

Imagined mobilities and the materiality of migration: the search for ‘anchored lives’ in post-recession Europe

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Abstract

The dichotomy between mobility and migration became a disputed conceptual distinction during the expansion of European Free Movement between the 1990s and early 2000s. Then, mobility literature sought to open a new chapter in the study of contemporary human lives by theorising them as ‘liquid’ and suggesting movement as their universalising feature. Intra-European migrants have been increasingly characterised by their ‘mobility spirit’ and therefore as legally unconstrained, driven by individualised behaviours and engaged in temporary cross-border movements. Set in the backdrop of post-recession intra-European migration, this paper explores how migrants’ mobility spirit is being negotiated with the need to anchor their lives to stable relationships and to the attainment of financial security. It draws on interviews conducted with Italian young adults in London and shows how imagined projects of temporary mobility materialize into longer-term migration experiences where the search for anchored rather than liquid lives becomes more prominent. Henceforth, the analysis challenges the typified profile of EU movers by pointing at their quest for social and financial stability and by exposing their personal vulnerabilities while making the theoretical distinction between migration and mobility less relevant.

Key words: anchored lives; EU Mobility; Italian migrants; intra-European migration; young adults

Introduction

In a Facebook post, one of the research participants reacted to the newly announced plan for the post-Brexit British point-based migration regime, which sets out to close borders for unskilled migrants and those with low English language skills:

If this stupid shit [new UK migration system] were in place eight years ago, I would [have] never had the chance to move to London. My English was rubbish, my skills were useless, and the hospitality industry was my only option. And I am very grateful to that first job in a kitchen, which allowed me to grow as a professional, taught me [a] work ethic, made me meet with likeminded people, and ultimately allowed me to learn English and move on to a line of work [in] which I was more interested. Post-Brexit UK is a nightmare that keeps on delivering.

In Britain, the EU expansion, the Great Recession and now Brexit have exacerbated a divisive language and brought to light new inequalities, turning cosmopolitan young EU movers into the ‘new citizens of nowhere’. The distinctions between skilled and unskilled jobs, as well as those between ‘mobile’ professionals and ‘migrant’ workers, are now more than ever embedded

in public discourse and current political language. These discursive distinctions and their implications are central to the analysis of this paper, through the lenses and the stories of post-recession Italian migrants in their late 20s and 30s living in London. Indeed, this paper looks at how their imagined mobility projects compare to the actual experiences of migration after departure. Because mobility is associated with high levels of agency and reflexivity, it also contributes to discussions about the nature of contemporary life course transitions and particularly how these migrants negotiate the search for novelty, adventure and new experiences with the need for stable social relationships and financial security.

From 1992 when the freedom of movement was initially established, to its expansion (2004–2007), intra-European migration has intensified and has acquired new features and complexities. However, the increasing mobility of young Europeans is not just the outcome of EU institutional reforms and the EU's migration regime, but also of wider global trends (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2008) – such the diversification of migration pathways and increasing levels of people's connectivity – as well as national and local circumstances. During the 1990s, Europe started to become 'a new laboratory of internal mobility' (Trenz and Triandafyllidou, 2017) and from the early 2000s, mobility began to receive attention as a paradigm, which for some is marking a theoretical shift in social science.

Mobility studies emerged from the need to expand the understanding and explain different types of people's movements: students, volunteers, refugees and asylum seekers, labour or return migrants, consultants and tourists. The underlying idea was to examine social practices across multiple spatial networks rather than confined to a territory (Glick and Salazar, 2013). Yet, as we shall see, the flaws of this new conceptual shift have quickly become clear. Firstly, the novelty of mobility is questioned, as its analysis has been a traditional concern of social science (Faist, 2013). Skeggs (2004) challenges the idea of mobility as a universalising condition of contemporary societies and argues that the mobility paradigm neglects the dynamics of power and control behind people's movement, supporting post-modern but also neoliberal ideas about the thinning of the social structure.

There is a whole body of research that has dealt with the spatial mobility of young Europeans (e.g. Favell, 2008; Robertson et al., 2018; Glick and Salazar, 2013). Drawing on these debates and based on narrative interviews with Italian young and early adults living in London, this paper brings together questions of life transitions and spatial mobilities, highlighting a disjuncture between how the highly individualised profiles of EU movers have been theorised and the actual circumstances of research participants.

