

Goldfishes with a conscience divided into compartments

Lorenzo d'Orsi

Abstract

In 1974 Italy changed from being a country of emigrants to a country of immigrants. Thirty years on, immigrants are playing an ever more important role in the country. Facing the consequences of migratory phenomenon, the author seeks to show the relevance of an overall view that doesn't lose the concreteness of specific references. In the essay I try to analyze the new items that were introduced by the «pacchetto sicurezza», where the question of immigrants stops being a collection of laws regarding migration and starts being a question of public security. Instead, the *case study* of Roma communities allows us to grasp the limits of the multicultural model and the drift of the process of ethnogenesis. Moreover, the author tries to illustrate the increasing role of the mass media, which is no longer a dependent variable but a co-builder of social reality, from such an analysis, no social science can escape. Finally, the consequences for “those who arrive in Italy” and for “those already in Italy” are understood from the perspective of the anthropology of violence: from the famous thesis by Hannah Arendt, to Pierre Bourdieu's *petit malaise* and Nancy Scheper-Hughes's *continuum genocide*.

Key words: «pacchetto sicurezza», process of ethnogenesis, mass media, multiculturalism, violence, continuum genocide.

In the last thirty years the Italian *net migration* has changed radically. Since 1974, Italy has indeed been transformed in a country of emigrants, i.e. with a net migration out, in a country of immigrants, with a net migration in. According to the estimate of the XIX Dossier Caritas of 2009 the number of regular immigrants present on the Italian territory is of approximately four million and three hundred thousand. Not a huge number if compared to the rest of Europe. A number that has nevertheless grown quickly and that does not include those immigrants that are in irregular conditions.

Due to the emigration towards America and Northern Europe, the Italian State has tried to safeguard emigration rather than immigration. For this reason the principle of *ius sanguini* has prevailed over the one of *ius soli*. In other words, to be born in Italy does not guarantee the Italian citizenship but a relative of Italian origins is sufficient to present a request. This is not the occasion to inspect all the set of rules on immigration. I would like to call the attention on the latest newness that represents a significant change compared to former actions: the so-called «*pacchetto sicurezza*»

(security package) of 2009 and in particular law no. 125 of 2008 and law no. 94 of 2009.

The laws and rules of the «*pacchetto sicurezza*» are not included in immigration legislation anymore but are included in a collection of laws for public security among regulations against the Mafia or against rapists.

The «*pacchetto sicurezza*» also seems to show the defects of former policies: the difficulty of considering immigration as a steadily growing structural process and the need for an immediate answer to the electorate rather than managing of the phenomenon. The political intention appears to be the image of a strong government that is able to defend the interests and security of Italian citizens. Immigrants are now included in the undefined category of “the Others”, that is “all people who are not like us”: marginalized people, prostitutes, homosexuals, etc. We are facing a process of criminalization of immigrants that are now considered a threat: carriers of criminality and attackers of Italian cultural purity.

But we should focus on the relationship between *immigration* and *criminality*. According to the Dossier Caritas, six out of ten Italians ascribe a higher criminal rate to foreign people. This phenomenon seems to be true just for irregular immigrants. The causes, however, appear to be linked to an illegal and precarious situation of irregular immigrants: it is the Italian state that establishes the border between regular and irregular, legal and illegal.

Moreover, the attention of public opinion is focused on the landing of undocumented people on Italian coasts. The «*pacchetto sicurezza*» tries to eliminate this phenomenon (with preventive expulsion too). However, these landings represent only 1/50 of our immigration. Almost four and a half million regular immigrants are not, therefore, at the core of public debate or are confused with the irregulars. A simple equation is therefore suggested: *foreign = irregular and irregular = delinquent*.

A closer examination of rules included in the «*pacchetto sicurezza*» allows a better comprehension of the processes *in fieri*.

In the first instance law no. 94 of 2009 is *retroactive* because it also pertains to those who are already in Italy when the law comes into force. Therefore, the law also concerns those who have been regulars but were not able to renew the residence permit.

