

*This work provides a comprehensive and multidisciplinary overview of contemporary diasporas, through both comparative reflections and ethnographically based case-studies from outstanding scholars, academics and humanitarian practitioners. The book is aimed at a wide audience, including academics, researchers and free scholars, but also to students, activists and experts in the field of migration, of intercultural studies and human mobilities by offering an explicit comparative mobilities analysis and a high-quality scientific overview on contemporary diasporas through a wider disciplinary angle.*

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EDITED BY ELISABETTA DI GIOVANNI  
CONTEMPORARY DIASPORAS



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# CONTEMPORARY DIASPORAS

## Mobilities Between Old and New Boundaries

EDITED BY ELISABETTA DI GIOVANNI

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Contesti Antropologici  
Anthropological Contexts



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MOBILITIES BETWEEN OLD  
AND NEW BOUNDARIES

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Contesti Antropologici / Anthropological Contexts- 1

*Contemporary Diasporas. Mobilities Between Old and New Boundaries*

Edited by Elisabetta Di Giovanni

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# Migration, then and now as a resource

LOREDANA BELLANTONIO

The migratory phenomenon that is currently affecting Europe and, in particular Italy, is not, as is commonly believed, a recent event, since more than thirty years ago, already represented a significant reality, although smaller and, above all, with fewer deaths. The US organization Human Rights Watch, for example, found that only in the years, from 1998 to 2011, 13.500 migrants have died in the sea<sup>1</sup>. After the rejections of the 2009 policy, the Libyan route is back to being used; landings are taken up on a massive scale, with numbers never seen before. Since 2011, the number of deaths has increased tremendously<sup>2</sup>.

For some time the press has been alarmingly talking of invasion (Francalacci 2014: <http://www.panorama.it/news/esteri/immigrazione-emergenza-europa>), feeding fears and hostile feelings. The “tabloid” newspaper headlines help to strengthen the image of migration as a threat. Two researchers have recently analyzed the main national Newspapers published from February to April 2011, and registered there was a higher frequency of landings on the Italian coast, to highlight the media logic and the weight that they have «in

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch *L'intolleranza quotidiana. La violenza razzista e xenofoba in Italia*, New York, 2011; Andrea Pira, *Immigrazione, Human Rights Watch: “Dal 1998 morti 13.500 migranti in mare”*, in “Il Fatto Quotidiano”, 18/08/2012, <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2012/08/18/immigrazione-human-right-watch>.

<sup>2</sup> *Immigrazione, raffica di sbarchi in Sicilia: arrivati oltre 950 clandestini*, in “Il Giornale.it”, 16 giugno 2013, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/immigrazione-raffica-sbarchi-sicilia-arrivati-oltre-950>; *Immigrati, venti anni di naufragi e tragedie nel Canale di Sicilia*, in “Repubblica.it”, 19 aprile 2015, <http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/04/19/news/immigrati>.



building the opinion about complex issues, such as precisely the migration» (Ieracitano, Rumi, 2014: 86). The more oriented newspapers have chosen «to connote the emergency situation by adopting a perspective that has varied between the humanitarian dimension, sometimes pietistic, sometimes as a social problem» (2014, 87). Lacking in the analysis of the causes of migration, and «events were generally traced back to the macro category of the North African crisis» (Ibidem). The actual terminology, which takes an emotional connotation defines migrants as «desperate castaways, poor» and even livestock, damned, disinherited, nameless people, displaced». Titles dwell on the landing consequences for the host territory. It highlights the emergency of the situation resulting in the request for intervention by national and European institutional organs; «sometimes it results in the emergence of foreign invasion syndrome... in terms of a management impossibility, of a far-reaching phenomenon» (Ieracitano, Rumi, 2014: 89). Often the articles highlight the difficulties and disadvantages of the host in the economic area: how much they cost. Newspapers, more politically oriented, «to support the idea of a foreign invasion threat, denounced the risk of masking behind the reception of political refugees, illegal immigration» (Ivi). The record of landings has recurrent elements such as , public anxiety, the lack of control, from solidarity to pietism, from insecurity to violence, but only few investigations basically examine the conditions of the countries from which people migrate and the reasons why thousands people land to unknown territories, or even consider the difficulties and risks migrants have to face.

