

# How ICT has Changed the Agenda of Italian Migration Studies and Affected Italian Migrants Descendants' Identities

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Internet started in 1993, with 130 websites, in 1996 their number grew to over 200,000, while today there are over 234 million. Such media revolution has had a deep impact also on the scholarship on migrations. My presentation will show, through the analysis of the activities of *Altreitalie* Center, how the ICT has contributed to the development of the scholarship on migrations and of new forms of Italian glocal identities.

*Altreitalie. International Journal of Studies on Italian Migration in the World* started in 1989 to create a forum for scholars of various disciplines from every country on Italian migrations and Italian communities. Up till then the mainstream studies on Italian migrations in Italy had dealt with the push factors: the economic impact emigration had in Italy, remittances, legislation, social impact, political emigration, but on the whole there were very few studies on the settlements of Italians abroad<sup>1</sup>. The aim of the journal was: to bridge the gap between Italian and foreign scholars in Canada, Central and South America and Australia and to start what now we

call a transnational dialogue on a transnational subject.

We immediately took the Internet opportunity: in 1996 we created a website and put *Altreitalie* on line. It was the first Italian journal to appear in full text and free on the web. The web helped the development of the transnational scholarship on migrations and started to break the long standing tradition which saw history of emigration and history of settlement as two separate fields of investigation.

## **Passengers' lists**

The data banks on ship passengers lists were created in 1993 and since 2000 they are on line. There are three separate data banks containing the transcription of the information contained in the passenger lists of the ships that arrived in New York, Buenos Aires and Vitoria, (Italian nationals only).

The United States data bank was created by Temple University, Balch Institute and Center for Immigration Research (Philadelphia), directed by Ira Glazier. It contains the files on about 200,000 Italian emigrants recorded in



the Ship Passenger Lists who arrived in New York between 1880 and 1891<sup>2</sup>.

In Argentina, the research work was conducted by the Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latino Americanos, directed by Luigi Favero. The Argentine data bank is made up of 1,020,000 files on Italians who arrived in Buenos Aires between 1882 and 1920. The information is taken from the landing lists (*Registro general de los inmigrantes* and *Lista de inmigrantes*)<sup>3</sup>.

In Brazil the information covers about 27,000 Italian emigrants who arrived in Vitoria between 1858 and 1899.

The use people made of our passengers' list tell us much about identity. In ten years we have had more than ten million visits to our website! We soon noticed an increase of visitors from Ar-

gentina (where the roots rush had not started yet) and Brazil. The website and the lists were used to obtain information to get Italian citizenship papers in order to leave the country.

"Rush" to citizenship began with the "discovery" made by descendants of Italians living abroad to have the right to recognition of Italian citizenship. In Argentina during the '70s, the years of the military dictatorship, having an Italian citizenship in many cases could mean the difference between living or dying. Later, in the late 80s, early 90s, was the economic crisis to give a further boost in research of the acquisition of citizenship. The boom of the requests, however, broke with the economic crisis of 2002. We then started, together with the Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos (CEMLA), a research and it came

out that Italian passport was asked to go to Europe. Spain was the first country of emigration, Italy came second with the US. In fact, as was confirmed by other inquiries, most of the Argentines with Italian citizenship felt more culturally related to Spain than to Italy, probably because of the language<sup>4</sup>.

### **Glocal identities: Argentina/ Piedmont**

I will give you another example of how we employed the web in doing research on migration. Two years ago, under request of a group of Argentine women of Piedmontese origins belonging to an ethnic umbrella organization, the FORO delle donne piemontesi d'Argentina, the Region Piedmont asked Altreitalie Center to organize a research on the history of the Piedmontese women in the country. The request was prompted by a desire of Argentine women of Italian descent to understand their ethnic cultural identity, but also to replenish a vacuum in the country's history, since the history of immigrant women in Argentina is one of the many stories that had not yet been written<sup>5</sup>.

