

## **‘It’s all their Fault’. Immigrants as Scapegoats and a Mirror Revealing Social Contradictions**

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# *It's all their Fault'. Immigrants as Scapegoats and a Mirror Revealing Social Contradictions*

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## **Abstract**

This article analyses the role as scapegoat and the 'mirroring' function performed by immigrants in societies where levels of economic inequality are increasing, and welfare structures are being constantly contracted. The central argument of this article is that, in a situation of prolonged economic crisis, political elites can blame certain minority groups for causing difficulties that really arise from macrosocial factors.

In the first section, the article examines the creation in and by the media of the image of immigrants as 'the enemy within', demonstrating the arbitrariness of this categorisation and how it acts as a catalyst for the discontent felt by native populations, in particular the Italian people. The social construction of immigrants as potential perils to law and order and as unfair competitors in the job market and in applications for welfare resources (which does not find confirmation in scientific research) also performs the function of legitimising the political elites in a time of enduring economic crisis and changes in the capitalist economic model.

The second section illustrates the dynamics, causes and consequences of the growth of economic inequality in economies around the world, with wages and pensions falling. States find themselves in great difficulty trying to counteract these processes of impoverishment in the population with social welfare measures.

The third and final section looks at the 'mirroring' function performed by immigrants. They act as a convenient catalyst for the anger of the native populations, in part because the conditions of financial uncertainty and social marginalisation in which immigrants so often live are also beginning to seem like the probable future for the natives. Therefore, immigrants show us an image of poverty and uncertainty which seemed to have been definitely defeated through the development of welfare systems but is returning.

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## **1. Foreword**

For at least twenty years now, how immigration is handled has been one of the main topics for political and media debate across Europe. Although the number of news items produced by the mass media system on this topic is enormous, only rarely is the public presented with any kind of objective information on the matter. For example, in Italy, only the most alarming aspects of immigration get airtime or column inches, i.e. when crimes or matters concerning general law and order are involved. The very laws governing immigration to Italy are marked by a strong orientation towards policing emergency situations and safeguarding law and order, while much less attention is paid to matters of social integration.

All of this helps us understand how it is that the public image of non-EU immigrants is so negative in Europe as a whole and in particular in Italy, and also why immigrants are perceived as dangerous by the majority of the population. Of course, we cannot deny that there are certain difficulties in accommodating cultures which, regarding certain issues (e.g. the social role of women, or the separation of civil and religious activities), at times display elements of conflict, although it must be said that the issue of managing cultural differences is often described in the public debate as if it were a struggle between monolithic and immutable symbolic spheres. However, the processes of cultural change which migrant populations undergo have been described in great detail over the years, starting with the Chicago School studies of European immigrants to the USA. More than cultural differences, it is other factors which feed into the hostility expressed by politicians and in public debate about foreign nationals.

In this paper, we discuss in particular the fact that immigrants can easily be used as catalysts for the anger of native populations when they (the natives) are suffering a situation of crisis marked by an increase in financial instability and lack of job security together with public welfare structures in decline. Over the course of human history, the 'scapegoat' mechanism has time and again shown itself to be highly useful in restructuring the symbolic borders of a social group exposed to a situation of peril and suffering a loss of internal solidarity and unity. Parsons (1994) explained the rise of Nazism and the extermination of the Jews in Germany, a society with one of the highest levels of schooling in the world, but which, after the First World War, found itself having to face one of the deepest economic crises in the history of capitalism without a political subsystem legitimised to govern the social consequences of

the crisis. While it is true that the current situation is very different from the situation in Europe between the two wars, nevertheless we can note that today, just as yesterday, changes in the labour market and an increase in economic inequalities linked to the development of the neoliberal capitalist system are accompanied by a widespread decline in the Western political class's ability to handle such phenomena by providing adequate levels of social welfare.

In addition, we must also consider the effects of the economic recession which began in 2008 and continues to have an effect ten years on. From this perspective, this paper argues that immigrants (as well as other minority groups, such as travelling peoples) simultaneously perform two roles: a) as a scapegoat blamed for problems which really arise on a macro-structural level, and b) as a 'mirror' or 'lens' through which to view a condition of progressive 'estrangement' which ever-growing numbers of Europeans are experiencing in their relationships to the world of work and the provisions of public welfare systems. We could say that immigrants perform a revelatory role unmasking a situation of social fragility which not only affects them but is also spreading to European populations. This is why foreign nationals (with their cultural differences and the difficulties which go with them) arouse deep-rooted fears in the wider population which can be kept at a distance or even denied by rejecting immigrants.

