

Burden or Resource? : The Positive Impact of Immigration on the Italian Welfare State

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## **Abstract**

Burden or Resource? : The Positive Impact of Immigration on the Italian Welfare State

(Under the Direction of John D. Stephens)

Immigration continues to be a hot topic of debate among many European countries as they are now faced with complicated challenges to their social protection systems. Realistically, immigration alone is not enough to solve the problems of welfare states like Italy as widely believed but it can be a good source of economic and social benefits to the Italian system. Our aim is to produce a better understanding of how immigrants impact the Italian welfare system. We will examine their perceived effects on Italian society, the different welfare policy towards immigrants across Europe and look at the positive economic and social impacts that immigration has on the Italian state. Lastly, we will look at immigrant use of social services and compare it with their contributions. We hope to present a clearer picture of the positive impact of immigration in Italy and immigrants' significant role in sustaining the welfare state.

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## Introduction

Immigration continues to be a hot topic of debate among many European countries as many are now faced with complicated challenges to their social protection systems. These challenges come in the form of demographic aging, female labor market participation, declining fertility rates and also, immigration. And while it is not a new phenomenon, immigration is a very sensitive and real issue in a country such as Italy. The media have shown images of immigrants landing on Italian shores, suggesting an invasion of the territory. This is a popular idea used by the Northern League to promote xenophobic views and anti-immigration legislation. This rhetoric leads many Italians, especially older generations to believe that immigrants are invading their country and benefitting from social services that their country provides. Recently however, there have been studies addressing immigration as a possible solution to the current welfare state problems. Statistics show that immigrants have boosted the nation's birthrate and have helped sustain the heavily burdened pension system. Realistically, immigration alone is not enough to solve the problems of welfare states like Italy but it can be a good source of economic and social benefits to the Italian system. Most immigrants that come to Italy are active members of the workforce and take on jobs that are not performed by Italians. And in a traditionally Catholic country, it is certain that female immigrants perform a service to society by providing in-home care, helping to keep the family together.

Our aim in this study is to produce a better understanding of how immigrants impact the Italian welfare system. However, it is important to consider a bit of Italy's history concerning immigration. Italy's recent transformation into a country of immigration, as opposed to its former status as one of emigration, has contributed to the development of restrictive immigration policies over the last two decades. Italy's inexperience in regards to immigration has undoubtedly shaped its harsh approach of the subject, overall culminating in policies that seek to stop immigrants from entering Italy by creating a web of bureaucratic processes. First, the economic boom of the post war years spurred an internal migration of workers from southern Italy to the northern part of the country, turning agricultural workers into industrial laborers. This internal migration was the first sign of immigration and was later accompanied by an external immigration of *extra-comunitari*.<sup>1</sup> However, it did not come until the early 1990s and can be attributed to several exogenous factors that profoundly affected not only Italy but the international community as well. At the onset of the immigration wave, Italy had only one existing law on immigration. The *Law n.943.1986* set out conditions for admission and regularization of 105,000 illegal immigrants already present in the country but made no distinctions for asylum seekers or political refugees (Veikou & Triandafyllidou, 2004). It was also intended to guarantee equal rights to migrant workers in Italy, which never fully materialized. To this day, Italy has failed in implementing the migrant worker's rights clause (ILO, 2009). And as a country so dependent on migrant work, it cannot afford to ignore immigration any longer. Immigration has become Italy's reality and it is a reality

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<sup>1</sup> *Extra-comunitari* are persons who hold citizenship outside of the European Union.

that must be acknowledged in order to deal with the challenges the welfare state is facing.

To better understand the impact that immigrant populations have had on the Italian welfare state, we will first introduce those immigrants making an impact by countries of origin. These figures will also include persons that now are members of the European Union community such as those persons from Romania and Bulgaria, as the data was collected before the 2007 enlargement. Secondly, we will examine the perceived effects of immigrants in Italy and their relationship and interactions with Italians. Section three will examine welfare policy towards immigrants in Italy and use other European countries as reference. Section four will be the main focus of our research and will look at the positive economic and social impacts that immigration has on the Italian welfare system and society. In contrast, section five will present data on immigrant use of social services and compare it with their contributions. Unfortunately, the literature on the topic of immigrant contributions to the welfare state is very limited in production and scope. And even though this will by no means be a comprehensive study, we hope to paint a clearer picture of the positive impact of immigration in Italy and their significant role in sustaining the welfare state.

## Section I

### From Emigration to Immigration

#### Origins of Immigrant Populations in Italy

Historically, Italy has been a country of emigration. Many Italians began to leave their homeland before World War I for places like North and South America in search of new opportunities. This emigration continued well after World War II (WWII). By the mid-1970s however, Northern Italy became the new land of opportunity as its industrial sector continued to benefit economically from the post-war boom. This economic prosperity attracted southern Italians as well as people from outside the European community, who numbered over one million by the end of the decade. From 1980 to 1990 the number of non-Italians increased by over 600,000 (D'Appollonia and Reich 2008, 208). By 1995, the estimated number of legal foreign residents in Italy was up to 781,000 (Foot 2008, 134). These numbers come as no surprise when we recall the conflicts and crises of the early 1990's, most notably the war in the Balkans.

