Only a variety of interests keeps you intellectually balanced

Interview with Giuseppe Sciortino

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Giuseppe Sciortino received his PhD from the University of Bologna. He is Professor of Sociology at the University of Trento, Italy. His teaching and research activity unfolds by sociological theory, cultural sociology, international migration, development sociology and sociology of sexuality. He recently edited *The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization* (with Ron Eyerman) and *Populism in the Civil Sphere* (with Jeffrey C. Alexander and Peter Kivisto), published *Rebus Immigrazione* and *Great Minds: Encounters with Social Theory* (with Gianfranco Poggi), among many other participations in articles and books.

Observatório da Emigração (ahead OEm) – We would like to know a little bit more how you got interested in the subject of migrations, did it started while you were studying? Did it come later during your research work? Could you tell us a little more about it?

Giuseppe Sciortino (ahead GS) – As with many things in my academic life, it has been a matter of chance. I was writing my PhD dissertation in Bologna in the late 1980s. It was a work in sociological theory, a conceptual reconstruction of the theories of Talcott Parsons. The fact was I needed to complete also some kind of "empirical" assignment on a "significant social problem". I did not have a clue. I asked my supervisor. He suggested I could write something on "that new thing, these foreign immigrants". He explained to me that it was a small and peripheral issue, a topic I could master in a short time and leave quickly. Thirty-five years have passed, and I still have not left it (nor have I mastered it). I guess this explains why my work on migration has always coexisted with research in other fields and different topics: social theory, cultural sociology and, more recently, sexuality studies. I know my younger colleagues think that having many broad interests is a mistake, both in professional and scientific terms. They think it is detrimental to specialisation and visibility. I think the opposite: only a variety of interests keeps you intellectually balanced, and overspecialisation is today one of the strongest dangers for the social sciences.

OEm – Your lecture with the Emigration Observatory focuses on a critical study you are doing about the changes in sexual behaviour and mores brought about by migration. What can you tell us about this study?

GS – It will basically be a critical review of what we know about the ways in which mobility is intertwined with changes in sexual practices, beliefs and discourses. I will accompany the review with some ideas for the development of a systematic research program. When I started focusing on the erotic dimension of migration, many of my colleagues were puzzled. I'd worked for decades on very structural issues: immigration policy, irregular migration systems, the ethnic bases of welfare states, decolonisation. Why had I switched to a marginal, and (perhaps for them) "naughty" topic? The fact is I do not think it is marginal, and surely it is not naughty. I think studying sexual change is a way to explore some of the major questions within the field of migration studies: how "far" and how "deep" is the personal transformation brought about by geographical mobility? Does geographical mobility have an impact on what many, indeed most (including migrants themselves), perceive as an unchangeable inner nature? Even more, I think the study of sexual change is logically connected to very core of the social scientific project. When we wonder how changes in intimate behaviours and beliefs are brought about by changes in the social environment, we are forced to confront the ways in which cultural and structural forces are able (or not) to modify the practices and self-understandings of individuals and groups, the role played by social groups and networks in trig-

gering, regulating or repressing potential changes. In short, the erotic lives of migrants (and natives) represent wonderful "strategic research material", to use Robert K. Merton's definition.

OEm – How did the idea/need to carry out this study come into existence? What are the most interesting facts?

GS – All my ideas on the subject are born out of the work I have been doing with Martina Cvajner, a colleague of mine. We have started working together for many reasons, including some that had later brought us to marry and have a child, Elia Arjuna, together. I was inspired by my interest in cultural sociology: I was puzzled by the frequency with which both migrants and natives were categorised in sexual terms. I could not understand why the debates on social boundaries and social memberships tend often to acquire some kind of erotic colouring. Martina, who is a die-hard ethnographer, kept talking about how much the sexual self of the migrant women she was observing was important for them, how much it shaped their settlement process (her findings have been recently published in "Soviet Signoras: Personal and Collective Transformations in Eastern European Migration", Chicago UP). We spent some time in the library together and we discovered that the topic was largely unexplored. There is a growing body of academic literature that explores the sexual lives of migrants and the role of sexual boundaries in the migration process. It has never, however, coalesced into a systematic research program. We also realised most of the available work was justified externally: in humanitarian, emancipatory or public health terms. There was very little attention to the analytical significance of the topic. So everything started.