The argument of this paper will be elaborated through a conceptual framework comprising three sections:

1. In the first section, we challenge the interpretation that immigrants are perceived as enemies only because of their cultural differences from the Italian population. We argue that the construction of the 'enemy' label is actually the product of a large segment of the native population experiencing financial and existential uncertainty, together with immigrants being exploited by the political and social elite in order to legitimise their power in the eyes of the native population;
2. In the second section, we present a summary of the growth of economic inequality on a global level and in Italy in particular, interpreting it as an element of social anomy, a sign of the declining legitimacy of the political classes and as a mirror showing us the changed relationships between social classes in a context characterised by the contraction of public systems for redistribution of wealth;
3. In the third and final section, we discuss the role performed by immigration as a mirror through which it is possible to reveal what is rarely revealed in public and political debates, i.e. that the changes wrought in economic and production systems make it ever more

difficult to ensure an effective process of social integration for everybody, making citizens ever more 'estranged' from each other.

## **2. The construction of the image of immigrants as 'enemies' and 'scapegoats'**

For more than twenty years now, immigration has been one of the most hotly debated issues in the mass media and in European politics. In Italy, the conceptual representations used to describe this complex phenomenon are characterized by fear, suspicion of foreigners and attention focused on the elements of conflict and competition for access to the labour market and to social welfare resources (Morowska, 2005). The migratory flows from African, Middle-Eastern and Asian countries are presented to the public as an uncontrollable phenomenon which could potentially lead to millions of humans moving to our continent (Colombo, 2012). Ambrosini (2010) shows how military-style metaphors are used in the public debate on immigration: 'invasion', 'defence of borders', 'ethnic replacement', 'Islamization'. What is really conveyed by these terms is that immigration could lead to the disappearance of the collective consciousness as understood by Durkheim (2016), in other words the loss of the set of norms and shared values belonging to European societies. As in a war, those responsible for that loss can be easily identified: the 'enemies', or the 'conquerors', are the 'immigrants', the 'illegal aliens', the 'Islamics', all of whom can be easily recognized thanks to their ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds (Maneri, 2009).

This work of creating an 'enemy' in the media has been ongoing for at least two decades. Using a qualitative study carried out between 2005 and 2009 on the articles published by the three biggest-selling Italian national newspapers (*Corriere della Sera*, *la Repubblica* and *Il Giornale*), Calvanese (2011) shows that these three major organs of public information together produced more than 11,000 articles about immigrants to Italy over that five-year period. Almost 60% of those articles centred on crimes having some kind of link to immigration, while only a minority (20%) of articles focused on the issue of immigrants' right to remain in Italy or matters regarding the opportunities offered by the Italian social welfare system (20%). The newspapers examined published almost all the news items relating to illicit acts committed by foreign nationals which arrived in the newsrooms, with only a minimal difference (3.5%) between the number of news items reported and those actually published in the papers. Conversely, the difference between the number of news stories relating to illicit acts committed by Italian nationals reported and those actually published was much higher (more than 30%). This means that

the crimes committed by Italians were underrepresented compared with those committed by foreign nationals. In the first three months of 2010 (at the height of the economic crisis), in the two TV news programmes with the biggest audiences in Italy (Channel 1 and Channel 5), crime – almost always committed by an immigrant – took up the vast majority of the airtime dedicated to ‘anxiety-inducing’ news items (72.3% of stories on Channel 5 and 82.3% of those aired on Channel 1) when we could have expected to see much more airtime dedicated to the social consequences of the recession (Osservatorio europeo sulla sicurezza, 2012).

This media bombardment has doubtlessly influenced the hostile attitude of Italians towards immigrants and refugees, who are seen as a danger to law and order and as conduits of cultural values which are hostile to and incompatible with Western democratic values (Dal Lago, 2012).