In order to develop our research, we built up a semi-structured questionnaire, based on 30 questions, which included cultural data, that was put online. The WEB made our research possible since, even though Italian migrants in Argentina are concentrated in specific areas, they are also spread in the most remote sites of the big country. Thanks to the engagement of the FORO, who advertised and promoted the survey via WEB through the whole country, we were able to obtain 1.176 contacts. 835 questionnaires were sorted out as com-

pleted and used for the statistical work. The second part of the inquiry consisted in collecting tens of in depth interviews, to have qualitative material to interpret the questionnaire. Skype was an useful tool for many of these interviews.

As mentioned above, Italian/Piedmontese identity in some cases was discovered because of the political and economic crisis in Argentina. At the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties, in the course of seven years of dictatorship at least 30.000 people disappeared, of whom 200 were Italian citizens and approximately 10.000 of Piedmontese origins. The dictatorship forced many young people to leave Argentina in the attempt to escape from prison torture and murder. In this occasion many Argentines seemed to remember their not so distant European origins.

The Italian passport was seen as a gateway to the European Union and therefore used as a kind of Visa to the European countries which offered the best conditions concerning employment and language facilities. The consequence was a growth of 300 % of Italian residents in Spain of whom roughly 60% came from Argentina. This erroneously called "return migration" had very little to do with the traditionally called cultural identity. It was rather a glocal identity at work. In fact those who choose Italy had the chance to get in touch with the ancestors' culture

As we have seen another "rush" to Italian citizenship<sup>6</sup> and the option of moving to the Peninsula occurred during the massive economic crisis which invested Argentina in 2001. Our survey shows that very few did emigrate.

Only 6% of the women had children who emigrated. And of these, only 16 % went to Italy. Confirming the results of our previous research, the big majority went to Spain (more than 70%) while 24% migrated to other European countries. Most of them moved alone (65%) pushed by economical motivations (78%), or social and familiar reasons (respectively 21% and 13%).

Also research done on Italian descendants in Brazil shows that the first country of emigration of Italian Brazilians is the United States<sup>7</sup>. In this case too global identities push for a search of an European passport to move to other western countries.

The role played by the web was conspicuous: through the data banks people were able to find their ancestors and gain an Italian passport, the browsing on Google maps helped them in getting acquainted with the place before leaving; emails helped them in getting and keeping in touch with relatives and so on.

### **Diaspora media: blogs, online communities**

Another facility created by the web is the possibility to meet on line to discuss topics related to Italian roots.

In the field of Italian American Studies, the oldest blog H-ItAm was created in 1995-6 by Italian American scholar, Dominic Candeloro. According to his creator, "The listserver, - which he calls - "a virtual Plaza" soon developed into a high tech information machine spewing out facts, opinions, and announcements that range from the sublime to the ridiculous to the repetitive"<sup>8</sup>. In the blog one may follow the discussion on Ital-

ian ethnic identity. «The topics which have elicited the most response focus on the negative media image of Italian Americans and how to deal with those negative stereotypes. More light-hearted strings of discussion have occurred concerning "La Befana," "Malocchio," "Sauce v. gravy a term for *sugo*," "Italian gestures," and "Nicknames." As is clear from edited log sampling, anything even remotely connected to Italian and Italian American life is a fit topic for the H-ItAm list.» The website, create to ease the dialogue among Italian American scholars, soon became transnational, connecting people all over the world. Today H-ItAm, a member of H-Net Humanities & Social Sciences OnLine, provides an interactive network/forum for scholars and activists relating to the Italian American Experience, and more generally, the ethnic culture of the Italian diaspora worldwide.

As far as Europe is concerned, recently a research was done by Francesca Romana Seganti on the relevance of blogs. The Web, in Seganti's words, «is used to liberate the "Italian self" which cannot be expressed during the working day due to the fact that migrants work in a foreign environment»<sup>9</sup>. The Chat-line is a tool used to «synchronize» the Italian self with the British environment. As the sociologist Rosa Tsagarousianou argues<sup>10</sup>:

'Diasporic media do not merely enable their audiences to «be in two places at once» but effectively give them the opportunity of producing new spaces where remote localities and their experiences come together and become «synchronised». the processes of self-im-

agination as a diaspora require diasporic institutions, which construct and sustain a diasporic space of communication and exchange where definitions of the diaspora are elaborated and reproduced.’

