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“My decision had already been taken”: narratives of migrant parents about “return” policies

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Autonomous Community of Galicia and the Veneto region developed policies with the aim of facilitating the "return" of emigrants and their descendants. But have these “return” policies conditioned contemporary migration flows from Argentina? The aim of this paper is to give an exploratory response through the narratives of 25 “Argentinean” migrant parents who moved with their families to these regions. Most of them manifested little or no knowledge about “return” policies. This situation would be related to: 1) personal disinterest, 2) different ancestral origins, and 3) the presence of social networks.

Keywords: “Return” policies; migrant narratives; Argentina; Italy; Spain

Introduction

Spain and Italy share with Argentina a recent history of migration, which is, unlike other transoceanic movements, remembered in the three countries. These memories are visible in various fields, such as cultural productions¹ and media representations². However, it is in the political field where these memories of human displacements have probably had the higher relevance.

As David Cook-Martin (2013) pointed out, during the 20th century, these nation-states developed their nationality laws taking into account the population movements among their territories (Cook-Martin, 2013: 28) and the logics behind those laws are still operative nowadays³. In addition, after the decentralization of power occurred in the two Euro-Mediterranean countries in the ‘70s and ‘80s, some political actors at the sub-national level have decided to evoke their own memories of migration through their own laws and policies.

In the last decades, some regions of Spain and Italy, such as the Autonomous Community of Galicia and the Veneto region, have developed

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¹ Many literary and film productions have evoked late 19th and early 20th century migrations and they have frequently linked them with contemporary migrations through family stories. For more information, see: Bernasconi and Bertagna (2008), Schmidt (2010) and the journal *Altreitalie*.

² See: Cook-Martin and Viladrich (2009) and Schmidt (2010).

³ The nationality laws of Spain and Italy are based on *jus sanguinis*, while the Argentinean law is based on *jus soli*.



their own laws and policies to maintain and reinforce their own ties with a segment of the population of the South American country. Among other initiatives⁴, these regions have developed policies with the aim of facilitating the "return"⁵ of those Argentines who descend from "their emigrants"⁶.

Guido Tintori has described, for the Italian case, these initiatives as the desire of the regions to become "*translocal actors in the international political and commercial scenarios*" (Tintori, 2009: 61). But, have they made it? Have regional "return" policies conditioned the contemporary migration flows from Argentina?

Since the official data regarding the outcome of these "return" policies is not available to the public, the intention of this paper is to give an exploratory response to these questions through the narratives of 25 migrants who moved with their families from Argentina to (a) the Veneto region, or (b) the Autonomous Community of Galicia. The aim of this paper is to understand which role these "return" policies played in their migration experiences.

The article is divided into four parts. In the first part, a brief overview of the recent history of migration between these territories (nation-states and regions) is presented. In the second part, the processes of implementation of "return" policies in the Veneto region and in the Autonomous Community of Galicia are explored. In the third part, a description of the fieldwork is offered. In the last part, the narratives of migrant parents regarding the relevance "return" policies had in their own migration experiences are displayed.

Recent history of migrations

During the late 19th century and the early 20th century, due to economic crisis and several conflicts (among others, the First World War, the Spanish Civil War, the rise of fascism in Italy and the Second World War), millions of people migrated from Italy and Spain to other territories.

In the Italian case, migration had a "*global dimension*" (Ramella, 2008: 120), as Italians moved to various destinations, such as Oceania, America and Europe. In the Spanish case, migration was more uniform, as most Spaniards went to Latin America.

However, despite that difference, both countries showed a clear preference for Argentina. The historical sociologist David Cook-Martin estimates that 5 million people left Italy between 1876 and 1976 and 3.17 million departed Spain between 1857 and 1975 to go to the South American country (Cook-Martin, 2013: 14). Around 200,000 people migrated from the Veneto region to

⁴ Such as economic and cultural exchanges.

⁵ In the paper, the concept of return is used without quotation marks when it describes the return of migrants to their home countries. It is used with quotation marks when it includes the supposed homecoming of the descendants of migrants.

⁶ Regional governments have defined co-regionals (and not co-nationals) as their migrants, creating what Zincone has defined as "localism of rights" (Zincone et al., 1994: 15).

Argentina during the mass migration period (1876-1914) (Nascimbere, 1994: 22) and one million people from Galicia did the same (Fariás, 2008: 133).

Among those migrants, the majority were workers of rural origin. Many were single men, but there were also entire families crossing the Atlantic Ocean with the purpose of "*making the Americas*". Many of them returned. Different historiographic studies estimate that 40% of Italian and Spanish migrants returned to their home countries (Devoto, 2003: 73). However, most of them settled in Argentina, and along with migrants from other countries, they became part of the body of the nation.

