

## The flows and the flood: the public discourse on immigration in Italy, 1969–2001

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### Abstract

Since the start of the debate on immigration in Italy there has been considerable interest in analysing the ways in which the public discourse on immigration has changed over time. This article examines the changes that have taken place in the period from 1969 to 2001. It is based on systematic study of the principal weekly news magazines (1969–1981) and on the daily press (1982–2001). It demonstrates significant changes in the ways in which immigrants have been portrayed and in the situations with which they are associated. These changes do not correspond with assumptions that continue to prevail in much of the press coverage. The study indicates that the key interpretative themes in the debate were evident prior to the mid-1970s, but that the politicization of the immigrant question in the period 1989–1990 critically changed the terms of public discourse. While the press is highly selective in the way these issues are presented, this has little to do with the criminalization of the immigrants (a theme on which most of the research on immigration has focused) but is more closely linked with the lack of transparency that continues to surround the participation of foreign workers in the Italian economy.

### Keywords

Immigration, discourse, press, Italy.

The ways in which the mass media represent immigration has been at the centre of one of the principal trends of Italian social research for some time. The role of the media has been analysed extensively over the last two decades, and they are often seen to play a significant causal role in a variety of social reactions, both positive and negative. This early focus on the characteristics of public discourse is not surprising if one considers the history of immigration in Italy. In 1993, despite a wealth of information on the subject, the vast majority of a cross-section of workers from Bologna candidly told researchers they had never had any significant interaction with an immigrant, and a third of them claimed to lack any direct experience of immigrants (Sciortino 1994). And this in a city noteworthy for having a great number of foreign workers. In other words, in Italy, the mass media is presumed to have played a particularly significant role in the structuring of public discourse on the subject. Far from discovering late the

phenomenon of immigration, and thus compelled to accept independently generated stereotypes and characterizations, the Italian media led the way, preceding the experience and often even the awareness of the presence of immigrants.

The attention that Italian research on immigration has paid to the role of the media is therefore completely justified. We believe that the available research presents some conceptual, methodological and historical limits, however, which greatly diminish its descriptive capacity. Conceptually, the social research on the subject does not have a fully cognitive approach, and often ends up assuming a sermonizing tone. In addition, this current of study has been compromised by its focus on the level of racism in the Italian media (Marletti 1991; Balbo and Manconi 1992; Viglono 1995). Many researchers thus oscillate between invoking a didactic role for the media and accusing them of producing social alarm and xenophobic reactions in an otherwise serene and pacific population. In both cases the research produced has encountered serious theoretical limitations. On one hand, it has judged the Italian media according to evaluative criteria extraneous to its rhetorical tradition and its communicative formulation.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it has resorted to a hyper-simplified vision of the relations between the media and its public instead of grasping the relationship between them. The analysis of public discourse has taken for granted its impact on the audience, instead of studying it.

There are also methodological limitations. The research available thus far on the Italian press, and even more so on television, bases itself on systematic studies of articles that appeared over a rather brief period of time, and often in reference to a single event (Palomba and Righi 1992; Riccio 1997; Mai 2002); on the cross-section of a few weeks for a number of years (Mansoubi 1990; Triandafyllidou 1999); or on the sampling of a few weeks in one or more well-defined time periods (Maneri 1998; Fondazione Censis 2002).<sup>2</sup> These research strategies are certainly comprehensible with respect to specific hypotheses and available funds. Nevertheless, they do not provide an adequate reconstruction of the comprehensive evolution of public discourse on immigration in Italy. The public discourse on the subject is characterized by the constant alternation of vastly different registers that converge in a recognizable structure only in the long term. Concentrating on limited periods, one risks identifying as 'turning points' what in the longer view are revealed as erratic oscillations on a well-defined curve. In focusing only on particular weeks of the year, one risks being submerged by the *basso continuo* of public discourse; articles on a particular theme may assume a paradigmatic prominence in one period, only to become one of many divergent sub-discourses in the economy of the entire year.

Finally, from a historical standpoint, the identification of the birth of public discourse on this subject is problematic. All the studies we consulted tend to locate that beginning in the second half of the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> The researchers assume that, prior to that date, public perception of the problem was in a latent phase, characterized at most by occasional apparitions of unconnected news items

(Marletti 1991; Viglongo 1995; Pugliese 2002). As we shall see in the following pages, an adequate reconstruction must, on the contrary, antedate this beginning by at least fifteen years: the data gathered reveal a plurality of narratives and themes that attempt to 'make sense' of these new figures as they gradually appeared in the public arena, at times employing rather sophisticated conceptual frameworks.

The analyses we present in the following pages aim to delineate the first cognitive steps necessary to surpass the limitations outlined here. Conceptually, we will try to reconstruct the primary changes in the structure of Italian public discourse on immigration by concentrating on two fundamental aspects: the system of codes and terminologies adopted to present and characterize the individuals in the articles; and the theme or context of the news item. In other words, we shall focus on the dimensions of public discourse that connect 'who they are' with 'what they do'. We believe this approach presents two advantages: it deals with operations that are logically priorities compared with other important selections that a journalist performs, and which are relatively more independent of the 'facts' that the articles present, interpret or communicate. These changes should therefore have a greater impact on the narrative structure produced by the print media. We shall refrain, however, from advancing any hypothesis on the effects of such changes on the Italian social climate, reserving the possibility of tackling this topic if and when audience studies conducted with rigorous methods become available.

