

The discourse that makes racism disappear. Italian football and the (re)construction of the Maignan case

Max Mauro - Department of Communication and Journalism
Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK

mmauro@bournemouth.ac.uk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9004-3140>

Abstract

When French goalkeeper Mike Maignan, during a game between Udinese and his team AC Milan in January 2024, asked the referee to suspend the match in the face of continuous racist abuse from the stands, it seemed a transformative moment for Italian football. There was wide expression of support for the last in a long series of players racially abused in the game. The culprits were rapidly identified and banned, the hosting team was forced to play two games in an empty ground. Over the following weeks, however, the owners of Udinese calcio, Udinese fans groups, local and national politicians, instigated a campaign to clear their image from the accusation of being “racists”. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Race Theory, this paper examines such an emerging discourse that, while eluding the issue (racism) transforms the assumed culprits into victims and makes structural or institutional racism recede from view.

Keywords – Race; Racism; Anti-racism; Critical Discourse Analysis; Football; Italy.

Introduction

In January 2024, French goalkeeper Mike Maignan, during a game between Udinese and his team AC Milan, left his position on the pitch and told the referee he will not continue to play in the face of continuous racist abuse from the stands. It was not the first time that a game of the Serie A was stopped for this reason, but this time it seemed a transformative moment for Italian football. The reaction from the football authorities was swift, and there was wide expression of support for the last in a long series of players racially abused in the game. The culprits were rapidly identified and banned from the stadium; the hosting team was forced to play two games in a partially empty ground; the Italian Football Association praised their own procedures. All good, then? In fact, racist abuse was registered again in the following weeks, in different games of the Serie A, but with less publicity.

At the same time, in the city of Udine, and in the region of Friuli, the debate continued for several days and weeks around a simple question: Can we all be labelled as racists for what happened in the stadium? “We” is meant as the Udinese fans, the inhabitants of the city, and the people of the region. As we will see, different actors, including the club owners, various

fan groups, media commentators, the mayor of the city and other institutional personalities, in different forms, contributed to the articulation of a discourse around an issue that no one dared to define but all seemed to know well: racism. The answer to the question was always the same: “We are not racists”. Some pushed even further, claiming that “There is no racism here”. These statements brought to the fore an emerging tension in the understanding of what constitutes racism in sport and society; in other words, between overt forms of racism and systemic racism (Ahmed 2012; Goldberg 2015).

Titley (2019, 17) contends that “public debate as to what constitutes racism is constituted through discourse”. He explains: “definitions of what racism means in public culture have become sites of acute political contest, and intensive discursive labour aiming to derail or reverse racism’s political implications”. Titley’s point is particularly pertinent to debates around a very popular sporting spectacle such as football. In many countries, like in Italy, football is one of the most, if not the most visible stage on which ideas of race and nationhood play out. These ideas take form as popular discourses in highly mediated sporting events that are followed by millions of people.

Using a specific case, the racist abuse received by Maignan in Udine, the aim of this paper is to show how football provides a problematic terrain for the definition of “racism”, which has implications beyond the field of sport. I will focus my attention on the level of discourse; in other words, to the way an event is framed and articulated by prominent actors in order to set a narrative, an “order of things” in the words of Foucault (2002 [1966]). Relations of power are central to this process, and by looking closely at its transient outcomes (the texts), we can unpack contradictions and gaps in the shared understanding of racism.

The paper evolves from the analysis of a particular text: ten days after the Maignan case, three major Italian newspapers published a full-page rebuttal of the accusations of “racism”, paid by an anonymous person (it was later revealed to be Gianpaolo Pozzo, owner of Udinese Calcio). This text is analysed in combination with statements from local and national authorities and fans’ groups, and anti-racism policies from sporting authorities. I will first outline the history of racism in European football and look at what I define as the “colonial archive” of Italian football. This will be followed by a methodological section, which illustrates the approach to the study, a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Race Theory (CRT). The central part of the paper is the discussion of texts produced by different actors, and particularly the full-page newspaper advert paid for by the owner of Udinese calcio. The conclusion will summarize the main points and present some recommendations for future research.

Racism and anti-racism in European football

The debate about the presence of racism within elite (association) football took prominence during the 1990s, when the first studies were published in the UK (see for example Holland 1995; Jarvie and Reid 1997). Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s racist chanting and verbal abuse toward black players were endemic issues in English football; this led to state policy interventions such as the Football Offences Act (1991), which introduced “racist chanting” as a punishable offence (Long and Spracklen 2011). For many observers and policy actors at that time, “racism” was mainly a behavioural problem of sections of society: young, disenfranchised males, generally known as “hooligans” (Back, Crabbe and Solomos 2001).

However, Back, Crabbe and Solomos (1999, 438) at that time appropriately argued that: “viewing racism as merely a constituent element of the wider problem of ‘anti-social’ behaviour has resulted in some issues being organized onto the political and intellectual agenda while others have been ruled out”. They invited to pay attention to the broader picture, for example to consider racial inequality among coaches and sports administrators, and to be cognizant of the complex “patterns of racialisation” operating in football and society. To some extent, their point is still relevant today, albeit in a changed social and cultural scenario.

