Educational and Anthropological Perspectives: An Italian View on Migration in Multi-cultural Urban Spaces

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Summary

In contemporary societies there are different ways to perceive the relation between identity and alterity and to describe the difference between "us" and "them", residents and foreigners. Anthropologist Sandra Wallman sustains that in multi-cultural urban spaces the frontiers of diversity are not only burdensome markers of identity, but rather they could also represent new chances to define "identity" and "alterity". These frontiers, in fact, can work like interfaces through which to build time after time, in a creative way, a relationship with the other. From this point of view, the concept of boundary can offer many opportunities to creatively define the relation with the other and to sign new options for cognitive and physical movement. On the other side, in many cases we have a plenty of mechanisms of exclusion that transforms a purely empirical distinction between "us" and "them" in an ontological contrast, as in the case when the immigrant undergoes hostilities through discriminatory language. Even though these forms of racism are undoubtedly objectionable from a theoretical point of view, they are anyway socially "real", in the sense that they are perpetually reaffirmed and strengthened in public opinion. They are in fact implicit "truths", realities that are considered objective, common opinions that are part of day-to-day existence. That is the reason why an anthropological prospective including the study of "common sense" should be adopted in our present day studies on migration, as pointed out by American anthropologist Michael Herzfeld.

My primary goal is to analyze with such a critical approach same pre-conditions of racism and exclusion in contemporary multi-cultural urban spaces. On the other hand, this essay would also investigate positive strategies of comparing, interchanging, and negotiating alterity in social work. I suggest that this approach can offer positive solutions in coping with "diversity" and in working out policies for recognizing a common identity which, at the same time, do not throw away the relevance of political and economic power.

1   A Nzema Proverb

"The eyes (nye) of a foreigner (ɛyɛvole) are large (mgbole) but (naa) he sees (cnwu) little (debie). But it is not his fault, he is a foreigner, and as such must be forgiven, as *Amaamuo* commands" (Pavanello 2002, 47). *Amaamuo* is a group of principles about good conduct. It is a foundation of tolerance and peaceful acceptance of a foreigner upon which the Nzema philosophy of diversity is based. A foundation very different from that which hides behind our declarations, statements such as "it's not the foreigners fault", that imply guilt. In fact this can be seen in an interesting essay on multiculturalism, interculturalism and education by anthropologist Gunter Dietz in 2003. The Nzema philosophy of diversity says: "The foreigner has before him new things which he has never seen before. With his eyes he thinks that he sees them, but he really sees what he wants to see, and many times interprets what he sees in

the light of his own ideas and what is familiar to him. Thus it happens that he forms an image of this new world in his mind that has absolutely no connection with reality, but is his own personal interpretation. This requires leniency, but only up to the point that it doesn't become arrogance. That is when the foreigner convinces himself that his view of the world is correct and that the view of the others of their own world is, according to him, wrong" (Pavanello 2002, 47).

2   A Person in Theory but not in Practice

We Europeans probably do not have a proverb that is equal to the Nzema proverb about the principle of leniency and tolerance toward foreigners. On the contrary in our society we have numerous mechanisms of ceremony and exclusion that make foreigners *invisible* or second-class citizens. The Italian sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago (2004, 9) sustains that humanity is too often divided between person and non-person: "National majorities, citizens gifted with formal rights and guarantees, and minorities of illegal foreigners (non citizens, foreigners) to whom these rights and guarantees are denied in theory and in practice". Therefore even if in theory we are all in agreement on the principles of tolerance and equality between humans, in everyday life we realize how easy it is to ignore, avoid or violate these principles. Even if many people agree that every person has the right to freely move around the world, especially to look for better living conditions, not all consider "diversity" like "identity" as above all a social construction, and therefore as something dynamic and progressive not static and unchanging.

