‘Christmas is Cancelled’: Controversy in Italian Schools (and Press)

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Abstract

Marco Parma, President of a public school in an immigrant neighbourhood in the southern hinterland of Milan, Italy, was accused in late-November 2015 of ‘cancelling Christmas’ in the name of inclusivity towards non-Catholic school pupils. Partially misguided and partially unfounded, these allegations became object of extensive media coverage and political controversy over Italian cultural identity and the role of public schools in it. Through critical discourse analysis and visual analysis, this paper scrutinizes a small corpus of newspaper articles from *Il Corriere della Sera* (Italy’s most circulated newspaper) covering the Rozzano scandal and the related images. Findings are as follows. Firstly, the episode is covered in terms of a clash of civilizations between an Italian Catholic ‘self’ and an immigrant ‘other’. Secondly, this ‘other’ is constructed as ‘Muslim’. Thirdly, Muslim voices are largely under-represented. When ‘Muslims’ get to speak for themselves, the voices included are usually those of private individuals (not community representatives), often in familial environments rather than public fora.

Keywords

Italy – secularism – religiosity – Catholic Church – schools – immigrant students – clash of civilizations – invasion – critical discourse analysis – visual analysis

1 Background

On November 27th, 2015, the Italian broadsheet newspaper *Il giorno* published an article titled ‘Rozzano: School Principal Cancels the Christmas Fest’.¹ In a

¹ Rozzano is a small municipality in the southern hinterland of Milan. Massimiliano Mingoa, ‘Rozzano, il Preside Cancella la Festa di Natale. E la Scuola Rimuove Anche i Crocifissi’,

sensationalistic style, the article claims that the decision to ‘cancel’ the traditional Christmas fest came in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris (13 November 2015) as a preventive measure in order not to hurt the sensitivity of Muslim school pupils. Marco Parma, the school principal referenced in the newspaper article’s title, promptly responded to the allegations made by the newspaper with an open letter to the school community.² In the letter, Parma confirms that the Christmas fest would regularly take place on December 17th. The only unusual event for the holiday season was the postponing of the ‘Christmas concert’ to January (contextually renamed to ‘Winter concert’) for logistical reasons. Finally, Parma admits that he did oppose one religious activity: the teaching of Christian carols by two mothers during lunch break; an initiative he marks in his letter as ‘inappropriate’ in a public school.

The principal probably expected that his letter would settle the dispute. In fact, in the following days the ‘cancelled Christmas’ attracted the attention of all major news outlets and reached the highest offices in the country, including that of the (at the time) Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. The episode remained in the public eye until the Ministry of Education, requested to investigate on the case, found that the conduct of Marco Parma was procedurally and legally sound and dismissed the case on December 4th.

Episodes such as this have not been uncommon in Italy in the last few years. Despite a small immigrant population share (8%),³ an invasion narrative has gained circulation in the Italian mediascape.⁴ These discourses usually revolve around the need to preserve Italian ‘culture’ against a threatening ‘other’.⁵ Through a critical discourse analysis⁶ and visual analysis⁷ of the coverage of the Rozzano case by *Il Corriere della Sera* (Italy’s most broadly circulated newspaper), this study offers empirical evidence confirming the above trend.

Il Giorno, 27 November 2015, viewed 22 April 2016, <http://www.ilgiorno.it/sud-milano/rozzano-polemica-scuola-crocefissi-festa-natale-1.1522604>.

2 Marco Parma, ‘Natale e Dintorni’, *Communication Internal to the School* 7, viewed 22 April 2016, http://www.icsgarofani.gov.it/attachments/article/173/circ_7_natale-signed.pdf.

3 ISTAT, *Noi Italia. 100 Statistiche per Capire il Paese in cui Viviamo* (Rome, Italy: ISTAT, 2014).

4 Stefano Allievi, ‘Immigration, Religious Diversity and Recognition of Differences: The Italian Way to Multiculturalism’, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 21.6 (2014): 724–737.

5 Francesca Orsini, ‘Cannons and Rubber Boats: Oriana Fallaci and the “Clash of Civilizations”’, *Interventions* 8.3 (2006): 444–460.