Today, most immigrants to Italy come from Eastern Europe, North Africa and East Asia. The largest group of immigrants is currently made of up Romanians and although the country has now joined the European Union, there are still marked differences between the two societies. Eastern Europeans account for more than 45 per cent of the immigrant population in Italy, followed by North Africans (16 per cent) and

East Asians (12 per cent) (Squillaci 2008). They work in various sectors of the labor market such as business, industry, artisan production, agriculture and even state administrations. However, almost 80 per cent of them are full-time, blue-collar workers with work contracts of various natures. While some are employed as seasonal workers and know when their job will end, others are given open-ended contracts with no timelines, that can leave the worker suddenly unemployed and at risk of losing their residency. After the Bossi-Fini Law of 2002, open-ended contracts became problematic for immigrants. Through this law, work and residence contracts became linked so that the expiration of one meant the other was no longer valid (Migration News, 2002). In 2007, this left 1.4 million immigrants constantly worrying about their future employment situation.

“Male, Romanian, 30-39 years old, lives in Milan and is a dependent worker.” That is the profile the Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale (INPS)<sup>2</sup> in Italy attributes to the legal immigrant residing in Italy for the year 2007. Last year, INPS released data for 2007, counting the number of foreign residents with a regular stay permit at 2.17 million (Squillaci 2008). Most of these legal immigrants are between 25-39 years old and considered dependent workers, making up 57 per cent of the legal immigrant workforce. Not surprisingly, the number of male immigrants is almost double the number of female immigrants, thus explaining the stereotype of the male immigrants promoted by the INPS. To enter the Italian labor market, there are two possible ways: the first is directly, if one already possesses a stay permit and meets the criteria; or second, by being part of the annual entry quotas determined by the Italian government that

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<sup>2</sup> “National Institute for Social Security.” Translation by the author.

determine exactly how many workers from each country will be allowed to enter Italy (Ministero del Lavoro 2009; Paparella and Rinolfo, 2002).

According to data gathered by the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica<sup>3</sup> (ISTAT), the beginning of 2008 saw the number legal immigrants residing in Italy rise to 3.4 million, including those belonging to the European community (Caritas/Migrantes 2008: 1). The areas of immigrant presence are as follows: about 815,000 immigrants made the Lombardy region their home and about 391,000 settled in the Lazio. Those numbers rise when we include immigrants that work in the region but do not live there. It is also important to note that Italy has now surpassed the European average in regards to immigrant presence by almost one per cent. *Caritas/Migrantes* has estimated that the immigration flows into Italy recorded over the last 10 years are comparable to and possible higher than the Italian exodus after WWII (2008: 2).

The rising number of immigrants is very significant to a country like Italy. Across Europe, demographic aging has become a problematic issue that must be dealt with rapidly and with long-term solutions. The European population as a whole is expected to decrease in size and increase in age; there will be less native Europeans but a majority will be of older age (Bermingham 2001: 357). In 2000, the fertility rate across Europe was already below the 2.1 children per woman needed to maintain a constant population (INPS 2009: 7). Italian citizens are fast becoming some of the oldest in the world, putting a huge burden on the social security system and vacating the labor market. Their entire Italian population is expected to decline by 28 per cent; from 57 million to 41 million over the next 50 years (Bermingham 2001: 357). They also have one of the lowest

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<sup>3</sup> “National Statistics Institute.” Translation by the author.

birthrates second only to Spain and an increase in median age that takes them from 41 to 53 years according to Bermingham (2001:357). Immigrants present a possible partial solution to this problem; 80 per cent of them are under 45 and their birthrates are at 2.5 children per woman (Caritas/Migrantes 2008: 2). However, as Bermingham notes, many of these are not realistic solutions. Demographers agree that if Italy attempts to use immigration to curb its population decline, it will end up with a population that is only 71 per cent native Italian by 2050, something very troubling for a nation that prides itself on its well-preserved culture.

## Section II

### Perceived Effects of Immigrant Populations on the Welfare State

#### A Tainted Picture

However helpful immigrants may seem to the current state of Italy's and other European countries' social affairs, they have certainly not always been looked at in a positive light. If they were, we would have no basis for our current argument. In fact, immigrants have always been looked at as outsiders, almost as invaders of a foreign territory and beneficiaries of a welfare system not their own. As Caldwell (2009) put it, immigration and welfare can often be a "bad mix." Among the many reasons for this thesis, he states that immigration can be blamed for the lack of comprehensive welfare coverage in places like the United States (Caldwell 2009). The native population, seeing immigrants invading *their* country and receiving *their* benefits, is much less likely to help support the welfare system that is supporting many foreigners. And even though immigrants are good for the economy in financial terms, their contributions often go to the private instead of the public sector. This leaves the native population with the full burden of maintaining its welfare system plus the immigrants living off of its benefits.

