

THE CONFINES OF IDENTITY: THE “SECOND GENERATIONS”¹

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1. Multiculturalism and Beyond...

In the last several years we have noticed a proliferation of research with particular attention placed on second generation immigrants, or the so called G2's. These works even allude to patterns of a sociological nature on the immigrants whom we prefer to define as migrants (not in honor of being politically correct, but to honor the exact etymology). The desire to get on and ride this media wave is evident based on what has happened in France, Germany, and England where the second generations have been at the forefront of upheaval. It remains therefore, in reality, an ulterior hypothesis: that the attention focused on the problem have an “exorcizing” effect to the tune of “I'll take care of the second generations to prevent riots from happening in Italy as they happened in France and London”.

Among the many publications – I had been talking about – I would like to highlight a work that was published in 2012 for Bonanno Publishing Press, for a series - entitled “Oltre la linea” (Beyond the Line) - that I co-direct with two colleagues. The book, edited by Simonetta Bisi, deals with the integration of migrants' children within the Roman school system: nevertheless, its validity surpasses any geographical dimension. It is not entitled *The City of Others. Techniques of Scholastic (dis) Integration*, for no reason. The study constitutes the need to reflect on models of migrant integration, on the work of institutions such as the school system and the way that “foreigners” are received into civil society.

The results of this kind of work are presented in the following words: “Multiculturalism has failed”. Coming to a similar conclusion following the ethnic based riots that occurred several times in London during the last ten years would only constitute a limited and superficial study. The thesis that “Multiculturalism has failed”, more for its theory than for its practicality, has instead conferred preeminent importance on religious identity rather than to an everyday identity, and

¹ Although this essay was conceived jointly, Paolo De Nardis wrote paragraph 1, while Luca Alteri wrote paragraphs 2. The essay was translated by Glenda Marozzi.

has furthermore transformed the single national community into the epicenter of the migrants social life. Other identities, other affiliations, other “spiritual memberships” compared to a specific religious identity have been drastically downsized. At the same time, the aggregation centers apart from those of the community (such as lay, institutional or even self organized, not based on confession however) have been debased. In English multiculturalism, the immigrants were Arab, Hindu, Sikh, or else Christian, the same being true for their respective offspring. Such a *reductio ad religionem* – in as much as being inspired by the noble principle of permitting the migrants to remain true to their own beliefs - has resulted in limiting aspirations in the lives of the new English citizens. Why limit oneself to one's own religious community or the rituals of one's own religion? Why feel only Arab? Isn't an Arab (or a Hindu, a Christian, an animist...) also a worker, an employee, a passionate fan of cricket, of Manchester United? One who appreciates jazz music? Perhaps even a vegetarian, a socialist, a feminist? “The world” – concluded Amartya Sen (2005) in a pointed analysis of the limits of multiculturalism – “isn't a federation of memberships to an ethnic religion, neither is, one hopes, Great Britain.” Such a judgment, which was written while London was beginning to reflect on abandoning its multicultural model, gains even more value if it is compared to the second generations in Italy.

The problem is absolutely complex: a simple linear analysis is not even feasible here; rather, a multi- dimensional approach is necessary which allows the diverse problems to converge on a common topic. The question of second generations presents itself like concentric circles wherein the child of immigrant parents is at the center. These same parents have bartered for integration in Italy's system by accepting arduous, repetitive, humble jobs that are socially looked down upon. However, doing this they gained a salary, created a space and a role within the society. Their children have broken away from their parents and refuse this so called “bartering” considering it a symbol of sub alternative integration, and consequently, a humiliating condition. These children, having grown up alongside their peers who have different life styles and models of consumption, being parked in front of a television, subjected to advertising and the messages of western society, have completely broken away from what their parents' experience was. At the same time, however, they also live in a context that is continual and that must not be under evaluated: they ask for independence and emancipation from their parents, even though having need of support and closeness. They are fluctuating between opportunities to climb the social ladder and the risk of losing themselves in anonymity. They are searching for a place to find themselves yet shy away from the responsibilities that this brings. They are in effect, just like their Italian counterparts, seeking reference points, beliefs, and self determined spirituality.

Charles Glenn (2004 p.179) wrote well when he said: “Teachers must be ready to recognize that their immigrant students (despite their external differences) may have much more in common with their Italian classmates than both groups have with the adults they are surrounded by”.