The process of imposing this image of immigrants as enemies began in the late 1990s, a time marked by intense migratory flows and heated political debate among the various national parties about the acute economic and financial crisis in a country marked by the diminishing ability of the national political class to handle the crisis. In an era of increasing globalisation and widespread delocalisation of businesses, it is clear that policies and apparatus for controlling immigration constitute, among other things, an instrument for politically and symbolically legitimising the authority of the national State in a globalised world. Ambrosini (2014) argues that, today, immigration policies are one of the few areas in which the State can exercise its authority unchallenged. Defence of the country’s borders thus becomes the expression of the existence and legitimacy of the authority of the State and also the dominant political classes. Similarly, Dal Lago (2012) notes that in a world of uncertainty of many kinds (financial, existential and employment-related in particular) dealing with immigration constitutes for politicians and the public bureaucracy machine an operative and symbolic space with which to ‘... ensure control of society and the functioning of the public control system’ (Dal Lago 2012: 245).

Therefore, representing migration as a danger to law and order and also to the cultural and moral cohesion of European nations has also served to re-establish where the nation’s borders lie, and to reinforce the boundaries of a collective identity – both Italian and European – undermined by globalisation and constructed as opposition to foreigners (Campesi, 2015).

However, immigration is also an effective means for legitimising the dominant political and social system. According to several authors (Dal Lago, 2012; Melossi, 2002; Sigona, 2009; Vitale, 2009; Wacquant, 2002), emphasising the perils posed by immigration and by ethnic minorities (in particular, travelling peoples) aids the creation of consent expressed towards political and

social elites in times of economic crisis. Pointing the finger at immigrants as the cause of the economic difficulties and the diminishment of the quality of life of the native population provides a handy scapegoat to political leaders, allowing them to shift the focus of the public's discontent and exploit anger in such a way as to consolidate both their political power and the framework supporting the dominant classes.

Melossi (2002) argues that the way immigration is represented to the general public by the mass media plays a highly important role in ensuring effective social control over the continued reproduction of the dominant social configurations, in other words in maintaining social domination. For Melossi (2002), in a democratic system, criminalisation of ethnic minorities occurs when a long-term economic crisis makes it very difficult to keep the social tension produced by the market system under control through redistribution of a part of the availability wealth, or in other words, the surplus value. In a context where redistribution of wealth has been frozen, the dominant classes use fear and suspicion – which often arises towards minority groups – to legitimise their own positions of power in the eyes of the population at large. This is brought about by focusing on the 'crimewave' and the consequent necessity to construct an enormous crime-containment structure which can be managed only by the social elites. Wacquant (2010) holds that focusing on the danger to law and order represented by ethnic minorities serves to hide the contradictions at the core of the neoliberal economic system, such as lack of job security, economic inequalities, the individualisation of risk and lack of social solidarity. Since, initially at least, it is immigrants and ethnic minorities who are most exposed to the contradictions of the dominant economic system (given their generally lower levels of education, their relative lack of political and union protection and the little social support they receive), the repressive reaction of the State is directed at them. This serves both to defuse these groups' potential for protest and, above all, to construct a new social reality through the creation of cultural representations which transform the needs arising from social issues (in particular, from class inequalities) into matters of law and order.

Immigration has certainly had a huge impact on contemporary economic systems and labour markets at a time when the capitalist system has been undergoing enormous transformations and States have been seeing their legitimacy progressively diminished. According to the OECD (2014), in the past 10 years immigrants have accounted for more than 70% of the increase in jobs in Europe and 47% in the USA, revitalising entire sectors of the economy which were in crisis or accelerating the development of those with positive growth trends. In Italy, immigrants contributed 8.8% of the national wealth in 2014, with a total value of over 123 billion Euros (Fondazione Leone



Moressa, 2015), despite often finding themselves having to work with irregular contracts, with little or no protection from trade unions and with low salaries in return for the amount of work they do (see Allievi and Dalla Zuanna, 2016; Ambrosini, 2010, 2014; Koser, 2009). In certain sectors, such as care services, agriculture, construction, transport and tourist services, foreign nationals constitute the majority of the total number of workers and their work helps to keep the prices of the products and services offered to consumers low (Fondazione Leone Moressa, 2015). In Italy, the changes in the labour market related to the presence of immigrant manpower have taken place within the framework of a social context marked by a long-term economic crisis and persistent difficulties in finding work (exacerbated after the crash of 2009) and also by profound and growing economic inequalities affecting a majority of the population. This characterisation of the figure of the immigrant as an 'enemy' has developed in a social system which has shown itself to be progressively less able to protect its people from the consequences of losing their employment and of seeing the effective purchasing power provided by their salaries diminished (ILO, 2016). This society needs immigrants to work in order to keep its production system competitive, but at the same time – at least in part due to continuous media pressure and political slogans – has constructed an image of immigrants as unfair competitors on the job market and in obtaining welfare resources. In this way, the increase in economic inequalities and the reduction in real income (which are the product of the dominance of capital income over earned income) are not ascribed as *structural* causes of the internal economic crisis in our society – causes which, on the contrary, are transformed into a *subjective* feeling of having one's opportunities to achieve success limited by *external* factors, such as jobs being stolen by immigrants. We could also say that, from this perspective, it is not only immigrants who experience an anomic condition, as understood by Melossi (2002), of subjectively perceiving that they live in an unfair society which curtails their prospects for self-fulfilment (achievement of their goals) because of the widespread inequalities in the spheres of culture, religion and language, as well as those of work and income. Indeed, many Italians experience a similar situation, as they are discovering how difficult it is today to count on levels of income which will be sufficient to protect them from the risk of poverty, and how this situation is caused by an unfair society, one which generates great wealth but redistributes progressively less of it.

