Moving on Italy as a stepping stone in migrants' imaginaries

Corresponding Author: Dr Anna Tuckett, LSE postdoctoral fellow, Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics & Political Science. a.l.tuckett@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

This article explores feelings of disappointment and failure among mi- grants in Italy. It argues that the ubiquitous circulation of discourses of disappointment can be traced to restricted possibilities for upward mobility produced by the legal, economic, and social forms of marginalization that migrants in Italy encounter. Disappointment, it contends, is the product of an imaginary migration trajectory that views moving on from Italy as the only way to be successful. Arguing that some low-status migrants can be considered "flexible citizens," I examine how my respondents' desires for mobility are shaped by opportunities and restrictions that are integral to contemporary capitalism, as well as by the differentiated inclusion into the global market that these produce. By their very nature, however, I show how these desires neglect other kinds of future imaginaries and arguably impede the chance to build greater equality for migrants and their children in the future.

Introduction

The disappointment of those who aspire to migrate but ultimately never leave their homelands has been extensively discussed in anthropological literature on migration (Carling 2002; Gaibazzi 2014; Jansen 2009; Vigh 2009). Examining migrant experiences in Italy, in this article I place the focus on those who *have* migrated but who still feel as though they have failed due to their lack of onward mobility. My aim is to show that this sense of disappointment is largely due to the limited opportunities that Italy offers migrants for upward mobility (Fullin and Reyneri 2011; Reyneri and Fullin 2011; Reyneri 2004). In large part these limitations stem from the racialized discrimination that migrants experience on a daily basis and a deep concern that, despite having grown up in the country, their children would also face limited opportunities due to their "migrant" status. It is also, however, related to an imaginary migration trajectory in which moving from Italy is thought to be the only way to success.

A sufficient number of rumours and accounts of "successful" migrants who have managed to take advantage of Italy's relatively flexible permit system, and the possibilities offered by the Schengen Area (Tuckett 2015), circulate in order to create a sense that on-migrating is possible if only one has the wherewithal to do it. These narratives and imaginations of on-migration play an important role in shaping the understanding of life trajectories for those who remain. Drawing on Ong (1999), I label those who did manage to on-migrate from Italy as "flexible citizens". Such a theorisation highlights several key points which will be developed throughout the article. Firstly, it demonstrates the embeddedness of non-elite migration projects within contemporary logics of capitalism. Secondly, it underlines how this logic,

which places success and failure on the shoulders of individuals rather than on broader structures and migration policies, infuses the experience of migration. And lastly, it shows how this logic prioritises the process of migration as the only route to life improvement, thereby eclipsing alternative avenues for social betterment that might otherwise be pursued.

Studies conducted in places with high levels of emigration show that understandings and imaginations of "home" and "away" are structured by unequal global power relationships in which material success and personal development are only thought to be achievable through migration (Bal 2013; Gaibazzi 2014; Gardner 1993; Gardner 2008; Vigh 2009). Focusing on the continued feelings of disappointment and personal failure experienced by those who have already migrated highlights how "hierarchies of globalisation" (Carling 2002: 37) mean that while most are incorporated into a globalizing world market, not everybody is able to benefit from it (Bal & Roos Willems 2014: 255). As I show, while studies have usually focused on those who are excluded from the migration process, it is also those who have left their homelands but still feel "unsuccessful" that experience this differentiated inclusion into the global market.

Context

This article is based on 19 months' fieldwork conducted in a Northern Italian city. While Italy made a rather late entry as a "destination" country, with substantial numbers of migrants arriving only in the 1990s, in the last fifteen years its migratory inflow is second only to Spain (Fullin and Reyneri 2011: 118). In line with other Southern European countries, migrants are ambiguously viewed as "useful invaders"

(Ambrosini 1999). Unlike in some Northern European countries, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, where many migrants have fulfilled a demand for high-skilled labor (Reyneri and Fullin 2011: 50), in the Italian context migrant labor is desired, but only in order to fulfill low-tech and unskilled occupations, which generally hold little possibility for social mobility in spite of individuals' educational achievements (Calavita 2005; Reyneri and Fullin 2011; Reyneri 2004). The vast majority of employed female migrants work as (live-in) carers and cleaners in private homes, filling the much needed care gap not provided by the state for the country's ageing population. And male migrants are largely restricted to manual labour which has a low social status (Fullin and Reyneri 2011: 143).

Exclusionary and restrictive immigration laws, which ensure that most migrants only have temporary and insecure legal status, cement migrants' subordinate position in the Italian labor market and wider society. Under the current law, legal status is contingent upon presenting a regular work contract. Consequently, regardless of how many years one has lived in the country, losing one's job or being employed unofficially in the "black market" can result in the loss of legal status. The long term permit and citizenship offer possibilities for secure legal status but both are notoriously difficult to obtain. Immigration laws ensure, therefore, that migrants remain in poorly paid and low level jobs, since otherwise they risk falling into "illegality".

This structural economic and legal marginalization is reinforced by the everyday racism and discrimination that migrants in Italy are routinely subject to. Among much of the native population, the reaction to migrants' arrival has largely been characterized by racism and xenophobia (see Cole 2005; Grillo and Pratt 2002). The national media, which focuses on entry and control of migration flows rather than

possibilities for meaningful integration, has played a central role in the production of such attitudes (Cachafeiro 2002; Mai 2002), while the right-wing separatist party the *Lega Nord* (Northern League) is a key player in refining and perpetuating this rhetoric with prominent party figures frequently voicing racist and anti-immigrant views in the media. It is this interweaving of economic, legal and social marginalization, with limited possibility for upward mobility for migrants or their children, that shape and fuel this desire to leave Italy and thereby produce it as an inferior country in migrant imaginaries.

