Everyday practised citizenship and the challenges of representation: second-generation associations in Bologna

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Abstract

Italy is home to a population of second-generation children of first-wave migrants who are forming and becoming involved in various associations. If the first immigrant associations tended to struggle for recognition through engaging in social activities based on Italian associational structures, the second-generation associations tend to address fully the issue of citizenship and to cross local and sometimes national boundaries. This kind of strategy has proven crucial for youth that were schooled and socialized in Italian society but who encounter difficult prospects in social mobility and in seeing citizenship rights been granted. In their struggle, they contest and critique the representation that targets them as forever migrants, to enhance their access to economic resources, social participation and political representation. With this purpose in mind, they are also well connected through online networking. However, various members of these associations seem interested in realizing a practised citizenship within local everyday life more than on paper.

Keywords

Second generation, associations, citizenship, representation, participation, diversity.

Introduction

During the electoral campaign for the last European Election in 2009, Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi stated that he was against a multi-ethnic society. If Italy is by now home to second-generation children of the first-wave migrants (Ambrosini 2005; Chiodi and Benadusi 2006; Colombo et al. 2009), we must stress that they are reaching adulthood at a time when Italian society is characterized by a serious ‘multiculturalism backlash’ (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). Members of the second generation are often depicted as ‘different’ by the majority of society, a phenomenon that is typical of contemporary cultural racism, which draws absolute boundaries to legitimize the incommensurability of cultures and the normalization of social exclusion and discrimination (Cole 1997).

Nevertheless, this Italian youth of migrant origin is getting organized in political, socio-cultural and religious terms via associations, which try to challenge such a state of affairs. If the first immigrant associations tended to
struggle for recognition through engaging in social activities based on Italian associational structures, the second-generation associations address the issue of citizenship and fight against discrimination to facilitate equal opportunities of social mobility for the youth of immigrant background. Yet, these youth associations also encounter various kinds of difficulties and problems that resemble the experiences of the first immigrant associations. We argue that, if they want to ensure consistency in their aim to enter concretely the local public space to realize, as they say, an ‘enacted citizenship’, they have to deal with the past and with the older organizations too. The problems of who dictates the agenda, of avoiding dependency and of elitism are only some of the common challenges facing new and old associations, first- and second-generation. As we shall see, the second-generation associations are characterized by familiarity with new media, public assertiveness, transnational connections and better linguistic skills, which facilitate communication with Italian institutions. Despite all that, they too must confront fear of exploitation, frustration of not ensuring active participation, or increase in recruitment together with financial autonomy.

The reflections presented in this article stem from a study on second-generation associations in the city of Bologna (Riccio and Russo 2009). From a methodological point of view, we wanted to avoid metonymic essentialism and we did not pretend that the experiences documented by exploring the social lives of both members and leaders of these associations constituted a representative case of the Italian second generation as a whole. We wanted to study an incipient and recent social phenomenon in itself, that of youth of migrant background organizing themselves to enter local public space. We wanted to explore the view ‘inside out’ and ‘outside in’ (Grillo 1985), and thus we also interviewed migrants with a long associational experience as well as local government personnel to gather a perspective from outside the associations. Finally, in addition to twenty interviews and participant observation at public events, we added two follow-up group discussions with eight of the interviewees, in which we focussed on the main points emerging from the research.

Associations revealed themselves to be a particularly interesting lens, through which to explore various social processes such as the constant struggle to improve the concrete and actual experience of being a citizen in contemporary Italian society. On the other hand, although the objectives of associations sound almost always altruistic and well intentioned, within them one can find innovation as much as reproduction and strengthening of cleavages and power asymmetries along gender, class and ethnic lines.

In this article, we focus on the characteristics of these new associations, their challenge of dominant representation and the differences between them and the previous experiences of migrant socio-political participation. In the conclusion we also stress the common problems all associations are facing and the need to keep connections with the past to avoid similar mistakes. Before that, we begin
by providing some context by looking at the delicate issue of citizenship and at the more local trajectory of migrant associations in Bologna. Then, we focus on the main characteristics, objectives and strategies of second-generation associations, and their emerging from the experiences of their members and from their leaders’ perspectives. We discuss the main challenges they face and reflect on what this recent social phenomenon teaches us about everyday practices of citizenship.

