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**“The integration of young immigrants in Europe:
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SOCIO-CULTURAL INTEGRATION OF YOUNG IMMIGRANTS IN ITALY

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Socio-cultural integration of immigrants

During the last few years, the process of socio-cultural integration of immigrants in Italy was characterized by considerable lacks: at the same time, though, some steps forward have been undeniably made.

Hundreds of thousands foreigner are in a condition of *lodging difficulties* (up till 860,000, according to recent estimations), or at least of “precariousness” for reasons of accommodation: that is, they are legally staying but cannot yet register as residents in their municipality, often because of lodging problems. About 12-15% of immigrants solved the problem by purchasing the house they were living in. 116,000 of them bought a house in 2005 (14.4% of overall buyers, the 20% in Rome), while 72% rent their houses.

The Italian provisions on immigration pay great attention to the *cultural mediation* as an activity which can unite in harmony Italians and newcomers. Cultural intermediaries, most of which are immigrants, are about 2.400 (according to Creifos); $\frac{3}{4}$ of them are women. In 4 cases out of 10 they have a degree and attended a course in order to work as intermediaries, nearly always in a condition of precariousness, mainly in educational and health services.

Conditions of insertion and *participation* are inadequate: 6 immigrants out of 10 would like to have the right to vote, while the main concern for 1 out of 5 is to find a house and a job. We must however point out that all around Italy more and more experiences of social aggregation of foreigners are carried out through forms of associationism which can be free or formally organized, as in the case of provincial or town councils formed by foreigners.

We must also underline that there have always been complaints in matters of *citizenship* acquisition, both for law restrictions and bureaucratic applications of the law itself.

Such deficiencies are not only found in the provisions, but in several aspects of social life as well. In 2005, 867 cases of discrimination were reported to the National Bureau Against Racial Discrimination (Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali, Unar), mostly in the Centre-North; such acts concern several different aspects of daily life, from work (28.4% of problems mostly concerning access to job market and *mobbing*) to lodging (20.2%).

The 7,583 *unaccompanied minors*, coming mostly from Romania, Morocco and Tunisia, run the risk to become illegal immigrants when they come of age, and it is necessary to improve the measures for their insertion, as a report of Anci hopes: 346 municipalities declared that they took responsibility for unaccompanied minors.

Socio-cultural insertion: the Italian model for integration

The most characteristic feature of immigration in Italy, in the international panorama of migrations, is the rapidity of the changing of our country from one of great emigration to a one of great immigration; the awareness of the importance and irreversibility of such process is still more recent and painful.

Italy follows a "Mediterranean" model of integration: it characterizes all countries of Southern Europe, but finds here one of its most complex expressions.

Our model is based on an incorporation, an unspoken agreement which over the last years has made a certain acceptance of immigrants possible in Italian society: immigrants are received as workers accepting disagreeable jobs now rejected by Italian workers.

Though in Italy some actions have been enforced in order to foster socio-cultural insertion of immigrants, there are still conditions of social exclusion which, at different levels, hamper and curb their access to jobs, to school, to lodging, to social and health structures, to the participation to public life.

In such a situation, the insertion of second generations is a great challenge. Provisions, services, social politics must all adjust to the change and regard it as a resource and a chance to grow instead of a problem to solve and "reduce".

Young immigrants and socio-cultural integration

Until a few years ago immigrant population in Italy was composed by a strong prevalence of productive subjects, i.e. mostly adult male workers, while now a progressive rebalancing of age brackets is going on, with a remarkable increase in the number of minors.

In this context, indeed, children coming in Italy from the immigrants' mother countries through procedures of family reuniting, as well as the births of children in Italy, have significantly contributed to re-define the migratory project: because of these facts, in immigrant families the need to integrate in Italian society in a more significant way have begun to emerge, together with new aspirations and expectations for the "social success" of their children.

On one side, this responds to an actual need for rejuvenation of population; on the other side, though, it forces us to face different thoughts and challenges, started by *integration* or, more specifically, *social integration*.

Speaking of social integration means conceiving immigration as a long-term phenomenon, which through different generations and phases can reach a full social citizenship based on mutual respect between different cultures and on actual chances for immigrants to take part and actively contribute to social life, in a condition of equality with Italians.

Immigrant children and teen-agers represent the most advanced level in the process of cultural confrontation of families inside society, as they are the ones who have the first contact with institutions and socialization environments.

The most influential among the main factors which can create hindrances to young immigrants' integration is clandestineness. It entails serious consequences, such as precarious and inadequate lodging, poverty, poor health conditions, insufficient or no school attendance. As a consequence of irregularity and of poor economical conditions, families often move from a house to another thus creating strong disruptions inside themselves, particularly for children. Regularizations become a starting point to be continued in integration, both for adults and, even more, for minors.

In Italy, there are an estimated 491,000 **foreign minors**. The **unaccompanied minors** (mostly males) are estimated to be 7,583, but we can deem them as certainly more numerous, as the rigidity of laws forces many of them to remain clandestine. Romania is the country where the relative majority of unaccompanied minors come from (37.2%), followed by Morocco (20.1%) and Albania (16.8%). These kids, who often remain clandestine, live in conditions of extreme precariousness: this shows the difficulty of starting long-term integration processes.

