



Narrating authenticity in northern Italian historical cafés



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ABSTRACT

While many migrants are now legal workers in Italian corporations (usually holding less desirable jobs), tensions between this new migratory workforce and Italians continue today. During the 1970s and 1980s, Italy changed from being a country of emigrants to a receiver of immigrants (the so called “extracomunitari”). This increased flow of immigrants has affected Italian self-perceptions of national culture and identity, and has led to new forms of strong anti-immigration legislation, supported especially by the influential *Lega Nord* (‘Northern League’) political party. A new wave of narratives that either counter or foster these anti-immigrant discourses has emerged. Using a corpus of naturally recorded oral narratives about migrants that I collected in several northern Italian historical cafés, this article explores how executives redefine both their individual and their corporate identities in narratives about immigrants. In particular, this article analyzes the different stances, or positionings, that executives assume to construct their corporate identity vis-à-vis the challenging Italian political climate surrounding migratory politics.

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1. Introduction

Coffee corporations, including historical cafés, which have been a kind of corporation in Europe since the nineteenth century, enjoy great popularity in many Italian towns. And, despite the fact that Italy imports all its coffee beans from equatorial countries, and that Italy first came to coffee thanks to the Ottoman Empire, coffee and coffee products have recently become indexes of Italianness itself. Although many of these Italian coffee corporations employ Italian workers, nowadays, this workforce has been hard to retain—even with Italy’s unemployment rate currently around 43%. As Italians have been seeking better positions, non-Italian migrants have taken their place in the coffee industry, albeit to fill less desirable jobs. And yet the presence of non-Italian migrants in this type of workplace has often been troubling to Italians, in part because of the threat posed to the constructed national character of its national drink, coffee.

While Italy’s political landscape is frequently in flux—as the recent elections demonstrate¹—one thing has been very stable in the last decade, especially in Northern Italy: the presence of strong anti-immigrant platforms. In this article, I explore the way these anti-immigration politics play out in the self-representations of a historical café that sells one of Italy’s most prized possessions and that has carried a prestigious aura since the nineteenth century. In particular, as a way to exemplify a

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¹ In 2013, the Partito Democratico (‘Democratic Party’) won the elections, thus replacing Silvio Berlusconi’s Partito della Libertà (‘Party of Liberty’) as the leading party in Italy for many years. In addition, the Movimento 5 stelle (‘Movement 5 Stars’), founded by the comedian Beppe Grillo, surprised many by coming into second place in the elections. The Lega Nord (‘Northern League’; discussed below), once a dominant member of Berlusconi’s ruling coalition, lost much of its influence after allegations of corruption surrounded many of its key members (including founder and leader Umberto Bossi).

common situation, I examine how an executive of a northern Italian coffee corporation narrates, takes stances, and enacts official and unofficial representations of his historical café, and how these reflect and index the politics surrounding migrants who often work in competing smaller cafés or bars that have mushroomed throughout the town. By looking at how executives portray immigrants in narratives presented publicly to interviewers asking about the corporation, this article reveals a strategic shift: while migrants seem at first to be included in executives' "official" narrative, as the narrative unfolds in the interaction, an "unofficial" narrative emerges that reveals what seems to be a fierce exclusiveness and nativism.

This article is based on a corpus of naturally recorded oral narratives produced by managers that I collected in several northern Italian coffee corporations and historical cafés.² While the data of this project include the analysis of 37 narratives produced by managers and representatives of Italian coffee companies and cafés, this article, given the space limitations, will focus on one interview with a manager of a historical café in a northern Italian town. Through an analysis of his four narratives told during the course of this single interview, I demonstrate how this manager semiotically constructs and moves across different senses of "authenticity" of his historical café and its coffee products.

