Multiculturalism in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article begins with a general overview of the current immigrant situation in Italy, followed by a discussion of the legal framework. The author maintains that there is a need to acknowledge and address the issues of immigration, including the importance of fully integrating the second generation.

Italy became a country of immigration during the 1970s. The immigrant population in Italy has doubled each decade since then. At the end of 1991, there were 648,935 legally resident immigrants in Italy; by the end of 2003 these numbers had grown to 2,193,999. The composition of the immigrants changed remarkably in the 80s and 90s. The incidence of immigrants who came from the European Union declined, while the proportion of immigrants from outside the European Union increased, and in the late 1990s accounted for 86% of the total (Macioti & Pugliese, 2003). Among the non-Europeans, in spite of the increase in Afro and Asian immigrants, their relative incidence declined in relation to Eastern European immigrants from Yugoslavia, Albania and Rumania, who became the fastest growing group.

The new immigrants tend to locate where demand for work is higher and more facilities make their integration possibilities easier and faster. According to the territorial distribution of residence permits, in 2003, 57.8% of the legal foreigners are in the North, 28% in the Centre and 14.2% in the South and Islands. The gender composition indicates a small imbalance in favour of male immigration; in fact, 51.6% (2003) of the total number of foreign residents are male. It varies greatly between national groups: data show a prevalence of female immigrants among some Asian groups (Filipinos) and Latin American groups (Brazilian, Peruvian), while male immigrants prevail among the African groups (Moroccans, Tunisians, Senegalese) and East Europeans, namely ex-Yugoslavian and Albanian. Among these two groups where the male component prevails, there are exceptions, such as Rumanians and Poles, where female immigrants are prevalent and, among Africans, Somalis and Ethiopians. 58.5% of the total immigrant population is concentrated in the age range 19 to 40 years. The proportion of minors in the foreign population (21%) also exceeds the proportion of Italian minors. There has also been a continuous increase in married people. Only a quarter have children with them, which is an indication of the difficulty involved in family reunion. Among the immigrants from outside the European Union, 66.8% hold a residence permit for work reasons, while 24.3% hold a permit for family reunion.

The sectoral distribution of the 771,813 regularly employed workers is as follows: 7.4% in agriculture (almost nine in ten with short term contracts), 21.7% in industry and 70.8% in services (43.7% in domestic service). Their employment is growing fastest in the less organized sectors (services and the building industry). Employment is highest between June and September, especially in commerce where it has increased by one third. In terms of occupational characteristics, 73% are registered as manual workers. This is due to a combination of two causes: their relatively low education level and the difficulty of finding a job on a par with their education and training. The information available regarding the education of foreigners serves little, given the educational differences which exist between schooling systems. When it is based on their declarations, there is an overvaluation of their education; when it is based upon recognition of their degrees, the difficulties in comparing different schooling systems may induce an under-evaluation of their education.

Even in an unfavourable labour market situation, the involvement of immigrants in trade unions has increased in the main Italian trade unions (Cisl, Cgil and Uil) from 200,330 (at the beginning of 2000) to 333,883 (at the beginning of 2003). These figures demonstrate a higher level of unionization among immigrants than Italians. According to a survey by IRES in 2002, the main reasons why immigrants contact trade unions are: to protect their individual rights at work 55.9%; to gain information about Italian life 24.1%; problems of regularization and family reunion, 37.8%. The latter are important in their own right, and because bureaucratic delays by the police make it difficult to gain access to rights.

The legal framework

Migration policy must promote the coexistence of different linguistic, cultural, social and religious traditions within the same society. Italy is one of the best examples of 'polycentric' migration. There is a stable population originating from every continent – no one predominates and none is insignificant. For every ten immigrants, 4 are European, 3 African, 2 Asian and 1 American. Present trends suggest that, after some Eastern European countries have joined and are joining the

European Union, the proportions will change to 4.5 Europeans and 2.5 Africans. Romania is the largest nationality, with a population of 239,426, Albania next with 233,616, following Morocco with 227,900 and then, a long way behind, Ukraine (112,802), China (100,109) and Philippines (73,847). The areas with the most consistent migratory flows have been Eastern Europe, and the Indian subcontinent. Recently, migration has increased from Latin America, as a result of serious economic crises, and from sub-Saharan Africa where demographic pressures are very high. This vast global movement of humanity has given birth to a mosaic of ethnicities, languages, cultures, social traditions and religions, and it is the task of migration policy to ensure that relations are harmonious.