During that period, the government of Argentina, like other governments of receiving countries⁷, developed policies to control migration flows and promote a certain type of migration, showing a clear preference for white and north-European migrants. Still, those policies seem to have had little influence on the transoceanic movements (Devoto, 2003: 61).

Social networks (Pedone, 2005: 109) played a more influential part. Fernando Devoto (2003) offered a double explanation for this phenomenon. The historiographer states that, on the one hand, primary groups were considered to be the most trustworthy source of information regarding the migration process, as they offered news about the journey and about living conditions in the countries of destination. On the other hand, families accumulated experiences of displacements that created an "*intergenerational migratory culture in which migration was conceived as a viable alternative to different members of those families*" (Devoto, 2003: 118).

Development of "return" policies in the Veneto region and the Autonomous Community of Galicia

The regional governments of Galicia and Veneto have remembered these transoceanic displacements in the last decades of the 20th century. Those memories have led to particular laws and policies, whose main aim has been to maintain and reinforce the ties with migrants and their descendants, but also, during the first years of the 21st century, to promote their "return".

In Spain, five Autonomous Communities have developed initiatives for "their emigrants": Andalusia, Asturias, the Canary Islands, Extremadura and Galicia. All of them consider that "*emigration is a hallmark of their recent social history*" (Cavas and Sánchez, 2007: 522).

In Italy, these initiatives were initially concentrated in the North: in Veneto, Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy and Friuli-Venezia-Giulia. But in the first decade of the 21st century, they expanded to Southern regions. This phenomenon has been explained (a) in economic terms, since the North is a more industrialized area, and (b) in historical terms, as migration flows started in the North (Fusaro, 2009: 26).

⁷ Such as the governments of Brazil and the United States. See: Devoto (2003) and Cook-Martin (2013).

The Autonomous Community of Galicia and the Veneto region have been chosen for this study because they share some similarities: (a) culturally, they have evoked late 19th and early 20th century emigrations as a sign of their regional identities; (b) economically, they have experienced similar economic cycles in the last century; and (c) politically, they have frequently been ruled by conservative parties in the last decades⁸. These similarities lead to the material and symbolic circumstances that allowed these two regions to promote analogous and (almost) parallel laws and policies for their migrants and descendants living abroad. In particular, both regional governments: (1) established contacts with existing associations of emigrants in the South American country in the ‘70s and ‘80s; (2) created the first legislation to maintain links with their migrants and descendants in the ‘80s and ‘90s⁹; and (3) in 2001, coinciding with the economic crisis in Argentina, they both launched their “return” policies¹⁰.

These regional policies could have conditioned the experiences of migrants who moved from Argentina to these regions. But, has it occurred? Are “return” policies relevant in the narratives of “Argentinean” migrant parents who settled with their children in the regions of Galicia and Veneto?

Methodological approach

In 2013, I conducted ethnography in the regions of Veneto and Galicia. During that time, the narratives of different members of 20 “Argentinean” migrant families¹¹ were collected and studied.

Through a series of in-depth interviews, it became clear that the migratory projects had been planned and organized by some (adult) members of those families: parents of young (and normally underage) children were responsible for the decision to migrate. For this reason, this paper explores the relevance these adult migrants confer to the regional “return” policies when they talk about their migration experiences.

During fieldwork, a total of 25 parents were interviewed¹²: 13 in the Veneto region (seven women and six men) and 12 in the Autonomous Community of

⁸ In 2001, when the “return” policies started, these regions were ruled by conservative parties and they are nowadays.

⁹ Ley de Galleguidad (1983) in Galicia and Legge Regionale: Interventi regionali per i veneti nel mondo (1995) in Veneto.

¹⁰ The motivations behind “return” policies are both economic and cultural: (a) economic because those initiatives are associated with the needs of the regional labour market and (b) cultural because it is assumed that migrants and descendants have maintained traditions and customs alive while they lived abroad. This issue has been subject to analysis elsewhere (Rovetta, 2016).

¹¹ In order to capture the heterogeneity of new family forms, under the name of “migrant families” are included all families composed of people who share emotional and kinship ties, and in which at least one member migrated from the South American country to one of the two regions of the Mediterranean countries as part of a collective strategy.

¹² They were contacted (1) through the snowball technique and (2) after months of participant observation in two migrant associations.

