



POLITICAL, GASTRONOMIC IDENTITY

Food as language for Italian Migration

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The culinary history of Italy is significantly linked to the development of an Italian national identity. Italian foods such as polenta and tortellini, although varying from region to region, represent a larger image of traditional Italian culture that is embedded in regionalism. Lega Nord, a far-right political party, has taken food into the political arena as a symbol to evoke fear or loss of a “traditional” Italian identity. Lega Nord has shifted its model of populism to fit within the national Italian identity thus creating a distorted image of a “national cuisine” regardless of distinct culinary traditions in varying regions. Through Edelman’s approach to political discourse, Italian food becomes a condensation symbol, or a symbol that evokes an emotional response but is seldom founded on a solid reality. This condensation symbol consequently becomes a relic to be protected thus representing anything outside of “traditional” as a threat. Immigration and the culinary traditions that immigrants bring to Italy is vilified and seen as the utmost danger to tradition and by extension, identity. Culinary tradition in Italy thus becomes a political construct (Ghiglione). Matteo Salvini, Federal Secretary of Lega Nord, has pushed forward the movement towards eliminating “foreign foods” from Italian historical centers and regularly uses social media to promote DOP (Denominazione d’Origine Protetta) products and traditional dishes while exhibiting “strict father morality model” characteristics (Lakoff).¹ Italian populist parties use food as a symbol to promote Italian identity and construct immigration as a threat. Matteo Salvini’s statements and Lega Nord members’ rhetoric can be characterized as examples of *gastropopulismo* (Parasecoli). Their discourse is both a symptom

¹ George Lakoff’s Strict Father Morality model is founded on the idea that the conservatives think about politics distinctly from liberals. This means conservatives believed in rewarding and punishing as mechanisms of good citizenship and that competition is moral because it creates self-discipline. Strict Father Morality is based on the idea that the government should act as a fatherly, protective figure and the citizenry should be obedient because the world outside of the nation-state is “difficult” and “dangerous”

and symbol of political quiescence and an indication of a defective patriotic national essence that constructs immigration as a danger to tradition.

Review of Literature

Food plays a significant role in the traditional Italian identity. Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari highlight the genealogy of Italian cuisine and outline the implications this changing genealogy has on what is considered “traditional” and what is left out of this model. Montanari’s *La Cucina Italiana. Storia Di Una Cultura* describes the emergence of northern foods such as polenta and various pastas and their shifting social position within Italian kitchens. This historical analysis helps guide research on the changing significance of food and the social implications that dictate these shifts. Although there have been analyses of how food is used as a political tool for immigration policy, there is a lack of literature on how food itself has become a language of its own. Benedetta Grasso writes about how Lega Nord’s “*Si alla Polenta, No al couscous*” campaign is a reflection of municipal bans put in place on “non-Italian” restaurants and a growing perceived threat of “ethnic” food. Grasso notes that this campaign also brings into question the difference between “imported food” and “ethnic food” as imported food is often considered as a gift and ethnic food is deemed something that needs to be controlled. The wording used to describe cuisines brought to Italy by immigrants usually evokes negative connotations within food discourse among Lega Nord members. While this wording may only be a part of the entire message it signals a distinct difference between the attitude towards immigrants and culinary traditions, often European, that do not represent a “threat” to the Italian identity. Frances Malpezzi outlines the “gentrification of polenta” or the history of polenta through a societal lens. Malpezzi explains how the significance of food has changed depending on resources available but also has changed meaning for Italians throughout time. Polenta is a

significant marker of changing attitudes towards what is a “traditional” food to be proud of and what is not-- polenta went from being the food of the poor in 18th through late 19th century to a trendy nostalgic food on Milan fashion week menus. Not only does polenta communicate a history on its own but also is a language with which to communicate nostalgia. Polenta accordingly takes on a political essence when placed within discourses on immigration and becomes misrepresented as the basis of Italian cuisine, when it has truly more accurately been related to the everyday life of northern Italians before the 1960s.

