

THE RED AND THE BLACK: IMAGES OF AMERICAN INDIANS  
IN THE ITALIAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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## ABSTRACT

In Italy, over the last decades, both the Left and the Right have repeatedly employed American Indians as political icons. The Left and the Right, that is, both adopted and adapted certain real or often outright invented features of American Indian culture and history to promote their own ideas, values, and political campaigns. The essay explores how well-established stereotypes such as those of the ecological Indian, the Indian as victim, and the Indian as fearless warrior, have often surfaced in Italian political discourse. The “*Indiani Metropolitani*” student movement resorted to “*Indian*” imagery and concepts to rejuvenate the languages of the old socialist and communist left, whereas the Right has for the most part preferred to brandish the Indian as an image of a bygone past, threatened by modernization and, especially, by immigration. Indians are thus compared to contemporary Europeans, struggling to resist being invaded by “*foreign*” peoples. While both the Left and the Right reinvent American Indians for their own purposes, and could be said to practice a form of cultural imperialism, the essay argues that the Leftist appropriations of the image of the Indian were always marked by irony. Moreover, while the Right’s Indians can be seen as instances of what Walter Benjamin (1969) described as Fascism’s aestheticization of politics, groups like the *Indiani Metropolitani* tried to politicize the aesthetics.

Keywords: Native Americans; Italy; Invented Indian; social movements; political discourse; ideology; ethnic stereotypes; cultural appropriation; cultural borrowing.

## 1. Cultural appropriation vs cultural borrowing

Over the last five centuries, American Indians have steadily peopled the European imagination. During the twentieth century, the immense popularity of Western

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movies, literature, and comics managed to secure a special, lasting place for the “imagined” or “pretend Indian” in the Old World’s popular culture (see Bataille & Silet 1980, and especially Feest 1987). What may be somewhat surprising is that, notwithstanding the decline of the Western as a filmic and literary genre, American Indians have by no means disappeared from the European cultural landscape. In Italy today American Indians are much less conspicuous in mass culture than they were in the 1950s–1970s period. Yet, what the record shows is that not only do they remain a part of the popular imagination but also, more interestingly perhaps, over the last decades they have been repeatedly employed as political icons by both the Left and the Right. In fact, both the far Left and the far Right – the Red and the Black I refer to in my title – have often tried in one way or another to claim Indians as their own intellectual property. They have, that is, both adopted and adapted certain real or often outright invented features of American Indian culture and history to promote their own ideas, values, and political campaigns. As we shall see, the invented, or to use Robert Berkhofer’s (1979) term, “the white man’s Indians” peopling Italian political discourse of the last forty or so years bear some resemblance to the invented Indians of other places and cultures, beginning of course with those manufactured in the USA.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, however, I will concentrate on what I see as the specific Italian contributions to the exploitation of some well-established stereotypes such as those of the ecological Indian, the Indian as victim, and the Indian as a fearless warrior. My scope is first informative, as I believe this to be one important feature of the enormous influence that things American have had on Italian culture at large in the post-World War II period. Secondly, my intent in this article is not only to call attention to yet another instance of the long, sad history of cultural imperialism but also to suggest that it may be wrong to file all acts of cultural appropriation under the same rubric. While the deployment of the image of the American Indian within a foreign cultural, historical, and political context must perforce entail a degree of interpretive violence, the intentions, conditions, and effects of each specific act of cultural appropriation must also be attended to. The line separating cultural appropriation (a colonialist act) from cultural borrowing (an emancipatory practice that opens one’s world to the worlds of others) may be very difficult to draw, but the responsibility of the critic is precisely to suggest where that line might fall.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, while in general the term “invented Indian” can be usefully employed in discussions of American Indian stereotyping, it also figures as the title of Robert Clifton’s (1990) wrong-headed assault on what he and the contributors to his volume see as Indian “myths” – an assault that rather than focusing on the shameful history of white misrepresentations, ends up targeting American Indians themselves.

<sup>2</sup> For a well-balanced and wide-ranging discussion of the topic of cultural appropriation across a spectrum ranging from art and music to genetics, see Young & Brunk (2011).

