Stating Otherness Through Socio-Cultural Biases

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Nowadays a well-defined idea of barbarians as the cause of the decline of an advanced civilization is widespread. This paper aims firstly to analyze the different meanings that the term *barbarian* has assumed in media outlets context in recent years, with emphasis on Italian political dimension. Secondly, it aims to examine if (and how much) it could be argued that, in these cases of manipulation, the sources of the late antique world have a crucial role in this kind of cultural biases. The comparative analysis of these two categories seems to reveal the reiteration of a stratified archive that, formed in ancient times and consolidated over time, maintains its main purpose: opposing the dominant social group (*ingroup*) and heterogeneous minorities (*outgroups*). So, what is the cultural operations that stay behind this approach? Is it possible to affirm that certain ideological identity archives are replicated over time applied to phenomena perceived as similar to each other, or would it be more correct to look at them as autonomous narratives?

Keywords: biases, media outlets, Islamist extremism, immigrants, political forces, barbarians

Introduction

Nowadays, more and more references highlight a strong relationship between our world and classical one, barbarians and new barbarians, especially by comparing the current social, political, and cultural situation with the IV-VI century barbarian invasions. This happens because a well-defined idea of barbarians as the perpetrators of decline of an advanced civilization is widespread.

A clear example is provided by the speech of the Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz (2020) after the terribly recent Vienna terrorist attack on November 2, 2020:

> It has now been confirmed that yesterday's attack was clearly an Islamist terrorist attack. It was an attack out of hatred—out of hatred for our basic values, for our way of life, for our democracy, in which all people are equal in rights and dignity. (…) Our enemy—Islamist extremism—not only wants to cause death and suffering, it also wants to divide our society. (…) We must all be aware that this is not a conflict between Christians and Muslims or between Austrians and migrants. No, this is a fight between the many people who believe in peace and those few who want war. It is a fight between civilization and barbarism. And we will fight this fight with all our determination.

Kurz's words reflect a widespread perception in Europe, especially following the French upheavals of the previous days. We thus identify a well-identified enemy, the Islamic extremism, who do not desire only the death of innocent people but the decline of Western society. Kurz is clear in saying that this is not a clash between different religions. He expressly points towards a clash between those who believe in peace and those who are consumed by hatred against our basic values, our equal rights, our way of life. A clash between civilization and barbarism.

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A decade ago Geert Wilders (2011), leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom, also addressed the Islamic extremists with the same words, referring to them as new barbarians invading the civilized world to overthrow it. He says that what is happening in Europe today (he refers to the immigrants issue), is "exactly what happened here, in Rome, 16 centuries ago". And he goes on saying:

> In the 5th century, the Roman Empire fell to the Germanic Barbarians. There is no doubt that the Roman civilization was far superior to that of the Barbarians. And yet, Rome fell. (...) Ladies and gentlemen, make no mistake: Our opponents are keenly aware of our weakness. They realize that the pattern which led to the fall of Rome, is at play today in the West. They are keenly aware of the importance of Rome as a symbol of the West. Over and over again they hint at the fall of Rome.

Wilders' insinuation clearly states a phantom attack to the Western countries by radical Islam and is not the only one (Nussbaum, 2012).

We could find an explicit reference to this stereotyped rhetoric (Fiske, 1998) in the Polish magazine *wSieci*, which in 2016 dedicated an issue to the "Islamic Rape of Europe" and put on the cover a white girl with long blonde hair, dressed with a European Union flag. There are dark hands on her trying to tear off her dress, squeeze her hips, pull her hair, block her wrists. The magazine offers a reading according to which the fear of external aggression by barbarian groups has insinuated itself among the people and the premiers of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic ride this fear. They have met in Prague to face German openings about refugees and the asylum seekers' allocation plan promoted by Brussels.

Thus, we perceive a clear contradiction with that Brussels itself has encouraged in the process of eastward enlargement, which would have promoted immigration flows to these countries and contributed to revitalizing Europe's aging process. Not only that, but enlargement would not change the nature but the basis of the dialogue between cultures through the integration of Islam.

In *The Dialogue Between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area*, a report by the High-Level Advisory Group established at the initiative of the President of the European Commission (2003, p. 11), it was stated:

> These two future developments will have a number of positive effects on the prospects for immigration and on the place of Islam in Europe. First of all they will show that a European Islam has come into being, thus dispelling the image of a rampant Islamisation of Europe. This European Islam is developing its own characteristics which increasingly distinguish it from Islam as lived in Muslim countries.

