

# **From “emigrants” to “Italians”: what is new in Italian migration to London?**

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London today hosts more than 200,000 Italian people. A traditional point of arrival for Italian migrants since the 19th century, London is a setting characterised by the presence of the ‘old’ classic economic migration – of those who left Italy mainly in the 1950s and 1960s, and the ‘new’ migration, made up mainly of highly-educated people in the professional, academic and arts sectors. These two groups differ as regards their time of arrival, socio-economic characteristics and educational background, and they rarely have the chance or find the need to interact.

This paper is based on interviews with representatives of Italian institutions and associations, and with ‘old’ and ‘new’ Italian migrants; participant observation of Italian events happening in London; and some elements of discourse analysis. By means of this empirical material, I aim to show that, besides their well-known differences, the ‘old’ and ‘new’ communities present striking similarities in their migration narratives.

**Keywords:** Italians abroad; London; Economic Migration; Professional Mobility

## **Introduction**

London is today one of the major destinations for Italian people. Already a traditional point of arrival for Italian migrants in the 19th century, since the 1980s, and even more in the past twenty years, London has seen a new wave of migration from Italy, characterised by young, educated, often highly skilled, migrants and students. London has become the symbol of this new flow, because it presents two main advantages: it is relatively close to Italy and hence easily (and cheaply) reachable by Italians, and – the UK being part of the EU – Italian citizens only need a national ID or passport to live and work there.

This new kind of professional migration has attracted the attention of the media, and new communication technologies have helped the development of a discourse, which emphasises the high education and the skills of these highly-mobile Italians who leave their country because of the lack of job opportunities and meritocracy. This discourse is created by excluding other kinds of Italian migrants; in particular, the old Italian migration and its descendants are not taken into account. The old and new migrations are detached from each other and they rarely have the chance to meet and communicate. The year of arrival in the UK assumes several important meanings: not only do the newly-arrived have a different relationship with the host country because of their knowledge of English, their education, and the presence of thousands of young Europeans, with whom they share many characteristics, but also they come from a country that has changed profoundly since the 1950s and 1960s. In spite of this, an in-depth look at these two groups reveals striking similarities in their narratives.

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This article focuses on both ‘old’ and ‘new’ first generations and examines the reasons why they left Italy, their socialisation in London, and the ongoing links they keep with their home country. In order to do so, it deploys a mix of qualitative methods that involve open and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and some elements of discourse analysis. I conducted interviews with two different panels of respondents. The first was made up of key informants, ‘highly active’ and ‘highly informed’ immigrants who helped me gain a deeper insight into the social and community life of Italians in London. The ‘highly active’ and ‘highly informed’ migrants interviewed were selected on the basis of their prominent role in the most significant Italian institutions and organisations including Churches, welfare agencies and associations, political parties and movements. The second panel of respondents was made up of Italian citizens (registered as residents abroad) from the two groups: the ‘old’ first generation who arrived between the end of World War II and 1980; and people from the ‘new’ wave of migrants who arrived from the 1980s onwards and have been living in the UK for at least three years (a period of time which was considered reasonable in order to examine their integration). Around thirty respondents from each group under study were selected, trying to divide them equally in terms of gender and geographical area of origin (North and Centre and South of Italy, including Sicily and Sardinia). It emerged that the average age of the respondents from the two groups at the time they moved to the UK was similar: 24 years for the old first generation, and 27 for the new first generation. The interviews took place in different periods between March 2008 and November 2010, and focused on the personal experience of migration, on migrants’ links with the home and host country, and on their political interest and participation. The interviews were then analysed in a qualitative and interpretive way.

As regards the other ethnographic methods I deployed in this work, my attendance at meetings and events organised by Italian institutions and associations, political parties and movements allowed me to observe directly the social and political processes occurring in the communities under study, and to learn more about the migration experience of Italians in London through informal conversations. As part of my analysis of the activity of Italian groups in London, I also monitored the newsletter and the documents published on their websites, and the news articles on new emigration from Italy and on the Italian presence in London that appeared in the Italian and international media between 2008 and 2010.