Methodologically, we will concentrate on the analyses of the changes in these two areas as they are perceivable in the weekly (1969–81) and daily (1982–2001) press. In both cases, we have selected publications that belong fully to the mainstream of the Italian press, reserving for future study the task of identifying substantial variations in the type of discourse promoted by newspapers that are largely territorial – either in the sense of local, or sub-cultural press, such as newspapers connected to political parties or specific subcultures.<sup>4</sup> Even though we are using different sources, we have chosen to conduct systematic observations on rather long time periods, and in no case for periods of less than a decade. We have fixed the beginning of our observation in 1969, the year in which, to our current knowledge, the first news items on the people whom today we would call immigrants appear in the Italian press. Our analyses result in a reading of the changes in public discourse, which is quite different from those currently available, and we hope to demonstrate the utility of an approach that is oriented more towards cognitive criteria and that considers longer time periods.

### **The slow construction of immigration as a significant phenomenon (1969–1981)**

The 'foreigner' is hardly new to Italian public discourse. On the contrary, foreign residents in Italy have long been a key element in national self-definition. Their presence has often been used to demonstrate positively the quality

of life of Italy (and its inhabitants, the *good people*) as well as to highlight negatively the provincial and backward nature of the country compared with those of foreigners. The birth in Italy of a public discourse on immigration does not derive, therefore, from the emergence of a distinction between Italian and foreigner, that is from the discovery of the Other, as much as from the progressive codification of a distinction among different types of foreigners, the gradual institutionalizing of a distinction between ‘foreigner’ and ‘immigrant’, and the establishment of relations between these conceptual oppositions and the distinctions applicable to the Italian population.

In order to examine the initial articulation of a public discourse about immigrants, we studied three principle Italian magazines from 1969 to 1981: *L'Espresso*, *Panorama* and *L'Europeo*. We surveyed all the articles about foreigners who had at least some temporal stability in Italy. We identified 601 articles, corresponding to five articles per thousand published by the three magazines over the course of the years considered. The foreigners in these articles are naturally a rather disparate group, including Mormon missionaries and Austrian prostitutes, German entrepreneurs and shady CIA agents, Arab millionaires and Scandinavian actors, criminals from Marseilles and Yugoslavian smugglers, Shiite imams and wayward students, children up for adoption and eccentric senior citizens. Generally speaking, the foreigner discussed in the press is the traditional figure of the well-off expatriate who is largely integrated into the elite of the country (Table 1).

The weight of this component is particularly visible in the frequent use of proper names to indicate foreigners: this individualizing strategy is used in more

Table 1 Characteristics of foreigners in the Italian weekly press (1969–81)

	Number	%
Actors, singers, artists	88	14.6
Diplomats	68	11.3
Exiles, refugees, dissidents	64	10.6
Secret agents, spies	52	8.7
Criminals, killers and international wheeler-dealers	47	7.8
Athletes	38	6.3
Unskilled workers	37	6.2
Investors, rentiers, executives	36	6.0
Prostitutes, pornographers, smugglers, slave dealers	34	5.7
Professionals	30	5.0
Foreign members of Italian families	26	4.3
Members of religious orders	24	4.0
Military	15	2.5
Students	12	2.0
Other	30	5.0
Total	601	

than 40 per cent of cases, revealing the high visibility of the foreigners themselves, whose identity is taken for granted. Moreover, the weeklies recognize these foreigners as emancipated, rational and free in relation to sexual and family customs. And even when the news item deals with non-western foreigners, they are often presented in fascinating and exotic terms. At the same time, this treatment of this type of foreigner does not necessarily reveal a positive prejudice towards foreigners: in fact, many of the articles associate the presence of foreigners in Italy with predatory behaviour in the economic arena and unwanted interference in the political arena.

Within this picture, it is important to note, however, that the people who today are called immigrants are not absent or marginal by any means. Seventeen per cent of the articles on foreigners are about unskilled or low-skilled workers, domestic help, exiles and refugees, just under one per thousand of the total informative offering, with peaks in some years of four to five per thousand.<sup>5</sup> The existence of influxes of foreign workers is affirmed by the late 1960s, and one quarter of the articles on these foreigners was published before the end of 1972. Furthermore, the length of these articles is longer than the average, denoting great interest in the topic. Nor do they represent unconnected news items; on the contrary, from the beginning of this period, articles about various geographic contexts and flows contain references to similar articles and events. By the middle of the 1970s, this practice of cross-referencing becomes more systematic with the birth of a narrative that connects the strongly diversified fluxes according to country of origin, area of settlement and type of work – for example the Tunisian workmen in Sicily and the Cape Verde maids in Rome – and seeks a unifying interpretation in these connections. This process becomes progressively associated with a structural question (How is the presence of foreign workers possible in a society anguished by unemployment?) and presents an urgent and pressing social theme. It is possible, therefore, to sustain that in the 1970s the media, far from showing a lack of interest often taken for granted today (Pugliese 2002: 67–8), actively attempted to attribute a substantial and revealing significance to the presence of foreign workers.