The «*pacchetto sicurezza*» also creates a different juridical status between Italians and non-Italians and between regular foreign people and irregular ones. In this way it introduces rules containing forms of indirect discrimination. Amongst these we can recognize:

- The impossibility of voting (both political and administrative);
- The impossibility of receiving a baby-grant, i.e. financial support for families with newborn children;
- The impossibility of participating in a public selection;

Besides, irregular immigrants are not allowed to get married and education is not guaranteed beyond compulsory school.

Law no. 94 of July 2009 introduces the *penal crime of irregularity* that seems to violate the principle of equality for all citizens. Indeed, irregular immigrants who commit a crime are punished more severely due to their condition of being irregular. Also, for those immigrants who try to enter Italy illegally there is a fine from 5,000 to 10,000 euro.

Specifically, the law lays down:

- The increment by a third of the punishment for irregular immigrants who commit a crime compared to citizens and regular immigrants.
- *The expulsion from the country if sentenced for two years or more* (sentence that is easily reached due to the increment of punishment for irregular immigrants).
- *The crime of aiding and abetting of irregular immigration* (in other words, those who give work or lend a vacant property to an irregular immigrant are punished).
- *The increment of the period inside the CIE (centre of identification and expulsion) up to 180 days* (this extension seems to be excessive if compared to the target of the CIE, i.e. the expulsion of irregular immigrants).
- The burden of having to show a residence permit in order to benefit from the welfare state and assistance and to register a child's birth
- The payment of a relevant tax (up to 200 euro) to obtain or renew the residence permit.
- *The "integration-agreement"*, i.e. a type of licence with penalty points that leads to the final expulsion from the country.
- The introduction of "bridge-classes" or "differentiated classes" for the children of immigrants.

The collection of dispositions that I briefly listed should reduce the level of *irregularity* and work as deterrent for those people who try to break into "Fortress Europe". But, as observed by Gustavo Zagrebelsky, the ex-president of the Italian Constitutional Court, the result obtained is the opposite. The status of irregular, indeed, is a condition determined by the law: it is the law that can decide who is irregular and who is not. A collection of laws to help irregular people out of their condition of irregularity could reduce the level of illegality and criminality in the country. The rules included in the *«pacchetto sicurezza»*, instead, travel in the opposite direction. They increase the difficulty of obtaining the residence permit and obstruct the transition to a condition of regular immigrant by suggesting the idea that irregulars are a threat for public security.

A series of examples can maybe help us to comprehend how these dispositions do not allow a change of status from irregular to regular.

A doctor examining an irregular immigrant is forced, in theory, to report him to the police, as stated by the *«pacchetto sicurezza»*. Professional associations opposed this rule by refusing to apply it. This bill was initially passed but after a long campaign it was discarded. The main risk, however, is that the immigrant chooses not to use the care system with strong risks for his own health and the one of other citizens. A prostitute, usually an irregular immigrant, cannot report her exploiter because she

would be expelled from the country. Furthermore, if an irregular immigrant witnesses some kind of violence he/she will not be inclined to testify for the same reason.

Besides, the «*pacchetto sicurezza*» runs the risk to go haywire at the legislative level. Whereas the constitution guarantees the fundamental rights to everyone, the «*pacchetto sicurezza*» denies them for irregular immigrants.

Therefore, the unilateralism of the dispositions contained in the «*pacchetto sicurezza*» seems to promote the idea of a society where the immigrant is alleged to be an economic resource for whom the only reason of being in Italy is working and producing. The idea that diversity could also represent a resource is denied at the source. The immediate consequence has been a strong increment of violence against foreign people (both regular and irregular ones) and more in general against the weakest fringes (homeless, poor people, beggars, disabled people, etc). It represents a cultural drift that sees the “last” as a rejection of society and as a possible scapegoat. Indeed, these rules, such as the differentiated classes for immigrants or the prohibition of the care system, seem to suggest a growing climate of *apartheid* that evokes a «world divided into compartments», as portrayed by Franz Fanon.