Fieldwork

Experiences with Italian immigration bureaucracy are characterized by long waiting times, changing laws, misinformation and the issuing of expired permits. In order to successfully navigate the immigration bureaucracy it is essential for even the most long-term migrants to have access to some form of advice provider. The migrant advice centre where I conducted the bulk of my research played a key role in helping migrants strategically navigate the shifting and uncertain terrain of migration bureaucracy, which I have called the Italian "documentation regime" (Tuckett 2015). The centre's main functions were to act as a drop-in advice clinic on issues relating to immigration law and to complete application forms on behalf of clients free of charge. These included applications for permit renewal, family reunification and citizenship. The advice centre was part of a trade union, which was significant in terms of the centre's role as a *patronato*. The term *patronati* refers to intermediary institutions attached to trade unions in which workers can receive free advice, assistance, protection, and representation (Agnoletto 2012: 13). Their role is to protect and

advocate for welfare users and ensure that the welfare system is functioning correctly. Although they are not part of the state infrastructure, they are state-funded since the state pays the *patronato* for each assistance file opened (ibid). In general, however, clients were unaware that the advice centre was part of the trade union and the vast majority whom frequented the centre were not trade union members.

Staff members at the centre were generally individuals who had previously been employed elsewhere within the trade union and had subsequently been employed at the migrant advice centre. Two of the seven employees were Italian citizens with migrant backgrounds, the remaining five were native Italians. Volunteers were key to the functioning of the office, in particular the reception counter. Volunteers tended to be either Italian students completing work experience or migrants.

Reflecting the diversity of migrant nationalities across Italy and the city where I was working, the clients who frequented the centre were a heterogeneous group hailing from all over the world. Clients were also diverse in terms of their personal trajectories. Some had recently arrived in Italy, others had been in Italy for decades, or were even born in the country. Some already held citizenship, while others were looking for ways to regularize their status. The peculiarities of the Italian documentation regime mean that legal status is highly fluid, and it is not uncommon for somebody who has been in the country for decades to lose their legal status. Documentation status does not, therefore, reflect length of time spent in Italy. Reflecting this diversity, the research participants discussed in this article were from all over the globe and held various kinds of legal status.

As a volunteer at the centre, I spent most of my time on the reception counter, but I also spent long periods of time with advisers at their desks in the back room participating in longer consultations. Much of my daily fieldwork was conducted in

the space of the centre, but over time I also developed close relationships with staff members, volunteers and some clients, so field research also took place in more intimate and social spaces.

There is No Future Here

For most migrants I knew who remained in Italy, there was a lingering sense of failure and disappointment. Analogous to the motivations that spurred initial migration, the desire to leave Italy was commonly framed in terms of trying to create a better future. Explaining why they did not want to remain, people described the racial discrimination they faced in Italy, as well as the associated lack of higher status job opportunities and the concern that their children would also face such discrimination. Biniam, a colleague at the advice centre who is originally from Eritrea, described living in Italy as akin to being in a "big prison", where he could not imagine his life improving despite his hard work and sacrifice. In particular, he was concerned for his baby daughter Olivia whom, he semi-seriously joked, he would send to England with me in order to give her a better future. Further shaping this sense of dissatisfaction was the notion that there were improved possibilities elsewhere. This belief was closely related to the fact that some people *did* manage to move on from Italy – either temporarily or permanently – which compounded the sense of personal failure and disappointment for those who were unable to.

A major cause of frustration and anger for migrants I knew was the sense that regardless of language ability, educational achievement, financial success or citizenship status, the colour of one's skin – or some other indicator of "otherness" – would mean they would never be truly accepted in Italian society. As Cole and Saitta

have recently observed in a poignantly titled afterword "Italy, dreams of a monochrome society?", the "master narrative emerging from opinion polls, political rhetoric and government policy and practice, is that Italy remains a white, Catholic nation rooted in Italian soil" (2011: 528). This narrative, they observe, is contradicted by the fact that a large number of migrants now live in Italy and make significant contributions to society. Most of all, it denies the emergence of a new Italian – "the youth of foreign origins" (ibid).

As Riccio and Russo point out, the racialized divisions which exist are "not a matter of mere cultural racism; phenotypic characteristics have also become more and more relevant in fostering Italian internal boundaries" (2011: 326). For Flavia Stanely (2008) this is because in Italy ethnicity and nationality are conflated, meaning that anyone who is not considered to be Italian (or a tourist) is demarcated as "*extracomunitario*" – non-EU migrant. This understanding of citizenship and nationality based on ethnicity means that being identified as an immigrant foreigner (rather than a tourist foreigner) is to be identified as an inferior other. The assignation of such a status is closely tied to exterior appearance and the assumption that Italian-ness can be detected through a certain kind of racialized body. Being defined as "other" in such stereotypical and negative terms based on appearance was a frequent cause for complaint among those with migrant backgrounds, all of whom experienced racism on a daily basis. As Al Badisi, an Italian citizen originally from Morocco recounted:

> Just this morning I was at the post office in Rosetta [small town north of the city]. I was filling in my *bolletta* [bill] and the woman working there was chatting to two *carabanieri* [military policemen]. The *carabinieri* turned to leave, calling out to the woman that they would pass by again. Then, I tell you, they turned their heads and looked pointedly in my direction. I know that they

meant it in reference to me, I was the only person in there and they were trying
to say I was a threat to the woman.

