Sushi-Eating Secondos and Casual Latins: Political Movements and the Emergence of a Latino Counter-culture among Second-Generation Italians in Switzerland

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Migrant youth develop different ways of dealing with their migrant background, some celebrate and reify their ethnicity, some distance themselves from people of the same background, and some situationally create new cultural repertoires and draw on multiple cultural frameworks. This paper describes two different ways in which second-generation Italians in Switzerland publicly celebrate their migrant background. Although they all grew up in similar socio-economic conditions, some have appropriated a discourse that celebrates cultural diversity as an integral part of Swiss society with the aim of increasing their political rights, while others publicly emphasise their Italianness and use Latino cultural categories to assert their ethnicity. Both groups employ a culturalist discourse, the former emphasising their belonging to Swiss society and culture, and the latter celebrating their difference. This paper discusses how these two kinds of identity politics are on the one hand related to the socio-economic and cultural context in which the second generation grew up, and, on the other, to the educational background and peer-group associations developed during young adulthood. By showing this plurality of social and cultural patterns of belonging among members of the second generation, the paper highlights the reflexive character of cultural practice and discourse.

Much of today’s public discourse on the children of migrants is centred on issues such as the burning suburbs during the Paris riots in 2005 (see Abbas this volume) and the religious radicalisation of migrant youth in the UK and Germany. At the centre of these debates is not only the structural marginalisation of the children of migrants, but also their supposed cultural and religious segregation and apparent failure to integrate (Vertovec and Wessendorf). While the extent of marginalisation of migrants and their children today is arguably unprecedented, as are the consequent socio-economic pressures placed upon them, such discourses are not new (Stolcke). Southern and south-eastern European labour migrants who moved to the industrialised northern European states during the post-war economic boom were similarly deemed to be unable to integrate into the societies of northern Europe.

This paper focuses on second-generation Italians in Switzerland. Post-war Italian labour migrants were discriminated against during the early years of their migration and were seen as culturally too different to become part of the majority society. They were described as knifers, seducers of Swiss women and lazy slackers who created public disorder (Braun; Dohner; Seiler; Stolz). In contrast, Italians are now well accepted by the Swiss and have become part of the Swiss imagined community (di Falco; Wimmer). Parallel to this process of increasing accommodation, the second generation has risen from their parents’ working-class background to middle-class status and most of them are well integrated socio-economically into contemporary Swiss society (Bolzman, Fibbi and Vial; Mey, Rorato and Voll).

This paper discusses how members of the second generation who “have made it” in terms of upward social mobility emphasise their migrant background without being judged as segregationist by the majority society. Being accepted as part of Swiss society, second-generation Italians today are free to practice their “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans). For some members of the second generation, employing a variety of cultural tools or practices has become an important way of asserting their identities.

Such practices of picking particular types of cultural repertoires that best fit the context have also been observed in other places, for example, among second-generation Sikhs and Caribbeans in Great Britain (Alexander; Hall “There’s a Time”), Arab-speaking youth in Sydney (Noble, Poynting and Tabar) and second-generation Italians in Perth (Baldassar “Marias and Marriage”). While this paper will similarly focus on such cultural practices, it will also describe activities based on political claims-making among the second generation. As with their cultural practices, the political activities of members of the second generation involve the self-conscious use of cultural and symbolic categories, but rather than constructing ethnicity in essentialist terms, they refer to notions of cultural diversity and emphasise belonging to Switzerland.
Although there are many different ways in which the second generation relate to their co-ethnics, the majority society and migrants of other origins, this paper will focus on two different ways in which members of the second generation deal with growing up in multiple cultural fields on the one hand, and, on the other, with being politically marginalised. One group of second-generation Italians emphasises their Italianness and playfully uses Latino cultural categories to assert their ethnicity and celebrate their Italian background, and the other group uses a discourse of cultural diversity as an integral part of Swiss society, with the aim of gaining facilitated access to Swiss citizenship. The former “Latino” group articulates otherness rather than belonging in relation to the majority society. The latter group strategically celebrates notions of diversity to mobilise against political exclusion, while emphasising the second generation’s belonging to Swiss society. The paper discusses the divergent ways in which members of the second generation use both strategies of differentiation and belonging in the context of cultural diversity.