## **Historical Background**

The first mass migration of Italians to Britain dates back to the 1950s and 1960s. These decades saw a change in the characteristics of Italian emigration to the United Kingdom. London, which had been the main destination until then, became secondary compared to the industrial cities of central England, notably Bedford (see King 1977, Colpi 1991, and, more recently, Ledgeway and Lepschy 2011) and Peterborough (Tubito and King 1996). The migration toward the industrial cities of England was due first to a series of agreements between the British and Italian Ministries of Labour (the ‘bulk recruitment’ scheme) and then to the initiative of individual employers (the ‘group recruitment’ scheme) as part of the

European Voluntary Workers scheme, followed by a process of chain migration and family reunification, (on the recruitment schemes and the migration towards industrial cities see: King 1977, Palmer 1977, Colucci 2002, Sponza 2005).

According to Colpi (1991) and Sponza (2005), to a large degree the strong anti-Italianism expressed by the British population during the war continued in the 1950s. While most of my respondents from the old first generation said that they did not feel there was discrimination against them, a few of them told me about episodes of racism they experienced in those years.

In 1951, the British Census recorded 33,159 residents who were born in Italy, the number rose to 81,327 in 1961. As shown by Palmer (1977) and Colpi (1991), London still had the main concentration of migrants who were active in the catering sector. Palmer (1977, 258) explains that many Italians who entered Britain as European Voluntary Workers, once their four-year contract in the industrial factories of central England had expired and they had been granted permanent residence, moved to London to find a job, typically in the catering sector, a situation that was confirmed in some of the interviews I carried out. The success of Italians in this economic niche was due to the cheap prices of the basic ingredients of Italian cuisine, to the use of the family as a labour force and to the fast-growing spending power of young people in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s (Tricarico 2007, and Palmer 1977).

As a consequence of these different inflows, the Italian presence in the United Kingdom reached a Census peak of 103,000 in 1971. However, it was already the case in 1969 that for the first time more Italians returned from Britain than migrated to it, and the 1970s saw the end of classic economic migration from Italy to Britain. From that point, many young people have arrived in Britain, to study English or attracted by a way of life considered freer and more fulfilling, as I will explain more in depth later. Many of them have stayed and more have continued to arrive, facilitated by Britain's entry in the EEC in 1973 (Sponza 2005, 18).

Since the 1980s, the intensification of economic and trade relations between the two countries has prompted a large number of Italian business-people, managers, technicians and office-workers clerks to settle in Britain. This process intensified further after European integration in 1993 and the boom of low-cost flights since the end of the 1990s. These new forms of mobility have caused a reversal of the net migration trend; the decline of the Italian presence in traditional destinations such as Bedford and Peterborough has been more than offset by the new wave of migration to London. According to a document published by the Italian Embassy in London,

mobility flows have changed and are mainly linked to the characteristics of London as an international financial and commercial hub. Italians who come to London are mainly experts in the economic-financial sector, medical doctors, officials who spend periods of 3-5 years in the British capital (working in banks, insurance companies and services), researchers, scientists and artists. Yet a flow of Italians involved in the catering sector still exists. Moreover, many young people live in the country, sometimes for long periods, to improve their knowledge of the English language and a

significant part of them settle for several years, finding jobs in the services sector (Ambasciata Italiana Londra 2006, 1-2)

This explains why the number of Italian-born citizens, which had reached a low of 91,000 in the 1991 Census, went up again to 107,000 in 2001, and peaked at 135,000 in 2011. In spite of the increasing attention of the media, so far only a few academic studies – among which should be mentioned Bartolini and Volpi (2005), Seganti (2007), Di Salvo (2011) and Conti (2012) – have analysed the characteristics of the Italian citizens who arrived in the UK in the past twenty years.

### **The ‘old’ First Generation**

The protagonists of this section are those Italians who arrived in the United Kingdom between the end of World War II and the late 1970s. The reasons for this migration wave were primarily economic and regarded above all the lack of industrialisation and the incapacity of agriculture to sustain the demographic pressure in the South of Italy (Ginsborg 1989 and Pugliese 2006). This analysis is echoed by the words of several of my respondents; for example, when I asked Matilde why she left the mountainous region of Abruzzo in 1953, she answered: ‘I come from the countryside...life was terrible here, under that sun that would burn you, there was nothing.’ Like her, others explained that their decision to move to the UK was due the lack of jobs in Italy, especially if they were from rural areas. For example Gino, who is from Sicily, told me that he lost his father when he was 14 and from then onwards he had to bear the economic responsibility of his family. As he was unemployed, he moved in 1955 to England to work, first in a greenhouse and then in a factory, and he was then followed by his family, four sisters and one brother. Almost half of my old first generation respondents indicated that the main reason, or one of the main reasons, for coming to the United Kingdom was job-related.