There are many causes that have combined to bring about this situation. The economic dimension is one of the most relevant as it determines the social and economic outline in which to consider the phenomenon of immigration, both on a local-national and on a global scale. These irregular migratory streams are, indeed, useful and functional to an Italian economic system that can be defined as *Post-Fordist* with a spreading shadow economy. Due to their position of “invisibility” they are forced to accept black work and cheaper salaries in difficult working conditions (without trade union protection and safety at work). The Rosarno case, debated by the press, is the most emblematic example. Similar dramatic conditions are nevertheless common in many other towns and cities, maybe not so far from where you are reading this article. Many immigrants find work in small industries in the North, in informal activities in central Italy (i.e. housemaids or in the building industry) and in the agricultural system in the South. This is not, in any case, the occasion to discuss this aspect. Simultaneously, however, the immigrant’s moonlighting mines the system of rights of the workers increasing the occasions of social conflict and the so-called “wars amongst poor people”.

In the next few paragraphs I would like to shed light on some other causes: the low professionalism and skill of cultural mediators and cultural operators, the limits of the Italian multicultural model, the process of ethnogenesis and the role played by the mass media.

Limits of the Italian multicultural project

I believe that a part of the fault lies in the limits of an Italian multicultural model that is, in my opinion, too rigid and stereotyped. This model seems to present at least three problems:

- It suggests the idea that culture is something static, with clear and neat boundaries, and able to shape the choices of people, without allowing the possibility of blending, melting or conforming themselves.
- It inspires the idea that societies were monocultural before the immigrant's arrival. The past, instead, seems to be full of continuous syncretisms, so that the French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle proposed the idea of a «*métissage originaire*» (*mestizo origin*).
- It create the illusion that cultures, instead of individuals, meet and clash with each other. In this way, it produces an excess of attention on the cultural dimension. A kind of «cultural fundamentalism» using the fair expression of the German anthropologist Verena Stolcke.

Instead, we should reflect on the concept of *culture* as being a tool of interpretation. It may seem to be a paradox that it is an anthropologist who denounces this «excess of attention», as the anthropologist Marco Aime noted. I believe, however, that during recent years both those who consider cultural diversity as a form of contamination and those who consider it as an opportunity have stressed the concept of cultural diversity too much. The risk is that of proposing a cultural explanation of reality even when it is not sufficient or correct. We are facing the phenomenon of *ethnicization of reality* and of *politization of ethnos*. In other words, there is the risk of ethnicizing questions that are not of an ethnic origin. In this way we do not take into account the socio-economic reasons that are also at the basis of the problem by shifting the problem of delinquency onto an ethnic level.

Besides, this phenomenon seems to be at the root of a new kind of racism. Not a biological racism based on natural differences, but a new cultural racism that sees the cultural difference as an insuperable gap and cultures as something that are unchangeable.

We should recognize that the promoters of integration, in the first place, have conceived it as a process that could be achieved by itself and without any attention or any investment from the institutions. They left the weakest fringes of society (from an economic and cultural point of view) alone. Racist rhetoric grew due to urban blight and institutional neglect. It seemed to be, at the same time, both a good lens of interpretation of reality and a good instrument of defence against a phenomenon that is not so easily comprehensible and controllable. Besides, the rare projects of intervention and integration have been often characterized by the lack of professional figures. The results have been, on the whole, almost always disappointing/unsuccessful.

When everything becomes ethnic: the process of ethnogenesis

It is a while now that in Italy a process of *ethnogenesis* (i.e. the process of construction and invention of an ethnic group or of its features) is also taking place. An emblematic example can be considered the *nomadism* of Roma communities in the city of Rome. Indeed, Roma nomadism is not a reality that should be considered as “natural” and taken for granted but it is the result of a process of construction that lies both on the level of public discourse and on that of institutions. Nowadays, Roma people are relegated to the so-called “nomadic-camps” (equipped, semi-equipped, or illegal), that can be considered true slums. “Nomadic-camps” are a form of *apartheid*, produced by those institutions that should have provided integration rather than separation. For this reason Italy has frequently been criticized by the Council of Europe in 2006.

In recent years, culturalistic rhetoric emphasized a supposed and irreducible cultural diversity: Roma people could not be integrated because of cultural features (such as *nomadism*) that make them extremely closed, external-proof communities that cannot be assimilated at the cultural level.