The findings presented here draw on qualitative ethnographic research carried out during 2003 and 2004 in urban areas of the German part of Switzerland and in southern Italy. Along with participant observation, 58 life-history interviews were undertaken with descendants of post-war Italian labour migrants who are between 25 and 40 years old. Some 23 of the interviewees had migrated to their parents’ village of origin in southern Italy (Wessendorf “Roots-Migrants”). This paper focuses on those who stayed in Switzerland.

From Discrimination to the Celebration of Italianness

The descendants of Italian migrants form the largest second-generation group in Switzerland, about a quarter of the 500,000 descendants of migrants living in the country (Mey, Rorato and Voll). Their parents began migrating in the 1950s from the very south of Italy to the French and German parts of Switzerland where most jobs were available in industry and hospitality. There are currently approximately 300,000 Italians living in Switzerland, 114,000 of whom were born there.¹ This is a considerable number for a total population of 7 million. Second-generation Italians grew up in lively “transnational social fields” (Levitt and Glick Schiller) characterised by strong family relations and Italian social networks in Switzerland and frequent visits to Italy.

Most second-generation Italians have been upwardly mobile, rising from working-class backgrounds to white-collar jobs (Bolzman, Fibbi and Vial).² Despite the professional and institutional integration of the majority of second-generation Italians, there are differences in terms of social networks. Some of them spend most of their time with other Italians, and maintain lively transnational social relations with southern Italy, while others have mixed social networks and see themselves as more Swiss than Italian. These differences in social affiliations can be explained by the ethnic composition of particular neighbourhoods and schools, the experiences during
childhood and adolescence in the transnational social field and the extent and quality of relations with the Swiss (Wessendorf “Who Do You Hang Out With?”).

While from the 1950s until the 1970s Italians in Switzerland were discriminated against in the housing market, the job market and sometimes in schools, today they are well accepted by the Swiss and are seen as a model minority. They have climbed up the hierarchy of different immigrant groups and in fact, Italianità³ (Italianness) has become a positive attribute among the Swiss, perceived as giving a Mediterranean flair to Swiss culture, especially among the Swiss urban middle classes (di Falco; Stolz; Wimmer). Italians have thus become part of the Swiss imagined community, even though the social networks of many first and second-generation Italians are primarily Italian.

Despite the long-term settlement of Italians and many other post-war labour migrants, Swiss laws of citizenship continue to be restrictive, and the children of migrants born in Switzerland do not automatically gain Swiss citizenship. It is particularly those second-generation Italians who are highly educated and who have mixed social networks with the Swiss who find these restrictions unfair and unjustified, especially as they grow older and become more aware of their exclusion from Swiss political life. During the past few years, some of these individuals have begun to make claims to facilitate access to citizenship and have thus contributed to widespread public debate on the concept of Swiss citizenship as well as on the continuing perception that, despite several decades of immigration, Switzerland is not seen as a country of immigration.

The Politicisation of the Well Integrated and the Celebration of Diversity

“No pizza without migrants” is the slogan used by a political movement in Switzerland known as the “Secondo Movement”. It was founded by members of the second generation in 2002 after the yearly May Day demonstration in Zürich. This demonstration often ends with street fights between mostly young protesters from the far left and the police. While the media can be relied upon to report on what is usually described as the “general decay of youth”, in 2002 a new angle was taken on the events. The city’s police deputy publicly blamed the destruction caused by the protesters on members of the second generation, and the largest newspaper in Switzerland pointed to the presence of “young immigrants with gel in their hair, those who are commonly called ‘secondos’” (Neue Zürcher Zeitung). Several members of the second generation were shocked by this open stigmatisation and reacted to it by founding organisations such as IG Secondas (Secondas Interest Group) and Netzwerk Secondo. They wanted to offer an information platform for the second generation and fight against the negative image ascribed to them. They designed and sold T-shirts bearing the word “secondo” (for men) and “seconda” (for women) as a way to communicate their pride in being members of the second generation, and to show that even if you do not look like a migrant, you might well be of migrant origin. They also created web pages and organised cultural events and public discussions on
second-generation issues (www.secondas.ch and www.secondo.net). In the aftermath of the May Day demonstration and during the emergence of this new movement, the activists of the movement turned the previously negative term “secondo”, associated with vandalising youngsters of migrant origin, into a positive term. Not only did the activists manage to imbue the term with positive connotations, but in the context of the movement’s campaigns and much media attention, “it became hip to be seconda” (Juhasz “Identifizierung und Distanzierung”).