In the second half of the 1990s, the campaign Let’s Kick Racism Out of Football became a formalized actor in the game when it turned into a charity with financial support from the Football Association, the Premier League and the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA). In the year 2000, the Council of Europe acknowledged the prominence of the problem across the continent and approved a “Resolution on preventing racism, xenophobia and intolerance in sport”.¹ The Resolution provided a definition of “racism” in this field:

(Racism) can occur at local level particularly, but not exclusively, in the interaction (for real or imagined reasons of colour, religion, nationality or ethnic origin) between or against players, teams, coaches and spectators and also against referees. It can include the abuse of teams or even whole groups.

Over the following years, policy documents and anti-racism campaigns in different countries seemed to share a somewhat uniform understanding of what is meant by “racism” in sport (Kassimeris 2008). It tends to reduce the issue to the manifest verbal expression of racist thoughts. This approach overlooks the fact that, even confining the discussion to manifestations of racism in sport, it is difficult to convene a single definition of racism. Echoing the work of Goldberg (2015) and applying it to the field of sport, Burdsey (2011, 12) argues that “manifestations of racism are influenced by specific local and global factors, conditions, epochs and political climates”. His view resonates with Doidge’s analysis of racism in European football; he contends that “it is important to understand the nuanced and shifting nature of racism in football” (2016, 183). Similarly, Garland and Rowe (2001, 10) argue that “racist behaviour and discourse in football, like those in society at large, are contradictory, irrational and changeable and therefore simplistic notions of racism can be damaging to anti-racist agendas”. In this context it would be helpful to adopt “racialisation” as an analytical tool, as “it points at the processes through which the construction of the idea of ‘race’ produces divisions among people” (Mauro 2018, 230).

In 2001, FIFA approved a resolution that urged all relevant parties to combat racism, adopting racial equality standards and increasing participation from minority ethnic groups. Soon afterwards, UEFA approved a *Ten Point Plan of Action for Professional Clubs* and over the following years developed specific actions and policy plans, which culminated with the launch of the “Respect” campaign in 2008. Kassimeris (2008) observes that UEFA’s approach was less ambitious than the one outlined by FIFA, but in the end proved a more viable framework for the national federations to develop their own anti-racism programmes. In 2013, in collaboration with the international grassroots organisation Football Against Racism Europe (FARE), UEFA

¹ Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/nice2_en.htm#an4 (accessed 24 August 2024)

set up a monitoring system for manifestations of racism and discrimination in official matches. Disciplinary actions, monitoring and education are the three pillars of UEFA anti-racism strategy (UEFA 2023).

Despite these efforts, racism has neither disappeared nor has it reduced its grip on European football. At the end of the 2023/24 season, Kick It Out stated that “racism remains the most reported form of discrimination”. The organisation received “more player-specific discriminatory reports in the professional game than ever before, with abuse targeting players soaring by 43 per cent”.² In Germany, during the 2021/2022 season, over 900 matches were suspended due to racism or discrimination across all categories.³ In France, in January 2022, Ligue 1 club Toulouse FC was sanctioned by deducting one point from their standings due to xenophobic attacks by their own fans.⁴ In June 2024, three men were jailed for eight months and banned from attending football matches for two years after being found guilty of abusing Real Madrid player Vinicius Jr. In the previous months, Vinicius Jr had denounced the racial abuse he had received in multiple occasions (Mauro and Martínez-Corcuera 2023).

At the same time, over the last two decades, the modalities of racist manifestations in football have evolved, finding new means of expression on social media (Kilvington and Price 2019; Kassimeris et al. 2022; Doidge et al. 2024). In July 2021, after the defeat of the men’s England team at the Euro 2020, three English black players received what the police defined as “a torrent of racist comments” online.⁵ The following year, UEFA launched “an online abuse programme, aiming to monitor, report and remedy cases happening during all UEFA finals and final tournaments”.⁶ At the men’s Euro 2024, the programme monitored 622 social media platforms and accounts of all the individuals involved in the tournament. These examples testify of the prominence of the issue across Europe, but also pose questions about the deeper ramifications of racism in sport and society. The case of Italy is particularly significant in that issues of racism in football have often been conflated with debates about race, national identity and immigration.

Football’s colonial archive

Like in many European countries, in Italy, since the end of World War II, the term “race” has been largely removed from public discourse when referring to human beings. As a word, it is hardly mentioned in textbooks, and to this day public speakers, including politicians, intellectuals and social scientists are very cautious to even mention it (Hawthorne 2022).