It was a similar story for Biniam, who told me: "when you get on a bus, people look at you suspiciously, as if you are going to rob their bag or something. Next time you're on the bus, look around. The immigrants are at the back and the Italians are at the front." In the case of female migrants, presumptions about criminality were expanded to include assumptions about prostitution. Chiara, originally from Eritrea, said the following: "do you know how many times men have pulled up in their cars on the side of the road while I'm waiting for the bus asking 'how much?' In broad daylight!"

These statements echo the way in which "*extracomunitari*" are portrayed in the media according to racialized stereotypes. Al Badisi and Biniam were perceived to be "*maghrebini*" and thus dangerous (Biniam was actually Eritrean but was constantly mistaken for a Moroccan), while Chiara, as a black woman, was associated with prostitution. Such discrimination against presumed "*extracomunitari*" also affected access to work and housing. Chiara described to me her long and depressing processes of searching for rental property. On meeting her, prospective landlords who had been enthusiastic to rent to her over the phone quickly made up excuses as to why the property had suddenly become unavailable.

These assumptions hold particular challenges for the second generation in Italy, where there is no discourse that acknowledges the existence of Asian or Black Italians as a cultural category. Rather, as Andall writes in relation to her work with the second generation in Milan, "being black and being Italian were perceived as mutually exclusive categories" (2002: 400). When I spent time with Chiara, who migrated to Italy from Eritrea when she was 13 years old, I frequently witnessed the

cultural confusion that is caused by being both Black and Italian. Chiara's manner of speaking, gesticulating, walking and dressing signify her Italian-ness, yet her dark skin and long braided hair simultaneously mark her out as an "immigrant". I often noticed a palpable moment of delay and confusion between when somebody first saw her and then heard her speak. Fully aware of the ambiguity she created for people, through her dark sense of humour she challenged these restricted ideas of identity and "Italian-ness". A joke she recounted to me was that while she cleaned the stairs of the building in which she lived, she allowed people to think that she was Signora Chiara Mariotti's cleaner and then revelled in their discomfort when she turned up to her building meetings as *the* Signora Chiara Mariotti: no-one would match the Italian name with her dark skin.

Recent literature has shown that these racist and discriminatory attitudes are increasingly being contested, in particular by the second generation through involvement in migrant associations (Riccio and Russo 2011). As suggested by Chiara's joke above, challenges to such prejudice are also being levelled through more informal everyday processes. In particular, the increasing presence of young ethnically diverse people speaking with strong regional Italian accents, who dress, move and gesticulate identically to their "native" peers, undermine these seemingly restricted categories of identity. Yet, despite these transformations and challenges, the structural obstacles which exclusionary immigration and citizenship laws create entrench the marginalization of migrants and their children, fundamentally limiting possibilities for change. Within this context parents were worried about their children growing up as second-class citizens. The chance of being professionally successful in the country seemed to feel unrealistic, even for "migrants" born and bred in Italy.

Such ideas were set against the belief that better futures could be found elsewhere. These imagined lives in other countries were developed through electronic media and contact with family and friends. When referring to life in other European countries people would exclaim, "black people are doctors and lawyers!" "There are shops where you can buy all the Eritrean ingredients," or "your permit gets sent to you in the post". Such positive images of accepting, cosmopolitan, and efficient countries were contrasted with Italy, which was viewed as discriminatory, inefficient, and backward. The conditions that pushed migrants into marginalized positions in Italian society, and created them as the subaltern "other", led to their disparagement of the country for its perceived lack of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and development. Although these opinions had a defensive use, they also fuelled migrants' sense of failure: many ultimately blamed themselves for their lack of mobility.

Italy as a Stepping Stone

The disappointment and sense of personal failure of those who remained was compounded by the continuously circulating stories and rumours of those who had managed to on-migrate. While in general, encounters with Italian immigration bureaucracy are characterized by uncertainty, arbitrariness, and delay, its ambiguous nature also creates scope for flexibility and manipulation (Tuckett 2015). As one colleague at the advice centre frequently observed with regard to Italian bureaucracy, "the impossible is possible".

In the stories that follow, Italy was often represented as a kind of "soft option", as migrants took advantage of the country's relatively flexible permit system

in order to scope out opportunities in other European countries (Schuster 2005). With the freedom to cross borders enabled by the Schengen agreement, migrants could use Italy as a place to access and renew permits while working elsewhere and eventually permanently on-migrating. Migrants were also aware of the benefits offered by particular host countries, with Scandinavian states particularly favored due to their reputation for strong social welfare systems and high levels of employment. On the other hand, decisions about where to on-migrate were also determined and constrained by diplomatic and legal frameworks. Thus social imaginations (Appadurai 1996) of migration destinations were shaped by, and constructed on, the basis of stories, rumours and experiences, as well as pragmatic knowledge about concrete laws.

For those who did manage to on-migrate, individual on-migration stories varied significantly. Some on-migrated almost immediately on arrival, as part of a pre-arranged plan. Others on-migrated years later, sometimes after even having acquired Italian citizenship. Still other individuals left Italy several times before finally moving back to Italy and settling there. The differences between people's trajectories depended on various factors, such as their "home" country, whether they had family members or contacts in Italy or elsewhere, or the location for which they had managed to access visas. On the other hand, there were many migrants who may have desired to on-migrate at some point in the past, but who had since established themselves in Italy and no longer wished to uproot.