6 Norman Fairclough, ed. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2nd ed. (Harlow UK: Longman, 2013).

7 Gunther R. Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (Abingdon, UK: Psychology Press, 1996).

2 An Italian Catholic 'Self'

The main narrative circulated in the coverage of the Rozzano case consistently referred to the existence of an Italian 'self' with clear cut cultural features. Examples of this narratives can be found in all the voices reported: politicians, journalists, and interviewees. The most vocal politician on the issue has been Matteo Salvini, populist leader of the right wing nativist party Lega Nord. In bombastic tones, Salvini referred to Parma's decision saying that 'only a madman would deny our traditions'⁸ and that 'teachers and principals who cancel Christmas should be fired'.⁹ Salvini went as far as showing up in Rozzano to symbolically 'donate' a nativity scene to the pupils and thus 'return' the stolen Christmas, as depicted in Figure 8.1.

Other politicians joined Salvini in condemning Parma's allegedly unilateral decision to 'cancel' Christmas celebrations. For example, Alessandro Colucci, group leader of the center-right (Nuovo Centro Destra – NCD) in the regional parliament of Lombardia, commented that

Questioning our identity and the long established traditions of our society in order not to bother people following other religious faiths is completely pointless and misleading. This is not how respect for diversity works.¹⁰

In the quote above, Colucci refers to Catholic carols and nativity scenes as deeply rooted parts of 'our identity' that should therefore be considered normal in public schools. According to him, this is so self-evident that questioning it is 'pointless and misleading'.

Consensus was also found on the left hand of the political spectrum, with the remarkable voice of Prime Minister and leader of the Democratic Party (PD) Matteo Renzi joining the discussion. Renzi commented that

Christmas is far more important than a school principal looking for controversy. Perhaps he believed that the decision would favour integration and coexistence; I believe he failed. ... [Inter-religious/

8 Paolo di Stefano, 'Canti di Natale e Presepi: A Scuola lo Show dei Politici; Il Caso', *Corriere della Sera*, 1 December 2015, 7; all translations from Italian into English are my own.

9 Federica Cavadini, 'Bufera sul "Divieto" di Natale Lascia il Preside Sotto Accusa; Scuola', *Corriere della Sera*, 29 November 2015, 1.

10 Marco Galluzzo, '“Non si Dialoga Rinunciando al Natale”', *Corriere della Sera*, 29 November 2015, 23.

FIGURE 8.1 Matteo Salvini (Lega Nord) in Rozzano

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inter-cultural] dialogue and exchange does not equate with drowning peoples' identity in a tasteless and indifferent 'politically correct'. Italy in its entirety, seculars and Christians alike, will never renounce Christmas.¹¹

Renzi confirms that Catholic traditions (here under the proxy of Christmas celebrations) are so central for Italians that they are something non-renounceable, as he himself affirms in the quote above.

The only voice from official politics offering a secular narrative is the one of Caterina Spina, Secretary General for the Milan Unit of the FLC CGIL, the national Union of public school teachers. When interviewed, Spina argued that public school are secular institutions unless made otherwise by law. 'If [they] want to make the preparation of nativity scenes and the teaching of carols mandatory for every school, then they should make it so by Ministerial decree'.¹² In an act of discursive defiance, Spina challenges politicians to follow through with the implications of their narratives.

Outside of official politics, some journalists from *Il Corriere della Sera* seem to share the same position as party politicians. For example, Marco Garzonio, journalist and lecturer at the Catholic University in Milan, published an opinion piece arguing against Parma's decision. Linking the ethos of the city of Milan to Christianity, Garzonio comments that

11 Galluzzo, '“Non si Dialoga Rinunciando al Natale”', 23.

12 Federica Cavadini, 'E Anche i Sindacati si Schierano con lui – La Cgil: E' Diventato un Bersaglio Politico; L'intervista', *Corriere della Sera*, 30 November 2015, 7.

Secular and religious institutions are meant to recognize and speak to each other, seeking to contrast the fears produced by tragedies, intolerance, and other phantoms. Rather than doing this, a man from the school system [Marco Parma] (supposedly a system meant to foster intellectual meetings, research, training, and constitutional values) is now going against the will of the enlightened and thinking Milan.¹³

The reference to constitutional values in Garzonio's piece is rather peculiar given that decision #203 of the Constitutional Court found in 1989 that the Italian state is constitutionally secular.

Also Isabella Bossi Fedrigotti, journalist and writer, dismisses the need for secularity as over-zealous in an open letter to the newspaper editors on December 4th. Bossi Fedrigotti comments

Over the last few days, I noticed many downtown boutique windows displaying the words 'season's greetings' or 'winter greetings'. OK, those shops probably have customers of other religions, and business is business. However, still minding business, customers might well be more interested in the windows of Dolce and Gabbana, exhibiting a nativity scene from the '700s and a large table prepared to resemble a typical Sicilian Christmas lunch.¹⁴

Here, Bossi Fedrigotti is trivializing secularism and simultaneously praising those Italian trademarks that proudly embrace the Catholic roots of the Italian people.