² KickItOut reports continue to rise. <https://www.kickitout.org/news-media/kick-it-out-reports-continue-rise> (accessed 21 August 2024)

³ Aytekin und Rafalski starten Aufruf “Schiris gegen Diskriminierung”. https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/aytekin-und-rafalski-starten-aufruf-schiris-gegen-diskriminierung-250120/?no_cache=1&cHash=bbc1b4ff30d94f17c5212273cd3de773 (accessed 22 August 2024)

⁴ Racist remarks during Toulouse-Rodez: the TFC sanctioned with a withdrawal of one point suspended. <https://europe-cities.com/2022/01/12/racist-remarks-during-toulouse-rodez-the-tfc-sanctioned-with-a-withdrawal-of-one-point-suspended/> (accessed 30 April 2024).

⁵ Euro 2020: Five people arrested over racist abuse of England players. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk57848761#:~:text=Five%20people%20have%20been%20arrested,in%20the%20Euro%202020%20final.>

⁶ Tackling online abuse at UEFA EURO 2024: First insights from group stage. <https://www.uefa.com/euro2024/news/028f-1b431b7d7f64-78c7bb36f713-1000--tackling-online-abuse-at-uefa-euro-2024-first-insights-f/> (accessed 22 August 2024)

Morning and Maneri (2022) highlight that “race” it is still considered “an ugly word” in Italy. At the same time, particularly when something happens in the “national game”, racism is widely debated and discussed. How can there be racism without “race”? The question of the “debatability of racism” (Titley 2019) in the Italian context assumes a perplexing perspective if we consider that, since 2013, Italy’s has its own National Office Against Racial Discrimination (UNAR), a public body whose director is appointed by the Prime Minister and whose function is that of “promoting equal treatment and the removal of discrimination based on race or ethnic origin”.⁷

Despite its apparent absence from public discourse, “race” is a very active signifier in debates about national identity. According to Hawthorne (2021, 9), in Italy “racism continues to reproduce and renew the category of race through new essentialisms that do not necessarily invoke blood or skin, but gain their meaning through other signifiers – including citizenship”. Debates about race and national identity are magnified and popularised by international sport events such as the UEFA European Football Championship and the FIFA World Cup. The trajectory of Mario Balotelli, the first black Italian football star, shows how race operates as a “floating signifier” (Hall 2013) – not a biological fact but an idea that can be declined and constructed in different ways according to the cultural context and the historical moment (Hylton 2008). As the son of African immigrants, he was racially abused while playing for Italy (“Our captain has Italian blood”, when he was supposed to captain the team in a friendly game), but also when he was playing for his club (“There are no black Italians”) (Doidge 2015). The point of contention for some when talking about Balotelli – the fact of being black *and* Italian, his double consciousness (Gilroy 1993) – highlights the fragility of an Italian national consciousness that was precariously achieved only in the 20th century, but also the persistence of a largely removed colonial imaginary (Mauro 2024).

In a way, football provides to Italian people the most accessible “colonial archive” of ideas inherited from the crimes committed in Africa before and during Fascism. According to Stoler (2002, quoted in Giuliani 2018, 5) a colonial archive is “a repository of codified beliefs” and a “site of knowledge production”. A few examples will make this “archive” evident to the reader. Over the past decade, several prominent personalities of Italian football have expressed openly racist beliefs without having to pay any consequences for them. In 2014, the former president of the Italian Football Association (FIGC), Paolo Tavecchio made derogatory remarks about African players while campaigning for the presidency. He referred to Opti Poba, a fictional player “who was previously eating bananas and now is a first team player for Lazio” (Tavecchio was later elected). In 2015, the former national team manager Arrigo Sacchi commented: “I am not a racist, but there are too many blacks in youth teams”, overlooking the fact that most of these “blacks” might have been born or raised in Italy and even hold Italian citizenship. In 2017, the former Torino captain, and club legend, Eraldo Pecci, while commenting a game on national TV said that “African players tend to lose games or not win them for a lack of concentration, they always make mistakes. Evidently, it is part of their DNA”. The same year, another famous former player, Stefano Eranio, made similar remarks during a Europa League game he was commenting on for the Swiss public broadcaster. He was dismissed the following day. In 2019, the president of Lazio, Claudio Lotito, referring to racist abuse of black players,

⁷ UNAR. <https://www.unar.it/portale/web/unar-en> (accessed 22 August 2024).

declared: “When I was little, we would shout buuu also to non-coloured players, *with normal white skin*, to discourage them from scoring” (italics are mine).

It would be wrong to believe that racism entered Italian football only in recent times. In 1961, the leading newspaper *Corriere della Sera* argued against the possibility of Pelè joining an Italian club. “Racism has nothing to do with it ... but we should be allowed to say that in football a black player among 21 white players would create a colour clash, it would to some extent annoy the spectators, from an aesthetic point of view” (“These players cost too much”, *CdS* 15 April 1961).