Imagined mobilities, anchored lives and the Italian culture of migration

The tension between how the mobility journey is imagined and the actual experiences after migration is the analytical focus of this paper, which is elaborated through the concept of 'anchored lives'. This idea initially emerged inductively from data analysis and was then investigated further in relation to recent literature about mobility. Similar notions – such as 'differentiated embedding' (Ryan, 2018) and 'social anchoring' (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016) – have been previously developed in different analytical contexts particularly to explain processes of migrants' belonging and integration into the host society. Though, if 'differentiated embedding' aims to explain how migrants develop attachment and find their own place into the different domains of the new society, social anchoring adds to this by introducing issues of identity and security which are most relevant to this work. Based on a theoretical discussion, Grzymala-Kazłowska (2016:1134) defines 'social anchoring' as the process of migrants finding

the footholds to restore their socio-psychological stability. Drawing on Grzymala-Kazłowska, Bygnes and Erdal's (2017:103-104) found that Polish and Spanish migrants in Norway searched for stable and 'grounded lives' as a way of dealing with the precariousness that deregulated labour markets and liberalised economies incentivise. While focusing on these migrants' future plans of return to their home countries, they conclude that the tension between migrants' wish for exploration typical of what the authors call 'liquid migration', and their desire for security was resolved in favour of the latter. This tension is also central to this paper, which juxtaposes next to the lifestyle choices of free movers the challenges of structured migrants' experiences, marked by reliance on family resources and by the quest for emotional stability and financial security.

The idea of 'anchored lives' also emerged in opposition to a wider debate about the 'new mobility paradigm' (Sheller and Urry 2006) presented as a conceptual shift in social science research. This paradigm emerged in the early 2000s to make sense of one of the most challenging aspects of globalisation, what Appadurai (1990: 297) defines as the moving flows of people around the globe or 'ethnoscapes': 'the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.' As Sheller and Urry (2006:107) point out: 'The scale of this travelling is immense'. Concurrent to studies of 'lifestyle migration' – about the relocation of more affluent people searching for better lifestyles (Benson and O'Reilly 2009:609) – the paradigm aims to shift away from a negative connotation of mobility as unsettling and problematic, and to account instead for a re-conceptualisation of spatial relations as fluid and re-formed by a range of technological, but also epistemological means. In many instances, mobility has also been enhanced and supported by the cosmopolitan beliefs and practices typical of the new generations. Youth cosmopolitanism is a characterising feature of globalization, which presents several features: a cultural condition, a worldview, an orientation to multiple identities, a practice and also a competency (Vertovec and Cohen 2002).

The emphasis on reconceptualising the pathways and consequences of spatial mobility has deeply influenced the study of life course transitions, which, as Robertson et al. (2018) argue, have now become mobile. New theories of 'mobile (youth) transitions' (Robertson et al. 2018) suggest that mobility has become a new important marker of adulthood – or rite of passage – which has involved rethinking the process of becoming adult as more contingent and less linear. These discussions have become very relevant in the EU context, supported also by the European free movement of people and by programmes such as Erasmus, Socrates and Erasmus Plus, but also by national education and social policies.

Within this theoretical framework, the language of mobility becomes distinct from that of migration. Robertson et al. (2018) regard mobility as a more appropriate paradigm to capture contemporary lifestyle considerations deriving from the increasing diversity of the transnational movements of today's generations to include temporary sojourns, leisure, cultural exchanges, volunteering, educational or work experience opportunities, rather than the longer-term and more established patterns of settlement in other countries. Different from migration, mobility is considered the result of free choosing and subjective decision-making (Cuzzocrea 2019) motivated by a need for personal exploration typical of youth. Against this backdrop, the idea of mobility has been linked to agency and possibility. Cuzzocrea and Mandich's (2016:555) analysis of Sardinian youths' essays about their imagined future suggests that mobility has become a way for young people to control the future and achieve their hopes and desires, which have become impossible in one place, but still appear feasible elsewhere.

Together with youth studies literature, references to the mobility paradigm are also seen within the debate about how to frame and define the flows of intra-European migrants. Favell's (2008,1-2) ethnography, carried out at the outset of the Great Recession and soon after the EU expansion, typifies the essential features of the European free movers – or 'Eurostars', as he defined them at the very start of his account:

You finish your undergraduate studies and decide to leave home. You throw all your things into a rucksack and say goodbye to your parents and hometown – an affluent small city in the provinces of continental Europe. You take a cheap airplane, with a one-way ticket that flies you direct to a small, modern airport, miles out from the city. When you arrive in the big city – the capital of European finance and media – you find a job a couple of days later, making BLT sandwiches every morning for the biggest chain of lunchtime cafés. This is a means not an end. At nights you study English and follow courses for an MA in graphic design or business studies. You live in a damp £100-a-week dorm, with three other young Europeans. (...) There are parties most nights, and you meet new friends every day (...) You feel liberated. A free mover. (...) A denationalized European.

Here Favell (2008) summarises well the features of the new 'mobility spirit' as being age-related and more prominent for younger people in their 20s, who tend to be in explorative stages of their life course (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; de Jong and de Valk 2019). Class is also a relevant context here, and quite a lot of focus in this field has been given to the experiences of middle-class Europeans employing mobility as a strategy to maintain or improve their social class positions (Bonizzoni, 2018). Europeans in the mobility literature (Dubucs et al. 2017) are often university-educated rational actors, willing to be employed in simple service sector jobs even if it means a pay cut because they can see future gains in the longer term (Favell, 2008). Yet drivers of mobility are multiple and not only economic, spanning through the life course (de Jong and De Valk 2019) and including the desire to achieve personal emancipation and self-fulfilment (Bartolini et al. 2017), enlarge cultural experiences (Dubucs et al. 2017) and escape the dull lifestyles of suburban areas (Favell 2008).

