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Immigrant Activism and the Role of Left-Wing Allies in Exclusion
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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of left-wing organizations (political parties, trade unions, and social movements) in promoting political participation in Italy and examines the competing discourses of inclusion by immigrant activists interacting with these political actors. I ask two research questions: How do immigrants perceive and act upon the opportunities of participation offered to them by their left-wing allies? How do their discourses and practices challenge left-wing actors' dominant approach to integration? Based on the selection of eight in-depth interviews with immigrant activists and other first-hand documentary sources collected during a fieldwork I did in Italy in 14 months between 2013 and 2014, the paper examines how immigrant activists are interacting with their left-wing allies through the lenses of immigrants' perceptions and actions. I identify major barriers to participation and the responses immigrant activists offer to react to them. Overall the paper offers new insight of the presence of immigrant activists as relevant actors in the Italian political landscape and shows how they are challenging left-wing actors' claims of inclusiveness and of promoters of a progressive, multicultural image of Italy.

Keywords: Left-wing allies; immigrants' political participation; barriers to participation; Italy.

Introduction

“The truth is that even though the Left was more open [than the Right], at the end they did not understand anything. While those of the Communist Re-foundation Party and the radical left organizations befriended immigrants and treated them as equal partners and as normal people, the other more moderate left-wing political parties were not treating them equally at all. In substance, all these left-wing actors without distinctions shared a big problem: it was never about trying to build something new together with immigrants. It was about an instrumental use of them. It was not always conscious. They used immigrants to bring forth their own ideas, their own political claims. Still today, the Left struggles to understand this point: things can be solved only through interaction. This is what it has been missing: the awareness that these interactions and exchanges change everything.”¹

“In 2002, during the meeting of the Social Forum in Rome, with our group from Naples we went to meet with the other anti-racist movements of Italy. After the Social Forum, a Table of Migrants had been created by various radical left-wing organizations. The Table was composed of both Italian and immigrants. During that meeting, I wanted to talk to the assembly and an Italian woman from our group told me that there was no need to do so, because someone else had talked *on our behalf*. I refused to accept what she was saying. I thought: “*I have to talk!*” In that exact moment I realized to what extent the spaces [of participation] were tight. The question of the self-determination of immigrants was obscured, hushed-up! Henceforth, in that occasion, I took the word and spoke precisely about the lack of spaces. After my talk, during the break, many immigrant activists came to talk to me. There were immigrants from all over Italy and they all expressed the same need to have a space where to express themselves. Among us, there were many immigrant activists who had been militating for years for the recognition of the rights of immigrants in Italy. We decided to meet again, in order to find a way to give voice to our need... For us it was an authentic liberation... because we could finally have a space in which to say what we thought. We saw in the people of the Social Forum those subjects who for many years had impeded us to have a say on the decision taken on our behalf. There were not mean people. They thought that they were more apt to do things for us than ourselves. However, as Gandhi used to say: “S/he who decides for me without me is against me.” You want to help immigrants? You want to support immigrants’ struggle? Then we have to construct the political itinerary together, because if we do not do it, you construct itineraries that represent not an advancement, but a true regression with respect to immigrants’ political self-determination.”²

In recent years, while the European migration literature has been examining the level of political participation of immigrants in the receiving society and has been focusing in both conventional and non-conventional forms of participation, very little research has been done on the relationship immigrant activists entertain with their allies. While the literature point out the important role of left-wing allies (e.g. Garbaya 2005), the relationship that immigrant activists establish with them is often assumed as obvious instead of being systematically explored. Yet, these alliances are crucial to understanding the ways immigrant activists engage in politics and make rights claims (Siméant 1998). What is more, alliances with left-wing actors are crucial to understand how immigrants participate in the receiving society and whether and how they will take action, even in very hostile environments (Nicholls 2013).

¹ Expert of Immigration in Italy, Interview in Bologna, 26 June 2014.

² Immigrant activists, Interview in Turin, 30 October 2014.

This study intends to overcome this gap in the literature of migration by examining the relationship of immigrant activists with left-wing organizations (political parties, trade unions, and social movements) in Italy and by focusing in the perceptions and actions of immigrant activists.

The two quotes above suggest major challenges immigrant activists face in Italy, with respect to participation. They indicate that there is a great resistance by institutional and non-institutional actors of the left-wing political spectrum to open up a space in which immigrant activists can participate as equal partners and make rights claims. The first interviewee highlights a less inclusive approach by moderate actors and a more equal attitude by radical actors. He also highlights that, after all, all left-wing actors in Italy were slow in recognizing and addressing the implications of immigration and the fact that diversity was going to changing the political landscape of the country. What they did, instead, was to use immigrants instrumentally, to make political claims.

The second interviewee, a key immigrant actor in the Italian political landscape of the radical left, describes a conflicting situation in which immigrant activists opposed concretely the radical left-wing organizations' practices of *talking on behalf of immigrants*, instead of letting them express talk for themselves, by creating an alternative organization composed only by immigrant activists. Like the first interviewee, the second interviewee talks about the inability or unwillingness by radical left-wing actors, to open up to the presence of new political actors in the Italian landscape and to construct the political itinerary together with immigrant activists.

Taking cue from the idea expressed in Ghandi's expression, "S/he who decides for me without me is against me!" (an expression widely used among immigrant activists in Italy when they refer to the behavior of their left-wing allies on their regard) this research focuses on two main research questions: How do immigrant activists perceive and act upon the opportunities of participation offered to them by their left-wing allies? How their discourses and practices challenge left-wing actors' dominant approach to integration?

In order to answer this question, the paper focuses on the relationship between immigrant activists and three main left-wing actors: the main left-wing party (the Democratic Party), the main traditional left-wing trade union (the CGIL) and the radical left (grassroots movements and trade unions). Based on the analysis of eight selected semi-structured in-depth interviews with immigrant activists and other first-hand documentary sources collected during a fieldwork I did in Italy in 14 months between 2013 and 2014, the paper examines the complex relationships immigrant activists have been building with their allies through the lenses of immigrants' perceptions and actions. It exposes major barriers to participation and the responses immigrant activists offer to react to them. Overall the paper offers new insight of the presence of immigrant activists as relevant actors in the Italian political landscape and shows how they are challenging left-wing actors' claims of inclusiveness and of promoters of a progressive, multicultural image of Italy.

The paper is divided as follows. First, it introduces a brief literature review and presents the case selection and methodology. Then, it offers a brief reconstruction of the role of the Italian Left in promoting people of migrant background's political integration in Italy since the end of the 90s in a national climate of increasing restrictive legislation and rising xenophobia. Subsequently, it presents a preliminary analysis of the interviews with immigrant activists and the implications of the findings for our understanding of the responsibilities of the Left in obstructing immigrant activists' political participation and their emergence as relevant political actors and agents of transformation. Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting new avenues of research.

The overlooked role of immigrant activists' interacting with left-wing allies

The literature on migration studies that examines the conditions under which immigrants engage in politics pays great attention to the role of the receiving society in offering opportunities for inclusion through institutional channeling (Ireland 1994) and by supporting symbolic and material recognition (Bloemraad 2006). Through this lens, European scholars have looked at the role of the receiving society in promoting civic participation within “ethnic” organizations (Fennema & Tillie 2004), consultative bodies (Gsir & Martiniello 2004), and trade unions (Mottura & al. 2010). Additionally, recent research has been examining participation of immigrants in local election and participation of new citizens of migrant background within political parties (Morales & Giugni 2011; see also the European project DIVPOL 2014). Finally, a renewed interest for collective mobilization of immigrants in vulnerable conditions has been reemerging after a long period of silence on the subject (Nicholls 2014; Oliveri 2012).³

Surprisingly, with the exception of few authors (e.g. Garbaya 2005), this growing literature has paid very little attention to the relationship between immigrant activists and their “allies,” the left-wing actors. This is surprising given that left-wing actors have been usually more inclined than their right-wing counterparts to grant specific political rights to immigrants and has thus represented the main opportunities for immigrants’ negotiations of their participation in the receiving society (Però 2007; Mantovan 2007; Kosic & Triandafillydou 2005).⁴

The presence of allies, and in particular their material and symbolic support, can be crucial to transforming immigrants’ political grievances into political action (Nicholls 2013). Arguably, they can play an important role in shaping the type of political participation in which immigrant activists will engage. In his study on mobilization of undocumented immigrants in France and the US, Nicholls spotlights the complexity of the relationships between undocumented immigrants and their allies, arguing that these alliances are “prone to divisions and splits, opening possibilities for alternative visions and discourses of citizenship” (2013, 86). He also highlights that, at the same time the cultural and symbolic capital of immigrants’ allies “allows them [immigrants] to assume control over how representation of immigrants are constructed and articulated in the public sphere” (2013, 86).