Cases of successful on-migration were not uncommon, but they also held a mythic quality. Stories of these cases were frequently the subject of conversation at the centre. They were good fodder for gossip, but they also held a practical function for clients who wanted to know how they could go about emulating a certain aspect of

a particular case that they had heard about. Such stories circulated within communities while gossiping at social occasions, as well as between communities in work places or at various sites within the documentation regime where people were invariably forced to wait around. Their circulation acted to shape imaginaries about future possibilities, as well as acting as practical guidance. The following cases illustrate two different types of on-migration trajectories. The first set of case studies draws on members of the Eritrean community who on-migrated from Italy. The second case study focuses on another typical trajectory: the use of Italy as a legal stopping base while travelling to other European countries in search of improved employment opportunities.

Through my close connection with Biniam and Chiara, siblings who respectively worked and volunteered at the centre and whom were originally from Eritrea, I came to know many individuals from the Eritrean community. Conversation and gossip over coffees and meals at people's houses and at Eritrean bars frequently revolved around the migration trajectories of community members. As well as my exposure to these stories due to my association with the community, focusing on Eritreans' on-migration is illuminating in two respects. Firstly, as I will explore below, Eritreans were more likely than other groups to successfully on-migrate from Italy. Secondly, and relatedly, because of the frequency of on-migration stories (both successful and unsuccessful) the importance of stories and rumours in shaping people's imaginaries of future migration trajectories, or their lack of mobility, was particularly pronounced.

Given the allegations of human rights abuses against Eritrea's president, which include denying his citizens human and democratic rights, freedom of speech, and legally obliging them all to undertake indefinite military service, Eritrean citizens

have relatively good chances for successfully claiming asylum. In comparison to other migrants who would not be eligible for asylum, Eritreans have two further incentives to leave Italy. Firstly, they have possibilities to gain legal status that others would not (although, as will be detailed below, the Dublin Regulation means that traversing through Italy is risky). And secondly, because Eritreans have a fairly good chance of successfully claiming asylum, those countries that provide welfare provision for refugees – which Italy does not – are, understandably, more desirable to this group. Decisions about where to on-migrate are heavily influenced by the trajectories of those who have gone before. "For the Eritrean community, Italy is just a stepping stone," Biniam told me one quiet afternoon in the centre sitting at the counter.

> No-one ends up staying here. Of the group I arrived with [other Eritreans who arrived in the same year], there were eight of us and now there is only me left. Eritreans are like sheep: they all follow each other. It used to be Great Britain but now Sweden is the country of choice. I would say about 95 percent of Eritreans who come to Italy these days move on elsewhere.[1]

In recent years, Biniam informed me, Eritreans have been less successful in claiming asylum in the UK, whereas chances of having claims accepted were perceived to be higher in Sweden, where refugees also enjoy a more generous social welfare system than in Italy, receiving housing and benefits.[2] When I asked him who remained in Italy and why, Biniam responded that those who have family or other obligations may be forced to remain, while others were "*deficienti*" (half-wits) and unable to migrate elsewhere.

The prevalence of on-migration among Eritreans was confirmed by the countless numbers of such nationals I met in my 19 months' fieldwork, many of whom were about to leave or had already done so. There was the *Professore*, as Biniam called him, who had previously been a university lecturer in Asmara. After several years spent saving money in Italy, he decided to move to the United States where he would try to claim asylum. He undertook a dangerous journey that involved travelling from Italy to El Salvador and Mexico before entering the United States as an asylum-seeker. While the United States was often discussed as the desired destination for many Eritreans, the risks and costs involved in getting there were too high for most.

In other cases, migrants tried to ensure that their children on-migrated. Several parents I knew successfully applied for their children to join them in Italy through family reunification, only to swiftly send them away to other European countries. Fekle spent months struggling to apply for her 16 year-old son Simon to come to Italy from the Sudan through family re-unification. Weeks after he arrived, Simon hid in a lorry and crossed the channel to the UK, where he claimed asylum as a 14-year-old. His application was successful and an English family has since adopted him. Although Fekle was again separated from her son, she considered his on-migration a success and was comforted by the belief that he faced a brighter future.

The flexibility allowed through eligibility for asylum or humanitarian protection is, however, severely curtailed by the Dublin Regulation which dictates that would-be refugees should remain in the first country they arrive in.[3] Therefore, asylum seekers arriving on the shores of Italy must claim asylum in Italy. This means that those who had on-migrated elsewhere, and who had successfully been granted asylum, were risking future deportation back to Italy. Unaware of such laws, many

Eritreans have claimed asylum in the UK, and other countries, after originally passing through Italy. Those who fall victim to efficient immigration bureaucracy may have their asylum revoked, sometimes even years later, after it is discovered that records of their fingerprints already exist in Italy.

In this respect, migrating to the US or other countries not involved in the Dublin Regulation is safer as records of claimants' fingerprints will not be on a shared database. One way to reduce the risk of discovery was to avoid claiming asylum in Italy altogether. Indeed, many of those I knew who had successfully gained asylum elsewhere in Europe had previously been living in Italy, not as refugees, but rather with family or work permits, and some even had citizenship. While the fingerprint databank for asylum claimants was likely to be crosschecked, the border agency of the new destination countries cannot feasibly crosscheck asylum seekers' fingerprints with those of all legal migrants living in countries that have signed the Dublin Regulation. Therefore, by *not* claiming asylum in Italy and instead obtaining a permit through other means, these Eritreans were effectively remaining beneath the radar and were unlikely to be caught out when they eventually did claim asylum in the UK, Sweden or elsewhere.