Therefore, in order to fully understand the meaning of the construction and use of the 'immigrant as enemy' category, we must look more closely at the context of growing economic inequalities and the consequent reduction in the economic and political elites' ability to meet the population's needs. In the next section, we analyse the dynamics behind the development of this

economic inequality on the international scene and in Italy and attempt to demonstrate how it is linked to the decrease in the resources invested in public welfare and the fossilisation of class structures resulting from this.

### **3. The increase in inequality as a factor in the declining legitimacy of political elites**

In his famous book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Piketty (2014) underlines that the increase in internal inequality currently characterising almost all societies around the world should essentially be traced back to two factors: on the one hand, to an increase in the earned income of the richest 10% of the population compared with the poorest 50%, and on the other, to an even greater concentration of capital income in the richest 10%.

Concerning inequality in earned income, Piketty (2014) shows how, today, in the countries with medium levels of inequality (such as European states), the highest-paid 10% receives around 25-30% of the total earnings, while the 50% with the lowest income receives around 30% of the total earned income in that nation. In countries with high levels of inequality (for example the USA, but also many Commonwealth nations), the upper 10% receives around 35% of the total earnings, while the 50% with the lowest earnings has to make do with only 10% of the total earned income (Piketty, 2014).

This increase in earned-income inequality, which began around the beginning of the 1970s in the USA and the 1980s in Europe, displays a non-uniform internal distribution. In particular, Piketty stresses that, within the tenth of the population with the highest earned income – which the French economist defines the ‘wealthy classes’ – there is a considerable difference between those the author terms ‘dominant classes’ (those found in the top 1%) and the remaining 9% (Piketty, 2014). It is in this numerically small dominant class that the concentration of earned income reaches its peak, both in Europe (where this 1% of the population accounts for around 7% of the total wages, salaries and pensions) and – above all – in the USA (where this small group accounts for 12% of the total earned income). Piketty also shows that these high-earning groups, despite being numerically small, are much larger groups than the few hundred families that, up to the end of the Second World War, constituted the traditional European and North American elite. Indeed, in the USA the percentile with the highest earnings comprises around 2.6 million people (Piketty, 2014), while in Italy the same group comprises approximately 400,000 people. Therefore we are not talking about groups with

almost negligible numbers, but relatively populous segments making up a very rich and influential social class.

Piketty attributes the causes of the increased inequality in the distribution of earned income to various different factors. For example, the fact that developments in technology are leading to continual changes in production systems is a spur for intense competition between businesses to secure the services of the people with the best professional competences and qualifications by offering high salaries. Furthermore, Piketty (2014) mentions the fact that many of these professionals sit on the boards of large corporations, meaning that they are able to set their own salary levels. It should be noted that the growth of inequality is a constant also in times of economic crisis when the earned income of the majority of the population tends to decrease (Franzini and Pianta, 2016). In these times of crisis, we can witness an accentuation of the inequality in earned income between the top ten percent and the middle classes. In his essay *The Price of Inequality*, Joseph Stiglitz (2014) shows that economic inequality in America increased at the time of the economic crisis; between 2009 and 2010, the richest 1% of the US population received approximately 93% of the extraordinary income generated in the country. Also in Europe, the top percentile saw its income increase more than that of the middle classes, albeit with lesser levels of inequality compared with the USA and the major Commonwealth nations (Alvaredo et al., 2013).