The voices of private citizens are also present in the corpus. These include school principals and teachers as well as a few lines by parents of school-age children. In the earliest article in the corpus (28 November), an official letter to Principal Parma signed by 28 school parents from Rozzano is quoted for the public to read

In name of what superior value should we renounce to celebrate Christmas? If that value is respect towards those who do not follow the Catholic Christian religion, we reserve for ourselves the right to disagree. In the

13 Marco Garzonio, 'L'Eccesso di Zelo Trascende il Natale: Dialogo Antidoto ai Pregiudizi', *Corriere della Sera*, 30 November 2015, 1.

14 Leda Guenzati Pessi, 'Il Natale Rovinato nelle Scuole: Ci Siamo Dimenticati dei Bambini; La Lettera di Isabella Bossi Fedrigotti', *Corriere della Sera*, 4 December 2015, 6.

very name of cultural exchange, we believe that preserving our traditions without limitations can do nothing but enrich those who follow other religions and traditions.¹⁵

A similar rhetoric is put forward by Massimo Barrella and Anna Sandi, both principals in public schools in the area neighbouring Rozzano. The latter draws a rather visual comparison between opposing carols in schools and demolishing bell towers as equally senseless acts of cultural self-annihilation. The former argues more mildly that 'parents of foreign students are not against nativity scenes, carols, or the crucifix in the classroom'.¹⁶

The main narrative emerging from these statements suggests the existence of a deeply held belief that to be Italian is to follow Catholic traditions. This belief is also accompanied by the notion that the 'other' can only be 'enriched' by exposure and participation in Italian Catholic traditions, including not-so-covert assumptions regarding Italian cultural superiority. Among private citizens, however, there are also voices in support of Marco Parma. For example, Manuela Gallina, elementary school teacher from the neighbouring area, states that 'school are secular places of encounter between cultures, not religions'.¹⁷ Antonella Campolongo, self-declared practicing Catholic and mother of a school kid attending Parma's institution, declared that 'religious carols should be sung in church, not at school'.¹⁸ These two women are not alone in supporting Principal Parma. A small but non-negligible number of school parents and teachers joined a solidarity march for the Principal and against the politicization of the event.

I wish to close this first section with an analysis of two pictures from the gallery complementing the reportage of the march. The first one depicts the people involved in the march carrying a banner spelling 'I stand with Parma' (Figure 8.2). The group is represented while walking from right to left of the frame. The image is in my view polarized, as the right hand (representing 'the new') is occupied by the people marching while the left hand (representing 'the old') is still partially empty. A possible reading of the image is that 'the new' (perhaps progressive multiculturalism) is marching to take over 'the old' (perhaps Catholic traditions).

15 Olivia Manola and Andrea Senesi, '“Per gli Islamici è una Provocazione”: Bufera sul Preside che Sposta il Natale; Il Caso', *Corriere della Sera*, 28 November 2015, 13.

16 Cavadini, 'Bufera sul “Divieto” di Natale Lascia il Preside Sotto Accusa; Scuola', 1.

17 Ibid.

18 Olivia Manola, 'Maestre e Genitori con il Preside di Rozzano', *Corriere della Sera*, 30 November 2015, 7.

FIGURE 8.2 People marching in solidarity with Marco Parma

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The second image represents two children sitting underneath a paper billboard spelling 'politics out of schools' (Figure 8.3.). The children are faceless because they are facing in a direction opposite to that of the camera. Their eye level is below the billboard, suggest that they are not engaging with it. Despite being 'faceless' because turned, the kids seem to demand involvement by the viewer, who is invited to care for them. The picture is highly polarized, with the children occupying the sphere of the real at the bottom while the billboard occupies the position of the ideal at the top of the composition. The explicit message spelled on the billboard clearly states that the problem at stake is the unwanted engagement of politicians with the school system (not, for example, separation of Church and State). The message is visually reinforced by the kids not staring at it.