An immigration policy on immigrants in Italy was first introduced only in 1998. In particular, it set itself the following objectives: to discourage illegal immigration; to develop an active policy on entries; to stabilize the foreign population present in Italy through the creation of a 'residence card' (*carta di soggiorno*); to involve countries of origin and transit in the policies for curbing irregular immigration.[1] This law created a National Fund for Immigration to promote activities and projects facilitating the integration of immigrants. Through this Fund, many local administrations provide immigrants with free advising, consulting and other services: employment advice, assistance in accessing public goods and services such as housing and health care, and Italian language lessons. Most of the public information made available to immigrants is distributed through the Agencies for Foreigners (*Uffici Stranieri*) that are located in all local, regional and state administrations. These agencies serve as the point of exchange between the immigrant community and public authorities; they regularly organize events and campaigns to promote awareness of civil rights among immigrants.

The efforts of national and local public authorities to facilitate the integration of immigrants are complemented by the activities of a wide range of civil society organizations. In fact, in many cases it is these organizations that are best positioned to provide immediate and concrete solutions to the practical problems commonly experienced by immigrants. There is frequent and effective cooperation between governmental institutions and civil society organizations concerning integration initiatives. Particularly at the local level, it is common for public administration offices and civil society organizations to collaborate closely in facilitating various aspects of the integration process. This collaboration is encouraged by the fact that NGOs which meet certain specified criteria may apply to the state for public financing (Zincone, 2001).

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Current political debate does not appear to acknowledge the importance of immigration, its increasing weight in society and its likely growth. The new law on immigration, finally through parliament on 11th July 2002 (n. 189), was part of the election manifesto of the centre-right coalition and came on the wave of massive law and order campaigns and "immigration alarms." The Bossi-Fini Law (Law 189) focuses on immigrants as workers. Its provisions bear a strong resemblance to the measures contained in Italy's first immigration law in 1986 (Law 943), but they have a more repressive character. While labour migration is one of the most important aspects of immigration, it does not encompass the whole of the migratory phenomenon. Immigrants are also citizens and bearers of social and cultural needs.

This law changes the situation considerably: it exacerbates the limits of the previous legislation and reduces the rights of immigrants and the space for integration policies. The integration measures contained in the previous legislation are left more or less untouched, except for those concerning housing, which are more restrictive.[2] Nevertheless, the consequences for integration will probably be serious for two reasons. On the one hand the new legislation tends to make the situation of immigrants less secure, especially for new arrivals, and this by itself reduces the chances of integration. On the other hand, there is the cultural discourse on which the law is based and which accompanied its creation and first implementation. The immigrant is seen as a threat and the law is imbued with a "mercantile spirit," an extreme expression of the "subordinated inclusion" model in which the immigrant is a "worker" and not a "citizen."

Some iconic issues

The illusion of 'Islamic invasion'

It is incorrect to speak of an "Islamic invasion," first of all because of the statistics. According to the estimates of the Fondazione Migrantes, Christians constitute 48% (814,000) of immigrants, Muslims 37% (621,000) and Asian religions 7% (115,000). For every 10 Christians there are about 5 Catholics, 3 Orthodox and 2 Protestants. Second, because Islam in emigration is "revisited" in a private way. According to some research conducted in Italy on the religious behaviour of Muslims, it was concluded that men and women live their religion "in silence," where mosques become spaces to meet and exchange information useful to proceed in the integration process or where the Arabic language is taught to the second generation. Nevertheless, Muslims have experienced difficulties establishing mosques and places of worship, observing religious holidays, and exercising other religious rituals. There are a variety of

state-supported integration programs for immigrants, many of which are developed and implemented in cooperation with civil society or religious charitable organizations. However, there is still little dialogue between the state and Muslim communities to develop a comprehensive policy to overcome the disadvantages faced by this group, or to evaluate the existing integration initiatives. The Italian legal system recognizes and grants extensive rights to linguistic or traditional minorities, and religious minorities whose rights are regulated by special law and bilateral agreements with the state (Aluffi & Zincone, 2004). As a state agreement has not yet been concluded with Muslims, their group rights are not fully guaranteed or protected.