Piketty's greatest merit, however, is his demonstrating that the biggest factor in economic inequality is still today related to capital income. In European societies – those with 'medium inequality' – the richest 10% of the population (what we could call the 'upper class') owns on average around 60% of the total capital, while in the USA this same group owns 70%. Again, within this group the concentration is further heightened within the 'dominant class'. This 1% of the total population owns on average 25% of the capital property in Europe and 35% in the USA (Piketty, 2014: 379). All this comes together to produce a situation characterised by an escalation in the overall inequalities in wealth in almost every country in the world. Yet this is not all: since the returns on capital are less susceptible to economic crises and to reductions in earned income, in times of economic crisis the gap between rich and poor widens.

The criticism of the 'top 1%' made by global protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street, using the slogan 'We are the 99 percent', captures a widespread feeling of grave injustice experienced by almost the whole population; people find themselves being poorer and poorer despite their individual efforts, while a small segment of the population stays rich mainly because of capital passed down from one generation to the next. If we

consider that, in 2016, just over thirty-three million people (0.7% of the world population) possessed a share of the total wealth in the world amounting to more than one hundred and sixteen thousand billion dollars (a figure in excess of 3,515,000 dollars a year per head), while the poorest 92% (amounting to four and a half billion people) possessed a share of the wealth totalling around thirty-five thousand billion dollars – meaning an average pro capite wealth of less than 8,000 Euros (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2016) we can realise that we are effectively witnessing once again the formation of strict class segmentation following the State systems for redistribution of wealth being thrown into crisis by the economic changes wrought by the introduction of the neoliberal model.

Certain authors (see e.g. Ricolfi and Cima, 015) dispute the fact that the growth in economic inequality has taken place on a global level or that it displays a constant trend. According to these authors, recent economic dynamics actually show a drop in the Gini index between the various states, leading to greater balance in the global distribution of wealth. This objection does contain some kernels of truth, as the income available to the world population has certainly increased (especially if we consider China and India), but if we examine the inequality dynamics within each state we can see that inequality between the different social classes is progressively growing, in part caused by the decline of the Welfare State. Moreover, in the first decade of the 2000s, the trend of decreasing levels of inequality between states ground to a halt, with levels remaining stable overall (Esping-Andersen and Myles, 2009; Franzini and Pianta, 2016).

Therefore, we can see that the neoliberal economic system has produced a shift in wealth from earned income to capital income, thereby effecting a kind of reverse redistribution from workers and pensioners to wealthy property owners (Gallino, 2012). In the OECD member countries, in the thirty-year period between 1976 and 2006, the proportion of earned income (including from self-employed work) to the GDP fell on average by 10%, from 68% to 58%. In Italy, this drop exceeded the OECD average, with a reduction of 15% bringing it down to 53% of the GDP (Gallino, 2012). Furthermore, even when the real value of salaries and wages increases, they never do so with the same intensity at which the worker's productivity develops.

Gallino (2011, 2012) underlines that the progressive increase in the gap between a small group of rich people and a multitude of poor – or at least members of an ever-poorer middle class – is also linked to the public redistribution mechanisms regarding taxes and welfare. For example, in Italy – as in the rest of the south of Europe – pressure to reach certain goals regarding public finances has led to significant cuts in welfare and healthcare

spending. In Italy, ordinary spending on the national health service grew only by 0.1% with respect to the GDP between 2000 and 2013, the time when the GDP was at its lowest (Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze, 2014), with an effective cut in spending amounting to 17.5 billion Euros according to the Court of Auditors (Corte dei Conti, 2014). The sustainability of the health system was made possible by increasing the amount of the contribution patients are required to make towards the costs of treatment, coupled with a reduction in spending on staff wages and a recruitment freeze (Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze 2014). As for welfare, the austere reforms approved over a twenty-year period, from the early 90s onwards, have lengthened the number of years citizens must work before being entitled to a pension – to the detriment above all of those who are currently out of the job market or have only fixed-term contracts – and made cuts to future pension payments (Ferrera, 2012; 2016).

Although Gallino's schematisation of a struggle between two classes over-simplifies a social context connoted by high levels of fragmentation in the labour market and large gaps in the respective wages received by those who work, it is nonetheless difficult to deny that the increases in economic inequality, linked in large part to the possession of capital income, are driving towards a progressive polarisation of social groups on the 'work-income' axis. The two ends of this axis denote not only the two extremes of the distribution of wealth but also two very distinct social universes separated (according to Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) both by levels of income – with the richest 0.7% of the population enjoying a pro capite income which is 400 times greater than that of the poorest 92% – and by lifestyles, levels of social and health care (Baumbach and Gulis, 2014; Stuckler and McKee, 2012), education opportunities and living conditions.

