

Differentia: Review of Italian Thought

Number 8 *Combined Issue 8-9 Spring/Autumn*

Article 7

1999

The Problem of Immigration in Italy

Flavia Pankiewicz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

Recommended Citation

Pankiewicz, Flavia (1999) "The Problem of Immigration in Italy," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*. Vol. 8 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol8/iss1/7>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu, hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu.

The Problem of Immigration in Italy

Flavia Pankiewicz

We live in a world in movement. The simplicity and the speed of our movements and the advent of new technologies, which have transformed our planet into a global village, are affecting the cultural physiognomy of entire populations and even the concept of nation itself. Nevertheless, we see the development of new particularisms, the triumph of parochialism, a strange kind of antihistorical attempt to exhume the stale certainties of the narrow universe of the medieval fortress against the inevitable collapse of the national boundaries, which forces us to question our stable social structure. And most noticeable of all, we see the ever-widening dichotomy in the world between the peoples who still fight against starvation on one hand, and the culture of consumerism and waste on the other, between economic powers and Third World countries, between the center and the margin of the world.

Poverty, starvation, diseases and political persecutions have forced large proportions of populations to look for a better life outside their own nation. The cycle of migration driven by the needs of the labor market in countries with developing economies must be seen as having come to a standstill, whereas the increase in migration connected simply with the worsening conditions in the country of origin is becoming more and more evident (pull-push effect).

As Amnesty International has brought to our notice, capital punishment is still applied in a hundred and thirty countries, often for nonexistent crimes; torture is used in sixty countries and there are still fifty countries in which you can be imprisoned for political reasons, without having committed any violent crime. Moreover, in most cases the system of international economic relations tends to exploit the Third World countries more and more, even though they are already on the edge of mere survival.

Countries like Africa have been handing over their total income into the pockets of the rich countries, for a long time, in the form of passive interest on debts contracted in the hope of improving their disastrous economic conditions. Millions of people, in order to live, have no other solution but to sell the only thing that hasn't been taken from them: their labor force.¹

So, the "margins of the world" move, boil over, cross the borders, flow towards the presumed paradises of capitalism, thus creating a phenomenon which is no longer possible to ignore. The emergence of the Third World peoples from the subterranean passages of history is considered by some to be the most important event of our century.

In Europe, since the fifties, almost all of the northern and western countries have become characterized by a large presence of immigrants. Initially, the process of decolonization and the lack of unskilled manual workers in the factories were the main incentives for immigration. But in the fifties and in the sixties it was still prevalently an intra-European phenomenon. In accordance with the so called "foreign guestworkers system" (the German term is *gastarbeiter*)² Southern Europe supplied the north with large numbers of migrant workers. Great Britain was an exception, since it was the only European country which had almost no immigration from Southern Europe. Most of the extra workers that Germany needed came from the former British colonies in the West Indies and Southern Asia.

Gradually, the migration towards Northern European countries took on an increasingly non-European character, since the economies of the North continued to need more immigrant workers than Southern Europe could supply. Turkey and North Africa and even more distant countries, like the Philippines, were the source of new human material to exploit. Then, between the sixties and the early seventies, the economic development of Southern Europe began to emerge from its former state of stagnation to become relatively flourishing, so this part of the European continent went from being an area of emigration to one of immigration for the people living in the countries on the opposite shores of the Mediterranean.

A part of the non-European immigration toward Southern Europe was also a consequence of the Northern states' "policy of closing their frontiers," having moved from a phase of "extensive" capitalism to one of "intensive" capitalism.³

In Italy, Spain, and Greece the number of immigrants grew rapidly. Many of them, lacking the right permits, found jobs in the rather extensive hidden economy of these countries⁴ and in the gaps in the labor market (activities which are generally refused by local people).

