The Present Significance of National Identity Issues: The Case of Italian Graduates in the UK

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Abstract: Italian graduates represent the bulk of the current phase of Italian migration to the UK. This paper proposes an analysis of the reasons why Italian graduates leave Italy to move to the UK. It will argue that issues related to the perception of Italy as a weak society and to Italians as sharing a weak sense of national identity are significant factors in these migrations. Overall, it will be shown that alongside other more structural reasons to migrate – mostly the stagnation of the Italian labour market and the difficulty of gaining access to qualified occupations – Italian graduate migration to the UK is conditioned, and in some cases is driven, by personal, cultural and ethical motivations. In particular, holding a negative view of Italy and experiencing a weak or problematic identification with its culture and mentalità emerged as significant factors in the decision to migrate. I will conclude that the present (re)emergence of issues associated with a weak Italian national identity indicates that ultimately the task of nation-building that started 150 years ago is still incomplete and affects current migratory trends.

Keywords: migration, graduates, Italy, mentalità, identity

Migration is a key aspect of Italian history. Italy has been a country of mass emigration since its foundation as a modern nation-state in 1861. Throughout the 'Great Migrations' period from the 1860s to the 1970s, more than 26 million Italians, generally men, left the country, mostly escaping from impoverished rural areas and directed towards continental Europe, the Americas and Australia. Today, Italy is both a country of emigration and of immigration, currently hosting approximately 4.7 million migrants mostly from North Africa and Eastern Europe, while counting about 3.5 million Italians officially living abroad (Fondazione Migrantes, 2011). Italian graduates represent the bulk of the current phase of Italian migration to the UK. In Italy, this is a popular topic of discussion because the emigration of graduates is often portrayed by the media as a 'brain-

drain' phenomenon which generally reflects the inadequacy of the Italian state to provide a future for its young generations of citizens.[1]

This paper will look at Italian graduates' reasons to migrate to the United Kingdom. I will claim that overall, alongside other more structural reasons to migrate – mostly the stagnation of the Italian labour market and the difficulty of accessing qualified occupations – Italian graduate migration to the UK is conditioned, and in some cases is driven, by personal, cultural and ethical motivations. In particular, I will show how negative views of Italy as the homeland and a presumed lack of identification with its culture and *mentalità* play a decisive role in Italian graduates' decisions to migrate to the UK. The data presented are based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with 36 recent Italian graduates who have migrated to the UK. After contextualising my study within the existing literature, the paper will analyse the migratory process and decision-making of Italian graduates in the United Kingdom, highlighting its distinct features and determinants. This discussion will take us back to the *Risorgimento* when the political need of 'making Italians' emerged. Contemporary analysis of Italian nationalism will also be introduced, particularly John Dickie's notion of 'inverted patriotism' (2001) which indicates Italians' tendency to worry over the capacities of Italy as a state to overcome its problems.

The foundation of Italy

The task of nation-building is, according to John Dickie (1996), a metaphor which is made of two main elements: the concrete initiatives carried out by the state such as propaganda, increased communication, educational initiatives and so forth; and socio-cultural changes which are not entirely in the hands of the state. The latter can create the conditions in which a nationalistic feeling may emerge and be embraced by a population, but its successful outcome is not guaranteed. In the case of Italy, the distrust of Italians for their state, institutions and governments has been a constant worry for the ruling classes. Early nationalists saw, in their shared pride for the artistic and humanist achievements produced within the peninsula, particularly during the Renaissance, the potential source of the nation's cultural roots. This belief, however, found little support among the mostly poor, rural and largely uneducated inhabitants of nineteenth-century Italy (Gabaccia, 2000). The ideal of a united Italy, both politically and culturally, was often being promoted by Italian thinkers in exile or living abroad, as in the cases of Garibaldi and Mazzini, two key figures of Italy's unification (Duggan, 1994). The willingness to unite the country did not emerge from within; and as a matter of fact, most of the inhabitants of the peninsula welcomed it with scepticism. The famous expression attributed to the nationalist Massimo D'Azeglio in the aftermath of unification in 1860, 'we

made Italy, now we must make Italians' (Gabaccia, 2000: 11), encompassed what was then, and has remained still nowadays, one of the recurrent issues of Italy as a modern nation state, that is the fragile and problematic relationship between its governments and its citizens. Geographically, too, the Italian 'space' has always been fragmented: the Alps, the Po valley, the long chain of the Apennines forming the backbone of the peninsula, and the large islands of Sicily and Sardinia form a diversity of regions, climates and cultures that historically have been detached from each other, hampered by large distances and poor communications.

