

# The new immigration in Sicily: between acceptance and rejection. The case of the city of Vittoria

Nunzio FAMOSO<sup>1,\*</sup>, Linda COTUGNO<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Humanistic Sciences, University of Catania, Piazza Dante, No. 32, 95124, Italy

<sup>2</sup> Department of Humanistic Sciences, University of Catania, Piazza Dante, 32, Catania, Italy

\* Corresponding author, [nfamoso@unict.it](mailto:nfamoso@unict.it)

Received on <06-05-2013>, reviewed on <02-06-2013>, accepted on <20-11-2013>

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to focus on the recent growing flow of foreign immigration into Sicily, in order to highlight how traumatic this development has been for Sicilian society. Although tolerance towards foreign presence is deeply rooted in Sicilian customs and traditions, recently it has been put at risk by the emergence of various ethnic groups, who are settling on Sicilian soil and are impacting upon local institutions, economy and society.

The Sicilian population is the product of a melting pot of races and ethnicities, whose features can be found in the make-up of the Sicilian population. However, since the end of the nineteenth century, Sicilian population dynamics have been stable, with no traces of unabsorbed foreign presences.

So, the plain of the Albanians, founded in 1500, and more recently Mazara del Vallo, which hosts a large group of Tunisians, were just isolated cases. The 70's are the turning point since Sicily from a land of emigration became a land of immigration. Lots of ethnicities use Sicily as a natural corridor where the Mediterranean flows are channelled. To conclude we would like to find out which are the levels of intolerance and acceptance, and if one is more prominent than the other.

**Keywords:** *immigration, Sicily, tolerance, customs, traditions, Mediterranean flows*

## Rezumat. Noile tendințe de imigrare în Sicilia: între acceptare și respingere. Studiu de caz – orașul Vittoria

Această lucrare prezintă fluxurile de imigranți străini în Sicilia, care s-au intensificat în ultimul timp, cu scopul de a sublinia cât de traumatic a fost acest proces pentru societatea siciliană. Deși toleranța față de străini este adânc înrădăcinată în obiceiurile și tradițiile sicilienilor, situația pare să se schimbe în ultimul timp ca urmare a apariției mai multor grupuri etnice ce se stabilesc pe pământ sicilian, având un impact considerabil asupra instituțiilor locale, economiei și societății.

Populația siciliană este rezultatul unei mixturi de rase și etnii. Totuși, de la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea, populația siciliană a fost relativ stabilă și omogenă. Comunitatea Albanezilor, fondată în 1500, și mai recenta Mazara del Vallo, care găzduiește un grup numeros de tunisieni, au fost doar cazuri izolate.

Anii 70 reprezintă punctul de cotitură, Sicilia devenind dintr-un spațiu de emigrare unul de imigrare, foarte multe minorități etnice folosind Sicilia drept un coridor natural ce canalizează fluxurile dinspre Mediterana.

În concluzie, dorim să aflăm care este nivelul intoleranței și acceptării, și care este mai pregnant.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *imigrare, Sicilia, toleranță, obiceiuri, tradiții, fluxuri mediteraneene*

## Introduction

Situated at the core of the Mediterranean Sea, Sicily has been since the ancient times the geophysical link and the crossroads of cultures and trades of people from Africa and the Middle East. By the second half of the nineteenth century, due to bad economic condition after the Italian unification (1861), emigration from Sicily to Europe, America, Asia and Africa intensified. Again, immediately after the Second World War large migration flows restarted not only inside Italy (to the capital, the industrial triangle and the Ligurian coast) but also towards Europe (first France, then Germany and Switzerland). In addition, some Sicilians opted to move to America, particularly to the United States, where large Sicilian communities still live.

Today the situation seems substantially different: the Island is in fact the first reception land for men who have crossed the Mediterranean Sea, braving much peril and hardship in their "coffin ships", to escape war, famine and rife poverty in their homeland. It was at the beginning of the seventies that Sicily changed its net migration. The island,

traditionally known as land of emigration, started to face with a large wave of immigrants and not it is experimenting new multicultural coexistence.

This paper aims to document the boot process that changed the sign to the picture of migration in Sicily. Particular attention will be given to a small Sicilian reality as the town of Vittoria. In fact, Vittoria presents a very significant cultural coexistence that is going to be just in line with the European trend.