In recent years, Italians have seen a new dimension added to their already prominent immigration reality. Already a burden on the welfare state, reports of sexual and physical abuse by foreigners and criminal acts have flooded the Italian media and

contributed to their negative image (Moore and Waterfield 2007; Moore 2007; AFP 2008). Italians possess hostile attitudes towards many of the country's minorities, including the Roma population. An estimated 150,000 Roma or Gypsies live in Italy, many in encampments on the outskirts of large cities like Rome and Naples. Many believe the hostile attitude felt by Italians towards Roma stems from the Roma populations self-contradiction (Walker 2008). The Roma reject institutionalization: they don't send their children to school and it is widely known that many of them make a living by stealing and other petty crimes. They reject school and work but they don't move about as they historically have done, instead settling in camps on the fringes of cities. And since many of the Roma possess Italian passports, they are entitled to benefits like social transfers, pensions and healthcare that they do not necessarily deserve.

Many Italians feel that Roma simply do not want to put any effort into their society's development. In fact, about 68 per cent of Italians want Roma expelled and an incredible 75 per cent want to see camps destroyed (Walker 2008). In May 2008 an angry mob torched a camp after a gypsy girl was accused of trying to kidnap a child. Anti-immigrant sentiments and crimes like these have spurred vigilante acts like the burning of camps and beating of immigrants that have been justified by prominent political parties such as the Northern League. And to make matters worse, the murder of an Italian woman by a Romanian immigrant exacerbated the anti-immigrant sentiment already present in Italian society and enraged Italians. Many blame Romanian immigrants for the crime wave that has reached Italy since Romania joined the EU. Coincidentally, the crime rate in Romania has decreased by 26 per cent (Moore and Waterfield, 2008).

The Italian government has responded to the crimes and the widespread anger of Italians by passing a new “Public Order and Security Law” that allows Italy to deport dangerous immigrants back to their home countries. With the EU’s support, police have used the law to raid camps and arrest hundreds of immigrants without permits (Rosenthal 2008). Current Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni, a member of the Northern League, has proposed to fingerprint all Roma living in camps as part of a “census.” While Maroni has said that this census would make it easier for authorities to identify child beggars and remove them from their parents and also to expel illegal residents, Berlusconi labeled it as a system that would be used to ensure that gypsy children attend school. There are also plans by Berlusconi’s government to make illegal immigration punishable by up to four years in jail. Even landlords caught housing undocumented immigrants can be fined. Media reports have suggested that these proposals to control immigration could lead to reimposing border controls on travelers, erasing all progress made by the Single European Act and the Schengen Agreement .

Even though we have seen a very biased and racially-charged picture of immigrants (at least in Italy), one cannot deny that their contributions to societies are significant. A study by Razin and Sadka (2000) on the economics of unskilled migration supports the thesis of immigration as a positive factor for pensions and the welfare state. According to the results, the arrival of unskilled or low-skilled migrants creates a better economic situation for the native population, provided the economy is small and has good access to international markets (Razin and Sadka 2000: 464). The assumption of migrants as low-earners and net beneficiaries of the welfare state did not hold true at the end of the study. In fact, at its worst, immigration has no effects on the native population’s pension

benefits (Razin and Sadka 2000: 470). Yes, the addition of immigrations creates a larger group of pension recipients at retirement age but the information provided later on suggests that they pay their own way and then some.

The connection between Italians and immigrants is becoming stronger and deeper on a social level as well. According to Caritas/Migrantes (2008), this is evidenced by three very important aspects of the interactive bond between the two groups. The first is an increased interest and awareness on behalf of immigrants in acquiring a long-stay permit or *permesso di soggiorno per lungo residenti*. Immigrants understand that their presence in Italy is no longer temporary and they are trying to make it easier for themselves and for Italians. Secondly, the number of inter-racial marriages accounts for 1 out of every 10 and in the northern part of Italy, they account for about 25 per cent of the total number of marriages. Lastly, the acquisition of Italian citizenship reached 38,466 in 2007. This is significant in a country like Italy, where the principle of *ius sanguinis* takes precedence.

With the recent increase in immigration, European welfare systems have new sources of labor and revenue. Influxes of immigrants into Italy can therefore be looked at as an important and vital factor in the future of the Italian labor market and the sustainment of the welfare system. Immigrants do not take jobs from native population, as widely believed. On the contrary, they fill positions in those sectors that are unable to recruit native workers. In most cases, immigrants respond to the need for “secondary” work that the native population refuses to perform because these jobs are often tedious, poorly compensated and at times, dangerous (INPS, 2009: 35). The only real benefits are directed at the employers, who are able to contract cheap labor from immigrants. This is

also the case in the provision of care services. Female immigrants often enter into the personal service sector by looking after young children while their mother is working or more often, taking care of the elderly. These jobs are possible because of a plurality of factors, mainly an increased participation by women in the labor market, a lack of state-provided care services and an increasing secularization. By performing these jobs, immigrants provide services that the state is slow to offer and thus are a source of “hidden welfare” (INPS, 2009: 35). However is this enough to guarantee their presence in Italy? In the next section, we will look at what types of policies are in place to aid immigrants across Europe and in Italy.