Nationalism can (also) be an intensely private phenomenon, capable of provoking powerful emotions such as pride, nostalgia and even embarrassment, as well as a very public, institutional and collective phenomenon in its manifestations (Dickie, 1996). Considering Italy's difficulty in building a national identity, it is not surprising that most scholars have argued that – except during Fascism and moments before World War One – nationalism and patriotism in Italy have been quite weak at both levels. To begin with, there are very few rituals dedicated to the values of patriotism and the glorification of Italian history. The official festivity to celebrate the unification of the country, on 20 September, is hardly noticeable. It was a primary goal of the previous president of the Italian Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, to re-introduce in 2000, the anniversary of the Italian Republic on 2 June as an official festivity, which was previously mostly forgotten. National unification itself is only celebrated as a festivity every fifty years. This lack of enthusiasm and of interest for collective manifestations of nationalism in Italy can be explained, according to Lanaro (1988), by the lack of a *siglo de oro* (golden era) in the history of Italian nation-making, which was instead characterised by a series of local events and charismatic leaders scattered across different centuries which then ultimately culminated in the 'unexpected' Unification of the 1860s. Above all, opposition of the Holy See and of many Catholics meant that a good proportion of the country did not want to be unified.

However, other factors also need to be considered. As argued by John Dickie (2001), Italian nationalism is characterised, rather ironically, by a chronic 'inverted patriotism', of which the worry over the inadequacy of Italy as a modern nation state and a pessimistic view of the 'perceived' immutable negative features of its 'national character' are the main characteristics. The Italian state itself does not look at its citizens as allies or in a benevolent way, so the mistrust between citizens and institutions is, to a certain extent, reciprocal. Since its foundation, the Italian state perceived the 'Italian character' as a political problem which needed to be fixed. Italians needed to be made, or better transformed into loyal citizens, possibly suppressing along the way their feelings of belonging and attachment to local places, home towns and communities which have

historically characterised them. The political discourse around the notion of the Italian national character is quite revealing in itself of the complexity of this issue. As Bollati argued in a famous essay (1983), the Italian national character was a project that existed well before the *Risorgimento* but what became significant about it was the political use that the Italian state made of it from its foundation.

The concept of national character implies the existence of objective dispositions of a population, which supposedly shares certain common moral and psychological traits. This notion has been increasingly abandoned by scholars looking at nationalism (see for example, Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983). However, in the case of Italy, intellectuals, both within and outside of Italy, have always been particularly interested and concerned with the nature of the Italian national character. Among the attributes which have been more often associated with Italy and being Italian, *trasformismo* and familism have been the most recurrent. *Trasformismo* refers to the political practice of forming a coalition with members of the opposition party. It is usually used in negative terms to indicate a disposition to create political compromises in order to protect personal interests (Altan, 2000). The concept of familism or better of 'amoral familism' was introduced by the North American anthropologist Edward Banfield (1958) in his famous study of a southern Italian village in the 1950s. The term 'familism' generally refers to the cultural practice of prioritising the interests of one's family over those of one's community. Here again, especially in Banfield's use of the term, familism has a negative connotation as it constitutes the 'moral basis of a backward society' (1958).

According to Patriarca (2001; 2010), the reasons for this association are to be found in the genealogy of the discourse around the Italian national character which has a long intellectual and political history. In her view, the reasons why Italians still nowadays believe that social and cultural traits such as corruption and familism are part of their 'national character' is because anti-Italian feelings have been embedded in the political and intellectual discourses surrounding their national character for centuries. This is partly because historically Italian intellectuals and scholars have been quite often cosmopolitan in their views and lifestyles and felt and created a distance between themselves and the average Italian citizen, whose vices and inadequacies vis-à-vis more civilised and modern countries they often emphasised. It should be noted that not all scholars agree with Patriarca's thesis on the historical responsibility of Italian intellectuals for the development of a weak national identity (see Garboli, 1997); Ferrarotti (1997) maintains that the relationships between collective memory and national history are necessarily unresolved and problematic.