The cultural and symbolic capital as well as the complex interaction with undocumented migrants are important factors that shape the relationship between immigrant activists with different statuses and their allies. The struggle over legitimacy and representation of immigrants can be a divisive subject not only among political actors positioned in opposite sides of the political spectrum, but also among actors positioned at the left side of the same spectrum.

In his study on the Italian Left, Davide Però (2007) and Claudia Mantovan (2007) identify major problems with respect to inclusion by the Left. While the first shows the existence of a strong discrepancy between inclusive discourses and exclusionary practices of the Left in the city of Bologna, the second suggests the existence of forms of paternalism, instrumentalism, and lack of equal treatment by both political parties and grassroots organizations. A recent research by Matteo Rinaldini (2012) on immigrant activists in the main Italian left trade union, the CGIL,

³ While an older European literature from the 1970s and early 1980s focused on immigrants’ social movement activism and class alliances (see Bloemraad and Vermeulen 2014), this orientation largely disappeared until making a comeback more recently (see for instance Chauvin’s work, in addition to Nicholls, in France). For the most significant work on the *sans-papiers* movement in France see Johanna Siméant work in 1998.

⁴ A striking example of this literature is the work by Federico Olivieri (2012). In his reconstruction of the cycle of protests of immigrant activists mobilizing in Italy between 2010 and 2011, the author never refers to the alliances that immigrant activists established with radical left actors during the occupation of a crane in Brescia and with Italian grassroots organizations during the organization of the “Strike of migrants: a day without us” in many cities in Italy.

highlights similar patterns, including a internal barriers within the union that prevent immigrant workers' greater representation and their ability to reach roles of responsibilities within the organization.

In this paper, I build on this literature on the barriers to participation of immigrant activists interacting with the Italian Left and offer an analysis of immigrants' perceptions and reactions to these internal processes of exclusion.

Case selection and methodology

This study draws from extensive fieldwork conducted in Italy between 2013 and 2014. It is based on a selection of the data collected during 14 months of research. The research was based on archival data (e.g. newspapers, official and unofficial documents of the left-wing organizations), participant observation to key events (including national and local meetings with main left-wing organizations) and more the 120 in-depth semi-open interviews with members of left-wing actors organizations, including 57 interviews with immigrant activists, mainly Third-Country Nationals.

For this paper, I focus on three main Italian left-wing organizations: the main Italian political party, the Democratic Party, the main trade union, the CGIL, and the radical left organizations. I have selected the three organizations, because they are particularly strong in Italy and because they have all mobilized around the issue of immigration in a relevant ways. They are also representative of different political orientation within the left-wing political spectrum and thus they offer the opportunity to examine whether ideological variations have had an impact on how they have framed the issue of immigrants' inclusion of their organizations.

I will use the archival data to reconstruct what the three left-wing actors mentioned above have done since the end of the 1990s to promote more inclusion and participation of immigrants.

To reconstruct immigrant activists' political trajectories, I rely mostly on eight selected semi-open in-depth interviews with the aim to explore the perceptions of immigrant activists and grasp how they perceive and act the opportunities offered to them by their allies. The analysis of these individual trajectories is also supported by field notes on informal conversations I had with the same people during meetings and events to which I participated. Even though all my interviewees accepted to be identifies, in order to protect their identity, I have used pseudonyms (See Appendix).

As for the interviewees, I selected immigrant activists who stood out because they were particularly active in the Italian left and that had hold or were still holding roles of responsibilities in one of the left-wing organizations under observation. As Kathleen Blee and Verta Taylor point out, semi-structured interviews contribute to our understanding of "mobilization from the perspective of movement actors or audiences" (2002, 92). What is more, "they provide greater breadth and depth of information, the opportunity to discover the respondent's experience and interpretation of reality, and access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the word of the researcher" (Blee & Taylor 2002, 92-93). Thus, semi-structured interviews, intense participation in weekly meetings, and informal contacts with immigrant activists allowed me to identify the main barriers (subjectively understood) that immigrant activists faced *vis-à-vis* their allies and *how* they developed responses to promote their greater inclusion.

The interviewees I selected were active in three main Northern Italian cities, known for the strong presence of left-wing actors with different political orientations: Bologna, Reggio Emilia and Brescia. As Table 1 shows, in all three cities the left-wing trade union is very strong. What is more, in the city of Bologna, one can find a strong presence of the other two main left-wing actor, the Democratic Party and the radical left organizations. However, while in Reggio Emilia one can

find a strong presence of the Democratic Party and a weak presence of the radical left, in Brescia we find the opposite configuration. The selection of the three cities allows to control for variations of the initiatives promoted by left-wing actors depending on local configurations of power (for the role of the locality see Garbaye 2005; Penninx & al. 2004). As observed above, I have selected interviews with eight immigrant activists for this research. It is one interviewee for each relevant organization in each city.⁵ Among my interviews there were fifteen women. However, in this sample they are not represented. This is because the women I interviewed had not roles of responsibilities in the organizations object of this study.

TABLE 1. Left-wing actors in the three cities and promotion of participation since the 1990s

	Reggio Emilia	Bologna	Brescia
Democratic Party	Strong	Strong	Very weak
CGIL	Very strong	Very strong	Very strong
Radical left actors	Very Weak	Very strong	Very strong

The goal of this empirical research is not to perform a systematic comparison of the interviews, but rather to show the richness and complexity of points of view of immigrant activists and their individual perception of the opportunities and barriers to participation offered by their allies. The strength of the empirical research is to show the diversity of point of view of immigrant activists in the Italian political landscape and how, notwithstanding differences in the types of trajectories and opportunities offered to them, they all share similar points of view on the barriers to participation they face through the interaction with different left-wing actors. The analysis of the interviews allows to that criticism towards left-wing actors cut across the left-wing political spectrum and shows the persistence of the barriers to participation by left-wing actors without relevant distinctions.

Italian hostile context and non-EU immigrants’ political rights

Like other Southern European countries such as Spain, Greece and Portugal, Italy unexpectedly became an immigration country in the first half of the 1980s, after having been almost exclusively an emigration country since the beginning of the century (Kosic & Triandafyllidou 2005, 5). The immigrant population in Italy grew exponentially, reaching the 7.5 % of the total population in 2013, triggering in part the rise of anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments and the growth of the anti-immigrant party, the Northern League. Scholars have noted that, since the beginning of the 2000s, like many other countries in Europe that have experienced a “return to assimilationism” (Brubaker 2001), Italy has moved toward an incorporation regime based on exclusion and “institutional racism” (Basso 2010, 391). Legal and political factors have contributed to the construction of immigrants as second-class citizens, excluding them as “others” from the mainstream of Italian society (Calavita 2005).

This national hostile environment has limited in a relevant way the ability of immigrants in Italy to participate in politics. The first limitation concerns electoral politics. In Italy, while national voting rights are restricted only to Italian citizens, European and local rights are granted

⁵ In the case of Reggio Emilia, given the absence of immigrant activists in the radical left, I have not used any interview.

also to EU citizens. The difficulties to access Italian citizenship by Third-Country Nationals (see Ambrosini & Triandafyllidou 2011) makes participation in electoral politics particularly difficult. In particular, two restrictive laws on immigration have been introduced in the 2000s: Law 189/2002, also known as the Bossi-Fini Law, and Laws 125/2008 and 94/2009, also known as Security Package (“Pacchetto Sicurezza”) (Zanrosso 2012). These two laws reflect the increasing influence of the anti-immigrant party, the Northern League, in shaping Italy’s immigration policies. Approved by right-wing majorities in the Parliament, both laws significantly modified the first comprehensive law on migration in Italy: Law 40/1998, also known as the *Turco-Napolitano*, approved by the left-wing government in power at that time (Zanrosso 2012, 102). The second limitation to immigrants’ inclusion is linked to the fact that legislation has made immigrant workers more vulnerable to blackmail in the workplace, thus making immigrant activism in trade unions more risky.