Although authenticity has been widely studied and problematized in anthropology (e.g., Bruner, 1994, 2001; Wong, 1999; Cutler, 2003; Vann, 2006; Jaffe, 2011; Goebel, 2012),³ in this article, I use this notion to mean an "aura" (cf. Benjamin, 1936; Hansen, 2007) of historical rootedness that is felt to pervade the historical café, an aura that needs to be protected and cherished—a moral obligation (and prerogative) of museums and historical sites in general, as is the case of the Midwest historical site of New Salem described by Bruner (1994). The authenticity of a living history museum like New Salem, or, in the present case, a historical café, needs to be validated by the authority of some connoisseur, whether a museum professional, a scholar, or a member of the managerial staff. Not only is this historical café's authenticity repeatedly confirmed by its manager, but it is also ratified by the entire town and by its citizens more generally, as I demonstrate in the analysis below.

Throughout his four narratives, the manager changes discursive gears from an official representation of the corporation to a more "unofficial" account toward the end of the interview. This shift is effected partly through a shift in his stance (Du Bois, 2007; cf. Kockelman, 2004, 2005; Agha, 2007) toward us, the interviewers, and the shift moves from an inclusionary authenticity to an exclusionary, nativist authenticity. During the interview, through his evaluative remarks about his historical café—evaluation of states of affairs being one dimension of a multidimensional stance—taking process (Du Bois, 2007)—the manager aligns himself with an "official" account of his café that positions us, the interviewers, as outsiders. However, later in the interview, he evaluates the café's authenticity differently (see also Jaffe, 2009) and comes to position us as insiders who have access to his "true" stance on this corporation. By inhabiting these seemingly contradictory stances on the café's authenticity, and by shifting his alignment and positioning toward us—the two interviewers—the manager not only protects and defends the authenticity of his historical café vis-à-vis the surrounding competing smaller cafés and bars, but he also reveals important political claims that concern tensions between Italians and the new immigrant population in Northern Italy.

1.1. Narrating historical cafés in Northern Italy

While coffee has become an Italian national heritage commodity and a solid and internationally recognized "made in Italy" product (Morris, 2008), its origins are not in the Italian peninsula, nor in Europe. As Ellis explains, "the practice of drinking coffee is of comparatively recent origin: It goes back only 350 years in Northern Europe, and only another century or so in Ottoman Istanbul" (Ellis, 2008:156; see also Ellis, 2004). Today, however, coffee has come to be assigned the title of Italy's "national drink" (Morris, 2010), perhaps even more so than wine. In Italy there is an extraordinary self-consciousness of national "excellence" at coffee. Coffee matters are taken seriously in bars and cafés at which espressos and cappuccinos are consumed and at the many illustrious coffee producers, such as Hausbrandt, Illy, Kimbo, Lavazza, Mauro, Pellini, Segafredo Zanetti, Splendid, Vergnano—just to mention a few of the most renowned ones. As Morris writes:

Nowhere has coffee become a more iconic symbol of the nation than in Italy. The "Italian espresso" has become closely identified with the country by both Italians and foreigners alike as have those beverages which employ this as a base such as cappuccino and caffè latte. (Morris, 2010:158).

As Paul Manning (2008, 2012) notes for the coffee register used at Starbucks, for example, Italian coffee terminology has also entered cafés around the world. Within Italy itself, each town and city often has one or more historical cafés located in its historical district. Insofar as these coffee-houses have legal rights and liabilities that are distinct from their employees and shareholders, these historical cafés are full-fledged corporate entities.⁴ Since there is a tendency for these historical cafés to roast their own coffee rather than use branded roasted coffees, they typically have their own coffee roasting facilities nearby

² The data used in this article were collected during linguistic anthropological fieldwork that I conducted in northern Italy between 2003 and 2013. While I collected many narratives from executives of several historical cafés and coffee corporations, I focus my analysis on one historical café. The narratives analyzed in this article were quite similar to others in the corpus, but there is no space here to compare them. The narratives used in this essay were initially collected for an ethnographic project on Italian business executives that I conducted with Gregory Kohler, who was, at the time, my research assistant. In this article, I use pseudonyms both for the name of the café analyzed and for speech participants to maintain their anonymity.

³ There is an extensive and conflicting literature on the sociocultural meanings of authenticity. See Vann, 2006 for an excellent review and synopsis. On issues of authenticity and authority referred to language, see Jaffe, 2011.

⁴ Although colloquially only publicly owned companies are referred to as corporations, I am using the term here in its legal meaning.

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