

Migrants and their Children as Potential Game-Changers:

Immigrant Incorporation in South Tyrol's Divided Society

Dorothy Zinn

As with most areas of Western Europe, particularly economically prosperous ones, migration to South Tyrol from Eastern Europe and the global South has increased enormously over the last twenty-five years. Elsewhere in Italy, this demographic reality has created some difficulties in the collective imaginary as the country's self-representation has belatedly shifted from being exclusively a land of emigration to one of immigration as well. As a consequence, Italian society – a relative late-comer to national and cultural unification and traversed with lines of internal difference – has had to somehow incorporate these migrants, with all of the tensions that a “new multiculturalism“ has posed for the society (Grillo and Pratt, 2002). This process is even more complex in South Tyrol: given the history of the province and the coexistence of the historically present groups (speakers of German, Italian and Ladin, as well as Sinti), migrants are arriving and establishing themselves willy-nilly into a territory characterized by stark institutional and social division. The discussion here will explore the complexities for migrant incorporation posed by the specific plurilingual situation in South Tyrol, with special attention to the educational system. Because of the role of schooling in social reproduction in general, and in South Tyrol in particular, the acute political-cultural importance of the educational system, the school system in fact offers a privileged lens through which we may explore the presence of migrants and their children.

Only relatively recently has the situation of immigration to deeply divided societies become an object of attention in the scholarly literature, where discussions have been examining the dynamics both of immigrant incorporation in such contexts and of the preexisting relations of difference among the groups involved in the salient social division. As Gilligan and Ball (2011) have noted, more research is needed to capture the special complexity of immigrant settlement in divided receiving societies, and some recent studies have responded to this need (e.g. Haque 2012, Blad and Couton 2009, Banting and Soroka 2012; Jeram, van der Swet and Wisthaler 2016). The growing phenomenon of settlement of third-country

nationals to divided societies like South Tyrol raises a number of questions: that of how national ethno-linguistic minorities receive and react to immigrants and potential claims for their rights to citizenship and the recognition of difference; what the contours of immigrant incorporation might look like in such a context; and how preexisting categories and relations of difference may be influenced or reconfigured owing to the presence of immigrants.

While some studies on immigration to divided societies have considered cases from institutional perspectives or using quantitative indicators to evaluate immigrant incorporation, the discussion proposed here addresses cultural meanings by moving between macro- and micro-levels of investigation.¹ In this way, the analysis emphasizes the tensions and processual aspects characterizing immigrant incorporation in South Tyrol in suggesting possible responses to the questions posed above. Drawing from Todd's (2005) proposal that such an approach may be particularly sensitive to the coexistence of multiple, conflicting symbolic orders, I consider to what extent the presence of immigrants in a divided society such as that of South Tyrol may be provoking an "exogenous shift" (Wimmer 2008) in local boundaries related to difference, in effect acting as what we might think of as game-changers with respect to the pre-existing situation.

South Tyrol is a small, autonomous province of Italy in the Alps bordering with Austria and Switzerland, featuring the presence of three major social groups: two national minorities made up of the dominant group of German speakers and the small Ladin-speaking population, and the numerous but politically less powerful Italian speakers.² The image of South Tyrol as a sunny *melting pot of cultures and contrasts* belies a latent tension and deep, periodically contentious, social division between the German and Italian speakers. Against this picturesque Alpine backdrop, one of the most dynamic economic areas of Italy, South Tyrol's cultural landscape — or, as Appadurai (1996) has put it, "ethnoscape" — has been increasingly redefined by the arrival of migrants from other EU and non-EU countries, most noticeably from the early 1990s on. The focus of this discussion, then, is on how this more recent, significant immigrant presence may be incorporated within existing divisions or possibly even be leading to their reconfiguration. To cite one local politician: "...[I]f [South Tyrol] is embarking on a process of integration of

1 The discussion is based on data and materials gathered as part of a broader study featuring ethnographic fieldwork in the South Tyrol school systems from 2012 to 2014, commentaries by local intellectuals and activists, semi-structured interviews, and the analysis of media sources and public records, including policy documents and provincial council debates. Support for the research was provided by a grant from the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano.