An Eritrean woman called Yanet had adopted this strategy. She was the partner of Dewat, a close friend of Biniam and Chiara. Dewat had lived without papers in Italy for ten years. He eventually obtained a permit during the 2009 domestic worker amnesty. This amnesty, in theory, gave undocumented domestic workers who had been working in Italy before April 2009 the opportunity to gain a permit through their employer. In reality, however, the law gave the opportunity to be regularized to anybody who was able to find, and usually pay, an "employer" (Tuckett 2015). Luckily for Dewat, Chiara was able and willing to "hire" him, and in 2010 he

was successfully issued with a permit. Yanet had lived in Italy for over five years where she held the long-term permit, public housing, and a job in a cleaning company. Several years previously, during the time Dewat had been trapped in Italy due to his "irregular" status, Yanet had moved to Sweden, where she had claimed and been granted asylum, and was now living as a refugee with their two young children. Living in Stockholm she received the full benefits to which she was entitled as a refugee. Meanwhile, in Italy, she remained, on paper, a legal resident. Her public housing was still in her name (where Dewat lived) and she continued to receive contributions for maternity leave. In Sweden, Yanet lived under a different name and, because she had never claimed asylum in Italy, was very unlikely to be discovered.

I met Yanet when she made a return trip to Italy in which she was organizing paperwork related to her resignation from the cleaning company. Eventually her paper existence in Italy would fade, as her documents relating to her legal status, public housing, and employment among others expired. Happily living in Stockholm, this was not a problem. The key to Yanet's success was her foresight in not having claimed asylum in Italy which would have meant her fingerprints were recorded in the database which EU member states share. In 2011, after Dewat received his permit through the amnesty in Italy, he joined Yanet in Sweden. Paradoxically, while his previously "irregular" status had confined him within Italy's borders for over ten years, his permit to stay in the country enabled him to leave it. Two weeks after arriving in Sweden under a different identity, Dewat claimed asylum: his claim has since been accepted. Although he had previously attempted to claim asylum in Italy, he was unlikely to be caught out by the Dublin Regulation as more then ten years had passed since he had made the original claim, at which time the electronic database for

fingerprints did not exist. Without this technology it would be very difficult for Dewat's double claim to be discovered.

Legal base

It is not only by claiming asylum elsewhere that migrants on-migrate from Italy. The long-term permit also offers possibilities for starting a life in a new destination, as it is technically valid for work purposes in all Schengen-member states. Ironically, for many the motivation to obtain this permit is to leave Italy. Those who were holders of the long-term permit, or desired to be, frequently visited the centre to ask for information about which countries it was possible to work in and how. Some did permanently migrate to other countries if they found work, while others would live elsewhere for a period of time before returning to Italy and possibly on-migrating again if they could. Sharif, the husband of a Pakistani woman I knew, was mostly absent from family life. For weeks at a time he went to different Schengen member countries, including Norway, Sweden and others, in attempts to find secure employment. While away he worked on short-term contracts doing manual labor or factory work. Sharif's wife told me how her husband thought there were better employment options outside of Italy, and once he had found something permanent the whole family intended to migrate. The long-term permit gave him the freedom to follow employment opportunities across borders as it did not require renewal and therefore did not necessitate presenting evidence of income in Italy for such renewal. Whether individuals did permanently migrate elsewhere or left Italy only for brief periods of time, Italy could be used as a platform to enter Europe or as a base where legal status was more easily obtainable and from where other opportunities in Europe could be scoped out. Since "illegal" status immobilizes migrants, Italy's easily

manipulated rules and access to permits made it a country which migrants could use as a legal base until they were either securely set up elsewhere, or until they made Italy their final destination country.

Flexible Citizens

For those who took advantage of Schengen freedom of movement laws or cheap flights to travel to Sweden in order to claim asylum, the motivation to leave Italy ran parallel to the logic that had compelled them originally to migrate: that of moving to places which offered better opportunities for life improvement. Leaving Italy was also bound up with decisions based around families and networks which were often situated in a historical context of colonialism. However, while recognizing the complexity and nuances in migrants' decisions to on-migrate, I suggest that we can view my respondents' stories as revealing a wider discourse situated within the "cultural logics of accumulation" (Ong 1999: 6) in which improved social and material capital were desired.

While Ong's high-flying and elite Chinese respondents faced significantly different concerns to those which preoccupied my informants, her arguments surrounding flexible citizenship have relevance here:

Flexible citizenship refers to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions. In their quest to accumulate capital and social prestige in the global arena, subjects emphasize,

and are regulated by, practices favoring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to markets, governments, and cultural regimes (1999: 6).

She further notes that, "those most able to benefit from participation in global capitalism were those able to celebrate flexibility and mobility" (1999: 19). As I have shown here, flexibility and mobility are also valued by migrants drawn from more humble backgrounds, who, although lacking elite status, nonetheless aspire to the "good life". Therefore, while flexible citizens are viewed by Ong as part of a global elite whose mobility is enabled by their wealth, the stories presented here have shown how the marginal and seemingly immobile can also be considered as flexible citizens in a contemporary global marketplace. While the long-term permit is intended to confer secure legal status in Italy, for my informants it was used, with varying degrees of success, as a means of accessing more profitable labor markets elsewhere. As we have seen, by taking advantage of the Schengen Area, those with long-term permits and good networks of contacts were able to engage in Europe's diverse labor markets and accumulate capital. While Italy was not perceived as the ideal destination country, given the relative ease with which documents could be accessed, for flexible citizens it was able to serve as a legal base when opportunities elsewhere were more restricted.