It is interesting to note how these ideological constructions crumbled in front of the disorderly march of men, women, old men, and children. The Syrians, the Iraqis, the Afghans, the Maghrebi are not warriors of an army that decided to conquer the "Old European Fortress" (Kauffmann & Jurga, 2002; Jünemann, Fromm, & Scherer, 2017), but poor people escaping from war, bombs, murders, and despite this their presence seems to be enough to blow up the foundations of European construction.

The Italian Case of Study

With the immigration challenge opens a further discourse on the new barbarians, narrowing the field of investigation to the Italian case, the events of the last years, especially after Matteo Salvini's establishment in government (2018), have led to an indiscriminate use of the word *barbarian*.

On the one hand, it continues to define immigrant groups or individuals marked as dangerous and destabilizing for the public order (Lee & Fiske, 2006; Fiske, 2015). On the other hand, the current situation

provides the basis to define also the new Italian political forces (the *Five Star Movement* and, above all, the *League*[1]) as barbarians.

The examples are many and come from different positions.

Father Zanotelli, a Catholic missionary, says he has "almost no more words for what is happening" (Corneli, 2019) in Italy about immigration. He continues:

> These days I read the UN report on the human rights of refugees in Libya dated December 18, 2018: it is devastating. We have a government of heartless barbarians, we are losing our humanity. The situation is unsustainable. I cannot understand how we can have a government that loses humanity. (Corneli, 2019)

The missionary expresses his pain noting that:

> Unfortunately in the Italian people, but the situation is no different in the rest of Europe, I don't know what happened. We came out of a Second World War, from a terrible melting pot, we had the homeland of rights and now suddenly it has fallen. The basic reasons I think are that the white tribe now feels threatened. We have conquered everything and now we feel threatened, we are afraid and then we must defend our comfort. (Corneli, 2019)

If Zanotelli's position may be influenced by Catholic morality, certainly more accurate, and at the same time worrying, are the opinions of two political scientists, Giovanni Orsina and Angelo Panebianco.

The first one, after having highlighted his disappointment over some initiatives of the government, offered his own recipe referring to stories of 16 centuries ago, that is to say at the time of the fall of the Western Roman Empire:

> the Rome we had known before the 5th century was no longer there, to regret it—we should have said—will not has much sense (…) let us at least, then, try to Romanize the barbarians. Barbarians came to power thanks to those who had ruled before them, who—in the past as now—in an attempt to exorcize those people who had come from outside, had borrowed their features, languages and movements for years and years. And, in this way, they had opened the gates of the city for them. Just as in recent years Italy, parties and intellectuals of the Second Republic are responsible for having adopted the populist and anti-European tones of their competitors. (Mieli, 2018)

Panebianco replied to his colleague with irony:

> I am happy to leave the task of polishing Odoacer to my friend Orsina (…) if things go the way he planned, it would be better to prepare a passport for Papuasia because I can't see myself teaching Salvini and Di Maio the basics of the State. (Mieli, 2018)

Beyond the joking tone, Panebianco foresees that there is still time because the real game will be played outside the Italian borders. In his opinion it is better to wait, at least, until the European elections when it will be possible, perhaps, "to avoid the plebiscite in favour of the international sovereign" (Mieli, 2018). After that, it is likely that a new game will open in Italy: "not to Romanize the barbarians, but to expel them" (Mieli, 2018).

It was 2018, the European elections were there, we have seen the results and we also know the success of the nationalist movements in Europe (Dunford et al., 2019).

For every government the management of immigration is a challenge: failing on this, means failing on everything else. So the alliance signed by the barbarians Di Maio and Salvini to take Rome failed, and while Di Maio agrees to be Romanized, Salvini has been irreducible and for this reason he was expelled.

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[1] It should be noted that since its birth the *League* has defined itself, and has been defined, as barbaric. For the presence of the *League* in newspapers between 1985 and 1993 see: Fusella, 1993.

It is interesting to note that Salvini's role is once again playing a leading role in the recent attack in Nice on October 29, 2020. Interviewed by the French television *TVLibertés*, the criminologist Xavier Raufer argued that: "If Matteo Salvini were still in his place doing his job, the three Frenchmen would probably still be alive today" (TVL, 2020). He has also given his interpretation of the case: "The media and others who have shown an unhealthy joy, today have only eyes to cry. The attack in Nice is a consequence of immigration" (TVL, 2020).