Citizenship and the backlash against diversity

All over Europe, during the 1990s and more so nowadays, there have been various attempts to deport or exclude migrants who are regarded as disposable workers, but seldom as citizens entitled to access social welfare. In Italy, illegal migration has become a focus of aggressive campaigns from the right. This has contributed to the politicization of migration issues and helped increase the pressure for migration control. Furthermore, and more relevant here, the situation of ethnic minorities of immigrant origin, some of whom may be members of the second generation, has been badly affected by these anxieties about immigration. The media increasingly present immigration as a threat, contributing to the ‘moral panic’, which negatively affects public opinion (Grillo and Pratt 2002). In everyday political rhetoric, one witnesses the increasing cultural racism dominating right-wing (and other) ideologies. This kind of discourse underlines diversity resulting from cultural differences and concludes that, because of these cultural differences, integration is impossible (Cole 1997). In 2008, for instance, the new Mayor of Rome, talking about the Roma minority in the capital, explained that some of them are good citizens, but others, ‘also because of their culture’, tend to steal and misbehave (‘Ponticelli, roghi nei campi rom’ 2008).

Furthermore, it is not a matter of mere cultural racism; phenotypic characteristics have also become more and more relevant in fostering Italian internal boundaries. As Andall’s (2002) work in Milan has shown, ‘the very notion of the possibility of being both black and Italian remains a marginal concept within the broader framework of the contemporary immigration debate in Italy’. In other words, ‘being black and being Italian were perceived as mutually exclusive categories. This view was not only evident at the institutional level of the police, but also amongst employers and by the gatekeepers of Italy’s physical borders’ (Andall 2002: 400). In addition to the cultural racism, an everyday racialization based on phenomenological criteria like skin colour also exists as part of contemporary Italian politics of exclusion (Fassin 2000). Such a multidimensional racism rhetorically creates a background to the widespread resistance in granting citizenship to migrants and their children.

As Thomson and Crul (2007: 1038–9) admit, citizenship is an important tool of inclusion, endowing migrants and their children with rights equal to
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their peers. Yet, ‘where more restrictive laws on citizenship exist, however, a discourse of exclusion is facilitated’. The Italian citizenship law of 1992 made it easier for descendants of Italian emigrants to regain citizenship, but also made it more difficult for immigrants to apply for naturalization (Sciortino 1999). This law is also more restrictive with the second generation, foreseeing that children born of foreign parents can request Italian citizenship when they are eighteen years old only if they remain continually resident in Italy and by going thorough a complicated bureaucratic process (Colombo et al. 2009). However, the really precarious condition is that of young people who came to Italy when they were children or even when they had already entered adolescence, who, in addition to experiencing problems of exclusion and language acquisition, discover themselves to be ‘foreigners’ when they are adults. As a leader of Next Generation, one of the associations explained clearly: ‘They might have been the best scorer of the inter-schools soccer tournament, but they have now to queue for a permit to stay…’

The need to change such a state of affairs concerning citizenship entitlement has spurred the birth of many of the second-generation associations. However, the experience of various members and leaders has taught us about the need to go beyond the formal dimension of citizenship and also consider the everyday-practised dimensions of citizenship. Some of these witnesses connect well with an emergent tendency of broadening analytically the conception of citizenship to include its participatory dimension, which also depends on social everyday inclusion (Holston and Appadurai 1999; Ong 2003). Institutional discourses tend to reify complex and ambivalent social and cultural processes affected by negotiation between individuals and groups. Such negotiation is influenced in multiple ways by the representation (symbolic as well as political) of migrants and their descendants.

Marshall has already stressed the need to take into account socio-economic inclusion as a background facilitating actually existing citizenship, defining citizenship as a ‘status bestowed on those who are full members of the community’ (Marshall 1950: 14), which includes civil, political and social rights and obligations. However, the community Marshall referred to implicitly was, unproblematically, the ‘nation’, conceived as a homogeneous cultural entity. A central question in the present debates about citizenship is the extent to which ‘difference’ discriminates between citizens; whether, rather than citizens being bearers of equal rights, their ability to exercise their full rights is affected by discrepancies in gender, culture and ethnicity. Therefore, citizenship is not merely about legal status because formal citizenship may not coincide with active and equal participation (Reed-Danahay and Brettell 2008). For instance, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) have shown that, whatever one’s legal status, educational attainment or economic advancement in the US labour market and society can become measures of a sort of second-class citizenship. In other words, as Bloemraad and colleagues explained, participation and activities that
make people an integral part of their local communities and institutions can be understood as a form of participatory citizenship that allows immigrants to make citizenship-like claims on the state and others, even in the absence of legal citizenship status, and perhaps even in the absence of legal residence. (Bloemrad et al. 2008: 162)

On the other hand, we should not forget that legal residence and the permit to stay might affect migrants' social life more than the granting of citizenship. The complex interplay of these factors is also anchored in the specific history of associational life in the local migration context.