## Section III

### Welfare Policy towards Immigrants

Across Europe, welfare policies towards immigrants have evolved in response to social and economic changes linked to themes we have previously discussed: demographic aging, low fertility rates, labor market segmentation and overall economic uncertainties. These themes highlight a crisis of the social protection system that will be felt strongly in countries like Italy, that have over-burdened pension systems because of the aging population and low fertility rates. Once thought of as a possible solution to the problems of the welfare state, the arrival of foreign (non-EU) workers is now regarded as a threat to social cohesion by the host society. It is treated as an “invasion” of the native culture and portrayed as an issue of security by political parties and mass media. Often, migrants are deprived of or given limited social rights in their host countries because they are seen as undeserving or are wrongly categorized.

### Migrant Social Rights

The situation of third-country nationals (TCNs or non-EU citizens) throughout the European community is quite complex. Although the European Union has tried to develop a common immigration policy, it has been unsuccessful due to the unwillingness of member states to give up sovereignty on such a delicate issue. As a consequence, TCNs are deprived of a series of rights that EU citizens take for granted such as freedom

of movement and family life. They are also more likely to work in atypical jobs such as part-time work and temporary contracts which often brings about unstable life and work conditions (INPS 2009: 19). Given that there is no common immigration policy in the EU, we can infer that any policies relating to the provision of social services for immigrants are also diverse across European countries. What are the main characteristics of Italian welfare policies towards immigrants? What services do they offer legal and undocumented immigrants? And how does Italy compare with other countries in Europe?

Policies throughout Europe vary from country to country. In Germany, immigration law has simplified bureaucratic processes by reducing the number of possible permits from five to two: permanent and temporary (Zincone 2008: 22). The law states that integration courses are obligatory for those immigrants who do not speak German. It has also established a ranking system, by stating that non-EU migrants will only be given a job if it cannot be filled by first by a German citizen and second, by an EU citizen. Sweden is one of the most advanced in immigration law, policy and integration thanks to its universalistic welfare state. In 2005, the Swedish government introduced a series of measures to facilitate integration into the labor market for immigrants. These included opportunities for first-time immigrants (that had never before been to Sweden) and apprenticeships in their own profession, lasting three weeks and which would award them accredited certificates. Immigrants in Sweden are able to integrate into society so well that they are able to start up their own businesses, at an even higher rate than native Swedes (INPS 2009: 24). In 2004, France extended contracts of reception and integration that stated an immigrant's willingness to abide by French law and respect the nation's values in order to be asserted the same rights as French citizens.

In Italy, it was not until 1998 that the law made a distinction between legal and illegal immigrants. For the most part, legal immigrants are entitled to the same social rights as Italian citizens under the *Law n.943/1986*. They are given full access to education, health care, pensions, and other social services. Slight differences in access pertain to maternity allowances (given only to those with a permanent residence card) and in linking public housing to a two-year residence permit (Zincone 2008: 9). Still, the access to social benefits is complicated and does not yield the same effect on immigrants as it does on the native population. According to Sainsbury (2005: 645), there is a marked difference between immigrant and citizen households in maintaining an acceptable standard of living. Immigrant households are more likely to be at risk of poverty and use social transfers as a way to stay afloat. The study found that the decommodifying effects of social transfers have a greater impact on native households than they do on immigrants. Immigrants have a harder time reaching and maintaining a standard of living that is considered acceptable and are often at risk of poverty.

In May 2009, the Italian government showed its continued support for restrictive immigration policies by adopting the principle of repulsion. Minister Maroni backed the return of 227 migrants originating from Libya and even suggested that the interception and return method should become a model for the entire European community (Polvedo, 2009). If put into force, this model would compromise the rights of thousands of immigrants with legal claim to asylum or refugee status and make Italy a violator of the Geneva Convention.

Interestingly, undocumented immigrants do have basic rights that include health care access and limited education if they manage to get into the country. They can even

receive limited legal aid and are entitled to receive services with an “anonymous” card by just paying the normal contribution and. Recently however, there have been proposals that if passed, would ultimately require physicians to report undocumented immigrants to the authorities. This could only lead to disastrous consequences such as ensuring that immigrants avoid seeking the healthcare they need for fear of being detained. The Bossi-Fini law of 2002 further stipulated that all social integration measures be limited to documented immigrants only, meaning that organizations like Caritas that regularly offer aid to all immigrants were legally prohibited from helping illegal immigrants. These private organizations however continue to operate on humanitarian grounds rather than follow restrictive legislation.