As Palmer (1977) has documented for the earlier migration of Italians to the United Kingdom, chain migration was quite typical, and several respondents followed relatives who had already settled in the United Kingdom; one out of three of people in this group answered that they left Italy because of family reasons, to visit friends, or to join their fiancé or husband who had already migrated. For example, Gaetano, who arrived in 1962 in the area of Croydon, explained to me that he left Italy out of frustration and came to the United Kingdom because:

I had a brother here...I had to enlist in the Italian police cadets (but then it did not happen for political reasons)...and then I was angry, I was disillusioned with this situation in Italy, and I came to England. After two weeks I wanted to go back, I didn’t like it. On the day I was leaving, we had a car accident with my brother-in-law, and I stayed some more weeks. I started a job in the hospital and my employers took a liking to me, so I decided to stay.

Luca, from the province of Parma (an area with historical migration links with the United Kingdom prior to World War II), had an uncle and an aunt already in London, so he came ‘out of curiosity’, to visit them when he was only 14, decided to stay and attended school until he was 16, and then found a job and never moved back. In other cases, the presence of relatives abroad was a means of avoiding military service, which at the time was mandatory in Italy. This was the case for Bernardo:

I had a sister here, I came on holiday. I had to go through the second check for military service and there was a delay, so I said to my sister ‘let me come to England 3-4 months’, and I never went back.

Because most of those who came in the 1950s and 1960s moved out from rural areas at a young age as they were in need of a job, it is not surprising that the majority of my respondents in this group had attended only a few years of schooling. The low level of education usually implied a complete lack of knowledge of the English language, which was indicated by most of my interviewees as the main hardship to face, once they reached the UK. Fundamental in improving their English was the chance some migrants had to live or work with local people, but many Italians – especially women – did not have this chance, either because they were staying at home and taking care of their children, or because they were employed in the catering sector and thus spending most of their time with other Italians. Quite a few British-born Italians I interviewed revealed that their parents or grandparents still speak very little English after many decades now of living abroad: this finding resonates with what Tubito and King (1996) reported about the social encapsulation of Italians in Peterborough.

Besides language and aspects such as the different food and the bad weather, the main adversity to face for many Italians was the difference in attitude and *mentalita'* (mentality). Gaetano described his initial disorientation well:

Coming from an Italian village where everyone would say good morning, we laughed, we joked, here in London no one would look you in the face, nor say good morning, good evening, except those people who knew you from work...it seemed very weird to me.

Because of these initial hardships, as indeed occurred in most destinations of Italian migration, Italians would turn to Italian institutions, churches and associations to make friends and get useful information and help. In this way, alongside groups related to the Catholic missions, Italian associations were set up on a local or regional basis to help fellow citizens or *paesani* (people from the same village) who arrived in the new country and to offer financial support to projects in the hometown. Gaetano, who has been contributing to the activities of associations linked with his home region (Basilicata) since 1972, told me:

Before, we would go to the station to meet these people, who arrived with a bag, a suitcase tied with string, and accompany them to the houses where they had to work or to the institutions, but now with the new technology...At the time there was the

need, the need to have a club to meet with people, now *non e' piu' come una volta* (everything has changed).

In fact, traditional associations are declining and are not attended much by the new wave of migrants or by young British-born Italians, just as the Church attracts fewer people than in the past. In spite of this, regional and Catholic institutions still play a significant role for the old first generation: 'it's important, and you spend a day together with many friends, you have a chat, play cards; before we used to dance, then when you get older you don't dance any more', said Matilde, whom I met at the weekly meeting of the Club for retired Italians associated with St. Peter's Church in Clerkenwell.

