



The Spreading of the Black Lives Matter Movement Campaign: The Italian Case in Cross-National Perspective*

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Following the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 and inspired by the actions of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, in June 2020 a wave of protest events spread across Europe as well. Based on in-depth interviews with key informants involved in the BLM campaign and a systematic mapping of protest events, the article analyses the diffusion of the Black Lives Matter movement campaign in Italy. We investigate the conditions for the diffusion, by considering the resonance of the protests in a time of backlash and pandemic; the channels of diffusion, namely mechanisms of thin diffusion linked to the instantaneous exchange of protest content; and the effects of diffusion, in terms of recontextualization of ideas and narratives from the United States to the Italian context, the emergence of new antiracist organizations and intersectional frames that point at Italian colonialism and structural racism.

KEYWORDS: Black Lives Matter; diffusion; Italy; protest; racism and antiracism; resonance; social movements.

BLACK LIVES MATTER IN ITALY: AN INTRODUCTION

Following the death of Afro-American citizen George Floyd on May 25, 2020, a wave of protests spread across countries and continents. The event sparked massive outrage among the American population, receiving unprecedented attention by media all over the world, and bringing the issues of systemic racism and police brutality forward to the world stage. Inspired by the actions of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the United States, in Italy, we registered about 150 protest events which occurred over the summer of 2020.

Conceptualizing the wave of antiracist protests within the framework of the BLM campaign in Italy as a case of cross-national diffusion sparked by an eventful protest, that is a protest that produce effects on the social movements themselves, through affective, cognitive, and relational processes (Della Porta 2018), we will

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look at how repertoires of action and collective frames have been adopted, but also adapted from the original movement in the United States to the Italian national context. In particular, we investigate how the BLM global wave of protest fits in the legacy of progressive and antiracist movements in Italy and to what extent it is perceived as a turning point in their development. Importantly, the antiracist movement in Italy has been traditionally rooted in an egalitarian conception that challenges the very notion of race as embedded in the fascist past with less attention paid to the colonial legacy. As in many other countries on continental Europe, race as a critical category is disowned because of its ties to the fascist history (Hawthorne and Piccolo 2016; Romeo 2012). Indeed, this evaporation of race (Goldberg 2009) and the consequent enduring denial of the presence of racism is a consistent trait of Italian society (Lentin 2004; Oliveri 2018). In the attempt to seal race and racism in the past (often considering it as an external challenge), the antiracist movement in Italy has rather been concerned with migrant rights from a culturalist perspective (Lentin 2004; but see Oliveri 2012).

In what follows, we introduce the theoretical basis of our analysis, building upon previous studies on transnational activism and cross-national diffusion of social movements' ideas. After having presented our data sources and methodological choices, we then proceed with the analysis of the empirical material, shedding light on mechanisms of diffusion, recontextualization, and adaptation. Finally, we conclude the article by summarizing our main findings and proposing further avenues for research in the study of the BLM campaign in Italy and beyond.

DIFFUSION AND RECONTEXTUALIZATION IN TRANSNATIONAL CAMPAIGNS

The wave of BLM protests of 2020 caught the attention of many for its magnitude and spread across the globe, hinting at the importance of processes of scale shift through which collective action moves beyond its original place (Tarrow and McAdam 2005). Looking at the mechanisms of transnationalization, social movement scholars have addressed the cross-national exchange of ideas, frames, organizational forms, and tactics as processes of cross-national *diffusion* (for a review, see Givans et al. 2010; Soule 2004; Soule and Roggeband 2019). The main idea behind the study of diffusion is that, first, collective action rarely happens in complete isolation within a country (Roggeband 2007) and, second, the spread of collective action cannot be reduced to a pattern-less "contagion" (Tarrow 2010).

Research on cross-national diffusion has focused on different aspects, including social networks (Oliver and Myers 2003a; Strang and Soule 1998), tactical innovation (Biggs and Andrews 2010; Edwards 2014; Nummi et al. 2019; Wang and Soule 2012), the role of media and ICT (Earl and Kimport 2010; Mundt et al. 2018 on BLM), and organizational dynamics (Meyer and Whittier 1994; Minkoff 1997). Three main questions have been addressed: the conditions for diffusion to happen, its main channels, and its consequences (Givans et al. 2010; Tarrow 2010).

As for the *conditions* for diffusion, arguments moved from geographic proximity to the social construction of similarities. Della Porta and Mattoni (2014) identify

important differences in the processes that led to the spreading of protests and cross-national diffusion of frames and repertoires of action, not only in proximate and similar contexts, but also in distant and diverse places, by looking at the active social construction of similarities between very distant sites. This happens in particular in the cross-national diffusion of specific moments that we characterize as eventful protests (Della Porta 2018; Sewell 1996). In this regard, Della Porta has suggested a “momentous approach” to contentious politics, which identifies, in the dynamics of protests during critical junctures, an initial trigger (i.e., a ‘crack’), its reproduction and, finally, its consolidation. In moments of crisis, emotional excitement but also cognitive liberation spreads quickly during the encounters of (unexpectedly) large masses of protesters. A crack—as a triggering event—reverberates when similar forms of protests are reproduced, contributing to feelings of empowerment and emerging innovations through intense networking in quickly multiplying protest sites. As structures weaken and conjuncture acquires relevance, choice points influence the open-ended process of reproducing the crack through fluidification of existing structures, but also the emergence of new norms. Sedimentation of changes induced by eventful protests is then embedded in the consolidation of collective identities and social networks. In this process, resonance supports the importation of ideas from abroad when there is an endogenous potential for mobilization, such as pre-existing local movement experience and activists’ networks. In fact, “a movement may take off in one place not so much because activists attribute similarity and begin to imitate practices but rather because the affective claims and struggles of people elsewhere resonate with their own and provide domestic activists with the inspiration to activate dormant potentialities for mobilization back home” (Roos and Oikonomakis 2014, p. 119).