## Section IV

### The Real Impact of Immigration on the Welfare State

#### Economic Contributions

After examining some of the characteristics of welfare policies in different European states, we can conclude that Italy certainly has room for improvement. Yet given the short falls we have discussed, why is it that immigrants are still attracted to this Mediterranean state? The Italian government makes it difficult for foreigners to enter the country with its on-going support for restrictive measures but immigrants continue to risk their livelihoods (and at times their lives) to step foot on Italian soil. Even so, making it into Italy will not guarantee success or economic well-being. So why do they keep coming? Besides the obvious aesthetic attributes, job opportunities are an integral factor of a person's decision to leave their country. As we have already discussed, immigrants to Italy have traditionally been attracted to areas of the country where industry was developed and is still concentrated to this day. This notion of labor market attraction is contested by some scholars, who argue that what really attracts immigrants to Italy is not the labor market but the welfare state<sup>4</sup> (Sciortino, 2004: 112). Sciortino refutes this popular theory and argues that the increasing demand for unskilled labor is due to a structural problem of the welfare state model in Italy and not because of the opportunity for welfare benefits (2004:112). And while the idea that immigrants are attracted to a

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<sup>4</sup> This theory is known as the *theory of the welfare magnet*. See Sciortino (2004: 112) for a more detailed explanation.

certain welfare state structures is not completely out of the question, this theory conveys a negative image of immigrants as beneficiaries with no actual contribution record. This is a stereotype that we hope to prove wrong. As we will see, immigrants are attracted by both the labor market and the welfare state, but by different reasons. They come to Italy to work jobs that are created because of the inadequacies of the welfare structure.

Immigration shows itself as a “main mechanism” of the Italian welfare model (Sciortino, 2004:112), not as an obstacle.

The on-going impact that immigrants have on the Italian welfare state is significant in a variety of ways. Recently, their importance has been studied by looking at what types of jobs they perform within the labor market, as well as the areas in which they tend to settle. From the late 1990s onward, Italy has seen a growth in demand for immigrant laborers by small businesses. This demand has a limited supply; employers must hope for laborers to be admitted under Italy’s quota system. In regions of northern Italy, local industries like artisan production cannot find enough supply of native workers so they constantly turn to immigrants to fill the void (Catania and Pavolini, 2008: 309). It is important to point out that immigrants have not taken jobs away from Italians as is widely thought. Immigrants take on jobs that have become vacant because of issues such as demographic factors and aging for example, and not because of competition. This has had a tremendous effect on areas of settlements for immigrants, who today concentrate around large industrial cities like Brescia, Milan, Bergamo, Mantova and artisan workshops around the Veneto region (Caritas/Migrantes 2008: 3). Many immigrants in Italy are considered *lavoratori dipendenti* or workers who labor for others. As previously

noted, they rely on others to give them jobs. This dependency leads their areas of employment to show signs of territorial settlement patterns by immigrant workers. For example, immigrants in the north work in companies, firms, or workshops; in the central regions, they mostly work for Italian families or own their own businesses; and in the south, agricultural work is popular (Caritas/Migrantes 2008: 4).

Autonomous work or self-employment is also a relatively new but thriving category of work among immigrants. More than 10 per cent of the adult immigrant population fits into this category by becoming owners of licensed businesses. The immigrants with the largest presence in the small-business sector as owners are Moroccans, Romanians, and Chinese with over 20,000 registered businesses (respectively) in Italy (Caritas/Migrantes 2008: 4). Albanians come in fourth with just over 17,000 licensed businesses. Many of these businesses are restaurants serving ethnic foods and boutiques that have become very popular throughout the country by providing cheap goods. We can see that although physical labor is a big part of immigrant work profiles, low-skilled work does not dominate and immigrants are making their presence known in other areas of the labor market.

As workers, immigrants also contribute to social security and other transfer programs as do native Italian workers. This is assured by registering with the state run social security agency . The number of insured immigrant workers registered by the *Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale (INPS)* at the end of 2003 was around 1.48 million and were concentrated in areas of the north and central part of the country (INPS, 2009: 55). However, only 41 per cent of those insured are women. This is most likely due to the type of work they perform. Most immigrants continue to settle in the northeastern and

northwestern parts of Italy where work is available. The central part has the highest percentage of domestic workers in the country with 31 per cent and the islands have the highest percentage of agricultural laborers with 17 per cent (INPS, 2009: 60). In 2007, it is estimated that 2.2 million immigrants possessed a stay and work permit, ranging from ages 15-94. This amounted to 92 per cent of the entire immigrant population surveyed in 2007 by Italy's ISTAT (Squillaci, 2008). This statistic shows that immigrants have come to Italy to be an active member of the workforce. Immigrants come mainly from Eastern Europe, North Africa and East Asia to work. Recently, there has been a steady influx of young Romanian males into big cities like Milan and Rome looking for work and when they find it, it is often physical labor. By being registered with INPS, immigrants are contributing to state tax revenue and the social security system. Immigrants are registered with the state-run INPS that administers social security but how much do they actually contribute?