In addition to the movement’s aim to change the negative stereotypes associated with the second generation, their main political goals related to changing the rigid Swiss citizenship laws (Balsiger). These laws are based on Jus sanguinis, which means that migrant children born in Switzerland do not automatically attain Swiss citizenship and are required to apply for it, which they can only do after living in Switzerland for 12 years. Naturalisation is conditional on the (vaguely defined) degree of integration, language skills, respect for Swiss law and guarantee of Swiss national security. Despite being a complicated, expensive and lengthy process (sometimes taking several years), the naturalisation procedure does not guarantee a successful outcome. This has discouraged many migrants and their children from applying (Marxer). The debate on citizenship led to referendums for “Facilitating Naturalisation” in 1983 and again in 1995, but both were rejected by the majority of Swiss voters (D’Amato). The Secondo Movement’s main aims were easier access to Swiss citizenship for the second generation, the right to political participation for all members of the second generation and automatic citizenship for the third generation.

In the course of the Secondo Movement’s successful media campaign, people of migrant background who were members of the Socialist Party drew on the positive “secondo image” and, during the elections for the regional parliamentary representatives in 2003, they formed a list of migrant and second-generation representatives for the canton of Zürich called Second@s-plus (www.secondas-plus.ch). With slogans such as “Nothing works without us”, “No old-age pension without migrants”, “No successful national football team without migrants” and “We are here because we are here”, the party claimed that the Swiss finally have to accept that Switzerland is a country of immigration and that it must actively begin to include migrants and give them more political rights, because it simply needs them. Although they did not gain any seats in the government, they managed to attract significant public attention with their campaigns, and they continued to publicly voice their opinions in the run-up to the referendum for facilitated access to citizenship in 2004, together with the activists of the Secondo Movement.

In the context of the citizenship referendum, the media wrote extensively on the Secondo Movement and the Swiss parliament strongly promoted the change to citizenship laws. Despite this political support, the revision of the law was rejected by 57 per cent of the Swiss population. Populist right-wing political and media campaigns had successfully fought against the new citizenship laws by creating an ambience of fear during the two months preceding the voting (Avanzino). In their
campaigns, migrants and their children were depicted as criminals and as a threat to Swiss society. Despite the rejection of the proposed new law, the movement had managed to make the second generation more visible and to draw public attention to the indispensability of migrants and their children to Swiss economy and society.

The Secondo Movement’s overt identity politics and “panethnic mobilisation” (Itzigsohn) were new phenomena in Switzerland. Members of the second generation claimed to be united on the powerful grounds of political exclusion. Instead of basing their assertions on cultural specificity or difference, they gained a voice by pointing to unity in diversity. Their political engagement stands in stark contrast to movements that engage in essentialist notions of cultural and religious identity (e.g. Schiffauer). With its cosmopolitan world-view, the Secondo Movement challenged notions of cultural purity and positively emphasised the indispensable contributions of the descendants of migrants to Swiss society. Furthermore, activists of the movement went beyond ideas of multiculturalism that tend to convey a picture of migrant groups as bounded cultural units within a culturally homogenous majority society. Instead, they emphasised that they belong to Switzerland despite their different cultural background and they showed that they have achieved both integration and upward social mobility not in spite of, but because of their migrant background and their “multiple cultural competences” (Vertovec and Rogers). The movement represented a trendy, urban, cosmopolitan lifestyle of successful, young and dynamic people of migrant origin, and one of their mottos was: “we are the same but different”.

