitimizing it as being in support of Italians. This legitimation happens through placing racialized welfare discourse within an economic frame using rational arguments and justifications, such as, for example, the financial resilience of the welfare system or the scarcity of resources for Italians.

During the campaign for the 2018 general elections, the League's anti-immigrant stance included, as one of its main points, opposition to asylum seekers' access to the welfare system. Under the slogan "Italians first", a specific target was their daily allowance, which was set against the unmet needs of Italians (Pellegatta and Visconti 2021, p. 63).

The social consequences of the racialized welfare discourse are significant. By socially constructing the asylum seeker as a threat to the welfare system and the rights of Italians, it fuels the racialization of this figure, guides Italians towards blaming migrants for the

crisis in the welfare system, and produces a form of conflict around the welfare state in the age-old but always useful war among the poor.

3.4. *“Good Job They Found Him Dead, Otherwise We Would Have Had to Have Supported Him”*

The main themes of the media campaign depicting refugees and asylum seekers as scroungers and welfare abusers focus on: their status as “illegal” (when, in fact, they are legal until the relevant authorities decide on their application for international protection); the fact that they have smartphones; their reluctance to work; their young age, in particular arguing that they should not flee from wars in their country of origin but take part in them; and the EUR 35 that it is alleged the state gives to each of them directly. The propaganda on EUR 35 “pocket money” has spread throughout the country, in a global context of neo-liberal policies and rhetoric characterized, among other things, by a war on the poor and the criminalization of exclusion (Morrison 2019; Wacquant 1999, 2009).

The effects of this campaign can be seen in social media and online more generally, where the popular racism, so skillfully fueled by doctrinal racism and institutional racism, can be found in comments left under news reports by national and local newspapers. Below are a few examples of comments under articles published in newspapers in 2015 (the year of the “crisis of asylum”):

“But what conditions? Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Angola are normal countries. The Chinese are investing hugely in Africa, creating jobs, while these illegals come here to live off the backs of others!”¹¹

“The people who come here are not refugees, they are mainly illegals who leave from countries where there aren’t any wars, such as Senegal, Ghana, and the Gambia, in all the other countries in the world they send them straight back, but we are in the business of providing reception services and so everyone can apply for asylum.”¹²

In addition to the issues of “illegals” and their alleged origins from countries that are not at war, there is the question of refugee and asylum seekers having smartphones. According to the racialized welfare discourse, they should be desperate and have no material possessions if they are to deserve international protection.

“The vast majority flee from African countries that are poor but where there is no war. They are just smartasses with several thousand \$\$\$\$\$\$ in their pockets to pay for the criminals who traffic them with the latest smartphone [. . .] They disembark with their smartphones and the first thing they look for is a Wi-Fi connection.”¹³

According to the racialized welfare discourse, in order to be deserving of reception, refugees must be poor and needy, while reception and international protection should be granted not on the basis of entitlement but on how miserable they are or manage to appear. As for the maintenance of refugees, this is carried out through the EUR 35 that the state is presumed to pay them directly, while their free health care is at the expense of Italians. In the comments, a comparison is constantly made with Italians in economic difficulty; frustration is channeled towards an internal enemy who has come from outside. Some comments on an article:

“They will get only hatred from me. [. . .] Income support for impoverished Italians is 40 euros per month (social card) while migrants cost us 35 euros a day to maintain. Millions of Italians, often in debt, struggle to make it to the end of the month with their meager pensions or low wages, are unable to pay rent, and food, are forced to eat into their savings... let’s save the needy Italians, and then, if we can, the migrants.”

“We are tired of seeing all these people walking around with mobile phones demanding more and more, and Italian people starving because there is nothing

for them. They get 35 euros per person and now at the end of the month they get a salary.”¹⁴

Many comments see in the presence of refugees a worsening of the living conditions of citizens and of the welfare system. For instance:

“They give these delinquents 35 euros a day, more than a pensioner who has worked for 40 years. But how disgusting that we Italians support them, they don’t pay a thing and they even get free medical and dental visits, we Italians pay them handsomely.”

“We have to support them in full and for life and we also have to pay for the recovery, funerals and repatriation of the bodies? And my son, who has a degree and masters all paid for by me, has no job and not even a tiny allowance and/or unemployment benefit!!!”¹⁵

“An unemployed person who has paid 30 years of INPS contributions gets, if all goes well, about 30 euros a day in unemployment benefits (which he has set aside for himself). A migrant 35, shameful!