Moreover, it is useful to remember that Italy is not the only country in which rhetoric about national character has been used or abused. Other European countries such as France or the UK have historically used

national character-based discourses and ideologies to justify their imperialism and military interventions. In addition, it is in the realm of ideas, rather than facts, that the unity of history can be found, as the Italian philosopher Croce reminded us (in Dickie, 2001: 29). In reality, national identities as unitary entities have hardly ever existed anywhere in the world. Identities, as Bauman pointed out (1996), are not stable entities and are constituted in the realm of representations, which is why discourses which stress the actual existence of national characteristics can be dangerous as they systematically naturalise subjective social and cultural traits.

In this regard, Donna Gabaccia in her book *Italy's Many Diasporas* (2000) offers an insightful analysis of the ways in which Italian emigration worldwide has produced a number of distinct diasporas, differentiated by historical epoch and by regional origin. According to Gabaccia, Italian diasporas rested on migrants' identification and feelings of belonging with their towns or cities of origin, rather than forming a single, shared, Italian national diaspora based on a common feeling of national identity. In this context, it is interesting to note that the role of Italian emigration in the making of modern Italy has only been recently recognised (Fondazione Migrantes, 2011). As Gabaccia argued (1997), a global, comparative and systematic interpretation of the history of Italian emigration and its impact on both the building of the nation and Italian national identity still needs to be explored. This article aims to take a step in this direction.

Background and rationale for the study

Italian emigration to the UK has a long history. Even though the number of Italians in the UK has never reached the scale of other European countries, such as France, Germany, or Switzerland, Italians have settled in the British Isles and in particular in the city of London since the Middle Ages (Fassmann and Münz, 1994). However, it was the period after World War Two that witnessed the largest arrival of Italian migrants who were involved in a traditional kind of labour migration, which brought unskilled Italian migrants to work in the industrial areas to the north of London, in particular to the brick factories of Bedford and Peterborough. From the 1970s onward, changing labour demand and expansion of the service sector in both Italy and the UK signalled the end of this type of migration and the beginning of what would become the new wave of Italian emigration to the UK (Bartolini and Volpi, 2005).

The emergence of a new and distinct Italian migration to the UK began in the 1980s, continuing increasingly during the 1990s until the present, thanks to the expansion of cheap transportation and mobile technologies. These new flows are characterised by the presence of young, generally middle-class and well-educated individuals who move primarily

to London for educational and professional reasons and from different geographical areas (Ambasciata d'Italia, 2007). The new migrants have little or no contact with the members of the past migrations. They tend to live scattered around the London area and indeed seem unaware of the traditional forms of association instituted for Italians abroad (Bartolini and Volpi, 2005). Instead, internet forums and social networks such as Facebook seem to be the most common ways for them to interact and exchange information (Scotto, 2010). Students, graduates, researchers and professionals make up the bulk of the new Italian migration to the UK. Their migrations are usually unstructured and temporary in intention (even though it is very difficult to estimate the number of permanent settlers and returnees), partly driven by the faster expansion of the service-based economy and of a graduate labour market, in the UK compared to Italy.

Reliable statistical data on Italian graduates' migration flows hardly exist. This is partly due to the flexible nature of Italian migration to the UK which does not require Italians to register on arrival, making these flows difficult to measure (Ambasciata D'Italia, 2007; Favell, 2008). Nevertheless, some information on the general characteristics of the new migrants is available through the latest notes (*Appunto*) of the Italian Embassy in London on the Italian community. This source stresses the increasing numbers of Italian professionals migrating and working in the city of London in the financial, research and service sectors and also the continuing primary presence of Italians in the catering sectors (restaurants, snack-bars etc.) (Ambasciata D'Italia, 2007). According to the registry of Italian residents abroad (Anagrafe degli Italiani Residenti all'Estero, AIRE), the number of graduates overseas increased by 53 percent between 2000 and 2006 (Del Pra, 2006: 107). The movement of graduates across Europe is of considerable importance for both sending and receiving countries. As the EU-funded Pioneer study (2006) – which has involved different universities and scholars across Europe – concluded, despite the varieties of migratory patterns across Europe, young well-educated individuals represent the bulk of intra-European mobility nowadays (Recchi et al., 2003; Recchi and Favell, 2009).