If it is true that the second generations of “non Italians” are different from the first generations (given that it would be too felonious to list the problems and the possible solutions), it is also true that the “seconds” are inevitably tied to the degree of integration and to the standard of life that the first generations have (with great difficulty) succeeded in reaching. If it is true that a fourteen year old with Moroccan, Bengali, or Colombian parents have different problems (in addition to, more serious, at times unresolvable) in contrast to a fourteen year old born to Italian parents, it is also true that the first fourteen year old inevitably lives in close contact to the second, interacts with him or her (even a conflict is a form of interaction), produces and receives stimuli, suggestions, and conditioning.

It is for this motive that the G2 is a strategic individual who totally represents the contradictions of the global society: this young person is the traffic light at the intersection, the road sign at the fork in the road... living that moment of uncertainty just before choosing among multiple answers... as dots suspended between two propositions.

The integration experience of the first generations passes through that of the second generations (when the satisfactory insertion of ones' own children turns out to be a gratifying, determining factor for a parent of a foreign origin.), but passes through even the youth themselves in general – irrespective of the citizenship requested and granted or not granted– in a society that often stereotypes them as novelties, frills, or non sustainable luxuries.

Faced with a situation of such importance – maybe because of its obviousness – many sociological analyses tend to consider the second generations as monads or elements left to themselves, disengaged and isolated from the social context they belong to; at the most, they enclosed in a family environment (the family of origin and the national community with its strict rules) that is described as behind the times, old fashioned, anti-modern, and extremists from a confessional point of view. Perceiving it in this way - which is too limited - causes the suspicion to surface that a political motive is underway (with the objective of justifying pressing political matters in dealing with migration) – and leaves out the interplay of three variables.

The first - of a judicial nature – regards the dimension of the citizen at large and highlights the unique Italian situation: the G2's that are born or brought to Europe at a young age either acquire or are able to request citizenship from the country that has allowed them in; whereas, Italian norms require that this concession be subordinated to reaching the age of adulthood and to a decision made at the

discretion of the Italian administration. Marco Demarie and Stefano Molina (2004, p. XXII) justly write that: "Naturalization is an undoubtedly delicate subject that requires reflection and caution, it is of the utmost necessity that the imagined pathways leading to citizenship are in the prospective where logic of *jus soli* wins out over *jus sanguinis*. This is a thought that must be an intrinsic part of the construction of European citizenship".

This comment has not only a judicial value but a symbolic one as well: if the State becomes, in the eyes of the migrant of the second generation, only an institution that punishes, it will never be recognized as authoritative reference point and deserving of that certain combination of faith and respect inherent in the concept of Institution.

The second variable concerns the labor environment: the first generation of migrants had found interstices of incomes by doing the jobs that the Italians found less than enticing (even though right wing Italians continue to negate that "there are no jobs that the Italians don't want to do"), but the G2s have witnessed the range of possibilities narrow down (due, even in part, to the chronic economic crisis). Given that the G2s tend to refuse to perpetuate the quantity and the quality of work done by their parents, such a situation produces a statistic framework that is not advertised much but that is already most alarming: in the European countries with the oldest migration, high levels of unemployment are recorded for the youth of foreign descent.

The third - and last - variable to analyze is specifically an economic aspect framed in an holistic approach in the relation between second generations and society. Integrating the youth of foreign origins into the society cannot take attention away from the transformations of the societies and from the economic cycle into which these G2s participate. Being marginalized, or rather, falling through the cracks of society, is not only motivated by identity and ethnicity but economics as well. Various empirical analyses have demonstrated how the material conditions of daily life influence whether the G2s are central or marginalized social settings. A comparison of Third Millennium immigration to the Italian immigration in the 1950's is valid here: degrading conditions inevitably favor deviant behavior, uncomfortableness, exclusion and – in a scholastic environment - dropout.

In the very light of these aforementioned variables, it is technically wrong to forget how multiculturalism produced optimum results for a considerable number of years. To quote Amartya Sen once again (2005, p. 8): "The most significant contribution perhaps, whose importance is not sufficiently recognized, comes from the full and immediate right to vote for all British citizens of the Commonwealth which constitutes the biggest part of non European immigration. This conquest has been reinforced by dealing in a non discriminatory way in Health, in Education, and in Civil protection: all this has contributed to integrating rather than dividing".

2. The Multi Ethnic School: A Misunderstood Condition

One other, perhaps less tangible, result deserves to be recognized objectively: multiculturalism has the merit of drafting a theory, of proceeding without making mechanical attempts, or worse yet, inopportune improvisations. On closer inspection, this is what characterizes the Italian school today: improvisation. Among the countless problems it is improvisation that comes to the forefront, both on the legislative front and in the daily management of the institutes. More precisely, the teaching staff has been forced to succumb to improvisation, having been abandoned and left to their own resources, always having less resources available to them while being obliged to raise funds like risky Non Governmental Organizations instead of being professionals who should busy themselves above all with creating an environment of balance and harmony between the students, the teachers, and the administrative, technical, and auxiliary personnel.