Italy is found more and more xenophobic or, in the words of anthropologist Annamaria Rivera, more and more racist. «One has the impression - wrote the author - they are now collapsed despite the weak embankments of censorship and self-censorship, which until recent years made problematic the explicit ruling of racist public discourse» (Rivera, 2008: 55). The definition of this process is not strange to some press that has helped to bring together all the negativity and the reasons of discomfort that the Italian population live on a single "object": migrants. As claimed by Rivera, «the constant exaggeration and manipulation of the facts of crime with foreigners as protagonists real or wholly imaginary, [...] the orchestration of real media campaigns against this or that target group were the substantial contribu-

tion it has been giving to the construction of the scapegoat, to which the reasons of the crisis, suffering and social tensions are given» (Ibidem). Few reflection on the undeniable fact that always the humanity has also faced long journeys certainly not just for the pleasure of discovery, but, more often, by necessity; emigration has always been for all mankind the last hope, the only resource available not to succumb on their native territories.

In a recent interview, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argued that «in the current “emergency immigrants”, there are few changes. From the beginning of modernity, fugitives from the brutality of war, despotism, and hopeless life, they knocked at our door. For people from this side of the door, they have always been “strangers”, “other”» (Goldkorn 2015: <http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2015/06/15/news/bauman>). But the “other” were also we, the Italians or, more generally, European, and we have “knocked” on the borders of many other peoples. The “other” scares us because, continues Bauman, in the aforementioned interview, «foreigners could destroy things that we like and threaten our ways of life. Foreigners know too little to be able to read their ways of behaving, to guess what their intentions are and what they will do tomorrow. Our ignorance of what to do in a situation that we do not control is the major reason for our fear» (Ibidem). Our discomfort is embodied in the image of the foreigner, the immigrant bearer of discomfort and disease. And so, «in times of heightened lack of existential certainties, the growing insecurity, the new immigrants are perceived as messengers of bad news. They remind us of what we would have preferred to remove: we make this as powerful forces, global, distant of which we have heard of, but which remain for us ineffable, what these mysterious forces, are able to determine our lives, and indeed regardless and ignoring our own choices» (Ibidem).

Some time ago, after numerous shipwrecks, appeared a cartoon on the social networks featuring the theme of emigration: a little white girl, of course, which evidently represented the joined-up thinking in the public mind, expressing a false conscience and an attitude of disbelief, she turned to a young black boy asking: “Why emigrating, if you will probably die on the journey?” The answer, laconic and concise, “You know, it’s about that “probably”. It suffices to explain that we are through a forced emigration phenomenon, in which travels

are undertaken because there are no other possibilities. That probably, does lead on the reflection of the tragedy that drives thousands of people to seek salvation in the territories believed cozy and flourishing; parents who provide their children the only chance of survival through an insecure and uncertain destination trip. We are facing an epochal tragedy that especially, we the Italians, should not fail to understand, given our recent past of emigration, of violence, abuse and exploitation. Emigrating, as then as now, is presented as the only resource available to mend from the wounds of poverty and situations beyond the individual control, of which reasons lie elsewhere, often originated in distant contexts. As reported by the National Museum of Italian Emigration in Rome, only between 1876 and the First World War, 14 million Italians have emigrated around the world and about 7.6 million people headed to America and more than 6.1 million to Europe (mainly in France, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland and Germany, while a small part in the UK and Belgium). At that time, the exodus interested mainly the northern regions of the Country, especially Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Piemonte, which provided themselves about 47 percent of the entire migratory contingent. In the following decades the migratory primacy passed to the southern regions: nearly three million people emigrated from Calabria, Campania and Sicily, and almost nine million from other Italian regions. After World War II began, the exodus to other European countries and to Canada, Argentina and Australia, brought the total number of Italian emigrants nearing thirty million. Although estimation cannot be considered entirely reliable, the number is certainly higher, saying that even now we are seeing numerous migrations, especially from young people, by a phenomenon known as "brain drain." Italians are also in top positions amidst migrant populations followed by Portuguese, Spanish and Greek. The flow has stopped in the seventies, as a result of the economic recovery that made think of an economic "miracle." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has calculated that, in 1994, the number of Italian people in the world, is allegedly more than 58 million. But our historical memory is short-lived (Bellantonio 2016). General welfare conditions, coming after the "economic miracle" of the 60's of 1900, have helped very quickly to forget the sufferings and the tragedies experienced by our people. Yesterdays and the contemporaneous forced migration flow, is not the result of free choices addressed