## Discussions

### *The origins of the phenomenon in Italy and current laws*

Nowadays, the matter of immigration is a current topic in Italy, because of the increasing presence of foreigners. This phenomenon is not new; in fact, the first wave of immigrants arrived in the seventies. In particular, after the adoption of a strict immigration policy by the countries of northern Europe, in 1973, Italy was transformed from a country of emigration to a country of immigration. The first immigrants

came mostly from north Africa, and until now they represent the majority of African migrants.

As we know the policy of the stop, derived by the "Anwerbestop" (the prohibition of recruitment) decided by the Federal Republic of Germany in 1973 and later generalized throughout Western Europe, represented the grand entry of the intervention of several States in the scenario of the great movements of population and labor, but also facilitated the spread of illegal immigration. By 1968, Italy welcomed few sporadic units of Tunisians in Sicily, which entered at more intense rhythms by the early seventies.

The Law 39/1990 Legge Martelli was the first law aiming at regulating immigrant workers, who were exploited as irregular workers. It treated the immigration issue by narrowing the flow of immigration, giving a pre-set number of accesses (a quota) and linking them to the job market. A permit of stay (Visa), which lasted two years and was renewable, could be obtained for work, study, medical care or family reunification. Those that got in with regular documents but stayed after the expiration of the permit, or those exceeding the quota, were considered "illegal immigrants". Illegal and irregular immigrants, as well as the ones who did not have the required qualifications, were expelled. Expelled immigrants had 15 days to leave Italy on their own, otherwise they will be deported by police. This law did not create an organic program for the future, but an economic view of immigration, which remains a constant of Italian immigration legislation. The current laws about immigration are the 189/2002 Bossi-Fini Law and the Security Set 94/2009. The Bossi-Fini law tightens the norms against the aiding and abetting of illegal immigrants. Immigrants found in international waters, formerly outside of the patrolling power of Italy, can be sent back to their country or to neighbouring countries. No boat carrying people without visas can dock on Italian coasts. To obtain a work permit – "contract to stay as a dependent employee" – a work-contract and a rental agreement are needed. Forced detention – and no longer the intimation of detention – becomes ordinary rule: all illegal/irregular immigrants found by police on Italian ground without the necessary documentation must be identified and deported to their countries of origin. Migrants can be detained in a Immigrant detention center for up to 60 days. They can only come back to Italy after 10 years. Non-Italian citizens serving a two-year punishment can, instead, be deported. The system of protection for asylum-seekers and refugees (the so-called SPRAR) is introduced.

The requirements that immigrant workers in dependent employment must meet in order to qualify for regularisation are as follows:

- the workers must have been employed by a company for at least three months;
- the employer must commit itself to hiring the worker on an open-ended contract, or on a fixed-term contract lasting at least one year;
- the employer must pay the workers at least EUR 700 per month, plus EUR 100 in expenses, and all within 10 days of the submission of the application for regularization and of the relevant documentation.

However, there are several criticisms of the Bossi-Fini law:

- Forced deportation in international waters contravenes Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948: "Every man is free to leave his land"; it is also against the Geneva Convention of 1951, as many refugees are sent back instead of being offered protection; it involves the risk of shipwreck in the sea, meaning that it is also against human rights.

- Having documents can make it easier for police to send an immigrant to his/her country; this encourages immigrants to "lose" their documents or give false names and nationalities (making police work more difficult and expensive), and to remain in the CIE as long as possible.

- Life conditions in CIE are hard. Indeed, several immigrants organised riots, escaped, or tried to commit suicide.

- No information was given about healthcare policies or regulation in the CIE.

- It is now impossible to regularise the situation of immigrant workers who have received a deportation order but remain in Italy. Many firms employ immigrant workers in this category, and the impossibility of regularising their situation risks leaving many companies with an insufficient number of workers.

- Employers now bear a great social responsibility for defining a welcoming policy for immigrants. Employers, in fact, will have to guarantee a decent life to immigrant employees. In reality, however, employers will have the power to blackmail and exploit illegal immigrants.