The vast majority of old respondents participated in the activities of Italian organisations, however it should be noted that participants from this group were the most difficult to reach, so it is likely that those who agreed to take part in the research were those whose ties with the Italian community were stronger. Meeting friends with whom they shared the same migration experience is important, also because after many years in the United Kingdom the relationship of this group of migrants with Italy has changed. The transnational space which is created as part of the migration process modifies the meaning of home, which can no longer be fixed, but has to be rethought, taking into consideration not only the place of origin, but also the everyday life of migrants in the country of destination, with new places of affiliation and kinship solidarities (Ganga 2006). With ageing making travelling more difficult, the passing away of relatives in Italy and – above all – the settling of their offspring in the United Kingdom, many migrants changed their original plans to go back to Italy once they retired. And when they go for holidays, they are often seen as strangers:

When I go to Italy they call me the foreigner, I am always the migrant; they don't consider us Italians, now we're English...and I feel bad about that...and I don't like that, because I am a foreigner in this country, in England, and then I go to my country and I am still a foreigner (interview with Titty).

Stefano, who works for a *patronato* (Italian welfare agency), used similar words and explained that whenever he goes back to his hometown, he feels like a stranger, he is defined as the 'English guy', in the same way as in London he is defined as 'the Italian guy'. For this reason, he stated, using a striking metaphor, that people who are in a situation like his live in a 'limbo' between two countries.

Mr Ballarino depicted clearly the dual situation of being emotionally attached to Italy, but preferring to live in the United Kingdom:

Italy is like a dream, like a child, walking in the field, free, but not when it comes to work...I feel I am Italian, as I was born there, but I would never go back to live there: forty-four years made me realise that England gave me my future, a job, hope for my kids, gave me everything. Going back to Italy is not so bad, but you know, the mentality, we are so different now, things are still how they used to be ...the problem is that the Italian system doesn't work.

The way in which old migrants are no longer used to, and very critical of, Italian attitudes to everyday affairs is evident in the words of several of my respondents.

Gaetano, who worked for many years in the health sector, puts it very succinctly and explains that in England there is much more seriousness in offices and definitely more meritocracy. Matilde went into more depth and explains that this inefficiency is due to the importance given to personal contacts in Italy:

In Italy, when you go to an office, you always end up being after someone else, because he knocks at the door (and he knows someone)...you go to the bank, you go to some office, wherever you go, the one who is known always enters first, and then they tell you to 'wait'. Here it's different, here you queue, whoever is first goes first, the second goes second, you can't jump the queue!

This is a very typical complaint I heard time and time again during my interviews, and at the same time it is one of the most appreciated aspects of British society. And for many migrants, who still have to deal with Italian institutions in order to renew their documents and get their pensions, this situation is unchanging. As Titty and Matilde, who are both over seventy years old and have lived in the UK for more than fifty years, stated:

I prefer the English mentality. Yes, I am Italian, I also accept the Italian mentality, but I prefer the English one, because Italy is always the same, it never changes (interview with Titty).

[In Italy] change has not happened yet, from the war until now it's still the same! (interview with Matilde).

Several respondents from this group showed these mixed feelings, due on the one hand to the emotional link with Italy and on the other hand to their disillusionment with their home country. During the meeting with a senator representing Italian citizens living in Europe, an old migrant suddenly shouted: 'the UK is our stepmother, Italy is our mother who has abandoned us!', generating a round of applause among the other old Italians who were attending. Interestingly, I will show in the next section how these bitter remarks are echoed by those of the new wave of migrants.

### **The 'new' First Generation**

The so-called 'new' Italian migration is characterised by a wave of young, educated and often highly-skilled, workers and students. These people define themselves as 'mobile people' more than as 'migrants', a term which had a derogatory connotation for several of my interviewees. Young mobile professionals are often simply labelled with the English word 'Italians'. In 1998, the journalist Beppe Severgnini created an online forum in *Corriere della Sera* called 'Italians', a meeting point for Italians living abroad. As a consequence of the immediate and continued success of the forum and of the socio-economic characteristics of

its users, the term Italians rather than the Italian word *Italiani* came to refer to the newly-emerging professional migration.

