

# **Notes on a Displaced Womanhood: Albanian Refugee Women in Southern Italy**

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This paper is the fruit of a preliminary inquiry into the presence of Albanian refugee women in Southern Italy. The research is based on participant-observation and interviews with Albanian couples the adjacent regions of Apulia and Basilicata. While it is impossible to offer a precise quantification of the Albanian presence, we recall that in 1991 over 40,000 refugees landed in Italy - some remaining more or less legally, others deported - and even today, clandestine landings continue on an almost daily basis. The two research sites were directly involved in the "crisis" of 1991, and while the refugees were "distributed" throughout Italy, the two regions presently host Albanians numbering in the thousands. We dealt with Albanian couples for the simple reason that we did not locate single women to include in the study.

To contextualize our research, it is appropriate that we offer an introductory statement which briefly illustrates the causes and circumstances which facilitated the exodus of Albanian refugees to Italy, and in particular, Southern Italy. The political events which took place in Albania at the end of 1990 and the traumatic changes of 1991 led not only to the fall of the Communist regime, but also destroyed the economic system, typically based on five-year planning. The popular reaction to the harshness and oppression of the old regime have had as a consequence the destruction of everything that had to do with it, even economic planning. The results have been disastrous, even if some sign of recovery is currently being registered. According to some estimates, during 1991 the public deficit reached 70% of the national income; the gross industrial product diminished by 30%; industrial production fell circa 50% with respect to 1990; the unemployment rate, which was already 50% in 1991, soared to 70% in 1992 (Dammacco 1993).

The two great refugee landings in Apulia which took place in March and August of 1991 are situated in this scenario of political and economic uncertainty, of hope in democracy, and of ingenuous faith in the power of the free market, but also in confusion and social degradation, loss of identity, and in fears for the future. The causes which pushed thousands of Albanians to abandon their country, carry out exhausting trips in overcrowded boats in conditions at the limits

of survival, cannot be reduced to one alone - and even today these causes feed the almost daily exodus of 'clandestines' towards the Apulian coast. Economic reasons are intertwined with political and cultural reasons; the necessity of survival intersects with the desire to have new experiences and to see 'other worlds'; the loss of a job and the necessity to find another abroad is crossed with the intellectual curiosity about the capitalist West so exalted by the mass media. As emerged in our testimonies, television played no small role in the decision to leave, particularly with the possibility of receiving Italian broadcasts in Albania.

Sometimes it is the rare and lucky chance to make a brief trip to another country which puts into motion the mechanism of discovering 'other worlds' and curiosity about them. The rigid autarky imposed by the regime, the prohibition of travel beyond the frontiers of Albania, and the propaganda of the regime which painted the capitalist West in grim hues, prevented in fact any possibility of comparison. When this was offered, it was as if the conscience had an opening for the eruption of doubts, the desire of knowledge, and curiosity about the Other. Such was the case of the testimony of one of our interviewees, a student of solid Communist faith, who had the possibility of making a brief study trip in Greece in 1990.

The motives for migration among the Albanians are caught up in a wider problem of the definition of the Albanians in Italy as (political) 'refugees' versus ('mere') economic immigrants. This problem is intrinsic to an artificial separation of intertwining motives, as well as to a political framework which instrumentalizes these definitions. First, it must be recognized, as we have underlined in other work (Zinn 1994), that the bureaucratic requirement to define *one* motive for migration artificially flattens the multi-dimensional subjectivity and experience of the immigrant, an effect which is reproduced far too often in social science surveys which allow only one 'box' to be checked off.

In fact, hunger - which would seem to be an economic motive *par excellence* - is often bound up with political elements. The Albanians interviewed perceived a purposeful government strategy behind the fact that their entire daily earnings could hardly feed their families. Food was strictly rationed under the regime, as X., a refugee woman described. Even if you had more money, you could not buy more than the allotment. As one husband put it, "The government kept us on a meter so that we could not speak, never be at peace." His family, which had political problems with the regime, was denied rations and had to buy food on the black market.