- Without the signing of joint agreements with the countries from whose coasts these immigrants embark, forced returns will hardly be effective.

- Push-backs are often violent acts, as the immigrants refuse to be repatriated.

- Despite the fact that 92% of the legal immigrants come with family reunion visas and working visas, the Bossi-Fini law focuses mostly on illegal migration: only 5 out of 38 articles deal with family reunion and work policies. The government has no actual policy regarding the social integration of regular immigrants (religious dialogue, for example).

According to the Security Set 94/2009:

- Illegal immigration becomes a crime, thus all public officers and public workers must report the presence of an illegal immigrant. Illegal immigrants are liable to pay a fine and can now be detained by the authorities for more than six months.

- Each petition made to the public administration, such as requests for money transfers, must be accompanied by one's permanent residency permit, with the exception of applications for health care, school and birth certificates.

- Helping an illegal immigrant come to Italy, or housing undocumented migrants is now prosecutable as a crime (up to 3 years in prison). Italian teachers must report undocumented children. School drop-out rates are increasing as a result.

- Legal immigrants married to an Italian must wait two years in order to get Italian citizenship.

- The law allows for the formation of unarmed citizen patrol groups.

It is worth underlying that the above mentioned laws are generally more concerned to reject immigrants than attract. At the present time not only does immigration remain a subject often misunderstood by public opinion, but it also enters in conflict with the economic and employment crisis in our country.

The question arises: how can Italy be the subject of immigration, even when our emigration is not yet finished? How do we accommodate these strangers, help them to settle in a country where there are still large differences between North and South? And how can the South, affected by atavistic hunger and unemployment, give positive responses to newcomers seeking work and escaping from their hunger?

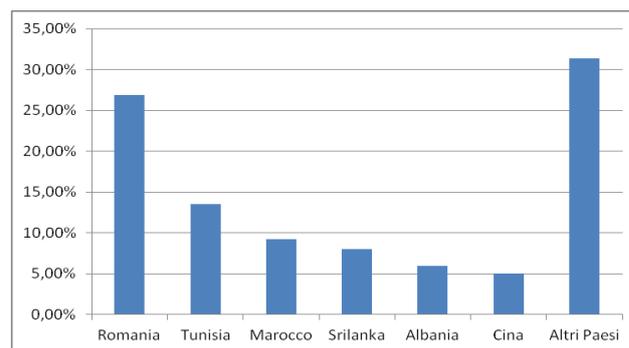
Therefore it is urgent to find the most suitable legal and administrative solution to changing needs, to make an immediate clarification on the legal status of foreigners, not only in the interests of itself, but also for the protection of the national institutions and the economy (BRUSA C, 1999).

### **Immigration in Sicily**

Traditionally a land of exodus, Sicily, in the second half of the sixties, saw a flow of foreign immigrants, that within a decade reached a considerable amplitude. This flow has been characterized by an ethnic point of view, being formed by migrants of different countries of North Africa, especially Tunisia and Morocco. The first immigrants came mostly from north Africa, and until now they represent the majority of African migrants. This choice is not only due to the closeness of this part of the African continent to Italy, but also for a historical and cultural bond that joins African countries to the Italian peninsula. Arriving by sea, by the ferries which regularly arrive to the ports of Palermo, they officially come for tourism, but in

reality they come and look for a job. They also enter Sicily through the island of Malta landing at Syracuse and Catania. They are usually in possession of the only tourist passport and begin to settle mainly in the province of Trapani in western Sicily, where large communities of Tunisians live. Today, the increase in the numbers of people from different ethnic backgrounds and countries is one of the most significant factors of the flux of immigrants to our country. Among the nine Sicilian provinces, the capital has the largest number of foreigners with 28,496 immigrants, of whom 54% are women and almost 19% minors, followed by the provinces of Catania and Messina with 25,908 and 23,550 units respectively. With 2,874 immigrants, the province of Enna has the smallest immigrant population.

We are experiencing a rapid increasing diversity of ethnic groups, cultures and religions. They are non-EU, mostly from Third World countries. Today we host Eritreans, Somalis, Senegalese, Cape Verdean, Sri Lankans, Filipinos (Fig.1). The flow of immigrants consists mainly of men and then of women, children and other family members who belong to a second chain migration of the parental type.