2 According to the 2011 Census, the German-speaking group represents circa 70% of the resident population of South Tyrol, while the Italian-speaking and Ladin groups are, respectively, 26% and 4%.

foreigners, what is the model they are being integrated into?“ (Provincial Council 21.10.2011). But as an actor himself caught up in the local system of differences, this politician does not consider how the “what“ ostensibly doing the integrating is itself a regime of various symbolic orders that is hardly immutable, and that the presence of immigrants themselves might in fact be provoking change in it even as their own social incorporation is conditioned by it.

The Background to South Tyrol's Ethnoscape

For centuries part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, South Tyrol was among the territories annexed to Italy in 1918 after World War I. Only a few years later, the rise of the Fascist regime in Italy led to two decades of intense linguistic and cultural repression of the German-speaking South Tyroleans. Subsequent to World War II, South Tyrol achieved status as an autonomous province, and after a lengthy process of negotiation, the autonomy statute gave a great deal of administrative power to the German-speaking South Tyroleans, who constitute a minority within the Italian state, but are a majority within South Tyrol, except in the capital city of Bolzano and a few small towns. Given the dramatic historical background of Italian domination in the first half of the twentieth century, the paramount concern of the new provincial leaders was to protect the German- and Ladin-speaking populations from the risk of cultural loss. To redress past injustices, in 1972 the Second Autonomy Statute established the principle of “ethnic proportion“, or *Proporz*, to make sure that each language group would be represented in the public arena and have access to public resources in proportion to its numerical presence, and the system functions on the basis of the census results regarding the three major linguistic groups. The data of the groups' numbers are gathered through a “Declaration of Language-Group Belonging“, whose compilation is requested of all Italian citizens resident in the province during the census. This Declaration is filed separately with the provincial court in order to be able to access resources such as public jobs and housing, or serve in roles that are distributed on the basis of the ethnic proportion. The Autonomy Statute also sought to guarantee preservation of German and Ladin language and culture by creating separate institutions and administrative apparatuses for the three major language groups. These latter institutional division and power-sharing arrangements are known as a consociational regime (cf. Wisthaler 2016). The logic – which, with specific reference the province, Kymlicka (2007) deems multicultural – is that of a form of positive discrimination founded on the creation of reified boundaries in order to protect minority identities.

Not all types of multicultural coexistence are the same, however, and we should perhaps view South Tyrol as a buffet rather than a melting pot: there is an astonishing degree of de facto social separation (cf. Medda-Windischer et al. 2011; Chisholm and Peterlini 2011; Riccioni 2009; Carlà 2013): separate, parallel school systems for each of the three major linguistic groups, separate sports clubs, separate media, cultural, leisure and religious organizations, separate uses of urban space; and – the drum whose beat sets the general rhythm – separate administrative institutions within the apparatus of the all-important Provincial government. If, as Anderson (1983) noted in his famous formulation, print (and other) media create and consolidate “imagined communities”, the media consumption habits of South Tyroleans indicate a predominant tendency for separate imagined communities (ASTAT 2006). In short, the Italian-/German-speaking social boundaries described in Cole and Wolf’s anthropological classic *The Hidden Frontier* (1974) appear to be alive and well.

