INTERNAL MIGRATION PATTERNS IN ITALY: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE BEFORE AND DURING THE GREAT RECESSION¹

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1. Introduction

Internal migration has always played an important role in Italian society (Ginsborg, 1989; Bonifazi, 2013), ensuring the functionality of the labour markets and a distribution of the population according to regional economic forces. The most significant contribution made by internal mobility was in the years of the economic boom when it was one of the main drivers of the country's modernization process. However, even in times when the phenomenon has been less evident, especially at the local level, it has always been one of the main elements in the process of renewal and change in Italian society. And obviously internal migration is not only linked to the labour market but also to other stages in the life course, like leaving the parental home, continuing professional or academic education, cohabiting and forming a family, as well as the dissolution of a family, retirement, the empty nest stage, widowhood, and the loss of independence.

Over the past decade, the phenomenon has been growing, leading in recent years to a total number of internal moves of about 1.3 million, an amount which had not been recorded since the early 1980s: before 2004, the last year in which changes of residence to different municipalities exceeded this figure was in fact 1982. This increase is largely attributable to the contribution of the foreign population, which, in these same years, has increased remarkably.

Numerous scholars from various disciplines such as history, sociology, economics, demography and geography have studied internal migration in recent years (Galli, 1996; Bonaguidi and Terra Abrami; 1996; Rees et al., 1998; Bonifazi, 1999; Bonifazi and Heins, 1999, 2000 and 2009; Pugliese, 2006 and 2011; Bonifazi et al., 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2017), following on from the seminal study by Golini (1974). Significant contributions can also be found in the recent editions of the ISTAT Annual Report.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the effects of the great recession, sparked in 2008, on internal migration in Italy. In the article, demographic as well as regional

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patterns and differences in internal migration are analysed to uncover the effects of the great recession. The data used concern changes of residence between municipalities gathered by ISTAT which, despite their well-known limits, allow the evolution of the phenomenon to be followed with sufficient precision and detail.

In general, many different drivers can be identified regarding the intensity, timing, and regional patterns of internal migration that are closely linked to the life course of the individuals and the family. Fielding (2012) and others see the labour and the housing market as the economic drivers of internal migration. Whereas the housing market is usually associated with short-distance moves, the labour market is traditionally seen as the driver of long-distance internal changes of residence and their nexus is analysed in the context of long-term structural processes in the economy and society, economic restructuring processes and the short-term business cycle (Fielding, 2012). Indeed, the great recession and its consequences could or should be placed in its importance and effects between a business cycle and a process of economic restructuring. A recent contribution by Impicciatore and Strozza (2015) covered the impact of the great recession, whereas Salvatori (1997) discussed in an earlier contribution the role of economic restructuring regarding internal migration processes.

The article is divided into three parts: the first gives a description of the effects of the crisis on the GDP and Italian regional unemployment; the second part provides an examination of the internal migration trends of Italians and foreigners in the period under consideration; and the third analyses the relationship between the great recession and internal mobility.

2. The great recession in Italy and its regional patterns

In Italy the great recession started in 2008 and, like in other southern European countries, it has been deeply affected by the persistent economic downturn. Needless to say that in discussing the effects of the great recession on internal migration no reference should be made to other economic restructuring processes and their very different consequences on these trends.

The recession has especially affected the younger age groups of the labour force, who have experienced high unemployment and difficulties entering the labour market. Some areas of the country – the Mezzogiorno – with a low GDP have recorded very high youth unemployment. What is important to remember is that these younger age groups coincide with the period in the life course of the individuals when the intensity of internal migration reaches its highest values.
Hence, a slowdown in internal migration in these younger age groups has a disproportionate effect on the overall values.

In 2009, the trend of GDP per capita showed a sharp contraction at the national level (-4.2% compared to 2008), followed by a recovery in the next two years, and a new decline that only seems to have come to a halt in 2014 (Figure 1). The result is that, in comparable terms, in 2015 the GDP was still significantly lower than before the onset of the recession. At the regional level, while some differences can be seen in trends among the five regional sub-divisions, the most striking is the Mezzogiorno’s (the South and the Islands) more intense struggle to recover the ground lost in 2008, with the consequence that the crisis has made the distance separating this area from the rest of the country even wider. Since 2008, the regional differences in GDP have remained similar in comparison to the national average: the North-West has increased to 123% and the North-East to 119%, the Centre stands at 110%, displaying a slight decrease, while the position of the southern sub-divisions, at 66%, has worsened further.