As for the *channels* for diffusion, the analysis singled out relational and mediated ones. These latter vary according to the degree of connection between different organizations, the presence of pre-existing networks and direct ties between individuals and organizations based on interpersonal communication and trust (relational), the extent to which diffusion is inspired and facilitated by media mass coverage and social media (nonrelational), and the intervention by third actors (mediated) (Oliver and Myers 2003b). In addition, studies on diffusion have identified different key actors involved in the process, such as early adopters and late adopters, pointing at the importance of the speed at which ideas travel and of the timing of their adoption (Givans et al. 2010). For instance, the anti-austerity protests of 2011 featured a grassroots transnational coordination based on fluid networks, as the mobilization of “first comers” was accompanied by a “logic of aggregation among individual participants that often used social media to come together around specific events” (Della Porta 2020, 125; Juris 2012). This logic has been considered an example of thin diffusion, based on the almost instantaneous exchange of information and content of protest through the individual use of new social media.

The analyses of the *effects* of diffusion address processes of learning and adaptation. Roggeband (2007, 248) has, in particular, singled out a mechanism of recontextualization to explain how adopters manage differences in terms of cultural understanding and contextual boundedness once they decide to follow an inspiring example. While early adopters tend to be more faithful to the original example

(“literal translation”), later ones are more prone to a cultural critique of the original frame and may opt for locally more resonant versions (*ibid.*), given also the wider range of examples they can refer to. An important outcome of diffusion is the generation of new networks and organizations which often results in power imbalances between actors in the network (Oliver and Myers 2003a), and notably between old and new actors, but also early and later adopters, over issues of leadership, issue ownership and access to resources and media at the national level (Roggeband 2007).

Building on these theoretical insights, our analysis contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the conditions, channels, and effects of diffusion of the BLM campaign in Italy as an instance of eventful protest.

DATA AND METHOD⁴

To reconstruct the repertoires of action, organizational models and collective framing of the BLM and related protest events in Italy, we have first mapped all relevant protest events that took place between May 26, 2020 and July 30, 2020; second, for most of them, we have collected the documents issued by the protest organizers to call for the protest and/or their statements during the events; third, we have carried out eight semi-structured interviews with key actors and protest organizers.

For the mapping of protests, we performed a variant of “protest event analysis” (Hutter 2014), using the basic but inclusive string “Black Lives Matter OR BLM AND [name of Italian region]” in three types of sources: Google search engine; social media and website publications of movement organizations; national and regional newspapers. We then manually coded all the relevant events in an Excel file, including information on the geographic distribution, the form of the event (sit-in, flashmob, march, etc.), the arena (offline/online, combination of both), the collective actors involved, the claims, frames and addressees.

The protest event analysis was followed by a qualitative frame analysis of the documents issued by the protest organizers to call for and/or comment the protest events. Based on about 100 documents, we have analyzed the ways in which the organizers presented the main problems (diagnostic frames), the possible solutions (prognostic frames) and the need to act (motivational frames) (Snow et al. 1986). Frames were singled out inductively through an iterative reading of the documents.

Finally, we carried out semi-structured interviews with activists from organizations that had emerged as particularly relevant for the mobilization of the protest campaign. Based on a purposive sampling strategy, built upon the information coming from the protest event analysis, we included especially the organizations that had emerged during the recent mobilization. Within these organizations, we aimed at conducting interviews with the activists that have been in the front line in the organization of the BLM campaign in Italy.

⁴ Our research on the Italian case is part of a broader comparative project on the BLM mobilization in Europe, including Germany, Denmark, and Poland as other case studies (Milman et al. 2021). The empirical investigation consisted of protest event analysis, in-depth interviews, and an analysis of mass media coverage.

Due to the restrictive measures imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy at the time, the interviews were carried out, between December 2020 and March 2022, online only. All interviewees (see Appendix, Tables A1 and A2) were founders and/or leaders of their respective groups; in four cases, these were the individuals initiating the BLM protests of June 2020. Respondents were recruited through personal contacts in the field at first, and subsequently through snowballing. The sample includes organizations established in the wake of the June 2020 protests, some of which named themselves as BLM local chapters (as in Rome and Bergamo), while other antiracist organizations preferred to use different names (as in Naples, Pontedera, Verona). We also interviewed antiracist organizations that were already present before the BLM protests but mobilized anew during the BLM campaign (Genoa). In addition, we also interviewed key informants within established organizations that have been active in the antiracist field in the past decade.

The interview outline aimed at investigating the organizational structure and main strategies, as well as assessments about the main challenges for the protest campaign and its aftermath. We looked in particular at the mobilization strategies, the coalition dynamics, the repertoires employed by the groups and single activists, the local translation of frames, as well as the location of the protests within the antiracist movement in Italy. The interviews, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were digitally recorded, after prior agreement by the respondents. We then transcribed the interviews and analyzed them through structural coding (Saldaña 2016), with the support of the NVivo software. The coding scheme included both deductive themes, derived from some theoretical interests and previous research, such as actors (internal/external), coalitions, repertoires, protest events, framing, organizational structure, and inductive themes such as, for instance, intersectionality, white privilege, or United States (see Appendix, Tables A1 and A2 for a list of main codes). We then proceeded to the thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) of the structurally coded data, most notably around the themes of channels, conditions and effects of the diffusion dynamics and their interplay.

WHY DID IT SPREAD? THE CONDITIONS FOR THE DIFFUSION

Italy can be considered a case of late adoption, or a later follower, of the BLM campaign since, started in 2013 in the United States, the BLM movement spread to Italy only in June 2020. The reasons behind the unsuccessful diffusion of the campaign from its original place in the 7 years preceding the death of George Floyd are beyond the scope of this study (but see De Genova 2018; Ghebremariam Tesfau' and Picker 2021; Hawthorne 2017; Lombardi-Diop 2012). What helped unlocking the process of diffusion in 2020 can however be singled out through the concept of eventful protests in times of pandemic. In fact, the campaign that followed the death of Floyd can be considered as characterized by eventful protests, happening in the exceptional times of the pandemic and acting as exogenous shocks, catalyzing intense and massive waves of protest that spread across countries at high speed, creating momentum after the initial crack represented by Floyd's murder. We identify three main conditions for the diffusion in Italy: the context of the pandemic, a politi-

cal environment that had increasingly and steadily moved to the Right, and the recent changes within the anti-racist movement.