However, if many people look at that government as barbaric, it does not consider itself like that and it continues to target immigrants as barbarians. Why? They are useful to politics for a reason that is not noble and not useful to the community: they are useful to win elections. How? There are lies about migrants that have gone viral and the method is always the same: take a believable information, not necessarily true, more often fake, and use it against an "enemy" (Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; Wodak & Leslie, 2017) who, if he tries to defend himself, then ends to spread the lie. This method is called *negative campaigning* (Lau & Rovner, 2009; Haselmayer, 2019) and it is a perfect technique that leaves no escape for the designated victim because it is based on the study of fears and the simplicity of exploiting them. The key point is this: to win elections and preserve power, why do we need to focus on the causes of fears and try to solve them, when it is much easier to create and propagate them? At the beginning the enemy is political, in Italy, in Hungary, in Great Britain, etc. Then, once the competitors have been defeated, it is necessary to find an endless, universal enemy, able to mobilize the electorate frightening it. It is no longer enough to say: we defeat the political enemy, because the risk would be a progressive lack of interest in public affairs. It is necessary to fear a danger, i.e. invasions of foreigners, to force people to be always ready to mobilize (Hewstone & Greenland, 2000). This is how is created the invading migrant, the potential terrorist migrant, the NGOs that facilitate the invasion and the hidden sponsors of the NGOs, who work to weaken Europe, to pauperize it with new hordes of barbarians, and then subjugate it. It is a paradoxical reconstruction that has conditioned the immigration policies of many European governments, especially in the last decade.

Outgroups in the Late Antique Sources[*]

If contemporary media outlets make such a strong mention of the past[2], is this imagery of *barbarians* confirmed in the antique sources? In order to attempt to answer this question, it is precisely to late antique narratives that we have to go back, trying to understand how the barbarian phenomenon has been culturally characterized and whether there are elements that have survived since then up to the present days.

Let us make a brief excursus in Latin sources preceding the collapse of the Roman West and examine how appears the relationship between Romans and barbarians. Certainly, both positive and negative references can be found, but it is the latter that offer the most interesting characteristics for the purpose of this paper.

In the I century A.D. the elegiac poet Ovid, who declines into disgrace with the Emperor Augustus in 8 A.D., is exiled to the city of Tomi on the Black Sea. Forced to live in a region on the borders of the Empire, with no possibility to return to the imperial court, Ovid cannot hide his disgust towards the barbarians, nor the trouble he experiences living in a land where he feels himself a barbarian, obliged to use gestures to communicate.

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[*] For all late antique sources, I provide the source mention followed by the reference edition that can be consulted online at the link provided in the References.
[2] Reducing the research field to Italy and taking into account two of the major Italian newspapers, *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*, it is enough to consider that for the biennium 2018-2019 there are 307 (165 in 2018 and 142 in 2019) articles containing the word *barbarian* for *Il Corriere della Sera* and 266 (143 in 2018 and 123 in 2019) for *La Repubblica*.

> For with us dwell without distinction the barbarians, occupying even more than half of the dwellings. Even should you not fear them, you may loathe the sight of their chests covered with hides and with their long hair. Even these who are believed to derive their descent from the Greek city wear Persian trousers instead of the dress of their fathers. They hold intercourse in the tongue they share; I must make myself understood by gestures. Here it is I that am a barbarian, understood by nobody; the Getae laugh stupidly at Latin words. (Ovid, *Tristia*, V, 10, vv. 29-38: Wheeler, 1939)

Between the II and the III century, there was an increasing mixture of Romans and barbarians. The military reform promoted by Emperor Gallienus (253-268 A.D.), making it possible for valiant commanders to gain access to the Empire's prestigious offices, usually reserved for senators, encouraged the process that induced the most ambitious barbarians in the Roman army to try their luck rising to the top of the military hierarchy, the imperial one.

In the IV century, the situation became more problematic (Wickham, 2005; Heather, 2009). The weaknesses of the imperial system opened up during the severe crisis experienced in the previous century and the reforms implemented to deal with them, first by Diocletian (284-305 A.C.) and then by Constantine (306-337 A.C.), bring with them important and radical changes. In the second half of the IV century, in fact, the Empire was forced to make compromises with the allocation of an ever-increasing number of barbarians within its borders: peaceful settlers contributing to the tax system, mercenaries serving in the army, *dediticii*, and slaves. This also leads to a deep crisis in the artistic representations of the barbarians who, if in concrete are no longer subjects that can be clearly separated from Roman society, on the ideological level they are still strongly stereotyped by an extremely politicized debate (Richard, 1999; Pohl & Heydemann, 2013).

