

## Descendants of Migrants in the Italian Context: The “Social Construction of Illusion”

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### Abstract

For the past two decades, young people with a migration background or born in Italy to immigrant parents have progressively become an increasingly important component in numerical terms, especially in a country marked by a demographic crisis that is now well established. Nevertheless, this numerical prominence has not yet been translated into adequate social recognition. On the contrary, the repeated stalling of proposals to reform the institution of citizenship suggests that it is possible to use Sayad’s category of “illusion” to speak of the “social construction of illusion”. This paper analyses the characteristics of this process, which sees the children of immigrants who grew up or were born in Italy particularly affected in the following dimensions: a flattening of linguistic requirements within schooling, without the opening to a broader socio-cultural recognition; a reduced social mobility compared with their parents, reinforced by the phenomena of educational channelling; a symbolic invisibility continually reproduced by the lack of reform (by birth) of the institution of citizenship. In this framework, the “voice” dynamics implemented by young descendants of migrants (especially through associations) constitute an important attempt to deconstruct this process. However, there is a need for inclusive policies with a strong symbolic connotation, capable not only of increasing the actual chances of social mobility of young descendants of migrants, but also of getting them out of the illusion of a “quasi-citizenship”. Only in this way will it be possible to prevent the “frustration of second generations”.

Keywords: descendants of immigrants, illusion, inequalities, citizenship, transition to adulthood.

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Received: 14 June 2024  
Accepted: 8 October 2024  
Published: 30 March 2025



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## 1. Introduction

The migratory phenomena that have been affecting the Italian context for over forty years translate a story that has articulated in different phases (Sciortino & Colombo, 2003): from the first-generation migrants who, especially from the 1990s onwards, were those “useful invaders” Ambrosini (1999) speaks of, to their descendants (Ambrosini & Molina, 2004; Ambrosini & Pozzi, 2018) who today not only attend school classrooms and to a certain extent university, but are now entering the employment system (Zanfrini, 2006) that for their parents was a sort of minimum licence of social legitimacy (Ambrosini, 2001a). A migration, the one to Italy, which has also been structured by gender (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Vianello, 2007) as well as by generation, becoming both structured and structural.

However, this factual maturation has not managed to undermine a public discourse that is still frequently polarised between “xenophobes” and “xenophiles” (Guolo, 2003), in which “fear entrepreneurs” thrive (apparently endlessly), for whom migration is often an unmatched generator of securitarian consensus. The necessary polysemy present in the literature – which refers to the protagonists of migrations in plural or at least critical-reflexive terms (Colombo, 2002; Colombo & Semi, 2007; Colombo et al., 2009) – indicates a marked distance from the public debate on the topic, still anchored to the term “foreigners” as an alienating and at the same time shared label, or to the term “immigrants” when trying to symbolically cleanse the great fault lines of inequality that, as we will see further on, still characterise the condition of migrants in Italy (Colombo, 2003).

This hiatus, however, entails diversified consequences on the components that today participate in the Italian migratory scenario (Caritas & Migrantes, 2023). The “stigma” is an inferiorising symbolic marker of a transversal nature, indeed, and it becomes even more expulsive when systematically reiterated towards those who are not and do not feel like mere arms, but want to be treated fully as people. Paraphrasing Frisch (2012), this is the condition of those who were born in Italy or arrived here in their early years, whose life-worlds are those of their Italian peers “on paper” and for whom the future does not take the unilateral or in any case priority forms of work, but those – more complex – of a potentially full and multidimensional social participation (Valtolina & Marazzi, 2006; Besozzi et al., 2009; Allievi, 2022).

It is those descendants of migrants that constitute the main theme of this issue, on whom we will focus in this contribution as a population of interest. The hypothesis here is that the category of “illusion” in the terms proposed by Sayad (1999) applies to the descendants of migrants, for the reasons we will clarify below. In his thought, collective “illusions” are socially operating because

## Descendants of Migrants in the Italian Context: The “Social Construction of Illusion”

Davide Girardi

they are shared by the people involved, they are characterized by contradictions, and these contradictions find in migration-related phenomena a peculiar representation.