Given the above, we can affirm that a social set-up which social democrats had been fighting against since the post-war period while supporting the development of social rights in Europe is re-forming. The dream of a society with less injustice, more inclusion and greater solidarity, one which guarantees the rights of its weakest segments, is confronting the reality of an economic system which is ever freer from political constraints and continues to widen gaps in income and assets, as well as forcing a reduction in the resources set aside for the welfare state (Pierson, 2007). This is the context in which we have to interpret the complex relationship between immigrants and native population in Italy.

#### **4. Immigrants as a ‘mirror’ reflecting an unfair society with little or no solidarity**

As Solano (2014) reminds us, the conceptualisation of the mirroring function of immigration was given to us by Allal, Buffard, Maire and Regazzola (1977) and subsequently developed by Sayad (2008). With this concept we mean that analysing emigratory and immigratory patterns sheds a light on the characteristics both of the emigrant’s society of origin and the immigrant’s society of arrival, as well as the relationship between the two contexts. Sayad states that immigration enables us to ‘see clearly what is concealed in the makeup and functioning of a social order, to reveal what some prefer to ignore and leave society “innocent” or ignorant of, to shed a light or zoom in on (*here we have the lens effect*) what is normally hidden in the social unconscious and is therefore destined to stay in the shadows, as a state of social secrecy or unthought-of’ (1996:10).

In other terms, as Dal Lago (2012) affirms, talking about immigration means discussing and analysing the characteristics of the immigrants’ country of arrival, which reveals in particular its contradictions, some of which have serious social consequences. For example, in a review of the studies carried out on the relationship between social capital and poverty, Narayan (1999) shows how levels of economic inequality are in negative correlation to the intensity of social cooperation and the general development of trust. Conversely, inequality indicators display a positive correlation with low levels of economic wellbeing and poorly functioning government institutions (Narayan, 1999). The Gini index in particular seems to have a strong correlation – much more so than the ethnic segmentation in various social contexts – with low levels of general trust and a low density of organisations and associations dedicated to the common good (Narayan, 1999). Furthermore, as we saw in the previous section, since the distribution of wealth does not increase significantly even in times of economic growth, research suggests that levels of economic inequality can be considered a valid indicator of the presence of social rifts and exclusion. This is probably due to the fact that, as it is above all the dominant social groups who make the political decisions regarding allocation of resources, these decisions tend to reinforce first and foremost the power and prosperity of these same groups to the detriment of those with less political and economic power (Narayan, 1999). High levels of economic inequality can also be seen to have a positive correlation with increases in social tension and conflict, with negative consequences also for the trust and satisfaction which citizens express regarding public and market institutions. In summary, the most egalitarian societies are those in which the population expresses the greatest satisfaction

with their quality of life as well as displaying higher levels of cooperation and happiness (Alesina, Di Tella, McCulloch, 2004).

If it is true that levels of inequality have a positive correlation to the emergence of serious difficulties for interpersonal trust and social cohesion, then the State's redistribution policies play an important role in strengthening interpersonal relations. To cite an example, Di Nicola (2014) demonstrates that the European countries with the highest levels of social expenditure are those where the citizens make the most positive assessments of their quality of life, interpersonal trust and trust in public institutions. What is more, in these contexts – where there is a high level of socialisation of needs – even the level of trust shown in their families is significant.

The negative effects of inequality are aggravated by the fact that contemporary culture tends to individualise the causes of hardship, when it really arises within a framework of radical economic transformation in our communities. Beck (2001) stresses that these transformations are accompanied by a profound cultural change which sees the individual as an isolated subject whose job it is to rationally plan their life following the model of an entrepreneur, within a social structure which '(...) is off-loading the responsibility for keeping up the pressure onto the individual. It becomes self-exploitation and self-oppression, and everyone is supposed to give three cheers because a new kind of autonomous person is being born' (Beck, 200:61). As Sennett (2006) observes, we are witnessing the emergence of a paradoxical situation, as the focus on individual independence is accompanied by an increase in situations of personal fragility caused by the changed labour-market conditions (in particular the lack of job security and lower wages), something which should spur us to question the value of individualism and to show greater solidarity. The fact is that it is harder and harder to count on solid support networks, since the crisis in political and welfare systems is accompanied by radical changes in family models (Di Nicola 2008; Saraceno 2015, 2016) and the progressive decline of trade unionism (Gallino, 2007). Together, these factors paint a picture of a social system where, for the overwhelming majority of the population, individual freedom of action and independence translate simply into an increase in risk and uncertainty in their lives (Bauman, 2001). In this social context, the issue of handling immigration constitutes an element shedding light on the enormous contradictions in the following spheres: 1) in the dominant cultural representations; 2) in the labour market; 3) in the public welfare system.