In the chaos of official announcements and meaningless norms, the teachers live their lives in perennial trenches, resigned to the need of adding to their obligatory work load: fantasy, the ability to improvise and to bear it all. Those who deal with intra-culture within the teaching staff work with an extremely high degree of difficulty, from the moment they have to implement the so called *legislative vacuum* in a sector that, being innovative, requires, on the contrary, the imposing presence of a legislator.

In the last few years (and in various countries) criticism about multiculturalism has appeared to be an exercise closer to political propaganda instead of an analysis of public politics. "The English model has failed" - was being said with a tone of triumph. But what about the French model? The United States model? The German model? The Italian model (if there has, in effect, been one)? The neighborhoods on the outskirts of the English towns in flames did not re-echo the tumult of neither the French revolts nor the ethnic conflicts in German cities or the struggles in the Italian Chinatown? Confronted with mass migration, every theoretical model (and each practical application consequently) has proven to be short lived. Nevertheless, to single out the only answer in the anachronistic closure of "the Fortress Europe" is an even more improbable than simplistic activity. If one looks closer, the history of the politics in each European country concerning migration has demonstrated pros and cons often modified based on the characteristics of the single models adopted:

"Research data tells us that France, with its assimilazionistic type of politics, has made positive headway in the fields of education and culture; however, it shows a deficient in work force integration. Germany presents discreet occupational results; however, it has not been capable of integration neither on a legal, nor an identity level. Although it had appreciable difficulty, the English

model has produced good results in the formative system, but still has ethnic based inequality in the work force: while, socially, it reproduces structures of minorities” (Demarie and Molina 2004, p.XXII)

Three conclusions are deduced from this brief list: 1) Italy does not appear because politicians have never committed to constructing a theoretical model of integration of the migrant; 2) The easiness or the difficulty of the integration process depends on the economic juncture, and its capacity to widen or narrow the threshold of acceptance for the *foreigner* by the middle class citizen, and then, by consequence, the politician; 3) Scholastic instruction is a variable that interacts with every model of national integration and with every age group, even when it is not expressly cited in the analysis of national models.

Even the phenomenon of the second generations does not escape, therefore, from the importance of scholastic instruction. At the core of this last aspect, Italy started out from a great vantage point given that it found itself having to confront the influx of people at its borders after having been a country of emigration for decades. That means that, on one side, if willing, one can understand what a migrant who was leaving a familiar place for a foreign country felt, and, on the other, to be able to depend, beyond that, on the examples of the confining States whom have all had more experience in the tradition of flows of migration.

As we know, neither one of these advantages were used to their fullest. The stereotypical image of the *good ole Italian*, being ready to welcome, ready to smile, and having the strength of the Latin spirit (“Mediterranean”) which is naturally inclined to being courteous and friendly, was shattered due to countless episodes of xenophobia (whether manifested or not), and to the evidence of absolutely strict legislative measures concerning matters of migration.

Upon further examination, even the question of immigration in the school has not been handled with the abundance of attention that it deserves; in the best of cases, it has been reiterated that the centrality of the school is an ideal meeting place for migrants and the society which greets them. As praise worthy a thought of this nature is, it needs to be analyzed deeper: since the school is the institution authorized to instill the culture of the country since it is “head of the house”, it risks becoming a physical place that emphasizes even more the distance between the culture the migrant has belonged to and the culture where he or she has come to. The analytical framework at times is disheartening: even commentators who are universally known to be “progressives” confront the subject with evident superficiality. Regarding this, there are two opposite attitudes: the first characterizes those who – honoring some sort of *realpolitik* applied to school politics – tend to confirm (at times radicalize) the status quo based on the assumption that the change will constitute a jump in the dark.

Charles Glenn (2004, p.171ss) for example: avoiding alarming the academic community on the scarce scholastic performance of the students with foreign backgrounds, the author reminds us that it was not necessarily a symptom of bad integration. It simply meant, he confirmed, that the students were not suited to reach higher degrees of instruction but that they would integrate all the same into society, dedicating themselves hopefully to manual labor! Citing his own words, he says "In reality, an option like the choice of a professional path, that could justly be seen as a problem of a descendant of professional or managerial classes could be a wise and realistic decision for an immigrant boy. Even in the computer science agencies there is need of craftsmen of various types, and often the immigrant children - lacking the linguistic skills necessary to achieve academic success – become craftsmen and small entrepreneurs; their children will be the ones to attend the university".