These examples exemplify the public archive of (subconscious?) colonial imaginaries that characterise Italian football. Referring to cases of racist speech which made news in Australian and the USA, Alana Lentin (2016, 36) writes: “This element of publicness, while providing formulaic examples of what racism looks like, allows for a further distancing between this supposedly ‘real’, and thus extreme and uncommon, racism and the hidden forms of ‘systemic’ racism”. Her point is relevant to our discussion, but it needs to be contextualised: on the one hand, the racist remarks listed above cannot be considered “extreme” in Italian football and society because they caused none or limited backlash – the exception being the former player sacked by the Swiss broadcaster. On the other hand, the Italian case confirms that certain public manifestations of racism contribute to the construction of a simplified idea of racism which overshadows deeper forms of racial discrimination and inequality. This reflects a common issue among European football, whose leaders tend to underplay structural forms of racism in the game (Mashigo et al. 2024).

Over the past decade, the Italian Football Association (FIGC) has been questioned for their discriminatory practices in the registration of youth players born or raised in Italy who do not hold Italian citizenship (Mauro 2016). The Italian citizenship law only allows a child born in Italy to foreign parents to apply for Italian citizenship when they turn 18. This means that about a million children born or who have lived in Italy for most of their life are denied Italian citizenship (Tintori 2018). For years, the FIGC limited the inclusion of these children in grassroots football by requesting a long list of documents to their families, longer than any other major football country in Europe (Mauro 2016, 63-64). In 2014, the Italian football association appointed former Olympic champion Fiona May as their first “anti-racism advisor”. She left her position in 2017 and later declared: “Fighting racism was not their priority. My experience with the FIGC was a disappointing one” (Giovio 2019).

All this arguably evidences how racist thoughts that circulate in Italian football (the colonial archive) can translate into practices. As noted by Hall (2018, 105): “Practices always have a meaning, meanings organise practices and produce real effects”. The connection between racist speech and practices tends to be overlooked in public debate, but, as we will see, even tangible, “spectacular” forms of racism such as those happening in the Serie A, tend to be dismissed or denied. What is at play, I believe, is a contested idea of whiteness and masculinity. In her insightful analysis of race, nation and gender in modern Italy, Giuliani (2018, 6) writes:

The racialised bodies of today, like those inherited from the past (southern Italians, Jews, the Roma, as well as the colonised), are constructed not only to discursively discriminate or justify exploitation and differential inclusion but also to construe by contrast the idea of whiteness – namely, the normative charge that structures and gives

substance and justification to the racialised social hierarchy that is variously reproduced in the very dis-homogeneous Italian society.

Methodological considerations

As said, the focus of this paper is discourse. Discourse is a way to imagine and construct reality that can have direct effects on people's actions. It is about naming things, making them real, obfuscating other things and certain aspects of the same things we give a name to. In the words of Stuart Hall (1992, 318), "A discourse is a way of talking about or representing something. It produces knowledge that shapes perception and practice". By looking closely at texts produced about racism in football we are also looking at meanings attributed to racism, at ways to make racism "real" in society. This naming of things, and its composition as meaningful texts, is linked to inchoating practices that might produce real effects in people's lives. Understandably, this is not a linear process, rather a circular one, it is part of a cycle of effects, where discourses emerge and become hegemonic based on existing practices, which they contribute to create and transform (Foucault 1984). The key driver, the engine of this process, is power. Critical Discourse Analysis is an approach to the analysis of meaning in texts and artefacts which has the critical inquiry of the workings of power as its focus (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). It studies "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (Van Dijk 2015, 466).

In this regard, the methodological stance of CDA intersects with Critical Race Theory's (CRT) attention to the institutional workings of racism and the invitation to acknowledge that race and racialization inform our social lives (Delgado et al. 2017). For CRT, racialized social structures privilege primarily white populations, granting them power and material benefits. In this context, Hylton (2010, 246-247) emphasises that "racist acts" cannot be "reduced to the overt and explicit, as opposed to the covert, often institutionalized discursive practices that constitute racialized processes; these regularly lead to undocumented racist exclusions or disadvantages". The type of discourse surrounding the Maignan case focuses on overt "racist acts", but its analysis helps us to unpack also the underdiscussed systemic dimensions of racism.

This study takes one specific text as the central point of analysis: a full-page advert published in two national and one regional newspapers. It is not uncommon for football clubs to buy space in traditional media to "communicate" directly with the public. Recently, Borussia Dortmund used a full page in the *Los Angeles Times* to salute their former player Marco Reus who had joined the Los Angeles Galaxy after a long career at Borussia. In the summer of 2024, the Dinamo Zagreb president bought a page in the Spanish sports daily *Marca* to invite their former player and current Real Madrid star, Luka Modric, to return to Dinamo Zagreb.

However, the advert paid for by the owner of Udinese is of a different kind. It is not a celebration of a player or of a success by the team. It is a message that deals with issues which are arguably *bigger* than football, and which have political, social and cultural implications. Why did he do it? Where does such a text come from? To help make sense of it, other connected texts will be examined, such as communiques by fans groups, press notes and public statements by local and national authorities, and news media excerpts. In this way, the main text appears as a sort of palimpsest ("a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has

been superimposed on effaced earlier writing”, Oxford Dictionary), which other texts are based on, refer to, or comment upon.