On-migrating was not solely rooted in economic instrumentalism. In reference to migrants' hopes for their children, individuals not only hoped that in the future their offspring would be able to enjoy improved circumstances for capital accumulation, but also that they would be free from racist and xenophobic discrimination. As observed by Calavita (2005), migrants' experiences of racism, legal precarity and economic marginalization in Italy are deeply intertwined. Among

my informants, many felt frustrated by the fact that, regardless of their citizenship status, integration or wealth, they would nonetheless continue to be considered *"immigrati"*, with all of the negative associations and limitations for social mobility that the term implies. Of course, my interlocutors' ideas regarding racial equality elsewhere may have been idealistic. Indeed, Ong notes how in the US her rich Chinese respondents struggled to be recognized as holding cultural capital, since there was a "mismatch… between the symbolic capital and its embodiment" (1999: 91-92). Despite this, however, my informants held firm to their conviction that outside of Italy their opportunities for social and economic mobility would be improved. As such, their desires to leave Italy were embedded in their aspiration to gain social and economic capital for them and their children, as well as to escape racialized discrimination.

In labelling those who left flexible citizens I do not wish to romanticize their on-migration. As we have seen, migrants were on-migrating in order to take up subordinate positions in other societies, either in low-level jobs or as welfare-dependent refugees. Analytically situating non-elite migrants as flexible citizens, however, highlights the ways in which they are as equally embedded in the cultural logics of capitalism, transnationalism, and globalization as the high-flying investors that Ong describes. As the next section will show, this is important, not only in framing the practices of those who leave Italy, but also to accurately understand the situations of those who remain, who acutely experience the inequalities created by the uneven nature of globalization and capitalism.

Feelings of Failure

While the previous section largely described people who did actually leave Italy, for most such mobility is not possible. In reality, the standard permit (in contrast to the less-easily-acquired long-term permit) allows little freedom. Permit renewal is a time-consuming process, contingent on evidence of salary and employment (Tuckett 2015). An individual who has spent most of the year outside of Italy would be unlikely to hold the requisites needed for renewal, meaning that continued domicile and employment in Italy is necessary, unless one is prepared to become an "irregular" migrant elsewhere.

Despite these realities, there were sufficient accounts and rumours of successful on-migration stories to create a feeling among those who remained that it was their own personal inability to take advantage of opportunities, which had led them to remain in Italy and – as they perceived it – live a less successful life. Feelings of disappointment around one's staying in Italy were, therefore, dialogically related to the sense that there were improved possibilities elsewhere and that others were managing to take advantage of them.

This dialogical relationship is akin to that between "home" and "destination" countries, so often explored in anthropological literature on migration. As noted earlier, this body of work has focused on the experiences of those who remain in a locality from which there is a large amount of migration (Gaibazzi 2014; Gardner 1993; Gardner 2008; Vigh 2009). In relation to this, drawing on Bourdieu, Vertovec (2004) has coined the phrase "transnational habitus" to describe the extent to which transnationalism structures the experience, dispositions and practices of even those who never migrate. Within this habitus, geographic movement and economic success are inextricably linked, since in the minds of both migrants and non-migrants alike, "connectedness to the global labor market is seen as virtually the only avenue for

success" (Gardner 2008: 485, 488). Transnationalism is not, therefore, about equal global flows, but rather about dialogical relationships of power between localities (Gardner 1993, 2008) within which "mobility is the most powerful and most stratifying factor" (Baumann in Carling 2002: 38). While studies have largely focused on those who are unable to migrate, here the situations of those who *have* migrated but who nonetheless still feel immobile are considered. This adds a further layer to the "transnational habitus" as geographic movement is hierarchically ranked, with certain destinations imagined as more powerful than others. The following narratives highlight these "hierarchies of globalization" (Carling 2002: 37) in which individuals are differentially incorporated into the global market and benefit unequally, if at all, from it (Bal and Roos Willems 2014: 255). They show how this "transnational habitus", which dictates that the only way to get ahead is to migrate (Gardner 2008: 479), continues to structure and stratify the experiences of those who already have migrated. As I will explore, those who remained in Italy and did not become flexible citizens felt like failures. Drawing on Chiara's alternative view on "getting ahead" – described below – which is premised on the potential of group struggle to improve migrants' conditions, I argue that the grounding of the "transnational habitus" within the logics of the global labor market restricts people's imaginaries of how to achieve life betterment.

Contributing to the sense of failure and despondency for those who remained in Italy was a commonly held view among different communities that those who stay are either "*deficienti*" (half-wits) and thus incapable of leaving the country, or "*delinquenti*" (delinquents) profiting from the country's supposed flexible and clientelistic systems. Regardless of whether or not this stereotype is true, the negative portrayal of those who remained in Italy was contrasted with the positive depiction of

those who had left. During evenings out with volunteers and staff members from the centre, the conversation frequently turned to those who were no longer around. I learnt the names and characters of a set of volunteers who, with Chiara, had been part of the advice centre's original team. These people were described as political, bright, ambitious, and keen to fight for migrants' rights. Chiara would sigh nostalgically as she recalled various events and struggles that they had experienced together. "But now he is in your parts," she would say, referring to different individuals who had since migrated to the UK. If not living in the UK, they were in France, Belgium, or Germany. "Why did they leave?" I enquired of her. "To find better opportunities elsewhere… and because they were smart," she answered. In this sense, the centre acted as a microcosm for a wider pattern in Italy, in which the supposedly best and brightest moved on.