In November 2009, Pierluigi Celli, managing director of Rome's LUISS University, one of the most prestigious private academic institutions in Italy, wrote an open letter to his son, published in *La Repubblica*, in which he advised him to leave Italy, because

this country, your country is no longer a place where it's possible to stay with pride... That's why, with my heart suffering more than ever, my advice is that, once you've finished your studies, you should go abroad. Choose to go where they still value loyalty, respect and the recognition of merit and results.

There are other examples: Sergio Nava, host of the radio show *Giovani Talenti* ('Young Talents') and author of the blog and book *La Fuga dei Talenti* (*The Flight of Talent* 2009), has been collecting accounts of professionals forced to leave a country where, in his opinion, clientelism and family matter more than merit. In 2010, Claudia Cucchiurato, herself a freelance journalist who moved to Barcelona, published a book derived from her blog on the new professional emigration from Italy, trying to explain the motivations of the exponential growth of this type of migration.

The sense of a lack of meritocracy in Italy is something that results in a shared identity for members of this group. These issues were addressed by many of my respondents and debated both in political meetings I attended and in informal conversations I had during my stay in London and during my journeys to/from Italy.

Veronica, who now works as a translator and writes scripts, portrayed the lack of meritocracy and the importance of knowing someone in Italy (as also discussed in King et al. 2014, 20):

I appreciated very much that here there is a lot of meritocracy in my opinion. They don't care about who you are, where you come from, which language you speak: if you can do what they need, you're the top. In Italy instead it's all about who you are the son of, all these things... I always had the aspiration to work in the entertainment sector and in Italy if you weren't *raccomandata* (literally "recommended") you could not even clean toilets, and as a principle I never wanted recommendations.

Veronica, like many of my respondents from this group, can be defined as a 'eurostar' – to use a term created by the sociologist Adrian Favell (2008) to describe the new generation of European citizens: highly-mobile people, who make pioneering use of the opportunities opened up by European integration and move inside the European Union, aiming to get better jobs, which are unattainable in their countries of origin, because of the absence (or low level) of meritocracy, flexibility and investment in the job market.

Among the thirty Italians from this group who participated in my research, twelve had completed a second stage of tertiary education (equivalent to Master's or above), nine a first stage of tertiary education, four some post-secondary, non-tertiary education, and the other four an upper secondary education. Only one person in this group indicated as his highest educational achievement a lower level secondary education or the second stage of basic



education. Overall, around three fifths of my participants answered that the main reason, or one of the main reasons, for coming to the United Kingdom was job-related, and another fifth of them revealed that their main motivation was study-related.

For example, Leonardo explained his decision to move to London to do a PhD in engineering in this way:

I wasn't thinking specifically of England, but I was thinking of going away. Let's say that I was a bit worried that, wanting to do research, it seemed to me very hard to have a career in Italy, especially considering that my interests were in a very small, a very narrow field...it seemed to me very hard to do a PhD and then start a career in Italy, so I thought to try directly abroad.

Alessia, instead, left her job in a law firm in Rome to work as a lawyer in London:

I came here because I was already 33, I was called by a client of the firm I was working for in Italy, and they offered me a permanent job, that is something that I had been looking for years in Italy, but no one could offer that to me, with normal working hours, from 9.30 to 5.30 pm, a good salary, some days off etc...I think that at my age I have the right to have a salary that allows me to live and buy a house, because it's absurd that a person who has been working for ten years in Italy cannot buy a house.

The journalist Marco Niada (2008, 235) speaks about 're-creative' migration to describe the mobility of many young Italians of different geographical and socio-economic origins, who go to London to try new experiences in an environment that they find more international, intellectually stimulating and competitive. We can also find this element in the words of Marcella:

More than professional reasons, for me what was stronger was the wish to live abroad, to change; I see living here as an experience: I am here by myself, I do what I want, no one helps me, I have no family here, all my family is in Italy, and I am ok with that...When you are a foreigner, you can choose what you want, you are an Italian in London and you can choose what you like more of English culture, and keep what you like of Italian culture.

Alessia explained which aspects of living in London she appreciates, compared to the reality of Italy:

I don't miss the narrow-mindedness, the discrimination towards coloured people, or homosexuals; as a woman I have also been discriminated against; once I did not get a job just because I was a woman, and another time I found out that a male colleague with exactly the same CV as me was earning 400 euro [per month] more than me, for no reason.