In this period, this new category of ‘foreigners’ does not acquire a common definition through generalizing labels. The distinction between ‘immigrants’ and ‘foreigners’ is made indirectly through highly differentiated strategies of presentation. ‘Foreigners’, the future ‘immigrants’, are rarely defined through proper nouns or the indication of nationality; they are much more frequently described using administrative or occupational categories or racial definitions. The term ‘foreigner’ becomes reserved for upper-middle-class foreign residents (Table 2).

There are similar differences regarding the context of the articles dedicated to foreigners in Italy. The future ‘immigrants’ are over-represented in articles that deal with labour market conditions, the situation in countries of origin, police oppression, urban marginality and acts of racism. However, they are practically absent from analyses having to do with criminal or terrorist acts and interference in internal affairs of the country; these articles focus on

Table 2 Characterization of foreigners and ‘immigrants’ in the Italian weeklies (1969–1981)

	‘Foreigner’ (%) n = 491	‘Immigrant’ (%) n = 113
Nationality	31	18
Religion	6	2
Occupation	0	18
Foreigner <i>tout court</i>	10	0
Administrative terms	1	35
Racial terms	2	7
Personal names	47	15
Area of origin	3	2
Adjectives such as <i>desperate, without a homeland, ghosts, etc.</i>	0	3

upper-middle-class ‘foreigners’, whom the weeklies portray as having notable economic resources, influence and power, as well as the ability to act above the law. On the whole, foreign workers are not associated with problems of security, except as victims of repressive operations that are generally described as cruel or irrational. And when journalists mention criminal acts committed by foreign workers, such acts are ‘explained’ as the effect of the marginal state in which these workers find themselves.

This last point would seem to confirm the frequently advanced theory that the media treatment of immigration in Italy – before the arrival of the Albanians in 1991 – was marked by a ‘facile anti-racism’, treating foreign workers as exotic and fascinating objects and assuming the heroic task of defending them to a narrow-minded and petty population (Balbo and Manconi 1990, 1992; Marletti 1991). This is far from correct, however, for during this entire time period there were two informative circuits transmitting news on ‘immigrants’. The first is the ‘learned’ circuit that expresses itself primarily in commentaries, reportages, inquiries and editorials, and that sees ‘foreign workers’ as components of the labour market and as individuals deprived of rights. It is an extremely compact current with a high level of consensus regarding the criteria of interpretation: an analysis of seventy-seven articles published by daily papers between 1976 and 1981, excluding the crime news, shows that more than 80 per cent of the writers describe foreigners exclusively in work-related terms (Merella 1980). The second current is constituted by the crime page, which presents foreign immigrants first and foremost as perpetrators of crimes and, to a lesser extent, as victims of exploitation.

For the entire decade considered, these two currents remain separate; they do not communicate with and, in all probability, ignore each other. Not coincidentally, the analyses of the daily press, where small news items have much greater significance, highlight the treatment of immigrants chiefly in terms of

crime news (Sala 1980: 92–100; Merella 1981: 105–18). This fact is further confirmed by Anteri's (1981: 90–108) research, which is based on the systematic examination of papers from 1979 to 1980. An analysis of the news items from five Italian newspapers (*Messaggero*, *Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Paese Sera* and *Tempo*) in those two years confirms that the daily press primarily dealt with immigrants in the crime pages, with the principle fonts of information being police forces and the courts. More than half of the articles assessed by Anteri report deviant acts, police operations or terrorist events (Table 3).

It is important to remember that, although the brutal murder of the Somalian refugee Ali Ahmed Jama took place in 1979, acts of violence on foreigners do not constitute a dominant theme in the period. Hence, the thesis of the predominance of 'facile anti-racism' appears to rest on rather fragile data.

Furthermore, it is crucial to keep in mind that reporting on the conditions of foreign workers in Italy is part of a narrative that was highly negative towards the migrant process. Far from adopting a position of exaltation of immigration and facile anti-racism, the press saw these workers as victims of a process that disclosed the profound ills of Italian society. Thus the presence of so many foreign maids revealed the status anxieties of the middle class and the lack of adequate social services; the presence of foreign workmen pointed to the inexistence of a policy of adequate pay that would make manual labour desirable to Italians; the high number of foreigners in the fishing and construction industries revealed anti-union strategies on the part of Italian employers. Immigrants, in other words, came to be seen as an indication of the problem, not the solution. The reporting of the conditions of these immigrants is implicitly connected to the problem of how to avoid further immigration. This perspective became explicit in the formulation of the problem by Romano Prodi in an article in *Corriere della Sera* in August 1977:

**Table 3** Context of the news items on 'immigrants' in five Italian daily papers (1979–1980)

	<i>Number</i>	%
Economy, labour market	19	8.5
Violence to foreigners	12	5.4
Politics and legislation	5	2.2
Deviance, public order	101	45.1
Biographical events	43	19.2
Foreign students	15	6.7
Terrorism	14	6.3
Other	15	6.7
Total	224	100

Source: our elaboration of Anteri's data (1981).

