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In Search of Justness: Children of Immigrants in Italy

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Abstract (EN) : The aim of the paper is to present the main results of a qualitative research carried out in Italy in 2007-8 with children of immigrants born in Italy or arrived at a pre-school age. The aim was to analyze how a relatively privileged section of immigrants' children – those with a relatively high cultural capital and who decide to invest on their educational in Italy – re-elaborates the projects and the experiences of their parents; how they react to the perceived opening and closing of the Italian society; and how they pose the problem of inclusion and participation.

Abstract (FR): Le but de la présentation sera celui de présenter le résultats principaux d'une recherche qualitative menée auprès des jeunes descendants d'immigrés, né ou arrivés en Italie pendant leur enfance. La recherche s'est concentrée sur une section spécifique des descendants d'immigrés, ceux qui ont un bon « capital culturel » et qui ont eu un parcours satisfaisant dans le système éducatif italien. L'objectif était celui d'étudier comment ils élaborent leurs projets de vie et l'expérience migratoire des parents ; comment ils réagissent aux ouvertures et fermetures de la société italienne ; comment ils se rapportent aux question de l'inclusion et de la participation sociales.

Key words : immigrants' children, generation, participation, Italy

Introduction

We base the following analysis and argumentations on an experience of seven years of qualitative national research (2003-2009) on the teenage children of immigrants living in the urban area of Milan (Colombo, 2010a; 2010b; Leonini, Rebughini, 2010; Rebughini, 2011; Colombo, Rebughini, 2012). We can rely on a broader panel of 266 narrative interviews, but for this paper we concentrate our analysis on a smaller group of 95 qualitative interviews conducted in 2007-8 with children of immigrants born in Italy (56 young people) or arrived at a pre-school age (39 young people). The aim is to analyze how a relatively privileged section of immigrants' children – those with a relatively high cultural capital and who decide to invest on their educational formation in Italy – re-elaborates the projects and the experiences of their parents; how they react to the perceived opening and closing of the Italian society; and how they pose the problem of inclusion and participation.

We present different rhetoric strategies young people use to describe themselves. After a brief account of 'classical' forms of identification – ethnic closure, mimicry, and crisis – we turn our attention toward broader and more complex forms of identification, which are shaped in a globalised dimension – transnational, cosmopolitan, and hyphenated. In these cases, self-identification process is not limited to a mutually exclusive choice between the country of departure (of the family) and the country of arrival (in which our interviewees were born and are intended to live). We show that children of immigrants' self-identification takes a wide variety of forms to face different situations and to pursue different goals.

We focus on the form of hyphenated self-identification, stressing the fact that it is not a “new category” of identification, standing with assimilation and ethnic closure. Rather, it represents a change in the meaning attributed to belonging and identification. We introduce than a theoretical tool that we find useful to understand hyphenated identification as a process: that of justness.

The Mediterranean Perspective and the Italian case

Our research was conducted in the urban area of Milan. In the last twenty years, Milan has attracted around 220,000 immigrants (18% of the population) offering jobs mainly in the complementary lower skill service sectors such as family care, building, food service, housekeeping. Most of the children of immigrants we interviewed have parents who work in such services. However, their position in a form of marginal middle class does not have developed widespread sentiments of social frustration yet. Certainly, among immigrant families living in Milan we do find very different situations, in terms of social conditions, educational and cultural resources, or structure of family ties. However, compared to other European cases, social stratification is less associated with housing and racial matters; social stratification is less visible on an urban scale with very few cases of explicit urban segregation of the underclass (both of immigrant or Italian origin).

More generally, in the Mediterranean countries - where immigration flows are more recent and where the descendants of immigrants are still regarded as a relatively historical novelty – the present generation of immigrants' children is demonstrating how complex the ties between requests for inclusion and plural identifications have become in contemporary global societies. Moreover, the Italian peninsula has been a border region for centuries with historical multicultural regionalism and recent political unification, at least compared to other European countries. Only as recently as the 1970's did Italy switch from being a country of emigration to being one of immigration. Hence, while other European countries had already dealt with the arrival in the public arena of the second generation of immigrants, Italy was far away from the political issue of migration and public debate was still focused on domestic problems.