OEm – I know you are working on other research projects, but they are still at an earlier stage. One of them is an empirical study of the transmission of sociability patterns in immigrant families (an analysis of a large-scale survey of the Italian foreign population), although it is still at an early stage what can you tell us about this project?

GS – A few years ago, the Italian national institute of statistics carried out a large survey of the foreign population. Among the many topics explored, they collected information on what the literature calls "core discussion networks" (in short, close friends) for all members of the surveyed household. Together with a colleague, Rocco Molinari, we have analysed the data, trying to understand how the sociability patters of immigrant parents (their degree of isolation, the degree of ethnic homophily of their network) influences the sociability of their second-generation children. We have discovered some important effects: indeed, the rupture in sociability experienced by migrants extend often its impacts to their children. We have also documented how some factors often mentioned to explain the friendship choices of second-generation children – such as the "traditional values" of the parents – are much less important than the actual examples provided within the household.

OEm – You have devoted some of your work to the concept of "migration regime" because of the broad and distinctive way in which this concept has been used – from economics to comparative politics, from international political economy to political sociology – do you think we are closer today to having a broad consensus on this concept? What is a "migration regime" for you? Is there really a difference between "migration policy" and "migration regime", is it a question of interpretation or is one the consequence of the other?

GS – My interest in migration regimes is largely due to the intellectual influence of Michael Bommes, a German colleague who unfortunately died prematurely some years ago. We used to have very long discussions, smoking an awful number of cigarettes (it was a long time ago; we would not smoke today). We were interested in the ways in which migration systems inter-acted with legal orders, but we were unsatisfied with the restrictive emphasis on the contents of migration laws that was so popular at the time. We wanted to focus on the set of rules and practices historically developed by a country or region in order to deal with the consequences of international mobility through the production of a hierarchy – usually messy – of roles and statuses. We wanted to place emphasis on law in context and on migration regulation as an historical achievement. In particular, we wanted to stress that migration regulations are hardly ever the outcome of consistent planning or shaped by unitary, strategic powerful interests. We wanted, rather, to interpret them as a mix of implicit conceptual frames, generations of turf wars among bureaucracies and waves after waves of "quick fixes" in response to emergencies, triggered by changing political constellations of actors. As I have written, the life of a regime is usually the result of continuous repair work through practices. So, yes, in my view there is a difference between migration policy and migration regime.

OEm – What is your opinion on the impact of a movement such as Brexit can have on the integration work that has to be done within the European Union? Given that much of the exit campaign focused on the issue of migration and mobility.

GS – I believe Brexit has been, above all, a revolt against intra-European free movement. The issue had been, for several well-known reasons, particularly salient in the United Kingdom for years. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the same issue is far from absent in the other member states. Brexit forces us to relearn two hard truths. The first – I think here of the work of Aristide Zolberg and Gary Freeman – is that the ideal of free movement runs against several restrictionist forces that are particularly effective in democratic politics. In fact, demo-cratic public opinions are nearly always more restrictionist than their (already restrictionist) governments. The second is that the co-existence of freedom of mobility and welfare states is very difficult.

OEm – With the speeches from the extreme right all over Europe and the large migratory flow (including refugees and asylum seekers) that has hit the European continent due to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, several North African countries, etc. and all the negative reaction that these arrivals have had, do you think that diversity as a core concept of the European Union may be at risk?