The calls for the protests referred in fact to the killing of George Floyd as a last one in a series of barbaric assassinations of Afro-Americans, that was all the more outrageous given not only the cruelty of the act, but also the pandemic context, which had amplified social injustices that emerged as linked to multiple forms of discrimination. Also the interviewees pointed at how the crack that triggered the mobilization resonated vastly in terms of the number, velocity, and geographic magnitude of the protest events. As they note, the resonance was increased as the pandemic acted as a “compressor” triggering attention to events happening far away:

BLM was born already in 2013, and the pressure created by the fact of being locked inside during the pandemic was decisive for the initial protests. Then I think that the resonance of the BLM movement in the United States, and then Italy, was channeled through this impressive ‘media awakening’. For once the waters have moved and I think we have to strike while the iron is hot. A fertile ground has also been created due to the pandemic that has pulled out, out of exasperation, everything that was rotten. The pandemic has exposed a lot of crises: this is the defining aspect of our movement today. (Interview 5)

Beside the shared pandemic condition, the social construction of similarity was facilitated by the singling out at the domestic level of aggressive backlash politics against civil and social rights (Della Porta 2022). The Italian political context, similarly to the one of the United States under Trump, has been characterized in recent years by the rise of neo-conservative challengers, and the consolidation of the role of radical right actors in institutional politics. This context of backlash politics has centered on anti-modernist and neo-conservative frames based on nationalist and authoritarian positions, oriented to counter progressive actors and policies, notably in the field of gender and migrant rights. The first signs of this trend emerged in Italy in the period between 2013 and 2018, with the increasing influence of the Northern League, which had been mutating from an ethno-regionalist party (Tronconi 2009) into a mainstream, national-populist one, strengthening its radical right-wing character. The controversial policies advocated by its leader, Matteo Salvini, during his time as interior minister—in particular against migrants as well as against pro-refugee organizations conducting rescue operations in the Mediterranean, but also in the defense of the “traditional family” against movements active for gender equality—had already triggered resistance with broad mobilizations on antidiscrimination and egalitarian platforms. In these mobilizations, progressive collective actors of various backgrounds—old left, new left, human rights, environmentalist, feminist, LGBTQ+—came together to call for social justice, and human and civil rights. Mobilizations continued, albeit to a minor degree and at a lower level, also when, in September 2019, a new government formed by the populist *Movimento 5 Stelle*, the center-left *Partito Democratico* and the left *Liberi e Uguali* came into power. In this sense, the BLM campaign should be placed in continuity with respect to the anti-backlash protests and the movements that, since 2017, mobilized to resist the attack on consolidated democratic values by Salvini’s League.

In all the calls for protest as well as in the activists’ statements during the mobilization, systemic, institutional racism was stigmatized not only in the United States, but also in Italy, especially in the mistreatment of migrants (‘of all colors’) and of

black Italians. Reference is often made to the so-called Salvini decrees (dating from the time Salvini was interior minister) that restrict migrant rights, the bad treatment of the asylum seekers, the extreme exploitation of migrant workers, and to the many deaths in the Mediterranean sea of migrants trying to reach the Italian coasts (a tragedy on which protest campaigns have been ongoing). The interviews with the activists confirm the presence of a pre-existent, latent potential for mobilization that has been activated in the context of the campaign and in which the affective claims and the struggle of protesters in the United States resonate with those of the Italian ones:

I think it has been the past ten years of right-wing, xenophobic politics in Italy. In this sense, BLM has been like a shock wave. (Interview 3)

The resonance of the BLM is enhanced also by some ongoing changes in the antiracist movement in Italy, with increasing acknowledgment of the need to overcome a mainly reactive mode, organizational fragmentation and the low autonomy of its main constituency, the migrants and racialized citizens. While the beginnings of the antiracist struggle in Italy can be traced back to the 1980s, strong mobilizations appear only at the end of the decade, passing through several critical events on the way. Crucial for the reconstruction and understanding of the antiracist movement's history are the controversial immigration regulatory policies introduced in those years. These have always been inscribed in the emergency paradigms present in the rhetoric of forces across the political spectrum to orient the public debate on these issues: the economic and social emergency aggravated by migrants, seen as a drain to the welfare system; the security emergency, criminalizing migrants and stigmatizing them as alleged criminals, and the humanitarian emergency, pointing at the failures of the Italian reception system (Miraglia and Naletto 2020). Recently, the sanitary emergency has relegated migrants to a condition of invisibility. In this evolution, we repeatedly assisted to processes in which racialization is deliberately employed by institutional actors and political elites as a crisis management strategy (Oliveri 2018).

The conflation of racism with immigration is thus a specific trait of Italy, according to which organizations from the left as well as the broader global justice movement later on, have always acted within a culturalist framework “determined by the felt need of the wider Italian left wing to ‘deal with’ the problems faced by immigrants and, in its own words, to embrace cultural diversity” (Lentin 2004, p. 164). Moreover, Italy has for the most part lacked a movement led by people of color and instead seen antiracist mobilization organized primarily by white activists joining from political parties of the left and labor unions (Hawthorne and Piccolo 2016), in what has been often described as antiracism with a performative dimension, meaning a lack of awareness by white antiracist activists of their own positioning and privilege (Pesarini 2020).

