Out of Albania: Albanians’ experiences of migration, albanophobia and integration in Italy

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Outline of seminar

• Why Albania?
• Motives, characteristics and evolution of emigration.
• Research methods and theoretical framework.
• Albanian migrants in Italy: narratives of work, housing and social space.
• Discourses of stigmatisation; reactions of migrants.
• A successful (partial) integration, but at what cost?
• Concluding synthesis: asymmetric assimilation and a difficult relationship with the homeland.
Funding and outputs

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Key publications:


Why Albania?

• The most dramatic emigration of any post-communist country; contrast with banned emigration for previous 45 years under the doctrinaire and isolationist regime of Enver Hoxha; attempted emigration seen as act of treason.

• By 2010, stock of emigrants 1.4 million, cf. Albanian population 2.8 million (2011 Census). Most migrants are in Greece (600,000) and Italy (450,000), creating a regionally compact transnational space.

• Remittances have been the main plank supporting the Albanian economy for past 20 years, both at macro level (% GDP, % export of goods and services etc.) and at micro level of family and household survival. Albania near top of global rankings of the relative scale of remittances.
Concrete bunkers: convex ‘repulsion’
Motives of emigration

1. Economic survival in the extreme economic and political chaos of the post-communist transformation: ‘economic refugees’.

2. Expression of personal liberation after decades of repression and isolation (under Enver Hoxha), and as ongoing protest against the emerging corrupt and paternalistic politics of the post-communist era.

3. Curiosity: the lure of the West and the forbidden fruits of capitalism. Role of Italian TV, watched secretly during the later communist years, but giving an idealised picture of Western/Italian society.
Satellite dishes: concave ‘receptiveness’
Characteristics and evolution of migration

- Migration continuous over past 20 years; distinction between 1990s (‘crisis migrations’) and 2000s (steadier flow, consolidation, family reunification etc.).
- Emigration has been accompanied by massive internal migration.
- Most migration irregular, given lack of legal channels: across mountains to Greece or by boat to Southern Italy.
- Regularisations since late 1990s in both Italy and Greece have transformed a mainly male migration into family reunion/formation, consolidation, and birth of second generation.
- Nevertheless, Albanians subject to harsh stigmatisation – ‘albanophobia’ – in both receiving countries.
Albania: internal and external migration

NB: Arrow magnitudes are indicative of, but not proportional to, observed flows.
Albanophobia and the dynamics of a partial integration

Research methods:

- Semi-structured interviews to quota-samples of 30 migrants each in Modena (Northern Italy), Lecce (Southern Italy) and Rome.
- In-depth interviews to key informants (community leaders, social workers, employers etc.).
- Surveys of political and media discourses towards Albanians in Italy (to reveal characteristics of albanophobia).

Theoretical framework and research design:

- Three dimensions of integration (work, housing, social space).
- Interpreted as a trajectory of ‘asymmetric assimilation’ or ‘italophilia’ vs. ‘albanophobia’.
Albanians in Italy, 2001

Fig. 2. Regional distribution of Albanians in Italy, 31 December 2001:
(a) ‘immigration index’ – Albanians per thousand of the regional population;
(b) Albanians’ share of the total immigrant population in each region.
Italian discourses of stigmatisation of Albanians

• Albania as a place of chaos and moral backwardness.
• Albanians as criminals and prostitutes.
• Myth of the ‘dangerous other’, but an other that reminds Italians of their own recent (but rejected) history of migration and backwardness – so the Albanian replaces the Southern Italian as the ‘other within’.
Immigrant narratives
1 – Work

• Most Albanians employed in manual and unskilled jobs; limited discrimination
  Lecce: agriculture, construction, small-scale industry, services
  Modena: construction, manufacturing, agriculture, services

• Access to work mainly through kinship networks, Albanian and Italian friends, newspaper ads., on-site visits, ‘hanging around’ at pick-up points

Lecce and South: larger informal economy, easier to work in black economy, but no contract, problems to get/renew permit to achieve family reunion

Modena and North: smaller informal economy, difficult to work in black economy, most migrants have contract, permit, easier to achieve family reunion.
Immigrant narratives

2 – Housing

• More difficult and discriminatory than work

Lecce and South: easier to find accommodation, but still discrimination; access more difficult in university towns (Lecce, Bari) where students compete for cheap rented accommodation

Modena and North: lack of affordable accommodation in town, plus discrimination; some immigrants forced to depopulated rural settlements

• Access to housing market: family-based networks, Albanian and Italian friends, agencies, newspapers; easier for families than for single men; very difficult without ‘Italian’ recommendation.
Immigrant narratives
3 – Social space

• Main obstacle to social integration is media stigmatisation, as ‘undesirable’, ‘criminals’, ‘uncivilised’ etc. ‘Albanophobia’

   Lecce: easier social integration, more ‘friendly’ locals, ‘piazza life’, stronger shared identity
   Modena: more difficult social integration in richer, more bourgeois and provincial urban culture; work harder; lack of neighbourhood integration

• Albanians counter collective stereotyping by successful ‘individual’ integration and full use of ‘normal’ channels (no recourse to ‘special’ services, charities etc.).
• Very limited tendency to form associations (rejection of ‘collective’ past, suspicion of other Albanians).
• Internalisation and negotiation of term ‘albanese’.
Welcome, hospitality, generosity

When I first arrived in Otranto [small coastal town near Lecce] I was lucky, very lucky to meet a family, they were excellent people and helped me a lot to settle in here. Initially I worked as a caretaker for them ... they paid me 400,000 Lire per month and treated me well ... they referred to me as their daughter. The head of the house, whom I used to call ‘grandpa’, insisted that I continue at university and helped me very much financially by buying books and also bought me a second-hand car with which I could drive back and forth to university (F34, Lecce).
Racism

Well, there are three main ways in which racism manifests itself. The first is physical violence, like those three Albanians who were beaten up by a group of nazis in Bolzano. This is the most evident and obvious form of racism.