**Fig. 1:** The most prevalent nationalities/ citizenships in Sicily in 2010, Source: our processing based on ISTAT data

They are concentrated in the major urban areas: the provinces of Palermo, Catania and Messina accommodate more than half of the island's foreign residents. The dynamics of the province of Catania is particularly strong (with a +21% in 2008), while Ragusa is characterized by the fact that it has the highest proportion of foreigners in the total population (5.2%). Looking at the Caritas-Migrantes Statistical Dossier on Immigration 2010, it is also clear that foreigners living in Sicily are young, aged in general between 18 and 39. We also see that, in 2009, their children accounted for 12.4% of the total births, just one percentage point less than the Italian average (13.5%).

In an interview with Monsignor Benedetto Genualdi, director of the Diocesan Caritas in Palermo, we can see how the young age of the immigrant population is also reflected by the

composition of school classes. During the year 2009/2010, foreign students (16,521) represented 1.9% of the entire school population, and 2.5% of the total primary school students, showing an increase of as many as 1600 units.

Initially, the occupations found are those of fishing, for instance Mazara del Vallo offers lots of opportunities in this sector. Other job opportunities are to be found in agriculture, especially in the nearby countryside such as Campobello, Salemi and Marsala. The Moroccans are mainly dedicated to street trading, moving constantly in search of new markets (CARITAS/MIGRANTES, 2010).

### **The case of Tunisian in Vittoria**

The immigration of foreigners in the province of Ragusa, and especially in Vittoria begins to emerge in the late seventies, when the arrival of foreigners across the country reaches very high numbers. It is still difficult and often unsuccessful to obtain official data on the presence of immigrants in Vittoria and Ragusa. The data, information and considerations that we report are often derived from the experience of our contacts with immigrants (only when it has been possible to overcome their distrust and the locals).

Vittoria is mainly an agricultural country. The migration flow that pours into this place undergoes considerable variations during the year due to the nature of the commuter phenomenon and due to the seasonality of agricultural labor. In Vittoria there are two immigration cycles: the first one from September to January and the other one from March to July, with two stops in the months of February and August. In greenhouses labor is intense and requires the presence of daily labor during the whole year, but assumes extreme importance, increasing in number of workers, during the collection period of the subsequent preparation and processing products for sale. During these phases there is a highest number of foreigners (Vittoria and the surrounding municipalities are interested in the processing of fruit and vegetables and flowers in greenhouses).

There was an increase in the number of immigrants in 1986 (both with a residence permit, and the vast majority, in a state of hiding) the year in which the Law No. 943/86 was passed. With the application of this law, the number of inputs should have been reduced, and at the same time it was necessary to regularize all the illegal situations. But something did not work properly, so that there were several decrees of extension, until 30 September 1988. In the years 1986/1988 the phenomenon of illegal immigrants, waiting for amnesty, greatly increased.

As to the origin, with the exception of the small contingent of Moroccans, some Egyptians, some

Senegalese and many Algerians, the most part of foreign immigrants are Tunisians.

From a recent survey conducted by the Provincial Office of Labour, resulting in a sample of 200 cards (out of a total of about 1000), there were 143 Tunisians (71.5%), 42 Moroccans (21%), 7 Senegalese (3.3%). Other nationalities, with fewer representatives were: Algerian, Brazilian, Filipino, Yugoslavian and Egyptian. Always following the same search, and referring only to the Tunisian group, it is noted that the majority are young, aged from 26-30. Almost all Tunisians have chosen Vittoria for residence, while just a small number live in Santa Croce, Comiso and Acate.

The data on the Moroccan group confirms they mostly live in Acate. They run almost all the activities of itinerant trade, moving with their cars loaded with trinkets, banquets and wheelchairs, to the municipalities of the province.

As regards the distribution by sector of employment almost all the Tunisians are employed in agriculture, mostly in Vittoria and in the municipality of Santa Croce and Acate. The territories of these municipalities, which are part of the Iblean plain, are the most exploited for the cultivation of fruit and vegetables in greenhouses.

Other areas of employment are restaurants and pizzerias and restaurants, while the fishing sector is in crisis. There are indeed problems of employment, ongoing struggles and controversies between small and large navy, insufficient port facilities.