Beyond the focus put on immigration, another important aspect for understanding contemporary antiracism in Italy is related to the antiracism put forward by left-wing organizations vis-à-vis Italy's history of fascism. Antiracism, in this sense, is rooted in the *Resistenza*, the historical fight of the Partisans against fascism (Lentin 2004). As underlined by several scholars, the problem with this kind of approach is the complete externalization of racism to non-Italians, with little or no

consideration of Italy's internal racism—such as in the cases of a long colonial history, the racial laws during the fascist regime, the North–South divide, reflected in the so-called ‘Southern question’, or Italian ‘new-Orientalism’ (Lombardi-Diop 2012; Schneider 1998). In other words, as Lentin (2004, p. 165) puts it, “Italian anti-racists’ construction of the problem of racism externalises it so completely that a more intimate narration of racism becomes almost impossible. Racism is construed as entirely new and to uniquely affect non-Italians”. This means completely neglecting the idea and the fact that Italian themselves in Italy, and outside Italy, are affected by racism. Beyond the self-organization of migrants, the antiracist movement in Italy has in fact involved mostly traditional progressive actors within the tradition of the Communist party and its once-ancillary organizations—in particular the *ARCI—Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana*—the trade unions, and religious charities, such as Caritas.

The evolution of the movement since the 1980s is largely determined by the resistance to discriminatory norms and policies concerning the entrance of migrants and their permanence in Italy—notably in terms of permits to stay (*permesso di soggiorno*), the rights of migrant workers, and their labor conditions—as well as by the weakness of social protection for migrants and the mobilization of racist frames and action by the radical right, which has been responsible also for the assassination of migrants and the “extremization of racism” (see Ghebremariam Tesfau’ and Picker 2021).

Against this backdrop and in the wake of the 2008–2010 global economic crisis, the years 2010–2012 saw a new cycle of protests led by migrants as a reaction to the neoliberal governance of migration harshened by the crisis, for the most part involving the mobilization of migrant workers against exploitative working conditions (see Oliveri 2012, 2015 for a review of this cycle of struggles). In the years to come, the administrative detention and repatriation of migrants would become—not only in Italy, but more in general in “Fortress Europe”—the main target of the movement’s mobilization efforts.

From 2013 up until the present, the objectives and priorities of the antiracist movement were focused on two main questions: the reception of asylum seekers and refugees, notably through the Centers for Extraordinary Reception, but also the racist assassination of migrants and the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean. In the “long summer of migration” in 2015, with Italy being a country of first arrival, the refugee solidarity activism intensified especially in the locations in which migrants entered in Italy, but also where they tried to leave the country, trying to move to their preferred destinations. In these contested spaces, activists from different background met, among others with a growing performance of “acts of citizenship,” as practices of citizenship rights by those to whom these rights are denied (Isin and Nielsen 2008). From emergency-based direct social actions, there was then an increasing shift toward more politicized episodes of contention (Zamponi 2018).

The issue of “landings and safe ports,” barring the arrival of migrants from across the Mediterranean sea to Italy, became one of the battle horses of the racist and xenophobic propaganda by the League’s leader Matteo Salvini, who even mobilized against rescuing missions at sea. The last 3 years have seen shocking episodes of racist violence, including in 2018 the racist raid conducted by Luca Traini, the

murder of trade unionist and worker Soumaila Sacko, the murders of Idy Diene and, in September 2020, the murder of Willy Monteiro. In this climate of intolerance and hostility, the antiracist movement still managed to build grassroots solidarity initiatives concerning reception and inclusion, as well as participating in cognate struggles, such as the one of the housing movements.

HOW IT SPREAD: THE “THIN” CHANNELS OF DIFFUSION

Over 150 protest events were organized in June and July 2020, for the majority in a spontaneous way and on individual initiatives, with the extensive use of social media as nonrelational channels, and mostly responding to a logic of aggregation, even in pandemic times. If we look at the data from the protest event analysis (Table 1 and 2), among the organizers of the protests, 26.4% are pre-existing antiracist organizations, 16% are individual organizers, 13.9% local actors and social centers, 16% a new-born BLM group, and 10.4% migrant and second-generation migrants. Rooted in other social movements are especially student organizations (25%) but also feminist (4.9%) and LGBTQ+ organizations (2.8%), already active against the neoconservative backlash, along with the Sardine movement mobilizing against Salvini (10.4%). Interestingly, the percentage of organizations rises significantly when moving from promoters to organizations formally supporting the protest, notably for LGBTQ+ (27.6%) and feminist (24.1%) but also environmentalists

Table 1. Organizers or co-organizers of BLM events in Italy

Pre-existing migrant/antiracist/antifascist organization	38	26.4%
Student organization	36	25%
Individual organizer	23	16.0%
BLM group	23	16.0%
Social center/local action group	20	13.9%
“Old” (left) organizations	17	11.8%
Migrant/second-generation immigrant organization	15	10.4%
Sardine	15	10.4%
Political party/trade union	13	9.1%
Feminist organization	7	4.9%
LGBTQ+ organization	4	2.8%
Fridays for future/ecologist organization	2	1.4%

Table 2. Organizations formally supporting the BLM events in Italy

“Old” (left) organizations	35	60.3%
Political party/trade union	31	53.4%
Pre-existing migrant/antiracist/antifascist organization	30	51.7%
Social center/local action group	20	34.5%
LGBTQ+ organization	16	27.6%
Student organization	15	25.9%
Feminist organization	14	24.1%
Fridays for future/ecologist organization	12	20.7%
Migrant/second-generation immigrant organization	10	17.2%
Sardine	9	15.5%

[Correction added on July 28, 2022, after first online publication: In Table 1, Social center/local action group has been moved after BLM Group. “Old” (left) organizations has been updated from 1 to 17.]

(20.7%). Traditional leftist organizations are present as supporters for 60.3% of the events and political parties plus trade unions in 53.4% of the events, showing their historical relevance in antiracist struggles, together with pre-existing pro-migrants and antiracist groups (51.7%).

The significant number of protest events recorded in Italy, we argue, should be placed in a context of thin diffusion. Indeed, the extensive coverage of the events by global media networks, in a moment in which the consumption of global news was particularly high (Trenz et al. 2021), allowed the shocking images of Floyd's death to travel across the world, creating impressive resonance and momentum. In this context, single individuals or small groups, in some cases with no previous experience of political activism, inspired by the images of the protests on both sides of the Atlantic, decided to take action. The protest events data indicate in fact that 16% of the covered events were organized by a few individuals, moved by a sense of indignation. Frequent statements reported in the calls for the events point at the need to act face to an outrageous crime.

