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THE OPINION

## Immigration in Italy: Between Exodus and Diaspora

**The phenomenon of migration is one of the modern-day elements that make the relationship between global flows and geographical culture more symbolically ambivalent. As with the globalisation of goods and information, the globalisation of people – as “naked lives” – is a flow capable of generating risks and opportunities, depending on how it affects territories and the resulting lengthy identity drifts. Immigration as an epoch-making phenomenon can only be tackled by stronger governments, stronger markets and far stronger community involvement. Here are some truths about Italy's situation.**

The phenomenon of migration, which causes thousands of people to undertake an exodus toward the most developed areas of the planet, is part of the process of the world economy's progressive interdependency which has been defined as globalisation. When we refer to global dimension, we mean the economic, social and information flows which have the prerogatives of being ubiquitous and pluri-localised. Such flows can sometimes bring into play and even affect places by transferring information, money, people, raw materials, products, etc. and causing local economies and societies to interact. They are movements which nonetheless transform economies, societies and even places, which respond in turn according to the strategies of adaptation, reaction and resistance.

Keeping this interpretation in mind we will refer to the flow of migrants which, indeed, impacts different places, or rather comes into contact with local identities that make up the mass of productive vocations, administrative traditions, and social and cultural organisations which characterise the forms of coexistence of different territorial subsystems.

### The phases of foreign immigration in Italy

But, let's take things in order. Several significant phases can be distinguished in the brief history of foreign immigration in our country.

**A. The initial phase.** Italy was still the number one exporter of labour in Europe at the beginning of the 1970s: in 1970 there were 152,000 Italians who had taken the road of relocation, compared with 144,000 foreigners who resided in Italy. 35 years later, things have changed dramatically, according to the most recent Caritas Dossier which estimates there are slightly more than 3 million foreigners with regular visas, a figure higher than that of Great Britain (2.8 million), coming fourth after Germany (7.3 million), Spain (3.4 million) and France (3.2 million). Facing a phenomenon of such huge proportions, an initial attempt to acknowledge it and create a basis for its regulation occurred in 1990, from the first and only National Conference on Immigration called for by the then-Minister Martelli. The Martelli law recognised some rights for immigrant workers, regulated their inflow and allocated the first resources for receiving them, at a time when foreign immigrants still flowed into the country in controllable rivulets.

**B. The invasion syndrome phase.** When the rivulets transformed into floods – a characteristic image of this period was the boat overflowing with Albanians who were later locked inside the football stadium in Bari – this social emergency became a political hot potato, mediated by showbiz society. Often spurred on by grudges held by the lowest echelons of the molecular civil war of metropolitan ghettos, sometimes by tragedies which filled air time during news broadcasts that reported a “sea jalopy” going under (remember that about 10% of new inflows are by sea, and there is no data available about deaths caused during attempts to land on Italian shores). It has been in the context of the invasion syndrome that for more than

a decade the various regulatory laws have been instituted, from the Turco-Napolitano law, which delineated rights and routes to inclusion up to the threshold of the right to vote, to the Bossi-Fini law, which was shouted out from a platform of repression, but in reality allowed for the largest amnesty ever to occur in our country.

**C. The metabolisation phase.** While the mass media played upon fear, in the many productive realities throughout the country, an initial effort was being made to metabolise this migratory phenomenon. This effort has to be included in our country's specific model of territorial capitalism, which with respect to the French, Anglo-Saxon or Rhine models is not structurally fixed to the hegemony of big cities, but is characterised by a productive network that is spread out and located in "city centres" as well as two hundred industrial districts. For this reason, the flow of migrants to Italian territories has dispersed itself in thousands of rivulets, chasing the opportunities that the many productive systems offered and still offer to this segment of society, thereby avoiding those dangerous metropolitan concentrations which, for example, inflamed the Parisian banlieues. Consequently, it results that the majority of foreign immigrants are concentrated in the Northern areas of our country, 36.6% in the North-West and 27.4% in the North-East, followed by the centre with 24% and the South with 12 percent.

**D. From metabolisation to citizenship.** Each year almost 175 thousand foreign immigrants enter the labour market. In 2005, 730,000 foreigners were hired by Italian companies, while 131,000 foreign citizens were registered as owners of companies operating in construction, commerce and domestic service. Such figures mean that the initial migratory micro-phase was mainly regulated by a "labour-law" pact, which exchanges residency rights with pluri-localised demands for labour throughout the country. Consumption by immigrants is getting progressively closer to that of natives. Again, according to the Caritas Dossier, 91% of foreigners use cell phones, 80% own a TV set, 60% have bank accounts, 55% own automobiles and 22% have personal computers. Each year an aspiring licensed driver is foreign, while in today's real estate market 15% of home buyers are foreigners. The pact is no longer viable, due to the progressive stabilisation of this migratory phenomenon, not so much in quantitative terms but

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rather in terms of the increasing settlement of subjects and their families within local communities, highlighting the necessity to shift the focus to themes of citizenship in terms of civil, social and political rights, in such a way as to bring about a reformulation in more articulated and modern terms.