As of now, however, it is necessary to return to what was mentioned at the beginning. The descendants of migrants who now live in Italy embody, on the one hand, the disavowal of the representations that reiterate the vision of migrants as “birds of passage” (Piore, 1979) and at the same time reinforce – to specifically decline the category of “mirror function” (Sayad, 1999) – the limits of the (failed) Italian model of response to the complexity represented by migratory phenomena (Ambrosini, 2001b). Their experience represents on the one hand a projection into the future, especially in the years of their training; on the other hand, it reflects how Italy has not yet legitimised a public discourse capable of finally giving migrants and their children the social role they not only play individually, but also and above all publicly. In other words, their formative years bear witness to a discourse of “otherness”: the descendants of migrants experience a condition that is not functional, but one of elaborating a discourse of possible citizenship. This “other” condition – not the subaltern integration experienced by their parents – has so far, however, been insufficient to redefine the public discourse according to coordinates different from those of the migrant exclusively as a “labour force”; as if, decades after the factual consolidation of migratory phenomena, the “flows decree”<sup>1</sup> was still the elective social space in which to decline according to open and not merely defensive modalities a semblance of collective elaboration on migratory phenomena.

The thematisation of this distance is the nodal element of this contribution. In this sense, the category of “illusion” used by Sayad will allow us, on the one hand, to frame its theoretical scope and, at the same time and for this reason, to highlight its not only symbolic but also (performatively) social unsustainability; in other words, it will allow us to signify this hiatus and, at the same time, to deconstruct its apparent social normality.

This will be achieved as follows. In the first part of the contribution, we will consider the dimensions that today substantiate the social relevance of migrants’ descendants in the Italian context, namely the scholastic one and the – albeit in more projective terms – working one.

We will argue about the reasons that suggest reading these dimensions as the privileged *locus* of the social construction of illusion, highlighting both its material and symbolic aspects. This interpretation will electively feed on Sayad’s reflections, combining them with a broader discourse on citizenship and the

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<sup>1</sup> The “flows decree” is the main regulatory instrument governing the entry of non-EU citizens into Italy for work reasons.

structural inequalities that still mark the social trajectories of migrants and their descendants today.

Finally, there will be space for a reflection on the role of policies and their symbolic trait, highlighting how interventions on this level can not only improve the material condition of the recipients but, especially for the descendants of migrants, be a vector of *symbolic liberation* not only for them, but also for their parents. In this sense, Sayad's reflections will constitute useful grounds to avoid a reductionism of a legal nature and, at the same time, to emphasise the implicit nature of any practice of normative regulation of phenomena.

## **2. Between promises of inclusion and practices of exclusion: school**

In the first decade of the new century, the main actors of the qualitative change observed in the migratory phenomena in Italy were first the descendants of migrants reunited in the first phase of their life course – the “decimal generations” identified by Rumbaut (1997) – and then the minors with non-Italian citizenship born in Italy to “foreign” parents (Giovannini & Queirolo Palmas, 2002).

The institution that first addressed these instances was school, and it is precisely in the school context that an early form of that tension between the legal framework and declared desire for inclusion – on the one hand – and actual processes of exclusion – on the other – became apparent.

The responses provided by schools to the growing number of students with non-Italian citizenship (as defined by the Ministry of Education) were from the outset uneven and bottom-up (Ambrosini, 2020). The first characteristic concerns its non-strategic and project-based nature, based above all on the willingness and ability of individual schools (when not of individual teachers) to actively intervene in the merits of their own educational programming and school activities (Fravega & Queirolo Palmas, 2003). Although there has been no lack of ministerial guidelines (Ministero della pubblica istruzione, 2007, 2012; Miur, 2014; Ministero dell'istruzione, 2022) – on so-called “interculturalism” – aimed at providing a non-extemporary reference to the needs emerging as a result of the gradual increase in the number of migrant descendants in schools, for practical purposes individual schools have shown discretionary intervention (or lack thereof). In this regard, research has shown how for many of them the presence of young people with non-Italian citizenship was dealt with almost exclusively on the level of strengthening linguistic skills. Only sporadically did this happen within a framework of more comprehensive reflection (Demetrio & Favaro, 1997) on the wider social significance of children and young people who were not only quantitatively transforming the face of the Italian school,