Often with no previous experience of activism, the organizers are however able to use social media to promote protests in their towns or neighborhood. As an interviewee noted,

It all started with S., this girl who has always been interested in these issues. She had seen the Instagram posts by Diletta Belotti, a Roman activist [focusing on labour rights], and got inspired. They opened this WhatsApp group of followers on Instagram, taking the idea from Diletta. By posting stories on Instagram this other girl was intercepted, who then contacted me to try to organize a protest together. After a fast exchange on Instagram and WhatsApp, adding people, we gathered together in a park during the period of restriction measures. (Interview 5)

Even when existing organizations are involved as promoters, the initiatives are launched by small groups of individuals rooted at the local level.

In these localized forms of mobilization, the individual experiences of the promoters are relevant in triggering forms of imitation of the original protest events, that then spread easily through the web. As in the activation of solidarity networks during the “long summer of migration” of 2015, personal experiences were cited as sources of emotional identification (Della Porta 2018). So, in particular the activist that launched what was going to become a very large national demonstration stressed her personal connection with the United States (as well as her lack of rootedness in activist circles):

For the organization of the protest of June I got 100% of inspiration by the United States since my boyfriend lives in Minneapolis and I have been there several times and so I felt close to what was going on. I was very much informed about Floyd and BLM events in the United States, and I wanted to create something here in Rome too in order to express my dissent. I started to look on the Web. I have never been an activist before, I had zero contact with movements or activists, and I could not find anything going on in the city. Therefore, I decided in a very spontaneous way and without expectations, what I wanted to do was to say “Alright, now I am going to take a sign and go in front of the U.S. embassy and I make an event on Facebook . . .” so this event started to get shared massively across the network [. . .] and some organizations contacted me, such as the Women's March, Fridays for Future, the Sardine. . . [. . .] All in all, I created the event on the 31st of May, people started to contact me around the 2nd of June and so we cooperate in the dark, online, for five days until the 7th of June, day of the protest. (Interview 2)

The initial, mostly nonrelational, diffusion of the protests through global media coverage coupled with the individualized use of social media developed then in more direct contacts and relations between American and European activists during the protest itself or in its immediate aftermath, thickening the ties between the two sides. As the two extracts from interviews testify for, this happened through either the activation of Italian activists in the search for contact in the United States or, vice-versa, through a more proactive intervention by American groups:

We were more than two thousand and after the protest they put us in contact with Washington and they recognized us as spokespeople of BLM Genoa, and we accepted with pleasure. (Interview 1)

I have been contacted immediately after the protest by a movement called The World is Watching, which supports BLM in the US, and we started to collaborate since then. (Interview 2)

As to be expected during eventful protests, beyond the conditions and the channels of diffusion the protests had an important effect on the emergence of new organizations, serving as an informal arena where both first comers and activists got to know each other and often decided to meet again in the following days. Together with the grouping emerging from the activation of few individuals, without previous experiences of activism, we also found the creation or consolidation of groups initiated by single individuals, previously active in existing groups (either groups already part of the broader antiracist/migrant movement or leftist collectives), who however decided to call the protest as individuals and not on behalf of the group: “There were social centres, feminist groups, and these students who had organized themselves for the protest” (Interview 2). In other cases, the protests promoted by individuals or small groups with no history of political engagement were then supported by groups active in the local territory (logistically, providing material, resources and skills to protest, asking permission to authorities).

WHAT SPREAD: THE EFFECTS OF DIFFUSION

The analysis of the protest events of June 2020 reveals that specific items spread from the United States to Italy, including specific forms of symbolic actions and master frames. The data we collected indicated a quite high level of mobilization, all the more so, considering that Italy was just coming out from a very severe lockdown, during the first and most dramatic peak of Covid-19 pandemic (see Table 3). Of the 152 events we registered, the 32.2% happened between May 25 and June 7; 30.3% between June 8 and June 14 (at the peak of the protest wave); 22.4% between June 15 and June 28, the remaining 15.1 between June 29 and August 2. The events were distributed over the entire Italian territory, with 27% taking place in the most industrialized North West, 28% in the North East, 18% in the Centre, and 27% in the

Table 3. Protest events and participants

<i>Number of protest events</i>	152
<i>Number of participants, total</i>	51.410
<i>Number of participants/event</i>	659.7
<i>Protesters per 100.000 inhabitants</i>	85.7

Table 4. Form of action

Flashmob/sit-in	117	77%
Distribution of leaflets/poster	14	9.2%
Demonstration/protest march	8	5.3%
Damage to property	6	3.9%
Cultural protest	5	3.3%
Initiation of open letter/petition	2	1.3%
<i>Total</i>	<i>152</i>	<i>100%</i>

South. Most of the events were organized in urban areas, with medium and small centers strongly represented: 12.5% happened in large cities with over 500.000 inhabitants, 42.1% in cities between 100.000, and 500.000 inhabitants, while as much as 23% were organized in small towns, with less than 50.000 inhabitants.

Looking at protest repertoire (see Table 4), we note that the most widespread form of action, adopted in many protest events (77% of the events), is a static sit-in, accompanied by a choreography inspired by the US activists. In most of the covered cases, the performance includes some common items such as the 8'46 minutes of silence, to remember the agony of George Floyd, the genuflexion in his honor, the raised fist. Often, the calls for protests invite the participant to wear or bring black objects. In many cases, an open microphone is organized on the sites of the protests—often the central square in town—to give voice to migrants and second-generation immigrants. In five cases, the sit-in developed into a demonstration/protest march, raising the total number for demonstration/protest march to 13—in the weeks of the BLM campaign, street demonstrations were banned in Italy because of Corona restrictions. Numerous signs written in English used during the protests, such as “No Justice, no Peace. Black Lives Matter. Say Their Name”—the latter often with the names of victims of racist violence in Italy—call for justice for the victims of police abuse and brutality.