The Italian case belongs to the “Mediterranean immigration model” – which also include the Spanish, Portuguese and Greek patterns of immigration - (Pugliese, 2002; Withol de Wenden,

2008), characterized by the presence of immigrants that shows very complex and fragmented differentiation, according to their national and cultural backgrounds, their economic status, their professional skills, their family situation. Nowadays, immigrants in Italy represent around 7% of the population – almost 5 million people coming from over 180 countries, no single group accounts for more than 20 per cent of the total foreign population. This diversity concerns not only the great variety of national origins, but also the capillary distribution – especially in the Northern regions - in large cities as well as in small and medium-sized towns, where immigrants work mainly in small factories and domestic services.

According to the latest statistics, minors with immigrant parents represent one million people. Today, around 60 per cent of these minors without Italian nationality were born in Italy and they are ‘foreign’ only from a juridical point of view, mainly because it takes such a long time to obtain Italian citizenship. These children were born in immigrant families with very different backgrounds: their origins are from almost all the countries in the world, without the presence of prominent communities at the national level. The economic and cultural capital of these families is also decidedly variable, but usually the first generation of migrants, that of parents - comes from big cities and has a discrete level of education.

Education remains the main standpoint of the growing presence of the children of immigrants in Italian public life. Foreign students concentrate especially in the infant school and in the primary school. However, in the last few years, their presence has grown also in the secondary school where youngsters who are not born in Italy remain more numerous.

In recent years educational delays of the children of immigrants are becoming a common problem in Italy, with features similar to those of other European countries: immigrant’s children choose more often vocational school and they cumulate educational delays since the primary school. However, students of foreign origin enrolled in lyceums present a lower level of difficulties and delays and these problems have a frequency similar to that of Italian students. In this case, the children of immigrants are very school-oriented and they invest their emotions and ambitions in the opportunity of higher education, towards university specializations and towards higher professional positions in Italian society. Overall, despite some marked difficulties, and the high proportion of school delays in the upper secondary school, the number of foreign boys and girls who hold a diploma is growing steadily (della Zuanna et al. 2009).

Hyphenated identities and plural identifications

In our experience of research on the children of immigrants in Italy, we have found six different identification models: three of them relate to more ‘traditional’ forms of belonging, which characterise the migration processes typical of the period of Fordist development – Ethnic Enclave, feelings of Crisis and Mimicry - whereas the other three forms are more innovative and deeply embedded in an increasingly globalised context – Transnational identifications, Hyphenation, Cosmopolitanism (Colombo, Leonini, Rebughini, 2009). The first three tend to be more static and to be perceived as a form of ‘either/ or’ choice; the second three look like a sort of translation of the older models in order to better fit the characteristics of a more complex and dynamic context. They are often conceived as a form of ‘both/and’ choice.

In this paper we focus our analysis just on the category of Hyphen, which is, in our opinion, the more promising to analyse the situation of the children of immigrants in our globalized societies.

The concept of hyphenated identities has been a focus for attention since the American framework of melting pot ideology for which hyphenation was considered as a situation of crisis, as the inevitable consequence of the incapacity to choose a precise identity. From this perspective, assuming a hyphenated identity implies a dual identity, oscillating between two cultures and feeling a tension or a conflict arising between them. On the contrary, current research on the so-called new second generation shows that among the adolescent children of immigrants, this form of ethnic self-identification is widely becoming a common way of presenting and describing themselves. In an

increasingly multicultural society, to call oneself “Egyptian *and* Italian” or “Peruvian *and* Italian” would be a way of celebrating one’s own difference without feeling excluded.