GS – The notion of diversity – and the now-popular term super-diversity – is important but it should be handled with care. Especially when we talk about migration, we should always be careful not to overplay the extent of social and cultural diversity. Most migrant households in Europe are not really radically different from native ones; they are just poorer. We should also remember some of the most important sources of the increasing cultural heterogeneity of European populations are home-grown: they derive from differences in values and lifestyles among natives. Issues such as gay marriage, trans rights or opposition to vaccines have not been brought up by immigrants. I think such home-grown cultural diversity may only increase in the future: the backlash sponsored by several right-wing actors may have temporarily succeeded (as seems to be the case in some Central and Eastern European countries). Still, I am ready to bet it will not stabilise as a permanent feature of the European cultural order. Something different can be said for immigrants. The current anti-immigrant sentiment is likely to penetrate the political vision on many integration issues. A variety of actors will stress the need for some form of cultural assimilation, even if they can hardly agree on which "culture" migrants should assimilate into. In particular, there will be a growing temptation to define immigrants, or some of them, as irreducible, external, to the civil sphere. The ways in which Muslims are discussed, and sometimes treated, in many places is not at all promising.

OEm – The refugee crisis that has affected Europe in recent years in general, but more specifically countries such as Greece and Italy, has been one of the topics of great debate at political, media and academic level. How do you see the measures taken by the EU in general?

GS – I am not particularly optimistic about the future of European asylum and migration policies. The refugee crisis of 2015-16 has weakened what was already a very difficult compromise, what I once called a "Gentle Monster". From one side, the EU is committed to a full and integral implementation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, including art. 33, the non-refoulement clause. This inevitably makes it a desirable place. Unsurprisingly, it receives a large proportion of the asylum applications filed in industrialised countries (the "gentle" part). From the other, the only way to keep the prospective numbers within manageable limits is sharply reducing – through a variety of means – the possibility for possible asylum-seekers to enter EU territory (the "monster" part). In fact, it is obvious that EU migration policy must rely on collaboration with potential transit countries, many of them having rather unsat-

isfactory humanitarian records and credentials. Only the gentle monster makes possible to have at the same time a universalistic promise of protection and a dramatic containment in the number of people able to claim it. Unsurprisingly, EU immigration policy is constantly attacked from the left – that thinks it is inhumane and hypocritical – and from the right, which would like to solve the ambiguity by maintaining only the "monster" part. I am afraid the real challenges will arrive from the right, whose positions are bound to be increasingly popular in the next years.

OEm – How do you see the measures taken by Italy?

GS – Since 2011, my country has faced a very difficult migration transition. It used to be a country receiving mostly labour migrants while exercising very little appeal for asylum seekers. Its borders were relatively secured through collaboration with many states of the Southern Mediterranean rim. In a short, condensed, period, in the last decades, the economic crisis has terminated the labour migration flows, while the flows of refugees and asylum seekers have taken centre stage. The collaboration with the authorities of transit countries in preventing departures has become weak or non-existent. To this, add the new control challenges: if you rescue the boats in the Mediterranean, you became responsible for their asylum cases and the EU criticises you because (allegedly) you have created an "incentive" to arrive; if you rescue the boats and bring back the travellers to Libya, you violate international law; if you bring the asylum-seekers into Italy, they will surely try to move to other European countries, and you will be accused of violating the Dublin convention and Schengen will be re-introduced at your Northern borders; if you do nothing, you are responsible for hundreds of deaths and the EU criticises you (rightly) for that. Whatever you do is wrong. In short, Italians have experienced a crash-course in "unwanted" humanitarian migration. Although the number of arrivals through the Libyan route has never been substantial in comparison to previous flows, the fact that it is composed mostly of young black males (not to mention that they are presumably Muslim) has had a strong impact on public opinion. The refugee crisis of 2015-16 has thus profoundly changed Italian attitudes towards European migration policies. It must be remembered that "Europe" has always been perceived in Italy as an important constraint that could force Italian politicians to behave better. In 2010, the Transatlantic Trends survey had revealed that Italy was the only country in which a majority of interviewees would have been more than happy to transfer all the key immigration decisions to Brussels (as long as it implied distance from their own government). The mix of indecisiveness, hypocrisy and short-sightedness revealed by the refugee "crisis" of 2015 has radically modified the idea that "Europe" necessarily means good. Italy has started – although it is rather doubtful – to see itself rather as a "victim" of European regulations. The substantial costs imposed on the countries with external borders by the Dublin rules – well known to the experts but studiously ignored in the public debate until then –

have become suddenly visible. The outcome has been the strengthening of an (already diffuse) negative view of immigration and immigrants, and the increasing popularity of openly xeno-phobic policies.