George Newth outlines the history of Lega Nord “populist regionalism” and the process by which the othering of immigrants has spread past “Padania” lines. Newth's research helps piece together how immigration is at the center of “traditional” Italian food discourse. Newth also details how Lega Nord’s vision of “traditional Italian” has shifted to fit a model that includes southern Italy and has taken a more nativist character rather than a regional separatist one. Giorgio Ghiglione takes a closer look at Lega Nord’s rhetoric on Italian food and the development of *gastropopulismo* and its origins in the Slow Food movement which originated in the left but shifted towards the right after political parties such as Lega Nord claimed Italian food as a language to communicate immigration as a threat. Ghiglione mentions Davide Maria De Luca, a political reporter from the online news outlet *Il Post*, who explains that the rise of food as a topic in political discourse comes from a difficult relationship between Italians and patriotism, “Italy is a country with a very low patriotism, so they weaponize the recipe of tortellini or lasagna.” (Ghiglione). In order to understand the scope *gastropopulismo* within a modern context, I will tie the concepts expressed within Ghiglione’s writing to Edelman’s concept of condensation symbols to explain how food is used to as a political expression.

Method

To understand food as language, I utilize Murray Edelman's concept of condensation symbols to explain the evocative nature of food within political discourse. Throughout my discourse analysis, Edelman's notion of condensation symbols, political acquiescence and quiescence will serve to frame the functions of food within political discourse. Within my analysis I will focus on Lega Nord's and Matteo Salvini's statements which limits the full scope of conservative rhetoric in Italy but provides ample examples on food and politics. Murray Edelman's *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* creates a framework to analyze political language as symbolism through food. These symbols create reassurance or threat and are created by the mass population, "man creates political symbols and they sustain and develop him or warp him" (Edelman). Edelman explains that politics serves as a "conveyor" of fears and aspirations because it is "remote, set apart, omnipresent as the ultimate threat or means of succor" (Edelman 6). Similarly, food and a national cuisine serve as a condensation symbol that often connects people to a remote past that they long to identify with but may have never existed.

My discourse analysis first outlines the history of Lega Nord as a separatist political party to a party whose origins come from a regionalist populism that now claims the "Italy first" slogan. Through outlining the history of Lega Nord with a focus on their populist and anti-immigrant policy I will analyze Matteo Salvini's tweets and comments about Italian food and the regional ties such foods are characterized historically. I will anchor much of my research in an analysis of Lega Nord's "Si alla Polenta, No al Couscous" campaign and will provide a brief history of polenta and its significance in northern Italy. This historical analysis will serve to explain how changing contexts have changed the definition or meaning of food within political discourse.

It is necessary to explain the origins of the Slow Food movement as it arose from the left but was later appropriated by the far right. The Slow Food movement is pivotal in understanding the relationship between people and food and the regionalism that characterizes it; it also is largely a populist movement and a product of ongoing regionalism. After outlining the history of Lega Nord, I will tie populism to Salvini's critiques of non-Italian food and his depiction of "tradition".

Lega Nord has historically been a radical right party that created its name from its early regional concern that southern Italy was misusing resources collected mostly from Northerners' taxes (Zaslove). After a successful general election in 1996, its best result since its inception, Lega Nord announced that it wanted the secession of northern Italy under the name of Padania. This political motion, although never realized, continued to characterize much of Lega Nord's political discourse despite its need to redefine their political message after Italy became an immigrant-receiving nation (Zaslove 5). Under Matteo Salvini's style of leadership, regionalism has been replaced by an "empty form of nativist nationalism... populism remains central to the party's strategic communication, but the EU has taken Rome's place as the people's 'enemy'" (Albertazzi). Although Salvini has tried to expand the Lega's presence in the south, its northern origins remain intact, making Milan and northern cuisines of the region "authentic" Italian food to be proud of, this is expressed within his tweets on classic northern dishes made with Italian ingredients. "With 2.6 million likes on Facebook and almost 800 000 followers on Twitter (as of June 2018), Salvini's personal accounts ... helps him shape national debates on issues concerning identity, immigration, and law and order, as the controversial remarks made via his social media accounts are immediately picked up by the press and television news" (Albertazzi).

The nativist shift Lega Nord has taken as a party may have initially begun with growing numbers of immigrants in Italy but was largely impacted by globalism and multiculturalism which was not experienced to this extent in smaller Italian towns and cities. The changing character of Lega Nord and Salvini's reconfiguration of far-right populism is reflected within his promotion of "native" Italian food.