The families who participated in the research emphasized the impossibility of commenting upon the conditions of hunger under the regime. We were presented with several narratives dealing with people who were sentenced to lengthy, harsh jail terms for the most minimal complaints. The interconnectedness of hunger and politics was exemplified in the response of X., asked if she was afraid living under the regime: "Of course. If you don't have money to eat!" The sad irony is, as we mentioned above, that the absolute refusal of everything connected to the regime after the opening to democracy has led to the dismantling of the economy as a whole and has exacerbated living conditions.

It is necessary to consider, however, the wider political framework in which the definitions of 'immigrant' and 'refugee' are deployed (cf. Zolberg, et al. 1986; Goodwin-Gill, Jenny and Perruchoud 1985). When the first mass exodus of Albanians arrived in Italy in March, 1991, the Communist regime was still in power, but it was already unclear as to whether these unexpected guests would be granted status as political refugees or be considered exempt from the recently approved Martelli Law, which was designed to limit economic migration by requiring proof of work and lodging upon entry. With the rapid turn of events in that period, by the end of the month the seeds of democracy began to appear in the cracks of the Communist regime. When it became inconvenient for the Italian government - already dealing with internal economic difficulties - to accept so many refugees, particularly with looming prospects of a mass migration from the ex-Communist East, the new label of 'democratic' for Albania provided ulterior justification to consider the Albanians as 'economic migrants' rather than 'political refugees', especially when it came to the second wave of mass migration in August, 1991.

In the case of the March exodus, having landed in Brindisi, the refugees received a hearty welcome on the part of the local population. The confusion and inefficiency which characterized the operation of the institutions were in part compensated by the great outburst of solidarity by common people and by voluntary associations, both lay and religious. First housed in public schools, then filed into refugee camps and into more or less makeshift housing, many of these refugees managed to stay in Italy, thanks also to the tolerant and elastic attitude of the Italian authorities.

From this ambivalent sympathy for the March arrivals on the part of the Italian government, it was decided late that spring that only a few would actually qualify for 'true' political asylum, and the rest of the Albanians were presented with a deadline to find work to

'regularize' their status - with 'work' listed as their motive for arrival - or face deportation. One woman we interviewed who had come that March had obtained her permit to stay and had found a regular job; her husband arrived clandestinely a year later. After she and her family moved to another town, she found sporadic work until her pregnancy prevented her from working steadily. In the meantime, her permit expired, and without a job she could not (and cannot) renew it. Her situation exemplifies how, as often occurs, women may be penalized by their special conditions as child bearers because they are ignored by laws designed for a 'universal' male subject.

Even if the new label of 'democratic' in Albania has been sufficient to convince the Italian government that Albanians are no longer political refugees, the discourses of the interviewees reveal a less clear-cut picture. Life itself in Albania does not seem to have changed so much in the eyes of the refugees themselves, watching from sixty miles across the Adriatic Sea, though they do appreciate the fact that they can now openly express criticism. The refugees in Italy maintain ties with their families and friends back home, and they listen to Albanian radio broadcasts, which are received in Italy. Our interviewees expressed their aspirations for a new, democratic Albania, but these hopes are clouded with fears of reactionary elements nostalgic for the old regime, and even the possibility of civil war was suggested in the current climate of instability. In the aftermath of the disintegration of the centralized, Communist economy, the free market has shown its more ominous side in the proliferation of drug trafficking and organized crime.

In the second exodus, that of the landing at the port of Bari in August, 1991, the welcome was completely negative. In fact, between the first and second refugee waves, the initial benevolence of public opinion toward the Albanians was transformed into refusal, even hostility, thanks also to a campaign conducted by the means of information which began to spread negative stereotypes on the basis of news reports of crime involving Albanians. The attitude of the government and the Italian institutions towards the Albanian refugees of the second exodus represents a turning point for Italian politics in relation to immigration in general. It is an symbol-episode of the 'European effect' on the institutional orientations in the field of immigration; a decisive role was played by the concern to demonstrate that Italy is not the weak link in European Community, of the 'European fortress' defined by various Community agreements (Ravenel 1993). The brutal and excessive reaction with regard to the seventeen thousand refugees, the use of force, the choice of resorting to the army, the segregation of the

refugees in a stadium-lager, the violation of the most elementary humanitarian principles, the literal application of the Martelli law, the round-ups in the city on the part of the *forze dell'ordine* ('forces of order') to flush out and deport the refugees, and finally, the deployment of a powerful military task-force in the Adriatic to block other departures: all this outlines the putting into practice of a completely repressive or military model of the handling of the 'immigration problem'.