In a narrative that might seem to be contemporary, Ammianus Marcellinus describes the asylum request of the Tervingians, who are starving and trying to escape from the devastation caused by the Huns. As we have already seen for our present, the situation is managed thinking first of all to profit:

> the affair caused more joy than for fear; and experienced flatterers immoderately praised the good fortune of the prince, which unexpectedly brought him so many young recruits from the ends of the earth (…); also that instead of the levy of soldiers (…) there would accrue to the treasuries a vast amount of gold. (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Historiae*, XXXI, 4: Rolfe, 1986)

Dazzled by the money, the emperor Valens orders that they are welcomed and "diligent care was taken that no future destroyer of the Roman state should be left behind, even if he were smitten with a fatal disease" (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Historiae*, XXXI, 5: Rolfe, 1986).

Valens is responsible for the annihilation of the Eastern army at the battle of Hadrianopolis and in this way he condemns the Empire to suffer the devastation of the barbarians because of his lust for glory. In his description, even though it is that of a Roman emperor, Ammianus does not hesitate to list some of his defects according to a pattern that has already seen previously linked to the barbarian narratives. Valens is procrastinating and lazy, characteristics that narrative stereotypes, to which Ammianus is faithful, attributed to those who are dark-skinned. To positively balance the figure of the emperor, presenting him as not completely "barbarian", contribute on the one hand the harmony of the body and on the other hand the average stature, not too tall or too short (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Historiae*, XXXI, 14, 7: Rolfe, 1986).

Towards the end of the IV century, the "ethnic" conflict between Romans and barbarians is about to reach its apex (Bury, 1967; Pohl, 1997; Liebeschuetz, 2001; MacMullen, 2003; Batty, 2007; Wood, 2018). Synesius of Cyrene is one of the major voices supporting the anti-barbaric movement between the end of the IV and the

beginning of the V century. He has directly experienced the invasion of Cyrenaica by the barbarians, so he conveys in his writings the worries about a Roman civilization that is perceived as declining and with no future:

> when the man with the leathern jerkin marches in command of those that wear the general's cloak, and whenever such an one divests himself of the sheepskin in which he was clad to assume the toga, and enters the council-chamber to deliberate on matters of State with the Roman magistrates, having a prominent seat perhaps next to the consul, while the lawful men sit behind him. Then again such as these, when they have gone a little way from the assembly, are again attired in their sheepskins, and once in company of their followers, laugh the toga to scorn, and aver that they cannot even draw the sword in comfort with it. (Synesius of Cyrene, *De Regno*, XV: Fitzgerald, 1926)

In the V century, despite the decline of political power, the propagandistic image of the barbarians remained alive as one of the few factors of *Romanitas* still firmly rooted in the cultural background of the Roman *élite* (Pohl, Gantner, Grifoni, & Pollheimer-Mohaupt, 2018). Sidonius Apollinaris, a member of the Gallo-Roman *élite* and a prominent figure on the Roman scene, provides a clear insight into the tragic situation of his time. The criticism of Sidonius is particularly focused to those barbaric costumes on which he knows he could more easily mobilize the consensus of the Romans.

> Do you want me to tell you what wrecks all poetry? Driven away by barbarian thrumming the Muse has spurned the six-footed exercise ever since she beheld these patrons seven feet high. I am fain to call your eyes and ears happy, happy too your nose, for you don't have a reek of garlic and foul onions discharged upon you at early morn from ten breakfasts. (Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina*, XII, vv. 3-15: Anderson, 1963)

Like Sidonius, also Salvian of Marseilles, an exponent of the Catholic community of Roman society, is a spokesman for the tragic situation that is affecting the West. Salvian believes that the primary cause of the evils of his time resides in the decay of moral customs.

> Let us compare the lives, the aims, the customs and the vices of the barbarians with our own. The barbarians are unjust and we are also; they are avaricious and so are we; they are faithless and so are we; to sum up, the barbarians and ourselves are alike guilty of all evils and impurities. Perhaps the answer may be made: if we are equal to them in viciousness, why are we not also equal to them in strength? Inasmuch as their wickedness is like ours and their guilt identical, either we should be as strong as they, or they as weak as we. That is true, and the natural conclusion is that we who are weaker are the more guilty. (Salvian of Marseilles, *De gubernatione Dei*, IV, 14: Sanford, 1930)

His invective points out a precise responsible, the Africans, who collect all the vices of the world. Every negative aspect, having arrived in Africa, increases in intensity to such an extent that, although the pagan and savage populations of the North can be criticized, they are not, after all, as despicable as the African populations.