**Figure 1** – GDP per capita (in €) in the regional sub-divisions, Italy, 1995-2015.

The Mezzogiorno’s greater difficulty in responding to the pressure of the economic crisis clearly emerges from the levels of unemployment recorded among the Italian citizens (Figure 2). Indeed, the unemployment rate observed in the Mezzogiorno was still close to 20% in 2016, while at the national level it was 11.2%, with just 5.8% in the North-East. While the differences for foreigners,
whom unemployment reached 16.8% in the Mezzogiorno, compared with a national value of 15.4%, were significantly lower.

In general, however, the crisis has affected all of the country’s regional subdivisions, resulting in a decline in the GDP, which as of 2016 had not yet been fully absorbed, and a significant increase in unemployment. This means that, on the one hand, there has been a reduction in the factors encouraging internal moves driven by economic motives, and, on the other hand, an increase in the forces driving people away, especially in areas of the country characterized by high unemployment and a low per capita GDP. Two processes which have had opposite effects on the migratory dynamics: while migration represented the only viable alternative to the reduced opportunities in the Mezzogiorno, at the same time the opportunities in central-northern Italy diminished.

**Figure 2 – Unemployment rates (in %) in the regional sub-divisions, Italy, 2004-2016.**

![Graph showing unemployment rates for different regions in Italy, 2004-2016.](source)

In fact, over recent years the number of Italians emigrating to other countries has increased at first steadily, then more rapidly, from an average of about 40,000 until the year 2010 to 50,000 in 2011 and 102,000 in 2015. In the 2014-15 biennium, 74% of Italian emigrants chose another European country, especially Germany, the United Kingdom and France. Whereas in the past emigration flows originated predominantly in the Mezzogiorno, in recent years the share from the other Italian regional sub-divisions has increased, to the detriment of the figures from the South.
3. Changes in the internal migration patterns of Italians and foreigners

3.1. Some general aspects of internal migration in Italy

Population register data on internal migration with national coverage have been available since 1929 (Figure 3). In the long time span since then, the 1930s and the years from 1954 to 1974 have been the two periods with the highest internal mobility. In both periods, the rates ranged in general between 25 and 35 per thousand. During the 1930s, internal migration grew in many European countries (Millward and Baten, 2010), as a result of the almost total closure of American destinations and the development of industrial areas. In Italy this trend was recorded despite the anti-migration law introduced by the fascist government to control and reduce the movements towards cities.

Figure 3 – Migration rates by distance (per 1,000), Italy, 1928-2014.

After the Second World War, Italy achieved extraordinary and unexpected levels of economic growth for a period of more than twenty years. Therefore, for the first time in Italian history internal migration became a feasible alternative to
emigration abroad on a large scale. In this period, millions of people moved from internal to coastal areas, from the hills and mountains to the plains, from rural to urban areas, from small towns to big cities, from the North-East and South to the North-West and central Italy (Golini, 1974). The oil crises of the 1970s marked the end of this phase and the start of a period of lower mobility, with rates dropping to between 20 and 25 per thousand. In the second half of the 1990s, a clear upward trend started until the economic crisis of 2008.

This growing trend is related to the rise in the numbers of foreign residents, whose higher internal mobility led to an overall increase in the intensity of the phenomenon. The number of changes in residence between municipalities in 2015 was 1,284,201 (Table 1): 60.3% occurred in the same province, 15.3% between provinces of the same region and 24.4% between different regions. In recent years, the number of changes in residence has generally been above 1.3 million. After the onset of the great recession in 2008, it declined from 1.39 to 1.31 million, to increase again to 1.36 in 2011 and 2013, not considering the 2012 value that was inflated due to changes in the administrative procedure for registering changes of residence. In 2015, only 1.28 million people changed residency between municipalities (ISTAT, 2016). In 2015, 15.8% of the changes in residence were made by foreigners, even though the total foreign population only represents 8.3% of the total population of Italy.

Table 1 – Internal migration—the numbers, Italy 2004-2015.