Italy is the only country in the West that has had to manage its development without the determining contribution of foreign workers. . . . In recent months, however, something new has taken place. Economic difficulties and increasing unemployment notwithstanding, it is becoming impossible to fill an increasing number of manual labor industrial jobs in northern Italy with Italian citizens . . . . I believe that, at this point, it would be foolish to take the same route as other European countries, thus adding to our current problems those of a difficult multi-racial cohabitation. I believe that once again we need to face these problems on our own, with greater and better information on the labour market, with a fairer territorial distribution of businesses, with the improvement of work conditions, and with further adjustments of wages.  
(Prodi 1977)

This formulation of the problem was so widespread as to be virtually unanimous in the press of the 1970s. Journalists, in expressing solidarity and sympathy with foreign workers, often observed that the demand they satisfied was for archaic or exploitative labour, and they were regarded as competitors to native labour. This thesis – and the suspicion that immigration forms part of an anti-union strategy based on illegal labour on the part of employers – is explicit in the early positions taken by union exponents and industrial economists as well as in the investigations by extreme leftist newspapers (AAVV 1981; Bonora 1983: 28–44). Furthermore, foreign workers are also associated with the risk of xenophobic reactions, deriving both from the above-mentioned competition and from the provincial and old-fashioned nature of Italian culture. On numerous occasions, such as in the debate over whether to welcome a group of refugees from Indochina and at various stages of international adoptions, both journalists and commentators were highly pessimistic about the ability of Italian society effectively to integrate people who are so different. These ambivalences were thus projected onto foreign workers, despite their being radically different from other foreigners: emblems of modernity, foreigners were attracted by the quality of life and the tolerance and peaceable nature of the population, but they were also signs of Italy's backwardness and provincialism. This aspect, together with solidarity towards foreign workers in Italy and diffidence towards the migrant processes, probably best explains Italy's migratory policy of the subsequent twenty years, which included notable tolerance towards irregular immigrants already in the country, but also the refusal to adopt an active policy regarding further immigrant entry (Sciortino 1999).

### **The construction of immigration as a major event and its politicization (1982–1991)**

In the 1980s there was a fundamental change in public relations on immigration. As the subject moves to the centre of the public arena and becomes a daily presence in the media, its importance and centrality for the future of the country



become increasingly less disputed. It is in this period that foreign immigration becomes the object of political controversies, legislative initiatives, academic reflections and social conflict.

The rapid increase in immigration's importance is accompanied by a radical restructuring of the circuits that generate news. And this change alters the thematization of the phenomenon. In the second half of the 1980s, the Italian press discovers 'immigration' and unites the narrative threads that previously, and often for good reason, had been kept separate. For the press, immigration becomes of crucial importance for the entire social life of the country. We witness the birth of a new narrative domain, defined and fed by a more generic and therefore more ecumenical vision of immigration.

The success of this transformation is determined by changes in the structures that produce the discourse. At the end of the 1980s, the relative consensus regarding the definition of the problem is broken, and we begin to see a rapid politicization of the question. Hundreds, at times thousands, of new interlocutors enter the field and begin competing for the attention of journalists. The capacity to highlight the epochal character of immigration, magnify its quantitative dimensions as well as denounce the risks and dangers becomes the principal tool for participation in this competition. The new discursive field is therefore radically different from that of the 1970s, when the argument belonged to a fairly restricted circle (and decidedly distinct from that of the daily news), of investigative journalists, economists, union experts, political militants and members of religious orders engaged in philanthropic works. Furthermore, the circuit centring on 'foreign workers' co-existed with analogous networks that reported on the conditions of exiles and refugees (in most part political militants who supported their causes), foreign students and the problems of urban marginality. In the 1980s, these micro-networks are on the whole substituted – at times incorporating the actors involved, and in other instances essentially obliterating them – by a large and highly competitive unified discursive field, which promotes a vision of immigration far less centred on the labour market and enticing economic factors, and much more preoccupied with the impact of immigration on the social and cultural life of Italy. This rapid transformation was fuelled by the fact that immigration became a political priority, which, especially from 1989 to 1991, received substantial financial and communicative resources.

In order to study this transformation, we systematically surveyed two of the most important Italian daily newspapers: *La Stampa* and *Corriere della Sera*. We selected all the articles that include a reference to immigration in the titles, resulting in a total of 2,980 articles. This number documents a perceptible change in the rhythms of public attention towards immigration. From a few tens of articles in the first half of the 1980s (between 0.09 and 0.3 per cent of the entire informative offering of the two newspapers) we arrive at hundreds of articles published between 1989 and 1991 (between 0.7 and 2 per cent).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, an unparalleled peak is registered: in 1990, the year of Law 39/90,

1,208 articles were published, more than in all the eight preceding years. Yet the changes are not limited to the rate of communications. The ways immigration is described change, both in terms of the characterization of individuals and the context of the news item.