The second-generation associations in Bologna and the challenge of representation

In the study of second-generation integration (Thomson and Crul 2007), the local level presents a particularly interesting setting in which to appreciate the interplay between structure, culture and personal agency. However, many studies focus on receiving states, their policies and the political opportunity structure (Schrover and Vermeulen 2005), sometimes running the risk of neglecting agency and, in our case, how youth of migrant background respond, adapt or circumvent laws as much as integration policies, and how their organizations and participation affect the meanings and practices of citizenship. In this article we focus only on the experience of associations, but we also appreciate the limitations of an over-deterministic reading through the lens of 'political opportunity structure'. Indeed, unlike the first immigrant organizations of the 1990s, second-generation associations show a more ambivalent and sometimes sceptical stance towards the opportunity offered by the institutional complex of Bologna.

Bologna’s economy has been historically characterized by the success of highly specialized small and medium-sized enterprises. Global economic restructuring and a demographic decline of the local population are important processes affecting the city (Salih and Riccio 2011). In 2009, 43,600 foreigners were counted coming from about 150 different countries, of which Romania (5,796), the Philippines (4,416), Bangladesh (4,102) and Morocco (3,259) were the most representative and the second generation numbered more than 5,500 (Comune di Bologna 2009).

Most of the associations in the city of Bologna were founded in the mid-1990s, when the left-wing local administration started to promote a ‘multicultural integration policy’ (Caponio 2005). Moreover, from the migrants’ point of view, a multiplicity of organizational actors started to play an important role in the interface with Italian institutions as well as being crucial in maintaining transnational connections with the homeland. An important function was performed by the national associations, which are often shaped by migrants who are the most knowledgeable about the institutions in
the receiving society. Yet, in the 1990s, many of these associations were perceived by various migrants as imposed by the local government rather than the outcome of spontaneous mobilization (Però 2002). In addition, one of the main problems encountered by migrants’ associations was access to public contracts and funding. However, in the last decade there has been a tremendous diversification of organizations within the Italian landscape, with the birth of foreign families’ and mixed associations together with what are normally called second-generation associations.

These associations of youth with an immigrant background are very dynamic and rich in initiatives, and carry important political weight. These ‘new Italians’, as they often define themselves, try to strengthen their social position. In their struggle for recognition, they often focus on the double meaning of representation (symbolic as much as political). They contest and critique the common representation, which targets them as forever migrants, in order to enhance their access to social resources and political representation and consequent participation. With this purpose in mind, they are also well connected through online networking and tend to be very active in the use of new media.

The first and oldest association is the Giovani Musulmani d’Italia (GMI) association founded in 2001 at the national level. It now has hundreds of members and several local branches in different towns and villages in Italy. The main aim of the organization is to become a point of reference for young Muslims born or brought up in Italy who want to be protagonists of their lives and in the society in which they live (Frisina 2008). The association maintains good relationships with the media and uses its website for circulating information (www.giovanimusulmani.it). The organization itself operates simultaneously on local, national and transnational levels (Levitt and Waters 2002). As we shall see, residing in a specific local context may assume particular importance, for it is the arena in which people’s voices and concerns could be heard and developed into new demands of participatory citizenship. However, along with the local context, second-generation Muslims often emphasize the importance of transnational public spheres as a major context in which to direct their efforts, emphasizing the abandonment of the national as the main or the only political and discursive arena in which identity politics should be played out (Salih 2004). Indeed, the nation-state is increasingly understood by second-generation Muslims as operating through an exclusionary process, which not only denies them access to citizenship and crystallizes them as permanent ‘others’, but also fails to acknowledge their complex identities (Salih and Riccio 2011).

The most popular organization, which is particularly active from a cultural and political point of view, is Rete G2, born in 2005 as a national network of young Italians of immigrant background. Thanks to its website (www.secondegenerazioni.it) it provides members with space for discussion and confrontation about citizenship rights, identity construction and everyday
discrimination (Colombo et al. 2009; Zinn 2008). Another well-networked national association was founded by children of Chinese migrants, also in 2005, called AssoCina (www.associna.com). Its aim is to represent young Chinese-Italians, provide a bridge between their parents and the Italian society and contest the dominant stereotypical representation of the Chinese in Italy. As a leader put it at a public event:

We want to realize a counter-information. This is why we have realized the website, not only to create a place to encounter each other. There is a section called ‘news’ where members write their own articles with the aim to counter-inform about all the stereotypical ideas about the Chinese, like that of the Chinese who cook dogs in their restaurants, or that of the Chinese who never die. We also have articles on citizenship or simpler stories but told without all the distortions of the news.