Mobility is considered an act of agency and freedom, but as with increasing individualisation, freedom comes together with higher levels of responsibility and therefore with new challenges and new pressures (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Varriale (2019) highlights the anxiety that Italian migrants experience when their subjective circumstances become 'out of sync' with normative expectations about the life stage they are at (Ibidem: 1161). Comparative research of Romanian and Italian migrants (Morosanu et al., 2019) also suggests that they were torn between the de-standardisation of the life course (no longer shaped by the linear passage from education into work and toward family formation), and their inability to completely free themselves from the societal norms which continue to shape their transitions to adulthood.

The binary between imagined mobilities and anchored experiences of migration is also relevant to the understanding of motivations to leave the country of origin. The idea of 'anchored lives' refers to the migrants' need to find the stable conditions that enable them to move forward with their lifecourse, but also to the structure of opportunities that shapes the migration journeys. Therefore, anchoring also involves that migrants' decisions to leave are not simply the response of young rational actors' calculations to mitigate the consequences of the Great Recession on their life outcomes. Even though this is undeniably an important aspect of the motivations of many EU migrants to leave their home country, we shall see that there is more that comes into play.

The idea of a culture of migration is able to account for the complexity of multiple motivations to leave and how they become anchored to the national, local and personal conditions of the migrant. A ‘culture of migration’ develops as a set of social norms which become established in a community and form a shared ‘imagination’, encouraging further departures as if they were part of a ‘normal course of events’ (Heering et al., 2004:325). People are more likely to migrate if they come from a household or community where many people have already left and so where migration experiences have been widely shared and accumulated (Massey et al., 1993). Transnational social networks have emerged between migrants in receiving countries and their peers and relatives back in the sending countries. These networks play a key role in sustaining the culture of migration by reducing the costs and risks of new flows and by incentivising the ‘mobility capital’ – the bundles of assets, competences and dispositions but also the ‘know-how’ to use connections at their advantage – which encourages the movement of people (Chatterji, 2013:279 & 301). Hence, a culture of migration allows the consideration of socio-structural factors, but it also helps to make sense of how personal imagination and social networks encourage migration.

Italy’s culture of migration builds upon the long history of the Italian pre- and post-war diaspora(s) (see Colpi, 1991) incentivised by the current circumstances of the country. As we shall see, Italy is an ideal site to explore the interconnectedness between individual ‘choices and actions and the constraints of history and social circumstances’ (Elder, 1998 [1974]:308). So far, mobility literature has highlighted the driving spirit that inspires young people/adults to leave. This paper will focus on how the described features of cosmopolitan free movers play out into the actual lives of migrant young (and early) adults and how they respond to both the constraints and the opportunities of leaving their country. In so doing, the paper aims to contribute to the understanding of how imagined mobilities become problematised through the material and relational challenges of the actual migration experiences.

Liquid or anchored lives? The analytical distinction between mobility and migration

The analytical distinction between ‘liquid and anchored lives’ also relates to a pre-existing debate about the implications of using the mobility paradigm for the understanding of wide and different migration experiences. Even among mobility scholars, there is an underlying preoccupation that the new mobility paradigm may neglect inequalities while creating new space for otherness, by proposing a conceptual distinction between new self-reliant resourceful mobile individuals – the free movers – and other less free, less skilled and mostly poorer migrants. As Bygess and Erdal (2017:105) point out: ‘We acknowledge that labelling the internal movements of EU nationals as mobility and third country nationals as migration can serve to deepen the constructed difference between subaltern “migrants” and white “free movers”, while diverting attention from the challenges, difficulties and racisms that white “internal” EU migrants are often faced with’. There is recognition that the possibilities and experiences of mobility are highly stratified as suggested by Farrugia’s (2016:836-37) idea of a ‘mobility imperative’ experienced by rural young people as ‘the processes that encourage or mandate [their] mobility’ to urban areas. The notion of a ‘mobility disjuncture’ accounts for the gap between the desire to leave and the much more socio-economic bounded capacity to do so (Cairns et al., 2013). In their call for the new framework of youth mobile transitions, Robertson, Harris and Baldassar (2018) highlight that even though mobility is seen as advantageous for the educated and middle classes, it is perceived as a much riskier option for the most disadvantaged youth. Mobilities also entail unequal outcomes and a diverse range of underlying motivations: for marginalised migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, mobility is not an expression of freedom (Skrbis et al., 2014) or of a lifestyle choice. Some have also argued that mobility may

remain 'rooted' to the localities of origin (Cuzzocrea, 2018) and not a special prerogative of the middle classes, but a new 'rite of passage' affected by the same inequalities and power relations that characterise other markers of adulthood (Thomson and Taylor, 2005). Moret's (2017) suggests that different levels of 'mobility capital' (as the body of legal, cultural and economic resources) enhance more or less free and multi-directional movements.