In this decade, the differentiation between ‘foreigners’ and ‘immigrants’ becomes fixed, and broad, unifying categories are established (Table 4).

From 1982 to 1985, an individual with the given characteristics had an almost two in ten chance of being defined in the press simply as a ‘foreigner’. In the years 1989–91, the possibility was reduced to less than one in ten. On the contrary, that same individual, who in the first period had had only a three in one hundred possibility of being defined as ‘immigrant’, at the end of the decade had a one in three possibility of being so defined. This need to differentiate is also conveyed by the success of the term ‘*extracomunitario*’ (outside the European Community), which was completely absent from 1982 to 1985, but is used in 10 per cent of the articles between 1989 and 1991. The distance between ‘foreigners’ (who are western and affluent) and ‘immigrants’ thus becomes codified and intensely reinforced.<sup>7</sup>

In the same period, moreover, the use of generic terms over more individualizing strategies increases. The term ‘immigrant’ absorbs the reference to nationality (which decreases from 43 to 13 per cent) and to work (which goes from 6 to 1 per cent). In 1989–91, the terminology has already shifted from multiple types of immigration used earlier to a single phenomenon of immigration of *extracomunitari*. This transformation facilitates the launching of immigration as a major national problem and its politicization, as politicians become a legitimized source of information on the issue. There is, however, no reason to assume that this rhetorical transformation was a foregone or necessary conclusion. On the contrary, one might expect that, given such a rapid increase

Table 4 Characterization of the foreigner in two Italian daily papers (1982–1991)

	1982–1985 (%) n = 232	1986–1988 (%) n = 307	1989–1991 (%) n = 1754
Nationality	43	20	13
Foreigner	19	27	9
Place of origin	6	6	4
Foreign worker	6	5	1
Clandestine	5	11	5
Immigrant	3	9	33
Administrative terms	3	1	2
Racial categories	2	5	10
Religion	1	1	1
<i>Extracomunitario</i>	0	1	10
<i>Vu cumprà</i> and other occupational slang	0	10	6
Other	12	4	6

in the number of articles on this issue, journalists would look for ways to diversify terminology so as to avoid obsolescence. And, in fact, journalists did experiment with various typologies and categories. A vast group of terms for denoting race develops, and their use becomes much more frequent at the end of the decade. In addition, derogatory or playful nicknames are coined, such as *vu comprà*, ('wanna buy?'), which is based on the association of immigrants and peddlers. These attempts fail rapidly, however: the use of racial categories becomes increasingly the object of polemical attacks, so that in the 1990s they are discouraged. Nicknames prove inadequate to express widely diverse situations, and thus have a purely transitional importance. Terms such as *vu comprà* are practically absent before 1988, and although in 1988–9 they characterize 20 per cent of the individuals in the articles, they later disappear. The terms 'immigrant' and *extracomunitario* are very rarely used before 1989; thus the rapid adoption of political-legislative terminology is particularly interesting for the changes in public discourse in this period (Table 5).

In the literature on the subject, the end of the 1990s is nearly always associated with the remarkable changes in the press's treatment of immigration. Many authors identify the end of the 1980s as the crisis point of the Italian media's facile antiracism (Balbo and Manconi 1992; Viglongo 1995). According to Marletti (1991), this is shown in the way the media researched and dedicated

*Table 5* Context of news items relating to immigrants in two Italian newspapers (1982–1991)

	1982–1985 (%) n = 259	1986–1988 (%) n = 372	1989–1991 (%) n = 2330
Politics and legislation	10	23	27
Marginality, poverty, hardship	6	8	9
Deviance	34	10	9
Labour market, economy	6	12	8
Protests against immigrants	0	2	6
Police operations, expulsions, evictions, round-ups	5	4	6
Changes in lifestyle, novelties, traditions	10	9	6
Arrivals, clandestine entries, transits, trafficking	8	8	5
Protests by immigrants or pro-immigrants	2	3	4
Acts of violence against foreigners	0	1	4
Acts of solidarity	4	2	4
Racism, prejudice	2	5	3
Services for foreigners, public and social services	3	6	3
Terrorism	7	2	0
Other	3	5	5

space – at times even straining the issue – to incidents of intolerance towards foreigners during this period, with the goal of highlighting and criticizing these acts. According to Mansoubi (1990), who studied the local newspaper *La Nazione* from 1978 to 1987, one of the major changes in this period is the increasing association of immigrants with deviance and criminality. Another study of the local newspapers of Emilia-Romagna in 1991 reveals a shift (considered positive by the author) from a declamatory discursive form centred on racism in Italian society to a more realistic and problematic journalistic style that does not hide the difficulties of integration (Grossi 1995). Along the same lines, a study of some national newspapers identifies a drastic change in the themes treated by these papers in the periods 1988–9 and 1992–3. The first period was marked by an emphasis on racism and xenophobia, the second by preoccupations with criminality and public order (Maneri 1998). These studies utilize sources and criteria of observation different from ours. Therefore, it is possible that our results derive from such factors as the different organization of local as opposed to national papers. The fact remains, however, that our results offer a dramatically different picture compared with that available in the literature on the topic (Table 5).