Thus, Italy has radically changed its role: from a country of emigration it has become a country of immigration. The first signs of this were seen in the seventies, when the balance between immigration and emigration pointed just slightly towards a prevalence of immigrants because of a large number of former emigrants returning home to Italy. The tendency was confirmed by the census of the population in 1981. For the first time in Italy, the increase in the number of residences was due not only to the natural increase in population but also to a positive balance of migration, that is, the return of former emi-

grants and the new immigration. The total number of residents was 56,243,935, 273,230 more than the number expected in theory if there had been no migratory movement. In the previous decades, the balance had been negative and counted many hundreds of thousands.⁵ The inversion of the tendency was remarkably evident.

The present numbers of non-European immigrants in Italy, distorted and swollen by those who want to create xenophobic alarm, speak of 781,129 non-European immigrants with proper permits residing in this country.⁶ We should point out that non-European community nationals (*extracomunitari* in Italian) refers not only to the immigrants coming from Third World countries but also to the numbers of Americans, Canadians, Swiss, Austrians, Swedes, et cetera. (Americans living in Italy constitute, after Moroccans and people from former Yugoslavia, the third largest non-European presence). The number of illegal immigrants amounts to a few hundred thousands: around 300,000, according to Caritas,⁷ more than 800,000, according to other bodies or associations.⁸ The total number of immigrants is therefore around 1,100,000, a number which puts Italy among the countries with the least immigration from the Third World in Europe. On the subject of legally registered immigrants, the average, against 57 million Italian residents, is 1.6%, while in other European countries the average percentage of immigrants is 4.6%.⁹

Regarding the problem of illegal immigration, common to other countries and well-known in the United States, we should remember, in reference to the European and American experience over the last few decades, that "restrictive policies on immigration have only increased illegal immigration and have even given a clandestine character to the entire phenomenon of immigration."¹⁰

In the last few decades in Italy, as well as in other European countries which have imported manpower, immigration has taken place in the absence of legislation regulating the process. The only reference was to an insufficient and restrictive legislation from the Fascist period, when Italy wasn't yet a country of immigration, and it wasn't applied anyway.¹¹ The consequence was that, in the eighties, the position of the majority of immigrant workers became illegal.¹² In the seventies, other countries had adopted stricter policies while Italy continued to rely on a lack of policy which produced, like the restrictive immigration policies, illegal immigration.

The presence of hundreds of thousands non-EEC immigrants came out in the statistics compiled in the early eighties but the same research carried out in those years demonstrated that a lot of these people had arrived at the end of the sixties, when the country believed it was only an exporter of labor forces.

More recently, politicians have worked on drawing up new laws to regulate this subject and the resulting Bills became the Act No. 943

of 1986 and the Act No. 39 of 1990 (the Martelli Act), which derived from the decree No. 416, issued by the then Minister of Justice, Claudio Martelli. And it is this legislation which basically regulates immigration in Italy up to today.

Both Act 943, as well as the Martelli Act, are generally more benevolent towards immigrants than similar legislation adopted by other countries.¹³ The former, basically grants, in theory, all the welfare and labor rights that Italians enjoy to the immigrants who possess the residence permit. Act 943 also gave illegal immigrants living in this country the possibility of legalizing their situation. Nevertheless there are two limits laid down by this law: the first is that it only refers to employees, ignoring the self-employed, a status very common in some communities (Senegalese and Moroccan). There was also the phenomenon of dismissals by employers of many workers they had previously paid "under the table."¹⁴ The second is that the self-employed workers, not mentioned in this law, were forced to register as unemployed in the local job centers (this was necessary to obtain a residence permit as an unemployed worker) thus falsifying the statistics about the number of unemployed immigrants.