As Ankica Kosic & Anna Triandafyllidou highlight, even though participation and representation of immigrants is traditionally linked to voting rights, “European legislation has become increasingly open to the granting of political rights to non-EU citizens (Kosic & Triandafyllidou 2005, 25). While the Treaty of Maastricht (Article 8b) and the Treaty of Amsterdam (Article 19) grant local voting to resident immigrants, the Council of Europe’s “Convention on the participation of Foreigners in the Public Life at the Local Level” grants non-EU citizens several civic and political rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, the right to form formal associations and trade unions, and the right to vote at the local elections. Despite these European incentives, Italy has ratified only the Council of Europe’s Convention, with the exception of the article that refers to the right to vote (Kosic & Triandafyllidou 2005, 26).⁶

Responses by left-wing organizations

In the national hostile environment that developed in the 2000s, left-wing actors have reacted in order to promote greater inclusion of immigrants and in order to promote immigrant participation in Italy. Since the first arrival immigrants in Italy, between the 1970s and 1890s, the Left had already worked on this direction. Left-wing actors presented themselves as “the bulk of progressiveness and welcoming” (Però 2007) and created opportunities for immigrants’ participation as early as the end of the 1980s (Kosic & Triandafyllidou 2005). Together with other stakeholders such as the Church, the main left-wing trade unions in Italy became the first “manager of integration,” by offering services to new arrivals and by mobilizing to protect immigrants’ rights and to encourage their inclusion in the receiving society. As early as the 1980s, left-wing trade unions started campaigns to unionize immigrants and created specific platforms in their organizations to promote participation and greater representation (Mottura & al. 2010). Additionally, left-wing local authorities introduced consultative bodies and political parties created platforms to improve opportunities for participation (Kosic & Triandafyllidou 2005, 26). Radical left grassroots organizations also mobilized in favor of the most vulnerable immigrants and organized migrants around the improvement of their housing and working conditions (Mantovan 2007).

However, as Ambrosini (2013) notes, the increasing national context in the 2000s has also strongly undermined the ability of migrants’ allies to act in favor of their greater inclusion.

⁶ Kosic and Triandafyllidou note that, “Various proposals to grant the right to vote have been presented by members of the left and center-left wing parties since 2001,” but with no success (2005, 26).

In this section I present a brief reconstruction of the ways the three main left-wing organizations in Italy have mobilized around the issue of immigration and promoted participation of immigrants.

The Democratic Party. The Democratic Party (*PD—Partito Democratico*) is the main moderate social-democratic left-wing party in Italy. It was founded on October 14, 2007, after the dissolution of the DS (Democrats of the Left—*Democratici di Sinistra*). It was created thanks to the fusion of various Left- and Center-Left parties. During the election on February 24-25, 2013, it was the main political party, followed by the People of Freedom (*Popolo della Libertà*) and the Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*) (Mosca 2013).⁷

Since 1998, a current within the moderate Left has been working on the subject of immigration thanks to the great interest in the subject of one of the key figures of the party, Livia Turco. One can identify three main phases of the emergence of the theme of immigration within the main left-wing party.⁸ The first phase took place between 1996 and 1999, when a left-wing coalition was governing the country. At that time, Turco, at the time a member of the Italian parliament, pushed for the approval of the first comprehensive law on immigration, the Turco-Napolitano Law (see Zaslove 2006).⁹ The Law introduced measures to promote participation as indicated in the Council of Europe's convention, except for the right to vote (Zaslove).¹⁰

The second phase started in 2001. Turco was elected again as a member of the opposition, and she promoted the creation of Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*), a structure of the party that aimed to favor inclusion of immigrants in the party. With this organism, in 2002, in response to the approval of the Bossi-Fini Law, she launched a campaign, "Brothers of Italy: Immigration is a richness for you, too!" ("*Fratelli d'Italia. L'immigrazione è una ricchezza anche per te*"), at the national level to sensitize the Italian population to the importance of seeing immigration in a positive light.¹¹ Unfortunately the campaign was not able to influence public opinion and most of the people involved and interested in the campaign were insiders and experts on immigration. What is more, the DS was silent on the theme, because at the time immigration was not its priority.¹² The third phase of the Democratic Party's approach to immigration developed between 2009 and 2013. At that time, the political party realized that it was important to talk about the theme and to raise public awareness.¹³ To this purpose, in 2010 the Democratic Party encouraged the creation of the National Forum of Immigration, a platform aiming to promote the participation of citizens (Italian and immigrants) interested in the theme of immigration. Through the Forum, the Party also engaged in many campaigns to enhance the awareness of the Italian population.

⁷ Mosca (2013) also indicates the presence of other minor parties, including the Northern League, Left Ecology Freedom, and Civic Choice.

⁸ I owe the reconstruction of these phases to Cesare F. (pseudonym), the Assessor of Cohesion and Security of the municipality of Reggio Emilia (Interview in Reggio Emilia, 3 March 2013).

⁹ In her book, Turco (2005) reconstructs the debate around the law and explains that it was a step ahead but still an incomplete work. According to her, the law needs to be further developed to accompany the fast-evolving social processes.

¹⁰ For a reconstruction of the debate on the right to vote see Zaslove (2006) and Kosic & Trindafyllidou (2005).

¹¹ See Iervasi, Maristella. " 'Fratelli d'Italia,' DS al fianco degli immigrati. Lo slogan della campagna contro il ddl Bossi-Fini diventerà il nome di una struttura del partito per tutti gli stranieri." *L'Unità*. January 31, 2002. <http://cerca.unita.it/ARCHIVE/xml/40000/36114.xml?key=Maristella+Iervasi&first=1101&orderby=0&f=fir> (Accessed June 25, 2015).

¹² See interview with Cesare F, Interview in Reggio Emilia, 3 March 2013.

¹³ Cesare F. told me, "the Party acknowledged that 'if it does not talk about the theme, then it is the others who will do it' " [this means the right and the anti-immigrants parties].

Gradually, at the regional and local level and through the Forum, the Democratic Party supported the creation of Provincial Forums of Immigration.¹⁴

Particularly in regions where it was strong (such as Lazio and Emilia Romagna), the Democratic Party was able to create strong networks of Forums. Within three years, the Party in the Emilia-Romagna Region created a Forum in almost every province. Additionally, it developed one of the most solid networks with a great level of coordination, thanks to the creation of a Regional Forum. Among the results of the work done by the Forum in Emilia-Romagna was the promotion of a leadership of migrant background in the party. During the national election of 2013, when the left-wing coalition won the elections, two main members of the Forum in Emilia Romagna were elected in the Parliament: Cécile Kyenge (at the time, the person in charge of the Regional Forum and a municipal councilor of the city of Modena) and Khalid Chaouchi, the president of the association GMI (Young Muslims of Italy—*Giovani Mussulmani d'Italia*), and one of the key members of the Forum of Reggio Emilia.

The CGIL. The main left-wing trade union (and also the most powerful one) in Italy is the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labor—*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*).¹⁵ This organization has played an important role since the first arrival of immigrant workers in the 1980s (Mantovan 2007). In contrast to the attitudes of trade unions in other European countries, which were unwelcoming if not hostile during the first phase of immigration (Penninx & Roosblad 2000, 5), traditional trade unions in Italy offered assistance and support to the newcomers almost immediately (Mantovan 2007, 90). This particularity can be traced back to the history of universalistic solidarism of the Italian unions, and also the specific qualities of the first immigration in Italy, which was considered a spontaneous inflow, not an organized one, and thus not in competition with the Italian workforce (Mantovan 2007, 90).¹⁶

It has been observed that the successful work done by traditional trade unions is reflected in the high level of unionization of the immigrant population (Zaslove 2006, 19). The number of immigrant workers in the CGIL is very high (410,127), representing 15.5% of the total active workers enrolled in the union (Caritas 2013), and has represented an important component for the union revitalization.¹⁷

The political orientation of the trade unions has had an impact on their approach to integration. The CGIL has a communist background and its modus operandi is more radical, political, and confrontational than that of the other unions (Mottura & Pinto 1996). This political orientation has had an impact in its strong promotion of participation of immigrant workers in Italy.

¹⁴ See the official document of the Democratic Party approved on February 26, 2008, on the Forums: article 24, Chapter VI, p.15. <http://www.partitodemocratico.it/allegatidef/Statuto%20PD=44883.pdf>

¹⁵ In 2013, the CGIL was the strongest trade union in Italy, with the highest number of people enrolled in Italy (39.9%) (Caritas 2013).

¹⁶ Zaslove (2006, 19) confirms this point when he states: “[...] trade unions [and left wing activists] within civil society were instrumental in assisting immigrants with housing, employment, and education. This position stems from both ideology and from a general pragmatism. The Italian Labor Unions have always held a progressive position vis-à-vis the so-called Third World, while they also recognized that, due to a decline in industrial employment and an aging population, the future of unions will depend upon immigrant labor.”