This framework of separate coexistence constituting parallel societies has long been promoted by dominant political forces within the German-speaking community. The rationale is, as famously stated by politician Anton Zelger in 1980, “The more separate we are, the better we will be able to understand each other” (cited in Baur 2000: 188). Far from being a multiculturalism of hybridity and mixedness – which, to the contrary, have long been disparaged as “Mischkultur” among the vast majority of German-speaking political parties (cf. Schweigkofler 2000; Fait 2011) – the system clearly bears within it the antinomies of a subnational minority multiculturalism whose extreme reification and reproduction of cultural boundaries risks facilitating far-right discourses of the “right to difference” (Melotti 1997; Holmes 2000).³

It is within such a situation that the presence of immigrants settling in South Tyrol must be considered. Until the mid-1990s, the majority of non-Italian citizens migrating to the province came from Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland. Even today, German citizens form the second largest national group (ASTAT 2014a). Over the last twenty years, immigration has risen significantly and has become qualitatively diversified: there are 45,469 foreign nationals resident in South Tyrol from 137 countries, unevenly distributed throughout the territory; they represent 8.8% of the province’s population, which is higher than the national average of 7.4%. Approximately one-third come from non-EU European nations, while 17.5% come from Asia and 12.5% from African countries. The largest national groups are Albanians (5,557), Germans (4,366), Moroccans (3,576), and Pakistanis (3,282). Thus, in a territory in which a form of multi-

3 There is a far from negligible presence of extreme right groups in South Tyrol, some of which have been found to have relations with German neo-Nazis.

culturalism has been institutionalized through the ethnic proportion system and separate-but-equal organizations, and in which an undifferentiated category of “immigrants” now numbers double the entire population of the Ladin minority, the question of how the immigrant presence is received is not a marginal one. The data from the Ninth CNEL report (2013) suggest a mixed picture: according to its indicators, South Tyrol features a relatively good social insertion of migrants compared to other Italian provinces (8th of 103), but despite high levels of employment it ranks 76th for the general level of labor insertion.

South Tyrol as a “Multicultural Success Story”

The regime for protecting the officially recognized national minorities in present-day South Tyrol has been celebrated by various observers as the happy-ending multicultural outcome of the political compromise that led to South Tyrol’s status as an autonomous province and even as a model for conflict resolution in other similarly divided societies (e.g. Steininger 2003; Kymlicka 2007; Nardon-Schmid 2008). Truly overt forms of hostility amongst the linguistic groups are indeed not very tangible, and while many local people suggest that there is a latent tension between the two major groups (Italian and German speaking), the last two decades have witnessed a climate of relatively peaceful and prosperous, if passive, co-existence (Baur 2000).

With the new immigration, one might ask whether or not the established minorities in a multicultural regime would demonstrate greater openness to forms of multiculturalism that directly regard the newcomers. Although there has been a presumption in the literature that national minorities would maintain strong group boundaries to the exclusion of immigrants, some scholars of immigration to divided societies have begun to question this (Jeram 2013; Muriel and Gatti 2014). Even so, it remains to be seen if institutional openness counters possible backlash discourses against immigrant multiculturalism that have developed throughout Europe on political and popular levels.

Following Sciortino’s (2012) exhortation to pay greater attention to the symbolic dimension of boundaries, in this section I describe some of the elements that anchor the various symbolic orders that give meaning to identity and difference in South Tyrol, and how such symbolic orders related now intersect and interact with those introduced along with the more recent social reality of immigration. Carlà (2013: 81) has observed how political parties in South Tyrol tend to fuse the theme of immigration with that of the traditional linguistic groups present and their relations of power. I would stress his point even more emphatically, in that the entire field of migration in South Tyrol is deeply permeated with symbolic

orders rooted in pre-existing categories and institutional structures. This is not to say that spheres of migration and the long-standing ethnic situation are congruent, but rather that they are inextricably connected.

In the sections that follow, I consider three important undercurrents in the present South Tyrolean ethnoscape: assimilation, exclusion and a broader inclusivity. The first two are strongly shaped by the interaction of the symbolic orders described above and existing institutional structures, while the third is an emerging development. Focusing in particular on schooling, in this discussion I attempt to exemplify, if only summarily, some of the multilevel interactions between institutional arrangements and the intentionality of various actors.