Others, on the other hand, glorify the figure of the *foreigner* "regardless", as if induced to be infatuated with the marginalized and deviant who live, in fact, on the "outskirts" which permits him/her to observe social contexts objectively, escaping from common sense and from feeling a sense of community and being subjected to ideological or environmental conditioning.

"The foreigner finds himself observing and acting from a particular position, he watches the world from the margins and can react with a sense of liberty in regards to the norms of the group of which he has partaken" (Colombo 1999, p. 41)

The foreigner, therefore, is not only the benchmark for democratic quality in a target society (more functional in regards to economic-political indicators), but can potentially contribute to the social progress of the above-mentioned context, and introducing elements of novelty and heterogeneity otherwise unattainable. The foreigner is the observer and the actor of the democratic performance; thus, the bringer of innovation and richness to environments that are accustomed to reproducing themselves automatically.

An attitude like this, however, hides a dark thought that is less cheerful and optimistic: hard analogies, in fact, can be seen in the image of the "good native" (Ibidem), or better, he who presents a situation that is "missing" and about which he does not complain (nor try to free himself from), but from which derives advantages. The foreigner, seen from this perspective, constitutes a kind of return to the "original pure man", not being contaminated by the legacy of civilization and being absent from cultural super structures.

Is it really like this? Responding to this question is not the objective of this current essay - let it be sufficient, however, to say that the idea of the migrant worker as the "pleasant and blessed outsider" is shared by only a small minority of people (the more culturally elite) and disregarded by the grand majority of the population who receive daily messages (from the media, from political propaganda

and from institutions) that are diametrically opposite and serve to associate the *Other* with chaos, insecurity, risks, and even impending danger.

In as much as has been demonstrated above, even the best intentions are at times invalidated from the start with superficiality and incompleteness, so much so as to trust in the goodness of sentiments rather than scientific studies and researches.

“While in modern Western times, the beginning of the collective demands were substantially oriented towards obtaining rights of inclusion founded on recognition of equality and universal rights; today, the collective demands of inclusion are becoming more and more frequent founded on a positive value reserved for diversity and specificity” (Colombo 1999, p.149)

Ten years ago Enzo Colombo had already understood an essential point which is applicable, in a certain way, to all of the minorities who request recognition in today's society. Asking if the migrant is less different in regards to his or her social and cultural context is pointless: the migrant *is* different. The point is to study the way the various social relations of the migrants' social network are built beginning with his or her very diversity. In other words, “the foreigner exists and is different, the problem is how to take the migrant in and how to explain the concrete forms of social rapports demonstrated when it comes to dealing with the difference itself” (Colombo 1999, p.57)

The essence of this work has been to prove this point by focusing on education with an invitation, despite everything, to use a minimum of optimism in confronting a subject such as this. In fact, in analyzing the documentation concerning this subject, one notes how many cases of missed integration exist, without, on the other hand, any follow up reflections as to why. The motivations are often detected as “external” to the scholastic reality in itself: a child with foreign origins did not integrate because he or she was poor, deprived of cultural stimuli in the family, anguished by a conflicting identity crisis, oppressed by religion, lacking faith.... Or else, he or she did not integrate because the family did not want the child to do so and did not work toward the goal of integration. At the most, the child did not integrate because of racism in the environment the child is in.

The school is an example of the social crisis we find ourselves living in. Answers that are so incomplete get justified because the background is missing, which we will recapitulate in these last few words:

- a) The Italian school is in crisis, government funding is lacking, it is not recognized by other social institutes, it has no type of authority and importance, it is considered more of a cost than an opportunity.

- b) A major part of the political systems just speak of scholastic integration of the foreign student as a priority (with the exception of, perhaps, the more conservative side). Nevertheless, one gets the impression that Italian politicians are contented with a multi-cultural model more than an inter-cultural model. They favor, that is, a “partial integration” in which the mechanisms of the education system orients foreign students towards professional schools, or else limits them to a basic education, like a precursor before being marginalized in a future job.
- c) Schools do not escape from the current rules of communications, for criticisms and problems are always newsworthy.

With this work we wanted to give a signal of a counter trend to highlight even the positive results achieved, at times, in silence, and at times, fighting with situations objectively difficult.

We want to remind and emphasize that “a school for everyone” is still possible.

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SUMMARY**The confines of identity: the “second generations”**

The essay concerns with the debate on multiculturalism and the national models of integration. By the help of a multi-dimensional approach, it studies the case of the so-called “Second Generations” within the Italian context: their standard of life, the relations with the first generations, the crises of identity, the cultural struggle, the risk of isolation. The field of analysis is represented by the Italian school and its lack of a theoretical model of integration of the migrant: scholastic instruction is a variable interacting with multiculturalism models and defining the chances of integration of the G2s.

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