¹⁷ The Catholic CISL is also very powerful with 31% of the number of people enrolled. Also, the number of immigrant workers enrolled in the organization is very high (384,237), representing even a higher percentage of the CGIL’s active workers (16.7 %). The rest of the union members listed above are distributed among the third main left-wing trade union in Italy (the UIL) and other minor unions.

By the end of the 1980s, the CGIL created specific Offices for Migrants or Offices for Foreigners (*Uffici immigrati* or *Uffici per stranieri*) within each territorial unit of the organization, the so-called Chambers of Labor (*Camere del Lavoro*). Though these offices aimed not to offer services to the immigrant workers, they became soon a reference for immigrant workers' political participation. In order to encourage participation, the CGIL instituted the Migrant Coordination Organization (*Coordinamento Migranti*), a platform at the national level that aimed at encouraging immigrants' participation and self-determination in the organization at the decisional level and attempted to promote greater inclusion of immigrants in the organization (Marino 2010, 346-348). Additionally, depending on the choice of the territorial branches, some Migrant Coordination Organizations were also created at the local level (Marino 2010, 348).¹⁸

The union also provided specific units for the defense of immigrant rights in the workplace, which were managed by the federations of each working sector.¹⁹

Over the years, the CGIL has also worked to enhance the level of representation of the immigrant workers in its organization. Already in 2000, the CGIL had 160 immigrants' representatives in the workplace (delegates—*delegati*), 3 national directors (*dirigenti*) and two secretaries of category (the CGIL-FIOM (metalworkers) of Biella, in Piedmont (North of Italy), and the FILLEA (construction) of La Spezia in Liguria (North of Italy) (Zincone 2000, 365-366). However, by 2013, a new research on the level of representation showed that the organizations struggling with fundamental barriers to the representation of immigrants in the organization (Rinaldini 2012).²⁰

Radical left organizations. The radical left organizations represent a complex world of grassroots organizations that are further Left than mainstream political parties. All radical left organizations share the idea of “no borders” and “free movement” and challenge the legitimacy of the state in controlling the movement of people through legal means (Cosseron 2007). These organizations have been crucial in supporting mobilizations by *sans-papiers* and people in vulnerable conditions (documented and undocumented) in the workplace. Often they have replaced the gaps left empty by trade unions, who have failed to protect immigrants who were not enrolled in their unions, and have organized strikes, protests and mobilizations to defend immigrants workers' rights.

In Italy, some radical left organizations are historically associated with the Communist Refoundation Party, or PRC (*Partito Rifondazione Comunista*), while other organizations are dissociated from any party and claim extra-parliamentary trajectories of political action (Cosseron 2007).

The Italian radical left organizations mobilized early on the issue of immigration, between the 1980s and 1990s (Sciortino 2003). However, a more structured anti-racist movement was organized only in the 2000s, during the G8 of Genoa, when the Social Forum created a Table for

¹⁸ Marino (2010, 348) explains that the need to create a Migrant Coordination Organization at the regional and local level was officially expressed in 1991 during the XXII Congress of the CGIL and was formalized in 1992.

¹⁹ Mottura & Pinto (1996) underscore that the CGIL was the first union in Italy to organize meetings with foreigners to discuss their specific problems. Moreover, the CGIL is also the only union to organize meetings with more continuity.

²⁰ See in particular the document produced by the CGIL and presented at the Regional Conference in Bologna, “Representation and Immigration” on the 6th June 2013. The report testifies of a striking low level of representation of immigrant workers in the CGIL and emphasizes the lack of representation in positions of responsibilities in the organization.

Migrants to discuss issues linked to immigration. This was the first attempt to organize the movement at the national level.²¹

In the election of 2006, there was a second attempt to create a large coalition of the left and the radical left through the Party L'Ulivo, led by Romano Prodi (Cosseron 2007, 10). In 2006, when a left-wing coalition won the elections again for the first time since the last defeat in 1999, the hope that the left-wing government led by Romano Prodi would help to re-launch the anti-racist movement was soon dissolved with the fall of the government and the success of the right-wing parties (with a strong presence of the Northern League) in the elections of 2008. What is more, as Fabio De Nardis (2011, 36) explained, with the fall of the Prodi government in 2008 and the ejection of the communists from the Italian Parliament, there was a radical de-restructuring of the “close bond between the movement of global justice and the Communist Refoundation Party.”

However, these attempts to create a structured movement were soon undermined by ideological conflicts that emerged between the Communist Refoundation Party and the radical organizations, and among radical left actors themselves. These conflicts reflect major differences in the ways these organizations interpreted the phenomenon of immigration and the actions that went with it (Cobbe & Grappi 2011).²²

Conflicts among left-wing organizations over the issue of immigration

Open conflict exists in Italy among left-wing actors on the issue of immigration. The first conflict emerged between the radical and the moderate left. Because the moderate left-wing government in power since 1998 established the link between the permit to stay and the work permit with the Turco-Napolitano Law and introduced the CIE, or the Centers of Identification and Expulsion (*Centri di identificazione e espulsione*) and the control of borders, the radical left organizations opened up a conflict with the moderate left. This conflict is still at the heart of main divisions of these organizations.

The second major conflict emerges between the radical left organizations and the CGIL. In particular a major problem arose in 2006, when the trade unions in Italy accepted to collaborate with the right-wing government and to take of the bureaucratic procedures to renew the permit of stay of immigrant workers. As it will be shown below, this fact also created also some major tensions between the CGIL and its immigrant unionists as well as immigrant activists in the radical left. One of the main critique is that since then the trade unions are overwhelmed with bureaucracy and delivery of services and are not able to do politics and organize migrant workers around issues linked to their basic rights.

The two following sections present the eight selected interviews with a focus on the perceptions of immigrant activists of the barriers to participation represented by their left-wing allies and the preliminary analysis of the findings.

²¹ This reconstruction is mainly based on first-hand sources, that is, interviews with main members of the anti-racist movement (Italians and immigrants) at the national and local level.

²² Notwithstanding the inability to create a solid national coalition, a few radical left organizations have been able to mobilize a great number of immigrants. One of the main events was the organization of “A Strike of Migrants: a Day Without Us” in 2010 (Cobbe & Grappi 2011). At the national level, one of the main organizations is the Project Melting Pot Europe. For the Promotion of the Rights of Citizenship (*Progetto Melting Pot Europa. Per la promozione dei diritti di cittadinanza*), based in in Padua, one of the strongholds of the radical left. See the page, “Chi siamo” (Who we are) <http://www.meltingpot.org/Progetto-Melting-Pot-Europa.html#.VUN4bUsqWHO> (Accessed June 20, 2015).

(1) Immigrant activists in the Democratic Party and perceived barriers to participation

Donald R. (Bologna) is a first-generation immigrant. He was born in Cameroon in the 1970s and arrived in Bologna in 1996.²³ He married an Italian woman in 2001 and at the time of the interview was working as an employee of the Emilia-Romagna region and was Assessor of Integration of San Lazzaro, in Province of Bologna. He arrived in Italy with a student permit and worked many different jobs to pay for his education. He graduated from the University of Bologna in 2001 in Communication Science. He explained that these communicative skills were very useful for both his work and political career. At the time of the interview, he was also doing a PhD in Montreal (Canada) on communication. Overall, Donald R.'s trajectory of integration was particularly successful.

Donald R. explained that when he was studying at University of Bologna, he got first involved in the world of associations. At the time, Bologna was an open city and offered him the opportunity to do so. Since 2000, he volunteered with the Metropolitan Forum of the Associations of Non-EU Countries of Bologna and its Province (*Forum Metropolitan delle associazioni dei cittadini non comunitari a Bologna e Provincia*) (Caponio 2006a, 195), a federation of immigrant associations created by the local left-wing administration of the time to encourage participation of immigrants in the city, and in 2005 he became President of the Metropolitan Forum.²⁴ In 2006 he also became very active with the Democrats of the Left (*Democratici di Sinistra*) and in 2009 he was elected councilor of the city of San Lazzaro and appointed Assessor of Integration of the administration. Since 2011 he had been in charge of the Provincial Forum of the Democratic Party.

Donald R. observed that when he was president of the Metropolitan Forum, between 2005 and 2007, he thought that the goal of the organization was that of “becoming a relevant political actor in the city, able to negotiate with other local actors.” For this reason, he encouraged the development of its political itinerary in the city, by building relationships with immigrant communities and also with local institutions.