However, the movement has been criticised for not representing those members of the second generation who are structurally disadvantaged. Critical voices argued that activists in the movement appropriated a discourse of assimilation, depicting those members of the second generation who publicly emphasise and celebrate their ethnic backgrounds as unwilling to integrate into Swiss society.7 Furthermore, the movement primarily represented high-status, well-educated, mostly left-wing, urban middle-class secondos, and activists of the movement homogenised “the second generation” as successfully integrated members of Swiss society. This misrepresentation is also mirrored in the countries of origin of the active members of the movement who were mainly of Italian, Spanish and northern European origin. People of former Yugoslav8 or Turkish backgrounds who are less likely to achieve high social status were under-represented. In fact, of the second-generation Italians who participated in the research presented here, only some of those with higher education belong to, or are even aware of, the movement.

Despite its good intentions, the Secondo Movement’s public discourse was coloured by a culturalist stance. The secondos celebrated cultural diversity and marketed a cosmopolitan “secondo lifestyle”, while at the same time emphasising their cultural similarities to the Swiss as one of the criteria for gaining facilitated access to citizenship. This cultural similarity was, for example, expressed with photos on their web page showing secondos eating Swiss fondue and drinking Swiss white wine, just like the Swiss do. Rather than pointing to the structural inequalities, which
affect some members of the second generation, the political activists’ strategy was to 
emphasise the success of the second generation. This strategy was a reaction to the 
previously negative media accounts of migrants and their children that problematised 
migration and disregarded its positive aspects. The Secondo Movement successfully 
managed to paint a more positive picture of migrants and their children, and their 
celebration of cultural diversity has been happily taken up by some of the Swiss 
media. Thus, even if the movement did not represent the wide array of second-
generation individuals, the activists’ strategic way of claiming political rights and of 
attracting public attention for important political issues helped to raise public 
awareness of the fact that Switzerland’s wealth is also created by migrants and their 
children.

The success of the movement shows that those involved knew how to gain media 
attention and how to reach the cosmopolitan, urban, politically aware Swiss middle 
classes, because they formed part of this very stratum of society. In addition, the 
media had been waiting to address issues of the second generation and citizenship, 
and journalists were looking for second-generation representatives with an inside 
view. One of the founders of the movement explained that as soon as they had set up 
a web page with contact details, they were swamped by requests from journalists who 
wanted to get more information. This media attention, which surprised even the 
founders of the movement, certainly played an important role in the sudden public 
attention paid to a movement which only represented a minority of those it claimed 
to stand for. Interestingly, many of those members of the second generation who do 
not know about the movement or do not feel represented by it have developed a 
similarly public way of claiming their migrant identity. But rather than celebrating 
cultural diversity and their belonging to Switzerland, they emphasise and assert their 
*ethno-national* origin.

The Celebration of Difference and the Emergence of a Latino Counter-discourse: 
The Casual Latins

At the end of the day, your whole life is about Italy, whether you like it or not. At 
home you speak Italian, you eat Italian, but you have to be at work punctually 
anyway, you are surrounded by the Swiss, and that’s good, that’s what makes it all 
perfect, . . . you just take the best of both worlds. . . . But still, you’ll have difficulties 
classifying yourself because you are not Swiss, you are not Italian, you are 
something in between, and it’s still cool too. Well, it’s like a trademark, . . . with an 
Armani t-shirt you show exactly what you represent, and with an “Italia t-shirt” I 
also want to show “hey, look. *This* is who I am, this is my background and I am 
here anyway.”

Pasquale is a second-generation Italian DJ. He is part of an association called 
Gentediaare, a group of five second-generation Italians who live in the same region in 
Switzerland, close to the river Aare (www.gentediaare.ch). The river gives the 
organisation its name: “people from the Aare”. Gentediaare maintain a web page and
regularly organise cultural events such as concerts or club nights with Italian and other DJs. Although they do not explicitly market their activities for an Italian audience, the events are promoted in a specifically Italian style, and their web page is in both Italian and German and displays various Italian “ethnic markers”. For example, each member of the team is pictured on an Italian Vespa (scooter), some of the social functions are given Italian names (e.g. Ritmo Mediterraneo/Mediterranean Rhythm) and the entries in the guest book where partygoers and friends write short notices are in Italian. In Gentediaare, a mix of Italian and Swiss German. Gentediaare is one of a number of second-generation Italian associations in Switzerland that celebrate their Italian background by using and displaying objects of “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans), especially in the realm of House music, party and consumer culture.9