Galicia (eight women and four men). They are middle class and they all migrated in the last two decades of the 20th century and in the first decade of the 21st century, relocating, in most cases, from urban areas (such as Buenos Aires and Rosario) to smaller cities or villages (in the provinces of Pontevedra and La Coruña in Spain and in the provinces of Padova, Treviso and Vicenza in Italy).

The vast majority descend from migrants from the region or country where they currently live. Eleven parents who live in the Veneto region have Venetian or Italian ancestors and one more has Spanish ancestors, while eight parents residing in the Autonomous Community of Galicia have Galician or Spanish ancestors and three more have Italian ancestors.

Parents' narratives about "return" policies

Having European ancestors had an emotional component for the majority of parents interviewed, as they remembered anecdotes and stories experienced or transmitted through family narratives. Nevertheless, when they mentioned their migratory projects, most of them did not explain their displacement in terms of a "return" to an "ancestral homeland" (Tsuda, 1999: 166).

On the contrary, migration was explained in terms of job opportunities and it was described as: a) a decision made among the adult parents, b) a choice consulted with the children, and c) an option communicated to the other relatives (i.e. parents, siblings).

There was no difference between those interviewees who had European ancestors and those who did not have European ancestors regarding their reasons to migrate. In fact, this link between migration and economic needs would coincide with the results of the researches: a) of Takeyuki Tsuda and his colleagues (2009) regarding other "return" migrations to "ancestral homelands"; b) of Laura Oso, Montserrat Golías and María Villares (2008) concerning Latin American migrations to the Autonomous Community of Galicia; and c) of Melanie Fusaro (2009) in relation to Argentinean migration flows to the Veneto region.

In most cases, migrant parents described their migratory projects in terms of "push factors" (e.g. insecurity, daily violence or political discontent) and not in terms of "return". Moreover, when these adult migrants were asked about regional "return" policies, the scarcity of knowledge that most of them expressed was remarkable. Some had not heard of them and the majority only had vague references and they never applied.

In the Autonomous Community of Galicia, many parents migrated with their families during the first decade of the 21st century and very few did in the '80s or '90s. This fact could have made a difference regarding knowledge and utilization of "return" policies but it did not prove to be relevant. The same situation could be observed in the Veneto region, where most of the parents interviewed manifested little or no knowledge about regional policies.

This contradicts Tintori's assertion concerning the "pull factor" that these policies represented for migrants coming from Argentina (Tintori, 2009: 55).

The general lack of knowledge can be related to three main reasons, which are interconnected: 1) personal disinterest, 2) different ancestral origin and 3) the relevance of social networks.

a. Personal disinterest

On frequent occasions, the scarcity of information was justified in terms of personal disinterest.

An example can be found in the narrative of Lucho¹³, who declared:

"I never knew about the benefits, or anything, from the Veneto region, and there are so many facilities! But that never interested me. (...) After coming, I heard about the “return” of the Italians or Venetians, I don’t remember. I heard they reimbursed the airfare, but we didn’t benefit from that”.

Lucho is a man in his fifties who has Venetian ancestors and who moved with his nuclear family to the small village where his ancestors once lived. Lucho affirmed that, because of his own lack of interest in getting the information, he did not benefit from any regional initiative for returnees.

During the interview, he explained that he migrated to work and he did not have any interest in asking for assistance. Statements like this were common among the interviewees: more than half of migrant parents expressed similar thoughts in both contexts.

b. Different origin of the ancestors

In some cases, the reason for the lack of knowledge was the “wrong” origin of the European ancestors. As these regions recognise only co-regionals as their migrants, “return” policies do not include any provision for those Argentineans who have ancestors from other regions of the same country.

This is what happened to Mafalda, a woman in her fifties who lives with her children in a small city in the Veneto Region. When asked about “return” policies, she said:

"I remember we had read [about the “return” policies] before coming. (...) But I didn’t read about the Veneto region because I don’t have a Venetian grandfather. My grandfather was from Lombardy, so when I found out I couldn’t benefit, I didn’t search further. (...) I think that they [the “return” policies] are good”.

Mafalda had an Italian grandfather and, when she and her husband decided to migrate, they searched for information about the regional initiatives. At that time, she found out that she could not participate in any “return” program because of the regional management of “return” migration.

This circumstance was experienced by other migrant parents¹⁴ and it confirms the “localism of rights” described by Giovanna Zincone (Zincone et al., 1994: 15).

¹³ Pseudonyms were chosen by interviewees.

¹⁴ A third of the interviewees in the Veneto region shared analogous experiences.

c. Relevance of social networks

All interviewees declared they had contacts in the region of destination prior to migration. These contacts were distant relatives in many cases, in others they were close friends or acquaintances. This circumstance was crucial for all parents, as those contacts offered, not only help during the phase of arrival, but were often instigators of the family migration.