According to data collected by Catania and Pavolini (2008: 310), the median income for immigrants was around 10,042 euros per capita. The state-run social security agency however, estimated this number at 11, 992 euros per capita. Taxes on these wages would amount to close to 3 billion euros, with all revenue going to the state. Not only do they work and pay taxes, but immigrants also buy properties and start businesses which also come with their own special tax categories that contributed almost 10 million in taxes! Counting in other forms of tax and the fact that there were at least 2.2 million immigrants in possession of a regular stay and work permit, immigrants contributed almost 5 billion euros in tax revenue to the Italian social protection system in 2007 directly from their pockets. (Squillaci 2008; Stuppini 2009: 3) Interestingly, if Italy were to legalize the

estimated 480,000 undocumented foreigners that were denied stay permits at the last immigration flow decree, the social security system would benefit from almost another 2.5 billion euros for the 2008 year (Dell'Oste and Milano 2008). The quotas are revised every year to let more and more immigrants enter legally, and the number is being pushed higher with the help of employers and domestic workers but that number is still less than one-third of the actual permit requests.

Even though the underground economy is a popular starting point in Italy and is a source of income for immigrants during at least one period of their lives, most aspire to have a regular, stable job like anyone else that will give them enough to provide the basic needs for their families. Two-thirds of immigrants interviewed by Caritas/Migrantes (2008: 4) said that even though the average income of an immigrant is less than that of a native Italian, they are happy with what they have and try to make it last by fulfilling only very basic needs like food and shelter. The perception of immigrants as welfare state beneficiaries and not contributors is an imagined and false concept.

### Social Impact of *Badanti*

A Catholic country by tradition, Italy has always focused many of its social services and transfer programs on the preservation of the nuclear family and the complementary male-breadwinner model. Ultimately, Sciortino identifies these aspects as structural problems in the composition of the Italian welfare model and as the cause for the high demand in immigrant labor (2004: 115). Because of the emphasis on the male-breadwinner model, job security (via iron-clad employment protection legislation) for at

least one member of the household and direct transfer policy (mostly cash subsidies), Italian families are expected and legally mandated to take care of their members. And as women (the traditional caregivers) began to participate more actively in the labor market, the issue of who would care for children and the elderly became increasingly problematic. Women were spending most of their time at work and away from the home, creating complications in the home but also an increase in demand for household and personal services.

The absence of the female caretaker at home is an issue that is quite complicated by the welfare state structure of Italy and the overwhelming responsibility felt by Italians to take care of their parents and grandparents. The Italian welfare state structure has been slow in providing care services because of its emphasis on social transfers, leaving Italian families with few options. Many families simply do not have the resources to put their elderly relatives into care facilities because of the overwhelming cost and sense of guilt. The arrival of female immigrants has partially answered the high demand for household and personal services. One of the most important roles female immigrants perform in Italy is that of a domestic worker. These are typically female workers that come to Italy from Eastern Europe or South America strictly because of the abundant opportunities to find work as caregivers. It was also common for women from former Italian colonies in Africa to immigrate to Italy and for many to be recruited from other traditionally Catholic countries through the Church's mission network, since this would ensure that the traditional Catholic values of Italians would be equally important to the new person in their home.

The role of a *badante* or domestic aide has become extremely important in caring for the elderly relatives and children of Italian families in many ways. First, working middle-class Italian families can now afford to keep their elderly at home and hire caretakers to accompany them on a daily basis. As Polvedo (2008) reports, many of these domestic aides are illegal but the costs of employing them far outweigh the complication of having to send family members to care facilities for the families who hire them. Salaries paid to a domestic aide range from 850-1,050 euros a month. Families would have to spend much more for private care facilities which are scarce in Italy. Secondly, a *badante*'s care extends as far as children. They act as nannies and play the maternal role while the mother is away at work. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, their presence enables native Italian women to go to work outside of their household and gives them a sense of freedom from the traditional stereotypes.

In the city of Vicenza in the northeastern part of Italy, it is estimated that domestic aides save the city 77 million euro a day by caring for the elderly. (Stella 2009) This of course, is assuming the city would have provided those services in the first place. Instead, the setup of the Italian welfare system is such that families have worked out their own way of arranging care. Social transfers are given to the family and they are responsible for using that money to care for their relatives. So why not make it easy and hire a domestic aide? While this seems reasonable, one of the region's most prominent political actors like the Northern League still protests immigration and have no intent on recognizing any of the work done by domestic aides. As Stella reports in his 2009 article, "*Se le badanti straniere tornassero a casa*" (If foreign domestic aides returned home tomorrow), the Northern League's secretary Alessio Sandoli was outraged at the 2,000

euro cost of a festival celebrating domestic care workers. He was quoted as saying that next the city would fund celebrations for immigrants, then one for Islamic terrorists and then perhaps, prostitutes.<sup>5</sup> Yet, he defended the 25,000 euro cost of a concert provided by the city for its citizens because it was part of an annual music festival. His quote wrongly portrays domestic care workers in a negative light. If the foreign domestic aides in Vicenza returned to their home countries, the region would have to immediately figure out how to provide care and housing for its elderly population. The act of “replacing” just 5,000 domestic aides would cost up 750 million euros (Stella, 2009). How would the city, region and state handle that amount of public expenditure? They would not because the welfare system would pass it on to the Italian families.