Moreover, recent studies (Favell, 2008; Hadler, 2006) on skilled and intra-European migration have indicated that the reasons why people move across Europe tend to include many non-economic considerations. This might also be the case of Italian graduates, even though the impact of the high rates of youth unemployment in Italy – currently estimated at approximately 30 percent (Cammelli, 2012) – and the difficulty of accessing qualified occupations in the Italian labour market cannot be underestimated. Despite the public attention generated by this phenomenon, there are not many academic studies which look at current Italian migratory patterns *per se*. This is possibly because the recent

transformation of Italy into a country of immigration has attracted, and rightly so, the attention of many scholars both within and outside Italy, while the current resumption of internal and international emigration has been generally overlooked (Pugliese, 2002). Furthermore, the literature on Italian graduate migration is quite scarce because graduates as a distinct category of migrants are often overshadowed by overlapping fields of study such as student migration, skilled migration and the brain drain literature (ADI, 2001; Avveduto and Brandi, 2004; Morano-Foadi, 2005, 2006; Becker et al., 2003). The Italian brain drain or '*fuga di cervelli*', is a recurrent topic of media and public discussion in Italy and it is commonly indicated as one of the long-term unresolved issues of the country. This is mostly related to the highly bureaucratic, anti-meritocratic nature of Italian academia which has often been described as a pseudo-medieval system characterised by nepotistic practices and a rigid hierarchy (ADI, 2001; Gambetta and Origgi, 2009; Gardini, 2009; Morano-Faodi, 2005; 2006). However, Italian academia is not the only field in which clientelism and non-meritocratic practices of recruitment take place (Piattoni, 2001). As we shall see later in this article, restricted access to qualified occupations characterises the Italian graduate labour market as a whole and usually plays a crucial role in the decision of Italian graduates to migrate.

Methodology

This article examines some of the reasons why Italian graduates decide to move to the UK. Semi-structured interviews with Italian graduates who have recently migrated to the UK are the main method of data collection. Qualitative interviews have been chosen not just as a methodological tool, but rather as a way of conceptualising knowledge based on the notion that understanding social processes and phenomena can be achieved by encouraging people to describe the world in their own terms (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). All interviews were conducted, transcribed, translated and coded by the author. In general, the interviews covered comprehensively the chronological progress of each respondent's migratory experience from the origin of their migratory project to the day of the interview. Particular attention was paid to the ways in which migrants rationalised and to a certain extent were able to 'explain' their decisions to migrate, trying to capture the complexity of their decision-making processes, paying attention to the patterns emerging from their narratives. All interviews were conducted from a broadly exploratory perspective which enabled the investigation of a wide range of topics including: personal background; previous experiences abroad and attitudes towards mobility (in particular as a student); timing and the development of the idea to migrate; reasons and motivations for migration; current assessment of the migratory experience and future intentions.

Considering that Italian graduates do not constitute a homogenous unit of analysis, the respondents were selected according to a number of criteria that reflect the specific purposes and areas of interest of this study. One of the most important of these criteria is the respondents' regions of origin which were broadly divided into three broad sub-samples: northern, central and southern regions of Italy. This does not imply that the study will be fully representative of the overall Italian national context in terms of graduate migration patterns, but it was nevertheless designed to investigate qualitatively a fair representation of those phenomena.