Understandably, to describe discourse as a communicative event we need to pay attention also to the context: who are the actors involved, their roles, the setting, and the power relations at play (Wodak and Meyer 2015). The aim of the analysis is not of just describing discourse structures, but to try to “explain them in terms of properties of social interaction and especially social structure” (Van Dijk 2015, 466). I interpret this paper as an intervention, a form of social action, which contributes to expose how manifestations of racism in football draw on and influence understandings of “racism” in society – discourse permeates society including popular culture, media and political thought.

The Maignan Case

On January 20th, the Serie A game between Udinese and AC Milan was suspended after Milan’s goalkeeper Mike Maignan informed the referee of the repeated racist abuse he was receiving from the stands. Following the protocol, the referee had initially stopped the match and asked “for an announcement to be made over the public address system requesting the public to immediately stop such racist behaviour”.⁸ The disturbances did not stop, so he invited the teams to leave the pitch and the announcement to be repeated. The game finally resumed after five minutes, and AC Milan won it. It was not the first time that a game was suspended for racist and discriminatory chants. In December 2018, the game between Inter Milan and Napoli was suspended for racist abuse toward the Napoli player Kalidou Koulibaly. However, the abuse resumed and Koulibaly was sent off for his reactions. At least two other players victim of racist abuse have been sent off in the Serie A: Sulley Muntari in 2017 and Romelu Lukaku in 2023, both for complaining about racism from the stands. Unfortunately, there are no available statistics for these cases, as neither the Lega Serie A neither the Football Association keep them or make them available. This could be read as subtle evidence of denial practices in tackling racism and discrimination in the game (FRA 2010). In 2022, UNAR, in collaboration with Lega Serie A, published the first “Report on discrimination in the world of sport”, monitoring nine major sports. Almost 80 per cent of the cases of discrimination were related to football, but there were no details about cases in the Serie A. So far, there have been no other editions of the report, but UNAR assures they will publish a new one in 2025.⁹

The case of Maignan made the headlines in international media, Italian talk shows and football programmes. Two days after the match, the police announced they had identified a man who had been filmed shouting racist abuse to Maignan. He was given a banning order of five years.¹⁰ Two days later another three people were given the same order. The Football Association decided that Udinese should be punished by playing two games without spectators (the ban was later reduced to a section of the ground). The process had been swift, there had been wide condemnation of the events and wide expressions of support for Maignan. A different story,

⁸ UEFA Safety and Security Regulations, 2019, https://documents.uefa.com/r/UPE0QDp~FJso7vSx8slqLQ/lkexux0yxh_1NT7TWEs1Ww

⁹ Personal communication with UNAR director Matteo Peradotto, 23 August 2024.

¹⁰ The DASPO (Ban on access to sporting events) is an administrative order of the local chief of the police force.

however, was unfolding in Udine and in the region of which the city is the main centre, Friuli.¹¹ On January 30th, ten days after the events, the two most widely circulated national newspapers, *Corriere della Sera* e *Gazzetta dello Sport*, and the main newspaper of Udine, *Messaggero Veneto*, published a full-page advert (double page in *La Gazzetta dello Sport*) that was an open intervention on the story.

The advert combines two images with a large headline and an unusually long text in the middle. The front image is that of a group of Udinese players (recognizable for the white and black striped jersey) celebrating a goal or a positive result. Among the players a football fan would recognize three of the most experienced players of the team, Wallace, Samardzic and Perez, with two younger teammates. Three out of six the figures in the image can be framed as “black”. At the back of the group of players stands the image of the principal square of Udine (Piazza della Libertà) with one of the city’s most iconic monuments, the clocktower, resembling that of the Piazza San Marco in Venice.

The headline occupies a third of the space of the advert and it is written in capital letters: SENZA MOTIVO (Without a reason). Six lines of text (three in the two-page advert) run below the headline, and further down, just above the picture of the players, another, smaller, headline: IL RAZZISMO NON CI APPARTIENE (Racism does not belong to us). At the level of denotation (Barthes 1972), all these elements together could make sufficiently clear the type of message being encoded in the text. Understandably, it is the written text that encapsulates the main message, while the images provide a meaningful context.

The unknown author (later to be revealed as Udinese Calcio owner Gianpaolo Pozzo) claims that the accusation of racism to the club and the city is unjustified and that “racism” has nothing to do with them, meaning either the club or the city – or both of them as a single entity, as the superimposition of the images of team and city square seems to convey. However, it is the text added between the two headlines that provides an explanation while also giving an insight to the mindset of the author. This is where the level of connotation emerges, revealing underlying, recurrent myths about this region and its inhabitants.