But Roma people have not been nomadic for many centuries, even though they are often alleged to be. Their frequent mobility in the world, in most cases, was not a cultural choice but the consequence of repressive policies: in most cases it was forced migration, not “traditional” nomadism. The high number of requests for social housing can be considered a demonstration of this.

Rhetoric and public discourse, in my opinion, should not be underestimated because they are widespread in the complex field of Italian social policies: in recent electoral campaigns, in debates on newspapers (the most important Italian newspaper, «*Il Corriere della Sera*», titled «the Nomadic Invasion») and are widespread between people of every social and cultural level. A cultural interpretation, for example, was very common among those students of anthropology at «*Sapienza*» University of Rome that I interviewed in my study.

The persuasive power of language is a strong political weapon because it represents the power of nominating things, classifying them and imposing a certain representation of reality. The world representation, indeed, is negotiated through discursive practise and those in a hegemonic position have the power of nominating and labelling other subjects. It is that struggle for the «*symbolic capital*» suggested by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who has shown that the social world can produce differences by simply nominating them. This means that people can be changed simply by telling them that they are different. The power of nominating becomes the power of establishing differences and, therefore, contributes to the making of identity processes.

The social construction of Roma people as “nomadic” and as a separated ethnic minority does not take place only on the level of public discourses but is also the result of a long institutional process conducted on the legislative level and inside educational programs.

During the 1980s, for example, the regional government proclaimed twelve laws to preserve and respect the cultural diversity of Roma people. These laws, however,

based on an ingenuous multiculturalism, reaffirmed the Roma *nomadism* as an essential cultural feature at the juridical level institutionalizing the so-called “nomadic-camps” as a suitable place to preserve cultural diversity. In this way, Roma people became *nomadic* by law.

A similar process is taking place at the national level. In September 2009 the Juvenile Court of Naples denied house arrest to a underage Roma girl due to her ethnic group stating that: «the subject is completely placed in typical patterns of Roma culture. And it's her being absolutely integrated in these patterns of life that makes [...] the danger of recidivism real» (my translation from the decision of the Juvenile Court of Naples, of 29/09/09 concerning the procedure no. 136/09).

At last, the process of *ethnogenesis* also occurs within education programs of Roma children. On this subject the Italian anthropologist Monica Rossi has shown that it is the institutions themselves that do not believe in integration. A paragraph of a municipal law states that: «the inability of tolerating neither school attendance nor work attendance is *embedded* in the nomadic culture» (my italics, my translation from the Town Council Resolution 28/3/1985, no. Prot. 8512).

Mass Media as cultural texts

In 1983 Benedict Anderson, analyzing the birth of nationalism, wrote that the sense of belonging is based on *imagined communities*: «because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion» (Anderson, 1983: 7). Mass media are fundamental in this process of *imagination* because, as I suggested before, they play an important role in the process of construction of identity throughout the symbolic dimension and the power of nominating.

Therefore, we should deconstruct the ideological structure hidden behind the concepts of common sense. Indeed, paraphrasing Ludwig Wittgenstein, it is more difficult to see what is in front of our eyes everyday: *the taken for granted*. It is in this terms that Foucault's method enables us to analyse the rational and mental structures at the base of the contemporary world, shedding light on the historical and cultural contingency of the *taken for granted*. Using the metaphor of the English philosopher Graham Burchell, we are like goldfishes dipped in a bowl: unable to define the contours of what includes us.

In this outlook, the analysis of newspapers, rumours and television programs becomes the analysis of cultural texts. In a society glutted with newspapers and televisions, mass media should not be considered a variable dependent on concepts such as class and structure (in marxist and lévi-straussian terms). These are major factors that any social, economic or cultural analysis cannot leave out of consideration. Mass media do not only seem, indeed, to be manipulating the level of representation, according to the old theory of double reality, but appear to operate on the same level of reality. Wittgenstein had guessed it before time when maintaining

that any reality does not exist out of the language. Using Thomas Kuhn's terms, the world is in some way dependent from the mind and culture, from thought and language.