A great part of these aides are illegal, a status that is often due to the strict immigration laws Italy has enacted with the help of anti-immigrant parties. These laws make it difficult for foreigners to obtain the necessary paperwork within in a realistic time frame and in some cases, that is the goal. (Rosenthal, 2008; Wilkinson, 2008). Currently, Italy is debating a tougher set of laws on illegal immigrants including domestic aides that would punish illegal immigration. Those arriving to and entering Italy illegally could face up to 18 months in detention centers, a policy that would be in line with EU policy (Polvedo 2008). In conjunction with the new *Public Order and Security Law n. 94/2009* passed after a recent rash of crimes thought to be perpetrated by immigrants, policemen have begun to stop people on the streets and demand to see their permits, visas and other documents. Badanti are no exception because after all, many are here illegally.

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by the author from foreign media.

Italy has recently recognized their unique service to Italian society by passing a decree that legitimizes the situation of illegal domestic care aides without fear of negative consequences (e.g. fines, deportation, etc.). Starting September 1, 2009, employers were able to regularize their domestic aides if they had not yet done so (Cirioli 2009). A special period of 30 days was implemented to achieve the decree's goal by giving employers two options for registration plus a price tag of 500 euros. They either had to go to the *Sportello unico per l'immigrazione* (a special office set up for immigration issues) or to INPS to register their aides without any repercussions. Unfortunately, this decree is considered a failure because it only regularized 294,000 domestic aides, which totaled 38 per cent of the actual requests (Pasquinelli, 2009). Italian families opted to keep employing many of their domestic workers illegally because of the costs of regularization in the long run. The aim of this decree was not only to regularize a majority of the illegal workers (that already have jobs) but also to register more residents with the social security system and in the end, contribute more to the welfare state.

In theory, the regularization of domestic workers and their registration with INPS should provide more funds to the social security system and help to alleviate some of the debt. Badanti live in their employer's household; they are provided with room and board so they have no real expenses. Many of them send all of their earnings back home to their families. However, living and working in the same place everyday can lead to a lonely and often depressing life in a foreign country. But the integration of immigrants into host societies is an entirely different issue better addressed in another research project. Our focus comes back to this: even though badanti have a much less significant contribution

to the welfare state in monetary terms (although they still pay taxes on consumed goods), their indispensability as social contributors is quite clear.

## Section V

### Immigrant Use of the Welfare Benefits and Social Services

How much assistance do immigrants require and how much does it cost the welfare state? According to Caritas (2008: 4), immigrants received social services totaling 136.7 million euros from all of the Italian municipalities. This figure accounts for 3.7 per cent of the taxes they contribute to the social security system. They also use and benefit from the same basic social services such as healthcare and pensions as the native Italian population. However, if added up, their use would be no more than 1 billion euros according to ISTAT data (Caritas/Migrantes 2008: 4). This sum, when looking back at their contributions, is easily covered by the taxes they pay. It can be generalized that immigrants pay their way through Italy with fiscal contributions but also, by providing care services for those in need thus saving the welfare state from having to increase public expenditures.

Legal immigrants use the welfare state in a much more limited scope than the autochthonous population, perhaps because their average age is quite young. But there are also various new levels of classification for immigrants that grant different rights and entitlements according to their residential statuses. Among the four groups of immigrants identified by the Italian government, immigrants with residence cards are entitled to the most rights and entitlements in the welfare system. This is largely due to the criteria required to obtain the residence card in the first place: he or she must have lived in the

country for at least five years, earn enough to support their own household (including all members), and have no criminal record (Sciortino 2004: 124).

Their contributions seem like a very large sum considering what they receive in return. While legal immigrants are supposed to receive equal social rights to those of Italians under the *Law n.943/1986* (Veikou and Triandafyllidou 2004: 5), it is not really the case. As Sainsbury (2005: 643) shows, formal social rights do not guarantee acceptable standards of living. The decommodifying effects of social transfers are simply not strong enough to make a significant impact on immigrant households. Because immigrants are usually employed in lower-paying jobs, their benefits are often less than citizen households. They have limited access to transfer programs like unemployment benefits and more importantly, pensions. And since the Italian welfare structure is oriented toward pensions, immigrants benefit minimally from this system.

Pension benefits for immigrants became an even more controversial issue after the reforms of 1995, *Bossi-Fini Law of 2002* and the *Financial Law of 2007* that took effect on January 1, 2008. Before 1995, pensions were earnings-related and each workers' pension payments were directly tied to how much he/she had earned on average over a minimum period of 10 years plus an extra supplement (MISSOC 2007: 1). After the reforms, the government introduced a contributory-based system for all new workers starting January 1, 2006. This system calculated benefits on how much a worker had contributed to the social security system, and also took into account life expectancy at their retirement age. The new pension system also guarantees benefits 35 per cent lower

than the previous system but this can be made up for by subscribing to a supplemental program (MISSOC 2007: 2).