To deny that queues in hospitals have also lengthened because of foreigners is to deny reality. You only have to put your head into A & E to see who most of the people there are.”¹⁶

According to the racialized welfare discourse, the refugees even engage in premeditated ploys to scrounge off the Italian welfare system, in a sort of welfare drain carefully planned from the very beginning of their migration journey:

“If their only intention is to flee war in their own country, why do they not then stop in the first state where they arrive after fleeing?... I guess they can’t be refugees, they only want to flee to countries with good welfare systems.”¹⁷

“Survival instincts with their thousands of dollars for smugglers and smartphones and smiling selfies, nice one! More like an instinct to be maintained in the country with the best welfare at the expense of taxpayers.”¹⁸

The racialized welfare discourse is a proven ideological device to the point that one person referring to the 12-year-old son of Pakistani immigrants killed in 2017 in the province of Modena, goes so far as to write: “Good job they found him dead otherwise we would have had to have supported him!”¹⁹

4. Conclusions

This article argues that welfare racism is a structural, structured, and structuring phenomenon. It has a long history with deep roots in racism’s inherent position in modern society, the colonial bases of the welfare state, the intrinsic limits of social rights in capitalism, and punitive migration policies. As an instrument of selection, exclusion, and stigmatization, welfare racism is a distinguishing feature of anti-immigrant institutional policies, which have become particularly aggressive in the neoliberal era with the dismantling of the welfare state and social rights. Today, it is a global phenomenon concerning world labor as a whole, producing inequalities and divisions in the working class.

In this article, we emphasized the relevance of racialized welfare discourse within welfare racism. Its ideological force has important effects on public policies—in particular social policy and welfare systems—as well as on migration policies, contributing to their tightening.

Firstly, states can instrumentalize the racialized welfare discourse to implement migration policies that exacerbate racial discrimination in the welfare state. For example, by granting or not granting citizenship or a certain type of residence permit, they can determine what social rights to give those who have not been granted them. The extreme deterioration of the conditions of migration and the worsening of migration policies over the last two decades has had negative consequences on asylum seekers’ access to welfare

systems and social benefits. Ever more selective, restrictive, punitive, and repressive migration policies have increased internal and welfare controls to such an extent that, in the context of the “war on migration” and the “war on asylum”, immigrants sometimes refrain from claiming welfare (even when they are entitled to it by law) because they are scared of immigration status checks.

Secondly, states can instrumentalize racialized welfare discourse to implement public policies that use welfare systems as a political filter with which to select migrants, thus including those who are “desirable” and excluding those who are “undesirable”. That is, by using racialized welfare discourse as a means of legitimation and mystification, states can use welfare systems as a tool with which to control migration.

The ideological force of racialized welfare discourse requires an intense effort of deconstruction and counter-narration, going beyond simple critique and de-mystification. For instance, the statement that migrants go to European countries to access good welfare systems and strong social rights, besides being obvious, says nothing about why there is little access to social rights in the countries they leave behind, why the welfare systems in these countries are weak, or why workers in these countries have fewer rights; in other words, it says nothing about centuries of colonial and neo-colonial domination. It also fails to mention that immigrants do not enjoy effective equality in social rights once they arrive in Western countries, with perceived increased welfare opportunities rarely reflecting the reality.

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² On welfare chauvinism see (Mewes and Mau 2012; Reeskens and Van Oorschot 2012; Van Der Waal et al. 2013; Van Oorschot 2006).

³ Another context in which welfare racism—using the expression “public charge”—has become widespread very quickly is the USA, although it is used above all against Afro-Americans (Brown 1999; Fox 2012; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Schram et al. 2003; Quadagno 1994, 2000; Ward 2005).

⁴ The 1914 Aliens Act and the 1919 Aliens Restriction Act introduced even more restrictive measures.

⁵ See (Martinsen and Pons Rotger 2017; OECD 2013). In France a phenomenon of inverse of social fraud has been observed, in which immigrants do not claim their social rights (Spire 2015).

⁶ In 2013, the tightening of migration policies and welfare controls was officially endorsed when the ministers of home affairs and immigration in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK issued a joint declaration demanding that those responsible for European home affairs and justice impose legal and financial sanctions on those who abuse freedom of movement (by which they meant Romanians and Bulgarians, who at the time had just become EU citizens) putting undue burden on these countries’ welfare systems. They also declared their intention to refuse social assistance to immigrants who had never worked in their country, even if they were EU citizens, claiming the right to expel them if their documentation was not in order.

⁷ That is, social benefits aimed at economically assisting workers and families—thus excluding health care, pensions, tax benefits—financed by state resources on the basis of a situation of need recognized by law as deserving support and protection. For this article, we mainly referred to (Guariso 2021).

⁸ This equal treatment was also confirmed by Law 328/2000 “Framework law for the implementation of the integrated system of social intervention and social services”. This limitation excluded, inter alia, residence permits for asylum applicants.

⁹ The provision does not repeal Art. 41, it establishes that social allowance and economic benefits constituting subjective rights are granted to foreigners holding a residence card, while for other benefits the residence permit of at least one year remains valid.

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