*Border region, always open to diverse cultures and people of all nationalities, Friuli Venezia Giulia welcomes and values, supports and creates development. Our people do not accept being labelled as racist for the despicable actions of a few individuals, who have already been identified and punished, and who do not represent us. Our supporters have always experienced sport as a healthy passion, beyond all differences.*¹²

Context is particularly significant in this case. Udine is the capital of Friuli, a historical region that for six centuries had its own parliament (The parliament of the Patria del Friuli). After the end of WWII and the agreement between the allied powers, Yugoslavia and Italy about the fate of Trieste and the surrounding areas, a new institutional region was created, Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Border regions have complicated histories. Historically, Udinese is the team that represents Friuli, which also gives the name to its stadium, while Triestina, playing in the third

¹¹ The region Friuli-Venezia Giulia was born out of the unification of two different border areas, Friuli and Venezia Giulia. Udine is considered the capital of the historical region of Friuli, Trieste is the capital of the institutional region Friuli-Venezia Giulia.

¹² Translated from Italian by the author.

tier of national football, represents Trieste and Venezia Giulia; that is the way fans of both teams have always felt about their teams.¹³ However, it is significant that the shirt sponsor of Udinese is the regional government, with the motto: “I am Friuli Venezia Giulia”. The message could therefore be interpreted differently according to the sense of (local) identity of the readers.

This contextual aspect is not directly relevant to the issue at hand, but it shows an attention to the commercial nature of the club – because of its sponsor, Udinese is expected to represent the whole region, not just part of it. This aspect aside, the underlying discourse is not only one that refutes the accusation of being racist but one that questions the existence of “racism” itself, at least in this place. It is a case of “not here syndrome” (Hurst 2021): racism is not a problem in our club and in our region. Let’s try to unpack the rhetorical devices employed in this text.

The text is made of 66 words, and it can be structurally read as three distinct but connected parts. The first and the third part make use of positive words that connote the region, its people, the club and its fans as the victims; the second part is negative in tone and meanings, it aims at defining what and who the region and its people are not. This pattern resonates with the “overall tendency of ingroup favoritism or positive self-presentation, on the one hand, and outgroup derogation or negative Other-presentation, on the other” highlighted by Van Dijk in his analysis of discourse and racism (2001:147). The region is “open”, “welcomes”, “values”, “supports”, “creates”. The supporters – “our supporters” – experience sport as a “healthy passion”. Between these two exalting representations come the negative connotations with which the people of this region (and the fans) want to have nothing to do: “not accept”, “despicable”, “punish”, “not represent”. According to de Saussure (2013), we tend to use binary oppositions to make sense of things; binary oppositions help our mind to produce a meaning out of a text or a message. In this case, the oppositions are quite evident: the text uses banal rhetorical devices to address a national audience and portray a sense of victimhood.

In the first line there are three notable signifiers: the “border”, the “cultures” and “nationality”. They are all used in positive terms, to emphasise a value – diversity – which appears precious in this context: how can there be racism in such a culturally diverse place? However, the history of this place tells a rather different story. Since the late 18th century, the border of this region has moved several times to accommodate the changes of power: from the Republic of Venice to the Habsburgs, to the French Empire under Napoleon, the Austrian Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and finally Italy. While Italy was formally unified in 1861, some of these provinces joined Italy in 1866 while the cities of Gorizia and Trieste only after WWI.

It is true that the region is historically made of different cultures, including the linguistic minorities of Friulans (speaking a Romance language), the German speaking minority and the Slovene speaking minority (they are among the 12 linguistic minorities officially recognised by the Italian state). At the same time, during the 20th century, Italian nationalism often targeted Slovene speakers. In 1920, the cultural centre of the Sloven community of Trieste was set on fire by fascist squads, a prelude to the fascist violence that will pervade Italy in later years. Famously, it was in the multiethnic city of Trieste that Mussolini announced the racial laws,

¹³ In August 2024, Triestina apologised after a large billboard had been placed outside the Udinese stadium. The billboard showed a sitter wearing the Triestina shirt with the writing (in English) “The most beautiful jersey in Friuli Venezia Giulia”. Udinese fans protested and the billboard was removed.

introduced in 1938, declaring Jews “irreconcilable enemies” (Burgio 2002). Anti-Slavic sentiments remained tangible after the end of Fascism. Finally, after WWII this border separated the East from the West in the context of the Cold War, even though Yugoslavia did not align with the Soviet Union. Until the Fall of the Berlin Wall, one third of the Italian Army was displayed in this small region (Michelutti 2012).

So, for the author of the advert to claim as cultural “assets” aspects that have historically been either downplayed or persecuted is an act of ignorance or, more likely, a crass rhetorical strategy that plays with historical facts. The next claim made in the advert resonates with a well-known pattern in contemporary debates on racism. The author of the advert claims that “our people do not accept being labelled as racist for the despicable actions of a few individuals”. In their analysis of racism in European football, Kassimeris et al. (2022, 826) state: “there is a broad consensus that racism exists within the sport, and yet an equally widespread insistence that the difficulties are primarily elsewhere – somebody else’s concern, or else, society’s problem” (see also Mashigo et al. 2024).