Descendants of Migrants in the Italian Context: The “Social Construction of Illusion”  
Davide Girardi

but also yearned for a qualitative leap from the “3Ds” jobs (Abella, Park & Bohning, 1995), used to account for their parents’ social experience. The almost complete focus on vehicular language skills and the almost entirely voluntarist intervention of the teaching staff represented a consistent continuation of the implicit model of response to migratory phenomena that was and still is the authentic mark of the purely reactive, emergency and bottom-up approach that still characterises Italy’s approach to migration. Twenty years later, the good practices implemented by schools still show their initial limitations: strongly localist, not always collaborative and not very attentive to a curricular dimension. From this point of view, while school autonomy (Parlamento italiano, 1997) has certainly favoured the experimentation of good practices, on the other hand, it has not been able to structurally disavow the discretionary nature mentioned above. Even today, it is difficult for the presence of young descendants of migrants in Italian school not to be evaluated in terms of the goodness of the straight-line assimilation dynamics (Gans, 1992), whose main indicator is the greater or lesser mastery of Italian as a vehicular language. It is equally difficult for parents’ involvement – often challenging – to be interpreted not as the most obvious consequence of a social participation “model” still centred on work (mainly de-qualified) (Cingano & Rosolia, 2010), but as an asserted cultural declination whereby parents would assign such importance to school that they would not feel directly involved – at best – to the overt evidence of a manifest disinterest in their children’s school career, at worst. More generally, the stratification of fragmented and poorly interacting practices has led to the creation of a largely procedural substratum of management of the presence of migrant descendants in Italian schools.

This procedural management – this is the hypothesis we intend to uphold here – took the form of an obvious form of performative “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 1998) against them. The lack of public thematisation of the change of pace represented by the descendants of migrants in the history of migration to Italy has taken the form of a sort of daily normalisation that has led to actual inequalities still weighing heavily on the educational paths of the descendants of migrants (Ministero dell’istruzione, 2023).

In other words, the policies (or lack thereof) adopted have not been able to go beyond the purely procedural aspect, failing to consider in synoptic terms the social condition of families – deeply marked by inequalities – the power of the stigma frequently incorporated by the teaching staff (Argentin et al., 2023), also alive and kicking, and the impossibility of treating cultural plurality in purely linguistic or folkloric terms.

The consequences of this combination are clear. The first element of the aforementioned symbolic violence is the scholastic segregation that still sees the descendants of migrants largely channelled into vocational courses (Ministero

dell'istruzione, 2023), and very subordinately or quite marginally (respectively) into technical institutes and high schools. This has, evidently, long-term implications in terms of potential social mobility (Schizzerotto, 2002; Borgna, 2021). Such an outcome is not illusorily the result of many subjective pathways that have thus qualified it; instead, it is the emerging effect of that normalisation of inequalities highlighted earlier. This implies that the young descendants of migrants are “les héritiers” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964).

This consolidation of inequalities along the entire educational path – especially from lower secondary school up to the first two years of upper secondary school – testifies with particular clarity to the first dimension of the *socially constructed illusion* we are discussing here. Its structural elements are, on the one hand, a dense socialisation of the young descendants of migrants “elbow to elbow” with their Italian peers (“on paper”), which leads to a similar capacity to aspire to representations of the future that are very similar or at least qualitatively of the same nature (Leonini & Rebughini, 2010); on the other hand, parallel to the formation of these shared representations, fault lines are consolidated that see the young descendants of migrants in a condition of actual disadvantage in comparison to their peers: their family background, the power of socially constructed stigma and teaching practices not infrequently informed by an unreflective construction of difference entail a *de facto* exclusion destined to mortify those very aspirations mentioned above. This consideration does not attribute any implicitly minor importance to the paths most attended by young descendants of migrants – such as that of vocational training – compared to those with a greater presence of young children of Italian citizens, but it does highlight how the social *status* of immigrant families and their more limited social capital (Eve, 2017) affect the social mobility trajectories of young descendants of migrants to a large extent independently of their actual subjective scholastic capital.

This element must be considered very carefully, especially from the perspective of the transition to adulthood of young descendants of migrants (Girardi, 2012, 2019), which is imposing itself and will impose itself even more in the future as the nodal issue in relation to their social trajectories.