People from all different communities emphatically told me that those migrants who had settled in Italy – be they Moroccans, Tunisians, Eritreans, or from some other place – were not representative of that national group. Although he did occasionally go to Eritrean bars, Biniam always complained about those who frequented them: "only those with *teste dure* [hard heads – fools] are here [in Italy]. There is nobody to have a serious conversation with." On other occasions, when he did meet someone he liked, he would enthusiastically and positively discuss how this individual was different to the others and how he had been able to have an intelligent conversation about the political situation in Eritrea. Similarly, Medhi, a Moroccan volunteer at the centre, frequently warned me not to speak to certain of his countrymen: "they are delinquents, Anna, stay away from them." Like Biniam, he told me how in Morocco many people were intellectual and political but that here [in Italy] the majority were delinquent. Such a discourse about the "low calibre" of

migrants who remain in Italy further compounded individuals' own sense of failure. As such, my informants' denigration of Italy, adulation of perceived superior countries, and damning opinions of the type of migrant that remained in Italy made their own trajectory appear more negative than it ought to have been. While they ultimately attributed their situations to their own failure, their own circumstances in fact challenged such sweeping statements about Italy, and the kind of migrant that remained there.

If staying in Italy was perceived as indicative of failure on the part of my respondents, it did not mean that people did not get on with their lives or enjoy them. Furthermore, despite the frequent lamentations regarding the country, some people told me that they preferred life in Italy to that in countries such as Sweden or Norway. As I was told by Ahmed, an Algerian man, "life in Italy is better than in Norway. It is so cold there, and everybody just stays in their houses." Migrants' experiences were related to their personal circumstances, their country of origin, and the particularities of onward migration for those who shared those origins. For Biniam and other Eritreans, it was the sheer scale of on-migration from Italy that made for the sense of failure among those who remained. In contrast, individual achievement and economic success were reasons for migrants to become more sedentary. Among the Chinese people I spoke to, for example, there existed a much lower degree of on-migration – and of dissatisfaction as well. This could be related to the fact that Chinese people were more likely to own businesses, thus giving them better long-term options. Idris, Biniam's 50-year-old best friend who had previously lived in the United States, owned a cleaning business and did not wish to on-migrate. He worked long hours but had become relatively financially successful and, unlike Biniam and other Eritreans, was relatively satisfied with his life in Italy. Economic success or belief in such a

possibility was, therefore, a motivating factor to remain in Italy, even if it was not a reality for most.

Chiara, on the other hand, held a different and uncommon view of migrants who left Italy and what their departure signified for those who remained. Despite her highly critical opinion of Italy, she firmly believed that migrants should not on-migrate. While her brother advised those who could do so to leave Italy, Chiara passionately argued that it was the responsibility of today's migrants to make Italy a better country for the future. Although she whole-heartedly agreed that quality of life was better for migrants elsewhere, she did not think that leaving the country was the solution. During an argument with her brother over this topic, she stated: "it is our responsibility to stay here. Do you think it was easy in England or France when immigrants first arrived? They struggled for the way it is now". Chiara believed that time and commitment were needed from the first generation in order for the situation to improve for the next. She passionately argued against what she regarded as Biniam's defeatist "jump-ship" attitude, arguing that it was difficult to imagine a better future if the most intelligent and hard-working migrants continued to leave the country. She compared the situation to a "brain-drain" in which the best, most ambitious, and promising people migrate, meaning that the situation in the "home" country never improves. Chiara thus held those who had left partly responsible for the lack of development for migrants' rights in Italy. In her opinion, it was precisely those individuals who were needed in order to create change. Demonstrating her strong sense of social responsibility and justice, she argued that it was up to individuals like her to make the system better. "Us immigrants also have to take responsibility for the situation in this country. We can't only blame the politicians. If we want things to get better we have to work for it, like people have done before in other countries."

Discussing the drastic rise in the cost of permit renewal, Chiara exclaimed: "We [immigrants] have to get pissed off! We cannot accept this situation, we need to react. People like me can be the *portavoce* [spokesperson], but we need the masses behind us." For Chiara, collective action and solidarity were needed to improve the situation. Yet such views were not commonly held. Instead, possibilities for betterment were seen to lie elsewhere. This widespread understanding of Italy as a stepping stone country added a particular dimension to migrants' sense of disappointment and infused the experience of those that remained.

Chiara's view about on-migration also highlights the limitations of Appadurai's theory of social imagination. While his acknowledgement of the power and widespread nature of social imagination is pertinent, as Ong notes, "he gives the misleading impression that everyone can take equal advantage of mobility and modern communications" (1999: 11). Indeed, those such as Biniam, who were not able to on-migrate due to financial difficulties, show that access to the benefits of capitalism are far from equally distributed. When flexibility was not obtained, rather than identifying "the processes that increasingly differentiate[d] the power of mobile and nonmobile subjects" (Ong 1999: 11), those who remained in Italy attributed their immobility to personal failure. Indeed, Biniam's opinion that those who remained were "*deficienti*" was accompanied by an acute sense of his own failure to improve his life conditions by on-migrating. Moreover, as Chiara strongly asserted, the social imaginary based on mass-media and transnational connections, which posits migration as the only means to achieve success, is ultimately guided by the "cultural logics of accumulation" (Ong 1999: 6) that, by their very nature, neglect other kinds of future imaginaries. As Chiara argued, this neglect of collectivist imaginaries for

those remaining in Italy impeded the chance to build greater equality for migrants and their children in the future.