Besides the form of action, the calls for the protest events as well as the statements about them, call for dignity and respect for all, stating the need to oppose any form of discrimination, including racial but also sexual and social discrimination. Also during the interviews, many of the interviewees articulated an “intersectional” master frame, claiming that “the strength of BLM is that it is intersectional, it involves more struggles, it is more inclusive” (Interview 2). The ability to “operationalize” this type of frame in the agenda of the existing antiracist movement has been pointed at by many as one of the main effects of the BLM campaign. As two activists noted,

This is one of the legacies of BLM, the highlighting of structural racism, declined in its different forms, and linked to other inequalities – and the capacity to operationalize this change in the agenda of contemporary movements. (Interview 7)

An intersectional approach emerges, in which the black issue is highly focused on the aspect of migration, but not only that. There is awareness of the other sources of discriminations, it talks about institutional racism, environmental racism, the one linked to the [historical] phase of feminism and the LGBTQ+ community. (Interview 5)

While we observe the diffusion of some of the core frames used in the United States' protests, activists in Italy from the start engaged in a process of recontextual-

ization and adaptation of the campaign. The resonance and the momentum created by the extensive media coverage of the events opened a window of opportunity to go beyond feelings of solidarity and empathy with Black people in the United States, by denouncing racism in Italy. All the calls for the protests include in fact the stigmatization of racism well beyond the United States, with specific reference to the mistreatment of migrants and Black people in Italy. As an interviewed activist explained:

True, BLM in the United States, but it is also important to speak about Italy, since often it considers itself safe from issues of racism. BLM does not work only for the Afro-American but also for the Italian black person. (Interview 6)

Besides the initial shock that triggered the mobilization, its development sensitized to the need to go beyond the expression of solidarity, with the black people taking the protests in their own hands:

Italy knows that it does not have the hands clean. For us [black people] it has been shocking to see how all of a sudden so many people, especially white people, were interested in the killing of a black person in the United States, without ever thinking that similar events happen in Italy as well. (Interview 3)

It is in fact during the protest itself, with its high emotionality and cognitive turns, that racialized people meet, catalyzing the creation of new networks:

Very young racialized people have realized that there is a resonance on this issue in the city, people who have finally felt represented, who discover that there are other people who experience similar problems. (Interview 6)

While initially “imported” from the United States, the protest campaign is seen as an occasion to reflect on one’s own conditions—as a “a moment of awakening, of listening to ourselves. We live in a world that is US-centred and we often forget what is going on in Italy” (Interview 1).

As it happens in particular in cases of late adoption, recontextualization becomes so a central element, which is stressed in the calls for the protests that usually mention specific forms of discrimination in Italy. In this sense, while some among the new antiracist organizations point at some similarity with the BLM in the United States, others take instead distance from the original model, asserting their own different identity. In particular, while some groups remained firm in claiming that since the beginning the organization of the protests was inspired and determined by the BLM events in the United States, others explicitly engaged with recontextualization pointing at the difference in the Italian context. To stress the specificity of the Italian context, in some cases the very BLM-label was rejected—as an activist remembered:

After the birth of BLM Italy, we did not position ourselves within it, we decided to call ourselves [with another name] because we did not want the slogan. We indeed wanted to be part of the movement but without using a brand. (Interview 3)

Whatever the name they chose, the activists stress their autonomous agency that allows them to develop their own subjectivity in-action. Typically, in the calls for the protests and during the protest events themselves, the many (Black) victims of racist violence and the several (Black and White) victims of police brutality in Italy were

named. If discrimination was diagnosed as the main problem (and a crime against humanity), the prognostic frames mentioned in the documents as well as in the interviews pointed at the need to change the very vision of citizenship, moving toward an inclusive conception (a long-lasting claim of groups active on migrant rights is *ius soli* or, more recently, *ius culturae*).

As an activist explains, the protest campaign catalyzed in fact attention to the injustice perpetrated against racialized people in the Italian context, triggering the emergence of a new organizational network in search of a new identity. In terms of immediate effects, the campaign has therefore allowed to give visibility to a generation that until then remained mostly on the background (Interview 8):

The protests of June would not have happened without Floyd, but we tried not to focus only on that since in Italy similar events also took place. We need to use Floyd to advance previous struggles and open dialogue on the new fight: *ius soli*, racialized people in Italy. Our goal is to create an Italian network with the organizations born with the wave of BLM, and only after that to create a movement, with a new terminology – Italian – with an Italian name that is not BLM but that is able to represent us. We need to move our thought from US-centred to Italy, here and now. (Interview 1)

Also among those who fully embraced the symbols of BLM during the first stages of the protest, the mobilization itself fueled a momentum that allowed for an increasing resonance of the specific forms of discrimination existing at the national and the local levels:

It is a fact that BLM in the US has created this momentum, the resonance of it, the scope, at the global level, in terms of attention and numbers. But this fact also led people to ask themselves questions about their own country, their own city. We need BLM to say out loud that the problem exists also here, even if we need to contextualize it to Italy. (Interview 2)

Recontextualization also affected the choices between attempts at transnationalization, particularly vis-à-vis the United States, and what we can call instead “indigenization.” Few groups, notably the ones that do not perceive closeness or association with the United States as problematic, have built contacts outside Italy and directly with the American movement in Washington, or with other US-based movements (i.e., Women’s March, The World is Watching). Many of the emerging groups have instead pointed at the need to mobilize on the issues and problems present in the local territory (even before the national level) as well as the experiences of black and racialized people in specific communities, which all together reflect a sense of great self-awareness of one’s own positionality. Beside concerns with effectiveness, these choices are also influenced by the normative value given to maintaining one’s own agency:

It’s not even a matter of political disagreements or different views: we do not want to feel the responsibility of being a local chapter of BLM, of having to coordinate with other chapters without even knowing who we really are as a group yet. (Interview 3)

The emphasis on the local conditions might however create some challenge for the creation of a national coordination, as the landscape of BLM groups remains fragmented (Clark et al. 2018). As an activist noted: “we did a national call to try to coordinate the various local chapters, in the future we would like to follow the model

of Fridays for Future by organizing coordinated actions. For now, each group collaborates but within its own territory” (Interview 2).