Despite multiple efforts to account for inequality and 'to attribute a cosmopolitan stance to the poor', the risk of the new paradigm serving a binary thinking about positive mobility and negative migration stays (Glick and Salazar, 2013:187). Yet this distinction is not only discursive and theoretical, but also political, marking wider implications about the power of national states to decide upon the entitlement to border crossing (Moret, 2017). In the context of post-Brexit Britain, the binary language also serves to legitimise the new point-based British migration system, based on easy visa entry for skilled, mobile professionals and on the exclusion of 'unskilled' migrant workers (Home Office, 2020). As Faist (2013) argues, the actual usage of the term 'mobility' in public debates is more important than attempts to define it. As long as mobility continues to be associated with the spatial movement of the highly skilled, who have free or easy cross-border rights, it is also opposed to the negatively connotated 'unskilled' labour migrants, who instead need visas and are expected to integrate. The danger of this distinction is promoting further discursive boundaries between movers and migrants with social and political implications. This binary thinking also risks reproducing transnational inequalities: 'Overall, to the extent that social scientists reinforce this discursive divide and hierarchy in the analytical distinctions made and the questions asked, they are part of the reproductive cycle of reinforcing the semantics of social inequalities across borders' (Faist, 2013:1644). Attempts to develop alternatives such as the 'liquid migration' of Bygnes and Erdal (2017:102) also risk creating further labels to categorise the movement of people, but with little explanatory power. The danger is to allow for further theoretical distinctions, which say little about actual life experiences.

In sum, mobility is framed as something that needs to be promoted, whilst migration sounds like something to be limited and prevented. Therefore, while on one hand, the 'mobility turn' has the potential to contribute to the analysis of different forms of spatial movements, on the other, it lacks more critical reflections about its possible implications on public and policy discourses.

Methodology

This paper is based on the analysis of 51 in-depth narrative interviews with Italian migrants in London aged between 23-40 years old (the majority of them were in their late 20s–early 30s). Of those, 18 were women and 33 were men, and they have been living in the UK for about five years on average. Three participants were from Italian ethnic minority backgrounds, respectively from Filipino, Caribbean and Libyan heritage. We also spoke to three gatekeepers who helped us with the recruitment and shared different experiences (members of Italian associations in London: a trade union, an Italian bookshop and a football association). Participants were recruited through a number of routes mostly snowballing from initial contacts, posts on social media, contacts through Italian organisations in London such as a trade union group and St Peter's Italian Church.

Italians are an interesting case study in the context of EU mobility. There are over 5 million Italians living outside Italy, accounting for 8.8% of the overall Italian population. The majority of them are 18–34 years old, almost 60% are single and men still slightly outnumber women

(Migrantes, 2019). Between 2006–2019 migration from Italy increased by 70%, with the UK being the top destination in Europe: Italian nationals are the second group applying for NINO after Romanians, with 53,000 new registrations in 2019, outnumbering even the Polish (41,000) (DWP, 2020). Italy has indeed a long history of emigration dating back to the 1800s, but the current socio-economic and political situation has provided a new ground for continuous departures. While struggling as one of the countries on the frontline of the humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean Sea, Italy is also facing challenging internal issues. The 2008 recession has only worsened pre-existing trends of high unemployment, underemployment, precarious work and falling real wages. Unemployment has remained high and characterised by high regional variation with only 7% of 25–34-year-olds unemployed in the North, compared to over 25% in the South (Istat, 2019). Italian migration has often been portrayed largely as a middle-class, highly skilled ‘brain drain’ phenomenon (Cattaneo et al., 2019), but in line with other studies (e.g. Tintori and Romei, 2017) this research calls for the need to account for higher complexity when describing the backgrounds of these migrants. Castellani (2020) points at post-recession Italian migration to Germany as part of the core–periphery dynamics emerging among EU countries, which reflect the south-north axis of the old Fordist-labour migration. Similarly to other Southern Europeans, the Italians in Castellani’s study were subject to unequal access to both labour and welfare rights and were relegated to migrants’ specific segments of the German labour market which are low-paid and with limited access to social protection.