- 1) On the cultural plane, immigration reveals how fragile – even misleading – is the promise of a modern world which is respectful and inclusive of diversity, as Parsons (1994) argued. This can be examined from two perspectives:

- a) regarding the acceptance of the cultural differences displayed by immigrants, we are currently witnessing a negative overall assessment (publicised in the media) of foreign cultures, which are accused of being incompatible with Western values. Balibar and Wallerstein (1991) defined this type of social representation of immigrant cultures as a new form of racism without races or biological components, a form of racism based on the arbitrary selection (performed by social elites) of cultural factors considered as indicators of a telling difference between immigrants and natives, a difference which becomes material in the segregation of foreigners in outlying areas of cities or in 'reception' centres. Immigrants' cultures are represented as if they were in themselves monolithic and immutable, almost as if they were tied to biological components and therefore to be rejected in their entirety;
  - b) the second perspective which challenges the promised inclusivity of modern culture comes from the fact that the economic and social changes described in the previous paragraphs are constructing social systems marked by severe class segmentation and the continued reproduction of inequalities in wealth and opportunities. Immigrants are the largest portion of these economically and politically disadvantaged groups and are – to our eyes – the confirmation that the destiny of the weak is not necessarily inclusion and greater social support, but could well be exclusion and limited opportunities in life.
- 2) The current mode of dealing with immigration, however, also highlights elements of inconsistency in the labour market. For example, while much is said about the need to limit the numbers of immigrants entering our country each year and to tighten requirements for obtaining residency permits, the number of immigrants entering Italy has always been much higher than the number established by the authorities. A significant proportion of these people enter the country illegally or become illegals with time, above all because of the structure of the Italian labour market and the types of jobs immigrants find themselves forced to accept (Ambrosini 2010, 2013, 2014). In particular, it is very difficult for immigrants to comply with the requirements of Italian law concerning residency permits in a labour market with such a high proportion of short-term employment contracts. 'Black-market' jobs (with no form of contract) and 'grey-market' jobs (with some form of contract but with modes of work not in compliance with current labour laws) are especially widespread in the spheres of activity where the greatest number of immigrants are found,



such as the services, hospitality, construction, transport and trade sectors; in 2014 their combined efforts were estimated by the Italian National Institute of Statistics to be worth 211 billion Euros, 13% of the GDP (ISTAT, 2016). The fact that immigrants are willing to work without regular, long-term employment contracts allows Italian companies to keep production costs and prices to the end consumers low, and to guarantee round-the-clock home help for the sick and elderly at a low cost (Ambrosini, 2013), therefore freeing up Italian women from the domestic duties they are forced into by the family-based model of welfare in their country. All these factors lead to direct economic benefits for Italians, in terms of both containing the costs of goods and services and increasing personal and family incomes (Allievi, Dalla Zuanna, 2016). In summary, while the labour market expresses a structural need for non-compliant working conditions, public opinion expects the work carried out by immigrants to be subject to rigid controls in order to avoid unfair competition with Italians; this is because both Italians and immigrants are faced with the same situation of lack of job security and exploitation.

- 3) Lastly, immigrants highlight the contradictions and injustices inherent to the current public welfare system. Immigrants are often accused of being a major cost for the social support system by 'taking' a lot more than they 'give' (Koser, 2009). But is this not a message addressed to the population as a whole? Have we not reached a stage where our conception of welfare makes it seem more like a privilege than a right achieved thanks to the struggles of the generations who came before us?

The welfare, healthcare, education and social support provisions of all the member states of the European Union have been undergoing review for some time now (starting long before immigration became the major issue it is today); in the southern European states, these reviews have mostly led to cuts because of pressure to meet certain budget targets. Within this context, in an attempt to reconcile the different needs for economic development, limiting public expenditure and redistributing income, the European Commission has come up with the 'Social Investment State' model. This is a way of trying to find a 'third way' to ensure the wellbeing of citizens between the pressure exerted by the neoliberal system to cut welfare resources and the pressure exerted by social democrats to ensure the redistribution of wealth (Ferrera, 2016; Esping-Andersen, 2011).