Moreover, it was decided to select as suitable respondents only individuals who had completed a full cycle of tertiary education in Italy and five years after graduation was chosen as the maximum length of time within which migrants could be considered as suitable respondents. This time limitation was included in order to select respondents at a similar stage in the life-cycle. In terms of personal characteristics, all samples of graduates are equally divided in terms of gender. Also, respondents are for the most part unmarried or similarly formally uncommitted in civic partnerships and without children. This decision was taken because previous studies, such as the one carried out by Hadler in 2006, indicated that having children is the single most important factor in decreasing the willingness to migrate among European residents (Hadler, 2006). I am aware though that this distinction limits the composition of the samples to one type of family and relationship dynamics and that many more personal and familial factors could have an impact on migratory dispositions and behaviours. Finally, in terms of employment distribution, the samples of respondents were selected trying to represent the existing variety of occupations and employment profiles generally associated with Italians living in the UK, incorporating graduates working in both public and private sectors (IPPR, 2007: 14). Considering that a general picture of intra-European migrations has already been proposed in other studies (in particular, Favell, 2008; Recchi and Favell, 2009), I chose to adopt a 'pure' qualitative perspective in order to look at how these movements were experienced and conceptualised by the individuals involved. The following section will report and discuss some of these findings.

Italian graduates' reasons for migrating

Italian graduate migration to the UK is a wide-ranging phenomenon which encompasses many different migratory experiences. Motivations to migrate among my sample of graduates were varied. When I enquired about them, respondents often recalled different considerations – some pragmatic and some more personal and subjective – which first led them to consider moving to the UK. Professional considerations were frequent, and often mentioned as the objective foundation on which the different decision-

making narratives were constructed, but these were not isolated and each graduate added his or her own twist of personal and ideological motivations. Despite the variety of human experiences and considerations encountered, some common characteristics can be observed.

Firstly, most respondents seem to share a background of previous experiences abroad. Student exchange programmes such as Erasmus-Socrates emerged as particularly popular. Respondents seemed to agree that studying and living abroad during their student years was a deeply transformative experience which changed their views, interests and aspirations once they got back to Italy, confirming the key assumptions of the literature on this point (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Findlay et al., 2005; Brooks and Waters, 2011). Secondly, the choice of moving to the UK seemed to be predominantly associated with the idea of learning (or improving an existing knowledge of) English as the 'global language'. Most respondents have enrolled, at some point during their stay in the UK, in English-language courses. Some of them first visited the UK as part of English-language summer schools in Oxford, Cambridge or Brighton, while others had friends or relatives who had done so. In most cases, the idea of moving to the UK to learn or to improve their English was mentioned as one of their 'original' motivations. For example, Alessandra, a 27-year-old female graduate from the south, recalled an earlier job interview she had in Italy, in which speaking English emerged as a significant requirement, and how this experience affected her decision to move to the UK:

> The story is that I went for an important interview [in Italy] and at the end they asked me to speak in English and I did not do well. After that experience, I said to myself that I absolutely have to learn English.

Alessandra's experience provides an example of how it was, at times, the direct experience of the difference that being fluent in English would make in the Italian labour market that encouraged some respondents to spend time in the UK. This would give them an opportunity to improve their English-language skills, in the context of English-language training – which is a well-developed service industry in the UK. In this regard, the general rationale that emerged from the narratives collected was that it was worth investing some time and money to move to the UK for a few months, even just to improve one's English, because this would add benefit in the future. Reasons to migrate, I will argue, are often overlapping and concomitant, and learning English emerged as the perfect, valid, objective 'reason' for moving to the UK; while only in a few instances was this indicated as the main or only motivation to migrate. Moreover, one should not underestimate the role of the specific context of the Italian universities as the sending institutions – characterised by infrastructural shortcomings

and a chronic lack of resources (Cammelli, 2009) – which may play a role in an exacerbated comparison between the poor conditions experienced while studying in Italy compared to other countries.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that on the whole, professional motivations had the most significant role within the narratives I recorded. Approximately two thirds of the interviewees stated work or the desire to pursue a specific career as their main reason for migrating. In particular, the desire to work in a particular field, or to pursue a career which was not available in Italy, often acted as a key trigger. The following quote from Luca, a 35-year-old male graduate from the south, illustrates this point.

> The United Kingdom has offered me things which I would never have had in Italy. What I adore about this country is that they judge you for what you can do; there may be internal games but, in my case, I think that I would never have managed to get to the same position in Italy.