Territorial research shows there are two sides to migratory flows:

– The first one is stable and is made up principally of families (most of whom have been recently reunited through the Bossi-Fini decree...) that are creating a social class and, in general terms, have a relatively stable and steady work situation. When the migratory route no longer creates problems relating to residency, work, not to mention separation from loved ones, appeals for integration take on different weights and measures. Problems, indeed, occur more often for the second generation, for whom school, rather than work, represents the route to integration and education.

Stabilised immigration requires social services and intercultural initiatives: nursery schools, access to health care, intercultural activities at school, linguistic mediation and the possibility of taking part in political and administrative life.

– On the other hand there is emergency, front-line immigration, and those who arrive in the Italian territory and must satisfy their basic needs: work and home. Very often, these are foreigners who do not hold a visa and who are enticed by work opportunities and a successive expectation to acquire legal status through

amnesty. In the majority of cases, these are young or adult foreigners, in good health, who set the pace for a migratory route with the objective of reuniting their families, and who will adapt to the demand for labour which is often under-qualified and precariously regulated. The demand by companies, in other words, is the multiplier of these migratory inflows, of people who leave their own countries and their own cultures, hoping for a better life, a freer life, but in reality are dependant on the market situation and do not have full rights to citizenship, finding themselves face-to-face with a complex bureaucratic system which is not always comprehensible.

**E. The appearance of “lost territories of the Republic”.** The political-institutional debate in this direction, in its current state, is still quite immature, even if there is no lack of important territorial experiences indicating otherwise. Still, even in those local systems that have been able to deal with the phenomenon on the basis of a tradition of civic virtue and advanced administrative culture, for example in the cases of the Province of Modena or the City of Brescia, limitations appear in dealing with this second stage of the process of social inclusion and the appearance of forms of “ghettoisation”. Specifically, a series of disturbing episodes have begun to manifest, which signal the appearance of what French historian Georges Bensoussan defines lost territories of the Republic, when referring to those areas (condominiums, neighbourhoods, abandoned areas, small territorial enclaves) where there are diffuse perceptions of a loss of sovereignty of civic rule and forms of coexistence.

### **Communities in diaspora and forms of regulation**

The reasons which have brought millions of foreigners to move towards the riches of the Western world refer back to those forms of diaspora which, evolving from the anthropology of the Appadurain Indians, take on different forms today. The diaspora of terror is what we now experience every day, with the actions of Iraqi terrorists but also with the logic of a preventative war which has triggered their behaviours.

The diaspora of desperation instead is that which accompanies all of the dynamics that are a part of uncertainty and risk: global competition which today involves countries that were

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once classified as “undeveloped” and which are now stuck between native traditions and development (China and India are the most representative examples); or migrations as individual or collective actions which denounce all of the uncertainty that is involved in groundbreaking entries into new economic cultural and real life situations. In all of these cases, desperation is always in ambush, in the form of fear that one’s own plan will fall through or betray those positive premises that gave it origin.

Finally, there is the diaspora of hope, reported by those who work for the advent of new forms of coexistence. They do not necessarily follow traditional forms of mobilisation; but rather the behaviour, for example, of volunteer and non-profit organisations.

In order for the diaspora of hope, or diaspora of opportunities, to prevail over desperation and fear, it is necessary to work on many fronts. Restricting the reasoning to a national scale, the current status of integration has happened through the market and the integration into the many local communities that were able to react to the phenomenon in a positive manner, relying on local public policies as well as volunteer or non-profit initiatives. Certainly, the vastness of the impact caused by a global phenomenon cannot be tackled only with the tools offered by the market and local initiatives; it is necessary

to outline a national legislative picture that is more transparent with regards to the regulation of flows and should be more efficient in creating a path to inclusion through citizenship.

The cynical indifference of the market and of consumption habits tells us that immigrants are a resource. Warm enthusiasm for volunteer organisations is an indication that fully-staffed businesses correspond to a social vacuum as regards housing policies of inclusion and integration.

The right to vote in political elections is welcomed along with appropriate social innovation providing for credit institutions that will deal with the problem of mortgages for immigrants. Projects have to be created for financing the construction of homes in order to resolve housing problems. Perhaps bank foundations could provide some significant assistance here, considering that these are no longer the times of the Fanfani housing plan. The same can be said for schools, the crossroads of lifestyle and religion. Without social innovation that really digs down into the wide drift of a multiethnic society, we fear that simply taking a position on these political questions will not be sufficient to resolve the problem. Among those hoping for an improbable return to the traditional welfare state, experienced during the second half of the 1900s, those who view privatisation and low-cost outsourcing of welfare as the only feasible way to reach a long-term equilibrium, and those who report the need to create artificial communities – welfare communities – it will be necessary to find new sources and practices in order to create a welfare mix that will be able improve upon the best features of the many possible solutions in this area, while also providing a less ambiguous connotation on the subject of subsidisation.

However, on the other hand, as revealed in the article by Speroni, the phenomenon of diaspora also involves us Westerners and our presumably indomitable cultures. Just think about the expanded relationships that globalisation imposes, with the throngs of entrepreneurs spread out across India and China or our intellectuals en route to American universities on both coasts of the United States. Most likely in the union of different cultures that will result from the diaspora of opportunity it will be possible to identify new forms of integration in today's global society. ■