While the idea of creating a “national network” is present in the narratives of the BLM groups present in the protests, a local territorial focus remains prevalent because of important territorial differences. As in October 2020 BLM Rome released a national political and cultural manifesto, inviting the local chapters to sign it, many groups remained unconvinced by the use of references that were influenced by a context they did not recognize as their own. So, as an activist observed, “we said we don’t need to use the most traceable word [BLM] – it’s like talking about climate change without calling yourself Fridays For Future: it’s totally fine” (Interview 3).

The focus on the local territory, its concrete needs and commitments, is in fact also seen as a device against potentially disruptive tensions between various groups:

The problem is that when there are many of us, we do not all get along: there are those who have a much more political imprint, some more social/cultural. For example, we are apolitical, and therefore we have decided to focus more on our territory [. . .] For the protests after the assassination of Willy Monteiro, the idea was to make an identical poster that was published on the same day, at the same time, by all the main national organizations – to have a greater media resonance – and to make all the protests on the same day. An organization from [a city in the South] has come up with some slogans that here in [a city in the North-East] would never have worked out well; it has also to be taken into account that the realities are completely different. (Interview 6)

As stressed also in the quote above, the efforts made by the newly formed organizations were in fact especially in the direction of a *reframing*, that is an adaptation to local conditions of ideas coming from afar. In addition to the frames that diffused in an identical form from the United States, other frames centered on Italian issues have been introduced. As the documents as well as the interviews pointed at, many of the latter revolved around *Afro-Italianità* (being Afro-Italian), and the reform of citizenship rights (*ius soli*) for migrants and particularly second-generation migrants. An important issue was also the refugees and migrants “constantly dying off our coasts,” in the Mediterranean. Police violence was linked more broadly to structural/institutional violence, strategically bridged to episodes of racist violence in Italy. The colonial past was often mentioned by the activists on issues of resignification of Italian history, and so is, in particular, its representation through symbols (statues, monuments, etc.), but also at the cultural level, through music, writing and more broadly political narratives.

In general, the recontextualization through the diversification of frames with cultural resonance in the national context, rooted in the Italian history and experience, helped local activists to “ride the wave” of global media and get public attention on institutionalized racism while broadening it to existing, but for long time ignored, issues in their own country. Since the beginning, activists pointed at the differences of the Italian situation in comparison with the American one, stressing the specificities and severity of the daily experiences of black and racialized persons in Italy:

We realized immediately that the protest was not just a positioning, a transitory support to the US; you could clearly distinguish the Italian contextualization from the start. That is, the issue of migrant laborers in the agricultural sector, the deaths in the Mediterranean, the *ius soli*, but also racist violence. (Interview 5)

Contextualization is in fact perceived by the activists as a most important task:

We must also act on contextualizing in the sense of Italians are not “good people” (*brava gente*); there is always this thing of racism that has been overcome after colonialism, or of light racism. And in my opinion, the BLM serves to say that the problem exists here too, and even if contextualized, the processes of racialization always have the same origin. (Interview 2)

As mentioned, if we consider the sedimentation after the eventful protest, certainly one of the most visible impacts in the short term has been the effect of protests on movement organizations, notably the generation of new organizations and consequent creation of power imbalances between older and new antiracist actors, as well as between the new actors themselves. In the documents analyzed, the involvement of very young people, going well beyond the “usual suspects” of organized activists, was pointed at, and so were the general appeals to the need to mobilize “beyond flags” (with often the plea not to bring symbols of specific organizations), but also the reference to personal experiences in everyday life as racialized individuals. Also in the interviews, the capacity of the protests to catalyze new energies is mentioned with reference to the June protests as the beginning of the political engagement for many participants. As an activist recalls,

After the protest we decided to meet again and we told ourselves that we wanted to continue to collaborate, also because it has been a mix of our enthusiasm and the enthusiasm expressed by others in the territory, everybody started to ask about us. From there we started immediately to organize online meetings, between the protest organizers and then also open to the public. This way a lot of people soon joined the movement and we became very active. (Interview 2)

In this sense, the diffusion of BLM in the country has triggered a transformation in the antiracist movement in Italy in terms of relations between existing groups and with new ones, but also and most importantly in the composition of the movement’s constituency (although, as mentioned above, this is not the first time that a cycle of protests led by migrant and racialized persons emerges, see Oliveri 2015). The establishment of new organizations has first and foremost brought forward the issue of black leadership and empowerment (as expressed also in the experiences of the open mics), as an increasing number of collective actors within the movement have a composition in which the majority of members are racialized people, notably in leadership positions. This increased “political protagonism” by (particularly young) black and racialized individuals, is considered by the activists we interviewed as one of the most important outcomes of the BLM campaign. The activation of racialized people was in fact noted as a turning point in the very composition of the organizations, thus representing a relevant discontinuity with the past:

The really different thing about BLM is the composition . . . before BLM the composition and activation of subjectivities that are racialized was non-existent. This is the strongest change in terms of quality. (Interview 5)

The protests are so defined as a turning point, with an increasing visibility and influence of racialized people. An activist observed.