Online and offline activities supported by IAL promote cultural continuity and special efforts are made to mobilize the positive common experience of the Italian culture. In conclusion, it is difficult to ignore the potential capacity of online Italian media for developing a new Italian «diasporic» identity.

### **Museums and virtual museums**

An element not to be overlooked is that the first migration museums, including the best known Ellis Island built in 1990, were born simultaneously with the web. As it had happened to the mass migration of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the birth of photography, new media still have a role in shaping migration.

The spread of local museum on Italian migrations in the past few years has shown the relevance of the web in terms of visibility: a website is to make the museum accessible to the world audience.

The National Museum of Italian Emigration (MEI) was created to network the various museums and research centers that at local or national level had been dealing with Italian migration and to connect them virtually. The emigration museum is located in Rome at the Vittoriano, a highly symbolic location, and aims to compensate Italy’s neglect for its migratory history by combining virtual and traditional forms of exhibitions.

To conclude, the web, is not only a useful tool to connect scholars but also, if not to create, certainly to help improving glocal identities, which characterized migrations since the beginning of migrations.

## Notes

- 1 With very few exceptions: Grazia Dore *La democrazia italiana e l'emigrazione in America*, 1964, the anthropologist Carla Bianco' *The Two Rosetos*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1974. In Florence Giorgio Spini started doing research on the religious diaspora of the Valdesi. In the 1970's Anna Maria Martellone published *Una Little Italy nell'Atene d'America. La comunità italiana di Boston dal 1880 al 1920* (Napoli, Guida 1973). For a complete review of Italian migration studies prior to the 1980's see Emilio Franzina, "Emigrazione transoceanica e ricerca storica in Italia: gli ultimi dieci anni (1978-1988)" which goes much beyond the periodization indicated in the title, in *Altreitalie*, 1, 1989, pp. 6-56.
- 2 The following information is available for each passenger:: name, surname, sex, age, level of education, any relationship with other passengers, port of embarkment, last residence, destination, type of transit, accommodation on board, profession, name of ship, date of arrival.
- 3 Information on: name, surname, marital status, sex, age, any relationship with other passengers, level of education, profession, religion, port of embarkment, accommodation on board, name of ship, date of arrival.
- 4 G. Bramuglia e M. Santillo, "Un ritorno rinviato: discendenti di italiani in Argentina cercano la via del ritorno in Europa" in *Altreitalie* 24, 2002, pp. 35-56; Alvise del Pra' e Maddalena Tirabassi, «L'America latina: motivazioni per il riacquisto della cittadinanza», Fondazione Migrantes, *Rapporto Italiani nel mondo*, Aa. Vv., 2007, pp. 357-69; CARPOS e Fondazione G. Agnelli (a cura di), *L'immigrazione extracomunitaria in Piemonte. I flussi di rientro dall'Argentina*, Torino, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1990.
- 5 The results of the research have been published in M. TIRABASSI, *I motori della memoria. Le piemontesi in Argentina*, Torino, Rosenberg e Sellier, 2010.
- 6 In fact there was also a migration flow during the early nineties due to the economic crisis occurred at the end of the eighties although the numbers are not comparable to the "rush" of 2001-2002.
- 7 C. Azzolari, G. Carbonella, A. M. Graziano, C. Patti, L. Severo e E. Scrolli, *Gli italiani in Brasile. Una indagine sulla doppia cittadinanza*, 2002.
- 8 Dominic Candeloro, H-ItAm A Virtual Piazza for Italian American Studies, *Altreitalie*, 19, 1999, pp. 87-103.
- 9 F.R. Seganti, *Building the Italian Diaspora Online: the Case of the Latest Generation of Italians in London and its Presence on the Web*, Ph. D Dissertation, London, London Metropolitan University, 2007.
- 10 R. Tsagarousianou, «Rethinking the Concept of Diaspora, connectivity and communication in a globalized world», *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 1, 1, 2004, pp. 52-65, p. 62.