Conclusion

Like the social imaginary that drives initial migration flows, my informants' desire to on-migrate from Italy highlights the uneven and hierarchical nature of globalization, since not all destination countries are considered equal. The low-status and low-paid work to which migrants are restricted, and the racialized discrimination they suffer, accentuates their unequal incorporation into the global labor market from which they scarcely benefit. Like their initial migration, mobility and on-migration from Italy was seen as the only way to improve their life conditions. Italy's relatively malleable immigration laws, as well as the EU's freedom of movement agreements, allow migrants a certain amount of mobility, which encourage and concretize such imaginations of life elsewhere. Situating my informants' desires to on-migrate within the cultural logics of accumulation (Ong 1999: 6), I have shown that non-elite migrants can also be considered as flexible citizens. Yet the flows and flexibilities celebrated by capitalism are also intimately connected to the global inequalities it creates. For those who do manage to move on, their position as the most marginalized in society continues in a new setting, while those who remain wrestle with the enduring belief that they have failed. Imaginaries of better futures, meanwhile, are restricted to individual and family oriented projects rather than collective struggles to create a fairer and more equal society.

[1] Earlier generations of Eritrean refugees were more likely to stay in Italy due to perceived ties created through the shared colonial history (see Arnone 2008: 325).

[2]. In Italy those who have been granted asylum do not automatically receive housing or any kind of financial support.

[3]. The Dublin Regulation (previously the Dublin Convention) was originally set up in 1990. The principle of the Regulation is to ensure that asylum seekers apply for asylum in the first EU member state to which they arrive.

References

Agnoletto, Stefano. 2012. 'Trade Unions and the Welfare State in Italy. CISL, INAS and the Italian "Fourth Way"(1945–1960)'. *California Italian Studies* 3 (2).

Ambrosini, Maurizio. 1999. *Utili Invasori: L'inserimento Degli Immigrati Nel Mercato Del Lavoro Italiano*. Franco Angeli.

Andall, Jacqueline. 2002. 'Second-Generation Attitude? African-Italians in Milan'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (3): 389–407.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large : Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press.

Arnone, Anna. 2008. 'Journeys to Exile: The Constitution of Eritrean Identity Through Narratives and Experiences'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34 (2): 325–40.

Bal, Ellen. 2013. 'Yearning for Faraway Places: The Construction of Migration Desires among Young and Educated Bangladeshis in Dhaka'. *Identities* 21 (3): 275–89.

Bal, Ellen, and Roos Willems. 2014. 'Introduction: Aspiring Migrants, Local Crises and the Imagination of Futures "away from Home"'. *Identities* 21 (3): 249–58.

Cachafeiro, Margarita Gómez-Reino. 2002. *Ethnicity and Nationalism in Italian Politics: Inventing the Padania: Lega Nord and the Northern Question*. Ashgate Pub Limited.

Calavita, Kitty. 2005. *Immigrants at the Margins: Law, Race, and Exclusion in Southern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,.

Carling, J⊘rgen. 2002. 'Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (1): 5–42.

Cole, Jeffrey. 2005. *The New Racism in Europe: A Sicilian Ethnography*. Vol. 107. Cambridge University Press.

Cole, Jeffrey E., and Pietro Saitta. 2011. 'Final Remarks: Italy, Dreams of a Monochrome Society?' *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16 (4): 528–30.

Fullin, Giovanna, and Emilio Reyneri. 2011. 'Low Unemployment and Bad Jobs for New Immigrants in Italy'. *International Migration* 49 (1): 118–47.

Gaibazzi, Paolo. 2014. 'Visa Problem: Certification, Kinship, and the Production of "ineligibility" in the Gambia'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20 (1): 38–55.

Gardner, Katy. 1993. 'Desh-Bidesh: Sylheti Images of Home and Away'. *Man* 28 (1): 1.

Gardner, Katy. 2008. 'Keeping Connected: Security, Place, and Social Capital in a "Londoni" Village in Sylhet'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (3): 477–95.

Grillo, Ralph D, and Jeff C Pratt. 2002. *The Politics of Recognizing Difference: Multiculturalism Italian-Style*. Ashgate Publishing.

Jansen, Stef. 2009. 'After the Red Passport: Towards an Anthropology of the Everyday Geopolitics of Entrapment in the EU's "immediate Outside"'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (4): 815–32.

Mai, Nicola. 2002. *Myths and Moral Panics: Italian Identity and the Media Representation of Albanian Immigration*. Ashgate.

Ong, Aihwa. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship : The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Pereira, Sonia. 2012. 'Immigrant Workers' (im)mobilities and Their Re- emigration Strategies'. *Employee Relations* 34 (6): 642–57.

Reyneri, Emilio. 2004. 'Education and the Occupational Pathways of Migrants in Italy'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30 (6): 1145–62.

Reyneri, Emilio, and Giovanna Fullin. 2011. 'Labour Market Penalties of New Immigrants in New and Old Receiving West European Countries'. *International Migration* 49 (1): 31–57.

Riccio, Bruno, and Monica Russo. 2011. 'Everyday Practised Citizenship and the Challenges of Representation: Second-Generation Associations in Bologna'. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16 (3): 360–72.

Schuster, Liza. 2005. 'The Continuing Mobility of Migrants in Italy: Shifting between Places and Statuses'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31 (4): 757–74.

Tuckett, Anna. 2015. 'Strategies of Navigation: Migrants' Everyday Encounters with Italian Immigration Bureaucracy'. *Cambridge Anthropology*.

Vertovec, Steven. 2004. 'Trends and Impacts of Migrant Transnationalism'. *Centre on Migration, Policy and Society Working Paper no.3 University of Oxford*.

Vigh, Henrik. 2009. 'Wayward Migration: On Imagined Futures and Technological Voids'. *Ethnos* 74 (1): 91–109.