First of all, our data register a considerable structural change: starting in 1986, immigration is politicized. In three weekly publications from 1969 to 1981, just over 6 per cent of the articles surveyed were about migratory policy, primarily regarding criticisms of the public security repressive methods. Anteri (1981) reveals that in 1979–80, 2 per cent of the newspaper articles were about migratory policies and legislation. Our study also shows that less than 10 per cent of articles fell into this category from 1982 to 1985. This percentage doubles in the three successive years, however, and nearly triples between 1989 and 1991, when no other category of news reaches even half this frequency. In other words, the entrance of politics into the descriptive field of immigration also signals its transformation into a contentious issue. From 1989 to 1991, nearly 10 per cent of the articles are dedicated to protests in favour of or against immigrants (with a slight prevalence of the second), but in 1982–5 less than 2 per cent belong to this category (with no news of protests against immigrants). The politicization of immigration and its transformation into an area of social conflict are therefore two important discontinuities from the nearly two preceding decades.

In the data we collected it is instead very difficult to identify the trends described in the literature: the increase in coverage of crimes involving immigrants and the more or less obsessive focus on racism and xenophobia among the Italian population. In fact, our data make us wonder if the identification of such tendencies is perhaps based on an error of perspective caused by the rapid increase of articles on immigration in the course of the decade. The increments in absolute values do not necessarily lead to increments in the relative importance of one theme over another, however. Without doubt, there is a noticeable increase in articles about criminal or deviant behaviour by foreigners: in the two

daily papers we studied, this type of news item goes from fifteen (in the period 1982–5) to 214 (in 1989–91). In relative terms, however, given the increase in the number of articles on immigrants, there is in fact a significant decrease in this type of news, dropping from 34 per cent in 1982–5 to less than 10 per cent in 1989–91. As the statistics available cause us to exclude that such a decrease is connected to a decrease in crimes during this period (Ministero dell'Interno 2001), doubts are cast on the thesis that foreign immigration and deviance tended to be associated in those years.

A similar problem exists in the claim that priority was given to news of racism and violent acts in general against foreigners. It is true that in both categories there were noticeable changes in the absolute values: in the course of the decade, articles about racism and xenophobia go from six to eighty, and articles about acts of violence from one to ninety-three. However, this does not negate the fact that both of these categories are substantially marginal, occupying 3 and 4 per cent respectively of articles about immigrants from 1989 to 1991. In the period preceding 1991, it is difficult to identify the major concern of the press, especially the daily papers, with racism.

In conclusion, the analysis developed in the preceding pages shows how various descriptions of the changes in public discourse on immigration are less certain than the literature on the subject would lead one to believe. The 1980s, and particularly the period 1989–91, reveal some important discontinuities: the development and institutionalization of an undifferentiated and totalizing notion of 'immigration'; the politicization of the topic; and the thematization of immigration as an area of social conflict. These three principle characteristics indicate the main discontinuity of public discourse in 1989–91, and are the major legacy for the successive decade.

### **Pandora's Box: the risks and dangers of immigration (1992–2001)**

The explosion of interest in immigration registered from 1989 to 1991 was too intense to sustain over an extended period of time. Already in 1991 – except for the weeks distinguished by the crisis in Albania – the coverage of immigration contracts: for the entire year, just over 1 per cent of all articles address this issue, and the figure drops even further in the following year. This reduction notwithstanding, the 1990s would produce far more articles on immigration than the preceding decade. Such a vast number of articles naturally poses problems to the researcher carrying out a systemic survey. Thus, in order to analyse the changes that took place in public discourse during the 1990s, we have maintained our systematic method and restricted our analysis to just one newspaper, *La Stampa*. We assessed 4,814 articles, corresponding to 0.6 per cent of the total number of articles, and studied the years after the communicative explosion of 1990 and the Albanian crisis in 1991, when immigration had become a mundane argument. Not coincidentally, the variations from 1994 to 2001 are much lower – a minimum of 0.5 per cent and a maximum of 1 per cent of the total offering

– compared with the preceding decade. This does not mean, however, that the 1990s was simply a period of adjustment, for both the characterization of individuals and the type of themes used to talk about immigration change.

Regarding the characterization of immigrants, our analysis confirms the use of the term ‘immigrant’ in a fifth of the articles throughout the decade. The consistency with which this label is applied demonstrates that it has entered the common language as the most popular and least problematic generic describer. Alternative generic labels such as ‘foreigner’ become completely marginal in the course of the 1990s, while the use of racial categories – applied with considerable frequency at the end of the 1980s – practically disappear. The success of the term ‘immigrant’ and its capacity to convey a collectivity is further demonstrated by the reduced use of *extracomunitario*: as it became increasingly less necessary to specify these immigrants as such, its use declined by half during the course of the decade. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the use of the generic term ‘immigrant’ registers a notably lower percentage than in 1989–91, when it was used in nearly a third of all articles. This is due to a noticeable retrieval of strategies of connotation based not on the distinction of Italians and immigrants but rather on those among immigrants (Table 6). Nationality is naturally the focus of these alternative nomenclatures, and, not coincidentally, the use of national identification is similar to that in the mid-1980s. At the same time, however, terms connected to work are not retrieved (references to work and nicknames such as *vu comprà* or *lavavetri* have practically disappeared), while a noticeable distinction is made between legal and clandestine immigrants. Between 1996 and 2001, 17 per cent of the articles describe individuals in these terms. This distinction is characteristic of this last phase: 70 per cent of the uses of this term occur from 1997 and 2001, and 90 per cent are published after 1993.