Perhaps because American Indians as real people exist at a far remove from the immediate Italian social and historical context, their image can more easily function as a veritable floating signifier, ready to be exploited by opposite sides of the political spectrum. This is not to say, however, that all the uses to which American Indians are put in writing and images can be considered as being marked by the same degree and kind of arbitrariness. As James O. Young (2000) has argued, we should “avoid making blanket pronouncements about cultural appropriation”. Experience should teach us that “cultural appropriation has many forms. Some examples of certain forms are certainly immoral. At the same time, many examples of all forms of cultural appropriation are morally unobjectionable” (Young 2000: 316). At first glance, all Italian appropriations of the image of the American Indian may be quickly condemned as instances of cultural imperialism – including those by self-proclaimed anti-imperialists – or at least as instances of red face minstrelsy. Yet, not only some caricatures appear to a discerning critical eye as more irksome, offensive, and outrageous than others, but their meaning and value must be gauged by the specific cultural and political context they wish to address. After offering a brief review of some of the ways in which Italians, just like many white Americans and Europeans have always done, like to “play” Indians, I will conclude with some considerations on why, to my mind, some distinctions among the ways in which the image of the American Indian is exploited are worth making.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The Red...

My first foray into Italian-Indian territory goes back to the late 1970s, and it resulted in a piece entitled “‘Was Anybody More of an Indian than Karl Marx?’ The ‘Indiani Metropolitani’ and the 1977 Movement” (Mariani 1987: 585–598). I do not intend to rehearse here in detail the argument I made in the essay, which was based on what I suppose could be described as my experience as a participant-observer in the last great student upheaval of the “long” Italian 1960s. Let me just say that what was usually described as the more “creative” wing of the student movement – i.e., those who sought to inject new life into a stale Leftist imaginary still heavily indebted to the symbolism of the Third International and Maoism – named itself rather informally *Indiani Metropolitani* (Metropolitan Indians). This was a somewhat large “nation”, comprising different “tribes” and “warriors”. Some sought, as the quotation inserted in the title of my essay suggests, to innovate the discourse of revolutionary Marxism by emphasizing its libertarian, transgressive potential. What made Karl Marx an Indian, from this

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<sup>3</sup> For two important studies of the ambiguous nature of the American fascination with native peoples see Deloria (1998) and Huhndorf (2001).

perspective, was a commitment to both individual and collective liberation that no party bureaucracy or actually existing socialism could repress. Others were eager to jettison altogether traditional Left-wing symbols and categories, and to replace them with “Indian” ones. Students, unemployed youths, disillusioned former militants of traditional left-wing parties that seemed unable to understand the needs of the newer generations, had obvious difficulties in thinking of themselves as a class in the old Marxian sense. At the same time, they had grown impatient with the idea that they could only be ancillaries of the only class (the proletariat) authorized to be the motor of social and political change. These young people chose to reinvent themselves as *Indiani Metropolitani*; as people who, tired of being marginalized by an incipient post-Fordist capitalism, decided to march out of their “urban reservations” and yet insisted all along on their status as absolute outsiders. The image of the Indian was meant precisely to suggest the extent to which these young people felt they did not belong in mainstream Italian culture. They wanted to be perceived as alien to Italy as they thought Indians felt in the United States of America.

Here I would like to do something I could not do in my essay and focus on some photos of the late 1970s *Indiani Metropolitani* that can now be found easily on the world wide web (see images 1–5). As even a cursory look at these images will show, in their effort to signify the American Indian, these young people resorted to classic Hollywood Western iconography. Most significantly perhaps, the *Indiani Metropolitani*'s masquerades turned on a contradictory temporality. On the one hand, the emphasis on the Indian's “metropolitan” character was meant to suggest that Indians were urbanized, contemporary figures who had broken away from a legendary past – the “brave” in image 1 is about to light a cigarette (a cowboy's Marlboro, perhaps), not a ceremonial pipe. On the other hand, it appears that the only way these young people could call attention to their “Indianness” was by employing symbols that confined Indians to the mythic early-contact era of the Western.