It should be made clear that highlighting the negative sides of Italy does not mean that they reject Italy completely or that these young Italians accept uncritically every aspect of their

life in the United Kingdom. Interestingly, given the educational level of most respondents from this group, nobody criticised British class society. This element of political analysis came up only in the conversations I had with some activists from left-wing parties and movements, who showed more awareness of the inequalities present in British society. This lack of critique towards British society might be due to the fact that the presence of Silvio Berlusconi as Prime Minister at the time of my research was a mobilising factor for many Italians. In this way, most people I interviewed focused on the deficiencies of the Italian economic and political system, and on the embarrassment caused by Berlusconi's personal behaviour, while they were more sympathetic towards the politics and the economy of their host country.

Instead, aspects such as the food, the weather, the friendlier attitude of people in Italy were mentioned in my interviews, and at the same time it was made clear that London is a place that offers big opportunities, but 'it is not an Eldorado here. Because in Italy there is this tendency to think that everything outside Italy is perfect!', to use Marcella's words. In her experience of working in the NHS, she found out that the health system in England faces many more problems than she expected when she left Italy, similarly Leonardo explains that merit is certainly valued more in the UK than in Italy, but adds that cases of nepotism also exist in British academia.

In their study, Bartolini and Volpi (2005) also documented the instability and transience of the experience of many young Italians in London, an aspect linked to the flexibility of the job market and also to the social dispersion typical of a metropolis, which makes it more difficult to create close friendships, as portrayed by Chiara:

Personally, I think that the good thing about Italy is having family or friends, friends you have known for a long time. I think the quality of life is a lot better in Italy, in terms of everything really...but I think in terms of opportunities there is lots more here. I think you can work based on merit, maybe not on other things...but then again if you are in trouble, it is good to have a network of people who can help you out, that is more difficult here...because it's London, and London is so big, and I feel so alienated sometimes here, and then you meet people, and they come and go.

Chiara's words touch on an important point, which concerns the social interactions of Italians in London. The lack of contact with English people is a recurring theme in the literature on European migration to Britain, as documented in – amongst others – the works of Burrell (2006) on Leicester and King et al. (2014) on London.

With the exception of those who experienced a relationship with an English partner, who gave them chance to access their network of family and friends,, my respondents usually found it easier to create close friendships with either Italians or with people from other nationalities, than with English people. This is mainly due to their preference for spending time and networking with people with whom they have something in common, for example with other 'eurostars', with whom they share the experience of migration to a multi-ethnic metropolis like London.

From this perspective, it is also easier to understand the success of new forms of associations, which target specific sectors of the community, such as the *Club di Londra*, that is a reference point for many Italians working in the financial and bank sector, or the Italian societies of many universities, whose activity is very helpful for newly-arrived Italian students.

Moreover, new forms of associations have been developing that exploit the opportunities offered by new technologies, in particular the internet. In fact, some websites such as [Italianialondra.com](http://Italianialondra.com) or [Italiansoflondon.com](http://Italiansoflondon.com) provide information for young Italians who plan to move to London or already live in the capital, organise events for them and help them to find fellow citizens with whom to network and create friendships.

Giancarlo Pelati, founder and chairman of [Italiansoflondon.com](http://Italiansoflondon.com), explained to me that in 1999 he had the chance to meet the journalist Beppe Severgnini, who had created the aforementioned 'Italians' forum, the year before.

By talking to Severgnini, I discovered that the phenomenon I was experiencing here in London, the new Italian emigration of the so-called professionals, those young graduates or people with professional skills who come to London mainly to improve professionally, then maybe go back or go somewhere else in search of a better job, an immigration that is very different from that of the previous wave, I discovered that this world that I had experienced in London was everywhere, that this phenomenon concerned not only London, but all industrialised countries where the new Italians were going to try to improve their professional skills

After he told me how [Italiansoflondon.com](http://Italiansoflondon.com) came about, I asked Giancarlo Pelati whether his organisation had any links with the old migration. He replied that the old first generation is excluded because they do not use the internet and they have different interests, while 'we are completely different, very dynamic, we organise events targeted to our community', and that 'we' meant the young professionals.