Our sample is mostly characterised by highly qualified young and early adults, but they are not necessarily from high socio-economic backgrounds. Ten participants had a master’s degree, 3 had PhDs and 14 of them had only FE qualifications, while the remaining were qualified at degree level (many with a 3+2-year Italian degree). Interestingly, many of them had parents with low qualifications (e.g. some only up to GCSEs and a few even lower), signalling the educational mobility of the migrant group, which is quite common in Italy among generations of parents mostly born in the late 1950s and 1960s and their children (over 25 years old). Yet educational mobility does not – in the Italian context – easily translate into occupational mobility due to bureaucratic procedures and formal requirements that affect meritocratic access to careers (Barone et al., 2011). Many young/early adults in our sample have not been able to find stable jobs in Italy, where real wages are also very low, and some of them were under-employed in the UK. There were several cases where lower-qualified parents were in much more secure jobs than their children with degrees. Yet, it is also true that some participants in the study did not even try to find jobs in Italy but left straight after the end of their studies. All of them were working full-time apart from one in full-time education, and they were employed in different sectors from health (nursing) to hospitality, but also in the creative industries, marketing, IT, architecture and urban planning. This context points to a complex jigsaw of circumstances difficult to reconnect under one unique pattern that is representative of migrants’ socio-economic backgrounds and class positions.

In the course of the interviews, participants recounted their migration journey from before they left Italy, to how they decided to leave and their experiences since they moved. To understand their trajectories, we asked them to draw their own maps of the journey and talk through the key turning points. A range of final questions aimed to enquire into whether their identity, views and attitudes on a range of issues (e.g. migration, gender equality, views of Italy and Italian politics) have changed since living in London. The interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were coded using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), allowing for both inductive and deductive coding. Three main themes were identified: life before departure (dealing with the province), risks and vulnerabilities, and life changes since migration. In the paper, these themes are illustrated using a selection of participants’ ‘pen portraits’ (Hollway,

W. & Jefferson, T.; 2012) as case study profiles based on narratives of migration. The profiles were not selected because of their ‘representativeness’, but on the basis of how effectively they portray the process of negotiating the freedom to move with the need for achieving secure and more anchored lives. All the interviews were conducted in Italian, and key extracts used in the reporting were translated by the author. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants.

‘Pen-portraits’: culture of migration and ‘anchoring’ in the lives of Italian migrants

The narratives of Italian participants in London disclosed ‘disjunctures’ between the initial imagined journeys of mobility and the materiality of their actual migration experiences which were anchored to the quest for professional, financial and emotional stability. The pen-portraits below mostly report on three main themes – reasons to leave and departures, migrants’ lives and settling in London, and vulnerabilities. These themes were shared by participants from different age groups (in their 20s and 30s) and gender and reflect how the imagination which shaped the pre-departure experiences was fed by the predating Italian culture of migration. London occupied a special place in these narratives and was depicted as the city of personal growth:

I when I was a 15-year-old watching MTV, MTV was based in London. London, London! You heard about London, you were bombarded with ‘London is cool! There is music! There are concerts!’ ... There was everything that interested us (...) It was the capital of our generation. So many of us grew up, like my ex-Italian girlfriend, with the myth ‘I’m going to London because in London I find what I love, what I’ve always chased, what I’m passionate about! (...) And I will be free’ (Luca, 35 years old)

Yet the analysis also suggests that these impressions were less guided by individualised experiences than initially anticipated. The stories of participants show that their actions and life plans were anchored to networks of political, historical, economic, social, personal and symbolic motives. The pen portraits particularly unpack the tension between imagined mobilities and the anchored lives which materialised after migration.

The migrant by family tradition

Chiara is 26 years old and she left the little suburban town in Lazio where she grew up six years ago, a couple of years after finishing secondary school and just after the death of her father. Both her parents had no degree and they both worked in admin for the same financial services firm. She continues with the family tradition, and she now works in the London branch of the same company having managed to progress from a mailroom clerk to a much senior role as financial adviser. The story of Chiara is embedded in the intergenerational transmission of a culture of migration, which in her case becomes part of her family history:

In my family, there is a woman from my grandmother’s generation onwards [my grandmother’s sister in the 1960s, my cousin in the early 2000s and my mom in the 1980s], who lived in England. Cool, isn’t it? [My mother and aunt] both married an English man, brought him to Rome and they divorced him, and married an Italian after. (...) So, I don’t know, maybe I wanted to follow the footsteps of the women in my family (laughs).

While the women in her family recounted positive experiences of London, Chiara's story highlights more challenging aspects of the migration experience also because, since the loss of her father, she felt under pressure to become financially independent:

Surely for me it was not fun like my mother and my aunt, I actually felt a strong sense of responsibility, such as: I am here and I have to get a job, I got a I job at [Company Name] opening mail, but then I have to hurry to make a career because now my dad is gone (...)

In this case, the culture of migration did not act as a rootless default mechanism, but it became embedded in Chiara's personal pre-migration experiences:

I actually was very unhappy [in Italy]. I was the typical girl from the countryside who was engaged since she was 15 years old with an older boy. Everything had already been decided for me (...) the boyfriend lived already with us anyway, we had a house where we had to go to live, we had to think about marriage, so [leaving] was just an escape, an escape from everything! (...) I was not happy in Italy ... I don't know, I felt forced and suffocated, so I said: 'I'm leaving!'