to meet the needs of knowledge, the best and most satisfying wages. The Wars, the systematic violation of human rights, environmental degradation, extreme poverty, shortages of food and water, political instability, ethnic conflicts, terrorism, are all “expulsive” factors, that contribute significantly to the international migration process. The decision to embark on the journey, and to abandon a precarious living situation and hardship, is also affected by that information, available on the places where the quality of life is very high, where food and water are not a luxury and the waste of life resources are quietly an ordinary praxis. The lack of humanitarian corridors, in the host countries, makes them unprepared with inadequate reception policies to support an impact so massive, and also contributes to the rise of restrictive and repressive legislation, in order to control the flow. Clandestinity, to which migrants are forced, encourages various forms of exploitation by criminal organizations; migrants also live in conditions of marginalization (social, occupational, economic, legislative, health condition) in a kind of subordination. This facilitates the rising of a feeling of revenge, from the host countries population, expressed mainly with rage and hostility towards migrants, leading the path of xenophobia. These are episodes of intolerance and violence given to one or other of the contenders; news is reported by the newspapers and the media, and serve as food and supporting reasons undertaken by migrants or by the host and the events are manipulated and taken out of context. In Italy – left outside alone from the rest of Europe to face the problem - the large presence of migrants determined by the constant landings, has resulted in a political and social “explosive” situation which displays now those who want the implementation of a real welcome plan and those ones who endorse a massive return of migrants to where they belong. There has been a number of negative and aggressive attitudes, by all accounts, with expressions like “send them back home”, “sink the barges”, “Italians don’t have enough money for a month, don’t give money to them, the migrants”, “let’s help them at(their) home”. Such this behaviour, whether is a manifest attitude of xenophobia and racism, it is in the same time the result of severe economic and employment crisis moment, which has been going on since 2008, empowering fears and revulsion, terrorism and rising crime.

Roberto Saviano, a journalist and writer whose attention is always paid to the analysis of organized crime, in an essay published some years ago, on a popular Italian newspaper, highlighted back then, the dangerousness of any general assertions that claim that all migrants are criminals or that their presence increases violence and degradation (Saviano, 2009). He keeps telling, therefore, two episodes «extremely significant, that entered the history of our Republic» occurred in 2008 which, according to the author, are presented as «the two most important spontaneous uprisings against the Mob in Italy, which are not coming from Italians but from Africans. In ten years it has happened only twice, from the wake of the received outrage and the end of endurance, public spontaneous protests, which were not organized by any associations, trade unions. Africans made it». Saviano refers to events in Castel Volturno, near Caserta, on nineteenth September 2008, arisen after the murder of, by the hands of Camorra, six African migrants<sup>3</sup> and those in Rosarno, in the province of Reggio Calabria, twelfth December 2008<sup>4</sup> when «two Ivorian employees were wounded and one of the two was in very critical conditions. The same evening, hundreds of foreigners - like the wounded boys, used and exploited in the fields - gathered to protest. [...] People gathered in the square, against the presence of the 'Ndrangheta, which dominates like it were a natural right. Such this episode had never happened before. [...] Nobody fought back, just Africans. They indeed defended all the citizens of Calabria, all Italian people. They defended the right to work and live with dignity and the right of the land» (Saviano, 2009). Besides, the above mentioned facts and the possible role of facilitator played by Africans, the observation on the relationship between migrants and Mob organizations, is very important. And yet, Saviano asserts: «When you generalize, you do a to crime organizations. They live in this generalization». And again: «Having an attitude to closure and criminalization helps Mobs' organizations,