Our New Other *Could* Become One of Us: A Variation on Strategic Essentialism

Although there is little available data on how immigrants are positioning themselves in South Tyrol's divided society, the results of the MigraData study based on 464 interviews with migrants from low-income countries offer some indication (Medda-Windischer et al. 2011). Not only do the majority feel more at ease with the Italian language than with German, but 53.9% declared feeling closer to the Italian language group, as opposed to 11.4% to the German language group and 22.6% to both groups equally (:66 ff.). The results of a survey of 565 migrants instead differentiate the picture from within the all-encompassing label of "immigrants" by pointing out that EU citizens have greater competence in German and are more likely to have German-speaking South Tyrolean friends (ASTAT 2012).

Given that a large number of immigrants will end up settling permanently in South Tyrol and eventually obtain Italian citizenship, in the view of some German-speaking individuals and parties, they risk swelling the ranks of "the other group". Among Italian speakers, too, there are those who see the immigrant presence with a strength-in-numbers view: for example, tentative 2011 census results (which, however, quickly proved to be incorrect) led some Italian-language commentators to exult at how naturalized immigrants were contributing to gains in the Italian language group through their Declarations (*Alto Adige* 11.06.2012). Looking with a view to longer-term developments, then, the process of migrant incorporation within South Tyrol sees migrants as potential, if often ambivalently received, new recruits to the three official groups.

Recruitment can be favored not only through the practice of making the Declaration, but also, and on a more fundamental level, through the process of schooling and the civic (and crucially, social and linguistic) enculturation it effects (Schiffauer et al. 2004). For this reason, the tripartite South Tyrol school system

has become an especially charged site in political debates. The educational system in South Tyrol is divided into three separate sub-systems on the basis of language, with three separate administrative and political directorates within the Provincial government. The basis for the separate systems is Article 19 of the Autonomy Statute, which provides that each of the three official language groups be guaranteed instruction in their “mother tongue.” Although the Italian- and German-language schools introduce instruction of “the other language” (as termed in local and institutional discourse) at the primary level and continue throughout secondary school, the overall results of L2 language instruction in the school systems have been very mediocre. In short, the separation of the education system directly feeds into the reproduction of social boundaries between the Italian- and German-speaking groups.

It is interesting to note the tension existing between the structure of the tripartite school system, originally aimed at protecting the German- and Ladin-speaking groups, and forms of intercultural education emerging as a response in Italy to the presence of students of migrant origin. Intercultural education is promoted as a policy at the national level (Legislative Decree 40/1998; Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione 2007), and on the provincial level it seems to be mainly interpreted with regard to the presence of foreign pupils, who are a rapidly growing presence in the South Tyrol schools. Actual practices of intercultural education in South Tyrol vary greatly: some are well informed by current pedagogical theories, others instead use the term to simply reference to second- or third-language instruction for foreign pupils, which may in fact be conducted within an assimilationist perspective with the aim of *solving the language problem* of newly arrived students as quickly as possible.

A final point has to do with enrollment trends. Article 19 guarantees all parents in South Tyrol the freedom to be educated in their “mother tongue”, and therefore choose the system in which their children will be educated. An implicit assumption is that people will choose the “right” school in relation to their linguistic background. Of course, this scheme does not take into account people from bilingual or plurilingual families, whether immigrant or not. When the children of immigrants began to enter the South Tyrol schools in the early 1990s, the initial enrollment tendency was overwhelmingly in favor of the Italian-language school system, apart from children of parents from German-speaking countries. The Italian-language system developed the image of being the default choice for immigrants for educating their children. For some national groups, especially those who spoke Romance languages or had integrated into “the Italian side”, this choice may have been seen as a question of linguistic affinity for the parents. Furthermore, the Italian-language system has been perceived as being more receptive to immigrant pupils: an abundant folklore abounds of stories to the