However, current interpretations of the widespread tendency among adolescent children of immigrants towards multiple hyphenated identification are still diversified and not always convergent: a weak and voluntary ethnicity, intermittent and subjective (Gans, 1992); an advantage of maintaining solid ties with the parental ethnic network (Portes, Rumbaut 2001); a selective acculturation (Berry, 2006); a spread of transnational practices and multiple loyalties, being immersed in a network that extends and crosses the borders of various nation states (Levitt, Waters, 2002); a necessity in situations characterized by the risk of racialization and discrimination (Purkayastha 2005).

We believe that it is important not only analyze the content of hyphenated identities but also investigate the *processes* by which this form of identifications are expressed, made accountable and legitimised. A hyphenated, fluid and adaptable identification allows the avoidance of radical choices between supposed irreconcilable features. Rather than expressing a state of confusion or indecision, it highlights the value attributed to both the continuity with the family bond and the capacity to fit into changing contexts. Hyphen here means to claim for the possibility to be *more* than a unique category.

According to this definition, hyphenated identification can highlight the capacity to fit into different specific and changing contexts than to showing a strong and coherent identity which is indifferent to the situations. To be ethnic in a globalised context has less to do with fixed categories and more to do with the ability to use the right code in the right situation (Colombo, Rebughini, 2012).

This idea of hyphenated identification as personal capacity can originate different adaptations to the context.

First of all, it seems to be a way of avoiding reduction and negative external labelling. The hyphen became a way to struggle against the obligation to choose an identity, to deal with the norms of the culture of the majority while maintaining the traditions of their family.

I feel one hundred per cent Italian ... in fact the way I live is different from my cousins [who live in the Philippines], my cousins would never dream of going out alone with their boyfriends, because the thinking there is a little backward, even going around holding hands is different ... but I don’t find it hard being a Filipino, actually I am proud to be one ... I even asked my parents to speak more Filipino at home so that I can learn it better ... I don’t want to lose this part of me
(Julie, age 17, born in Italy, Philippine parents).

For a long time it has been very difficult for me to answer questions like: are you more Italian or more Eritrean? Because the answers are intricate. I can decide: “OK, now I’m Italian and I send my Eritrean side to sleep completely”, otherwise I can say: “I have my origins, I have my roots, I trust in them, I stand by them relying on them”. But for me, my turning point arrived when I became aware and I accepted being a mix of different things, not only of my two cultures, but of a lot of other things I’ve lived and incorporated ... I’m ... I’m a real mix of different things ... a lot of things, a puzzle. But not really like a puzzle, because a puzzle is made up of separate pieces, which are side by side. Even if they fit together and make a nice picture, they are still only next to each other, so I prefer to speak of fusion, because it is difficult to understand where one thing begins and the other ends. I’m really that fusion, the real point of that fusion is me ... and that point is already full of people, there are a lot of us in that situation, and this is something new, it is a new way of thinking about yourself, no longer compelled to be only one thing
(Aline 22 years old, born in Italy, Eritrean parents)

The children of immigrants aspire to both inclusion and recognition: they do not want to be seen as different – always being asked: Where are you from? – while at the same time not having their difference ignored – nobody asking them about origins.

Often other people ask me “but do you feel more Italian or Ecuadorian?”, and this kind of question makes us feeling really awkward, because you don’t know how to answer such a question ... my uncle is used to asking me such a tricky question, and I say “well, but I don’t know what to say”, he asks me “tell me, on a scale of one – one hundred, how much do you feel Italian? How much do you feel Ecuadorian?” “But I feel myself half and half!” Because, anyway, I grew up there, I had my school there, and I lived there half of my life, but I live here the other half, do you understand? ... I feel myself halfway, I have nothing to share with Italy, but I still feel Italian!

(Pamela, 19 years old, born in Ecuador, in Italia since the age of 12).

Hyphenated identification implies a critical stance towards reductive categorization. To be considered in one sole way restricts opportunities. A hyphenated many-faceted and mobile identification is certainly the most commonly used because it best reflects the complexity of one’s own personal experience. Not having to choose one sole option but keeping open several corresponds to the skills required to pass from one context to the other.