The immigrant as victims

Every 25 hours a foreigner falls victim to an act of violence (physical attacks, pick-pocketing) and a third of these have a racist motive. Furthermore these acts are not carried out by extremist groups but by so-called "normal" citizens. The preferred victims are women, and the most dangerous places are cities (Rome and Milan are the most xenophobic) but the phenomenon is spreading into the suburbs and the provinces. Discrimination does not consist only of acts of street violence but also of unfair treatment in the work place, discriminatory treatment by banks in relation to the opening of accounts, and in difficulties experienced from landlords and agencies when seeking accommodation.

Immigrants as criminals

It is usually believed that immigrants commit more crimes than the locals. According to a recent survey conducted by the European Observatory against Racism (2002), 72% of the people interviewed shared this belief. For a more accurate analysis of the statistics, one needs to take into account the following points: that a high percentage of immigrants do not have problems with law enforcement; the need to distinguish the occasionally delinquent immigrant from the real criminal; that 78% of crimes committed by immigrants are attributed to illegal immigrants; that the majority of cases involve the following nationalities: Moroccans, Albanians, Romanians, Tunisians, Algerians, Yugoslavians, Senegalese, Nigerians and Chinese; that for a number of reasons the northern regions offer a more favourable environment for immigrants to commit crimes.

The crimes most frequently attributed to immigrants are: drug offences, exploitation of prostitution, violation of immigration laws and crimes committed in the course of dealing with public officials. These latter involve perjury, obstruction of an officer of the law in the course of an arrest or investigation and falsification of documents, and all are closely tied to the condition of being "non citizens" and therefore to the requirement to obtain numerous documents. The presence of foreign prisoners in jails has grown (17,778 foreigners of a total of 56,572 on 31 May 2004, a little less than one third of the total[3]), but this is also due to the length of criminal proceedings: the majority concern people who are only under investigation or who are unconvicted.

According to a survey for the National Commission for Integration (2000), three quarters of the immigrant population consider that Italians have a distorted image of foreigners, that they see them as frightening, and that Italians accept uncritically reports in the mass media, without distinguishing between the various nationalities. Interviewers found that Italians demand from immigrants a level of respect for the law which they themselves can not claim: tax avoidance, and failure to observe other laws is common among Italians themselves. Immigrants believe that many Italians are keen to look after their own interests without getting involved with immigrants. Nevertheless, they believe that Italians can demonstrate solidarity with them, an example of trust that deserves to be reciprocated.

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The future of multiculturalism: the children of immigrants

It is vital to build a space where our children and the children of immigrants can meet as equals. We continue to speak of them as "immigrants," even though two thirds of them did not come to Italy but were born here. While the immigrant population has doubled during the last 10 years, for minors this has happened in just 4 years. Their numbers increased from 126,000 at the end of 1996 to 284,224 at the end of 2003. Including those under fourteen entering through family reunion[4], their number already exceeds 300,000, a fifth of the immigrant population. The term "bambino straniero" (foreign child) is also incorrect, because we are often talking of children born in Italy, who talk like us, have the same tastes and can often be distinguished only by facial characteristics. Their number reached 100,000 only four years ago, and grew to 147,000 during the school year 2001-2002 and 182,000 in the following year. Six out of ten are enrolled at primary or nursery schools. They are now less than 2% of the resident population; however, by 2017, according to a government estimate, this could rise to 529,000, or 6.5% of

the school population. An investigation of schools throughout Italy by the Ministry of Education in 2001, found that in only 7% of schools are there no foreign pupils (the percentage is about three times higher in the South), in 64% foreign children make up more than 3% of the school population, and in 28% more than 5%. This population is quite varied in relation to country of origin, and is highest in primary and comprehensive schools.

Migration policy focuses a great deal of attention on immigration flows, which is understandable since the newly arrived are, in a manner of speaking, the valve which regulates the growth of the foreign population. It should not, however, ignore settled immigration and particularly long-established immigration, since it now represents the majority of immigration and expresses the new social reality in the host country. To be concerned solely with new arrivals is to confine ourselves to emergency measures, ignoring the more profound needs for coexistence. Cultural mediation is very important in this context as a way of integrating the first generation, and even more important, the second generation.

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Notes

[1] Sciortino, p. 58, in ISMU.

[2] The previous government promoted the integration of immigrants into society through Law 286/98 that explicitly encourages the development of programs and policies to encourage cultural exchange. Law 286/98 also provided for the establishment of a number of official bodies to facilitate the integration of immigrants.

[3] Source: Italian Justice site: www.giustizia.it.

[4] According to Italian migration law minors under fourteen years old are registered on the residence permit of their parents and, obviously, they aren't in the statistics.