3 Who Is the 'Other'?

If the narratives represented in the corpus under scrutiny consistently construct the existence of an Italian 'self' culturally identifiable as Catholic, this self is also constructed in opposition to an 'other'. In the earliest article of the corpus, commentary on the student body of Parma's school states that 'foreign

FIGURE 8.3 School children facing a billboard spelling 'politics out of schools'

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students are around 20% of the student body; many of them are Muslim.¹⁹ In another article, the already-mentioned Massimo Barrella (school principal) commented as follows. 'Christmas a provocation? [It is not, because] Muslim pupils help their classmates in decorating the nativity scenes'.²⁰ More explicitly, journalist Marco Garzonio opened his above-described opinion piece by saying that 'A Muslim family would never dream of renouncing to celebrate Ramadan because they fear to hurt the sensitivity of the Milanese people hosting them'.²¹

19 Manola and Senesi, '“Per gli Islamici è una Provocazione”: Bufera sul Preside che Sposta il Natale; Il caso', 13.

20 Cavadini, 'Bufera sul “Divieto” di Natale Lascia il Preside Sotto Accusa; Scuola', 1.

21 Garzonio, 'L'Eccesso di Zelo Trascende il Natale: Dialogo Antidoto ai Pregiudizi', 1.

FIGURE 8.4 Children running towards a school's entrance

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These comments are seemingly unprompted. However, a similar narrative is also present in images. One specific picture included in the corpus represents some elementary school pupils walking/running towards the entrance of the school (Figure 8.4). The image is strongly polarized, as it is spatially divided in two parts by the tree in the middle. The left end is occupied by a veiled girl running alone on the grass, while the right hand is occupied by a crowd of other kids walking together on pavement. Positioning the crowd walking united on concrete on the right suggests a sense of strength in communality. On the other hand, positioning the veiled girl running alone on uneven ground on the left suggests a sense of weakness coming from exclusion.

These initial elements suggest that there is a narrative in the corpus that understands all immigrants/foreigners in Italy as 'Muslim' and that constructs Muslim-ness as the locus of alterity for the Italian Catholic self. Based on these elements, I started looking for the voices of the 'Muslim' other. In the corpus under scrutiny, only three Muslim voices were presented. *Il Corriere della Sera* reports on a short comment by Davide Piccardo, coordinator of the Islamic associations in Milan, in which he states that 'the celebration of Christian fest

has never been a problem for Muslims in this country'.²² Piccardo is the only voice in the corpus representing the Muslim community in some official capacity.

The most extensive interview with a Muslim person in the corpus is an interview with Laila Magar, Egyptian immigrant and mother of two children, both of whom have attended Parma's school in Rozzano. The interview is complemented with a few lines by her husband Mahmoud El Kheir. Magar comments on the case stating

Who can possibly be bothered by Christmas [celebrations]? Maybe the Principal, surely not the Muslim community. My kids always took part in the Christmas celebrations at school, singing ... traditional Catholic carols. Why create a problem that is not there?²³

El Kheir's comments follow the same lines, and read as follows:

Who are we, Muslims, to say what is allowed and what is not in Italian schools? We are guests in this country. I hope that public opinion will understand that the decision was not prompted by Muslim parents.²⁴

El Kheir's quote above is particularly poignant. By stating that Muslims are guests in Italy, he de facto endorses the dominant narrative that sees Italy as an unchangeably Catholic entity (despite its own constitution). Simultaneously, El Kheir constructs his own subject position as that of an inherently foreign 'other' that should willingly accept a diminished position in society. By extension, he does so for all other Muslims included in the collective 'we' he uses.

Aside from Piccardo, Magar, and El Kheir, one further Muslim person is named as being interviewed. However, her voice is not reported directly, nor is her name. Her figure remains vaguely identified as that of 'a veiled woman' getting her groceries at the local market.²⁵ In light of this final example, I wish to close the section by pointing out the contrast between the reporting of Italian Catholic voices and that of Muslim voices. The spokespersons of the Italian 'self' almost exclusively comment from a position of authority conferred them by a political or professional title. By contrast, the Muslim 'other' is virtually

²² Cavadini, 'Bufera sul "Divieto" di Natale Lascia il Preside Sotto Accusa; Scuola', 1.

²³ Galluzzo, '“Non si Dialoga Rinunciando al Natale”', 23.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Manola, 'Maestre e Genitori con il Preside di Rozzano', *Corriere della Sera*, 30 November 2015, 7.

always speaking in a private capacity and in non-institutional settings, such as their own home (that's the setting of the interview with Magar and El Kheir mentioned above) or the local market. Arguably, the recurrent representation of Muslims as private individuals always caught off guard during their daily errands with hardly any institutional representative to speak for them is another element that contributes to further disempower their voices in a master narrative that already presents them in a subordinate social position.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter presented a polyphony of voices that argue for the existence of an Italian national 'self' that is unmistakably Catholic. Salvini and his nativist Lega Nord adopt what Marco Tarchi has defined as 'ethnopolitism': a political rhetoric based (among other things) on the assumption that different 'cultures' are not meant to mix, and corroborated by a relatively overt notion of racial superiority.²⁶ This rhetoric also infuses the letter signed by the school parents opposing Parma's decision and claiming that 'preserving our traditions without limitations can do nothing but enrich those who follow other religions and traditions'.²⁷