What is also noteworthy about these images is the fact that, as far as I know, while dressing up as Indians at theme parties or during Carnival is a common and perhaps world-wide practice, to don an American Indian garb at political demonstrations is something that had been done only during the American revolutionary period, when, as Helen Carr has noted, “the perpetrators of the Boston Tea Party dressed up as Mohawks, and cartoons depicted the colonists as Indians oppressed by the British” (Carr 1996: 36).

The American Indian as a revolutionary symbol made a comeback of sorts during the Sixties. In those days – to quote the Native American narrator of one of Sherman Alexie's early stories – “my father was the perfect hippie, since all the hippies were trying to be Indians” (Alexie 1993: 24). But hippies, unlike the militant American Indian father in Alexie's tale, were certainly not the most

politicized wing of the anti-war movement. There is no question that the *Indiani Metropolitani's* iconography was absolutely and literally Carnavalesque. The Plains Indians headdress shown in image 1 is of course a cheap plastic one to be found in any retail store during Carnival, along with the rubber hatchets (see image 2) and the “war paint” (see image 3). However, most of the “Indiani” by no means subscribed to a “peace-and-love” pacifist philosophy, as a look at one of their most militant slogans will attest:

Geronimo, Cochise, Nuvola Rossa, tutti incazzati, alla riscossa!  
 [Geronimo, Cochise, Red Cloud, are all damn angry and fight back!]  
 (Mariani 1987: 591)

### 3. ...and the Black

Those were the days in which American Indian imagery would seem to be an exclusive property of the radical Italian left, though I suspect the same could be said of other European countries, as witness, for example, *The Redskins*, the Trotskyist punk rock band founded in York, England, in the early 1980s.<sup>4</sup> However, it turns out that the American Indians had their own admirers on the opposite side of the political spectrum as well. If we are to believe Guido Zappavigna (2012), at the time a member of F.U.A.N., a neo-fascist organization of university students, right-wing youngsters “were sympathetic to the *Indiani metropolitani* and ... started to talk about the issue of green spaces”.<sup>5</sup> It is probably no accident that Zappavigna mentions ecology as the “Indian” theme he and his neo-fascist friends were most interested in. It is a well-known fact that romantic anti-capitalism has often fed extremely reactionary world-views. The famous case of *The Education of Little Tree*, the “Cherokee” autobiography that eventually turned out to be written by Forrest Carter (1988), a fascist, a terrorist, and a member of the Ku Klux Klan, is a reminder of how the cult of the Indian as a creature of uncontaminated nature has certainly not been limited to latter-day admirers of Mussolini. However, whereas Carter kept quiet about his real identity, Italian neo-fascists have always been outspoken about their sympathies for the American Indian. One of the best-known, and certainly most ludicrous, examples of Italian neo-fascists’ love of the imagined Indian is provided by

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<sup>4</sup> It is of course ironic that while many American Indians have been fighting against the use of the “R-word” in U.S. sports by the famous Washington, D. C., football team, on the other side of the Atlantic the label has been appropriated by a left-wing group — yet another illustration of the fascination for things American Indian shared by people with rather different political beliefs.

<sup>5</sup> All translations from Italian into English are mine.

Ignazio La Russa, a former Italian Minister of Defense during the Berlusconi government and a long-time member of various reincarnations of the disbanded (and outlawed) pre-World War Two, *Partito Nazionale Fascista*. He has named his three sons Geronimo, Lorenzo Cochis, Leonardo Apache. As one can see, the same warriors invoked by the *Indiani Metropolitani* as exemplary figures for the “new partisans” of Italy, were revered by Mr. La Russa, even though, given his unwavering support of the war in Afghanistan, one wonders why, rather than busying himself with placing his “Indian” children at the head of lucrative companies, he did not send his supposedly pugnacious children to fight the Talibans. Also, he seems to have kept quiet about the U.S. decision to associate the name of Geronimo with the mission to hunt down Bin Laden. My guess is that probably – as others have already argued – he would maintain that the link between the two figures is indicative not so much of America’s unsolved relation with its indigenous population as of its desire to “honor” the great Apache chief.