As Luca's quote suggests the general belief that emerged from the respondents' narratives was that the UK offers more professional opportunities to Italian graduates than Italy does. This is partly explained by Italian graduates by reference to the more open and meritocratic recruitment processes for jobs in the UK, compared to the lack of meritocracy and the abundance of irregularities that are generally associated with access to jobs in Italy. Ultimately, filling jobs that are available in the UK, but not in Italy, emerged as a main factor in the decisions to migrate of many Italian graduates. In this regard, it is important to specify that interviews were conducted in 2008-2009; at the time, the extent and the repercussions of the current international financial crisis had only started to emerge. Therefore, the UK appeared to the Italian graduates that I interviewed as a promising place to live, study and work.

Nevertheless, the decision to migrate was often the result of a combination of different factors, and professional considerations should not be analysed in isolation from other desires and aspirations. In fact, a general feeling of discontent with other areas of their lives back in Italy often emerged as the decisive factor to migrate. The next quote from Daniele, a 30-year-old male engineer from the northern region of Piedmont, illustrates this pattern:

> *Were you tired of your home-town?*
> Yes, absolutely! [...] Then there is the experience of working there where you get badly squeezed, badly paid, they give you a salary increase of only €50 per year. All these things, and on top you also come from a small place, which is not the best. Then in my sector, you are in touch with other people abroad that do your same job and they earn three times as much…and it is not that life in Italy is that much cheaper [in comparison].

As Daniele's quote indicates, migratory decision-making can encompass both economic and personal motivations. Nevertheless, the recurrence of mentions about the difficulties encountered in the professional sphere, either while looking for a job or while working in Italy, makes it important to emphasise the significant role that the Italian labour market had in triggering these migrations. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that these migrations are largely unstructured in nature, and that the greatest majority of respondents moved to the UK with only a vague idea of how to look for jobs. In this regard, the relatively short distance between Italy and the UK, the rise of the service and knowledge economy in the UK, the cheap travel available between the two countries, and the favourable institutional circumstances that surround these migrations, clearly play an important role in offering a chance to Italian graduates to 'try' moving to the UK to fulfil their aspirations.

Analysis of the meanings respondents attached to their 'private' reasons for migrating offers new insights into their decision-making processes. Critical perspectives on Italy as the home country and on Italians as fellow-citizens were frequently expressed by participants living in the UK. These negative considerations often emerged in relation to other aspects of their lives in Italy. The perceived lack of meritocracy and the presence of irregularities in the recruitment process for many professions represented a major source of frustration and disillusionment with Italy as a country. In addition, a more general sense of discontent with Italian culture and the lifestyles of Italians themselves also emerged from the narratives. In particular, the perception of Italy as a country characterised by social, moral and cultural decay was quite recurrent and seems to play an important role in supporting the decision to migrate and the future mobility intentions of Italian graduates. The following quote from Marco, a 30-year-old male philosophy graduate from the north-east of Italy illustrates this point:

> I think that for Italy this is a very sad moment… Whoever wins the next election…it is still a sad moment, it is a miserable moment for Italy. I see my school friends who have remained there, for sure they eat very well, dress very well, but they live a life which, in my opinion, is fifty, a hundred years old, backward, they all live at home with their parents […] There is a psychological dynamic which is very miserable in Italy at the moment.

As Marco's words suggest Italy is generally seen from abroad as a country which is going through a difficult historical phase. This belief was expressed not in reference to the recent international economic crisis, which started just after most of these interviews took place, nor in reference to the recent sexual scandals surrounding former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, which have likewise emerged since my fieldwork. Even so, the

high degree of cultural pessimism that seems to characterise these views cannot be analysed in isolation from significant events of the country's recent history – such as the collapse of the first Italian republic and its political class in the early 1990s – which have already been identified as the main possible causes of the societal malaise that seems to characterise the country at present (Buzzi et al., 2007; Ferrarotti, 1997; Livi Bacci, 2008). Moreover, it could be argued that this lack of belief in one's home country and the negative views of Italy articulated by some respondents could be both a cause and a consequence of migration itself, as they might be used to justify the decision to live abroad. In turn, living abroad might also exacerbate negative views of Italy as the sending country, as the following quote from Elio, a 37-year-old political science graduate from central Italy suggests:

> As regards my view of Italy, in the first two years in the UK, there was always the realisation of how badly things work in Italy, I saw everything as black, while in the UK all was good, just because you are considered on the basis of what you can actually do, and they give you some space [rather than because of clientelistic mechanisms]… In the last couple of years however, I think I reached a more balanced view of both countries, also because during my first few years here I still had some anger toward Italy because I really felt forced to leave.