Another significant element is discrimination: it confines the immigrant minor in a specific condition of disadvantage, which must be distinguished from that of the other categories of minors "at risk", who are disadvantaged as well, but not "different" in their ethnic or immigrant origin. Diversity because of origins can sum up, as often happens, to socio-economical disadvantage; but it remains as a stigma which, as such, gives a specific feature to the condition of immigrant minors.

In addition to such problems we must also consider another aspect, "subjective" so to say, involving a potential risk of non-integration of the immigrant minor. It is well known that the fact of coming from an immigrant family or belonging to an ethnic minority is associated to a higher level of difficulty in developing "capacities" of minors. Some of the problems are: the influence of linguistic and cultural barriers; the negative impact of stereotypes and biases on an ethnic and racial basis; values which are different from those of the majority of social components. Such instances are supported by statistical evidence, which show the school difficulties of young immigrants and the smaller presence in working, artistic and professional positions requiring a high level of education.

In Italian **school** foreign presence is strongly polycentric, as foreign students come from 187 countries. According to MIUR, in school year 2004-2005 the first countries as for the number of students are Albania (16.7%), Morocco (14.4%), Romania (11.5%), China (5.2%) and former Yugoslavia (3.5%). The overall number of foreign students is 361,576, increasing of 20% per year and with an incidence of the 4.2% on the school population (a percentage reaching the 8.4% in Emilia Romagna, the 7.8% in Umbria, the 7.1% in the Marche, the 7.0% in Veneto and Lombardia, the 6.5% in Piemonte). Among chief towns, the greater incidence is in Milan (11.6%) and Reggio Emilia (9.8%). The higher percentage of failures of foreign students in comparison with Italians seems to be mostly due to language problems: the difference between Italians and foreigners widens as the school level rises (See *Indagine sugli esiti degli alunni con cittadinanza non italiana. Anno scolastico 2003- 2004*, Miur 2005).

Despite of globalization, the number of foreign students enrolled in universities is still low: 38,000 out of 2,300,000 foreign students in the world (in 2004). It is a poor attendance, if compared to the 10-12% of the world total in the United Kingdom, Germany and France. Besides, scholarships available for students coming from developing countries are too few. In academic year 2004-2005 enrolments were 8,758, and 4,438 students took a degree.

The way towards integration of Italian school, especially primary one, is still long (i.s. must still go a long way towards integration): the problem of learning Italian language is very serious, and it represent a strong cause for failures and delays. A valid system for planning the learning of Italian as a second language is still missing. From this point of view, too, cultural diversity – though it is also an enrichment - becomes some sort of handicap which characterizes specifically immigrant minors compared to other categories of immigrants and involves further elements of difficulty and disadvantage in reaching the level of integration to be hoped for in a democratic society founded on the respect of rights.

The process of building an identity

The main hypothesis is that foreign children and children from foreign families are exposed to a double process of acculturation and socialization, as they are given the hard task of mediating between two separate worlds which tend to propose different models of ethnic identity: family and new society. Minors thus find themselves forced to propose their own model, which is an extremely complex operation.

In this situation, the foreign minors try to recombine the difficulties they live in, adopting one of the four solutions which follow. Such solutions present numerous aspects, due to the numerous factors of the relationships between different subjects: the foreign person, his/her family, the old society, the new society, the communities of compatriots already living in the new country etc.

The first solution foreign minors may adopt is the so-called *cultural resistance*. The term "resistance" describes the attitude of immigrants towards the new society and their effort to refer, mostly or exclusively, to original ethnic culture and identity proposed by their parents, accepting all its aspects, be it language or food, clothes or social behaviour. In this case,

relations with Italians tend to be reduced to minimum too, and this determines the creation of subgroups in which chances of exchange and communication with the outside world are also reduced, while, inside the family, traditional behaviours are strictly observed. They are proper "encapsulated communities", which often live in circumscribed areas.

This solution entails an apparent risk: if it's not properly managed and handled, it ends up making the minors feel always as strangers and "others" in the country they now live in.

The second solution is the opposite of the first one, and it is related to the process of *assimilation*. The foreign minors in this case fully adhere to the identity proposal of the new society, rejecting or even recanting their original culture. The pros of this solution are: a strong will to learning and adjust to the new country, a high quantity and quality of exchanges with Italians. The risks, on the other hand, are: the possible depreciation of some own features, the increase of conflict towards family ties and the break-up between generations. In this process, moreover, sometimes a paradoxical situation comes up: on one side, the predominant cultural model of the new country is actually perceived by minors as a winning one, i.e. the one proposed in daily life (by school, TV etc.); on the other side, the process for a true assimilation has virtually disappeared or it has never been carried out. The consequence is a lag between the expectations of the minors and the actual receptiveness of the society.

The third solution may be defined as that of *marginality*; it is usually regarded as the most frequent condition. The identity of foreign minors is confused. They live on the fringes, both those of the new culture and of the old one, incapable of proposing a real alternative in identity. In this case, foreign minors feel they don't belong to any of the two cultures, and they put on a passive attitude, incapable of choosing between family ties and the fascination of emancipation.

The fourth solution, finally, is the *double ethnicity*. Generally there is a slow but deep analysis, in which identity is formed by a continuing confrontation between worlds, i.e. family and new society, which does not get to ultimate or extreme resolutions, but to a process of selection and adjustment. In this case, foreign minors are able to achieve an identity made up by harmonization and integration of values of both cultures, and, most important, a sense of double belonging is developed.