OEm – In your article "Italian immigration: the origins, nature and evolution of Italy's migratory systems" you discuss the evolution and characterisation of immigration to Italy from the 1970s to the late 1990s. Looking at more recent data on immigration to Italian territory, provided by Eurostat, we can see that Italy has established itself as a country of immigration, with a very positive net migration since 1990. The flow of entries into the country has grown exponentially since the late 1990s, with the exception of a small decrease between the years 2009 and 2014, but despite the great facilities for migration that exist between European Union countries, immigration to Italy is mostly from outside the EU (between 2013 and 2018, 67% of entries into Italy are from non-EU countries). In your article you had already pointed out this strong component of extra-EU migration, especially from countries in Africa, Asia and the Balkans, do you think that the networks that were established until the late 1990s are the explanation for maintaining these figures?

GS – The paper you mention, that I wrote together with Asher Colombo, was intended to achieve two goals: to document how the history of immigration in Italy was actually much old-er than usually assumed and to argue that there is no "immigration" but only "immigrations", a set of migratory systems largely independent one from the other. When we wrote it, intra-European migration (except from the Balkans) was relatively rare in Italy. Now, in fact, Italy has a large segment of its foreign population made of EU nationals, particularly Romanians. You are right to stress the number of EU citizens in Italy's foreign population is however relatively low. I believe it has to do – above all – with the Italian labour market. Italy has little demand for semi-skilled and highly-skilled labour. In fact, there is an overproduction of educated youngsters, many of which actually migrate to other European countries. In the global compe-tition for talent, Italy simply abstains from participating. This sharply reduces the appeal of the country for a sizeable segment of mobile Europeans. Why should they come here?

OEm – Between 1970 and the end of the 1990s, migration was mainly the return of former colonies, work-related migration and recruitment processes, from students, refugees, people setting up their own businesses and young people. In the chapter "Immigration" of *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Politics* (2016), you argue that current immigration to Italy is similar to the European immigration of the 1960s, i.e. the entry of workers to suppress labour needs in less skilled sectors, followed by family reunification. These characteristics of immigration to Italy seem to have more to do with economic and social issues of the country than characteristics and problems in the immigrants' countries of origin, do you agree?

GS – Migration is an interactive process, so there is always an interaction between country-of-origin and country-of-settlement dynamics. As I stated earlier, the migratory situation of the country has changed quite a bit since I wrote that chapter. Now, labour migration is fairly marginal, family-reunification has stabilised and nearly all political parties are obsessed with asylum-seekers. We are still following the sequence of the former guest worker countries, only much more rapidly.

OEm – Different governments on the left and right wing in Italy have proposed measures to control immigration. Is it a sentiment among the Italian population the need to control immigration in the country or is it a response to the EU's needs? How has this issue been seen by Italians?

GS – Italian public attitudes toward immigration have been very stable, and they are highly negative. They have become more outspoken and more politically influential in recent years. It used to consist of opposition to incoming migrants, matched however by a certain degree of acceptance for those already present. Today, I think it is correct to say that a strong minority of Italians is suspicious also of those immigrants who have been settled for a long time. It is a minority, but big enough to paralyze progressive political forces. I do not think Italians have necessarily changed attitudes and behaviours, but for sure degrading comments and discriminatory acts have become more accepted, tolerated, or even praised. In fact, if attitudes were geography, Italy would be currently a leading member of the Visegrad group. I am also afraid Italy is not alone in this.