This phenomenon of “making culture” among migrant youth has been observed in a number of contexts such as among South Asians and Latin Americans in North America (Itzigsohn; Purkayastha), or Sikhs and Caribbeans in Britain (Alexander; Hall “Lives in Translation”). These studies criticise the conflation of community, culture and ethnic identity in multiculturalist discourses which portray ethnicity as a “fact of life” and as a taken for granted way of explaining cultural difference. They show that migrants and their descendants are not ethnically ordained, but are constantly negotiating and making sense of the crosscutting cleavages of plural social systems. Importantly, the cultural practices of migrant youth are highly context dependent and situational (Alexander; Alund; Baumann; Van Niekerk). Hall, for example, shows how second-generation Sikhs in Britain negotiate their cultural practices according to various contexts such as the temple, home, market arcades, schools and nightclubs, consciously deciding “the time and space to act English or Sikh” (“There’s a Time to Act” 254). Similarly, in their study of Arab-speaking youth, Noble, Poynting and Tabar (40) show how “the deployment of intense senses of ethnicity, fluid boundaries and hybridism constitutes a repertoire of socially useful subject positions appropriate for different contexts” (see also Noble this issue). This is illustrated by Pasquale’s (the Italian DJ) emphasis that “you have to be at work on time” and that you just “take the best of both worlds”. At work, he employs what he perceives as typically Swiss practices, while during his spare time, he celebrates his Italianness.

Gentediaare is a typical example of “making culture”. The people participating in Gentediaare and in their events take up a counter-position to what they see as narrow-minded Swiss working-class values such as order and cleanliness, and they have “developed a strong self-confidence which is expressed in their own subculture and in an explicit and well articulated group identity” (Wimmer 13). Wimmer describes them as Casual Latins, because they consciously celebrate a more communicative and pleasure-oriented southern European lifestyle, emphasising the more spontaneous and cordial Latin art of improvisation and opposing the perceived narrow-minded culture of the petit bourgeois Swiss. Although the Casual Latins are mainly comprised of second-generation Italians, they also include people of other southern European origin such as Spain and Portugal.10
While on the one hand, the Casual Latins’ celebration of Italianness is constructed as a counter-position to the Swiss majority society, on the other, the new spaces and associations they have created also result from shared experiences of strong transnational relations with Italy and well-developed Italian social networks in Switzerland. Furthermore, the Casual Latins’ group identity is based on shared interests in consumer culture and leisure activities such as football and clubbing. Sharing such interests is crucial for sustaining social networks with other second-generation Italians and for the reification of their Italianness. Of particular importance for the Casual Latins are popular music, especially House music, and consumer culture. Although Swiss youngsters are just as interested in House music and consumer culture, second-generation Italians have developed their own specific ways of doing ethnicity by adding identifiable Italian diacritical markers to mainstream culture. In clubs, Italian DJs play at the turntables, and, second-generation Italians publicly assert their Italianness by displaying ethnic symbols such as Italian fashion (Giorgio Armani, “Italia” T-shirts, etc.) with stickers of the Italian flag on T-shirts and jackets, Italian cars (Fiat, Alfa Romeo) and Italian motorcycles (Ciao, Vespa). On the Internet and in numerous weekly events, the Italian House scene represents itself from a cosmopolitan angle, fostering connections with Italian DJs from Italy and Germany, and organising “package party-weekends” to Rimini, one of Italy’s most well-known party locations. Similar trips are also organised to see important football games in Italy.