3   Social Enemies

Starting with this brief comparison in the way "we" (the natives) view "them" (the immigrants) and the way "they" view "us", we could suggest that the basis for understanding diversity is as follows: "they" would have the right to the same indulgences that "we" would like to find in a world that we do not know. Instead, reality is different, immigrants in search of work, refuge, or a new life are excluded and immediately transformed because of – skin color, religious beliefs, an incomprehensible language, and a different life style – into social enemies. Building a peaceful attitude in relation with diversity through intercultural ways often remains an ethical principle in word but put into practice with difficulty. We need to realize that we still do not have a solution to this evident contradiction if we consider the fact that also our political culture prevalently conceives measures to expel, control or confine immigrants in a society defined as "global". Through symbolism that transforms a purely empirical distinction between us and them in an ontological contrast, that is between worlds radically opposed, the immigrant is represented through discriminatory language and undergoes hostility, earlier then in fact, in the substantial desire for separation: foreigners from Italian citizens and legal immigrants from illegal immigrants (Dal Lago 2004).

4   The Social Perception of Immigrants

Racist and xenophobic visions describing the condition of immigrants, finally filter, reproduce and transform their deep humanity into an easy "alterity" made objective, namely into "the other" objective version of reality. Mass media are the main news channels, which are like a second skin for us, an audio-visual skin that is more and more interactive nowadays, through which we often learn and know. A detailed analysis of the way in which such news channels are socially created makes it possible to understand even the kind of censorship they adopt, how they manipulate public opinion, and above all how they are classified within their production context. (Gramsci 2000). In this way it might be possible to take into account the scare vision present in Italy about immigration, or a twisted social perception of the so-called phenomenon of the "invasion of the immigrants". A contribution to this has been given by

inflated figures and the creation and spreading of a negative image that would make up a vicious circle capable of increasing xenophobia and racism. But there is more than this: "the issues of invasion, of immigration as a source of insecurity for Italian citizens, of *being a clandestine* as a synonym for criminal, soon become as precious as money to be spent on the election market, used to the full extent by the rightist parties, but sometimes competed for by the leftist parties as well" (Rivera 2003, 43-44).

5   Anthropology as the Study of Common Sense

In this state of affairs, we might guess how the whole matter about "immigration" in the global society should entail a detailed analysis of the various social practices through which diversity is handled. In order for us to do so, we need a careful examination of the categories that represent the foundation of exclusion and marginalization. In this specific case, a never-ending meditation on the terms used by mass media and public opinion would be necessary. Such a reflection might bring to light those social and cognitive categories that are by now part of "common sense", and that are widely used in the present Italian debate over immigration and foreigners. My address is inserted in this context. My goal is also that of making people feel the anthropological presence inside the ethos of social work, and expanding the interactions experienced within "diversity".

In a world that is apparently more and more inclined to go back to dangerous essentialisms, we feel the need to understand why old and new forms of racism and xenophobia are coming out again. Even though these forms are undoubtedly objectionable from a theoretical point of view, they are anyway socially "real", in the sense that they are perpetually reaffirmed and strengthened in public opinion. They are in fact implied "truths", realities that are considered objective, common opinions that are part of day-to-day existence. That is the reason why I shall adopt an analitycal perspective which, according to Michael Herzfeld (2006, 17), considers anthropology as the critical study of common sense (i.e. as an ethnographically grounded critic of those ideas, practices, *habitus* and ideological patterns which organize daily life and structure people' understanding of the ways the world usually works).

6   The Frontiers of Diversity

As we talk about diversity, we are faced right away with the stereotype of the foreigner-immigrant, and the accompanying list of racial or ethnical elements that would define it. My contribution starts with this willingness to question ourselves about the way in which our common sense works: or the way in which we classify alterity (or diversity) and therefore identity. Immigration can be, from this point of view, a phenomenon that reveals the inhospitable nature of the so-called "reception" society, or the relationship between those who are "in" and those who are "out", on the basis of the combination identity/alterity.