The Martelli Act, passed later, was less faulty but, nevertheless carried in its wake many other problems which have not yet been solved. The immigrant is no longer required to prove that he has a job as a condition for the legalization of his situation. The criteria for those who apply to benefit from the amnesty are less restrictive. The Act also deals with the norms regarding political asylum.¹⁵

However, even the Martelli Act is an expression of a policy of "closing the frontiers."¹⁶ Basically, like Act 943, it confirms the principle of "different treatment": "acceptance" of legal immigrants, "rejection" of whoever arrives later. Immigration motivated by the search for a job, according to the Martelli Act, should take place by planning the flow. On this basis the Government has to issue a ministerial decree every year, in which it establishes how many immigrants may enter Italy the following year in search of work.¹⁷

The revision of the Martelli Act has recently sparked fiery debate among progressives, Green and Catholic associations on the one hand and the Right on the other.¹⁸ Basically, the progressives prevented a clause which would have transformed illegal immigration into a criminal act.¹⁹

A closer look at the different nationalities of immigrants in Italy shows a substantial presence of workers from the Maghreb. It is an almost exclusively male flow of individuals who have probably chosen Italy as an alternative to France, after the new immigration restrictions adopted by that country. Most of the immigrants from the Maghreb are Moroccans, who compose numerically the largest community of non-EEC immigrants in Italy (about ten per cent of the total

number of immigrants). There are also many Tunisians, who—like the Senegalese (Mouride and Tijane), have arrived more recently in Italy—work mainly as street traders. Other communities are made up of Egyptians, Nigerians, Ghanaians and Eritreans. A conspicuous migratory flow (more than 4% of the total immigrant population), which is prevalently female and employed in the sector of domestic work, comes from the Philippines and is mainly composed of Roman Catholics. There are also some Latin American immigrants from Salvador, Brazil and Argentina.

Sri Lankan (Singhalese and Tamil), Chinese and Eastern European (mainly Russian and Polish) immigrants have established small communities in Italy. Other newcomers have recently arrived, from the Balkan area.

Most of the immigrants work as domestic help, including giving assistance to old people and invalids in their homes, or as street traders, in the catering sector, in agriculture, in the fishing industry, in the construction industry and in factories.

The Albanian presence in Italy is a special case, most remarkable in Apulia which is the “landing stage” for the dramatic and repeated attempts at exodus of the Albanian people towards the Italian coastline.²⁰ The phenomenon had its notorious peak in March and August 1991, when ships full to bursting of Albanians sailed into the Apulian harbors. It has been defined as an exodus of almost biblical proportions: 46,000 people (25,000 in March, 21,000 in August) which dramatically brought the human, social and political condition of the Albanian refugees to world public attention. The first arrivals were accepted also because of popular pressure,²¹ whereas the later arrivals, most of whom were repatriated, showed up the total lack of readiness of the Italian government for this event.

Motorboats of all sizes (skaff in Albanian), with Albanians aboard, make almost daily attempts to reach the Apulian coasts which are still patrolled by Army platoons ready to enforce repatriation.²² And often, as we are used to reading in the hurried headlines in our newspapers, the Albanian fugitives meet their death in disastrous shipwrecks, before even glimpsing the Italian coasts.

Various forms of racism have reappeared with the advent of immigration on the Italian scene.²³ Thus the generic definition of Italy as a non-racist country,²⁴ which might have been plausible up to a few decades ago, seems to have given way to the idea that the Italians are not immune to racism and suffer from the “xenophobic syndrome” no less than other nationalities. Verbal and even physical attacks on immigrants, together with a long list of expressions of intolerance and discrimination, foreground the increasingly short historical memory of an Italy which only few generations ago was a nation of emigrants.

The sociologist Laura Balbo has defined Italy as a monocultural

system and, like other Western countries, European countries in particular, inspired by a white-centrist model. Italy is basically anchored to a "system which defines and prefers a relatively homogeneous model, an average type of Italianness (citizen, worker, Catholic, educated, white), and which works to reduce, as far as possible, any deviation from this average type."²⁵ We are not all conscious of this: it is a social mechanism which has the precise object of reproducing this model and is considered "natural." Other Western countries, like Switzerland or Great Britain and, outside Europe, the United States, encounter pluralistic situations. Within their boundaries they have different languages, religions and traditions. Whereas in Italy only now are we beginning to come into contact with peoples and cultural traditions which we used to consider as exotic forms of expression or as folklore, but at any rate as something alien to our universe, something which didn't interfere with our country or our lives.