Once she left her town, some of the issues experienced at home were brought forward into the new life which acquired a different complexity: Chiara was trying to navigate her rejection of the standardised life course (getting married, having children etc.), which she left behind in Italy, with the need for more emotional security that she has not been able to find in London. She felt proud of her career achievements in the city, but she clearly struggled on a personal level:

[Migration has made] my life much more complicated. Because I am alone, and therefore I have nobody to share my difficulties with, and I have been having many difficulties since I moved ...

For her, life after migration was marked by the struggle to anchor her life to steady relationships while facing a battle with loneliness and depression. Like for many in our sample, the tension between the need for anchored lives and the passion for exploration was difficult to resolve and had emotional implications.

The province's runaway

Lorenzo is in his late 30s, originally from a town in the north of Italy of about 50,000 inhabitants. He comes from a large family with several brothers and sisters and many uncles and cousins, all living locally, but he lost his dad a few years ago. Both parents had degrees, but the family went through very difficult economic circumstances due to his father's business failure. Lorenzo spoke of a learning difficulty, which made life at high school pretty hard – he failed for two years and finally completed school, but only with a low average mark. Against the odds, he excelled at university and graduated with a first in Education Studies. The success had a lot to do with discovering and getting support to address his special needs. Then, it was time to leave. Lorenzo left straight after graduation, having had a taste of the bad working conditions in his local area as a factory worker: 'I only have little experience in working in Italy, but that was enough to understand what it was like: underpaid, illegal (...) I had decided to leave anyway, regardless.'

For Lorenzo, the culture of migration became embedded into a sharp criticism of the Italian province's lifestyle and values which acted as an incentive to leave. Indeed, his account of why he left had more to do with the cultural settings of his local area than with work-related and economic reasons:

I come from a very small place of about 50,000 inhabitants. It's quite difficult to get to, it's the typical Italian province, nothing happens, it is a place for [retired] elderly people ... there are no jobs ... (...) I always had this deep desire to leave that place. It's nice, beautiful, it looks like a museum, but it's dead. What has always amazed me about small towns is how if you look or act a bit different, you are immediately singled out and pointed at ... I have never felt I fitted in there, and I never wanted to make an effort to be part of it anyway ... I did not belong to that environment and it did not belong to me ...

Lorenzo's reflections embody an important theme about the 'Italian province'. In Italy, regional variation in socio-economic indicators – particularly between the north and south of the country – is very high with implications for the lives of youth, young and early adults. Nonetheless, in the narratives of participants, the 'Italian province' was presented as more than a geographical district or a place, but rather a culture stretching from the north to the south of the country and even incorporating Milan or Rome, perceived as 'provincial' when compared to other more cosmopolitan capitals abroad. In contrast to the imagined mobility, life in the province was slow paced, based on strong community ties to which the participants were expected to conform, but they did not necessarily feel they belong to. As Lorenzo pointed out, he grew up feeling an 'outlier'. These issues led to a strong urge to leave Italy and fed the 'Italian culture of migration', turning individual narratives into a collective history shared by more than one generation.

Yet leaving the local community and embracing a cosmopolitan city life led to an all new set of challenges both for personal identity and social relations. Lorenzo struggled initially with finding himself in the fast pace of London life, overwhelmed upon his arrival by the crowd of a busy Liverpool Street Station:

While I was waiting for him [friend] (...) I was struck by these tall buildings and this Babylon of languages. I stood there like a fool and watched people. Someone speaking in Arabic passed by, someone else was speaking in Italian, another one in Spanish, everyone was running like crazy and I didn't understand why they were all in a hurry. It took me a long time to get used to the rush of London. In the end, my friend arrived, and he took me on the Tube, where immediately there were the new first rules [to learn], like you have stand on the right on the escalators. So, what impressed me was how much more dynamic and faster everything is, including people's relationships ...

Lacking a project and a plan, he moved from one job to another, all in hospitality, investing most of his salary into paying rent – a well-known story marked by the tension between newly acquired independence and a lack of financial and emotional 'anchoring'. Lorenzo fell into a rough patch after the end of a relationship and – similarly to Chiara – he also experienced depression. At that point, he left London looking to recover and have a new start. At almost 35 years old, he finally came back, took a loan and successfully completed a master's in a prestigious Russell Group university, while switching between 'skilled and unskilled jobs', working in a coffee shop while gaining some experience in research. Shortly after the interview, he got a job in the public sector, but he is already considering further studies. While showing

some of the features typical of free movers, Lorenzo battled with the pitfalls of a so-called liquid life: he was wary of 'biodegradable friendships' and struggled to establish long-lasting and reliable social relationships. His journey in London has been 'bumpy' – no regrets, but the future still looks blurry.