As another member of the association, who is an activist in the local branch of Bologna, further exemplifies:

We are editing a new video on the electoral participation of naturalized citizens . . . it is an electorate that the media normally do not consider and that people ignore . . . we offer the possibility to let ourselves be known to the Italian audience who is interested . . . to let our everyday life be known like in a simple act of active citizenship as the political elections. (member of AssoCina)

To deconstruct and reconstruct the public image of the Chinese youth means to facilitate a process of ‘normalization’ of the presence of the second generation in the public sphere, especially at the local level.

These three national associations represent what Brettel (2008) has recently called ‘netizens’ to evoke social actors able to empower their everyday struggle to realize citizenship by navigating cyberspace. However, one registers a need of ‘re-territorialization’ among these bigger associations, which develop several local branches in different towns (Riccio and Russo 2009). Also, local laboratories exist, such as that of Crossing, an association also concerned with the problem of representation, which has become a nationwide web television channel: Crossing TV (www.crossingtv.it). This is a cosmopolitan television channel stemming from a mixed association and aims to fight the ‘ethnic labelling and stereotypical rhetoric of Italian media’. Here the aim of actively creating counter-hegemonic representation is clear:

Crossing TV was born to answer to an important need. In the media delirium in which white, black and yellow youth are involved, often in an instrumental and exploitative way, it is important to create a space which is
pure, not labelled, not labellable and, more relevant, not labelling. (member of Crossing TV)

Like AssoCina and Crossing, other associations also try to combine the outward communication aiming to challenge common representations with more internal reflections on cultural essentialism and on the need to recognize more complex forms of identifications that are able to conflate their family experiences with everyday life within Italian society. In this regard, GMI, the association of young Italian Muslims, constitutes a crucial example: ‘We were born to say that you can be comfortably Italian and Muslim, it is not a problem, neither a contradiction, they are not contrasting identities (member of GMI).’

All of these associations look for the recognition of youths’ multiple and situational identities and show a commitment to a cosmopolitan morphology of the organizations able to go beyond the ethnic line. For instance, Next Generation, an association born two years ago in a town (Imola) within the province of Bologna, managed to reunite young members of different national origin including Italians. However, such cosmopolitan projects may fail in their implementation. Arcimondo, a local association born two years ago with the help of Arci (an Italian cultural association of the left) in Bologna, with the objective of fighting discrimination and aiming for a cosmopolitan membership, could not avoid a striking majority of Moroccan members. This was partially due to the fact that the recruitment process was run through personal networks of the leaders, who are themselves of Moroccan background.

Furthermore, as anticipated in the first part of the paper, members of the local second-generation associations are more interested in realizing a practised citizenship in social everyday life than on paper. They think that discrimination and social marginalization are the crucial issues:

Yes, I am a foreigner, this is a fact. If they give me citizenship, that’s a bureaucratic thing, I am always a foreigner, if I walk in the street, I am always a Moroccan, not kidding; even if you show the red passport of Italian citizens you are always a Moroccan. For the Italian law you are a full citizen, but for the Italian people you remain a foreigner. (member of Arcimondo)

Among ourselves we talk more about the meaning of citizenship, not about the bureaucratic piece of paper, I know that’s important too, but the priority remains your recognition. (member of GMI)

Although the question of citizenship played the role of a springboard for most of the national associations of the second generation in Italy, these local branches and the local associations seem to favour a broader objective:

The campaign for the change of citizenship law is important, do not get me wrong, but if and when this will be granted, what will you do? Do you stop
working? Do you cease the associational life? I think the second generation should go beyond formal citizenship and work on the sense of belonging to a territory and on the meaning of participating in its life. (member of GMI)

The main objectives of both national and local second-generation associations are the struggle against discrimination and the enhancement of equal opportunities of social mobility for the youth of immigrant background. Clearly, the experience of these associations is somehow different from that of their parents, who are often accused of being unable to understand the main characteristics of Italian society on the one hand, and, on the other, to be begging for just a bit of space and recognition. Members of the second generation feel Italian and, in a more assertive way, want to communicate their priorities ‘loud and clear’ (Zinn 2008). They openly criticize their parents for being inward looking and for being unable to interact with Italian institutional and associational structures. However, they too experience various problems of participation, mobilization and networking with the institutional complex that shapes the local contexts.