Indeed, everyone knows that the U.S. Army has often given its weaponry American Indian names, from tomahawk missiles and Cherokee jeeps to Chinook and Apache helicopters. The Italian Army does not do that, but the logo of the parachute club *Istinto Rapace* (rapacious instinct), run by the neo-fascist group *Casa Pound* (in homage to the great modernist fascist poet Ezra Pound), is copied from the Hopewell mica bird claws of the Hopewell culture (100 BC – 500 AD) of the Middle Woodland [see image 6].<sup>6</sup> This is hardly surprising considering that, as Domenico di Tullio has observed in his book *Centri Sociali di Destra* – a study of recent Italian far-right radicalism – the opposition to predatory neo-liberal capitalism proclaimed by reactionary sub-cultures often goes hand in hand with their support of the American Indians, the Tibetans, the Palestinians: of all those peoples, that is, who are seen as fighting for their national rights. Italian neo-fascists are certainly not unique from this point of view. Hartmut Lutz (2002: 167–184) forcefully argued some years ago that Germany’s long-standing fascination with American Indians and anti-Semitism “are fed by the same political and cultural processes that went into the construction of the German nation state” (Lutz 2002: 168). In other words, aggressive ethnocentrism rather than being incompatible with what Lutz describes as “Indianthusiasm”, may often spring from the same psychic sources, both in Europe and elsewhere. After all, even a self-proclaimed imperialist like Theodore Roosevelt was both an Indian-hater and an Indian-lover: that is, he detested the savage tribes but loved the “vanishing” individual braves.

The most extravagant attempt to forge a link between the fascist Right and the American Indians, however, is an internet legend concocted, as far I could determine, by the self-styled Italian journalist and “researcher” Gabriele Zaffiri.

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<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Professor Radosław Palonka of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, who graciously pointed out to me the Hopewell source of the logo.

In an article published on a website called “CrimeList”, Zaffiri tells the story of a “scouting unit” comprising American Indians who supposedly served in the U.S. army during World War II in the North African, Italian, and Normandy campaigns, and were eventually captured by the Germans. “These redskins were quite happy to join the Waffen SS as they were hopeful that the Third Reich would win the war in Europe and then move on to conquer America and destroy the government of Roosevelt’s gang, which they saw as plutocratic, with the goal of building a new, autonomous American Indian nation” (Zaffiri 2008). Never bothering to quote any historical source whatsoever, and referring exclusively to some mysterious “top secret documents”, the article – a textbook example of what is nowadays called “post-truth” – argues that the head of this special American Indian unit was a “Chief Standing Bull”, picked personally by Himmler himself. This Standing Bull is described as a Cherokee, though he is also identified as a descendant of Sitting Bull, who obviously the inventor of this tall tale ignores to have been a Lakota. In a sort of reversed anticipation of Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglorious Bastards* – where it is a U.S. unit that “plays” Indian, terrorizing the Nazis – the piece goes on to argue that these American Indians were known for hunting the scalps of their enemies, prizing especially those of American soldiers. The article’s finishing touches are also worth recalling. According to Zaffiri, Chief Standing Bull witnessed the marriage of Hitler and Eva Braun, but only thirty members of the American Indian unit survived the battle of Berlin against the Soviets. Captured by the Red Army, Truman asked Stalin to return them to the U.S., so that they could be tried by a military court. Stalin complied and the Indians were condemned for treason in 1947, but finally pardoned by Bill Clinton in 1995. It is hard to believe that anyone could believe any part of this outlandish story, but if one checks the Internet it will be found that many refer to it as a fact, including, for example, both the left-leaning association *Sentiero Rosso* (Red Path), which is officially registered with the Italian state as a charity organization and gathers funds for impoverished American Indians, and the *Liberali per Israele* (Liberals for Israel), a fiercely pro-Zionist website.

