

MEMORIES OF BELONGING: DESCENDANTS OF ITALIAN MIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES. 1884–PRESENT (STUDIES IN GLOBAL SOCIAL HISTORY, VOLUME 17; STUDIES IN GLOBAL MIGRATION HISTORY, VOLUME 5), CHRISTA WIRTH (2015)

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The book *Memories of Belonging* represents a collection of stories pertaining to one family – that of Giovanni Soloperto and his wife Elvira Stranieri, their children, and some of their descendants up to the fifth generation. In 1913, the Soloperto couple emigrated to the United States from Sava, their home town in Southern Italy. The author, Christa Wirth, is one of their descendants of the fourth generation. Basically, she acts both as an outsider and as an insider in collecting idiosyncratic stories from her relatives, which she then transforms into empirical data for this interesting study.

This analysis hinges on the triangulation of oral history in the form of interviews conducted between 2002 and 2010 together with migration and memory studies. These three points intertwine between individual and collective experiences. Those interviewed shifted constantly over time and space, linking their present experiences to their recollections of the past.

Wirth shows how, over generations, collective memories and individual stories of belonging are created, contested and recreated. The author explains that her analysis unfolds along the lines of locality, class, gender and generations (12). Thus, Wirth is not interested in ancestry as such. Genealogy normally traces the paternal lines. In this study, the author found more help through the maternal lineage.

As a historical demographer, I find it difficult to reject, as the author did, the notion of heritage through the ‘bloodline’. The author believes that people are kin when they believe that they share a common ancestry. In itself, such an idea reflects the currently influential social theories formulated as a reaction to neo-liberal positions. The author definitely does not seem to share the neo-liberal ideas in which the responsibility of the state is shifted onto the individual.

Such a definition is changing the notion of kinship; yet, in her analysis, Wirth had to rely on the traditional meaning of kinship. Her interviewees were mostly descendants of Giovanni and Elvira, and are the backbone of her study. Still, it is not clear whether the author covered all the descendants of Giovanni and Elvira.

Thus, this book is more or less the story of three women – Elvira and her two daughters, Beatrice and Marie. No Soloperto surname appears among those interviewed. We do not get to know whether anyone of the three sons of Giovanni and Elvira – Angelo, Dan and Americo (Ski) – had offspring or not, and whether they were interested in cooperating with this research. The author speaks of some sort of split in the family. Perhaps, in part, this explains why she preferred to apply a restricted concept of the family based on common experience and shared family memory, rather than the more traditional one, based on values and paternal lineage.

For this reason, Beatrice La Motta, daughter of Giovanni and Elvira, becomes a pivot of the whole analysis. She and her descendants are described

as the separated line, as they did not stay in Worcester, the town of arrival of the Soloperto family, where Marie and her descendants continue to live.

The author was helped by the fact that Beatrice was the last survivor of the Soloperto family who, besides being Wirth's grandmother, actually engaged in conversation with her. More importantly, Beatrice made the transition from migrant to ethnic American. Beatrice was born in Italy and brought over to America when she was only 2 years old. In theory, she has no vivid memory of Italy, but reading between the lines of Wirth's narrative it clearly transpires that these two years seem to have somehow conditioned Beatrice. It is not clear whether such conditioning is to some extent a subconscious remembrance of Italy or linked to memory stories through the family of her country of origin.

ISSUES RELATED TO THE HISTORY OF MIGRATION

Wirth's work backs Dolores Hayden's studies on identity being intimately tied to memory (1995). However, both identity and memory can only be fully understood if analysed within an historical context. The issues related to memories within the family of what may be defined as policies of assimilation form the backbone of this study.

The collective memory of the Solopertos strongly challenges the immigration paradigm of assimilation. It is often argued that America, as the most complete democracy, created a space where one's dream can come to fruition. Studying the lives and endeavours of these Italian migrants questions such an understanding of the American nirvana.

For many Italian migrants, this turned out to be just a slogan with no relevance to their lives or identities. At least Wirth's study shows that Elvira had serious problems in understanding the New World. More importantly, the Italians were one of those 'races' to have been heavily discriminated against and demonized by the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP). The non-WASP individuals were considered racially inferior people. It was a time when theories of race and ethnicity were held in high esteem.

History shows that America had different and contradictory policies with regard to the issue of assimilation of migrants within the prevailing culture. The Soloperto family witnessed policies of ethnic resilience dominated by the eugenic racial theories that placed Italians in an ethnic group culturally and religiously diverse from the white Protestant majority.

Wirth reminds us that scientific arguments were used to deny African Americans and Indians citizenship, while the Mediterranean people, together with the Jews, ranked at a lower pole than the Aryan race. The resulting social uncertainties faced by the Italians, in particular racial discrimination, which led to depression and feelings of loss, were experienced by others – not only by the Eastern Europeans to whom Wirth refers but also by Maltese (who at the time were British subjects) and Arabs. The Italians, like the Maltese and Arabs, entered the United States as aliens.

It was only by the fourth generation that concepts of fear related to migration were completely rejected. Such an empirical revelation shows that integration takes generations – at least three – before it can become complete (159). Second, it confirms the author's concepts of 'Liberalism' and that an American society where everyone can make their dream come true is a 'myth', as is the idea that America is a society where everyone can choose his or her own identity (38). Finally, I would add, American society is similar to any

other society that one would find in the West and, ultimately, the rest of the world.