A second strategy of ‘internal’ differentiation is the increased use of highly evocative adjectives, not infrequently with a heavily moralizing dimension. Terms such as ‘slaves’, ‘desperate’, ‘displaced’ and ‘phantasms’ represent 11 per cent of the total attributions from 1999 to 2001. The frequent use of emotive and evocative terms is a familiar aspect of Italian journalism. Nevertheless, the extensive application of this rhetorical strategy is a novelty of the second half of the 1990s: again, 60 per cent of the articles using evocative terms were published in 1998 or after, and 90 per cent appear after 1993. Even the frequent recourse to nationality is not simply a retrieval of a previous approach: fairly widespread in the 1980s, its use at the end of the 1990s is primarily in news about criminal acts and illegal immigration.

Highly pronounced changes are registered in the selection of terms associated with news about immigrants (Table 7). In the course of the 1990s, news of criminal acts and deviance are the most diffuse, equal to at least a quarter of the total articles about immigrants. A further 17 per cent identify immigrants as the source of problems of public order (illegal entries, clashes between immigrants and the police, evictions, roundups and expulsions). The overall importance of

Table 6 Characterization of the foreigner in the newspaper *La Stampa* (1992–2001)

	1992–1995 (%) n = 964	1996–1998 (%) n = 1368	1998–2001 (%) n = 87
Nationality	28	30	25
Immigrant	19	19	21
Clandestine	9	17	17
Adjectives such as <i>desperate, displaced, phantasms, etc.</i>	6	10	11
<i>Extracomunitario</i>	10	7	5
Religious categories	4	2	7
Foreigner	3	3	4
Racial categories	8	2	0
Personal names	3	3	3
Geographic areas	4	3	2
Racial terminologies	1	3	1
Nomads	1	1	2
Occupational slang	2	1	1
Foreign worker	1	0	1
Third World origins		0	0

Table 7 Context of the news items in *La Stampa* (1992–2001)

	1992–1995 (%) n = 1254	1996–1998 (%) n = 1809	1999–2001 (%) n = 1962
Deviance	26	25	27
Politics and legislation	21	25	26
Arrivals, irregular entries, traffic	5	14	10
Anti-clandestine operations, raids, evictions	5	7	7
Socio-cultural changes	4	4	5
Urban degradation	4	5	4
Protests against immigrants	6	5	2
Marginality, poverty, hardship	6	2	3
Protests by immigrants or pro-immigrants	4	3	4
Work, economy	3	2	3
Racism, prejudice	4	2	2
Acts of violence against foreigners	4	2	1
Other	8	6	6

these two voices is equal to or greater than that at the end of the 1970s, and decidedly higher than levels recorded in the preceding twenty years. Conversely, terms about immigrants in the labour market (3 per cent of the articles on immigrants in the decade), conditions of marginality and poverty (4 per cent) and public services for them (less than 2 per cent) have substantially disappeared. The only voice in some way comparable to that of deviance is immigration

legislation and politics, the subject of a quarter of the articles. This decade, and in particular the second half, marks a decisive turning towards the themes of deviance and public order.

The noticeable increase in the 1990s of news on immigrants and crime has been emphasized by various authors, who note a growing concern over security in Italian public discourse (Maneri 1998; Dal Lago 1999). However, this increase can be explained in two ways. It may, as these scholars sustain, have to do with changes in the rhetorical frameworks that media systems use to interpret and present news, regardless of the events reported. But it may also have to do with the effects of changes in the Italian society that are reflected in a substantial alteration of what is considered 'newsworthy'. Given the data currently available, it is difficult to establish which of these two interpretations is correct. We have attempted to understand the issue by comparing the percentage changes in foreigners reported for crimes frequently associated with foreigners (petty theft, robbery, drug dealing and brawls) with the changes in the articles dedicated to this theme.