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<sup>3</sup> *Strage nella terra dei Casalesi: 6 morti. Agguato contro il clan degli immigrati in "Repubblica.it"*, 18/09/2008 <http://www.repubblica.it/2008/09/sezioni/cronaca/caserta-sparatoria/caserta-sparatoria/caserta-sparatoria>

<sup>4</sup> *Rosarno, ancora proteste dopo la spartoria di ieri in "Repubblica.it"*, 13/12/2008 <http://www.repubblica.it/2008/10/sezioni/cronaca/ndrangheta-arresto/rosarno-immigrati-2/rosarno-immigrati-2>

because it forces each migrant to relate to crime organizations, because they represent the main channel for approval, whatever document, house, even ads in newspapers and legal aid. And it is not the role of the “beautiful souls”, as some would say, but it is the way Italian Mob exploits every weakness of migrant communities. Unless they are protected by the State, they are going to be exposed to their will, to the racket» (Saviano, 2009). Antagonisms, tensions, intolerance and prejudices do not facilitate the resolution of the problems of international migration. The solution must be found in the political field and it must be based on a cultural matter, leading to accept others as people. But, recently news clearly show that this kind of truth is ignored by those people who want to defend selfishness and ancient privileges. Among the general lack of interest and charges of intolerance for the disruption that the presence of so many migrants causes, including racist statements and acts of repulsion, these men’s destiny slides over our shoulders and consciences without leaving any remarkable sign. Unfortunately, our society is actually far from realizing a common presence of all, since it is still fails to root the very concept of tolerance. Though Italians themselves, know better the concept of migration, matter of fact they represent without any doubts, amidst all Europeans, the ones who massively have migrated, if truth must be spoken, between 1870 and 1970, an amount of 27 million of Italian people left their country to live abroad<sup>5</sup>. Our memory seems to be very weak, it prefers to forget about the past in order to hide behind the repulsion, waving old and new fears, prejudices and hatred. The real problem is the fact Italians, mostly young ones, has no many notions of their ancestor’s past. May be due to a lack of the educational system, the general misinformation and the distance from the elders, the drama of migration is indeed unknown or maybe willingly hidden.

In the well-known Gian Antonio Stella’s book, *L’Orda. Quando gli albanesi eravamo noi*, (Stella, 2002), starting from xenophobic facts, he intends to demonstrate the fact that the Italians abroad were not different from the hundreds migrants in Italy nowadays. Stella

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<sup>5</sup> Cfr.: Franzina Emilio, *Le fonti per la storia dell’emigrazione*, in Treccanti.it, 2011, s.v. “emigrazione italiana”.

talks about heartbreaking stories and the struggle of so many Italians have been through, being accused of felony or the most ignominious acts. Well, about Italians, or migrants, a lot of prejudice and fear were hanging back then, and now the same story is being repeated towards this new migration flow in our country. The massive migration flow of Italians to America began since 1885. Even before, there was a vast migration mainly to Europe from the northern people of Italy, which happened to repeat every year, i.e. the case of “mondine” or weeders who, generally in springtime, used to move to the paddies of Vercelli, Novara and Pavia. Transoceanic departures with permanent settle down were just few numbers. The continental and transoceanic migration flow was meant to rise after the population increase in 1870. After World War I, it neared in 1920 about 615.000 units per year and grew until 1927, when the rising of Fascism restricted the flow itself. Truth to be told, Government wasn’t against migration, in fact, the so called remittances, id est the earnings sent from migrants to their families, were used to fatten the local economy, because the lack of handcraft left in the country, made the cost of it very expensive. Italian emigrants headed to America, after a long (three to four weeks) - piled in the holds of ships carrying goods from America to Europe and return often offered the free trip - arrived in the ports of the major cities like Boston, Baltimore, New Orleans, New York, living their traumatic impact with the new lands. At this point, maybe you we read the word of a witness-partisan, a witness of the past, a writer, now also a little overlooked, that in 1889 publishes *Sull’Oceano*, an “hybrid” text, a bit novel, a little travel reportage, a little diary. The reference is to Edmund De Amicis, best known for those readings school pages on his book *Cuore*. *Sull’Oceano*, beyond the moralistic and nationalistic intent which is interwoven with almost the entire production of the writer and journalist Oneglia, it is a lucid, but also participated and moving testimony on the massive Italian emigration, as well as a strong social protest. Embarked on “Galileo”, he begins the Atlantic crossing of twenty-two days from Genoa to Buenos Aires, with 1,600 emigrants to South America. The passenger, chronicler and witness De Amici’s, comes into contact with a different humanity, made up of immigrants, especially of the north of Italy, direct, mainly, to Argentina and Uruguay. Among them some burghers, craftsmen, farmers, but also many illiterate, poor and devoid of any “trade”.