Though the notion of American Indians happily deciding to don Nazi uniforms to get their country back is an insult to both the history and the intelligence of the indigenous soldiers who served in the U.S. army during World War II, the story I just quoted does only limited harm. Any individual with a modicum of common sense would wonder why no reputable source has ever talked about such events. A much more insidious use of the pretend Indian has been recently made in Italy by the *Lega Nord* (Northern League) [see image 7].<sup>7</sup> What the poster says is the

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<sup>7</sup> The *Lega Nord per l’Indipendenza della Padania* is a federalist and regionalist Italian party with a strong base in the northern regions of Italy. The party has supported the center-right coalition led by Berlusconi that governed Italy from 2001 to 2006, and then again from 2008

following, “They had to endure immigration. Now they live on reservations”. This poster was first printed during the 2008 Italian general elections, though – as the current League’s secretary, Matteo Salvini, has acknowledged – the idea had been stolen from the neighboring xenophobic Swiss group “Lega dei Ticinesi”. “We liked the poster and we copied it. The message is very effective”.<sup>8</sup> So effective, in fact, that what has been dubbed by some journalists “the League’s Sitting Bull” made a successful comeback in the 2010 regional elections. What one needs to ask is *why* this image works? How does it manage to promote the anti-immigration policies of the *Lega*? The analogy between the American Indians colonized by white Europeans, on the one hand, and the Italians threatened by the immigrants, on the other, is obviously untenable. The thousands of impoverished immigrants from Africa, Asia, or Eastern Europe wishing to enter the EU countries in search of labor, or escaping from wars, famines, dictatorial regimes, bear only a superficial resemblance to those Europeans who, over the last five centuries, made their way to North America, and eventually did indeed contribute to confining the surviving American Indians to reservations.

More importantly, perhaps, the Europeans of today can hardly be compared to the hundreds small or large pre-Columbian American Indian nations spread over an immense territory and unprepared both technologically and politically to confront over a lengthy period what was literally a militarized invasion of their territories. While in the early phases of colonial history, as recent studies have insisted (see, for example, Richter 2003; DuVal 2007; Witgen 2012), several American Indian nations were able to retain some significant degree of control over their territories and their peoples’ destinies, after the American revolution their capacity to resist the dynamics and consequences of the Whites’ invasion was quickly eroded. In fact, it would be easy to overturn completely the message of the Northern League’s poster by pointing to a different, later period of Indian-White relations in North America. Today’s migrants – and especially the “clandestines”, those who, after facing the risk of drowning or of suffocating in a ship container, reach the Italian shores only to be locked up in the so-called C.I.E.’s (Identification and Expulsion Centers, in the Italian state’s newspeak) – recall those vanquished American Indians who were rounded up on reservations by the U.S. government, deprived of their basic rights, and forced to become strangers in their own land. Moreover, contemporary migrants may be also compared to those American Indians who, especially over the course of the twentieth century, moved from reservations and rural areas to the cities in the hope of finding jobs, and were often exploited, discriminated, beaten by the

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to 2011. It has distinguished itself for its racist and anti-immigration policies. An identical use of the image of the Indian was made in 2010 by the Nigel Farage’s UKIP [see image 8].

<sup>8</sup> Interview quoted in Poletti 2008.

police and vigilantes just like so many immigrants to Italy and other European countries are today.<sup>9</sup>