The latter is what happened, for example, in the case of Susanita, a woman in her forties who migrated to Galicia with her husband and their children. When asked about her migratory project, she said:

"They always insisted a lot from here, the consins of C. [her husband]. His consins, ever since we got married, told us: 'come here, we are waiting for you. In here you'll be better...'"

Susanita migrated with her close relatives knowing that they would receive support from her husband's relatives, and so they did during the first months of their stay.

This circumstance reveals a similarity between the 19th century (North-South) migrations and contemporary (South-North) migrations. In both cases, social networks played a central role, as they offered: a) the most reliable information about the contexts of destination; and b) support, especially during the first period after displacement (for instance, in all cases, social networks provided the first accommodation and, in many occasions, they also facilitated the access to a first job).

The exception(s) to this lack of knowledge

Despite this general lack of knowledge about "return" policies, some exceptions have been found.

Among the interviewees, two people declared to know and have benefited from a regional initiative. In the Autonomous Community of Galicia, a man received a "return" subsidy during the first months after arrival (until he got a job), and in the Veneto region, a man benefited from a "return" program (*Progetto Rientro*¹⁵), which a) covered air travel, accommodation for the first three months, and b) included a temporary contract in the industrial sector.

The latter is the case of Patoruzú, a man in his forties who migrated in 2001. Although he received economical and professional support, he stated that his decision to migrate preceded his participation in the program:

"I came with my family. Before coming, I got in touch with them [two regional policy makers]. But my decision had already been taken. I was coming. I was coming. I just got in touch with them and I saw that they could give me a hand".

As his narrative shows, his migratory project preceded and surpassed the participation in the "return" program. He was thankful for the support he received, but his decision to migrate was not related to the "return" policy and, in fact, he did not use the word "return" when he talked about his migration.

¹⁵ This program recruited workers in Argentina for local companies in the Veneto region. It worked from 2001 to 2005. During the last two years, it also included active recruitment of workers in Uruguay, Brazil and Chile (*Progetto Rientro*, 2005: 55).

Positive evaluation of the "return" policies

Finally, it should be noted that despite the exclusionary and discriminatory nature of these initiatives (they favour contemporary migrations on the basis of blood ties), no interviewee expressed disagreement regarding these policies. Instead, those who had some information about them and declared their opinion evaluated them in positive terms: as a way to payback a historical debt.

Among these migrants, it was commonly stated that Europeans who migrated to Argentina in the late 19th and early 20th century were well received; hence many of them considered that they deserved the same (good) treatment.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to offer an exploratory response to the role "return" policies have played in the migration experiences of families who moved from Argentina to (a) the Veneto region or (b) the Autonomous Community of Galicia.

This qualitative study has analyzed the narratives of 25 migrant parents who moved with their families to one of these regions. It has been noted that most parents interviewed manifested little or no knowledge about "return" policies.

Among the interviewees, some had never heard of "return" policies and the majority barely had vague references. This scarcity of knowledge can be related to three main reasons: 1) personal disinterest, 2) different ancestral origin and 3) the relevance of social networks.

Two exceptions were found in this situation. Two parents knew and had benefited from these policies. Still, in both cases, the informants said that their migratory projects preceded and surpassed the utilization of the regional resources.

These narratives contradict Tintori's assertion regarding the "pull factor" that these policies represented for migrants coming from Argentina (Tintori, 2009: 55). Even if the exploratory character of this study does not allow generalization of these findings, it seems (a) that the regions are not be the "translocal actors" they aspired to be and (b) that the social networks would continue to play (as they did during the historical North-South migrations) a central role in the migration experiences across these territories. Social networks would be the most reliable source of information and they would offer support, especially during the first period after displacement.

As a final point, it is noticeable that migrant parents evaluate these "return" policies in positive terms. Despite the discriminatory character these initiatives have, these migrants do not consider that "return" policies "*violate the universalism and equal opportunity that are hallmarks of classical liberalism and human rights*" (Skrentny et al. 2009: 44), as they treat blood ties as real and relevant. These migrants consider "return" policies as a way to payback a historical debt.

This research has contributed to identify a mismatch between the regional policies and the narratives of migrants. In the former, migration is considered

as a “return” to the “ancestral homeland”. For the later, migration can be related (or not) to the migration of their European ancestors. This difference in the interpretations could be one of the underlying reasons for the limited interest manifested by the migrant parents regarding “return” policies.

Further research on migration policies and their relation to migrants’ perspectives could contribute to the design and implementation of more grounded and effective policies.

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