George Lakoff's *Moral Politics* decodes political language in terms of two-family models, the "Strict Father morality" and the "Nurturant Parent morality" model. Both of these models provide a set of worldviews and moral priorities for the corresponding conservative and liberal political perspectives. These models also come with a set of metaphors that communicate morality in varying ways. The Nation as a Family metaphor provides the context for analyzing language through food in relation to a "family". The significance of food is particularly salient when considering the profound links between Italian dishes and the people who consider them a fundamental part of their identity. Lakoff explains that "within the Strict Father morality, illegal immigrants are seen as lawbreakers ("illegals") who should be punished... hence they are not children in our family" (Lakoff 187). The culinary nationalism that nativist political parties such as Lega Nord use create an Italian identity within new waves of immigration in Italy (Horowitz). Matteo Salvini, the Federal Secretary of Lega Nord, has used metaphors that correspond with the Strict Father morality model and has communicated through his promotion of regional Italian cuisines that there is only space at the table for "traditional" Italian foods. Through Salvini's food metaphor and Strict Father morality, a nativist protectionist Italian identity is created, and immigrants are subsequently othered from the national identity.

Matteo Salvini has routinely placed food at the center of political discourse. His focus on Italian ingredients and products becomes a metaphor when placed within Lakoff's concept of the

Nation as Family. Although Salvini seems to fuse economic tensions and immigration, his message on morality becomes abundantly clear when examining his tweets regarding food (Salvini). Lakoff explains that although cutting the cost of government stands at the center of conservative discourse, the conservative agenda, and the liberal agenda, is more concerned about morality (194). According to Lakoff, “the ultimate conservative agenda ... is moral, not financial” (Lakoff 196). Salvini is known to make references to Italian products and the economic “benefits” that Italian food brings to Italian people. However, his rhetoric can be defined as implicitly moral, as highlighted in comments by Salvini, “flooding the tables of European citizens and the stomachs of our children with Tunisian oil, Moroccan oranges, tomatoes that come from nobody knows where, rice from Cambodia, powdered milk from Ukraine.” (Paura). Salvini’s rhetoric is not only an illustration of Strict Father Morality but it also stands entirely at odds with the Nurturant Parent model which would typically be supportive of immigrants and by extension “foreign” foods (Lakoff). Salvini’s focus on immigration, foreign restaurants and foods is not economic. “Protecting” Italian food becomes a frame that “easily and quickly expands into vaguer and more emotional questions of national identity, race, and belonging” (Donadio).

The image of foreign foods flooding an Italian table, bring to mind the same ideas illustrated in Otto Santa Ana’s *Brown Tide Rising*, where “waves” of immigration are seen as something to be controlled, dominated and inherently suffocating or smothering (Santa Ana). The aqueous character immigration is given and the Italian “table” setting brings about an image of inescapability. Part of this notion evokes a sense of urgency for Italians and easily sways them into thinking this “flood” can eclipse their prominence on the dinner table which is historically a place of community gathering, family and arguably the most intimate space over which a family

or community converses. Having “a seat at the table” takes on a new meaning when the table is Italian, the significance becomes much greater when the food served is the embodiment of a culture and identity, even if it does not align with the identity of those around the table in the modern day.

In contrast to following the Nation as a Family model, Lega Nord and Salvini have followed a new populist regionalist ideology that fits within the “us vs. them” rhetoric that Lakoff uses to describe conservative “Strict Father morality”. Lakoff explains that the Moral Strength metaphor is directly associated with the presence of immorality or evil; therefore, morality is described as strength “backbone” (Lakoff). The populist regionalism that characterizes Salvini’s discourse on food today contrasts with Lega Nord’s historical regional stance that promoted northern secession, Padania (Newth). When Lega Nord attempts to promote a “pure ” authentic Italian identity today, their history and criticism of southerners conflicts with the concept of one sole and true Italian cuisine and Italian identity. Lega Nord’s historical ties to northern secession provide an example of how metaphors change within contexts, The Lega Nord campaigned for the revision of statutes made by Movement for Piedmontese Regional Autonomy (MARP) and in Lombardy, the Movement for Bergamascan Autonomy (MAB) in order to bring in “fiscal federalism which would ensure that any resources collected from the reduction of in-state expenditures would be redistributed in a way that would benefit the northern regions, not the whole country (Newth). Within this period in the late 1950s, the metaphor for “family” was the northern regions called Padania, those in the conservative parties had to greatly shift their Strict Father morality to include the rest of Italy once Lega Nord became a political party that promoted the slogan “Italian’s first!” (Newth). This shift aligns with the concept that

the morality metaphors are directly impacted by the frame, which in this case was a changing family model from regional to national (Lakoff).