Donald D. expressed strong criticism towards left-wing actors in the city. Recalling the experience of the Metropolitan Forum, he observed that main left-wing trade union, the CGIL, strongly opposed his activism and prevented immigrant active in the Forum from becoming autonomous and eventually it impeded the Forum to be empowered in the city.

The hardest shots that I received in the world of the politics did not come from immigrants or from the xenophobic Right, but from the extreme left and from the left-wing trade union, which by definition (and also by their own definition) are said to be close to immigrants. I believe that the CGIL of the territory contributed to the defeat of the Metropolitan Forum. The CGIL wants to have the exclusive discourse on migration issues. It doesn't want you to be autonomous because they want you to go to them and that they do the things to you. [...] This is the country of mediation: do you have a problem?! It is the other [the Italian organization] that must deal with your problem. And you remain a “third” party, as the thing did not concern you. You are only an object! You are part of their discourse, because this legitimates those who talk on your behalf. The CGIL could not put up with the fact that people who were the objects of their discourses were becoming political subjects, able to carry out their own aspirations and requests. [...] they could not tolerate the requests of immigrants who could *alone* present their own problems. They

²³ Interview in Bologna, 5 June 2013.

²⁴ Però (2007, 91) explains that the Metropolitan Forum was created thanks to a European project presented by the Municipality of Bologna in collaboration with other European cities. For a list of the different local organizations created to encourage participation see Kotic & Traindafilidou 2005.

though it was better for *them* to represent *us*. Each one of our public appearances had to be organized by them, in support of greater visibility for *their* work on immigration.

Donald R. got involved in politics in 2007 and became an active member of the political party, also because he wanted to contrast this system of mediation. He explained:

In my view, to assume even a minimal role within the political party is the beginning of a proactive participation. This is the threshold: to move beyond the world of associations. The immigrants who enter in Italy are represented as users, consumers, as those who are served. And the political discourse of the Right and of the Left reinforces this approach. I believe that true participation of immigrants in Italy will be possible by affirming the opposite of this representation.

Donald R. went on to explain that been elected as a representative of the municipality was the first step but was still not enough. He observed that in this respect, the political party was also impeding immigrants' emancipation and instead of valorizing individual competences was promoting a new form of ethnicization.

Unfortunately the role occupied by immigrants in Italy and in any political organization is mainly based on compliance. If one of us is a Ministry of Integration, like Cecile Kyenge, or Assessor of Integration—as in my case—regretfully, we are not doing anything else but answering to the consumer paradigm of immigrants. Because the mayor, when he appointed me, thought he was doing a favor to the cause, instead of thinking that I am actually competent. This is why instead of working on communication, which is my specialty, I am given the role of Assessor of Integration, which reminds me that this is supposed to be my role: that of being an immigrant working for other immigrants.

Donald R. noted that he has invested a great deal in overcoming the limitations of this Italian paradigm based on compliance:

Our true political participation will consist in saying that *we are those who serve*, that is, the citizens legitimized to occupy with full rights the role of those who administrate and take decisions and not only of those who receive. There is a saying: “The hand that gives is always above the one that receives.” We want to affirm that today participation for us means being on the side of the hand that gives and not always on the side of the hand that takes.

I asked him if he saw changes coming up soon in the direction of a greater self-determination of immigrants on the side of those “who took decisions.” He answered,

Absolutely yes! Things go so fast that the actors in the city don't even realize that Donald R. can become mayor of San Lazzaro in few years. If Donald R. ran for election with the support of the community, the community could vote for him. The party was not expecting my election in 2009. They put me in the list to say: “Hey, look how good I am!” Donald R. corresponded to a cosmetic function. But the party was floored because they didn't know where I took the votes, since they had made already their calculation without taking me into account.

Reda B. (Reggio Emilia) is a second-generation immigrant.²⁵ He was born in Tunisia in 1985 and moved to Reggio Emilia at the age of 13, in 2000, thanks to a family reunification. His parents had been living in Italy since the 80s. After he gained his degree in a technical school in Italy, he worked as a metalworker. He has been married to a woman from Tunisia since 2011, is a Muslim, and has had Italian citizenship since 2006.

He told me that three months after he received his Italian citizenship in 2006, he decided to run for elections with the Democratic Party, and the same year he became councilor in Quattro Castella (Province of Reggio Emilia). He adhered to the political orientation of the Democratic Party and also its political position on immigration. This is why he decided to become more and

²⁵ Interview in Reggio Emilia, 20 February 2013.

more involved. In 2010, he became the promoter of the Provincial Forum of Immigration of the Democratic Party of Reggio Emilia, and since then he had been the person in charge.

During our interview, Reda B. observed that, he promoted the creation of the Provincial Forum, because he wanted “to open up a space, hoping that the confrontation would allow the development of more relevant discussions on immigration issues”

Reda B. believed in the work of the Forum. He explained that the achievements of the Forum at the national level (and of the Forum of Emilia Romagna in particular) brought about two important results at the level of immigrants’ representation: the election of two members of parliament of migrant background in Emilia Romagna (Khalid Chauchi, from Reggio Emilia, and Cecile Kyenge, from Modena) both of which were involved in the Regional Forum of Emilia Romagna.²⁶

Reda B. explained that he faced prejudice in the workplace. I asked him if he faced racism or prejudice in the world of politics. He admitted that he saw racism from both the right-wing and the left-wing parties. He was often attacked politically because he was a Muslim. He added, “As an immigrant, I have come to realize that Italian people, including politicians, know very little about the phenomenon of immigration. There is lots of ignorance that needs to be overcome through our contribution.”

I asked Reda B. to tell me about his experience with the Democratic Party.

Teresa C.: Can you describe the Party’s treatment of people of foreign origin? Would you say that it is an equal treatment?

Reda B.: I am afraid there is no equal treatment! The reason is that the party puts meritocracy into the background. What matters for the party are your contacts and networks. When you think of it, it is obvious that a person of Italian origin has more networks and an immigrant is disadvantaged.

Teresa C.: What about Cecile Kyenge (the Minister of Integration)? How would you define the Party’s treatment of her? Equal treatment?

Reda B.: I call their treatment “Democratic racism”! They recognize you have difficulty adapting in the country and they want to lend a hand. However their mistrust and their culture of prejudice remain. No one in the Democratic Party dares to counter and openly challenge the general mistrust of the population and the hostile attitude towards immigrants. Within the Democratic Party, there are people who think: “I support you for the battle, I encourage you during the campaign, but at the end it is always the Foreigner people who steal.”

Teresa C.: So are you saying that they have the same negative opinion as the majority of the population?

Reda B.: Yes, they do! In any case, even if they don’t, they never challenge it. To take up the theme of immigrants’ inclusion, in the specific case of Italy, means first of all to be accused of defending the thieves and *the clandestini*.... To eradicate cultural prejudice takes an enormous amount of time and energy, but politics does not have time any more.

Moreover, why one should try to eradicate a cultural inheritance if there is no gain in doing it?! The biggest problem is that immigrants do not vote. This means that working for immigrants’ inclusion doesn’t pay you back. Unfortunately if we continue in this direction the cultural prejudices will never be overcome

Teresa C.: Do you think that the barriers are only towards people of different national origin, or does class play a role as well?

²⁶ Before she became the Minister of Integration in 2013, Cecile Kyenge was in charge of the Regional Forum and she played an important role in empowering the Provincial Forums of the Emilia-Romagna.

Reda B.: Italy struggles to imagine a person of foreign origin in a decisional position, as a director of a hospital, for instance. So yes, it is about both class and national origin

Teresa C.: What about the crisis? How does it affect the themes we are addressing?

Reda B.: The Democratic Party has disappointed me a great deal. It can't define its own political orientation and it has lost its incisiveness on political matters. It seems like a political current without political goals. The greatest problem is that the financial crisis opens up the path to other parties, such as fascist parties, which are apt to use the effects of the crisis instrumentally. In politics, if you are not efficient and do not occupy the political space, the empty space will be occupied by someone else.

Reda B. also explained that the right to vote at the local level would allow to improve the situation and force politicians of the right and the left to change their discourses on immigration. He also added that other left-wing organizations in Italy were unlikely to improve the situation of immigrants in Italy. While the traditional trade unions, including the CGIL, were unable to renew themselves and to give answers because they had become "too old," the radical left actors were not able to promote real inclusion in the Italian society and were not able to offer viable political solution to the problems faced by Italy to tackle integration and immigration issues. Reda B. explained,

The radical left organizations mobilize vulnerable immigrants and prioritize conflicts with authorities rather than integration. The process of integration must be accompanied. We need to build the basis of cohabitation beyond ideological conflicts. Integration concerns neighborhoods, work, schools and social life. It is of paramount importance to create a harmony with the local society, beyond the workplace. If you want a person to give the best of him/herself, you have to support pathways of openness among people who live in the territory. The radical left is blind to most of these issues.