The tendency is often that of hiding the existence of many ways for us to relate to a foreigner, the fact that during each meeting there are different potential ways to perceive the difference between "us" and "them" and that the frontiers of diversity are not only burdensome markers of identity, but rather some interfaces, new chances to define "identity" and "alterity", to build time after time, in a creative way, a relationship with the other. As nobody usually mentions the symbolic, economic and historic-social orders in which meetings take place, it must be said instead that the success of each meeting depends on the context in which it takes place. It means that it depends on both the material conditions of the context and the non-material resources, namely on the particular "habitus" (Bourdieu 2003, 2005) and the emotional reactions of both of them: migrants and natives. Because of this we can say along with Sandra Wallman (1999-2000, 21) that each meeting between them and us is an original product of

"What-is happening, and What-people-feel-about-what-is-happening *in combination*". According to the English anthropologist a connotation typical of migration processes toward European cities is the commitment to find and protect one's own "home". The comparison between immigrants and residents would differ according to the sort of identity and belonging relationship that is being established in each instance between people and places. Borders are defined and established this way: on the one hand in the absence of a vital space, on the other hand in defense of such a space different adaptive strategies take place. Sometimes these are positive strategies of comparison, interchange and negotiation with alterity. On other occasions these are defensive strategies of rejection and intolerance.

7 Embodied Racism

The dynamic aspect and the richness typical of a multicultural experience are often drowned out by a policy of cultural purity or, on the contrary, by an inappropriate and exotically oriented emphasis on cultural differences. Sociologist Renate Siebert (2003, 12) claims that: "racist ideology acts like a sort of filter placed between people, structuring the projections toward each other, affecting the identity and recognition processes. [...] It is a combination of representations, images, cognitive phenomena that involve the psyche, the conscience and feelings". A proper standard linked to the mental and cognitive dynamics that inform and deform our perception but also the sensitivity in our relations with others. Then our sense of responsibility toward people, that are to be viewed in their individuality and peculiarity (not as black, Jewish, foreigners or Muslims), fails. But those operating in the field of social professions need to take into account a further element essential for analysis of interpersonal dynamics: attention for the body and for the so-called embodiment processes. The body not really intended as a biological and material entity, but rather as the result of social, historical and cultural processes. Embodiment intended in a double sense: - On the one hand as the somatization of culture. - On the other hand as the bodily production of culture.

8 Culturally Informed Feelings

Culture is to be mutually intended both as the product of ideas, representations and material conditions, and as a bodily phenomenon and embodied experience (Csordas 2003). In this regard, anthropology has stressed how culture builds the body, marks the external surface, modifies them inside and determines gestures, posture and movements. Suffering and frustration, for example, are to be intended as individual feelings, but also and especially as social feelings, that is culturally informed and belonging to a larger conversational system. Similarly the anthropologist Paola Tabet (1997, XIX-XX) noted how normal and obvious racial ideology is among students, as well as their mostly unconscious immersion in it, starting from their perception of "race" as natural identity, this being as an established fact and, as such, out of question. Race, in other words passes through bodies, skin, eyesight, smell and touch. *The right skin* is in fact the title of Tabet's book.

9 Re-mapping the Spaces of the Relation with the Other

a) Bodies and Places in Migration

Migratory phenomena have had effects on the way we think and build the relationship between identity and alterity, so much so that today we speak of multiple ways to build an identity: far away from the network of relationships of which they were a part, the bodies of immigrants and refugees are the place in which hybrid, uprooted and mobile identities are embodied. These are products of the tensions between local worlds and broader historical, economic and political scenarios (Pandolfi, a cura di, 1996). This means that in the study of migratory experiences the ability of groups or individuals to be somehow located

contemporaneously in more then one place should be included. In fact, the migratory experience is not necessarily an uprooting experience because there are many "present stories" (Augè 1997) that are not confined to a single and unique point in space and time.