This explanation is quite convincing, because it makes it clear that the lack of IT skills is only one of the reasons why the two worlds of old and new migration rarely meet. Age plays an important role too: the age of respondents from the old first generation at the time of data collection ranged from 53 to 87, with an average of 74; the age of respondents from the new first generation spanned 21 to 70, with an average of 37 years. Similarly, the participants' marital status matters: three fifths of the old respondents were married or living with their partner (plus another five who were widowed) while less than half of the new first generation defined themselves as married or cohabiting. To use the words of Stefano,

as long as there are people who are of a certain age who are interested in contributing, all goes well, the association progresses, but when these people start getting tired, age begins to advance, the ailments etc. etc., and then they cannot be as active as before.

At the same time, it is also the case that those who arrived more recently would rather meet and spend time with students or professionals who come either from Italy or other countries, and with whom they share similar socio-economic and cultural conditions (Bartolini and Volpi 2005: 96), expectations and challenges. This seems to explain why Giancarlo Pelati,

while defining the members of Italians in London as mobile professionals, still stated that they feel the need to meet other (professional, 'talented') Italians.

I had the chance to attend two events organised by Italiansoflondon. On the basis of this experience I can confirm that the users of this social network are mainly young Italians who work as professionals or in academia. However, it should be highlighted that social events are also attended by Italians who are in London on a more temporary basis (often to improve their English, while working part-time) and by young people from other nationalities, who often come along with their Italian friends.

In November 2010, Italiansoflondon and the Italian Bookstore organised a debate called 'Goodbye Italy'. Three journalists and writers (from the radio and newspapers) were invited to analyse the new and professional emigration of talent from Italy and to try to understand why many young Italians leave their country in order to have their qualities and their right to work recognised. The two main speakers were Sergio Nava and Claudia Cucchiurato, whose activities in collecting stories of professional migrants I described earlier. In this way, the event gave these two journalists, who have been playing a leading role in the emergence of the discourse on the new Italian migration, the opportunity to meet with the protagonists of the phenomenon they narrate, in London, which has become the main destination of this type of migration. And, symbolically, the venue chosen was the newly-established Italian school, an institution set up with the contribution of the new professional migration.

More than 300 people attended the event and many had to stand because the conference hall was full. The stories told during the debate resonated with those published in Nava's (2009) and Cucchiurato's (2010) books: they emphasised - rather vaguely, by means of anecdotal evidence - some positive aspects which are popularly considered part of being Italian according to the stereotypes, such as style and creativity (in fashion and design), the ability to get by in hard times, while at the same time distancing themselves from other characteristics, such as clientelism, nepotism, political transformism and a lack of respect for the law, which are considered among the main causes of the backwardness of the country. The contributions of the participants became part of the *Manifesto degli Espatriati*, an initiative launched on-line by Cucchiurato and Nava 'to give voice and mobilise young Italian professional expatriates'. Keywords such as 'meritocracy' and 'transparency', which are considered constitutive more of British rather than Italian society were emphasised, thus providing Italians in London with a discursive basis for the expression of their voice in Italian political debates.

## **Discussion**

The differences between the two communities that I have analysed in this paper can now be summarised and pinpointed. The study of the different groups which make up the Italian population in London today has allowed me to reveal the differences in terms of education and socio-economic background between the old and new first-generation migrants, an aspect often emphasised by media and scholars (for example, see Fortier 2000). What is probably

more interesting is that, in spite of these differences, members of these two groups share attitudes and behaviours that are usually overlooked in academic literature (with the exception of Di Salvo 2011) and in the current discourse on Italians in the United Kingdom.

Firstly, some similarities emerge in the relationship with English people. Fortier has written that the relationship with the local English culture is 'complicated by the experience of migrations, as well as by the legacy of an inherent spirit, or mentality, that only Italians and their descendants can possess' (Fortier 2000, 82). I reported that most of my respondents from both the old and new first generation expressed their difficulties in making close friendships with locals. A few older Italians spoke openly about episodes of racism they experienced after their arrival, while only a couple of the younger respondents implied that being a foreigner may affect negatively their socialisation with locals.