Bujar A. (Brescia) was a 36-year-old professional from Albania.²⁷ He arrived in Italy in 2001 at the age of 24. At the time of the interview, he had applied for citizenship, and he was hoping to be able to enter politics in the near future. At his arrival in 2001, he did not have documents and lived clandestinely for 3 years, until he regularized with the amnesty of the Bossi-Fini Law in 2002. He received his documents in 2003, and since then his status has been regular. In Italy he worked many different jobs and, once he received his permit, enrolled at the University in the law department, from which it got a degree in 2006. At the time of the interview, he was working as a freelance professional and offered expert advice on immigration. He recalled that he started being politically active in 2003, when he was a student at the University of Brescia. In 2009 he became a member of the Democratic Party. One year later, when the Provincial Forum was created in 2010, he became the person in charge of institutional relations.

When I asked Bujar A. to tell me why he was active and why he opted for the Democratic Party, he explained that the main reason he participated in politics was "to deal with daily discrimination (permits, restrictions on movement, delays in the release of documents.)" He chose the Democratic Party because it represented most closely his political orientation and he thought that mainstream politics was the best way to bring about change. He explained that immigrants had to become stronger and "force politics to listen."

The real problem is that *we* [the immigrants] are weak. Instead of asking, we need to force politicians to listen to us. To talk of immigrants makes them lose votes. So we need to change politics and stop asking for charity. Immigrants should represent immigrants, and bring forth

²⁷ Interview in Brescia, 11 October 2013.

their claims through the support of the [existing] associations. Immigrants have different mentalities, different cultures. Yet, they should unite and go beyond their differences. Many people are impeding this transition, including the Democratic Party.

Bujar A. expressed concerns about the low level of participation among people of migrant background in the city. He observed, “We [immigrants] distance ourselves from politics day after day. Just like many Italians, we believe that politicians are all corrupted.” He also identified major barriers to participation. Among other things, he emphasized the fact that immigrants were exposed to blackmail because of the restrictiveness of the Bossi-Fini Law, the exploitation of the issue of immigration by politicians (in both left-wing and right-wing parties). Bujar A. added, “We are continuously exposed to the vigilant eye of the police. We have heard about cases of people who did not receive their permit because they had participated in political rallies and thus were considered ‘dangerous individuals.’”

Beyond the current legislation, Bujar A. also explained that the Democratic Party was responsible for the limited participation in the city. He explained:

In the last twenty years in Italy, there is a political side that defends immigrants [the Left] and a side that is against them [the Right]. In spite of their differences, both sides impede immigrants from talking for themselves... *there is no representation!* Immigrants are used by politics: the Right refuses them and the Left exploits them. In the Democratic Party, there is little space to access certain levels of representation. In Brescia, the moderate left is particularly blameworthy. No one in the city thought about participation. The problem is that immigrants do not have the power to negotiate politically, because they can't vote. Someone wants us divided. Not those who refuse us, but those who exploit us. The Left fear the right to vote.

In this view the Provincial Forum, for Bujar A., was an opportunity to create the conditions to “force politics” to deal with immigration and integration in a better way. However, he explained that the Democratic Party opposed its empowerment and growth.

The Forum has a role of façade. The Democratic Party gives the Forum very little power and for this reason it can take very few decisions. Some of the Italians involved in the Forum are interested in the issue of immigration. However, many of them are put there by the Party when the leaders do not know where to send them.

I asked Bujar A. about the role of the radical left organizations in the city, the main left organization able to mobilize immigrants in the city and to create alliances with immigrant activists. He admitted that,

[...] the radical left represents the immigrants in the city much more than the political party and the trade unions. I believe that it is so because the political party has left a vacuum and because for trade unions, immigrants are only numbers and there is no representation. In the city, the radical left has the allegiance of the immigrants who are active. However, we [the moderates] believe that there is more than just protests. We also want to build political trajectories that allow us to negotiate with politics. We are trying to make Italians understand other aspects of immigration, beyond the exclusive focus on *the permit of stay*. We also live the crisis, even in a deeper way and we need to make Italian understand this point.

Bujar A. also believed that it was necessary to create alternative opportunities for participation beyond the platforms offered by the radical left.

We wouldn't like to leave the radical left a monopoly on the discourse on immigration. It is a question of parallel trajectories. One trajectory does not exclude the other. Above everything, we want to avoid going beyond the limits of legality.

Bujar A. believed that the right to vote at the local level for Third-Country Nationals was a necessary step for greater inclusion. He believed in the principle “no taxation without representation.” He observed, “The administration sends me a request for the taxes every year. If you don’t give me the right to vote, why do you ask this duty of me?” He also added: “The Left fears the right to vote! This is the case for both the radical left and the moderate left. In this sense, the Left is guilty of duplicity. We, immigrants, don’t believe in them anymore because we are aware of this fact!” He added,

Why does the radical left never talk about the right to vote? This is called *duplicity*, pure propaganda. They are just like the Northern League. The latter attacks us, but the radical left is like a traitor friend. With the Northern League you can at least fight back. The radical left preaches, but they don’t help you succeed. Why don’t they talk of the right to vote? The Left knows that “not all immigrants are adherents of the left. Many immigrants are confused about their political orientation. In any case, it seems to me that very few of them are adherents to the Left.

He added that in order to change the general situation and prevent the instrumental use of immigrants by the left-wing organizations in the city, it was necessary to fight for the right to vote. “Immigrants’ vote would force politics to take immigrants’ point of view seriously and to act accordingly.”

(2) Immigrant activists in the CGIL and perceived barriers to participation

Ramzi M. (Bologna) is a first-generation immigrant.²⁸ He was born in Morocco in 1959 and arrived in Italy in 1986. He was enrolled in the CGIL for many years and he was part of the CGIL-FIOM. In Morocco he had been active in the communist movement when he was young, and he explained that for him it was obvious to get involved in left-wing organizations in the country of arrival, given his ideological affiliation.

My first real political experience in Italy was with the CGIL-FIOM, of course! I was not a delegate because my company was very small, but I would participate in all the activities and meetings in which we would discuss worker rights.

Ramzi M. was also extremely active in many activities in the city. I asked him the reason for his participation and why he chose to be active with the CGIL. He answered:

This country has given me a lot. I want to give back something in return. For this reason, if there is a chance to militate for the defense of rights, I get cracking. I chose the CGIL, because I had a communist background, but also because my comrades encouraged me. At that time there were strong relationships of friendship and a real involvement. However, I did not want to have a career inside the union. I wanted to be free. I have always had a good relationship with those who think like me, but the CGIL has the tendency to co-opt immigrants and I didn’t want to be co-opted and used by them.

I asked Ramzi M. what were the main barriers to participation. He explained that there were important cultural barriers:

We are far behind in Italy in terms of participation. Politics have lost credibility. The Left has not understood that yet. I am not sure how it will be possible to win the trust of the people again. The problem is that the Left still sees immigrants as *poor devils*. Even our comrades [of the CGIL-FIOM] have this attitude towards us, apart from those who have lived abroad, and thus

²⁸ Interview in Bologna, 14 November 2013.

understand a little bit more your situation, change their hostile attitudes. There is no opening towards diversity and this is a great barrier to inclusion.

At that point, I asked if the left-wing trade union made a difference with respect to other political organizations of the left. He answered that the system of compliance was widespread in the GCIL. He also added that the CGIL used immigrants instead of let them express their points of views. Also prejudice and fear were major components.

They haven't done anything! It suffices to look at the *level of representation*. Compare the number of their members and the percentage of the representatives. *They let you say very few things*. Many of the delegates and functionaries are there because they tell them what they want. What is more, the Italian unionists are not prepared on the questions of immigration. Many fear the foreigners. They fear "the other." They always fear that the foreigner will steal their jobs. In the past they asked me to be part of the CGIL. It was fifteen years ago. I refused. I was one of the first to be targeted by the CGIL. The CGIL was the first to play on the image of immigrants and they continue to do it today. There are people of migrant background in the CGIL that have been working there for twenty-five years and haven't advanced in the organization. They always remain at the same level. You have to give some possibilities! But they do not do it. What is missing is the will to create an immigrant leadership. This is the truth. For me this is not the path. Society does not work well. It is far behind. The fact is that in Italy there is not meritocracy. This is the real problem of the country. All these organizations use immigrants and they treat them as subordinated.