On this occasion, moreover, an unusual convergence took place between political decisions, institutional action, and the orientation of mass media and public opinion, with the exception of some rare and feeble voice of dissent. The mass media, in a nearly uniform manner, liberally dispensed stereotypes and naturalistic metaphors: the exodus was defined as a 'catastrophe', a 'cataclysm', and so forth; the refugees were described as a 'horde of invaders', a 'wretched army of unemployment and hunger'; 'delinquents', and so on.

Meanwhile, the mood of the population seemed to have been inspired more by hostility or indifference than by participation, sympathy, or solidarity, as in the case of Brindisi. Yet this widespread negative attitude toward the Albanians held by many citizens of Bari (sometimes the very ones who expressed xenophobic prejudices and opinions) did not impede them from concretely helping the refugees who roamed the city, hunted by law enforcement agents. Many of these refugees were clandestinely hosted, fed, and helped to leave for safer zones.

We were able to affirm this same phenomenon in the stories of the women and men we interviewed. Despite the fact that in recent years a xenophobic attitude has been spreading in Italian public opinion, in the concrete experiences of the immigrants the elements of sympathy, aid and solidarity on the part of the Italians have prevailed. These elements emerge strongly in the stories of the couples we interviewed. G. and MP. remain in Italy thanks to the concrete aid received by Italian friends. G., who arrived in Brindisi in March of 1991, was able to legalize his position with a permit to stay because some Italian leftist 'comrades' helped him to become a partner in an agricultural cooperative. MP. was able to come to Italy last April, because the same 'comrades' obtained a 'call to work' for her as a 'domestic collaborator'. In their case, that of two educated people, if not intellectuals, the common belonging to a leftist political group set off the spring of solidarity.

In the cases of other women interviewed, an important function is played by neighborhood relations, which are still a rather important part of social life in a small town such

as P., where a number of Albanians have settled. M. and S., for example, arrived with Yugoslavian passports which they had purchased in Albania on the black market; they chose the town as their destination because S.'s brother was there - he had managed to obtain political asylum in 1991. In their home, there is a constant traffic of neighbors, especially housewives, who drop by to visit them, to play with their two small children, or to help M. coordinate household operations like canning vegetables. M. stated that her stove was gift from a neighbor who M. and S. say is 'like a mother.' M. commented in particular that she talks freely with this woman, really as if talking with her own mother. She spoke of this woman and her other neighbors:

When we came, before, I stayed in another house. An old house. This *signora* helped me a lot. Then she found this house, because it was humid in the other house. Not good for the children. She's always near us. She comes to see what we're doing, she comes two hours to see what we're doing... She does shopping for me, writes down what we need. This washer, it was a gift from five, six *signore* here [gestures to indicate the neighborhood]. They gave me the money and said, 'You buy yourself a washer.'

Another example of their bond with these individuals is that regardless of their Muslim faith, M. and S. had their daughter baptized by their landlords; as in many other predominantly Roman Catholic areas, in Southern Italy (particularly among the lower classes), ties of godparenthood have a material and symbolic importance which extends beyond the more baptismal ceremony. As clandestines, without legitimated access to Italian institutions, M. and S. have nonetheless benefited from the complicity of their new friends to enroll their son in nursery school and obtain medical care.

X., who had first come to Italy with her three children, joined later by her husband, was very vocal in her appreciation of how Italians had received her. She came to the town with her family after living in two other places in Southern Italy: "When we came here, we didn't have anything. The neighbors helped us a lot. The house didn't even have a bathroom. There wasn't water here when we came. The neighbor there [indicating across the street, the second story], he said, 'Come to my house.'"