It is quite common for a football club to claim their “clean conscience” when it comes to accusations of racism (Back et al. 2001, 164). In the end, their cooperation with the sporting authorities can lead to a reduction of fines and bans (as it happened in this case). At the same time, being labelled as racist is “bad publicity”, particularly in a diverse and globally popular sport such as football (Goldblatt 2019). All tactics are legitimate to avoid this accusation, and the claim that “our supporters have always experienced sports as a healthy passion, beyond any differences” is another problematic statement. Udine is the place that recorded the first racist incident in the history of Serie A that made national and international news. In 1989, Udinese fans wrote anti-semitic slogans on the wall outside the club’s headquarters against the signing of Ronny Rosenthal, an Israeli player. The signing did not go through in the end, but pictures of those “graffiti” remain. Two years before, racist abuse had been directed at Geronimo Barbadillo, black Peruvian star of Udinese, who was thought to be willing to leave the team. “Go away, shit n*****” someone wrote on a wall near to Barbadillo’s home.¹⁴ More recently, a study on young black and racialised footballers revealed how racism is a regular occurrence in youth and grassroots football in this part of Italy (Mauro 2016).

Lentin (2018, 401) argues that “The denial and redefinition of racism – that which I am calling ‘not racism’ – has become a central formulation for the expression and legitimization of racism”. The club as the author of the advert used expensive and falsifying rhetorical strategies to clean their image and, while doing so, they diverted the attention from the real problem at hand.¹⁵ Racism is not the issue here, but the accusation of being racist is. If the factuality of racism, at least in its verbal manifestation, cannot be denied, it can however be directed toward specific subjects, a minority, a few bad apples. Once the “culprits” are punished the problem will magically go away. Again, this is a well-known pattern in what Goldberg defines as “racial neoliberalism” (2009): the structuration of racism(s) in a society that while denying the existence of racism it continually reproduces and re-articulate its tenets. In the words of

¹⁴ This is the translation to the Italian abuse: “Negro di merda”. This is the same insult shouted 12 times to Maignan by a Udinese fan, who was filmed doing it.

¹⁵ According to official tariffs published by *Corriera della Sera* in 2024, a full-page advert costs €34,000.

Bonilla-Silva (2021) it is “racism without racists”. Ahmed (2012, 150) provides a succinct and illuminating description of this phenomenon:

the reduction of racism to the figure of ‘the racist’ allows structural or institutional forms of racism to recede from view, by projecting racism onto a figure that is easily discarded (not only as someone who is ‘not me’ but also as someone who is ‘not us,’ who does not represent a cultural or institutional norm).

Finally, the use of pronouns in the advert reveals underlying power dynamics. Who has the right to speak? The advert speaks of “our people” and “our supporters”. The verbs that follow are assertive (“do not accept”, “have always experienced”), but they don’t show the level of agency of the subjects spoken about, rather that of the author of the text. For Fairclough (2003, 113), “action processes foreground agency, contributing to the representation of power”. When, the day after the publication of the advert, Pozzo admitted to the local newspaper being the buyer/author of the advert, he made, maybe unconsciously, his power position clearer: “We did not want this to be just about Udinese, so we decided to promote an anonymous campaign all Friulians could identify with” (note the mention of Friulians and not Friuli-Venezia Giulia).¹⁶

Competing discourses?

In response to the media hype around the case of racism at the Udinese stadium, the organisations that represent the Udinese fans circulated statements that reinforced the points made in the advert, adding more layers of signification. The Udinese Supporters Association stated: “While fully aware of the serious problem of racism, we consider it absolutely inappropriate to accuse the Friulian people of such a discriminatory attitude”. The Ultras published their own *communiqué*, in which they denied any “discriminatory chant”, claiming that “any rude words or uncivil shouts from an individual do not reflect my community”. Interestingly, the note of the Ultras is written in the first singular person by “Curva Nord”, the name of the group, based on the section of the stadium where traditionally the ultras are located (the north stand). “Accusations of racism and ignorance don’t affect me. I welcome people of all ages, all social classes and all nations. The only colour that really matters is black and white (i.e. the colours of the Udinese jersey)”. Curva Nord refers three times to the “Friulan people”, even speaking on behalf of black and minorized Udinese players: “Several players of Udinese are of colour and none of them has ever complained about experiencing racist behaviour at the stadium or in everyday life from the Friulian people”.

The first statement speaks on behalf of a collective entity – the Friulian people – which is other from the collective they claim to represent – the fans; this confirms the close identification between the region and the team. At the same time, the statement makes the “Friulan people” appear as the victims of the events. Again, racism is not the issue, rather the accusation of being a racist is the issue. The Ultras, in whose section the four “culprits” of the chants were standing,

¹⁶ Messaggero Veneto (2024), “Maignan: pagine dei quotidiani comprate da Pozzo”. 31 January. https://messaggeroveneto.gelocal.it/italia/2024/01/31/news/maignan_pagine_dei_quotidiani_comprate_da_pozzo-14034148/ (accessed on 24 August 2024).

take this approach to a different level. Not only do they speak on behalf of the “Friulian people”, but also on behalf of the black players! Read through the lens of CRT, this sort of discursive *disclaimer* (Van Dijk 2001, 150) shows how racialized hierarchies operate to reaffirm “power relations that perpetuate racial inequalities in society and maintain the status quo” (Hylton 2010, 348).