The tasks usually carried out by immigrants do not require specific qualifications, they are used as labourers, unskilled workers, labourers, waiters. It is known, however, that many of them have a diploma, some even graduation. The massive integration of immigrants into employment does not seem to have favored a harmonious integration of these into the social and cultural context of Vittoria. For this reason, immigrants maintain strong relations with the motherland and their families with frequent trips back home and sending savings. The integration is hampered by widespread ethnic and religious prejudices, stereotypes and cultural attitudes that put the immigrant communities in marginal social areas.

There are few mixed marriages, as there are few opportunities of meeting up between the two communities. Outside the world of work, immigrants live in total isolation from the host community. The Tunisians have a social club, opened thanks to the efforts of the Tunisian Consulate in Palermo, where they meet and they are able to play. For some time it was closed, because it was not well managed by those who were in charge of. They usually go to the bars in the main square, Piazza del Popolo, but not all the bars allow them to enter. The owners refuse

the newcomers because they consider them to be dirty and quarrelsome. This attitude creates hostility.

It happens that many Sicilians prefer to avoid them and not seeing them, sometimes without even entering, even occasionally, in those bars where the presence of Tunisians is evident.

Other meeting points are the Piazza Manin, located in a central position and close to the center where there is the social life of Vittoriesi. The explanation for choosing this place lies in the fact that here the parish of Sacro Cuore is located, this being the only shelter and sustenance centre for immigrants.

Here, the priest assisted by few young volunteers, prepares hot meals, offered in the morning and evening, and he is also responsible for the collection and distribution of clothes while offering assistance to newcomers.

In this square a large number of them gather very early in the morning (from 5:00 to 6:00) in order to wait for Vittoriesi offering as cheap labor and occasional "black jobs", for the whole day in the farm. Sometimes meals are also included. They gather in the same square, in the late afternoon, when they finish work and have some "free time" to have a chat with their fellow friends, forming many small groups or sitting wherever possible. Sometimes they can be "hundreds" in cafe or game room.

Another place of reunion, especially in the early hours of the morning, is the Market Square of Flowers, a big structure for the marketing of this product, situated on the outskirts of the town along the axis that goes from Vittoria to the sea, in the district Macconi, rich in greenhouses.

Here, too, immigrants gather waiting to be hired for the day. Many of them do not come back in the evening, because landowners use to keep them in their funds. They accommodate in small rooms used for sheltering tools. Sometimes they are offered meals. Of course there is a mutual benefit in this custom. The employer has the possibility to monitor the harvest and shelter from the bad guys, the immigrant perhaps has the chance to feel a bit more secure and independent, away from the town and the problems that it entails.

Another point of reference for the immigrants is the weekly market, where they buy not only food and clothes, but also items aimed at furnishing the houses under construction in their country of origin. They also buy other household goods, which will be brought to Tunisia to resell them in order to maximize the savings.

On Saturday night and Sunday they rest, and it is possible to see them walking in the main street, or still in the square, dressed in a different way, less sloppy, someone even fashionable. Even those who live permanently in the country estates, come to the

town, many have a car, but most of them use mopeds, cheaply bought. One can easily understand when there is a special day for them, by observing their actions: they drink a little more, especially beer, laughing and joking with each other using higher tones of voice.

Sometimes they exaggerate, and often "raise the elbow", this is the basis of their fights involving many of them, in these cases they can become violent. Sometimes it is necessary to involve the police, there can be wounded persons, with large cuts done by a knife or caused specially by broken bottles.

In fact, they have created a problem of public policy, from this point of view, for the most part they are stopped by the police for control of documents, state of drunkenness, fights. The Western way of life is certainly tempting and paradoxically the Tunisian independence accelerated the process of Westernization.

This process has affected all the sectors of immigrant life: from political and economic to cultural life, implying an increasing spread of education and a process of secularization.

In particular, this change can be seen in the migrant women, who are more emancipated (the propensity of limiting births) and tend to dismiss their old traditional dress and replace them with modern ones. They also tend to use the patio for new leisure activities.