"Monoculturalism—writes Laura Balbo—means that the criterion, perhaps not explicitly declared but implicitly shared, is the superiority of dominant white culture, 'more advanced' than all the others. The principles on which all the bureaucratic system is based, the procedures and the policies of the institutions, in European society, are wholly monocultural."²⁶

In line with this theory there is also the recently advanced thesis of the existence of a "differentialist" racism, based on the conviction of "cultural" rather than "biological" superiority. Thus the eighteenth-century doctrines of "superior" and "inferior" biological races have been abandoned and substituted by a need for identity which tends to repel all the individuals who cannot be integrated—namely the immigrants—because of a presumed irreconcilability of traditions and customs.²⁷

The sociologist Luigi Manconi has identified three different kinds of racism within Italian society. The first has been defined as "additional or alarm-provoked" and refers to the overlapping of the factor of real or presumed social alarm (drug pushing, petty violence against people and property, infectious diseases), with "difference" (somatic, ethnic and cultural). This overlapping—according to Manconi—generates the discriminatory attitude. He basically thinks that "the system of ideological and biological motivations of racism has been taken over, largely, by a system of social and psychological motivations."²⁸ The distinguishing aspect of this theory is the need to identify the source of the "threat"—the culprit—in someone on the outside of the community.

The second type of racism identified is the one defined as "competitive" and is born of the need for the "symbolic and material control of the territory and its resources. The competition, in this case, seems to center mainly on the availability of services (subsidized

accommodation, welfare assistance, etc.), on the priority in the enjoyment of these services, and on the sharing of the disadvantages determined by their death."

Lastly Manconi refers to a racism he defines as "cultural or ethnocentric-intolerance provoked" which springs from a defense of one's own culture, value system, lifestyle and from a rejection of the culture, values and lifestyle of others.)

A recent study on acts of aggression against foreigners in Italy,²⁹ referring to 1994 and the first two weeks of 1995, has brought to notice a disturbing result: 126 acts of violence, that is, a physical assault every three days. And this is a figure which might be just the tip of the iceberg, since according to a reliable assessment, only one out of four acts of violence is reported to the public authorities. The immigrants tend to avoid reporting these incidents for various reasons: sometimes they do not have residence permits and so are afraid to declare their presence and often, even if their position is legal, they tend to take shelter in anonymity, little trusting the state apparatus. They are also handicapped by their poor knowledge of the Italian language and laws. Furthermore, the risk that reporting an attack leads to more violence and reprisals, against which a foreigner is not able to defend himself, is clearly evident from this research. This is why the real figures for physical assaults—according to the researchers—might be at least twice the numbers registered: therefore a physical assault every day and a half or maybe more. Assaults, beatings, injuries and attacks have taken place, almost always carried out by groups of youths, generally adolescent and mostly from marginal strata of the population: that is, those most exposed to the effects of foreign immigration. Moreover, racism feeds on commonplaces and stereotypes, which lead to seeing the immigrants, the Romany gypsies and the refugees only as beggars or thieves, pushers or drug addicts. Few people are aware of the fact that in Italy, these days, the work of many immigrants is indispensable for the functioning of important industrial, agricultural and handicraft sectors and that the immigrants contribute to fill in all the gaps created by the Italians' refusal to carry out many humble jobs.

The sociologist Franco Ferrarotti, one of the most brilliant Italian experts on the problem of racism, cites an explicit example of diffidence toward the foreigner found in Plato's *Laws*. The foreigner from Athens arrives in Crete, an island with ancient laws of divine origin (which are therefore untouchable), and asks questions, thus spreading doubt and uncertainty—and so he begins to be treated with diffidence, an attitude which continues to exist in the modern world.³⁰