As Elio's quote indicates, migrants' views of Italy have to be seen against the background of the life-cycle factors which have, at least partly, generated them. As Elio frankly admitted during the interview, his view of Italy was very unbalanced during his first couple of years abroad because he was still feeling upset and angry about the events which had led him to migrate in the first place. In this respect, it could be argued that these negative views of Italy are also partly the result of living abroad in the UK which was perceived as a more advanced and meritocratic country. Nevertheless, I would argue that the recurrence of the negative views of Italy indicates a common perception among graduates of the limited life-chances that they would have there. This belief considerably affects their future intentions to return to Italy, once they migrate. The following quote from Arianna, an anthropology graduate from the south of Italy, reinforces this point:

> *Why don't you go back to Italy?*
> Because there is a socio-political situation that I don't like…In my opinion, Italy is an old society which is folded in on itself…there is no investment in young people and you can see this from the policies, from what happens when you look for a job… It seems like they do you a favour in giving you a job […] I like Italy, at the end there are things that I miss like living outside in the piazza, the way of

socialising, my friends, food, but these are not things which make me
want to return.

As these quotes suggest, the perception that Italy does not offer much to its
young citizens can be a significant factor in the decision of Italian graduates
to migrate permanently. These considerations can be particularly
influential if the respondents come from regions of the country where job
opportunities are already limited, notably in the south. Nevertheless, as
previously stated, negative views of the country were not restricted to
graduates coming from a particular geographical area, and they covered a
wide range of issues, which were not necessarily linked to the lack of job
opportunities. I would argue that what these quotes indicate is a general
scepticism as to what Italy as a country has to offer to its younger
generations. In this regard, what these quotes express is a kind of 'inverted'
patriotism as suggested by Dickie (2001) which is reflected in graduates'
general belief in the inability of Italy as a country to overcome its problems.
The Italian political class was at times deemed responsible for this
situation, but not by a significant number of graduates, who generally
pointed to the unresolved issues of Italy as a whole, and the vague origin of
these problems, reflecting the popular belief that problems in Italy are due
to the Italian 'national character' (Altan, 2000; De Monticelli, 2010; Dickie,
2001; Patriarca, 2010). In this respect, it is interesting to note that, during all
the interviews I conducted with Italian graduates, within and outside Italy,
encouraging aspects of Italy as a country, or references to positive historical
episodes or to cultural achievements, such as for example, the liberation
from Fascism or the unification of the country itself, were rarely mentioned.
This supports the argument that Italians tend to have a peculiar and quite
partial view of Italy and of its history as a country (Ferrarotti, 1997); a view
that seems naturally biased toward the negative side of the coin, as shown
by Dickie (1996; 2001).

These findings have critical implications. In terms of their future
orientations, half of the sample of Italian graduates interviewed in the UK
foresaw their future lives in the UK or abroad, while another quarter
thought that a return to Italy would be very difficult and unlikely. In this
respect, it could be argued that holding a negative view of the home
country and a pessimistic view of its future significantly shape graduates'
decisions to migrate and not to return, even in the case of a relatively
wealthy country such as Italy, which also has much to offer in terms of
culture and lifestyle. Moreover, it also transpires from the quotes presented
that being idealistic, and to a certain extent non-conformist, are common
characteristics of the graduates interviewed in the UK. The relationship
between the level of conformity to the dominant culture and the emergence
of migration, which is expected to be higher in areas where conformity is
lower, has been pointed out by Fielding (1992) in an intriguing essay on
culture and migration. This correlation seems to be quite significant in the

case of Italian graduates. As the quotes in this article have suggested so far, an underlying motive of the narratives presented is constituted by a general lack of identification with Italian society and culture. Feeling 'atypical' was a sentiment shared by nearly half of the graduates interviewed in the UK, who tended to consider themselves as 'outliers' (cf. Gladwell, 2008). In particular, a lack of identification with what was perceived as the collective *mentalità* – the general ways of thinking and feeling of the country – was identified by approximately a third of the respondents as a significant reason for leaving Italy. Another illustration of this point can be seen in the narrative of Andrea, a 35-year-old male from the south. He said:

> There is always a bit of sadness for the places left, for your country, but when I actually think about what I would have done there, if I stayed, what were my real prospects? I had a job with my parents and that is all…even the fact that I got married here, when I was in Italy I didn't think about it at all, for the atmosphere, for everything… Italy is a country with one of the lowest birth rates, with fewer children; but why? I can understand that, because when I lived there, I did not have any intentions to get married and to have children… I am done with Italy…there are the most beautiful places in the world but I would never go back there to live.

It could be argued that Italian graduates in the UK are tied into an identity dilemma, which is centred on their sense of belonging to Italy as a country toward which they feel very critical. Nevertheless, as studies of political dissidence indicate (among which, see Ranciere, 1999), even those who feel more strongly in disagreement with the mainstream culture of their country, can paradoxically find their sense of allegiance to the home nation in their conditions of 'dissidence'. This idea seems relevant in the case of the Italian graduates. In fact, despite their criticisms toward Italy, the graduates whom I interviewed never declared that they did not 'feel' Italian; rather, they tended to portray themselves as being a different kind of Italian, one who did not conform to the general negative stereotypes that are attributed to the country and who manifested therefore, a different *mentalità* compared to their peers who remained in Italy. This finding supports a previous study by Bartolini and Volpi (2005) which indicated that some of the new Italian migrants were made up of people who generally felt a sense of 'discontent' with Italy as the home country (2005: 103). The data presented in our study suggests that this trend is continuing and seems particularly relevant in the case of Italian graduates.

Conclusions

Overall, our analysis indicates that Italian graduates' decisions to migrate to the UK are the product of a complex and multi-level process which merges, on the one hand, the unique structural characteristics of Italy as a sending country, and on the other, the subjective experiences and personalities of each migrant. This generally confirms the view of sociologists such as Zanfrini (2004) that migration is a total social fact in which cultural, social, individual and economic strategies play a significant and concomitant role (Friedman and Randeria, 2004).

In the case of Italian graduates moving to the UK, the experience of a hierarchical and restricted labour market in Italy is at the base of many of the migratory narratives analysed. Moreover, the emergence of an 'inverted' kind of nationalism (Dickie, 2001) among these graduates – largely characterised by the idea of Italy as a weak society, unable to resolve its problems, and by the lack of belief that this might change in the future – was identified as a key factor in these migrations. The negative and stereotypical accounts of Italy observed among Italian graduates suggest that 'inverted patriotism' is still the dominant characteristic of Italian nationalism. This might be particularly visible in the case of Italians abroad, who through the choice to leave and their claimed lack of identification with the lifestyles of Italians in Italy can be seen as 'privileged discontents' who find in the UK both a professional and a cultural escape.

These considerations seem to point to the conclusion that the present (re)emergence of issues associated with a weak Italian national identity indicates that ultimately the task of nation-building that began 150 years ago is still incomplete and affects current and future migratory intentions. In fact, one could wonder about the future of these graduates and whether they will ever return to a country which does not seem to be capable of offering a future to its 'younger' generations. Nevertheless, like any complex society, Italy cannot be constrained into a unitary synthetic description and its future is open to multiple scenarios. It is difficult to predict whether there will be significant changes which will impact on its social and political status. In terms of the future of Italian graduates' migratory flows, making some predictions might be more reasonable. The data collected and the analysis undertaken suggest that overall, Italian graduate migration to the UK is ongoing and there are no obvious signs that these flows will stop or decrease in the short term, especially considering that recent governments have not successfully dealt with their most significant structural push factors – restricted access to most occupations – which continue to characterise Italy as a whole.

F. Conti

Notes

[1] Examples of recent media articles on this topic can be found in the two most widely read Italian newspapers, *la Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera*. Ian Fisher published a well-received article on this phenomenon in *The New York Times,* on 13 December 2007, entitled: 'In a Funk – Italy sings an Aria of Disappointment.'

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