effect that German-language schools have actively discouraged the enrollment of migrants' children through requiring a restrictive minimum German-language competence, although such testing cannot officially be used to turn students away. Since around 2008 or so, however, there has been a gradually developing receptiveness in the German system to foreign students, conceived in some quarters as a strategy of inclusion to avoid "having them go over to the Italian side". Even the most hard-line ethno-nationalist parties have complained in the Provincial Council that the children of migrants entering the Italian school system might well endanger future numerical strength of the German-speaking group, and thereby lead to an alteration of the *Proporz*, and consequently, the material resources and positions distributed accordingly. In this case, incorporation of the new groups appears to be accepted upon the condition of assimilation to the German-speaking group, adding a new twist to the notion of strategic essentialism. On their part, migrant parents are also aware of the greater prestige that German enjoys on the local level, and they are actively recognizing the value of fluency in German as a means of improving their children's chances in the South Tyrol job market. For this reason, too, more and more migrant parents are enrolling their children in German-language schools. It is also true that, while migration to South Tyrol was at first overwhelmingly concentrated in Bolzano and the larger urban centers, in recent years it has reached more isolated valleys and villages where the population is entirely German-speaking and only German-language schools are present locally. A countervailing approach is the offering of plurilingual instruction (Italian, German and English) in some Italian schools, deployed as a strategy to combat waning enrollments and flight to the German-language system. In the school studied in the field research, this was an attractive prospect for families, even attracting a few from the German-language system. The mother of one of the pupils in this school was a founding member of an activist group of "Mothers for Plurilingualism", and she is an Eastern European migrant married to an Italian. Currently, among the total population of students without Italian citizenship, about 45% of students attend German-language schools, while 55% attend Italian-language schools. Another aspect that merits further investigation, but which is beyond the bounds of the present discussion, is that of the degree to which foreign students' identity is conditioned by going through one or the other school system, as opposed to remaining attached to an identity dictated by their parents' countries of origin.

Some Others Might Be Better than Other Others

Although there have been calls for unification of the school system, this idea has long been a taboo among the hegemonic political forces in the province. There have instead been periodic proposals from different political parties to create a fourth school system, one reserved for foreign pupils, based on the presumption that the latter have insufficient language competences and create problems for their classmates. One thus notes how the formula applied to protect the established minorities may be translated into an exclusionary tool. As one German mother-tongue local remarked to me, “It may be that the immigrants finally give the Germans and the Italians something to agree upon.” It appears more likely, though, that the long-time separatism will gradually move in the direction of a greater mixing of groups, if not an actual unification of the system.

However, we should not overlook how incorporation processes through education may not in fact be neutral with respect to racialized categories: not all foreign students going through a given school system can expect to be subsequently incorporated on equal footing within that official linguistic group, and an articulated hierarchy of group membership could develop, featuring cross-cutting lines of division. For example, Islamophobic rhetoric from very different political quarters suggests that the process of incorporation might privilege Christian migrants (especially Catholic ones) and their descendants, especially those from Europe; this view has actually been advocated in policy documents (Pahl et al. 2007, Carlà 2013). In this scenario, the German- and Italian-speaking groups would find common ground in the overwhelmingly shared Catholic religion. Moreover, the effects of racialization are not evenly distributed among all groups forming the broad *immigrant* category: some second generations manage to assimilate, effacing their difference, while others remain racialized as visibly different despite a high degree of cultural and linguistic assimilation.

In any case, there is no lack of the usual xenophobic barbs that we find elsewhere throughout Europe about migrants absorbing resources that could be used for *natives*. Many everyday discourses attribute the peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups in present-day South Tyrol to the substantial funding transfers that the autonomous province has received from the central government over the last decades. The widespread perception expressed in these discourses is that over the last twenty years there has been an abundance of wealth to spread around and keep people satisfied, thereby staving off the threat of a vicious struggle over resources among the three official groups. The current climate of economic crisis will lead to some reductions in these transfers, and the question would be whether or not such cuts would have negative consequences for relations among the established groups, as predicted in such local theorizing. There have been ominous signs

that at least some politicians will not hesitate to make reference to a context of increasingly scanty economic resources in their xenophobic rhetoric, with the aim of pitting the alleged needs of the established against those of migrants and refugees.