The moderate right and the centre-left adopted a more cautious stance. While not wielding any overtly racist argument, representatives from both hands of the political spectrum argued for the self-evident existence of an Italian national self that is Catholic or that, to the very least, follows traditions that are infused with Catholicism, such as celebrating Christmas. This trend was not unexpected, since Catholicism is a well-known political force in Italian politics, usually imagined as a 'white whale' impossible to ignore.²⁸ Counter-narratives were very limited, and ultimately advocated for the separation of Church and State but not against the Catholic nature of the Italian 'self'.

If the ethnopolitist narratives by definition exclude immigrants, moderates on the left and on the right make reference to either assimilationist or multiculturalist approaches to diversity. This trend has also been observed in

26 Marco Tarchi, *Italia Populista: Dal Qualunquismo a Beppe Grillo* (Bologna, Italy: Contemporanea, 2015).

27 Manola and Senesi, "Per gli Islamici è una Provocazione": Bufera sul Preside che Sposta il Natale; Il caso', 13.

28 Alberta Giorgi, 'Ahab and the White Whale: The Contemporary Debate around the Forms of Catholic Political Commitment in Italy', *Democratization* 20.5 (2013): 895–916.

the literature,²⁹ and concern was voiced regarding the (in)efficiency of these models that have over-lived their times and have been replaced elsewhere with more inclusive paradigms.³⁰

If the Italian 'self' is constructed as unequivocally Catholic, the 'other' is constructed just as inescapably as 'Muslim'. This emerged mostly through unprompted reference to the Muslim religion of foreign students as well as in more overt considerations throughout the corpus. This trend also finds confirmation in the literature, with Stefano Allievi's 'how the immigrant has become Muslim' being one classic scholarly example analysing the path through which Muslim became the 'other' in the European public sphere.³¹

Muslim voices are numerically under-represented in the corpus, despite the ubiquitous inference that they are indeed the cause of the Rozzano incident. Furthermore, while Italian Christian voices come from all spheres of public and private life, including institutional representatives at all level, the only institutional Muslim voice comes from a local-level representative that is given the space of a single line of text. Finally, while Italian voices are mostly assertive when stating their positions, Muslim voices are presented as defensive and submissive, to the extent that one of them has not even achieved the right to be quoted directly. Also this final trend has already been object of inquiry. Through different angles, a wide array of studies has observed how Muslim voices are silenced³² or granted space only when they are not 'too different'.³³ I wish to conclude by pointing out that this final trend is not specific to the case of Muslim minorities in Italy or Europe. In the North American context, a seminal study by Vargas has found that people of Hispanic origin are consistently under-represented in local news and portrayed in disempowered positions. Vargas describes this in terms of a semi-conscious editorial process that (1) limits the space offered to Hispanic voices (i.e. not quoting them directly),

29 Tiziana Caponio, 'Multiculturalism Italian Style: Soft or Weak Recognition?', *Challenging Multiculturalism: European Models of Diversity*, ed. Ray Taras (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012): 216–235.

30 Maria Bustelo and Emanuela Lombardo, 'Comparing the Europeanization of Multiple Inequalities in Southern Europe: A Discursive-Institutionalist Analysis', *The Europeanization of Gender Equality Policies: A Discursive-Sociological Approach*, eds. Emanuela Lombardo and Maxime Forest (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 121–144.

31 Stefano Allievi, 'How the Immigrant Has Become Muslim', *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 21.2 (2005): 135–163.

32 Stefano Allievi, 'Sociology of a Newcomer: Muslim Migration to Italy – Religious Visibility, Cultural and Political Reactions', *Immigrants & Minorities* 22 (2012): 141–154.

33 Wendy Pojman, 'Muslim Women's Organizing in France and Italy: Political Culture, Activism and Performativity in the Public Sphere', *Feminist Formations* 22.3 (2010): 229–251.

(2) interviews private citizens rather than community leaders, and (3) focuses on the private affairs of the interviewees rather than public processes.³⁴ In light of the similarity between these two cases across the North Atlantic, further research should explore through a larger sample the validity of this comparison.

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34 Lucilla Vargas, 'Genderizing Latino News: An Analysis of a Local Newspaper's Coverage of Latino Current Affairs', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 17.3 (2000): 261–293.

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