The 'new Italian'

Since Favell's (2008) *Eurostars and Eurocities* was published, just at the outset of the Great Recession, the ethnic and socio-economic composition of European migrants has changed, as well as their motivations to leave and experiences in the receiving countries. Domenico is a Black Italian with Caribbean heritage, in his mid-30s: 'No longer so unusual these days. They call us "the new Italians". Well, right ... I guess I have to call myself second generation.' His parents were not highly educated, but he has a degree and a master's from Italy and dreams of making it in journalism. The story of Domenico reveals a very specific tension between his idea of an imagined mobility and the life after migration:

I always had in mind this idea of leaving. I always had this great fascination for London. I had the idea ... the interest of trying and learning from whom invented a certain style of journalism that I admire, the approach to journalism that they have in here ...

The interview suggests that the culture of migration acted via a more intricate range of motivations – some to do with escaping the provincial life, similarly to other respondents, and others more specifically about his Italian Black Caribbean ethnic background. While growing up, he had to get used to being told: 'Wow! You speak very good Italian! Where did you learn it?', 'Ah, but were you really born here?' and 'Did you really grow up here?'. Hence, together with the difficulties associated with a parochial and narrow-minded provincial life, Domenico experienced the extra challenges of dealing with racism and discrimination, which were summarised by a specific life-changing event:

My childhood was marked by this story. This lady, the mother of two childhood friends of mine, I don't know why ... I was just a child and walked on her flower beds and she said: 'don't step on my flower beds!' using N word ... And she is a high school teacher, if you know what I mean ... (laughs)

Similarly to Du Bois's (2015 [1903]) story about reaching his racial consciousness as a child while playing with other children, Domenico presented a childhood event as the turning point of his coming of age and an identity marker:

But the problem is that in that area, the use of that N word is something that is absolutely not seen as strange indeed ... That is, in short, if you get upset, it is because you are touchy or something like that. Some just say it but do not really mean it, but others do!

By contrast, he described the advantages of being a black person in London – where he does not stick out as much as in Italy and can more easily 'vanish among others'. However, life in London hasn't been exactly easy in other respects. Domenico recounted the struggles of finding stable employment and accessing the difficult field of journalism as an 'outsider' lacking contacts and social networks while moving through a number of 'humble' jobs in hospitality to get by. After six years, he has still not achieved his goal, and while working part-time for the

communication department of a financial company, he tries to write as a freelancer. Having his first child has also put things into perspective: he is happy his son will grow up in London, but the financial concerns are pressing, and he misses family support and the more affordable childcare available in Italy. Regardless of his childhood and coming-of-age experiences, he is a bit wary to define Italy as a racist country, but he expresses concerns about the divisive language and anti-migration propaganda. He defines himself as Italian, as ‘this is what I am; I could not associate myself with another identity’. Domenico shows how a person’s background matters to how mobilities and departures are imagined but also to the subsequent experiences of migration and consequent identity. There is some goodness in being Italian, but a lot of room for the country’s improvement, he implies.

The quintessential mover

Sabina is a 40-year-old writer from Rome. Although her parents did not go to university, she was exposed to high cultural capital from childhood, grew up surrounded by books, was sent to a foreign secondary school in Rome to learn an extra language and then to one of the best universities of the country, where she graduated with a first in philosophy. She got a job soon after graduation in Rome and then moved to Brussels when she was offered a better position. There she met her current husband, who got a job in London, and that was what brought her here. Her story initially resembled more closely the profile of a free-mover brain drainer, but the way her journey unfolds finally points to the importance of anchored lives in migration experiences. For Sabina, Italian migration is not about ‘brain drain’ but ‘ambitions drain’, so people move to achieve their life goals which are impossible to accomplish in Italy. Taking risks is part of the game, but for her, when evaluating the pros and cons, mobility is advantageous overall:

Actually, I find that we should rather talk of ‘ambitions drain’ [rather than brain] Such as: ‘I’m going to be a waiter at Pret à Manger, but in the meantime, I have my National Insurance Number, some cash that allows me to be a bit independent. I have my freedom, which, if I was a waiter in Italy I will not have, because I would have the boss oppressing me somehow etc. ... So, I am going to carve out a bit of independence enjoy it and then, maybe, I will go back to Italy after I [have] lived all of this ...

She speaks of being part of an ambitious generation of young adults who move in search of adventure and new life experiences, challenging the stereotype of the provincial Italian migrant who leaves with local ‘cheese in the suitcase dreaming of the pension back in Italy’. Sabina did not feel like a migrant at all. Like most participants, she almost ‘stumbled’ from the chair when we asked the question. It appeared, clearly, that migration has acquired such a negative connotation that many young adults in the sample did not want to be associated with the term. Yet some participants told us that Brexit has made them feel more like ‘migrants’ than they ever felt before.