Interestingly, the Ultras directly refer to the issue – racism – to deny its existence (Titley, 2019). It is worth to pay attention to the way the sentenced is organised. The subjects of the action are the players of colour. According to Hansen and Machin (2018, 133), in a text, “activated social actors are represented as ‘the active, dynamic forces in an activity’ (van Leeuwen 1996, 43–44), the ones who do things and make things happen”. However, in this text the players of colour are made subjects of an action they are unaware of having made – not-complaining about racism. There have been no public statements on the Maignan case by current or former Udinese players of colour.

In this occasion, political and institutional actors have greatly contributed to the articulation of a discourse on racism, using their position to legitimize a particular reading of the events and of the nature of racism (McGlynn and Tacon 2024). As we will see, despite the protestation and the victim complex statements, there are no competing discourses. The mayor of Udine, representing a centre-left coalition, proposed to confer Maignan the “honorary citizenship”. He explained: “this case goes beyond the sporting dimension of the club colours. We talk about human rights”. And further: “Udine is not racist and it has a long history of welcoming people”. In the end, the city council voted against the honorary citizenship, but by absolving the city and its population from the accusation of racism, the mayor reinforced the message encoded in the advert. The arguments of the opposition in the city council were not dissimilar: “The citizenship should not be granted because it could appear to be a reparative action for a fault that the Friulian people do not believe they have”. A similar point was made by the president of the region, leading a centre-right majority: “Racism is not everyone’s fault, only the guilty should be punished”. The editor of the local newspaper, *Messaggero Veneto*, intervened with an editorial, in which he argued: “One, two, three, four or ten? There are always too many idiots who have made Friuli and Udine pass for what they are not: racists”. As proof of the level of attention to this case, even the Minister of Interior felt pressured to comment on the story: “These hateful gestures, committed by a handful of criminals who try to hide in the crowd, bring discredit to an entire community and convey a distorted idea of our country”.

What is at play here? Sara Ahmed (2012, 146) contends that “when racism becomes an institutional injury, it is imagined as an injury to whiteness. The claim ‘we would never’ use the language of racism is a way of protecting whiteness from being hurt or damaged”. The fact that all the actors involved are from the white majority, and they are all male, attributes a further layer of signification to the discourse we have described. Football played by men is a national treasure that needs to be protected - not protected from a racist culture in which is historically imbued, but from the accusations of racism.

Conclusion

The racist abuse suffered by Mike Maignan at the Udinese stadium in January 2024 has received unprecedented media attention in Italy and internationally. This fact has provoked a reaction of different actors, both within and outside the field of football. What might have been an

opportunity to debate the problem of racism in Italian society, of which football is arguably a prominent form of popular culture, it has become an opportunity for the denial of racism. All the different statements and texts contribute to construct a discourse – a way to see and represent things, to make them real. This discourse is hegemonic because it is articulated by actors differently positioned in society, in terms of power, who all repeat similarly encoded messages. The advert paid for by the owners of Udinese calcio, while motivated by the decision of the football authorities to play two games in an empty ground (decision later revised), is essentially a protest against the accusations of “racism”. The issue is made to be simply what happened in the stadium, the racist verbal abuse. While it is important to tackle this type of behaviour, the effect of such discursive strategy is that of reducing racism to that “thing”, and that thing only. Furthermore, it is something that only a few are culpable of – they are the only ones who should be held accountable. Racism is reduced to an individual crime. It is explained “in terms of its manifestation as a behaviour, action, or attitude rather than as the expression of systemised racial logics with complex and multi-routed underpinnings” (Lentin 2016, 36). Altogether, the analysis has unpacked the fragility of strategies aimed at eradicating racism from football while ignoring the social contexts in which racism remains, by and large, unchallenged and not “seen” by the white majority; what King (1997) defines as “dysconscious racism”. Despite long-term campaigns and initiatives from the main sporting bodies, racism continues to characterise football across Europe. Disciplinary actions have become more effective thanks to technological advancements and the transformation of stadia in spaces of hyper-surveillance. At the same time, educational activities, such as anti-discrimination days, are not making much difference to rooted prejudices and historicised racialisations. By shedding light on these tensions, this case study exposes contemporary (mis)understandings around race and racism. It further shows how a “colonial archive” still operates within Italian football; while articulated essentially in speech, it informs practices and produces real effects. Further research could, from a media studies perspective, explore the role of traditional media, such as newspapers and television, in public debate around racism. In a media landscape where traditional media continue to lose audiences, to what extent are newspapers influential in defining the agenda of public debate on sensitive issues such as racism?

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