These socio-cultural practices, based on shared interests as well as common references to their ethno-national origin, could be described using Vermeulen’s distinction between “culture as lifestyle” as opposed to “culture as way of life”. Culture as way of life refers to the values and practices that we learn and internalise in the socio-cultural context in which we grow up. Culture as lifestyle involves the use of specific symbolic markers such as music, consumer goods or clothes which serve to distinguish oneself from others and to create an imagined community through references to ethnic origin (Van Niekerk; Vermeulen). In addition to growing up with Italian ways of life, the Casual Latins also choose culture as lifestyle. Importantly, culture as lifestyle can change over the life-course and is not characterised by continuity and stasis, but by the development of specific social networks and certain interests during different periods. Pasquale, for example, has primarily Italian friends today and is very active in celebrating his Italianness. He explains his changing social affiliations as follows:

At the moment we [Gentediaare] also share the same interests. I used to have very good friends who are Swiss. For me, it is just a period of my life. When I did my apprenticeship I could not imagine being anything other than Swiss, because you had common interests... you could really share something. And today, it is Gentediaare for me.

Thus, Pasquale’s social networks have changed since his adolescence, and his Italian background has become more important over time and in the context of many
friendships with other second-generation Italians. However, although his social networks have changed, Pasquale’s sense of place and home has stayed the same. He cannot imagine living anywhere other than the Swiss town in which he grew up. This view is shared by other Casual Latins. Although they celebrate their connections to Italy, many of them emphasise their rootedness in the place where they grew up in Switzerland. Despite, or maybe because of, their transnational upbringing, they feel most at home among co-ethnics in Switzerland, and they do not aspire to live in a different place or to travel the world. Having achieved their parents’ goal of social upward mobility through migration they are content with the social and economic security Switzerland offers.

The Casual Latins’ attachment to place, their strong social ties to co-ethnics with whom they share both culture as way of life and culture as lifestyle, and their limited desire to travel the world, somewhat contradict their criticism of the Swiss as parochial. However, their local attachments could be interpreted as resulting from a tension between “insider” and “outsider” status as members of a minority, a phenomenon observed among members of the second generation of various origins in New York, many of whom define themselves as “New Yorkers” (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf and Waters). Despite this attachment to place in Switzerland, the Casual Latins are not involved in the debates about facilitated access to Swiss citizenship. Although many of them do feel that Swiss citizenship laws are unjust, they are not interested enough to invest energy into obtaining more rights. Why are there such different patterns of dealing with one’s migrant background and issues of citizenship? And why are the Casual Latins not involved in the political Secondo Movement?

**Being Secondo or Latino: Education, Class and Peer-Group Affiliation**

Socio-economic and educational background as well as peer-group formation plays a major role in the socio-cultural and political practices individuals engage in. The vast majority of second-generation southern Italians come from working-class families and the formation of their social networks is directly linked to the schools they attended. The Swiss school system is based on state schools, and pupils are allocated to the schools closest to their home. Secondary schools are divided into three levels, the highest level leading to automatic access to university. Only a few second-generation Italians have achieved the highest level, and the majority of Casual Latins went to the lowest or the middle levels after which they could either continue their education (for example, in commercial colleges), or do an apprenticeship. Many second-generation Italians met at school, particularly in urban working-class areas, and developed common interests and formed peer groups. In contrast, most of the politicised secondos attended the highest or the middle level of secondary school and went to university or other higher education institutions where they developed social networks with the Swiss or people of other national backgrounds, and, especially, of middle-class background. In the peer groups formed at school and university, the secondos developed interests in political issues related to Switzerland, and they
acquired the cultural and social capital needed for political activism. Thus, schooling and educational career play a major role in terms of the development of specific interests and the establishment of friendships (Wessendorf “Who Do You Hang Out With?”).

Juhasz states that high educational achievement among the second generation is often accompanied by both the acquisition of social and cultural capital and the distancing from the milieu of origin. This can lead to the decreased importance of the migratory background as a social and cultural resource. In contrast, members of the second generation with lower social status sometimes react to social exclusion by embracing ethnic stereotypes. This has also been demonstrated among Antilleans and Moroccans in the Netherlands of whom those with the weakest labour market position identify more strongly with the country of origin (Snel, Engbersen and Leerkes). Baldassar (“Marias and Marriage”) found similar heterogeneity based on education among second-generation Italians in Perth, where young people with tertiary backgrounds are less likely to participate in Italian social networks and culture as lifestyle practices than their less (formally) educated peers. These university-educated youth, who have similar resources of cultural and social capital as the Swiss secondos, emphasise belonging to mainstream Australian society and carefully avoid any overt and emphasised expressions of Italianità, which they see as potentially “embarrassing” (Baldassar “Migration Monuments” 48).