For Sabina, mobility is cultural and enhanced by the apprehensiveness of Italian families, who over-protect the children, projecting them into unadventurous and predictable lives. Against this backdrop, London is the perfect destination, where the ‘can-do attitude’ can lead very far. For her, moving to London has meant a huge life change, leaving a highly paid job to jump into a void as a freelance writer, facing new financial challenges while also becoming a mother. Yet things have turned out well, as she has recently published her first novel, which was running for a well-known literature prize. Dealing with these changes was only possible thanks to the

financial and emotional stability provided by her husband, who is able to support her and their young daughter. Hence, the liquid lives of enterprising movers rely on the availability of grounded support. This was similar to the experiences of many other migrants in the study who took risks, left their country, their job, their girlfriends or boyfriends and attempted later-in-life career changes, although they did so not as individualised mobile individuals, but thanks to the grounded support of their families and social networks.

Conclusion

This article is set in the theoretical context of both intra-European migration and mobility studies and seeks to unpack the tension between imagined mobilities, as described by the literature, and the actual lives of migrants after migration. To do so, it relies on the ideas of culture of migration and ‘anchored lives’.

A lot has changed since the 2008 recession when Favell (2008) was writing about Eurostars and Eurocities. Matching some aspects of Favell’s profile of Eurostars, many participants left before even trying to have an adult life in Italy and were just looking for change. Yet these sought changes were less subjective than anticipated, but rather part of a widely spread intention to leave Italy. The analysis suggests that a culture of migration, rooted in the 19th and 20th century’s Italian history, but still very prominent today, was behind the apparently individualised, at times sporadic and improvised departures of some of the participants. Decisions to leave Italy were formed both in relation to national and local challenges. Yet these challenges were not always directly experienced by participants, but almost passed on by word of mouth and others’ narrations, which were then reconfigured and adapted to make sense of personal circumstances. The culture of migration – rather than a ‘mobility spirit’ – acted implicitly and took different forms in participants’ narratives of departure, like escaping the province for Lorenzo, or looking for a place more open to racial diversity in the case of Domenico. For Chiara, the culture of migration became embedded in her family’s tradition and for Sabina took the shape of an explorative need for a life change.

If the culture of migration helps with making sense with how migration journeys were initially imagined, the idea of ‘anchored lives’ provides a better understanding of the experiences after departure and challenges the profiles of mobile individuals and self-reliant risk-takers presented in other studies (e.g. Dubucs, 2017). The concepts of social anchoring, embeddedness and grounded lives were developed in response to understanding migrants’ adaptation to the host societies and their plans to return to their countries of origin. The way the term ‘anchored lives’ is used in this paper draws on a different issue, which is to explain the tension between imagined and actual experiences of migration. The adventurous and risk-taking behaviours which characterise the ‘liquid lives’ of free movers are meant to be more relevant for young people in the explorative stage of their life course, such as the late teens and early 20s (e.g. Cuzzocrea, 2019). Yet claims about the generalisability and universalism of this framework have sometimes led to extend its application to much older groups well into their young and early adulthood (e.g. in their 30s or older) (Robertsons et al., 2018). In line with other research (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016; Ryan, 2018; Morosanu et al., 2019; Bygnes and Erdal, 2017), this paper raises doubts about the universalised value of the individualised profiles of mobile young adults and points at the importance of thinking about life experiences as anchored rather than liquid. Anchored lives are closely tied to the material conditions that shape the lives of migrants mostly concerned with finding long-term employment, financial security and emotional stability. The aim here is also to contribute to wider theoretical questions beyond migration and about whether liquid and unpredictable lives mirrored by the individualisation of the life course

(Cotè and Bynner, 2008) are the actual response to the changing socio-institutional and structural arrangements of modern societies.

Indeed, the pen-portraits depict how the actual realities of these supposed ‘movers’ become anchored and materialise into the experiences of settlement that most migrants face: learning a new language, adapting to a new environment, finding somewhere to live in the expensive and precarious London housing market, looking for work and developing new social relationships. In dealing with these challenges, migrants exposed clear vulnerabilities while telling us about experiencing loneliness, lacking a sense of belonging and feeling adrift. As the migrants’ profiles suggest, the risk-taking attitude and lust for these adventurous imagined mobilities had come to terms with the need for more anchored lives. Indeed, our respondents also took risks, sometimes even by leaving stable jobs and relationships at home, to accept pay cuts and underemployment abroad. However, these risks were most often moderated through the support of families, which were important players in the mobility plans and migration experiences of these young adults. Similarly to other research (Castellani, 2020; Varriale, 2019), the findings presented here also highlight the differences and inequities within contemporary Italian migration. Ultimately, these migrants were looking for new life experiences, which come together with the need for security, stability and with relationships that make them feel they belong. Against this backdrop, the paper goes beyond the binary mobility and migration, and contributes to an understanding of post-recession intra-European migration, which is sensitive to migrants’ experiences of both the opportunities and the structural challenges of cross-border movements.

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