For instance, the problem of who dictates the agenda is still very much felt. There are some public funds that have begun to be targeted towards the second generation in recent years, but most of the people we have worked with have displayed a certain degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, the majority feel the need to shape a stronger organizational identity:

Before diving in we need to better understand who we really are; we need to strengthen our structure and our credibility at the local level. (member of GMI)

We are not ready yet, we need a better organization with more members. (member of Arcimondo)

On the other hand, many express the fear of being instrumentalized and exploited, like the following common refrains testify:

The first steps are to let ourselves be known and gain a bit of visibility . . . the issue about the second generation is becoming fashionable and we do not want to be used, we need to learn to relate ourselves with the different institutions. (leader of Arcimondo)

I do not like it when the personnel of the commune has already organized everything and only then call us to participate, but if you have done everything what should you need me for? I say no, thank you! Either you call me at the beginning and you take me as a serious interlocutor, or you only want to use me to play big with your potential electorate. (member of GMI and Arcimondo)
We do not want that they do things ‘in our name’, we are sick and tired of being beneficiaries of local policies, we want to be partners. (member of Next Generation)

The assertiveness we find in most of these claims is new, but the suspicion of being manipulated is an older problem that the parents’ associations got to know quite well in the 1990s. Furthermore, like the parents, the second-generation organizations confront various difficulties in ensuring participation of the members in common activities and, consequently, they run the risk of not reaching that financial autonomy that would ensure that they participate in projects as partners rather than beneficiaries. There is a complex vicious cycle to be avoided of which past experiences remind us.

**Conclusion: continuity and change**

Various differences are apparent between first- and second-generation associations, with the latter seeming more interested in acting towards the society they have grown into. They feel Italian and they do not seek to be ‘accepted’ by Italian society, rather to be considered full members with respect to equal opportunities in social mobility for all members.

However, despite the differences and the claimed desire of autonomy from both Italian institutions and parents’ associations, most of the interviewees recognize the need to cooperate among associations. Thus, although the two forms of association are different, it seems that they need to hold dialogues to create better links to the institutions of the receiving society. This is even more necessary if the focus of the associations is, as is often claimed, the participation in social life and an everyday experienced citizenship. On the one hand, this more ambitious objective differentiates second-generation organizations from previous migrant associations, while on the other hand it obliges members of the second generation to take into account these same older associational experiences and intermittently to create links for common strategizing.

Another common problem is characterized by how the leaders of representative associations may afford to be. As with the former migrant organizations or with the Secondo Movement in Switzerland (Wessendorf 2008), the leadership consists of politically aware, well-educated youth of immigrant background, mainly students, who engage in local cultural and social politics. This feature translates into problems of trust and recruitment. According to some activists, the worst problem is time. Most of the young workers of migrant background do not find time to participate in the associations’ activities. Furthermore, the difficulties of everyday life (permit to stay, work relations, salaries, rent, etc.) make the issues debated within the associations a bit remote for many members. These are problems typical of associational life in general, not only of the second generation, as a member of Arcimondo explains:
In all associations one finds ‘intellectuals’, people with a better educational standard than those who go to work early, often confront serious problems, at work or with permits ... they do not see associational participation as worthwhile.

On the other hand, at high school or university one develops different expectations of social mobility, and contests diffuse discrimination. Moreover, this elite may constitute ‘a vanguard’ able to create a strategic place within Italian public space, which can reveal itself to be crucial for youth of immigrant background more generally (Colombo 2007). We are dealing with a very recent phenomenon and most of the young persons we have worked with have shown themselves to be aware of all these problems and ready to engage (Riccio and Russo 2009). In this context, they are helped by a promising critical and sophisticated reflexivity. Also, as we have seen, the aim to foster a more cosmopolitan understanding of ‘being Italian’ becomes indirectly relevant for the realization of citizenship rights within a society ever more hostile towards diversity. Despite constraints and limitations, the ongoing socio-political trajectory of these associations leads us to think of citizenship as a negotiated and contested process of everyday inclusionary and exclusionary practices. In other words, it reminds us all that the rights acquired or gained in the past should not be taken for granted because they can be erased in the future.

Notes

1 In this paper we consider ‘second generation’ in a loose sense, comprising children of migrant background who have grown up in Italy as much as those who were born in Italy.

2 This study emerges from a broader research project, ‘Urban Contexts, Migration Processes and Young Migrants’ (PRIN Project 2006–2008), supervised by Professor Matilde Callari Galli. The project aimed to explore the socio-cultural experiences of young people of migrant background in two urban and multicultural settings: Bologna and Perugia. Between May and July 2009, Bruno Riccio was a guest at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (MMG) in Göttingen, where he gave a longer version of the paper to a seminar organized by the Department of Socio-cultural Diversity, and we wish to thank all the participants for feedback.

References