In the case of second-generation Italians in Switzerland, ethnic reification and the celebration of Italianness cannot only be interpreted as a response to social exclusion, because many of the Casual Latins have been successful in their professional careers and feel integrated in Switzerland. Hence, culture can also be chosen as a lifestyle for those who simply share common interests with co-ethnics. Rather than interpreting social exclusion as the only factor that explains affiliation with co-ethnics and the reification of ethnicity, other factors such as shared interests also need to be considered. Thus, the Casual Latin’s affiliation to the Italian social milieu is based on shared interests, education, and, importantly, the continuity of transnational ties to country of origin. In contrast, the secondo political activists have mostly enjoyed higher education and their social networks are more mixed. Importantly, they do not reject their national origin, but they represent a certain worldliness, which one second-generation Italian describes as follows:

Lately . . . I noticed this manifestation of Italianità, but the kind of manifestation by well-earning, well-dressed professionals with a certain life-style, you know, the “Sushi-eating Italianità”, the globalised [Italianità].

Thus, these secondos emphasise a cosmopolitan and urban Italianità while at the same time celebrating cultural diversity and belonging to Switzerland. Both the politicised secondos and the Casual Latins situationally celebrate their migrant background and use symbolic labels to formulate their belonging. The former use the secondo-label as a general category for all descendants of migrants to agitate for more political rights and to emphasise the contributions they make to Swiss society. At the
centre of this discourse is their belonging to Switzerland (Juhasz “Secondos und Secondas in der Schweiz”). The latter use the Latino-label to create their own cultural space in which they share their transnational lifestyles and their common interests. Their discourse is centred on their being different from the Swiss, despite their strong affiliation to the locality in which they grew up. Each of these labels, expressed on trendy T-shirts and well-designed Internet pages, entail the celebration of diversity and the advantages of being of migrant origin. However, ultimately, “secko” is a marker used for concrete political claims-making, while “Latino” is a marker of symbolic ethnicity (Gans) which stands for culture as lifestyle as well as culture as way of life (Vermeulen).

Conclusion: Culture and Multi-culture as Lifestyles

Second-generation Italians have developed different forms of political and cultural practices in a social environment characterised by cultural diversity. Although they grew up in similar socio-economic and cultural contexts, some strongly identify with other Italians and emphasise their ethnicity, while others represent a more universalistic, cosmopolitan stance on cultural diversity. The Casual Latins define themselves on the basis of difference from the majority society, while the political secondos emphasise their being part of the majority society.

The way in which members of the second generation have appropriated such different discourses is related to education and peer-group association. The Casual Latins have achieved lower or middle education and have formed social affiliations with others of working-class background. They have developed a counter-discourse against the majority society and celebrate their ethnicity by way of an essentialised rhetoric of being Latino. They emphasise their difference from the majority society and demonstrate “Mediterranean nonchalance and spontaneity” as a counter-point to what they see as petit bourgeois Swiss values. In their pan-Mediterranean practices they situationally enact culture as lifestyle. This culture as lifestyle is influenced transnationally, but it is also locally embedded in the Swiss towns and neighbourhoods where the Casual Latins grew up.

Although they also grew up in working-class families, the political secondos have higher educational backgrounds and as a result greater access to social and cultural capital that allows them to participate more broadly in mainstream Swiss society. Because they feel socially, structurally and culturally firmly established as part of Swiss society, they claim the right to full political participation. They do so by strategically using their multiple cultural competences. In contrast to the Casual Latins, they employ a discourse of cultural diversity as an integral part of Swiss society, enacting “multi-culture as lifestyle”, while at the same time emphasising their belonging to Switzerland.

Of course, not all second-generation Italians form part of the two groups presented in this paper. Some of them live Italian culture as way of life without publicly reifying their Italian background, while others have different primary identifications, for
example, with their job or with a specific subculture, which are more important to them than ethno-national origin. However, the two different ways of dealing with “everyday cultural multiplicity” (Amit-Talai) and political exclusion presented here are particularly interesting. They not only show the interplay of socio-economic background and ethnicity, but also how cultural difference can be lived as lifestyle on the one hand, while on the other, cultural diversity as positively valued cultural capital can be strategically used for political aims. It also shows that individuals are “more than their membership of and participation in collectivities” like ethnic groups, but that they self-consciously and sometimes strategically manipulate belonging, group membership and identification (Cohen 132).