The new method of administering pension payments is less of a burden on the welfare state and relies more on workers to seek their benefits. But paired with the Bossi-Fini law of 2002, it makes life difficult for immigrants. Immigrants who have been part of a mixed-system and who have decided to return home before reaching retirement age have a tougher route to obtaining their benefits. The system indicates that if they leave Italy before they have reached the minimum retirement age or have contributed for at least 20 years, they are at risk of losing all of their pension contributions (Zincone 2008: 9). This is because in the old system, only the last ten years of wages earned are taken into account when calculating pensions. So in theory, immigrants could have evaded paying their taxes before those ten years and would receive benefits they were not legally entitled to receive. This is what many Italians are led to believe through right-wing parties, media portrayals, and overall opposition to immigration.

## Conclusion

Considering the variety of tasks immigrants perform in Italian society and the labor market, it would be logical to assume that their presence would be welcomed with open arms. This however, is not the case. The treatment of immigration as a security issue has intensified in recent years with the help of political forces like the Northern League. Based in the north, the political party asserts its ideology on the construction of a community of the north and identification of the “other” . In this case, the other is the enemy and the enemy is the immigrant. Some of the party’s most recent campaigns have targeted immigrants as invaders and have even compared the potential danger of an immigrant “invasion” to the one experienced by Native Americans in North America (Northern League 2009). How can Italian society change their perception of immigrants when they see campaign posters as xenophobic as these plastered along buildings?

When compared to other European countries, Italy lags far behind in the development and implementation of inclusion and integration policies for immigrants. Countries like Sweden have ensured that their immigrant populations receive the same social rights as native Swedish citizens. Germany’s particular guest-worker model of integration has not been very successful but at the very least it attempted to take measures to integrate immigrants. In Italy, no such measures have taken place. The only existing legislation on immigration portrays immigrants as persons that need to be regulated and controlled. Even the Immigration law of 1986, that was supposed to give regularized immigrants the

same social rights as Italian citizens, fell short. And the Migrant Convention of 1975 that asserted migrant worker's rights was also lost in the mix and never formally passed. Italy has been slow implementing these and other acts but seems to be quick to implement laws that restrict the access of immigrants to benefits such as pensions, as we have seen.

The notion of immigrants as only beneficiaries of the welfare state and not contributors is false and preconceived. First, immigrants come to Italy to find jobs and better opportunities. Most of them settle in areas where jobs are available to them, such as the north. It is also important to point out that immigrants have not taken jobs away from Italians. They take on jobs that have become vacant because of demographic factors, not because of competition. Many of the jobs they perform are jobs no longer wanted by Italians of working age. Secondly, immigrants with jobs are contributing to the welfare state. By being registered with INPS, immigrants are contributing to state tax revenue and the social security system. They will get what they put into it so that in itself is an incentive to work hard. Yes, immigrants are registered with the state-run INPS but how much do they actually contribute? Estimates of contributions vary but fall within a close range. According to Catania and Pavolini (2008: 310), the median income for immigrants was around 10,042 euros per capita and INPS estimated this number at 11,992 euros per capita. Taxes on these wages would amount to close to 3 billion euros in contributions to INPS alone. Not only do they work and pay taxes, but immigrants also buy properties and start businesses which also come with their own special tax categories that contributed almost 10 million in taxes! Counting in other forms of tax and the fact that there were at least 2.2 million immigrants in possession of a regular stay and work permit, immigrants contributed almost 5 billion euros in tax revenue to the Italian state in 2007 directly from

their pockets. Third, one of the most important roles immigrants perform is that of a *badante* or domestic worker. These household aides are typically female and come to Italy from Eastern Europe or South America. They have become extremely important in caring for the elderly and children of Italian families because of many reasons and they are seen as indispensable.

Of course, all of these contributions come at a cost. Since 2007, there has been a wave of crime going through Italy. Many media reports portray immigrants, mostly Romanians, as the perpetrators. And there is also the worry that immigrants will burden the social system because they too, get old. But that cost is no match for what immigrants provide to the Italian state now. Beyond monetary contributions, they provide companionship for many of the nation's elderly. They help keep the traditional family model alive for Italians, something that is indispensable to many Italians. Yes, immigrants will get old and need their pensions too. However, it is only fair that they receive the benefits they have earned by way of their contributions.

Overall, immigrants seem to be a very ample resource for the Italian welfare state. As Sciortino aptly states, "immigration functions as an alternative to the direct provision of these services by the state" (2004: 122). Immigrants are filling jobs created by the same welfare state that in certain cases denies giving them assistance. Italy needs to recognize it cannot exploit immigrants; if immigrants are contributing to the upkeep of the social protection system through taxes and by providing invaluable care services, they should be offered the same and equal social rights as Italian citizens. Lastly, we can say that through the evidence we have seen, their contributions far outweigh their costs to the

Italian social protection system. But in order to solve the woes of the welfare state, we must not rely on immigrants alone and search for practical reforms.

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