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<td><strong>Italians</strong></td>
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<td>Women</td>
<td>568.2</td>
<td>559.9</td>
<td>572.1</td>
<td>578.2</td>
<td>579.9</td>
<td>542.7</td>
<td>555.3</td>
<td>552.6</td>
<td>629.1</td>
<td>548.9</td>
<td>530.9</td>
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<td>Men</td>
<td>580.8</td>
<td>576.6</td>
<td>592.3</td>
<td>597.5</td>
<td>596.0</td>
<td>554.9</td>
<td>564.7</td>
<td>567.1</td>
<td>647.8</td>
<td>564.2</td>
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<td>1,149.0</td>
<td>1,136.4</td>
<td>1,164.4</td>
<td>1,175.6</td>
<td>1,175.9</td>
<td>1,097.6</td>
<td>1,120.0</td>
<td>1,119.7</td>
<td>1,276.9</td>
<td>1,113.2</td>
<td>1,073.8</td>
<td>1,081.7</td>
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<td><strong>Foreigners</strong></td>
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<td>Women</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>95.8</td>
<td>105.3</td>
<td>111.4</td>
<td>119.4</td>
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<td>101.9</td>
<td>109.8</td>
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<td>103.7</td>
<td>106.0</td>
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<td>114.7</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>161.5</td>
<td>185.3</td>
<td>203.9</td>
<td>203.9</td>
<td>212.9</td>
<td>215.2</td>
<td>225.5</td>
<td>238.4</td>
<td>279.4</td>
<td>249.1</td>
<td>239.4</td>
<td>202.5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,310.5</td>
<td>1,321.7</td>
<td>1,368.3</td>
<td>1,379.5</td>
<td>1,388.7</td>
<td>1,312.8</td>
<td>1,345.5</td>
<td>1,358.0</td>
<td>1,556.3</td>
<td>1,362.3</td>
<td>1,313.2</td>
<td>1,284.2</td>
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Source: Authors’ calculations based on ISTAT data on changes of residence.

The decrease in the number of internal moves in 2014 and 2015 could, according to provisional figures, discontinue in 2016, with a rise to 1.33 million (ISTAT, 2017). In general, the great recession has determined a halt in the growth
of the internal moves that started at the end of the 1990s (Bonifazi, 2013), especially if we consider that the peak in 2012 is linked to the introduction of a faster registration procedure. The increase, as already mentioned, is largely to be attributed to the contribution made by the foreign population. In absolute terms, the internal moves of foreign residents amounted to 88,000 in 2000, rising to nearly 213,000 in 2008, and to 279,000 and 249,000 in 2012 and 2013 respectively, before settling at 202,000 in 2015. In 2000, foreign residents accounted for about 7% of all internal moves, whereas their share exceeded 18% between 2012 and 2014, and now counts for less than 17% of all internal moves. The reason is the considerably higher mobility rates of foreigners compared to Italians.

In the early years of the great recession, internal migration in Italy experienced a steep reduction, with a particular decline in 2009 in the migratory flows involving the large metropolitan areas. Simultaneously, a few migratory trends such as apparent return migration flows have gained in significance. In all likelihood, the economic downturn caused the anticipated return of Italians who had migrated previously from some southern areas, for instance from the Naples metropolitan area, to economically more dynamic areas of Emilia-Romagna, for example. Although there has been a decrease in the rates of internal mobility of the foreign population, the continuous rise in this population caused by immigration flows has led to a continuous increase in the number of foreigners who have changed their residence from one municipality to another. It should be noted that variations in the number and rates of changes in residence are not so unusual and therefore should not be attributed too much importance. For example, the aforementioned changes in the procedures introduced in 2012 led to much greater variations in the year 2012. Structural changes in Italy’s system of internal migration are aspects that are attracting more interest and attention among scholars. For example, the economic crises of the 1970s led to fundamental changes in the internal migration patterns, changing the direction of some internal migration flows.

3.2. Changes in the intensity and timing of internal migration

In order to have a more precise idea of the effects of the crisis on internal mobility, reference is made to the Gross Migra-Production Rates (GMR) which standardize the change in the age structure of the population in the same way as a life table does for mortality and survivorship. Here the GMR is the sum of the age-group-specific migration rates for the 0-79 age range and it can be interpreted as the number of changes of residence over the lifespan that can be expected on the basis of the propensities of the year under observation. In Figure 4 separate GMRs are presented for Italians and foreigners, and for women and men. The rates are further differentiated according to the type or distance of migration flows: within
Local Labour Market Areas (LLMAs) and between LLMAs. The definition of the 611 functional Local Labour Market Areas are based on the analysis of 2011 commuting for work patterns (ISTAT, 2015). LLMAs seem to be the ideal instrument to distinguish short-distance and medium- to long-distance migrations.

**Figure 4** – *Gross migration production rates for the Italians and the Foreigners, Italy 2004-2014.*

For the Italians (the lines in the figures overlap because the differences between women and men are so minor), the great recession seems to have had minor effects. For example, if we compare the 2008 and 2014 values, for men the transfers per 1,000 persons decline from 1,741 to 1,661 (a decrease of 4.6%) and for women from 1,695 to 1,632 (-3.7%). The decrease is higher for moves between LLMAs than within LLMAs. For men, the variation ranges from -5.1 to -4.0%, and for women from -4.4 to -2.9%. In all likelihood, this suggests that the most intense decline was due to economic reasons, more frequently in the case of medium and long-distance migration flows.