Perhaps the Civil Rights Movement was responsible for the rejection of values of competition and social mobility. Instead, it slowly formed a counter-culture. From non-pure white Aryan subjects, the Italians, like the Poles, Lithuanians, French, Greeks and Maltese, started to be seen as part of the white ethnic groups, in particular after World War II. Whiteness studies confirm that, in America, being white was quintessential for gaining access to resources and power. Yet Wirth challenges Mae M. Ngail's argument that Southern Europeans represented the prototype for assimilation. Wirth insists that not all the Italians were assimilated, and there were Italian migrants who returned to their homeland while others continued to undertake the transatlantic crossing, to and fro, between Italy and the East Coast. Half of the Italians who entered the United States returned home (301).

Such a narrative implies that the historical idea that the American dream involved no class struggle is totally false. Yet, if an ethnic group is discriminated against by another dominating group, which in the case of the Italians happened to be the Irish, then that ethnic group would be more prone to reaching out.

Elvira sought to raise her children in the Roman Catholic tradition. Some broke away from their Catholicism completely, either because of marriage or for other reasons. Those who sought the confessional line joined the Protestant church, such as the Presbyterian Church. Without doubt, many Italians sought to counter the negative image that they had started to acquire, which in part was linked to the fact that the Protestants demonized Catholics by accepting the concept of 'Anglo-conformity'. In conformity, members of the Soloperto family started to see the key to their success. In other words, they sought to adapt to the dominant culture.

The perception of religion, or better Catholicism, was different for the next generations. Some of the adult males ended without any religious affiliation. This was in part explained as being the result of an embedded sense of anti-clericalism among Italian males prevalent in Southern Italy at the time. The Church was seen as the ally of landowners who started being depicted as the oppressors of the working classes. Ironically, while anti-clerical discourses were welcome among the Protestant community, speakers against landowners appeared in America as radicals and anarchists, and could explain why the same Protestant American society started to target Italian migrants. Landownership was a principal value on which American society and the whole system was founded.

THE FOURTH GENERATION

Today, the members of the fourth generation are going through an ethnic revival, which is expressed by the interest shown in genealogical studies, Italian food and cuisine and, in some cases, by having migrants returning to their Roman Catholic roots, seen as the religion of their forefathers. Others had their ethnicity fade away as a result of intermarriage, with their offspring being brought up against a mixed-heritage background. These are also seen as hyphenated identities. In these situations, it is up to the descendants to pick up the pieces and choose the type of ethnic affiliation they want to belong to. In many cases, this depends on the particular situation at that moment.

The author shows that, by the fourth generation, the idea that an individual could rise above the social ranks, as far as their talents would allow, was not always the case. Social mobility, as in the case of the Soloperto descendants, shows its presence during the first and second generations, and this was obtained through, among other ways, education and college degrees. Moreover, some of their descendants viewed integration efforts in an often-unfriendly environment as really worth the price (149).

However, by the fourth generation family members can also start experiencing regression, in the sense that their social level would not necessarily be the same as or even higher than that of their fathers and mothers. On the contrary, they are more likely to experience downward mobility than an upward trend (296). This might explain why, when fourth generations were asked about the way they view migration, a collective nostalgia was created as the interviewees forgot all about the hardships, and associated the success of their forbearers on economic autonomy, which in turn was equated with the family – in other words, how much land the family would succeed in owning or whether the family would own its family home (252).

What is also interesting is the idea presented in the book that the concept of education also changes by the fourth generation. While for the first and second it was seen as a male domain, by the fourth, females are found to be more interested in pursuing their studies than males. But this is not necessarily related to migration. The fourth generation is experiencing the trend that is prevalent in our times. It is now part and parcel of American society and will therefore be following the main trends developing within that society. Contemporary studies undertaken for Malta, for example, show that females are more prone to continue their university studies than males. What is striking, but expected, is that education reflects the way those interviewed tackled the questions put to them. Wirth rightly notes that education is, in a way, conditioning their replies, as many sought to uphold a learned standard of objectivity in their answers by consciously or unconsciously seeking to distance themselves from the question.

Education can account for the descendants of the Solopertos forgetting or losing all knowledge of their ancestors' maternal language. By the third generation, they barely knew a word in Italian, or could only remember a word or two of the dialect their grandparents spoke, but many of those interviewed continued to identify themselves as Italian American.

But there are also positive points that emerge amongst the third and fourth generations. These generations are more likely to bury past feuds and start talking again and sharing their memories. At the same time, by the fourth generation, some of the second cousins lose any knowledge of their kinship. Social media is helping to re-establish such lost links.

CONCLUSION

Wirth has succeeded in providing a new anthropological and historical understanding of the history of migration and memory based on the intersection of class gender, residence and generation (267). Convincingly, the author shows that the price of migration is the loss of continuity and identity (266). This challenges certain popular perceptions currently being pursued in Europe that the inundation of migrants will annihilate Europe's perceived identity.

The author has presented a strong basis on which future studies can continue building on post-structuralism studies. Her studies convincingly

show that the Italian community differentiated, in their collective memory, between what is known as cultural and communicative memory.

Today Italy, together with the rest of the south, has shifted from a migrant-sending to a migrant-receiving country. Therefore, this study is not only important in terms of its analysis of the history of memory and identity of a migrant family, but it can also help to formulate a framework for all European countries that are today experiencing an influx of migrants in the same proportion as the one experienced by America at the turn of the twentieth century. Reading this book can help administrators in Europe to not repeat the mistakes committed in America against non-white migrants.

Yet, the tension being experienced in Europe finds a parallel in America's history. This book about memory and identity shows the way. Perhaps we in Europe should start emphasizing more the values of social mobility and difference by producing values aimed at creating cohesive communities. The problem lies in Europe's lack of any existing structure today that can create cohesiveness within the community. In the past, this was given by faith. Perhaps the creation of a common identity and memory in Europe can help us find the cohesive structure that can start making our continent one.

REFERENCE

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