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CRIME AND MIGRATION POLICIES: REAL DATA AND "MASS PARANOIA"

La ricerca criminologica ha ampiamente dimostrato che è del tutto infondata l'idea secondo cui i flussi migratori sono necessariamente anche flussi di criminalità. La paura dell'immigrato, invece, continua ad essere incoraggiata e usata come strumento di aggregazioni politico-elettorali. L'inclusione sociale degli immigrati è l'unica strategia efficace per la prevenzione della loro criminalizzazione che, altrimenti, resta comunque possibile.

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 Abstract ENG

Criminological research has clearly demonstrated that the idea that migratory flows are necessarily crime flows is groundless. Fear of immigrants, on the other hand, continues to be encouraged and used as an instrument of political/electoral aggregation. Social inclusion of immigrants is the only effective strategy for the prevention of their criminalisation, which, otherwise, remains a possibility.

Summary: 1. Migratory flows and crime flows: an irrational and baseless Hypothesis. - 2. Immigration an crime between first and second generation. - 2.1. The causes: psychosocial hypothesis. - 3. Immigration and “mass paranoia”. - 3.1. Governing through fear: the role of media. - 4. Migration policies, fear and welfare State crisis.*

1. Migratory flows and crime flows: an irrational and baseless Hypothesis

Although periodically called into question, the fact that there is no direct proportional relationship between immigration and crime has never been seriously disproven and confirms the centuries-old foundation of criminology that migratory flows are not necessarily crime flows.

Research on the subject dates back to Thorsten Sellin^[1] who in the 1930s, while studying the migratory flow from southern Europe to the USA, was the first to demonstrate how the opposite hypothesis - that frequent crimes are committed by immigrants who are therefore the cause of a considerable increase in overall crime rates - is irrational, baseless and therefore essentially emotional.

Sellin's conclusions were confirmed in several subsequent studies which examined radically different migratory flows from those he had considered, in terms of geopolitical context and other economic, social and cultural factors^[2].

It therefore seems that the falsification of the initial emotional and irrational hypothesis of the immigration-crime relationship is a constant. But such a conclusion can only be supported by taking into consideration a further variable that involves the opposite pole of the hypothesized relationship: what crimes are we talking about?

From this point of view, even the classic reference to violent, predatory and contact crime in the criminological debate could be misleading in the context of legal systems which, like the Italian one, have been overwhelmed by excessive enactment of laws, and which,

even in this limited perspective, end up by attributing criminal relevance to facts that are irrelevant in terms of real social harm. In Italy, not even an inter-university research project conducted in the 1990s was able to determine the number of criminal offenses encompassed by the entire legal system: at the end of that research project, however, an oscillation of several thousand types of offenses remained^[3].

However, this too could be considered an outcome of the economic, political and social evolution that has led to completely dysfunctional choices in the management of social problems related to immigration in Italy.

2. Immigration an crime between first and second generation

Almost all the studies on immigrant crime confirm Sellin's initial hypothesis: if there is a link between immigration and crime, this emerges not among first generation but among second generation immigrants^[4]. Only among the latter did Sellin detect higher crime rates than those that characterise the indigenous community.

The reasons are easy to understand and, at the risk of excessive simplification, can also be effectively summarized.

2.1. The causes: psychosocial hypothesis

A useful analytical tool is the fundamental classification of criminal choice inhibitors divided into "internal containers" and "external containers", proposed by Walter Reckless in the 1960s^[5].

The first generation immigrant still retains all the of the so-called internal containers which include the ethical-social options acquired during their cultural formation which, in the case of a migrant's inevitable disorientation, may even be reinforced as an essential identity reference^[6].

But not only.

Even the external containers, represented by social control systems, have a stronger effect on first generation immigrants than on their children, First generation immigrants find themselves living in a condition of extreme loneliness which overwhelms the "pioneer" immigrant - the immigrant who, in the context in which he or she tries to fit, does not find a community of immigrants already established to facilitate social inclusion. In this

solitude, the informal and proximity control of the native born population - the most effective and widespread form of social control - will therefore be much more carefully carried out^[7].

The condition of second generation immigrants is completely different.

For them, parental figures - socially marginalized 'losers' – are not an effective model for the natural adolescent identification necessary for a solid structuring of the superego (Freud). It is therefore very likely that their "internal containers" are weak.

On the other hand, while second generation immigrants may share the sense of marginalization with their parents, they do not experience the same loneliness which has made informal control of the native born population more effective on their elders. Most likely, however, they can already refer (direct or mediated) to a "differential association"^[8] or, in any case, to a group also defined by a specific subculture^[9]. It will not coincide with the parents' 'loser' group, but neither will it be that of the native born population which rejects them today as it rejected their parents in the past. Rather, as an essential reference for the vitally important construction of personal identity (or for identification with the group), the two cultures necessarily enter into conflict, leading to different evaluations of the criminal relevance of certain behaviours.

Deviance and crime represent the almost natural outcome of this type of individual condition. The only thing that remains is to consider the causes in order to create adequate social (and economic) policies.

"What was is no longer, what should have been is not yet". This is the synthesis (almost a slogan!) often used to represent the situation of second generation immigrants who experience a double cultural conflict with their parents (culture of origin) and with the society in which they fail to integrate. In a nutshell, it seems that their problems have a common identical origin: the difficulties of inclusion and social integration.