### **3. The labour market: beyond the “labourer for life”**

At the beginning of the 2000s, the role of the school-to-work transition of young descendants of migrants was considered a central issue for the future of the “second generations” in the Italian context (Zanfrini, 2006) because already at that time it was increasingly clear that – based on the numbers and echoing Sayad’s (1999) critical considerations – immigration in Italy was no longer just

Descendants of Migrants in the Italian Context: The “Social Construction of Illusion”

Davide Girardi

a “work” immigration, but had become a “populating” immigration.

Twenty years on, that theme has remained marginal in relation to the overall debate on migration (Allievi & Dalla Zuanna, 2016) which instead has remained anchored to a securitarian, emergency representation certainly not interested in highlighting the qualitative change that the transition to adulthood of young descendants of migrants implies for the society in which they develop their social trajectories.

Taking up Sayad’s arguments, it is possible to state that the transition to the adult state of young descendants of migrants represents the potential *intergenerational extension of the illusion* experienced by their parents in the dialectic between emigration society and immigration society. For the latter, the illusion is not only that which permeates migration to a new social context – which then turns into suffering – but can also be read with reference to the immigration society, in which the social goals of the children themselves become a measure of the outcomes of the migration project. For first-generation migrants who, still structurally in Italy, remain “labourers for life”, the overcoming of this condition by their children (at least embryonically) can give rise to a twofold outcome: the confirmation of the parents’ illusion or the deconstruction of the same by means of actual paths of social mobility.

Furthermore, this reflection does not only have subjective implications but – as Sayad points out – more extensively social and structural ones. From the point of view of a “mirror function”, the employment outcomes of the young descendants of migrants give the measure of how much the social construction of expectations implemented in the aforementioned school paths can be translated into concrete evidence of social mobility, thus contributing to deconstructing the idea that the social condition of parents is reiterated in that of children. It would be, in this case, not only a factual deconstruction (i.e. linked to the dynamics of the labour market), but also a powerful lever for changing the representations and the symbolic universe associated with the condition of migrants in the Italian context.

On the other hand, in the case where the social mobility trajectories of migrants’ descendants are absent or completely marginal, the effect would be the opposite, as the above-mentioned “social construction of illusion” would take shape: downward crushing mechanisms of young migrants descendants’ skills and expectations, in this sense, would not only be the consistent result of that formative channelling mentioned above, but would also be the intergenerational reification of the (direct or indirect) migratory background of migrants’ descendants, making it in *itself* a variable (Schizzerotto et al., 2011) still capable of influencing not only the experience of first-generation migrants, but also that of their children.

From this perspective, too, the fusion of subjective and social horizons –

the true hallmark of Sayad's work – takes place. In the transition to the labour market, that is, Italian society finds itself at a crossroads: either the unfolding of a self-fulfilling prophecy – whereby “3 Ds” jobs are a sort of destiny that from parents can only be passed on to children – or the chance that the social paths of the descendants of migrants may reflect a collective symbolic maturation with respect to the phenomena arising from migration.

The investigations carried out so far do not allow us to provide an unambiguous answer, also due to the fact that the descendants of migrants who are newcomers to the Italian labour market are only now showing quantitatively appreciable numbers, and even less represented are the “second generations” proper (descendants of migrants, born in Italy); they do, however, provide some clues.

In a 2018 paper (De Rosa & Pontecorvo, 2018) based on data from the National Institute of Statistics, the employment paths of first-generation immigrants (born abroad and arrived in Italy as adults), those of the descendants of migrants whose migration took place at pre-school and school age (generations 1.25 and 1.75 according to Rumbaut's classification) and those of natives (young people born in Italy and Italian citizens from birth) are compared. The results show that first-generation immigrants are more present in construction (mainly men) and domestic services (women); descendants of migrants who arrived at pre-school and school age are mainly represented in industry (men) and services (women) and young people born in Italy and with Italian citizenship are more present in the most qualified positions.