According to the Social Investment model, public spending on welfare should not be viewed only as a cost, but as a factor which can increase competitiveness and economic efficiency, by investing above all in the factors of greatest risk, such as abandonment of education, premature exits from the labour market and long-term unemployment. Having assessed the changes which have occurred in the economic system, the demographic structure of European societies and the consequences of the economic crisis on public finances, the supporters of the Social Investment State propose considering labour-market entry as the best preventive measure against social risks, and social welfare policies as a factor in acquiring and boosting one's ability to create the best conditions for finding employment. For this reason, social support policies should be directed above all at implementing active labour policies and measures for reconciling caregiving and breadwinning roles through programmes to support the unemployed and income-supplementation schemes (Leoni, 2016).

The problem is that current salary dynamics in the labour market are not enough to guarantee workers sufficient protection from poverty. Furthermore – in part because of the fast-paced technological transformations in production systems –, it is not only doubtful whether there will be enough jobs available in future to meet the demand (Kaplan, 2016), but we are also witnessing the creation of large pockets of the population who will have very little chance of accessing the new types of jobs, given their current low levels of education, professional training and/or work experience.

Another factor is poverty: as poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon where economic, educational, family, environmental and social factors all come into play, boosting only job-market activation factors leads to an improvement in the employment prospects only of the most advantaged groups (those with the highest levels of education and income), while the fight against economic inequality gradually grinds to a halt in Europe (Cantillon, 2011).

In such a worrying situation, the presence of immigrants certainly heightens the fear of having to battle for ever-scarcer welfare resources, especially in members of society with little education and/or who are no longer young (Mau and Burkhardt, 2009). Some authors (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004) have even argued that the increase in ethnic heterogeneity in Europe could lead to a change in the standards of organisation and distribution of welfare resources, leading to them

becoming more like in North America, given that the current set-up of social policies has always been based on an ethnically and culturally homogeneous model of society. Other studies, however, demonstrate that European welfare systems maintain their structural stability over time, even when the ethnic composition of the populations changes (Mau and Burkhardt, 2009).

## 5. Conclusions

The hostility shown towards immigrants by the media and in political speeches is a phenomenon which certainly has a complex background and involves many factors. Two of these – the increase in economic inequality and the weakness of the political elites – have been examined in this article as the frame inside which to observe the relationships between the different variables contributing to create the type of attitude expressed by a given community towards immigrants.

The picture we can see at the end of this study leads us to conclude that how immigration is handled links to the social, economic and political characteristics of a given social context. Immigration effectively constitutes a space for political action and the legitimisation of political action, especially in times when it is not easy to guarantee the electorate sufficient resources for the improvement of their prospects in life. The scapegoat phenomenon has been well known throughout history and has been used many times by social systems in crisis to galvanise the group by identifying an enemy against whom to join forces. Parsons (1994) uses this phenomenon to explain the rise of Nazism and the persecution of the Jews in Germany at a time when the traditional system of social integration (the aristocracy and the monarchy) had disappeared and the fragile parliamentary democracy was unable to cope with the aftermath of the economic crash of 1929.

Even today, the fact that the changes which economic systems and social policies have undergone have led to an increase in economic inequality and a deterioration of the population's effective and perceived living conditions certainly constitutes one of the greatest difficulties contemporary political systems have to face. Unlike Nazi Germany, in contemporary democracies it is unacceptable to exclude a group on the basis of their biological characteristics but having someone to blame for problems which are difficult to overcome is an opportunity taken advantage of even by those who have the task of governing today. Immigrants and ethnic minorities are very handy scapegoats, given their lack of integration into the society they have joined and their lack of political influence, although we must not forget that similar

symptoms affect a growing number of natives, as they face a situation of ever-increasing uncertainty (regarding jobs, salaries, housing and their existence in general) within a context of constantly decreasing institutional solidarity – the same solidarity achieved through struggles lasting more than a century which eventually managed to transform the capitalist system into one with at least a certain concern for its weakest members (Marshall, 2002). Perhaps a part of the hostility felt towards immigrants is due to the fact that, to our eyes, they are a picture of a frightening future which is getting nearer all the time.

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