Muhammad M. (Reggio Emilia) is a first-generation immigrant.²⁹ He was born in Pakistan in 1975 and moved to Reggio Emilia in 1996, at the age of 21. He earned a university degree in Mathematics in Pakistan. In Italy, he married a woman from Pakistan. He moved to Italy because it was a gateway into Europe, but he would have preferred to go where his degree could have been recognized. He arrived in Italy without documents and was regularized thanks to an amnesty launched in 1996.

At the time of the interview in 2013, he was very active in the world of associations and he had been president of the Pakistani association at the provincial level for seven years. He was also active in the volunteer sector and participated in events that promoted cohabitation between Italians and immigrants. Muhammad believed in civic activism as a means to create the conditions for a dialogue between the Italian and the immigrant community.

Between 1996 and 1999, he worked as a metalworker, and between 1999 and 2006 he worked in a factory that did injection molding. He was very active in the workplace and he was a delegate of the CGIL for many years. Since 2002, he volunteered for the CGIL's Office for Foreigners. In 2006, the CGIL asked him to take roles of responsibility and he became a functionary of the Office. Muhammad M. explained that the CGIL of Reggio Emilia had created a Migration Coordination Organization, a platform to allow immigrant workers to make their claims in the union. As a person in charge of the Office for Foreigners, he was also a key member of the Migration Coordination Organization of the CGIL. He observed that the organization was extremely active and visible in the past and he had been proud of being an immigrant activist.

My role was to be a bridge between immigrant workers and the CGIL. We would organize meetings to explain immigrant workers what was the work of trade union. Our organization was able to make immigrant workers aware of the meaning of representation in the workplace and in making them understand participation. The organization was also able to mobilize immigrant workers and with their involvement exert pressure on local institutions to change things in the

²⁹ Interview in Reggio Emilia, 15 October 2013.

city. The strength of the Migration Coordination Organization was that it was managed by immigrant activists and was able to give them the space they needed to frame their rights claims.

According to Muhammad M., unlike from other similar organizations in Italy, the Migration Coordination Organization in Reggio Emilia was not managed by Italians, but by immigrant activists and this, according to Muhammad M., made it special: “Where Italians managed it, the Migration Coordination Organization is weak. Where immigrants manage it, then it is strong. This is a fact!”

However, he also explained that everything had changed in the second half of the 2000s, when the CGIL agreed to work with the government and stopped encouraging participation and political activities. He explained: “In my opinion there is a strong will to fly low when immigrants’ rights are involved. The Migrant Coordination Organizations have disappeared from the territorial branches of the CGIL in the entire country. This means that this is something intentional and that the CGIL doesn’t want us to become leaders and to grow in their organizations.”

According to Muhammad M., the end of the Migration Coordination Organization was also the end of true political participation in the city of Reggio Emilia, and he was not sure how things would evolve in the future. As far as his personal trajectory was concerned, at the time of the interview he was planning to leave Italy and join his family in Great Britain. A year later, when he moved to London, he wrote me an email and told me: “Unfortunately, the anti-immigrant politics of the Office for Foreigners of the CGIL forced me to leave a role that had become only bureaucratic and non-political.”

Mohamed D. (Brescia) is a first-generation immigrant.³⁰ He was born in Morocco in the 1960s and arrived in Italy in the 1990s. At the time of the interview, he was an Italian citizen and the person in charge of the Office of Foreigners of the CGIL of Brescia. In 2001 he was a functionary of the more radicalized sector of the CGIL, the CGIL-FIOM. Then the CGIL asked him to work for the Office of Foreigners.

He recognized a positive role of the CGIL in the city and also the fact that he was a immigrant working for CGIL with roles of responsibilities, a thing not common in Italy. He also added that he was happy to do so because the CGIL did not try to stop him from mobilizing in the immigrant social movement in the city and making radical claims for the improvement of immigrant conditions in Brescia.

During our interview, Mohamed D. recalled a moment of great mobilization in Brescia in 2000. He recognized the role of the CGIL in that occasion.

The CGIL of Brescia gave immigrants who were attached to the Office of Foreigners the possibility to work in autonomy and to support immigrants’ mobilizations. It didn’t talk on their behalf, but gave voice to immigrant activists. It was a very important time for immigrants’ participation in the city. There were platforms of the CGIL at the time in which even undocumented immigrants could participate.... they could feel that they were protagonists. The most beautiful thing of the CGIL at that time was exactly that: They gave us their support to the movement 24 h out of 24.

Thanks to the role of the CGIL at the beginning of the 2000s, it was possible to create “strong relationships with the immigrant communities, relationships that have lasted until today.” At that time, a forum of immigrants’ associations was created and there was a representative of each

³⁰ Interview in Brescia, 15 July 2013.

community in the city. Also a Migrant Coordination Organization, a platform to promote participation of immigrant workers was created.

However, Mohamed D. also explained that things changed in 2006, when the CGIL signed the agreement with the Government and accepted to renew the permits of stay of immigrants in its offices. He added, “As Migrant Coordination Organization, we decided to go to the square and protest against our own organization. Today we still pay the price of that decision.”

Among the main problems linked to this decision of the CGIL, Mohamed D. indicated that the CGIL stopped doing politics and encouraging immigrant participation and focused mainly on delivery of service. He angrily admitted:

If you do something, you do it to improve the situation and not to worsen it! We have been asking for a simplification of the procedures! It is not nice to go to the unions for my documents. I have to go to the municipality and not to the union. When there is too much work to do, when we do too much service, than we are not able to do politics.

Mohamed D. also added that the CGIL in Brescia was not working on the creation of a immigrant leadership in the union. He observed that, the day he would leave the Office, no one was going to be able to replace him. He noted, “You have to come to the point in which all are useful, but no one is indispensable. The CGIL should understand that it is about time to create the conditions to allow that one person can always be replaced by someone else.”

(3) Immigrant activists in the radical left organizations and perceived barriers to participation

Farooq I. (Bologna) is a first-generation immigrant. He was born in Pakistan in the 1970s and arrived in Bologna in 1998.³¹ He graduated in Political Science in his country of origin and left to find more security abroad. When he arrived in Italy he did all kinds of non-skilled jobs before he bought a boutique and started working for himself. Farooq I. was a very active member of the immigrant community, a main representative of the Pakistani community, and a key member of the MCO.

He explained the reasons of his activism:

It is something natural for me to help others. I help fellow Pakistanis and other immigrants. I want to express the voice of immigrants through my activities! Since the beginning, I always told myself that an immigrant is not someone who arrives in a place and that is it. In reality, immigrants bring all their person and they need to express themselves. My question is then: How can an immigrant express his project of life? How can he give voice to his needs? We need to go toward Italians and tell them who we are and what we do.

He continued:

Participation” means to “talk for oneself.” No one can talk about something if he doesn’t live it. Participation is synonymous with self-determination. It is you that knows your situation and can bring a change to that situation.

I asked him why he decided to be a key member of the MCO and what distinguished this organization from other organizations and channels of participation in Bologna. He answered:

I believe that the MCO is the voice of immigrants, for immigrants. It is unique in the landscape of Bologna. In other places, such as the Provincial Council, immigrants must listen, but cannot make decisions. Since my arrival I tried to find a way to get involved and give voice to the needs of immigrants. In most of the places where I went in Bologna, immigrants were supposed

³¹Interview in Bologna, 3 June 2013.

stay quiet. What is more, trade unions have political affiliations and do not act in our interests. In 2004, I contributed to the creation of the MCO. We wanted to create the conditions for immigrants to express their voice starting from their problems and conditions in complete autonomy.

Farooq I. observed:

The MCO is my life. For many years I had one main thought: that of being the voice of immigrants. In Italy I have found many platforms, many trade unions. I have understood that left-wing actors only want to *use immigrants*. I have seen many groups. They organize assemblies and meetings and they are all linked to the political parties. They never act in our interest, the interest of immigrants, but *in their own interest*. Five or six years ago they called me and asked me: “Are you coming to our event? How many are you?” I asked them: “What projects do you have for immigrants? What projects for workers?” and they made me understand that they had not thought about it... then I told them: “Then, why should I come to you? I am not coming! This is a very important day for immigrants, for workers and you don’t do anything for them?!” They said: “We can discuss it later,” but I answered: “No! Before not after! We have to think about immigrants long before. Now immigrants have woken up!”