What makes the poster effective, then, is not the soundness of the historical analogy. The reason why the League's fans like it is that it allows one to reimagine the Italian people – and in particular the people of “Padania”, the invented Northern Italian “country” of the League's propaganda – as the “victims” of an “invasion”. Paradoxically, a xenophobic and right-wing political organization capitalizes on what progressive historians, writers, and filmmakers have tried to show over the last decades: that the “conquest” of America was not the ideal, heroic endeavor we were taught to believe for a long time, but to a very large extent a brutal process of ethnic cleansing. Against this “new Western” background, the Indian stands out as the paradigmatic victim, and, since the name of the political game nowadays is to insist on one's (whether invented or not, is irrelevant) status as victim, the image of the Indian is effective because it corroborates fears of being “invaded” by immigrants eager to impose upon us “their values” (usually Islamic ones).<sup>10</sup> One is reminded of the well-known Marxian passage in which the power of ideology is located in its ability to make “men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*” (Marx & Engels 1974: 47). In this poster, the very Western countries that not only were in the forefront of the scramble for Africa, but continue to this day to enjoy a privileged economic and political position and indeed profit from the cheap labor provided by destitute immigrants, are depicted – thanks to the American Indian analogy – as the victims of an invasion. Thus, the League can retrospectively, and of course hypocritically, sympathize with the proverbial plight of the poor Indian as well as turn today's actual victims into dangerous, ruthless invaders who are going to place us on “reservations” if we are not wise enough to vote for the League. What we have here is a textbook example of what Teun van Dyk means when he argues that the denial of racism is in fact “one of the crucial properties of contemporary racism” (van Dijk 1992: 87). The image of the American Indian is on one level meant to suggest that the Northern League is not a xenophobic organization – they are *not* racist, they actually *like* Indians. On another level, however, the poster argues that northern Italians *are like* Indians – they are the ones who are the potential target of the foreigner's “racism”.

The appeal that the imagined Indian has had, and continues to have, for both the Italian Right and the Italian Left may count as further proof of its inherent

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<sup>9</sup> Studies on the fate of American Indians from the post-Wounded Knee phase to the late twentieth-century are legion. For a useful, recent overview, see Ewen & Wollock (2015). More specifically on the urban experience, see Lobo & Peters (2001).

<sup>10</sup> My sense of the centrality of the victim in current cultural and political discourse is mostly indebted to the work of René Girard (1977, 1987). But see also Mesnard (2002) and Giglioli (2007).

cultural, and especially political, ambivalence. This ambivalence has at times bordered on schizophrenia, as when in the Revolutionary period on the one hand American Patriots compared themselves to Indians and on the other the declaration of Independence mentioned the indigenous peoples only in an off-hand reference to “the merciless Indian savages” unleashed by the British King against the colonies. The Indians, then, could be both figures of resistance to British imperialism and bloodthirsty enemies of the nascent republic.

#### 4. Of irony and “prosthetic memory”

In contemporary Italian political discourse, as we have seen, American Indians may no longer be perceived as “savages”, but their victimized status can be evoked by both the League and the *Indiani Metropolitani*, just as their “fierceness” can be idealized by both the Right and the Left, though in somewhat diverse ways. I would insist, however, that as offensive as most of these images of the American Indian may be, they are not all arbitrary or dangerous in the same degree. When, as I argued in my essay of many years ago (Mariani 1987: 585–598), one of the leaders of the *Indiani Metropolitani* claimed that Karl Marx was “Indian”, he proposed a sort of Situationist reading of certain Marxian ideas, by having recourse to an obviously imagined notion of “Indianness” that had little or nothing to do with the past or present lives of North American Indians, the tradition of Native American tribalism, or the specifics of the American Indians’ history. Yet, by resorting to the metaphor of the American Indian, his primary intent was to construct an intellectual and political provocation, not that of reinstating worn-out stereotypes about Indians. *Irony* is perhaps the dominant, key trait that distinguishes the *Indiani Metropolitani*’s use of the image of the American Indian. For the most part, the Italian *Indiani* deployed such image ironically, fully aware of the fictitiousness and invented nature of what, with Jean Baudrillard, they would have had readily recognized as a *simulacre* (Baudrillard 1981).

I cannot consider this use of the imagined Indian as equal to the one we have observed in the Northern League’s poster, and not simply because of the difference in the political message that the invented Indian is asked to deliver. In the League’s poster, contrary to what may at first appear to be the case, we do not witness the *Indianization* of the peoples of “Padania”, but, on the contrary, the *Padanization* of the American Indians. The latter are used simply as an empty shell or a literal dead metaphor emptied of any ability to interrogate the world in novel ways. It is a different thing to argue that Marx was an Indian. Also in this case, of course, one is in part Marxianizing the American Indians, but the main political objective is to Indianize the left – to force the left to reconsider critically its history and political strategies. The imagined Indian is used, in other words,

to call into questions certain well-entrenched notions and ways of seeing the world, rather than to reinforce a stereotyped vision of reality.