Therefore, if communicating is operating and saying is doing, as John Austin wrote, mass media don't simply tell the social world but contribute to build it. By giving distant images to distant people they shape the progress of events and create new ones. Mass media become, therefore, co-builders of the social reality.

In this way it is interesting to recall the concept of «*flow*» developed by Raymond Williams. The British thinker considers television, unlike cinema or books, a *megatext* without neither beginning nor an ending. It is a magma containing any kind of message and any kind of ideology, that is able to interbreed and make indistinct the boundaries between the different districts of meaning. In this way fiction, reality and verisimilar tend to blend and to confuse themselves. It is this same *logic of mass media* that produces a manipulation or, using a more correct term, an unwilling distortion. This doesn't lie in the content but in the form of a communication because, as Marshall McLuhan had anticipated, it is the grammar of codes that builds the content of a message. Mass media, therefore, don't seem so much to suggest what you have to think, but rather about what you should think.

Immigration gives us an eloquent example. The overestimation of immigrant presence is mostly determined by the daily bombing of newspapers and televisions trying to make news. But the logic of mass media also produces a distortion on the level of the form of the language. Mass media usually report the nationality of offenders only when these are "non-Italians". This gives the idea that the geographic origin or the cultural affiliation could be one of the causes that produced the deviant behaviour. If the crime is committed by "Italians", instead, the nationality is not reported and the crime is soon forgotten. Therefore, we end up remembering primarily those crimes committed by foreign people and the perception of the "foreign who delinquents" increases.

Conclusion

We can, therefore, conclude that there are two different approaches to the issue of migratory streams in Italy.

On one hand there are those who consider immigration to be the worst harm. To fight it they oppose a bravely local defence with laws that become stronger and stronger leading to a hardly inevitable clash. On the other hand there are those who want to manage the change. It is hard to do because it involves the relationship between local and global, the (social, economic and political)relationship between the North and the South of the world, and puts the call of the western model of development into question.

Moreover, there is a paradox. On one hand people dream about, not secretly anymore, the shutdown of boundaries, but on the other hand Italy is a country that needs many immigrants for economic (they represent 9,5% of GDP equal to 134 billion euro) and

demographic reasons. Indeed, the Italian population is characterized by the *second demographic transition* with a pyramid of age that is almost reverse and a TFR (total fertility rate, i.e. the number of children per woman) that is less than the minimum threshold that enables the population to reproduce itself in the next generation. Who will pay for welfare-state, public schools and pensions in a society with more elderly people than young ones? Immigration could, therefore, represent a form of demographic wealth since the average age of foreign people is thirty-one years of age and that of Italians is forty-three.

If we once again consider the analysis of the Caritas Dossier 2009 we can observe that, compared to Italians, foreign people do not have a higher criminality rate, do not waste public resources considering what they restore in contributions, and, above all, they represent a strong demographic trade-off.

In spite of all this the episodes of growing discrimination and racism appear to create a context of «*violence atmosphérique*» (atmospheric violence), according to the definition of Franz Fanon. The Italian context seems to be consistent with the analysis of the anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes. The American anthropologist, when studying the madness of everyday life with its little scapegoats and its forms of symbolic violence, has suggested the idea that in society we can always find certain «eliminationist impulses». These proto-elements of genocide nest in ordinary life producing a «*genocidal continuum*» composed of «small wars and invisible genocides conducted in the normative social spaces of public schools, clinics, emergency rooms, hospital wards, nursing homes, court rooms, prisons, detention centers, and public morgues» (Scheper-Hughes, 2002: 376). In this perspective, “everyday” violence makes sense and reduces “the Others” to the status of «*non-people*», using the expression of the sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago regarding irregular immigrants.

Masses of small genocides, thereby, seem to be hidden in everyday life, becoming almost invisible to our eyes like the contours of the goldfish bowl: *refusal to help the weakest, militarization of everyday life, social fear* (the perception of the poor or ethnic groups as a threat) and *reversed feeling of victimization*. These elements can be tracked down in the Italian context: in “nomadic-camps”, in dispositions of the «*pacchetto sicurezza*», in differentiated classes for immigrants, in the attempt to insert the symbol of the crucifix in the National flag, in the compulsory reporting of irregular immigrants for doctors and in the different treatment given to immigrants in working places.