The lack of integration prevents parents from acting as a reference point for a child's natural adolescent identification which is fundamental for solid structuring of the superego and represents the prerequisite for satisfying the natural need for personal identity as an adult through the usual mechanisms of social interaction. The only possible alternative for the necessary satisfaction of that natural and primary need is joining subgroups, even those with criminal subcultures.

3. Immigration and “mass paranoia”

Why do the confirmed results of Sellin's work, which blatantly deny that irrational and emotional prejudice, fail to translate into political, social and cultural action? The answer is important.

Often in Italy - but not only in Italy - the exact opposite seems to happen. In fact, the political actor – who may happen to maintain ownership of a media company while in power, and in any case is extremely attentive to the definition of the relative agenda^[10] - often not only shares but actually encourages that prejudice, helping to spread fear of the immigrant.

3.1. Governing through fear: the role of media

“Governing through Crime” is the title of an excellent volume by Jonathan Simon. It has been published in Italy, but with a different title: “The Government of Fear”^[11]. Most likely, the publisher - obviously with the author's consent - wished to emphasise the broader context in which the problem defined by the original title, and dealt with extremely well in the volume, is placed, which is the political use of fear.

The literature on the subject is plentiful. David Altheide's 2002 “Creating Fear” is one of the few examples I am familiar with. Between 1990 and 1997, prior to publication in the USA by the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University in Virginia, an anomalous 600% increase in media representations of actual murders (excluding that of OJ Simpson's partner!) on the NBC, CBS and ABC networks had already been documented. In reality, however, national homicides actually decreased by 20% during that period^[12]. Other anomalies also emerged in the US criminal statistics in that same period: with unprecedented progression, between 1996 and 1997 the death sentences carried out in the USA increased by about 50%, from 45 in 1996 to 74 in 1997. In Texas in those same years, executions following death sentences increased by 1200% (from 3 sentences carried out in 1996 to 37 in 1997).

There is also relevant documentation in Italy. A decade later, the Pavia Media Research Observatory documented an almost identical evolution in Italy. In the face of a substantially stable situation in the real trend of crime, the "great crime bubble"^[13] in Italy exploded in 2007 when widespread news broadcasts of criminal episodes on the largest Italian networks (RAI and Mediaset) were not reflected in the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) official crime statistics^[14].

4. Migration policies, fear and welfare State crisis

"Mass paranoia (or media)": this is how Alessandro Dal Lago already referred to the Ebola virus; the so-called "mad cow" disease and AIDS back in 1996^[15].

In the context of mass communication, therefore, the findings of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in the 1990s and those of the Observatory of Pavia Media Research in Italy ten years later with reference to crime did not represent a new trend. Indeed, for several years prior, mass communication seemed to be focused on topics that had a strong social impact, because they were a source of fear, concern and alarm.

Why? First of all because these are issues that instantly generate audiences and readers and in turn, as Lippmann realised back in 1922^[16], an increase in the cost of media advertising space. During economic crises advertising represents the main (if not the only!) source of income for the mass communication entrepreneur and despite providing a service of public interest, even as simple as the dissemination of information, sooner or later, economic crises lead to the reduction of or even the exclusion from public subsidies to the media industry (as has also happened in Italy in recent times).

Secondly, since the 1980s, the same economic crises have resulted in a universal reduction of the benefits and concessions attributable to the intervention models of the Welfare State. Consequently, all over the world wherever the public service has managed, for example, the health and education sectors with free access and without the need to make a profit, the economic recessions have led to financial crises and the costs have weighed ever more heavily on citizens.

But the crisis of the welfare state has also become the crisis of political leadership which, at all levels, has looked elsewhere for the reasons for its legitimacy. If a danger and/or an enemy do not already exist, they must be created and if they cannot be created, it becomes important to at least create fear in order to assign the leader the role of defender.

Fear - whether of a disease or a terrorist or a common criminal or an immigrant - then becomes essential. How useful and essential then is any management of intrinsically criminogenic social problems.

The problem of the immigrant destined to increase crime rates in a social context exists and cannot be denied. However, it is a question of honestly and carefully evaluating and verifying the reasons for and the presumed inevitability of that destiny.

In criminology, for example, it is an already established fact that the real functions of criminal law can be very different from its apparent functions (Merton, 1949). To

criminalize the immigrant for the mere fact of being one - as has happened recently in Italy with the introduction of the crime of illegal immigration - means not only risking to alter the statistics on crime committed by immigrants, but also placing them on a path of (secondary) deviance that the deficits of the current paths of integration and social inclusion already make highly probable.

But an accepted fact in criminology is that the most effective form of crime prevention is not tertiary prevention regarding the sentence (which is false prevention or, at the very least, mere prevention of recidivism and in any case it does not even work!), but rather primary and secondary prevention, implemented with adequate social policies.

Following the 1992 attacks in which magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino lost their lives, Gesualdo Bufalino, a well-known Sicilian writer, wrote in the *Corriere della Sera* that to fight the Mafia we did not need more police, just "an army of teachers".

An army of properly trained cultural mediators would be a good start for the development of an effective policy of integration and inclusion of immigrants who, as the centuries-old history of migration as well Italian data indicate, have always been a precious resource. It has recently been estimated that despite all the problems encountered, in 2017, 8.7% of the 2017 Italian GDP was generated by immigrants.

Note e riferimenti bibliografici

* Testo della relazione tenuta il 7 ottobre 2020 nell'ambito di Online International Workshop su "Anthropology of Crime and Criminalization", organizzato dal Dipartimento di storia e cultura dell'Università di Bologna

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* Il simbolo {https/URL} sostituisce i link visualizzabili sulla pagina:
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