The differences among the foreign population are much greater: between 2008 and 2014 the men's GMRs range from 4,508 to 3,128 moves per 1,000 (-30.6%) and in the case of women from 4,458 to 3,597 (-19.3%). Significantly, more than ten percentage points separate men from women, demonstrating that the crisis has hit foreign men harder than women, who are occupied in sectors such as providing
services to private households that are probably less affected by the recession. However, the observed changes seem to be more the result of secular trends than to be linked to the great recession. It is of equal interest that in the case of the foreign population the differences between intra-LLMA and inter-LLMA migration flows are small, only amounting to about 0.4 percentage points in both cases. This is a situation that, in our view, confirms the fact that the presence of foreigners in Italy is modifying the way in which the national migration system operates, shifting the centre of internal mobility from the traditional South-North migration flows to shorter distance residential changes.

By analysing the changes in the age profiles of internal mobility (Figures 5 and 6) from 2004-2008 to 2013-2014 it is noticed that among Italians the variations are clearly limited, whereas they are much more apparent in the case of the foreign population. In the latter case, the reduction in values during the years of the great recession appears clear and it is concentrated in the 20-34 age range, which is when the intensity of mobility peaks. The decrease is slightly more intense in the case of men, so that today in some age groups the rates of intra-LLMA and inter-LLMA migration are higher among women than men.

**Figure 5** – Gender- and age-specific migration rates for the Italian population (per 1,000), Italy 2004-2008 and 2013-2014.

| Source: Authors’ calculations based on ISTAT data on changes of residence. |
The changes over recent years emphasize a second peak in internal migration rates concerning foreign women between 50 and 64 years of age. This peculiarity is linked to women, mainly from central and eastern Europe (Ukrainians, Moldavians, Romanians, etc.), who care for and provide assistance for elderly Italians or, in general, provide services to Italian families. This second peak has become more accentuated in recent years and it appears in both the intra- and inter-LLMA migration flows. In this age range the most recent data show significantly higher rates for women than for men for both types of changes of residence, leading to the hypothesis that the great recession has hit occupations regarding services to private households less harshly.

Figure 6 – Gender- and age-specific migration rates for the foreign population (per 1,000), Italy 2004-2008 and 2013-2014.

3.3. The changing regional differences of internal migration

Net internal migration is an indicator of the quantitative demographic effects and consequences of internal migration. If we are to accept that internal migration acts as a mechanism to level out labour market or economic disparities in general, in Italy the levels of net internal migration should only be considered problematic in the case of a few LLMAs displaying extreme values.
At the level of the five regional sub-divisions, the first and most severe effects of the crisis were to reduce the net migration gain of the North-East (down from 2.5 to 1.5 per thousand) and to limit the net migration loss of the South and the Islands, in the first case dropping from -3.3 to -2.5 per thousand and in the second from -1.6 to -1.2. In 2015 the North-West and the Islands returned to the values observed in the year 2008, whereas the Centre experienced a slight decline during the same period, and the North-East did not return to the levels of attraction seen in the years before the recession. At the same time, the South was able to reduce its net migration loss.

**Figure 7** – *Net migration rates by regional sub-divisions (per 1,000), Italy 1995-2015.*

Analysis of the regional detail of the migratory balance of the LLMAs before and after the crisis shows interesting differences between the two periods. In the 2004-2008 period, the two groups of LLMAs with a population loss due to internal migration included Turin, Milan, Florence, Naples, Palermo and many other cities in the Mezzogiorno; Rome and some southern LLMAs and the Centre-North appeared in the group with a net migration close to 0. The two groups with net migration gains covered the rest of the Centre-North and often concerned those areas bordering with Italy’s main metropolitan areas.
Figure 8 – Net migration rates (per 1,000), Local Labour Market Areas, Italy 2004-2008.

Total net migration 2004-2008 (per 1,000)
- +4.5 and more (40)
- +1.5 to +4.5 (143)
- -1.5 to +1.5 (213)
- -4.5 to -1.5 (138)
- less than -4.5 (77)

Source: Authors’ calculations based on ISTAT data on changes of residence
Note: The area of the LLMAs is proportional of their total population.

In 2013-2014, the situation presents interesting changes. The number of LLMAs in the class with a gain of more than 4.5 per thousand fell from 40 to 10 and especially affected less populous areas; the group with high net migration gains (between 1.5 and 4.5 per thousand) also saw a significant reduction in the number of LLMAs, decreasing from 143 to 88. In this case, however, we observe a
significant change as this group was joined by the Milan and Florence LLMAs, which experienced a moderate migratory loss before the crisis, and the Rome LLMA, which was marked by balanced migration before the crisis. The Turin LLMA also improved its situation, entering the migratory equilibrium category.