Lakoff explains that the Strict Father morality model is based on the idea that obedience to rulers and fatherly protection are central to the morality and overall worldview of conservatives. Although Lega Nord was not always a national conservative group, their current frame provides morality as national concern. Food becomes tied to morality within Salvini's Lega Nord when it is referenced in the context of new "foreign" restaurants. The othering of immigrants and their cuisines also creates a framework where immigrants are not shielded by "fatherly protection" but are otherwise deemed the "danger" or "difficulty" that Lakoff uses to describe the Strict Father Morality worldview.

Food protectionism in Italy falls under the strict Father Morality Model. This sense of food protectionism has gone as far as requesting UNESCO protections of Napolitana style pizza as an "intangible cultural practice" (Zupello). Modern day food protectionism in Italy can be partially traced back to the Slow Food Movement of 1986 which was spearheaded by Carlo Petrini as a response to McDonald's opening in various Italian historical centers, specifically in Piazza di Spagna. The Slow Food Movement also created a formal community of people who valued traditional food and its geographic links. Folco Portinari, co-founder and co-writer of the Slow Food Manifesto of 1989, claimed that people had fallen "prey to the same virus: 'the fast life' that fractures our customs and assails us even in our own homes, forcing us to ingest 'fast food.'" Part of what the Slow Food Movement fought for was a decrease in import culture thus urging its followers to eat locally grown produce and ingredients (Zupello). Slow Food Movement's rhetoric, however, has somewhat been coopted by the right as a weapon against non-Italian, specifically Middle Eastern cuisines in historic centers. In Verona, this notion can be

seen in the banning of Kebab shops in the historic center. The mayor of Verona, Flavio Tosi, is a former Lega Nord ally and the main force in the efforts to limit the number of Kebab shops in Italy. In February of 2016 Tosi tried to “preserve” Verona’s historic center by banning “inauthentic” food that Tosi claimed was disruptive (Wilson). Tosi specifically banned all new kebab and gyro shops from opening in the city and singled out “oriental and Middle Eastern cuisine” as being the reason streets were becoming “dirty” and produced more “trash” than what they deemed to be “authentic food” (Wilson).

Lakoff’s Strict Father Morality model provides a cognitive linguistic model to understand the ways in which metaphors operate. His Strict Father Morality and Nurturant Parent Morality models are centered on the idea that politics is communicated through metaphors that carries significant moral meaning, especially when it comes to the conceptualization of the conservative worldview. Lega Nord and Salvini’s promotion of Italian food and subsequent othering and demonization of foreign food stands as a broader metaphor for their views against immigration. Salvini’s mention of foreign foods “flooding the European table” brings to light the danger or threat he is trying to communicate. Lega Nord and Salvini’s discourse on food has more to do with the fear they want to ignite in the larger Italian population about immigration than the actual production of Italian grown products. By inflaming fear, they are able to continue their notion of fatherly protection. Within the Strict Father Morality model, Salvini and others are able to propel their nativist Italian Identity while shutting immigrants out of what is considered “traditional”.

Murray Edelman’s notion of condensation symbols as language that evokes emotions can be seen through the kind of political language used in ads by the Italian Nationalist Organization Lega Nord’s slogan “Si alla polenta, NO al cous cous. Orgogliosi delle nostre tradizioni” [Yes to polenta, no to couscous. Proud of our traditions] (Booker 5). Lega Nord is a political

organization, the “symbol act” is largely targeted at an Italian audience that identifies with traditions and thus gives meaning to them. Edelman’s conceptualization of political language can be translated into the use of food as an identity foundation for Italians in the face of large waves of immigration. Food serves to create “quiescence” in those who may merely view food as an extension of a static tradition.