One may wish to argue that, from an American Indian point of view, this makes little or no difference. There is no question that both the imagined Indians of the Left and those of the Right share certain age-old stereotypical features.<sup>11</sup> Both the Right and the Left, as we have seen, exploit the idea of the Indian as a victim, as a fearless brave, and as an ecologically sensitive being. Moreover, from both a discursive and an iconographic point of view both camps would seem to privilege an image of the American Indian as trapped in a quasi-mythic, eternal early-contact era. On the one hand, the Right has relatively little or no interest in the American Indians as contemporary political subjects, and confines them to a legendary past also when it currently uses their image (recall that the League's Indian, for example, is certainly not an Indian of today but one straight out of Western comic books). On the other, the Left imaginary seems to have at least some rudimentary notion of the fact that Indians still exist today as communities tied to their past but also ready to face contemporary cultural and political challenges. Barring some neo-fascists, who could be described as reactionary anti-imperialists, for the Right American Indians are largely the symbol of a bygone past. The Indians of today are not "real Indians" given that they do not dress, speak, or ride horses the way Geronimo did. For left-leaning young radicals like the *Indiani Metropolitani*, instead, American Indians were the symbol of a contemporary disenfranchised urban "multitude" engaged in a struggle for liberation that links the resistance to the colonialism of the past to the political struggles of the present. This also explains why, while on the Left appropriations of American Indian symbols and images are often marked by a considerable degree of irony – by a self-conscious awareness that what is being staged *is* a masquerade – the Right's "Italian Indians" are locked into a Romantic past, untouched by anything like the post-modern rhetorics of the *Indiani Metropolitani*.

As Walter Benjamin noted in one of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, "The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past" (Benjamin 1969: 261). Though on a much smaller scale, something similar happened with the *Indiani Metropolitani*. The latter's "citations" of an idealized past, while on one level amounted to a recycling of trite stereotypes, when considered within the political context of the late Seventies may be seen, to paraphrase Benjamin's well-known dictum, as an attempt to charge Indian antiquity with the here-and-now – an

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<sup>11</sup> The Left has been by no means immune to an "Indianist" discourse. Think, for example, of the many discussions concerning the "primitive communism" of tribal societies. For some interesting materials dealing with this, and other related problems, see Churchill 1983.

effort, however awkward, to explode the American Indians' struggle against white invasion out of the continuum of history. This way of "citing" the past – as Benjamin knew all too well – is totally different from the way Italian Fascists tried to appropriate Roman antiquity. Their idealization of the glories of the Roman Empire were part and parcel of an injection "of aesthetics into political life" whose scope was the subjugation of modern Italian masses to the absolute leadership of the Duce. More modestly, though no less insidiously, the "citations" of the American Indian that can be found in neo-fascist iconography or in a poster like the Northern League's one are meant to provide reactionary world-views with an "aesthetic" American Indian veneer. Similarly, the use of Indian names by Mr. La Russa is of course purely decorative, whereas the *Indiani Metropolitaniani's* chant on Geronimo, Cochise, and Red Cloud moved in the opposite direction – it *politicized* the aesthetic.