Does this happen where you live?
No, not in Modena. The second form is typical of people with a lower level of education ... so they might insult you verbally by calling you ‘albanese di merda’ (shitty Albanian) or other similar things, but even this is quite rare and is getting more and more sporadic. The third way is more common and consists in finding an excuse, it is a very kind and polite form of marginalisation, which keeps you at a distance, by denying you the chance to be known better. (...) You see, in Italy there is a sort of refusal to accept that an Albanian can be an intellectual, that he/she can be as good a doctor as an Italian. This seems to be the most difficult thing to accept and I have the feeling that Italian people can help you in a very generous way, but when you actually get what you want, they are not very happy. They might be happy of having helped you, but not that you got that far, do you understand? (M23, Modena).
Albanian = rough, uncivilised

What I really don’t like about Italians is that they talk about things they don’t know ... like when they talk about Albanians. I mean the way they say ‘Albanians’ ... it is not like the way we would say ‘Italian’ ... it is not neutral, they say ‘albanese’ when they mean something dirty, bad, stinking, something they don’t like. (...) And there is nothing you can do, even if it is unfair... Italians should not talk like that because when they went to America they experienced exactly the same things ... Italians, mafiosi, drug smugglers... (M22, Bari).

‘Coward like an Albanian...’. ‘Liar as an Albanian...’. ‘You are dressed like an Albanian...’. ‘Albanian’ basically is the adjective, Albanian is an adjective Italian people use when they show their contempt for something (F31, Lecce).
Albanian = prostitute

Well, it is very common for Italian men to try and chat you up, it is enough to be a woman and they would try ... if you are Albanian it is even more likely to happen as here you are seen as a prostitute... Once I found myself in a very embarrassing situation. Just think that this happened with one of my supervisors at work, and I used to work [as a part-time translator] at the Law Courts in Lecce... He asked me ‘Do you have other occupations?’ I answered ‘I am studying at the moment so I can’t work much...’ He went on and said ‘But you know that this work will finish sooner or later...’. Then he said ‘Did you used to work in the street or in a flat?’ I just could not believe my ears and I said ‘What?!’ And he said ‘No, I mean, you were very brave to find the strength to stop...’. In that moment I felt so insulted that I thought I was going to slap him in the face ... but I just told him I was sorry to have spent two years working side by side with such an idiot, and left (F31, Lecce).
‘Coming out’ as an Albanian

Once I met this Italian girl at university. She approached me herself. I was sitting on my own in the canteen and she asked what degree I was doing and other general questions. I responded to all of them and was honest with her. She didn’t ask where I was from but I was determined to tell her at some point if I was to see her again because I didn’t want any confrontation with her later on. So one night she invites me to her place... We were having fun and enjoying ourselves and I really wanted to tell her about my life and such things. But at that moment her flat-mates came in so we left. She then kept text-messaging me and telling me how much she was attracted to me and other stuff. One day I couldn’t hold back and had to tell her so I blurted it out. I never thought I could have seen anybody so stunned like she was. It was unbelievable. She didn’t know what to say. She withdrew her hand around my neck and I asked her whether she was feeling all right. I did get the point that my nationality disappointed her so much. I thought that was so ridiculous. I now see her just randomly and she greets me with this guilty conscience for having left me so unfairly (M24, Lecce).
Internalisation of the negative stereotype

Those Albanians who commit crimes and have problems with the law, I think they deserve the treatment they get from society, but the rest, people like us who are law-abiding and yet are in need of help, don’t deserve the racism (...) I feel a bit diffident towards Albanians now ... I socialise mainly with Italians. The only Albanians I mix with are my family (F, 31, Lecce).

Are your friends Italian or Albanian?
I don’t know many Albanians. I stay with my family. I don’t like to make acquaintances with the Albanians, I don’t like them... They have done many stupid things (M, 24, Modena).
Concluding synthesis

• Albanian migration to Italy a case of differential in/exclusion (Castles 1995): incorporated into some spheres (labour market, neighbourhoods, schools) but partially excluded from others (citizenship, residual discrimination, ‘glass ceiling’ etc.).

• Quantitative indicators (employment progress, geographical distribution, demographics, school results, language, religion etc.) all indicate rapid assimilation trajectory, faster than any other migrant group in Italy.

• Success achieved by individual not collective effort; no ‘ethnic mobilisation’. Rather, a distancing from Albanian identity, due to internalisation of anti-Albanian stereotypes, plus pragmatic stance of mimesis and identity encryption (Romania 2004).

• Final element is Albanians’ problematic dis-identificatory relationship with their homeland: rejection of the communist past; uncertain positioning within the fast-changing ‘new’ Albania, seen as corrupt and lacking enough economic prospects for return. Transnational kinship relations remain strong, facilitated by spatial proximity.