Therefore the worlds of immigrants, spatially separate but communicating, can be better understood only by means of multi-located ethnography, that is adopting a methodical outlook that multiplies the real and virtual places of ethnographic research and that focuses on the relationships between these (Rossi 2003, 48). In fact, ethnography can follow in space and time, not only individuals and groups but also material objects, metaphors, narrative plots, life stories and conflicts by following the most recent indications of urban anthropology, indications about the fading of cultural confines and growing urban complexity (Sobrero 2000, 233).

b) The Image of Immigrants in the Nation-State

It is interesting to note how the image of immigrants in our cities is the product of a "euro centric" stereotype, placing the immigrants as our antagonists in the work market and in receiving benefits from the nation-state. The consequence of this image is that we "localize", naturalizing, the presumed identity of immigrants inside the nation-state. Instead the presence of immigrants in the cities – created to emphasis the stability of the nation-state - indicates the existence of a dynamic relationship between urban life and the creation of new identities not necessarily foreseen or approved by the nation-state (Herzfeld 2006).

In what way is it possible to individuate these new forms of identity?

- In the first place, restoring to the city its heterogeneous and fluid character, able to create new forms of symbolic and political mobilization.

- Second, considering the permeability of borders and the negotiability of "interactive" identities that people experience in the city.

- Finally, relocating the stereotype of the nation into movements of non-integrated citizens.

10 An African King in a Tuscan Town: Searching for Common Language

An innovative experience was conducted by the town of Peccioli, Toscana, where communication has been promoted with the Nzema of Ghana since 1997. The communication developed by repeated encounters between Italian and African authorities concluded in 2002 with the inauguration of a new school in a village of the African nation. The dialogue was mediated, among others, by an Italian anthropologist, Mariano Pavanello of the University of Pisa, who has conducted a very long field research in the village area. A symbolic moment of that encounter is the visit of African King Annor Adjaye III in Peccioli, July 5th, 1997[1]. The following is an account of Pavanello in "I Quaderni Pecciolesi" (2002, 4-8): "Dressed in a metallic blue tunic with designs in gold and silver, a turban also blue decorated with gold and silver colored buttons and an elephant's tail in hand, the African king walked, smiling and tranquil, not intimidated at all by the amazed stares of passersby [...] In his address to the counselors and public present in the hall, he said that he felt it was his duty to bring to the

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[1] The African king Annor Adjaye III reigns, without governing, with the title Homanhene, Supreme Head, over a small, traditional area of Ghana, the Western Nzema Traditional Area, that corresponds with the modern administrative district of Jomoro.

small Tuscan town that had received him so warmly, the image and feeling of his people and that he could do so because he represented that people since he embodied its history. And, as we will see, their history is also our history. So he concluded that if we have a common history behind us we also have before us a common future. The king […] the distant great grandson of the last Slave Merchant-King, came to Europe to speak the language of modernity [...] That July 5th it was unexpectedly made clear that a man with much darker skin, dressed in an absolutely eccentric way, from a very different and far away world, in reality spoke about himself and his people using ideas and concepts so familiar that he was suddenly transformed into one of us [...]".

The Nzema proverb cited at the beginning teaches us something about tolerance. But even the encounter of the Nzema king with the counselors and the public present at the Town Council Hall of Peccioli tells us something about the paradox identity/alterity: the possibility to explore cultural differences in a practical way, as one of the many dimensions of living together in an era in which this happens continually, through more and more common languages.

Epilogue

Speaking a common language; comprehending the sense of "diversity"; creating times and places where to perform "intercultural" communication. How can we realize these goals in the real world? As we have seen, we have doubts about the fact that we could really achieve these aims through a process of formal, institutional negotiation among imagined (Anderson 1991) different essential identities, participating in a supposed ideal common public space: this is, in fact, an option which implies an integral (istic) vision of what "culture" is, and which often produces the effect of concealing concrete gaps in political, economic and intellectual power[2]. At the same time we are aware that these gaps in power could simply be reproduced by any (ideological) presupposition of universal values, goals and ideals which in fact denies the same existence of different (from our own) social and cultural practices. We also know that negating or concealing our embodied discriminatory attitudes, grounded on ideas of racial, ethnic and cultural essence, are rhetorical tactics people use to make operative their social classifications: sentences such as "we are not racists" do not cancel the effectiveness of racism, they simply let old and new forms of "racism" work (Bolognari 2006).