What I think has changed since previous anti-racist protests is the presence of blacks, of racialized people in the organization. Before they were not organized by blacks, but by white anti-racist groups, or they were protests for migrants, etc. Now we see black people in charge,

managing protests and groups speaking for the whole community. It's a huge thing, people who speak for themselves. (Interview 1)

The activation of black subjectivities and antiracism within the movement is perceived as a turning point with respect to previous mobilizations and in particular in relation to already existing actors, mostly focused on migrant issues and still predominantly white in their composition. Moreover, the internal empowerment of black and racialized people in the various groups made issues of color-blindness and white privilege within progressive social movement organizations even more manifest:

During the protest, since we were not formally an organization yet, we needed to lean on existing organizations and some problems emerged because of that. They [activists from existing organizations] did not want to give us the right amount of space in the organization of the protest; they did not understand that in that moment we [as racialized individuals] were the ones mainly affected by the events. They came to the protest with the posters and signs ready, with slogans about what they thought a racialized person could feel in that moment . . . It's wrong. First of all, you need to listen to us, we are the injured party in this cause. (Interview 6)

These themes are recurrent across different aspects, from the organization of the protest, to the building of coalitions as well as access to the media and to leadership, pointing to different tensions and power imbalances in the movement's network. It is quite evident from activists' accounts that there is a tendency toward contradistinction and, to some extent, even controversy vis-à-vis consolidated anti-racist organizations (Interview 8). Even when considering the effects in the short term, activists pointed to the challenges faced in finding a collective voice, as one interviewee noted while reflecting on this:

Beyond the initial, massive participation, it is a movement that struggles to establish itself in a coordinated way all over the territory . . . as many other contemporary movements, it is characterized by a strong personalization, individualism, in which it is difficult to think collectively. There are weaknesses in terms of the autonomy of the movement. (Interview 7)

In this, the activation of black subjectivities and antiracism within the movement constitute the fundamental axes for understanding the emergence and positioning of new groups, born in the wake of the BLM protests, with respect to the other actors internal and external to the movement.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the antiracist protests within the framework of the BLM movement campaign in Italy provides important insights on the cross-national diffusion of protest waves. In addressing the question of the *conditions* for the spreading of the campaign in June 2020, we pointed to several factors. We argued that the BLM protests should be interpreted as eventful protests, that produced effects on the social movements themselves, through affective, cognitive, and relational processes. In intense times, the initial crack reverberated all over the country with massive protests, that left their mark as they sedimented, transforming the contentious politics concerning racism.

The extraordinary circumstances produced by the pandemic, and particularly the restrictive measures, have affected the protests in different ways. On the one hand, they have constrained the physical space for protest, as street demonstrations were banned and rules on keeping distance limited the number of participants, forcing the invention of new performances. On the other, however, they seem to have enhanced attention and then solidarity as well as empathy toward what was happening in a country that was at the same time one of those whose citizens have been very much affected by the pandemic and, additionally, one whose leader, Donald Trump, had come to symbolize racism and social injustice. In this sense, the campaign resonated with previous mobilizations against so-called backlash politics—involving first and foremost those groups that had been most active against the backlash politics in Italy.

When looking at the *channels* through which the protests spread, we noted a path of thin diffusion. In a moment of high media attention, the widespread protests in the United States functioned as a powerful catalyst for the diffusion of a moral shock which triggered high emotional responses. In an activist environment dense in social media, protests were called often by small nets of individuals, acting at the local level. These were supported by antiracist organizations, together with other social movements organizations (especially feminist and LGBTQ+ ones) that had mobilized already against the recent backlash on social and civil rights, as well as traditional left-wing organizations, favoring the spreading of protests all over the country.

Considering the *effects* of the BLM protests, one of the most significant, as acknowledged by the activists, is the inclusion, representation, and empowerment of black people in the organizing structures of previously existing groups, and the emergence of new ones centered on creating new spaces for black people to speak, act, mobilize. The vast majority of these are racialized youth, often students, “feeling voiceless,” who mobilized for the first time in the wake of the spreading of BLM in Italy. Given the diversity of the actors involved in the antiracist movement, its fragmentation, and the emergence of new realities following the BLM protests, the theme of coalitions and alliances should also be analyzed from the perspective of both internal and external dynamics. Some groups have grown rapidly since the protests and despite the pandemic have already established networks at the local level, starting many initiatives and activities. Moreover, in the activists’ narratives, it is clearly possible to identify a series of issues that reoccur across different aspects of the mobilization. Many of these are clear condemnations of problems that refer to the Italian reality: the externalization of racism to non-Italians, the whitewashing of antiracist struggles (particularly from the Left), the victims of home-grown racism, the great plurality of experiences and realities present in the territory which make the living situations of black and racialized Italians diverse from one region to another. Many of these struggles nowadays are focused on issues of citizenship, but also of migrants’ reception, and are based on the deconstruction of the Italian colonial past. However, some members importantly noted that this type of alliances, particularly with migrant groups, displays a series of tensions that still need to be addressed.

In light of these Italian peculiarities, the high mobilization capacity shown by the BLM protests and the engagement by a very young and diverse Italy, important

questions emerge that would need further reflection and analysis: are we observing a qualitative change in the Italian antiracist movement and particularly in the struggles of Black Italians? If so, which are the main actors and voices involved? What kind of strategies and narratives are brought forward? Could the BLM campaign in Italy have a long-term impact on the way that racism is addressed in Italy? Further research is clearly needed to evaluate the consequences of the triggering event and of its reverberation and the extent to which these are sedimented in a new wave of anti-racist struggles.

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Table A1. List of interviewees

Interview	Date	Organization	Number of interviewees	City	Date of creation
1	02.12.20	<i>Antiracist organization</i>	1	Genoa	August 2019
2	04.12.20	<i>BLM local chapter</i>	1	Rome	June 2020
3	05.12.20	<i>Antiracist organization</i>	1	Naples	June 2020
4	11.12.20	<i>Political movement</i>	1	Pontedera	September 2020 (officially)
5	22.12.20	<i>BLM local chapter</i>	3	Bergamo	June 2020
6	30.12.20	<i>Antiracist organization</i>	3	Verona	2019 informally September 2020 (officially)
7	02.03.22	<i>Antiracist organization</i>	1	Rome	1992
8	06.03.22	<i>Antiracist organization</i>	1	Milano	2008

Table A2. List of main codes

Name	Description	References
Alliances/Coalitions		11
Protest event	BLM June protests	14
Conflictualization		10
Critical juncture		7
External actors		10
Media		3
Political parties		7
Frame alignment	Localizing, bridging, extension	13
Frames		62
Black protagonism		13
Education		4
Intersectionality		5
Italy		14
Racism		6
Second generation		6
Strumentalization		5
USA		7
Future		3
Organizational structure		32
Internal actors	Groups within the movement	20
Pandemic		4
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