But what is it that allows these eliminationist impulses to turn into ethnic persecutions and genocide? What is it that allows to reduce Others to the status of *non-people* without raising any objection of conscience?

Obviously there isn't an univocal or monocausal answer to these questions that have accompanied social scientists for decades. There are authors who, however, have given an original contribution.

Hanna Arendt tried to explain the «*grey zone*» described by Primo Levi, i.e. the silent majority that witnesses without intervening or taking sides, by suggesting the idea of

a conscience divided into «*watertight compartments*». According to the German scholar there are individuals who develop a “conscience into compartments”; even though they maintain the rules of the usual morality in almost all the spheres of the daily life, they renounce to any responsibility in certain areas of the social and individual action where they follow the dictates of authority. In psychoanalytic terms a defensive mechanism not dissimilar from a dissociation combined with a repression.

A similar thesis has been advanced by the American historian Christopher Browning. He investigated the causes that induce ordinary men to carry out those orders that break the most banal moral principles. The answer seems to lie in an interlacement of historical, social, cultural and psychological causes. Among the latter Browning mentioned the tendency to the conformity of the group and the interiorization of the principle of authority that had been shown by Stanley Milgram’s experiments in the field of social psychology. Milgram, avoiding the psychological determinism of mass violence, showed how violent behaviour depends largely on the submission to received orders and on the respect of the social role that is played.

In «*La Misère du Monde*», a book that can hardly be separated from the French context, Pierre Bourdieu appears to portray many features of the contemporary Italian reality. In the analysis carried out by the French sociologist there are several typologies of social and existential «*malaise*» (discomfort) among which the malaise of those who are afraid of not being able to live. This concerns the dissatisfaction that is determined by a disastrous relationship between the Ego and the society where any reconstruction of the meaning one’s existence in agreement with the vicissitudes of the exterior world appears to be impossible. A malaise that produces «*une fatigue de vivre*» (effort of living) and that leads to the lost of perspective, to the fear of not been able to go on, to a violent desperation and to distrust towards Others and diversity. A malaise that reveals itself both in those people who are reduced to the status of *non-people*, as witnessed by the Rosarno events, and both in those who develop a conscience divided into «*watertight compartments*». In both cases the biographic illusion breaks and it is difficult to reassemble an equilibrium between the subjective dimension and the collective one. Using the expression of Bourdieu, we are facing of a corrosion of the «*habitus*».

If there isn’t a clear caesura between the two extremities of a totalitarian society and a democratic one, but a *continuum* without interruption, Italy will slowly slide to one of these two extremities. The one populated by goldfishes with a conscience divided into watertight compartments.

Posters of the electoral campaign of «Lega Nord» (North League):

«They Couldn’t Make Rules for Immigration, Nowadays They Live in reservations! Think about It».



«Lega Nord» represents the third Italian party and is the first in some regions of Italy. Four of the ministers of the current government belong to it, among them the Minister of Interior, the main author of the «pacchetto sicurezza».

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The Author:

Lorenzo d'Orsi graduated in «Theories and Practices of Anthropology» in July 2008 at «Sapienza», University of Rome, where he is now attending the postgraduate course. In 2008, he coordinated a series of seminar meetings regarding the problem of integration of Roma and Sinti people in the urban area of Rome. He also edited the consequent publication of the acts. Lorenzo is a co-founder of the association of social studies «AMIGI». Currently, he is developing fieldwork research in Uruguay on memory and violence.

Below are his most important works and publications:

L'Afrique fantôme di Michel Leiris. Rilettura di un classico dell'etnografia, «Tesi in Teorie e Pratiche dell'Antropologia», supervisor: Prof. Alberto Sobrero, A.A. 2007-2008.

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The “Pacchetto Sicurezza” and the Process of Ethnogenesis, in «Network Migration in Europe», online review.

Mail: bilbodorsi@hotmail.com

Translated by Lida Patrizia Cancrini Pini