In this paper, after a brief presentation of these theoretical points, we have stressed the relevance for a social working action of a point of view which is both critical (in the sense of an anthropological attitude to be critic about habitus and common sense) and practical (in the sense of an active participation of the social worker into the web of embodied social, political, economics hierarchies and meanings which shapes social lives). As an example of this perspective we have considered the Nzema project and the cooperation among an Italian University (Pavanello at that time was professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Pisa), an African "traditional" kingdom, (the kingdom of Western Nzema is part of the Republic of Ghana), a little village on the coast of Ghana (Ngelekazo is in the Jomoro district, Western Region) and a little Italian town (Peccioli is a *Comune* in Pisa Department, Tuscany). In this case study the critical attitude of an anthropologist with a deep knowledge of an African context have been "forced" to dialogue with the different presuppositions of both African and Italian institutions, being at the same time obliged to find new (educational and

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[2] In a very thoughtful essay, Piper and Garrat (2004), two british critical pedagogists, held this point of view when they write: "We argue that current discourses, which inevitably lead to the celebration of difference in classroom situations, can have significant and sometimes unintended negative consequences" (p. 278).

political) ways to put in practice an (anthropological) academic competence. At the end of the process, inside a critical and operative space of common interaction outlined and produced by the agreement of different institutions, we find not "cultures", "societies" or, worse, "identities", but *only* real people (girls and boys from a little Ghanaian village and a little Italian town), doing real things (Ortner 1984: looking for practical instruments of understanding and dialoguing each other).

We suggest that the Nzema project could in same way be considered a model of and a model for a practical and critical approach to social work. We hope it could have something to "teach" to the great deal of intercultural projects which animate the Italian civil society to day. Such projects (twinnings among European schools, and between European and African primary and secondary schools, cultural exchanges between teachers, social workers, students) are obviously inspired by the will to develop peaceful interactions among different people, peace and social cooperation through new educational strategies which are grounded in the concrete interaction between Italian (or European) and non Italian (o European) schools[3]. All these projects make use of anti racist didactic proposals, centred on values like the respect for human rights and dignity, and on a culture of non violence. They all offer to the Italian (and foreign) pupils important opportunities to learn languages, to experience the dialogue with different cultures and new, concrete, types of cooperation. They all mix the new communication technologies, which can improve and redefine the intercultural dialogue, with more "traditional" ways (exchanging photos, drawings, music, tales, everyday experiences) of doing intercultural education. We agree with their intentions and with their goals, and we really appreciate their experimental character, particularly when these projects let real scholars play the game of intercultural dialogue with the new technological tools. What we think our critical, anthropological and pedagogical, perspective could add to these experimental educational projects is a deeper consciousness of the not conscious, embodied character of some discriminatory attitudes; the idea that, for this reason, an anti racist didactical planning is not necessarily an effective instrument to stop racist practices (Piper and Garrat 2004, 287); the presupposition that the presence of a thick, situated anthropological competence could really help in making plain the not conscious prejudices of different actors of the intercultural scene, and the way they work, thanks to its familiarity with a cultural critique of common senses. In this perspective, the Nzema project could stand as an example of a different way of practicing the intercultural dialogue, if only because it remembers us that this dialogue is probably easier when the interacting subjects are a king, an academician, and a leftist mayor.

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[3] As interesting examples of such a strategy we can remember: the Project "SCUOLA NEL MONDO" (School in the World) which provides a solidarity twinning among Italian, Malawi and Madagascar schools (see www.scuolanelmondo.com/progetto.html); the e-Twinning, an electronic multi twinning among schools from different European countries which involves directors of studies and headmasters, teachers, librarians, in elaborating concrete intercultural projects (see www.programmallp.it e anche www.pubblica.istruzione.it/buongiorno_europa/e-twin.shtml); the twinnings of "Legambiente scuola e formazione" (Legambiente, an environmentalistic association, School and Education), which are directed to develop international cooperation in the educational field concerning environmental preservation, peace keeping, health care, and legal practice (see: www.legambientescuolaformazione.it)

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