Edelman explains quiescence as a reliance on “stereotype and similar guidance of reality to psychologically alleviate the feeling of anxiety and uncertainty and provide the individual with the illusion of some kind of intellectual security” (Edelman 32). Edelman’s analysis of political action and dormancy is reflected within the usage of traditional Italian cuisine as a kind of foundation to Italian identity. Italian food translates into language once it becomes clear that it is used to reassure those identifying with tradition and threaten those who do not. This becomes evident within the municipal bans on “foreign food” in northern Italy, bans that are often referred to as “gastronomic racism” (Grasso). The reasoning behind this specific ban in Trieste, Italy, came from a statement by the Minister of Agriculture stating that local specialties needed to be “protected” from the emergence of diverse cuisines. This ban required restaurants to serve kebab and other non-Italian dishes with a side of the traditional polenta in order to “preserve” the historical significance of the food (Grasso). Polenta is historically a dish that was accessible to the masses because of its simple and inexpensive preparation (Capatti, Montanari). Polenta was widely a food of the poor in its early history which may be why this dish was picked over a more complex pasta or risotto. The history and the meaning that has been reflected onto polenta has created a remote condensation symbol in which groups like the Lega Nord cling to identity affirmation. This condensation symbol continues to resonate for many *leghisti* because of the quiescence that is created when connecting a current identity to a seemingly static past. Salvini

and Lega Nord continue to use condensation symbols not because they are engaging in the history of Italy but because the history is made to be fixed and unchanged.

Edelman explains that leadership is “recreated historically by writers and interest groups, as it is created contemporaneously by followers” (Edelman 94). Similarly, the history of a food, culture or symbol can become distorted, reshaped, misrepresented and completely manipulated. This might be the case of polenta as it is seen as a national food today but has its roots in a different history. Polenta was known in ancient Rome as food of the poor, and later fed those where not part of the court or peasants (Malpezzi). The lack of nutritional value in Polenta is written to have been part of the reason the pellagra disease became so widespread in northern Italy. The fact that this particular dish was reshaped to become a symbol for the country illustrates Edelman's concept of history and the warping that may happen when one historicizes or traditionalizes a symbol that is inaccurate in its reach.

What makes the case of Italian food nationalism unique is the local identity that many Italians seek to preserve. Edelman writes that political language and remoteness is a way of making such language symbols and thus abstract; although food and its local character in Italy have a strong geographic attachment with those who consume the food, the reality check that Edelman ponders is still lacking. Although political parties such as Lega Nord give the local character of food meaning, this does not take away from the reality that Italy's demographics are changing and will inevitably require a revision of Italy's political and social identity. The ban on couscous or any kind of municipal action in Italy serves as a “formal notice that all is well” for some, meaning those who support the ban and see this restraint as helpful. However, this municipal action also serves as a symbol of threat to Italian identity and might even spark the

idea that Italian traditions are truly being threatened by the emergence of non-Italian restaurants (Edelman 33).

Although the emergence of “ethnic” restaurants in bigger cities such as Rome, Milan and Florence have been relatively small, accuracy does not seem to be of concern to either the Lega Nord party or those supporting the leaders of the party. Edelman highlights that “accuracy is not an important characteristic of political language but the appraisal common to members of the group” (Edelman 115). Although accuracy is assumed to be important in any kind of political action, it is overlooked in the Lega Nord case. In the case of these particular Lega Nord ads, “the medium is the message” (Edelman 132). In addition to political passivity to facts or accuracy, those who find solace in the Lega Nord’s use of language are ultimately being supported by not only those they surround themselves with but their changing environment in general. Edelman explains the nature of this kind of environment, “the fact that behavior takes place in a supporting environment implies that the sign alone does not cause the response evoked, since the sign is merely one condition for a response-sequence in the given situation in which it is a sign” (Edelman 104). Complacency and quiescence seem to grow out of the need to preserve identity, an identity that was given meaning by the masses who recognize a threat rather than a reassurance.