OEm – The countries of southern Europe are, on several issues, placed in the same "bag" and on migration issues it has not been different, with a clear polarization of southern versus northern countries. As the southern countries have such different migratory contexts (for example, Portugal being a recognized country of emigration and Italy having become a country of immigration), do you think that this simplistic distinction between southern and northern countries makes sense?

GS – The South-North myth, as Claudia Finotelli called it in her seminal work, is simply a myth. There are many differences between Northern and Southern European countries (as well as between Eastern and Western), but these differences do not coalesce in a unified cleavage. I think we can argue that commonalities of specific immigration policy domains (external controls, internal controls, labour migration, asylum, etc.) across European states tend to prevail over internal consistency of individual countries" overall immigration policies. I have been writing a chapter on external controls for a book that will be edited by Claudia Finotelli and Irene Ponzo precisely on the alleged North-South divide. My argument there is that the emphasis on the North/South divide – and the related fascination for the convergence debate – is misleading. It presents European states as if they were independent units, each dealing with their own admission and control challenges. The fact is, they are not. They never have been: during the Huguenot crisis, kings tailored their admission choices through careful anticipation and monitoring of what other kingdoms were doing. At least since the Tamil "crisis" in the early 1980s, the control policies of the main Western European countries have been designed assuming some kind of coordination with neighbouring states. If very few foreign migrants are detected trying to cross the border between Belgium and the Netherlands irregularly, this is not because Dutch border controls are "more effective". It is because many other EU member states apply – more or less enthusiastically – visa requirements and border controls to prevent potential asylum-seekers to arrive at those borders. On the contrary, if some Mediterranean countries experience strong pressure over their maritime borders, it is not because their border controls are "inefficient". They actually aren't: very few of those boats can arrive undetected. Their entry is made possible not by ineffective controls – actually, all boats are identified long before their landing – but rather by the legal protection guaranteed by EU immigration policy and international law. They arrive in Lampedusa or in the Greek islands only because the entire EU control system is designed to make those Mediterranean routes the only available option for a large segment of those trying entering Europe.

OEm – In the chapter "A European sociology of migration? Not yet, not quite" of the book *Handbook of European Sociology* **(2015), you advocate that the study of migration at European level is not yet conceptually cohesive enough and that it lacks a shared agenda, so/ it cannot yet be said that we have a European sociology of migration. Are we any closer to achieving this?**

GS – There are many promising elements. There is a whole new generation of migration scholars that take for granted international collaboration and transnational research. There are interesting cases of sophisticated research being carried out in several countries. There are several journals that publish research on many European countries. There is IMISCOE, an ever-growing network that facilitates cross-border intellectual exchange. Still, I do think that it is difficult to talk of a "European" sociology of migration. What we miss is a common vocabulary and a shared research agenda. There is not (yet?) a tradition of analytical thinking on migration-related issues. What is assumed to be "theory" in European migration studies is too often lousy ideology, easy appeals to humanitarian feelings or the latest fad in political theory. Our data sources are still largely national. European research is also unfortunately strongly dependent on either European or state programs: in fact, the agenda for research is too often shaped by founding considerations. I am also worried we are over-producing graduates in migration studies.

OEm – The restrictions on mobility imposed by COVID-19 made 2020 an atypical year in terms of international migration in particular and mobility in general. Do you think that after Covid we will see a change in international migration or will we go back to where we were?

GS – As Niels Bohr is claimed to have said, "prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future". I think that COVID-19 has stopped, but not radically altered, the dynamics of migratory systems. There is no doubt that these have been strange years. In 2020, the global number of travellers was one fifth of the previous year. The number of asylum seekers has been the lowest in many years; even irregular crossings at the EU external borders have been the lowest since Frontex started collecting data on them. In recent decades, the world has never been so still. Has it changed the world to the point there will be a "before" and an "after"? I do not think so. I think such situation is an anomaly, and mobility is likely to increase again noticeably as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic recedes. I offer two caveats. We should always remember that migrants are a very small percentage of the global population. And we should also remember that the future level of the demand for labour is hard to estimate.

OEm – Thank you very much for the interview and availability.

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