Another way of putting all this would be by invoking Alison Landsberg's (2004) notion of "prosthetic memory". According to Landsberg, thanks to today's "new memory-making technologies" (photography, film, contemporary "interactive" museums, and so forth) "the memories forged in response to modernity's ruptures do not belong exclusively to a particular group" (Landsberg 2004: 2). "Prosthetic memories are transportable and therefore challenge more traditional forms of memory that are premised on claims of authenticity, 'heritage', and ownership". In her view, "[t]his new form of memory is neither inherently progressive nor inherently reactionary, but it is powerful" and rather than "disdain the new memory-making technologies, we must instead recognize their power and political potential" (Landsberg 2004: 2–3). Claiming as one's own the memory of oppressed or disenfranchised minorities may be an instance of cultural appropriation, but also an imaginative act with some genuine emancipatory energy. This, I believe, is a conclusion corroborated by the evidence discussed throughout this essay. The "political potential" that Landsberg points to, can find expression in an extremely reactionary form such as the one exemplified by the Northern League's "American Indian poster". However, the "transportable" memory of the American Indians' struggle for survival and renewal may also be claimed by groups whose political goals are more consistent with the long history of Native American creative resistance to colonialism and imperialism. To quote Benjamin again, what fuels the revolutionary spirit is "the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren" (Benjamin 1969: 260). Prosthetic memory widens the pool of "enslaved ancestors" one can call on, which is exactly what happened when the memory of American Indian resistance ("Geronimo, Cochise, Red Cloud fight back!") replaced the more "authentic" one of the Italian partisans. While the insidious reach of cultural imperialism and appropriation should never be underestimated, our business as

critics is to show why, and on what theoretical grounds, certain cultural borrowings may be more legitimate or at least tolerable than others. In my case, what I have tried to show is that, their reliance on stereotyped images of Native America notwithstanding, the imagined red Indians of the Italian New Left are no doubt more interesting and plausible than the dead ones of the Right. Yet another demonstration that red is far better than dead.<sup>12</sup>

### ILLUSTRATIONS



Image 1.

[https://www.ariannaeditrice.it/articolo.php?id\\_articolo=19623](https://www.ariannaeditrice.it/articolo.php?id_articolo=19623)

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<sup>12</sup> The ideas for this essay were developed through discussions with Masturah Alatas, whom I also wish to thank for reading an earlier draft, and for pointing me to the van Dijk essay.



Image 2.

<https://www.portametronia.it/wp-content/gallery/il-1977-ed-oltre/indiani-metropolitani.jpg>

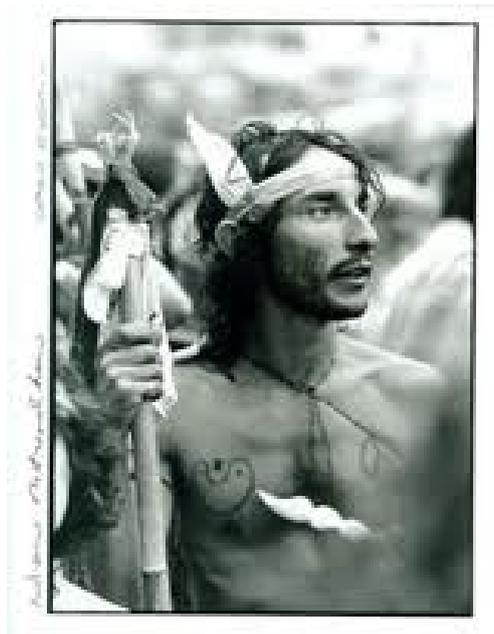


Image 3.

<https://www.arengario.it/tano/fotografie-vendita/movimento77.htm>



Image 4.

[https://ita.anarchopedia.org/Indiani\\_metropolitani](https://ita.anarchopedia.org/Indiani_metropolitani)



Image 5.

[https://www.vitatrentina.it/media/archivio\\_immagini/iltotem\\_degli\\_indiani\\_metropolitani](https://www.vitatrentina.it/media/archivio_immagini/iltotem_degli_indiani_metropolitani)



Image 6.

<https://casapoundpuglia.altervista.org/tag/istinto-rapace/>



Image 7.

[https://oltreilguardio.altervista.org/il-potere-dellimmagine-nella-propaganda-leghista/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1483952121.8741850852966308593750](https://oltreilguardio.altervista.org/il-potere-dellimmagine-nella-propaganda-leghista/?doing_wp_cron=1483952121.8741850852966308593750)



Image 8.

[https://oltreilguardio.altervista.org/il-potere-dellimmagine-nella-propaganda-leghista/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1483952121.8741850852966308593750](https://oltreilguardio.altervista.org/il-potere-dellimmagine-nella-propaganda-leghista/?doing_wp_cron=1483952121.8741850852966308593750)<sup>13</sup>

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