

Originally published in Italian: [*“Il risveglio incosciente di coscienze assenti. - Laetitia Marshall”*](#)

June 2, 2020

Irresponsible Wokeness, Absent Consciences: Italian Responses to Black Lives Matter

By Laetitia Marshall

Translated by Marina Romani and Julia Nelsen

The case of police violence in the United States that led to the death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man killed last May 25 in Minneapolis, MN, made headlines around the world. Floyd's murder, and the subsequent protests that erupted in cities throughout the US, have roused people and institutions at a global level. The protests, begun to say “enough” to police brutality against Black people, soon turned into a class struggle, a fight against a system based on and created for oppression.

In the Italian media, reactions to the news have fallen into two main camps: on the one hand, those who insist on circumscribing the problem to a mere abuse of power of which anybody could be a victim; on the other, those who are able to acknowledge a wider perspective. The latter understand that the origins of the protests lie in the systemic and institutionalized discrimination of African Americans, which manifests – among many other ways – also in terms of racial profiling.

Many Italians denounced the situation on social media to the cry of Black Lives Matter, sharing content aimed at raising awareness. In the days following Floyd's killing, a group of activists even gathered outside the American embassy in Milan to protest against the murder.

We might ask ourselves if this “awakened conscience” with regard to racism overseas will stay equally “woke” about racist episodes on the Italian peninsula. The answer is revealed in a widespread lack of awareness of our Italian reality – an ignorance that emerges in expressions uttered with condescension (*“thankfully I was born in Italy!”*), pointing the finger at the politics of the other while completely ignoring what's happening in one's own backyard.

As a Black girl raised in Italy, this rhetoric that absolves oneself of responsibility is exhausting. If in the United States the problem is a system that began with oppression, developed through oppression, and has operated thanks to oppression, in Italy the primary vehicle for discrimination remains ignorance – one that often stems from a lack of listening to minorities. This lack, in turn, translates into the absence of a real interest in the problems that minorities

face, and it manifests as a refusal to question one's preconceptions, to accept criticism from those directly concerned, and to take an active stance on the issues that affect them.

The media spectacle of this struggle, minus any in-depth analysis of the underlying causes and oppression that sparked it, becomes an end in itself, a self-congratulating performance that in no way benefits the oppressed. What's happening in the US will make sense for us only if we stop to examine the way in which racism and colonialism affect our culture. What's lost in anti-racist activism in Italy is a structural criticism against racism. And racism is not only about populist leaders and their explicitly discriminatory outpourings. Racism has dominated Italian culture for years: it didn't stop with Mussolini, nor did it start with Salvini. Believing in this illusion is a consequence of the lack of interest that I mentioned above. In Italy, racism is part of the experience of each immigrant – no matter if first-, second-, or third-generation – almost intrinsic to it. Racism becomes a daily struggle if one's origins are easily identifiable based on the color of one's skin.

Talking about racism in Italy, especially if you're part of a minority group, is almost taboo. How many times have I been told that my criticism of microaggressions, of behaviors that even unconsciously promote inequality, of joking remarks, was "too much" – "*you see racism everywhere!*" Somehow, the person to whom you try to explain racism proves more sensitive than you, the person who is subjected to it daily. To live in denial adds nothing to the conversation; instead, it gives even more space to discrimination, which then becomes the norm. Those who choose not to see it become part of the problem.

Yet the veil of illusion that each of us creates to absolve ourselves of responsibility doesn't erase the reality that minorities face. The dehumanization of Black people, the exploitation, the contempt for minorities – they all remain. Racism is rampant here as well; it is woven into the texture of our society. It shows its face on a daily basis, when people have no problem perpetuating ignorance and xenophobia in your presence because they don't mean *you*, because you're different, you "don't seem African," because you don't embody the African stereotype that is painted in their minds. When you step into an office and the first thing someone asks is "do you speak Italian?", even if you were born in Italy, because a Black person is obviously an immigrant who came by boat, who hasn't integrated, who can't possibly have adequate knowledge of the language. When a woman wearing a veil is called a terrorist on the street, amid snickers. Racism exists in the media when journalists repeat the narrative of the immigrant who came to steal jobs from Italians (who do you mean by Italians?). Racism is cultural when a story about the "first Black attorney", Hillary Sedu, makes headlines. Racism is institutional when a Senator of the Italian Republic [Matteo Salvini] dares to visit the home of a Tunisian man on live television to ask if he is a drug dealer, having no proof and breaking several laws, yet is accompanied and supported by police.

Black Lives Matter also applies when it comes to immigration policies and immigrant rights. Black Lives Matter when these lives are left in the Mediterranean Sea to die before the eyes of the Coast Guard, where they become food for hypocritical and absent consciences and for the

speculations of politicians who turn them into propaganda tools, on the right as well as the so-called left. The lives of Black people matter when it comes to farmworkers and laborers who are exploited and suffer abuse every day on Italian soil, when it comes to the regularization of their work. The lives of Black people matter when it comes to policies that acknowledge them above all as human beings, not as mere means of production or resources.

Pointing the finger at others, while ignoring the voices of those who are calling upon you at home, is mere hypocrisy. It's too easy to take a stand on events far from us, on which we have little influence, about which we can indulge in extreme outrage – and nothing else. Sharing content can certainly create awareness. But this awareness has to start with oneself. It's useless unless it comes with taking an active stance in one's daily life.