Again, as with M. and S., the neighborhood women drop by frequently - taking an interest in X.'s sciatica and obtaining medicine for it; visiting her 8-month old baby. In this community, where it would be unlikely for local women to feel free to enter the home of a single

*male* Albanian, the presence of the Albanian women allows for the inclusion of the couple in the neighborhood network, which is a significant element of local life. The quotidian responsibilities of the household, assumed disproportionately by the Albanian women and Italian women alike, presents the occasion for the neighbors to have sustained interpersonal contact with the Albanian couple. This effect is especially important for the inclusion of the Albanian man who, as a single, might simply be spied upon from a distance.

While the women among the Albanian refugees were largely outnumbered by the men [unfortunately, there are no reliable data to offer a quantification], we suggest that the actual presence of the Albanian women in these concrete relations with Italians has given some space, if limited, to a de-essentialized view of the Albanian refugees as a whole. Until such a space exists through real contact, the muting of the female presence enhances the perception among the Italians that their guests are less than welcome. First of all, the overwhelming presence of men in the refugee 'waves' seemed to place this immigration alongside other, more strictly economic migrations in Italy, which are predominantly male. After the initial sympathy and enthusiasm, mass media reports and hearsay in the communities which housed the Albanians in tent cities depicted threatening images of *wild masculinity*: sexual assaults, theft, and recruitment into Mafia activities. As with the media handling of the Cuban Mariel refugees (Pedraza-Bailey 1985), it appeared that Italy had embraced the 'dregs' of Albanian society: ex-convicts, Albanian secret police, and assorted hoodlums. If it wasn't enough that the Albanians were considered 'mere' economic immigrants seeking to strike it rich in Italy, the images which ascribed them a savage masculinity justified the exceptional 'hard-line' tack which the Italian government assumed with the August arrivals.

In the course of the Albanian crisis, if the image of the Albanian refugees in general became one of savage masculinity, what little attention was given to Albanian women in particular tinged this 'wildness' with a highly sexualized character. In one of the communities where fieldwork was carried out, hearsay dealing with the locally-housed refugees reported (probably apocryphally) that a young Albanian woman prostituted herself for the ridiculous sum of 200 lira (the price of a phone call), and she had so many customers in one day that she ended up in the hospital. In the same town, a respectable shopkeeper created a scandal with his extra-marital liaison with an Albanian teen. Meanwhile, a young Italian woman, jilted by her boyfriend, complained that he went out with an 'easy' Albanian girl. This emphasis on the illicit

or unregulated sexuality of Albanian women was an aspect of the Albanian women's presence in Italy which was not initially given substantial weight in our analysis, but which in retrospect we realized was and is important in the discussion not only of the Albanians, but also other immigrants in Italy. In this sense, Albanian women have been subsumed within a wider discourse of immigrants as sexualized Others (women in particular, but not exclusively). Since the demise of the Iron Curtain, the Italian media have increasingly reported the presence of Eastern European women - often generically designated as 'Slavs'- engaged in commercial sexual activity in Italy. In effect, prostitution does become one readily available means of getting by for immigrant women, especially for young, single clandestines. Italian police reports have suggested that some of the Eastern European prostitution - including that of Albanian women - is an organized traffic.

The discrepancy between the widespread moods and attitudes in Italy on the one hand, which offered a negative view of the Albanians, and the concrete relational practices on the other, which revealed various forms of solidarity, obliges us to make a few observations. As many studies reveal, one of the bases of racist and xenophobic 'logic' is *essentialism*, which consists of "the attribution to all members of a social, ethnic, historic or racial group traits that can, in reality, be found more or less frequently among these groups" (Aron 1969: 86-89). Through improper generalization, the individual dimension gets dissolved inside a collective entity; the singularity of the person disappears in favor of the generality of group membership. From this the tendency to conceptualize the Others - foreigners, immigrants - according to stereotypes which summarize the essence attributed to the groups to which they belong. On the contrary, when the Other becomes the pole of a real, interpersonal relationship, element of a concrete relational experience, he/she ceases to be perceived in un-real and phantasmal terms. He or she is no longer the incarnation of the *type* which summarizes the essence attributed to the group of membership, but becomes individualized and therefore humanized.

