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Local Identities, Identification and Incorporation of Albanian Immigrants in Florence

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Abstract

In this paper, the concepts of city as context, locality and incorporation are applied to the case of Albanian immigrants in Florence. To date, most research on the incorporation of immigrants and its relationship to space is based on the city or the inter-relations between the nation-state and city as contexts where incorporation takes place. The findings of my study show that the relationship between locality and the incorporation of immigrants is multi-dimensional. Firstly, although findings support the role of the urban ethos in immigrants' incorporation, the city is

relationship between locality and the incorporation of immigrants is multi-dimensional. There are significant differences between localities within the city and between generations of immigrants in the way they perceive their

denizens to construct their public behaviour, which is now more comprehensive due to the social sophistication that results from these encounters.

reduction and widening of streets and spaces as a bespoke enterprise of a nation-

funding initiatives (Haddock and Bedani 2000: 284). Indeed, economically, Italy functioned since the twelfth century represented by cities such as Florence and Genoa which at the time were managing the trade of Sardinia and Sicily (Dickie 2001). These divisions, which have a strong historical basis, have aggravated in the modern history of Italy, since automatic market mechanisms have been unable to counter the historical and structural factors that are on the basis of these differences (King 1987).

Even in the context of regionalism, Florence and the region of Tuscany have a particular position. Being a strong region with an unrivalled cultural tradition, Tuscany was subject to particular economic and political reforms that transformed it into the model state of enlightened absolutism in the eighteenth century, while the Restoration¹ had been less disruptive than in the other regions. Its governing elite took care of the

The Case Study: Incorporation and Identification of Albanians in Florence

The remainder of this paper draws on qualitative material collected during fieldwork I carried out in Tuscany in October-December 2008. Fifty-five interviews were conducted: twenty-three with teenagers, twenty with parents, eight with teachers and four with key informants. From these fifty-five interviews, sixteen were conducted with eleven teenagers, two parents, one teacher and two key informants in Prato, a small urban area in the vicinity of Florence. This serves as a 'control group' in the investigation of the city as context, locality and the impact on incorporation. In addition, a focus group with five teenagers (three girls and two boys) was organised in a secondary school in Florence.

Interviews with the first generation (parents) were in Albanian, although Italian expressions were used in most of the interviews. Interviews with teenagers were conducted in both Italian and Albanian, depending on the teenagers' preference. Interviews with first-generation immigrants took place in their workplaces, in cafés and a smaller number in my residence, whereas those with the teenagers took place mostly in schools. Other material was collected through participant observation in migrants' homes, at community events and in secondary schools. The names used are pseudonyms; when they were revealed by participants a name of the same category (i.e. 'Albanian' or 'Italian') was used.² All interviews were recorded.

Despite their relative recency of arrival compared to many other immigrant groups,

told me. It's in the North, it's better,
because here we are in the South, we

127). Indeed, many Italian cities have experienced housing crises, which became especially evident by the end of the 1960s when the economic situation worsened. Florence was one of them, with 30,000 people demonstrating for housing reform in 1968. The situation is even more problematic for Albanian immigrants, since they experience discrimination in the housing market as immigrants and as Albanians. Long-term immigrants are

in Italy is the co-existence of specific conditions of vulnerability with a strong drive towards assimilation

Florence and Florentine identity and culture, seeing it as a reputable culture and a famous and distinctive location and accent in Italy. This is more broadly related to the nature of Albanian identity.

the second generation means that they still find Florence too small, the city nevertheless encourages an interest in history and art and an eagerness to become more 'cultured'.

I have always worked in bars, since 2002 I have been a barman. In 1997-2002 I was a dishwasher, but I have learnt many things. I learnt English too, as there no-one spoke ò In Florence before 2001 you would speak only English; only on Saturday you could speak Italian because the Florentines go out on Saturdays . In Florence you hear all the languages. You can find everything here. Just go around the corner and you will find ten Albanian newspapers. And then Arabic, French and from all the countries of the

the subtle exclusion experienced in Florence and the 'southern' culture in terms of both experiences of friendship and discrimination. Cultural difference between the immigrants and the receiving society appears here as an important marker of the socialisation process and of the 'outcomes' of the incorporation process.

I have been here 15 years and I don't have the same friendships that I had in Greece, although I am the same person and behave the same way. Here people are superficial and don't go too deeply into things, neither the first day nor the last. This is the Florence I know, because it's not the same everywhere in Italy. I have friends in the South that say that they have made many friends and have created close relationships far more than us here. So basically it is relative and it depends on whom you meet (Gino, father, 37).

ZV: Who are the people who help you most in terms of employment here in Florence?

Anton: To tell you the truth, in the beginning, from 1992 till 2001, I had the opportunity to meet many Florentine families that have accepted me also into their families and they invited me to dinners and events, and in this way they have helped me in terms of my social integration. But the problem is, and it's not only the problem of the Florentine people, but that of Western people in general that is reflected here, that friendship is a little bit commercial... commercialised (father, 38).

Yet, there is a difference drawn between the historical centre or *centro storico* and the rest of Florence. It is the historical centre where pleasant anonymity and uncontested inclusion are experienced. In the liminal space of the historical centre there is no pressure to integrate, there is a feeling of having the right to feel a citizen of the world, there is a place in the city where the burden of having immigrant status is not felt. The process of identification is also characterised by the search, on the side of

Albanian immigrants, for their own niche. This orientates them towards identification with a famous city and an indisputable cultural tradition, as they relate to its great cultural heritage and are not constantly reminded they do not belong. On the other hand, Florentine culture, as an important element in Italian culture, is seen as the reason for exclusion in other instances, spaces and levels. This is reflected also in the system of education and the attitude of the teachers who are taking some time to fully recognise diversity in the schools, in Florence and beyond.

But realistically an extra-communitarian [non-EU] child they cannot accept as inherent, not as an inherent of their culture, or a child that comes from Africa. They cannot accept him as a descendant of Michelangelo, not only because of colour, but not even a white person, they cannot accept him as a descendant of Leonardo Da Vinci, so that he ensures Italian continuity (Pali, father, 48).

ZV: Are there discussions in class about diversity?

Teacher: Yes, there are. For example, I am personally a Euro-centric, so I think that Western culture is superior [.] So basically I don't think that all cultures are the same as American anthropology claims. I emphasise classical culture, the terms of civilisation, city, political freedom, equality between individuals, but not in the racist sense that the others are inferior, and should work for free for us, as Hitler used to say

Furthermore, the role of the city and locality can be different when different levels of incorporation are considered. My results

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