On the other hand, and quite contrary to the “ethnic war” hypothesis, it might also be the case that cost-cutting measures could become a window of opportunity to effect some changes in the direction of restructuring the entire edifice of separate institutions upon which the autonomous South Tyrolean system has been constructed. Such changes, unthinkable to date among hegemonic actors, might come to be viewed as *common sense*, if not wholly palatable, through the rationale of economic crisis. One example of this was the inauguration of a new library in the town of Ora/Auer, touted as a novelty for housing the Italian- and German-language collections and library services under the same roof. In a news report covering the event, then-Provincial President Durnwalder commented that it was a sensible operation from an economic point of view, adding – with a barely perceptible wink in his tone – that “And then, there is nothing wrong with someone reading something in German sitting next to someone reading something in Italian” (RAI 3 Alto Adige, 09.06.2012).

The Possibility of a More Inclusive “Us”

Although they show no signs of relinquishing the long-standing *Proporz* system, current leaders of the hegemonic *Südtiroler Volkspartei* (SVP) party might slowly steer the society in the direction of greater intercultural dynamics among the various groups, old and new. This potential has been rendered manifest by a few groundbreaking events over the last three years that have demonstrated a softening of the SVP’s original ethno-nationalist core. In this complex cultural panorama, other forces have continued to exert efforts toward a more inclusive dynamic. Green politician and intellectual Alexander Langer left a strong legacy of intercultural theory and practice in South Tyrol; his work is being carried forth by the Greens and the Alexander Langer Foundation, and it is also being discovered anew by different actors. The Catholic Church itself has heavyweight standing in the province’s society, and while several of its institutions and practices have had the effect of reinforcing the cultural separation of language groups through the last decades, it has recently made moves to alter some of them in a more inclusive way. Here, as with the school system, the immigrant presence might be allowing the Church certain openings for promoting an intercultural discourse.

In South Tyrol, immigration was relatively invisible until recently, with German-speaking migrants making up the largest proportion, and immigrant mul-

multiculturalism was a non-issue. Now, the visible presence of migrants appears to threaten the national minority not with claims for their own recognition, so much as through the possibility that they will affiliate with the Italian language group. In South Tyrol it is structurally impossible at present for the German-language minority to impose its language in such a way: the regime regulating co-existence in South Tyrol requires official bilingualism and a rigid identification of the population that is in turn directly connected to the distribution of concrete resources. The *Proporz* system thus gives the sides an incentive to compete for and recruit new members rather than build an overarching identification. Kymlicka suggests that sub-state minorities might well need to impose some relatively illiberal measures in order to encourage immigrant integration and steer them away from the national majority (2001: 286, ff.). In South Tyrol, such policies do not appear necessary, because the prestige and economic opportunities associated with the German language are, to some degree, already attracting immigrants spontaneously.

After over forty years of the Province's autonomy, the position of the formerly at-risk official minorities has now been consolidated; on several sides there have been calls for a new form of belonging to South Tyrol, a form of civic citizenship that would supersede the older ethnic divisions (Medda-Windischer and Carlà 2013). How feasible this might be, however, is questionable, in that it would mean unhinging the consociational system: long hailed for establishing a peaceful coexistence, in a new phase of intense immigration and demographic change, this system – explicitly defined along ethnic lines – continues to offer reassurance to the German-speaking minority faced with the specter of its assimilation. The competition between the Italian and German language groups favors immigrant inclusion among the German speakers, but the form it takes is more assimilatory than multicultural with respect to immigrant identities, and migrants have no official ethnic recognition. If the growing, stable presence of a migrant population in South Tyrol gradually provokes a silent revolution within the German language group, it remains to be seen whether or not such a development will allow for the dissolution of the historic Italian/German division.

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