As Berger and Luckmann sustain, in the direct encounter the Other is fully real, much more than in any other form of integration. In the face-to-face relation, the schemes of typification are extremely vulnerable:

Whatever patterns are introduced will be continuously modified through the exceedingly variegated and subtle interchange of subjective meanings that goes



on. For instance, I may view the other as someone inherently unfriendly to me and act toward him within a pattern of "unfriendly relations" as understood by me. In the face-to-face situation, however, the other may confront me with attitudes and acts that contradict this pattern, perhaps up to a point where I am led to abandon the pattern as inapplicable and to view him as friendly (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 30).

According to this hypothesis, which seems confirmed by our research, one of the primary problems to be faced to affirm the possibility of co-existence with the other is that of de-reification, of the construction of a relation based on reality, in which the other is presented not in the form of a phantasm, but in his or her individuality and subjectivity, and in his or her concrete existence.

We mentioned above that the real contacts between Albanian women and Italian women often - but not only - take place in the context of the domestic sphere. That is, the aspect of Albanian women refugees' subjectivity dealing with the domestic sphere is one of the important points of exchange, featuring both comparisons and contrasts. The picture emerging from the interviews and narratives of the Albanian women confirms previous research regarding other Socialist countries: while the government espoused legal parity for women, the *de facto* conditions belied a different reality (cf. Lapidus 1978; Rueschemeyer 1981). Parity was sustained in relation to the possibility of working outside the home, which in the vast majority of cases was a matter of survival, not careerist ideology. Nonetheless, Albanian women generally remained saddled with the brunt of domestic work, which was particularly arduous in light of the widespread lack of household appliances.

Here we are only able to offer some tentative comments on the refugees' identity as women; we sketch three situations which provide a glimpse into the trajectories of these women's lives, perhaps suggesting points for further investigation. In Albania, X. worked taking tickets on the bus system in her city, while carrying out the domestic tasks for herself, her husband, and three children. She wants to work in Italy, and expects her daughters to find work after their studies. In Italy, she and her family first settled in town C. where she worked as a housekeeper in a hotel. But there is an extremely high rate of unemployment in Southern Italy, and following their subsequent move to town P., X. has found the employment situation

precarious for herself and her husband, who works as a fieldhand when work is available. For the first time in her married life, X. is a housewife.

M. emphasized that she was exceptional in Albania - a housewife. In Italy, she continues her life to a large extent as it was in Albania - she is 'always home'. Her husband spoke at length of the educational achievements, property, and standing of his family, which belonged to the pre-War bourgeoisie. In Albania he held down two jobs to bring in enough money to feed the family while his wife stayed home. In Italy he is working as a fieldhand, but as soon as they regain the family property which was confiscated by the regime they plan to return to Albania.

M. pointed out that now there are many women staying at home in Albania, because so many have been put out of work with the dismantling of the old economy. MP. was one of these women who lost a job; she is a recent arrival in Italy, working two jobs - in an agricultural cooperative and as a 'domestic collaborator'. Her relatively recent impact with work relations under the capitalist system yielded critical commentary:

I found that capitalism and the market economy are not paradise. I was struck by the waste, consumption, the destruction of resources. You always find solidarity and humanity in the marginal parts of the society. The behavior of the rich is scornful, indifferent. When I go to work for a bourgeois family I'm treated like this, as a *thing*, a work machine.

From these sketches we are reminded that women's identities are not based solely on their biology, but on a web of class relations and the palimpsest of individual aspirations and cultural ideals traced through time, before and after a War, before and after a Regime. For decades, religious identity was suppressed; propaganda of equality of the sexes was met with patriarchal order; the regime was present in all aspects of life. The displacement of Albanian women across the Adriatic Sea bends the threads of this web and weaves in new elements. It is a blend in which uncertainty is a principal ingredient, none the less so for their sisters back home.

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