The particular ideological standpoint that Lega Nord positions itself in is evident within Salvini’s tweets as he has both criticized and shamed people in Italy who do not prepare Italian food the “Italian way”. This discourse takes on a political character when set within the framework of immigration. When the archbishop of Bologna, a large southern city in the south, hosted a dinner for the poor where pork-free tortellini was served, he was shamed by Salvini for “erasing Italy’s history” (“Stanno cancellando la nostra storia”) (Mastinu). Tortellini is

traditionally filled with prosciutto or pork however, the archbishop's decision to switch to chicken stuffing was due to the large Muslim immigrant population attending the dinner. Although this dinner was not a switch from Italian food to a different cuisine entirely, many columnists reacted to this substitution arguing that "tradition" is important, one conservative newspaper even going as far as saying tradition starts to weaken through "little things" (Baroncini). Historically, the ingredients used in tortellini in brodo were expensive, and warranted only when there was a celebration, making it not as much of an everyday dinner as polenta was. The significance of its preparation is closely tied to how it is being interpreted by Salvini within this context—to Lega Nord this is a dish that should go untouched in terms of its traditional preparations. However, the weight that is put on the preparation of such a dish is astronomical compared to the relevance it may have with immigration. Edelman explains that "emotional commitment to a symbol is associated with contentment and quiescence regarding problems that would otherwise arouse concern" (Edelman 32). Tortellini, like polenta, consequently, becomes this symbol therefore vilifying any change made to tradition. What makes this symbol political, however, is that it is juxtaposed within a context involving Muslim immigrants who become vilified along with this change.

Leghisti may frame non-Italian food as a threat because of political efforts to try to other immigrants and make the case that they are intruding on their culture. However, what becomes abundantly clear in both Montanari and Ghiglione's work is that there is not a complete unified modern identity among the Italians in the north and in the south. There is a disconnect between the Italy that Lega Nord promotes and the Italy that Italians have historically identified with. Montanari explains that most Italian food is identified by its regional roots rather than being nationalistic in character. The advent of specific labeling for ingredients and food in general

came from a specific desire from Italians to identify the geographic origin of the food they would eventually put on a table. This demand came from a pride in regional traditions, as a way to identify to specific provinces, cities and towns. The labeling emerged through classifications, regulations, juridical frameworks and different international conventions that sought to give consumers information about the origins of their food (Parasecoli). Fabio Parasecoli, President of the Association for the Study of Food and Society, explains the demand for “place-based labels” as a desire for knowledge on the origin of a food but specifically what the geographic place means, “A place in this sense is not only a portion of neutral geographical space; is also includes how that very space is experiences, including through memories, custom, and social structures... I consider such perceptions to be cultural and social constructs to the generation of which all stakeholders contribute, notably with heavily weighted input into both trade talks and political debates” (Parasecoli). Political, gastronomic language evokes memories and feelings associated with food and geography. This language is composed of Edelman’s condensation symbols and aren’t representative of Italy as a whole. The face of modern Italian literature, film, and various other sectors of culture continue to change, food however seems to remain unchanged. Part of what allows food to remain the same within the consciousness of Italians is the Baudrillardian concept of simulation, traditional food being an example of simulacra. The relationship between *leghisti* and food and those who identify with such a relationship is consumed by the symbolism of the cuisine, the simulation becomes more of a reality than the actual authentic present.

Edelman established his framework on language and symbolism by also implying that the “ensuing isolation of the individual” will further the spread of quiescence (Edelman 182). The isolation that he references from Frenkel-Brunswik’s work may be that of growing increasingly

attached to remote “standardized” concepts that one becomes isolated within the symbolism and unable to act autonomously in the face of political action. This is the case with Italian cuisine that operates under the guise of being more intimately related to an ever-changing identity but is ultimately just as intimate and private as Edelman explains political action and language to be (Edelman 32). Lega Nord’s political advertisements are likely a symptom of political quiescence; the use of condensation symbols as key to communication also promotes acquiescence in those who may not feel the threat of “foreign foods” but are ideologically tied to a popularized traditional Italian identity. The link to a past Italian identity becomes standardized for many creating a cycle of endless quiescence and cultural dormancy. Lega Nord and Salvini will continue to use foreign foods as the scapegoat or culprit of a changing Italian identity and a changing Italian table if the historic relevance of Italian food does not become questioned. Whether or not this questioning is necessary to truly evaluate the right’s efforts against immigration depends on how far the connection to food runs within Italian culture. Lega Nord and Salvini represent what successful promotion of condensation symbols look like within a space that is seemingly apolitical. Italian food as a political condensation symbol has thrived in a country with a regional identity rather than a national one and has persisted because of the quiescence that it creates.

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