As we can see in Table 8, the percentages of foreigners denounced for all four crimes increase considerably in the course of the decade, as does the percentage of news items about crimes committed (or suffered) by immigrants compared with the total number of articles about immigrants. There would seem to exist, therefore, a strong relationship between the increase of crimes reported and the frequency of the news items about criminal behaviour. In other words, a

*Table 8* Foreigners reported for certain types of crimes and journalistic coverage of criminality of foreigners (1988–2000)

Year	<i>Reports (foreigners of total)</i>				La Stampa	
	<i>Petty theft</i>	<i>Robbery</i>	<i>Drug dealing</i>	<i>Brawls</i>	<i>No. of articles</i>	<i>% of news items on immigrants</i>
1989	17	7	14	10	7	6
1990	23	12	17	22	26	8
1991	23	13	16	20	6	7
1992	25	14	15	19	19	15
1993	27	15	19	21	35	26
1994	29	17	22	24	123	36
1995	32	19	23	25	147	22
1996	31	19	22	26	170	35
1997	35	21	28	29	151	23
1998	38	23	32	30	134	20
1999	39	25	29	33	159	27
2000	40	28	29	34	162	24
2001	–	–	–	–	138	30

The data reported are from Ministero dell'Interno (2001). The data about 2000 are provisional.



significant part of the increase could be explained by the increase of this type of event. At the same time, this comparison shows that the relationship between newsworthy events and news is not at all mechanical: in different periods, the percentage growth rate of this type of news in *La Stampa* is decisively faster than the percentage of reports for those crimes, in particular for petty theft and drug dealing. The considerable increase in the percentages of foreigners reported between 1989 and 1991 is only slightly reflected in an increase of articles about criminal acts, while in 1992–6 the production of related articles is much more robust than the increase in denunciations. Thus, instead of anticipating the change, the newspaper seems to have followed it, and with a certain delay; once it became a ‘hot issue’, however, it received particularly extensive coverage. Internal mechanisms of news production are not the only factor in increased greater security concerns: important as they are, these mechanisms are nevertheless restricted by the flows of newsworthy events.

In conclusion, we sustain that to determine the media’s role in public discourse on immigration, one should look not so much at what one sees as what one doesn’t. If the substantial increase in news about criminality finds a partial justification in the increase in criminal acts, this does not hold for other and rather extraordinary differences between reality and public discourse. Our data documents that, in the course of the 1990s, news items regarding foreigners’ participation in the labour market and more generally in the Italian economy practically disappear. In the 1990s, this category represents less than 3 per cent of the news about immigrants published in periodicals, the historical minimum since 1969. And this in a decade in which foreigners became a structural component of manual labour in many sectors in Italy (Ambrosini 2001; Reyneri 2004). This gap between reality and public discourse is much more radical and unjustified than that often attributed to the media about deviance. Starting with this discrepancy, one could effectively investigate the selectivity of the information system in order to understand in what way this is the epiphany of a public culture. Work is absolutely central in the early debate on immigration in Italy, yet in the following decades it is completely removed or marginalized. However, a country that imports large numbers of foreign workers but does everything to avoid talking about it could be considered rather bizarre.

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## Notes

- 1 In Italian public discourse, the confines as to what can be said are loose and porous, emotional tones and aggressive positions are often deliberate, and the making of coarse statements is often required or at least tolerated.
- 2 An important exception is found in the research of Vittorio Cotesta, which is based on a systematic study of five daily newspapers in 1991, 1994, 1995 and 1997 (see Cotesta and De Angelis 1999; Stoppiello 1999).
- 3 With the exception of Bonora (1983).
- 4 For studies of local press, see Mansoubi (1990), Iris (1991), Grossi (1995), Lodigiani (1996), Riccio (2001).
- 5 Although newspapers were not part of our systematic study of this period, the limited press reviews compiled at the time that are still extant today document, in spite of their high selectivity, that in the 1970s at least 100 articles, largely comments and investigations, were dedicated to the problem of unskilled foreign workers (Tassello 1978; Ecap-Cgil 1979; AAVV 1981).
- 6 This increase is even more revealing if we consider that in these years there was a notable growth in the number of articles published by Italian dailies. *La Stampa* increased the number of articles it published by almost 40 per cent between 1983 and 1991, and *Corriere della Sera* increased its output by 35 per cent.
- 7 This need to differentiate was felt not just by journalists. In one of the first surveys of research on immigration in Italy, the author affirms the impossibility of considering as immigrants 'Americans who work at the NATO bases . . . the Japanese and Arabs who buy up the historic centers of our cities'. According to the author, the fact that these foreigners are not 'immigrants' is determined by 'the absolute indifference with which the expansion of their presence is met' (Palanca 1990: 14).

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## Appendix

We used various databases to write this article. The first, dealing with the years 1969–81, was constructed through the systematic examination of three Italian weeklies published in this period, *L'Espresso*, *Panorama* and *L'Europeo*. This survey included all articles about foreigners in Italy for more than just occasional purposes, and was carried out directly on paper copies of the weeklies. A second database, covering the period 1972–81 was constructed by compiling all the articles of the daily press by Tassello (1978), Ecap-Cgil (1979), AAVV (1981), Sala (1981), Merella (1981), Anteri (1981) and Bonora (1983). A third database, for the period 1982–91, was compiled by selecting all the articles in *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* whose headlines contained one of the following words or derived terms: immigrants, foreigners, *extracomunitari*; or that were classified under these terms in the newspapers' electronic archives. For *Corriere della Sera* we used the CD-Rom of titles; for *La Stampa* we used electronic archives. A fourth database, dealing only with *La Stampa*, was constructed by extending the research of the preceding database through 1992–2001.