Eurocentric prejudice has ancient roots. Since the Middle Ages the idea of a Europe counterposed against the rest of the world has been prevalent. Once the opposition between the Germans and the Romans was over, the one between the East and the West took its

place. According to Machiavelli, Europe is a collection of individual "virtues," whereas the Orient represents despotism, political and intellectual stagnation. Voltaire himself, when he identifies the four happy ages of history, refers to the four European ages. "Enlightened cosmopolitanism turns dialectically into its opposite; the European particularity is transformed into a justification of unquestionable superiority; the apparently universal[istic] cosmopolitanism is made to coincide with a single cultural tradition and with a single racial type: the European, Caucasian or Aryan.... The prejudice to overcome is the Eurocentric one which sees in the Western culture the only true culture, while the others are only pre-cultures, non-cultures or "illegal" cultures, so to speak."³¹

Apart from this sort of discrimination it seems evident that on a world level, we are slipping more and more into a dualistic system which counterposes the rich West against the poor countries of the world and which tends to maintain this distinction even when the people from the Third World cross their borders, in search of a better life in states where the economies and the lifestyle are defined as "more advanced."³²

All the peoples who live in this kind of system and enjoy its privileges should ask themselves some questions about the future of the world. On a planetary level we have to "question how we produce, distribute and consume."³³ Moreover the melting pot model, in which assimilation takes place, hasn't yielded the hoped-for fruits because it is not really a democratic system. It is based on the principle that minorities must be assimilated and integrated into majorities, and this implies giving up their cultural identity.³⁴

In a recent work, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Thomas Schmid hold that immigration has not damaged the host countries but has benefited them, and that we are dealing with a phenomenon which is historically necessary for the growth and enrichment of those countries. The most advanced nations of the planet are all multicultural.

We should commit ourselves to constructing a society in which respect for everything that is "other" is widespread, a system in which the meeting of different cultures is a source of wealth and not the pretext for a clash, a real and universal democracy, of which we cannot expect a utopian perfection but at least a radical reduction of economic and social imbalances. On taking a closer look, despite its differences, humankind undeniably has the distinguishing experiences of life in common: birth, instincts, feelings, primary and secondary needs, illnesses and death. We should hope for the only desirable future: a truly democratic multicultural world.

[1997]

1. Perrone, Luigi. *Porte chiuse*. Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1995, p. 5.
2. Entzinger, Han B. "L'emergenza delle politiche di integrazione per gli immigrati in Europa," in (various authors) *Italia, Europa e nuove immigrazioni*, Torino: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1990, p. 179.
3. In the phases of extensive capitalism, the widening of the productive base increases employment, whereas in the phases of intensive capitalism there is greater investment in constant capital (machinery, technological development) and therefore a reduction in the number of workers employed with a consequential increase of the GNP (gross national product) and a cut in salaries. See Perrone, Luigi. "Insediamenti terzomondiali e mercato del lavoro in un'area periferica del Mezzogiorno: il caso Salento," in *Inchiesta*, 1990.
4. Entzinger, Hans B. "L'emergenza delle politiche di integrazione per gli immigrati in Europa," *cit.*, pp. 179-200.
5. Pugliese, Enrico. "Emigrazione e immigrazione in Italia," in M.I. Maciotti & E. Pugliese, *Gli immigrati in Italia*. Bari: Laterza, 1993, pp. 5-8.
6. "Immigrazione, il Polo contro i clandestini", in *L'Unità*, 9 August 1995, p. 10.
7. International charity organization run by the Italian Catholic Church.
8. In *Il Manifesto*, 12 October, 1995.
9. Pugliese, Enrico. "Emigrazione e politica migratoria," in M. I. Maciotti & E. Pugliese, *Gli immigrati in Italia*, *cit.*, p. 41.
10. Since Italy lacked this kind of legislation it was necessary to apply the laws on public security, thus regulating the matter as a question of public order. This aspect conditioned the two successive laws because the paperwork was put in the hands of the police rather than City Hall, a situation which the voluntary organizations and the democratic sector continue to protest.
11. Because the immigrants, coming mainly from the south of the world (Africa, Asia, Latin America) and from Eastern Europe, had entered the country with a tourist visa and they could not be registered as workers.
12. Pugliese, Enrico. "Immigrazione e politica migratoria," *cit.*, pp. 40-49.
13. The strongest criticism made by the democratic forces, which time has proved right, is that the two Acts, which they defined as "who is in is in," did not deal with the matter of the successive waves of immigration.
14. The law foresaw the possibility to legalize the position of employees "paid under the table," without penalizing the employers. Nevertheless, since it meant that it was no longer possible to have this manpower at low cost, they preferred to fire their employees.
15. In fact, this law introduces the right to political asylum in Italy where, before this date, there was a geographical limit, that is, only the people who fled from Eastern Europe could be considered to have the right to asylum. Only two exceptions were made: one after the *coup d'état* in Chile and the other for the Vietnamese boat-people.
16. Pugliese, Enrico, "Immigrazione e politica migratoria," *cit.*, p. 43.
17. Note that the immigration quota for newcomers is now "zero." The last decree of 1995, issued nine months late, established the number of possible incoming immigrants at 25,000 for this year.
18. On this subject the Roman Catholics have pointed out that the Pope has recently warned Europe of its xenophobic wave.
19. Pugliese, Enrico. "Immigrazione e politica migratoria," *cit.*, p. 39.