Figure 9 – Net migration rates (per 1,000), Local Labour Market Areas, Italy 2013-2014.

Source: Authors’ calculations based on ISTAT data on changes of residence.
Note: The area of the LLMAs is proportional of their total population.
The fact that the crisis led to an improvement in the net internal migration in central-northern metropolitan areas could indicate a better response in these areas to the recession's demands and/or even a slowdown in migratory losses from these metropolitan LLMAs owing to the fewer opportunities outside these LLMAs. Another hypothesis could be the further deferral of changes of residences linked to the life course while awaiting an improved economic situation. Another factor to be considered could be that the crisis led to a reduction in real estate values and therefore reduced the advantages or the possibilities of leaving the metropolitan areas (Crisci, 2017).

The intermediate group appears to expand in 2013-2014, especially in the Centre-North, while maintaining its position in the Mezzogiorno. With rising net migration gains in the LLMAs of Turin, Milan and Florence, the two groups with net migration losses seem to be concentrated in the Mezzogiorno.

4. Conclusions

This contribution discusses the nexus between the great recession and internal migration and it confirms the limited effect of the great recession on internal migration patterns in Italy.

It seems difficult to attribute overall changes in the intensities and the timing of internal migration to the great recession. Whereas the trends for the Italian population seem to be more or less stable over recent years and the observed variations can be attributed to general societal changes, the decline in the intensity and the timing trends of internal migration among the foreign population seem to be a secular trend linked more to integration processes and the economic role of the foreign population in Italian society than the great recession.

However, analysis of net internal migration in the regional sub-divisions and the LLMAs indicates that the great recession might have some limited effects on the observed trends of the regional disparities.

The authors tend to accept the fact that the great recession is not fundamentally changing the regional patterns of internal migration in Italy. Fundamental change probably occurred with the restructuring of the Italian economy and the emergence of the Third Italy during the 1970s when the industrial triangle of the North-West, based on a Fordist economy, lost its importance to an economy characterized by an important service sector concentrated in the metropolitan areas and an industrial sector characterized by small and medium-sized companies (Bonifazi et al., 2014).

For decades, young adults have also been lengthening their cohabitation with their parents, extending their vocational training and studies, and delaying the formation of a relocated family, which accentuates the tendency to limit internal
mobility. Even the tendency - out of choice or necessity - towards families in which both partners are economically active decreases the propensity to change residence especially over long distances. The important factors restricting internal mobility in Italy are (1) a static labour market characterized by very high unemployment especially among young adults and (2) a static real estate market with a limited number of rented homes and a high percentage of homeowners.

Apart from the economic motives, young people’s participation in post-compulsory education and training, permanence in the parental home, cohabitation and formation of a family play a fundamental role regarding internal migration. In Italian society, these factors are continuing to lead to a postponement of most events in the life course, including changing residence. In our view, this makes Italy a low mobility country, especially when focusing on internal migration (Bonifazi et al., 2017).

As mentioned, other forms of geographic mobility, like daily and weekly commuting (Crisci and Di Tanna, 2016; De Santis, 2016), play an increasing role in a labour market that with the onset of the great recession places ever more weight on precarious working contracts.

Acknowledgements

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**SUMMARY**

**Internal migration patterns in Italy: continuity and change before and during the great recession**

Like others (see for example Impicciatore and Strozza, 2015), the authors show that the nexus between the great recession and internal migration is first of all characterized by the continuity of existing patterns. The intensity of internal migration in Italy changed little during the great recession even though, in 2009, when the first effects of the crisis were felt, a strong decline was observed in the numbers of changes of residence between municipalities. This abrupt decline, which can certainly be linked to the sudden credit crunch caused by the onset of the recession, was however compensated in the subsequent years. The gender- and age-specific internal migration patterns of the Italian and the foreign population show significant and interesting differences. However, their levels and trends cannot easily be attributed to the onset of the great recession.

In terms of the regional patterns of internal migration, it seems possible to identify the influence of the great recession. The areas mainly affected by the great recession are those zones with traditionally low levels of GDP per capita and high levels of unemployment, and their economic disadvantage worsened with the crisis. For these areas in particular, internal migration became less and less of an option during the great recession, because the traditionally attractive Italian destination of the Centre-North itself suffered the effect of the economic downturn. So, in the years since the onset of the great recession, the number of Italians emigrating has increased significantly.