«Most of the migrants, as always, came from the North of Italy, and eight out of ten from the countryside. Many Susa valley, Friuli, farmers from lower Lombardy and high Valtellina: the farmers of Alba and of Alexandria» and yet Como weavers, carpenters in the province of Verona, of the surroundings of Lake Maggiore, in Liguria and Tuscany. Few, at that time, the southerners. A varied humanity «all provinces and all professions», all sharing the hunger and misery. Among the passengers also many women with their children, but many also were «alone, or not accompanied by a friend; and among these, several Ligurian, who went to seek his employment as chief or maids; others went to seek a possible husband» (De Amicis, 1889: 25). Except for a few travelers, «most of them, speaking the truth, were forced to emigrate by hunger, having unsuccessfully debated for years, under the claw of misery» (Ibidem, 40). The precarious conditions from which they fled, with the illusion of a better life, often were disappointed again before touching the new lands because many of the emigrants were already been deceived and defrauded by exploiters promises of wellness. The travel conditions of the third-class migrants were always uncomfortable when, at times, even inhuman. Numerous accidents and shipwrecks, including that of the “Sirius”, which sank in 1906, caused about three hundred casualties, or that of the “Princess Mafalda”, which sank in 1927. Let us read De Amicis: «And all this misery is Italian! - I was thinking my way back to the stern. And every ship that sails from Genoa’s is filled of it, and will sail from Naples, Messina, Venice, Marseille, every week, all year long, for decades! And yet you could call luckier, for the trip at least, those migrants of Galileo, than the many others who, in years gone by, for lack of space in the hold, had been camped out on the deck, with animals, where they lived for weeks and suffered a deadly cold; and many others who had risked to starve to death, or to die poisoned by battered cod or corrupted by water» (Ibidem, 79).

Arrived in America, immigrants, moved to gloomy buildings, were first subjected to a medical examination; then they had to pass an exam/interview. Finally, if accepted, they could enter to America. The severity of controls made famous Ellis Island, in New York, which was even called “The Island of Tears”. Ellis is one of the forty islands in the waters of New York, which is in front of Manhattan, the main island on which stands the majestic heart of the “Big Apple”. In



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1894, following the decision of the Federal Government to take control of several migration flows particularly in southern and eastern Europe, became a switching station for immigrants.

Ellis Island was nothing more than a station where health and identity were checked and every arrival was registered. From the average of five per day, to peaks of ten thousand heads; a place where people must pass before they could go around the Continent. Families were separated, men on one side, women and children on one another. Each migrant was seen by a doctor. The migrant who passed the medical examination, went into the "Record Room" where he was questioned by some inspectors. To each and every one of the, was assigned an "Inspection Card" with a registration number. Ellis Island has been active until 1954. Today it hosts the "Museum of Immigration". More than one hundred million Americans can trace their origin to the United States to a man, a woman or a child across Ellis Island. The "Museum of Immigration", opened in 1990, after the main building has been restored, recreated the atmosphere of the place through film and photography exhibitions that celebrate America which fundamentally defines itself through immigration. It hosts the permanent exhibition "People of America," which tells American immigration over four centuries, providing a statistical picture of immigrants (origin, reasons for the presence, destination, race etc.). There are also numerous photos of immigrants. Some rooms show the difficulties that people faced in order to take part in the American daily life: the low wages, the problem of language, lack of medical care and unhygienic house conditions. In the midst of so many witness, they include images and documents that tell a story of Italians in America, or better, as noted by a signboard, "La Merica".

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