> Yet this crime was the especial prerogative of all the people of Africa. For just as the filth of a boat is washed down into the bilge water in its depths, so vices seem to have flowed into their habits from the whole world. (…) The race of the Goths is treacherous but chaste, the Alans unchaste but not treacherous; the Franks are deceitful but hospitable, the Saxons savage in their cruelty but admirable for their chastity; to conclude, all races have their own peculiar vices accompanied by their own good qualities. But among the people of Africa practically without exception there is nothing but evil. If inhumanity is the subject of our accusation they are inhuman; if drunkenness, they are drunken; if falsehood, they are most false; if deceit, they are unexcelled in deceitfulness; if greed, they are surpassingly greedy; if perfidy, theirs is unequalled. (Salvian of Marseilles, *De gubernatione Dei*, VII, 15, 63: Sanford, 1930)

Concluding here this brief excursus on late antique sources, what we could deduce from it is a transformative process. Nevertheless, this transformation is demonized by the conservative Latin *élite*, who

perceive mixtures between Romans and barbarians as a factor of instability and weakness for the Empire. The conservative aristocracy tends to express his latent hostility towards new barbaric *élite* adopting propaganda narratives that make extensive use of those stereotypes stratified in previous centuries to discredit the competitors and referring to those new socio-political agents' clothes and behaviour as barbaric (von Rummel, 2011).

Since the V century A.D. the socio-political situation of the Empire, especially in the West, has shifted the balance in favour of barbarian immigration. We could observe the results of this process in the following century, when intellectuals who write in Latin are largely barbarians in their origins. Furthermore, we shall notice the definitive collapse of the Roman Senate in the West[3], to the extent that, from the middle of the VI century A.D., the term *Romanitas* has lost its cultural value to assume the mere function of linguistic and symbolic category[4].

Conclusions

There is no doubt, I would say, that the comparative analysis of late antiquity period and our present reveals the existence of a stratified archive. This set of biases, formed in ancient times and developed over the centuries, maintains its main purpose: opposing the dominant social group (*ingroup*) and the heterogeneous minorities (*outgroups*) classified as barbarians, today as in the past.

From late antique sources, with their notion of intrinsic superiority of civilization to barbarism, the European modernity inherits the concept of the barbarian along with certain specific prejudices. The classical image of the barbarian has to be accommodated, however, to the changing historical circumstances of next centuries. What Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre have introduced in historical research as *historical semantics* (Febvre, 1930) might be useful in explaining the European attitudes towards the barbarians and clarifying some of the presuppositions of nowadays European morality, spirituality, and psychology. Alterations in the relationship between civilization and barbarism occasionally endowed the word *barbarus* with new meanings and the traditional biases had to be adjusted to new realities. A description of the uses and the meanings of this term in literary sources of III-VII centuries Europe, together with the study of what constituted its antonym during the same period, could reveal much about the preoccupations and anxieties of contemporary European men.

So, after all, it does not matter whether the narrations on the barbarians, old and new, are justified or not. What should suggest us is that, as I have hopefully highlighted, the dialogue between identity and otherness represents the fertile ground for creation and development of many borders, often independent from rational thought. The *barbarus* is evoked in civilized minds, whether the word is applied both to ancient Goths, Vandals, Africans or nowadays Arabs and Italian politicians. It arouses feelings of fear, distrust, and hatred for a variety of peoples, which are seen by their "civilized" critics, to a greater or lesser extent, as a threat posed by warlike, unpredictable, and cruel enemies.

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[3] The last *senatus consultum* is dated 533 A.D. and from 554 A.D. Justinian abolishes its titles in the recently re-conquered West. In 590 A.D., for example, Gregory the Great can state that there is no longer a senate in Rome: "senatus deest, populus interiit (...), vacua ardet Roma" (Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Hiezechielem prophetam*, II, 6, 22).

[4] Almost as proof of this, Walter Pohl (Pohl et al., 2018, pp. 4-5) argues that, within modern and contemporary historiography about this period "Uses differ considerably between the disciplines. 'Roman' is a key term for ancient, medieval and legal historians, for historians of art, for classical and early medieval archaeologists, and for classical philology, which deals with Latin, but calls its speakers 'Romans'. Likewise, 'Roman' also means different things between different national research traditions. (…) Difference in terminology and approach reflect the multiplicity of the subject and of its modern uses".

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