By the 1980s, Vittoria became a national reference standard, not only because it hosted the highest number of North-African immigrants, but also because of its emerging model of openness within the agricultural framework, proving that if the first obstacles of hostility are overcome, there is a good chance for a small multicultural society.

## Conclusion

Immigration to Sicily started in the late 70s and has increased at a giddy speed since then. Immigrants come from Africa, Asia, Middle East, Latin America and also from some eastern European Nations. Several laws have been passed regarding immigration: no. 39/1990, no 40/1998 and the law no. 189/2002.

A lack of serious intercultural project, factious and unfair information, and a growing number of illegal immigrants resulted in a negative perception of foreigner. Indeed, the financial and economic advantages due to the presence of legal immigrants do not justify the irrational xenophobic attitude that has developed in our country.

Nevertheless, this unfavorable condition, which worsened due to the present economic crisis, has not discouraged immigrants, who in spite of the difficulties have succeeded in carrying out

alternative forms of work. Some immigrant communities are no longer looking for employment but are adopting a business's outlook and setting up self-employment activities (BRUSA C., 2002).

An evident example of this tendency is provided by numerous wholesale and retail shops, restaurants and stands opened by the Chinese. Senegalese also seem to be more interested in self-employment with the creation of phone centers and money transfer. North African run ethnic shops and take away kebabs shops with favourable results.

However, after more than forty years, the process of integration of immigrants still appears to be rather problematic. Furthermore, the process also involves the immigrants' children, who were travelling to Sicily since the early nineties to reunite with their families and to eventually forge a new life path. In this context schools and cultural association play a pivotal role in order to enhance social integration and preserve identities and culture.

### References

- AA.VV., *Human Development Report 2003*, Oxford University Press, 2003.
- BRUSA C. (a cura di), *Processi di Globalizzazione dell'economia e mobilità geografica*, Società Geografica Italiana, Vol. LXVII, Roma, 2002.
- BRUSA C. (a cura di), *Immigrazione e multi cultura nell'Italia di oggi*, Milano, FrancoAngeli ed., 1999
- CARITAS/MIGRANTES, *Immigrazione. Dossier statistici 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010*, XVII, XVIII, XIX e XX rapporto, edizioni Idos, Roma 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010.
- DI BLASI A. (a cura di), *Geografia, Dialogo tra Generazioni*, Atti del XXIX Congresso Geografico Italiano, Bologna, Pàtron editore, 2005.
- DI GENNARO G., LO VERDE F. M., MORO G. (a cura di), *Il Mezzogiorno dopo la grande regolarizzazione. Tre approfondimenti regionali; Campania, Puglia, Sicilia*, Milano, FrancoAngeli ed., 2006.
- FAMOSO N., *Movimenti migratori, diversità e convivenze*, in BRUSA C. (a cura di), *Immigrazione e multiculturalità nell'Italia di oggi*, cit.
- LODIGIANI, R., *Donne migranti e reti informali*, in *Studi Emigrazione / Etudes Migrations*, XXXI, Roma, 1994.
- NEROZZI S., *Immigrazione e mercato del lavoro in Sicilia: un'analisi dei dati INAIL*, in *StrumentiRES*, rivista della Fondazione RES, anno III, n. 4, Unicredit, Palermo 2011
- NOZZA V., PEREGO G., FEROCI E., *Il Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 1991-2010: 20 anni per una cultura dell'altro. Introduzione al XX Rapporto sull'immigrazione*, in CARITAS/MIGRANTES, *Immigrazione. Dossier statistico ...2010*, cit.
- RIZZO C., *Lanterne rosse: la presenza cinese a Catania*, in CAMPIONE G., FARINELLI F., SANTORO LEZZI C. (a cura di), *Scritti per Alberto Di Blasi*, Bologna, Pàtron editore, 2006, pp.1349-1360.
- ROSATO V., (a cura di), *Accoglienza e inserimento dei migranti*, in *Studi Emigrazione / Etudes Migrations*, XLVIII, Roma, 2011-
- SORBELLO M., *Provenienza, distribuzione ed integrazione degli immigrati nella città di Catania*, in CARLO BRUSA (a cura di), *Processi di Globalizzazione dell'economia e mobilità geografica*, Roma, Società Geografica Italiana, Vol.LXVII, 2002, pp. 251-266.