Today’s second-generation Italians in Switzerland are free to employ such different strategies of politics of identity because they have been socio-economically upwardly mobile and are generally accepted by the majority society. However, in relation to other migrant groups, identity politics can be perceived as a threat to the integrity of “the national culture”. In Switzerland, this has been particularly the case in relation to people of Yugoslav and Muslim origin who started arriving in the early 1970s and took up the lowest socio-economic positions (Stolz; Mey, Rorato and Voll). Although many of them have lived in Switzerland for 20–30 years, they continue to be perceived as too different to integrate. Because of their structural marginality, they serve as ideal scapegoats for the anti-immigrant discourses of the populist right-wing parties such as the “Swiss Folk Party” (SVP).

Thus, the politics of recognition of migrants and their descendants are met with various degrees of openness and acceptance, depending on the structural integration and the degree of accommodation by the majority society. The example of Italians in Switzerland shows that by taking an historical in-depth look at past migrations and processes of settlement, we can demonstrate the elasticity and changeability of perceptions about “culture” and “cultural difference”, and illustrate how, over time, groups perceived to be different during some periods can become part of the imagined national community. In the course of this accommodation, the celebration of cultural difference becomes generally accepted as a lifestyle choice, and is not perceived as a threat to “national integrity”. However, being accepted as part of an imagined national community does not automatically grant the political rights the secondos are claiming. Despite the reality that without migrants and their descendants Switzerland would not only “have no pizza” but suffer a considerable loss of skills, knowledge and, quite simply, taxes, the culturalist populist discourses against diversity continue to be effective in the restrictions of the political rights of migrants and their children.

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Notes

[1] These numbers refer to those Italians who have not yet acquired citizenship. Between 1974 and 2005, a total of 70,000 first-generation Italian migrants acquired citizenship, along with 71,000 members of the second generation (Bundesamt für Migration, Statistikdienst, 2006). Presuming that they still live in Switzerland, there are currently approximately 441,000 people of Italian origin who do not have Swiss citizenship residing in the country. On the reason why some migrants of Italian origin have acquired citizenship and why others have not, see Bolzman, Fibbi and Vial.

[2] However, while the vast majority of them have achieved a higher status than their working-class parents, only few achieved higher education (3 per cent of Italian descendants went to university, in contrast to a total of 11 per cent of the Swiss) (Juhasz and Mey). But research, which accounted for socio-economic background found that members of the second generation of Italian and Spanish backgrounds have been upwardly mobile to a higher degree than their Swiss peers of the same class background (Bolzman, Fibbi and Vial).

[3] The term “Italianità” is used among both Swiss and Italians to express certain features associated with “Italianness” such as cordiality, openness, enjoying life, etc.

[4] In various European countries, 1 May is a national, political holiday celebrating workers’ rights.

[5] The term “secondo” was first used publicly in 1993, in the film “Babylon 2” by Samir.

[6] The movement agitated for “facilitated access to citizenship” that would include the right to apply for citizenship between the ages of 14 and 24 for individuals who have permanent residency permits and who have been to school in Switzerland for at least five years. It includes reduced costs and a simplified naturalisation procedure requiring processing only at the regional level (www.auslaender.ch/einbuergerung/revision).


[8] By former Yugoslav, I refer to the nation-states which were formerly part of Yugoslavia.

[9] House music is a form of electronic urban dance music characterised by a heavy 4/4 bass drum pattern, popularised in Chicago in the early 1980s.

[10] There seems to be a “hierarchy of otherness” (Noble, Poynting and Tabar) among second-generation Italians in Switzerland: while second-generation Spaniards and Portuguese belong to their group, Turks and migrants from former Yugoslavia do not (Wimmer). However, this is changing today with an increasing number of children and adolescents of many different origins and more interaction between them.


[12] See, for example: www.weekendance.ch

Works Cited