20. Costa K. Barjaba, Z. Dervishi, L. Perrone. "L'emigrazione albanese: spazi, tempi e cause," in *Studi Emigrazione*, no. 107, 1992.

21. It is sadly well known that, during the shameful riot at the Bari football stadium, the Albanians were locked in and food was thrown to the angry prisoners from the terraces. Pieces of heaters were launched over the walls of the stadium as a reaction to this lager-style treatment. The thousands of prisoners who resisted the siege longest were forced out by a colossal blitz on the part of the armed forces and were then repatriated. Moreover, five hundred fleeing soldiers were expelled with a vague promise of an agreement with Tirana which would prevent the death penalty from being applied. See *Stop Razzismo. Italiani, faccie di bronzo*, supplement to *Senzaconfine*, no. 1, Roma: January 1993.

22. All this is part of the so-called "Operazione Pinerolo," for which the Government issued a decree (no. 216, 30 June 1995), which was considered unconstitutional and therefore contested. According to the Italian Constitution, in fact, the use of the Army may be permitted only with the authorization of the Parliament. The decree was rejected during a sitting of the "Committee for Constitutional Affairs" and only later modified and then ratified. (no. 365, 28 August 1995, published in the "Gazzetta Ufficiale" no. 203, 31 August 1995).

23. I am referring to more recent years, decades after the infamous "racial laws" introduced in 1938 by the Fascist regime.

24. Balbo, Laura. "Vocabolario," in Laura Balbo & L. E. Manconi, *I razzismi possibili*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1990, p. 29.

25. Balbo, Laura. *cit.*, p. 30.

26. See the *Documento d'Intenti* of the "Costituente" Rete Nazionale Antirazzista (Napoli, 6-8 October, 1995).

27. Manconi, Luigi. "Razzismo interno, razzismo esterno e strategia del chi c'è c'è," in L. Balbo & L. E. Manconi, *I razzismi possibili, cit.*, p. 91.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

29. Manconi, Luigi. *La violenza nascosta*, Dossier 1, 1995. See also Gentiloni, Francesco. "Quotidiana violenza ordinaria indifferenza," in *Confronti*, July-August 1995, pp. 33-34.

30. Ferrarotti, Franco. *Oltre il razzismo*. Roma: Armando Editore, 1988, p. 34.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-49.

32. Robert D. Kaplan, the English author of *The Coming Anarchy*, has drawn attention to the fact that, nowadays, with the blanket diffusion of television reception and with the invasion of new technologies "the poor" see much more clearly how "the rich" live. The disparities are huge and this is a strongly destabilizing factor. A sort of "short-fuse bomb." (In: PANORAMA-Pulp Future, a BBC television programme - March 1995).

33. Cf. Luigi Perrone. *Porte Chiuse. cit.*, p. 10.

34. Cuocci, Lucia. "No al melting pot, sì all'integrazione pluralistica," in *Confronti*, January 1995, pp. 26-27.