Tariq A. (Brescia) was born in Pakistan in 1984 and arrived in Italy in 2006, without documents.³² He was linked to the Muslim community in Brescia aligned with the main mosque in the city. From 2010 to 2013, he was one of the most visible undocumented immigrant activists in the city. In 2013, he was mostly active with the main radical left-wing organization, Rights for All (*Diritti per Tutti*) and was still undocumented because he could not regularize after the 2009 amnesty.

He started our interview, by saying that he did not trust left-wing parties and trade unions. He knew that they were the only ones who were trying to do something for immigrants in Italy. However, he criticized the lack of substantial inclusion.

They always talk *about us*, but never truly *with us*! When it comes to being truly inclusive, left-wing parties and also trade unions—who according to their discourses should be more inclusive than the others—are all the same. They claim they are more inclusive than the Right, that they are doing their best to help immigrants, but in the end they do not tackle the fundamental barriers that keep us from taking full part in society and achieving full citizenship. You can see it by the way they treat us: they never allow us to participate as protagonists in their organizations and very few of us cover strategic offices in their organizations. Not to speak about listening to what we really have to say. The main left-wing party in particular is impermeable to our quest for authentic recognition. I can truly say that there is not a real platform in which we can compete in the political arena as equals and make our own legitimate claims as individuals and as collective political forces

In 2009, Tariq A. applied for the amnesty of 2009 and he got involved in the Brescian social movement, during important immigrant mass mobilization that took place in Brescia in 2010.

According to Tariq A., the state plays with people and the 2009 amnesty was never meant to regularize undocumented immigrants. It was rather an occasion to steal money from undocumented immigrants, already under very vulnerable conditions. In this view, he had wished that left-wing organizations had done something for him, but they didn’t. He made the point that only the radical left-wing organizations did something to support immigrants request to be regularized.

He explained that he had no doubt about the organizations that mobilized in favor of immigrants in the city: “I believe that the only organizations on our side is Rights for All. It is a

³² Interview in Brescia, 18 July 2013.

matter of material, logistic, political and moral support! They have always been with us! They have always supported us! They are willing to confronted the police for us.”

Tariq A. explained:

No one can talk for you! Only you who know your situation also know what you need. We feel *no one really represents us*. We only represent ourselves, because we are the only ones to know what we need and want and because we are the ones who know what it means to be an “outsider” in the Italian society! In the time of crisis, I don’t understand why Italians do not stand up for their rights and protest against injustices. “We” [the immigrants] will fight for the improvement of this society because we have nothing to lose! In this sense, Italians should join our fight for recognition because it is also about them and about the health of their democracy.

Tariq A. observed that the struggle of the crane was

[...] it was a great opportunity for us [immigrants] to raise our voice! People started to talk with each other sporadically. In those days people kept abreast. Moreover, every evening there were assemblies to get more information about what was going on... There were lawyers with us... It was a time of ferment, of great mobilization.

Preliminary results

In the section above, I have presented the eight selected interviews with immigrant activists who had roles of responsibilities in left-wing organizations. The empirical data suggest that immigrant activists face major barriers to participation in the channels opened to them by left-wing allies. The interviews show that the difficult national context alone does not explain the barriers that immigrant activists face with respect to participation. The presence of strong international barriers within left-wing organizations is a major obstacle to participation.

First of all, the interviews suggest a widespread perception among migrant activists that mainstream left-wing organizations have offered inadequate responses to the challenges of a growing diverse population. According to them institutional actors like the Democratic Party and the CGIL are characterized by lack of meritocracy, of equal treatment and a strong presence of paternalism. Also processes of ethnicization and an instrumental use of immigrants for political purposes are major problems in these organizations. Immigrant activists also complain about the reticence by these two actors to promote autonomy and immigrants’ self-determination. When immigrant activists present a tendency to leadership, they are tamed by the left-wing organizations. Also mistrust and prejudice towards immigrants are widespread.

Also factors such as the weakness of the left-wing political parties and trade unions and their inability to stand for their ideological beliefs are suggested among the reasons for deceptions. Migrant activists also believe that this weakness is the result of inadequate responses to political problems by left-wing actors. They also explain that like the rest of the Italian population they know that the Left is a weak actor and is not trustworthy and that immigrants are not any different from Italians in this respect. Among other things, the interviewees believe that these organizations are more concerned with their auto-conversation and they are worried that immigrant self-determination and autonomy will undermine their traditional role as mediators. That is why these organizations insist in talking on immigrants’ behalf, instead of letting them emerge as relevant political actors. It is also for this reason that according to most of my interviewees the left fear the right to vote of immigrants at the local level, because this would have given immigrants’ voice and allowed them to negotiate with politics as equal subjects.

Finally, most of my interviewees suggest that the radical left organizations have been filling the gaps left empty by more institutionalized actors. Migrant activists in the radical left make the point that, precisely because all the mainstream left-wing organizations have failed to promote

inclusion and to let immigrant “take the floor,” they have found in non-institutional actors major allies to bring forth their claims for greater inclusion.

The radical left organizations were considered, however, very controversial actors. Immigrants active in more moderate left-wing organizations highlighted their pros and cons. They recognized that the mainstream actors have deceived immigrants and radical left actors had filled the void. They also acknowledged the ability of these actors to mobilize immigrants in vulnerable conditions. However, the interviewees also believed that the radical left had its own agenda and was not willing to go beyond ideological divide. Overall, they used immigrants for ideological purposes. They also complained about the fact that these organizations tend to address minor issues (even though important) such as undocumented immigrants’ rights and exploitation and to leave aside major issues linked to immigrants’ integration. For all these reasons, most interviewees explained that they did not feel represented by the radical left and they didn’t see in it an actor able to improve immigrants’ cause in Italy. What is more, among other things, like the other left-wing actors, the radical left is silent on immigrants’ right to vote and this is according to some interviewees a visible example of the fear of these organizations to let immigrant express themselves and take the risk of seeing their views challenged by immigrants active in Italy who might not support their political views.

Conclusion

In the last ten years, migration scholars have highlighted an important shift by Western democracies towards neo-assimilationist migration policies (Brubaker 2001). This shift has resulted in a greater convergence by countries with different citizenship and immigration regimes towards more restrictive measures for inclusion as well as borders’ control. Scholars have also argued that with this shift, states perpetuate the construction of immigrants’ as a “social threat,” weaken the legal means for their protection and exposes them to exploitation by employees and racism by the local population. Finally, the financial crisis have added a burden on immigrants difficult processes of integration in an hostile environment and has undermined the ability by stakeholders allies to promote their inclusion and to raise their voice in their defense

Also for this reason, in recent years, most research has focused on the rise of the Right and in its impact on integration of immigrants in the receiving society. Nonetheless, left-wing actors also bear a great responsibility. This study suggests a great slowness by left-wing actors to read the phenomenon of immigration and understand its implications beyond ideology and self-preservation. Further research is needed to examine the responsibility of left-wing actors for greater inclusion of immigrants in the receiving society and their role as agents of integration.

This research examined the barriers to participation (subjective perceived by immigrant activists) of left-wing actors and the resistance of these allies to be inclusive in Italy. It showed that contrary to left-wing organizations claims of inclusiveness, these allies *de facto* fail to create the conditions for immigrants’ participation in the receiving society and within their own organizations. Further research is needed to assess the responsibility of the Left in contributing to the failed processes of integration in European countries and cities, and also how they have contributed to the more recent neo-assimilationist turn and processes of securization in European countries, in some cases, simply by misinterpreting the important transformations that the phenomenon of immigration represents for the receiving society.

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Appendix: List of the eight selected interviews with migrant activists

Organizations	Name	Role	Status	Origin	Main city of activities
Democratic Party	Donald R.	In charge of the Provincial Forum of Immigration	Italian citizen since	Cameroon	Province of Bologna (San Lazzaro)
	Rena B.	In charge of the Provincial Forum of Immigration of Reggio Emilia	Italian citizen since	Tunisia	Province of Reggio Emilia (Quattro Stella)
	Bujar A.	Active in the Provincial Forum Immigration	Applied for citizenship	Albania	Brescia
CGIL	Ramzi M.	Activist		Morocco	Bologna
	Muhammad M.	Functionary	Permanent resident since	Pakistan	Reggio Emilia
	Mohamed D.	Functionary	Italian citizen	Morocco	Brescia

			since		
Radical left organizations	Farooq I.	Activists	Permanent resident	Pakistan	Bologna
	Tariq A.	Activists	Undocumented migrant	Senegal	Brescia