I’m happy in Italy, I feel this is my place... however, there are things about Egyptian culture that are better than in Italy like, for example, devotion to family and parents and friendship, there’s a greater sense of friendship... on the other hand, there are things in Italy that I like better, like all the comforts, greater study and employment opportunities, freedom... I try to keep both and make the best use of them. I’m now hoping to take Italian citizenship... this is important, because if you have an Italian passport you can travel anywhere... however, I don’t want to give up being Egyptian totally ... that carries its advantages too ... it’s a great civilisation... also, I like going to Egypt and feeling at home; we have a house by the sea, at Sharm-el-Sheikh. Last year, I invited two classmates... they were very envious... then, when I took them there, showed them around, showed them what life in Egypt was like, I knew my way around and I knew where to go... I showed them everything and now they’re always asking me “when will you invite us to Egypt again?” After that holiday, they think more highly of me...

(Hassan, age 18, Egyptian parents)

However, the ability to move backwards and forwards, to switch codes, may be a problem when stereotypes impose negative labels. In many cases, gender, skin colour, shape of the eyes, as well as surname and clothing style, may make code switching impossible or ineffective: only people who fit racial standards can credibly show hyphenated identification and present themselves, with some chance of plausibility, both ethnic *and* national. In this case, presenting a hyphenated identification may constitute a valuable way of facing exclusion. Claiming they are truly Italian, when other people contest this identification, is a way of resisting discrimination and denouncing the double bind into which the majority has cast them:

Sometime I’m really proud to be Algerian, other times I’m really proud to be Italian, it depends, but facing racists I feel deeply Italian ... against racist people I say: “I’m Italian and you must shut up, you must respect me” ... to people who tell me: “shut up you who are foreigner! You have no rights to be here, you’d better go back to your country”, I feel frustrated, and I yell my being Italian because I want them to respect me and not be racist with me ... I was born here and I spent all my life here, I study hard, I’m involved in Italian

politics, I'm more Italian than you and you say to me I'm a foreigner and I cannot speak! I can't stand that! You must shut up
(Asma, age 19, Algerian parents)

By hyphenated identifications they claim the right to be Italian *and* different, they assert that being Italian *and* children of immigrants are not mutually exclusive options. The tendency to introduce oneself using hyphenated identifications manifests the need to manage multiple identifications that elude the possibility to be over-synthesised.

In search of justness

For the children of immigrants, hyphenated identification is a useful tool to signal the desire to be included, to participate actively without, nevertheless, having to become fully homologous with the majority. It signals a desire for integration that cannot be reduced to assimilation. The capacity to manage multiplicity and ambivalence is a necessary skill for continuously constructing or deconstructing boundaries and personal social locations.

This idea of hyphenated identification point out that identification is neither a completely self-determined achievement nor an injunction that was totally imposed. It arises, instead, from the need and the ability to construct a moving multiple identity that is continuously being defined and that can and must be differentiated depending on the contexts, the audience and the goals. For the present generation of young people this means having at least the potential opportunity to collect information, objects, tastes, cultural references, rules and habits from disparate places, putting them together in a personal way. This means adaptation, improvisation, flexibility, mediation, in a word the capability to find a personal point of *justness*.

In a situation in which the capacity of mediation and the contextualized use of difference become indispensable skills for full social participation, the principles of coherence and integrity have ceased to be the real objective. As opposed to previous generations, roles and strong identities are no longer preferable to temporary back up and references. Unified - and reified - identities, coherent belonging to an ethnic group, or incontestable loyalty, have become instead the sign of an inability to coexist in a situation of inevitable pluralism. Equal participation in social life is more important than demonstrating coherent consistency that would rule out dealing with the context. In this case, there is a preference for coherence and harmony with the context – rather than with a reified idea of culture - indicating a certain ability to change according to circumstances, and to match continuity with transformation.

In this vein, the concept of justness can be helpful as a *synchronic* theoretical tool, to point out the ways in which immigrants' children manage their identifications, justify them and claim them as appropriate according to the situation.

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