As I have shown, the old migrants socialised mainly with fellow citizens or – even more often – with people from the same village or the same region, while the newly-arrived tend to meet with other professionals. In both cases, they are fulfilling the same need, that is to share a similar experience and to network for both personal and professional reasons. This has an effect on the evolution of the world of Italian associations in London as well.

Looking at other parallels between the two groups, although Italy has undergone profound changes in the past fifty to sixty years, it cannot be denied that the main reasons prompting young Italians to leave are still job-related. The words of my respondents confirm the analysis of the aforementioned article in Time Magazine:

The motives of those leaving haven't changed much since the last wave of economic migrants struck out to make their fortunes a century ago. But this time, instead of peasant farmers and manual laborers packing themselves onto steamships bound for New York City, Italy is losing its best and brightest to a decade of economic stagnation, a frozen labor market and an entrenched system of patronage and nepotism (Faris 2010).

The old waves of migrants were forced to leave by an complete absence of job opportunities, while the new wave is in search of positions of employment in which their qualifications and skills are valued. However, these are expressions of the same problems, listed by respondents from both groups: the excessive bureaucracy, the inefficiency of offices, the importance of knowing someone to get things done, the lack of meritocracy and the bottlenecks in the job market.

Among the 'old' Italians, these negative aspects were discursively opposed to their hard-working attitude and their respect for family values which allowed them to be successful in their experience in the UK, as was analysed by Anne-Marie Fortier (2000). Among the 'new' wave of Italians, by contrast, other concepts, such as meritocracy, fair and transparent competition, a high level of education and talent, are given a high value and are the key words of an emerging discourse on the so-called new Italian migration, which has been developing through the media (especially those using new technologies) and of the new associations and networks in London, which targets this new professional migration.

Finally, both the old and new first generations have a better opinion overall of British rather than Italian institutions. One general reason can be found in the discourse on the Italian national character, a feature of which is to be self-critical while at the same time comparing Italy to other countries (Patriarca 2010), while a more specific one is that my respondents have all lived in the UK for at least three years, which means they have succeeded economically and are to some degree settled in the country. Nevertheless, both old and new first-generation Italians still follow Italian politics, as has emerged in the previous sections. Although there is not enough space in this article to discuss the theme in depth, I would like to make a few points about the political involvement of Italians in London.

The old first generation has a basic – sometime scant – knowledge of Italian and British politics and participates mainly just through voting, both in Italian and in local elections. The new first generation, on the other hand, is still mainly orientated towards Italy, especially in the very first years after their arrival (although non-electoral forms of participation apply to only a minority of the community). British public affairs are known at a basic level, but not having the right to vote in national elections does not encourage members of this group to be more informed and active.

The range in levels of participation can be explained by the different reasons for their interest. Several old respondents expressed their interest in what happens in Italy as a manifestation of their emotional tie with the country. For example, Pietro said:

Although I have lived in the UK for fifty-two years, I still hold an Italian passport and consider Italy as my country; therefore I take an interest in what's happening there.

And Franco, who arrived in the UK from Sicily in 1955 and is now more than eighty years old, said with emphasis and pride that he votes 'because our homeland always calls us!'. These passionate statements show an emotional attachment to the home country, which leads people like Pietro or Franco to stay informed about what happens in Italy. To some extent, this behaviour is a substitute for a return, which is no longer possible, and this sense of home country loyalty appears to have an abstract, or perhaps symbolic, quality (Waldinger 2008: 21).

Among younger Italians too, there are many who explain their interest in Italian public affairs in terms of their emotional attachment to the homeland, often reinforced by the presence of family and friends still in Italy. But in their case their interest and participation in Italian politics has been greatly enhanced by new means of communication which allow them to follow Italian political debates and to be active in different ways. These recently-arrived Italians who continue to participate in Italian politics, want to contribute to the evolution of political, social and economic debates in their country of origin by offering their perspective as Italian citizens and residents of London. In their view, their professional success in their host country provides the justification for their active involvement in the politics of their home country. On the basis of my study, I would argue that the successful migration experience of many old Italian migrants is overlooked by the new waves of migrants and more interaction between the two groups could offer new insights into the reasons why Italy

is a place from where people continue to migrate, and could help generate solutions to the long-term issues which have been affecting the country.

### Notes on contributor

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