Another survey carried out a few years earlier on administrative data (Girardi et al., 2014) reports similar evidence comparing three groups aged between 18 and 23: Italian citizens born in Italy, “decimal generations” (foreign-born young descendants of migrants) and second generations (“foreigners” born in Italy). In this case, however, the data also make it possible to observe previous training trajectories, confirming some of the evidence of the survey mentioned above and showing other interesting dimensions. At the educational level, vocational training centres see a large majority of “decimal generations”, while “Italians” are much more present in high schools. However, it should be noted that the “second generations” are still more present than the decimal generations in high school and are, on the contrary, less present in vocational training. These data on the educational career become even more noteworthy when looking at the transition to the labour market. Here, second generations are more present than decimal generations among office workers and markedly less present than decimal generations among unskilled occupations.

A third work of a quantitative nature (Rocco & Girardi, 2023) conducted on administrative data confirms these trends, although in this case the groups considered do not make it possible to isolate the component of the “second



## Descendants of Migrants in the Italian Context: The “Social Construction of Illusion”

Davide Girardi

generations” (young descendants of migrants, born in Italy): this in-depth study, however, confirms how the migratory background is in itself a variable capable of producing net effects on the chances of social mobility of the subjects concerned, and how young people with a more structured path of migratory seniority show more evident chances of improving their social status.

A different 2017 study (Eve, 2017) – carried out with qualitative methods in an area of Northern Italy (Milan) and in one of Southern Italy (Naples) – then attests how the elements of “field” are fundamental but not exclusive in accounting for the trajectories of social mobility experienced by young descendants of migrants. Symbolic elements that refer to the “power of definition” also count, such as that exercised by teachers’ evaluations in the school transition phases, from lower to higher education (namely, in the transition from lower to upper secondary school). Definitions such as those represented by teachers’ orientation indications can thus reproduce representations of the young immigrant or of immigrant origin as intrinsically incompetent, thus reinforcing a stigma that can become a sort of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1979) in conflict with the parents’ strong motivation towards their children’s school career, which for the former – as we said – is a long-term investment.

The research evidence, then, tends to confirm the “cautious” reading of the social mobility paths of young descendants of migrants referred to above. On the one hand, there are embryonic – but not necessarily prodromal – signs of social mobility of young descendants of migrants. These trends might suggest the idea that the *illusion* cultivated by fathers – at the origin of their migration and with respect to their children – may be factually shaken by an actual change in the social participation paths of the new generations born of immigration. On the other hand, they refer to the idea that these paths are still very much linked to individual trajectories (Beck, 1992, 2008), rather than to a paradigmatic change of outlook occurred at a social level (Bourdieu, 1979). In other words, they seem to be the outcome of a dynamic of individual resilience, also in consideration of how the factors that most affect future mobility paths – such as educational credentials – still assign to the descendants of migrants a starting position that at an aggregate level (i.e. not linked to specific favourable situations) still appears to be one of clear disadvantage (Azzolini & Barone, 2013). On the contrary, this position of structural disadvantage itself risks undermining the subjectively achieved goals, because it assigns a wider social component – the young descendants of migrants – a constrained social space (Bourdieu, 1979), almost creating a sort of *symbolic wall* that risks thwarting (at least in part) even those results of social mobility that are beginning to be glimpsed.

Moreover, the specific situation of the descendants of migrants is part of a

broader national framework of structural disadvantage of the young population with respect to the adult population (Barbieri & Scherer, 2005; Schizzerotto et al., 2011; Bertolini, 2018): the de-structuring of the Italian labour market that has taken place in recent years sees the youngest as particularly affected by these processes, both because the dynamics of getting trapped in de-qualified positions are more present among the youngest, and because these positions have a very marked influence on the trajectories of transition to adulthood. Once again, therefore, the condition of young descendants of migrants can become the mirror of more general phenomena affecting the broader Italian population.

#### **4. The crystallisation of a “quasi-citizenship”: the mark of illusion**

It has been shown so far that the educational and employment situation of the descendants of migrants presents strongly ambivalent, but no less unequal traits: while there is no lack of some traces of potential social mobility – respectively, educational segregation no longer devoid of exit elements for some and a labour market with some elements of possible mobility – it is also evident that such traces are still too timid to outline a trend that would structurally undermine a field of possibilities that remains unequal.

There is, however, a third dimension that is a clear marker of the extent to which the descendants of migrants still find themselves in a context that reproduces the illusion, that actively constructs it as a semblance of full participation and at the same time a plastic disavowal of actual participation. This is the dimension, precisely, of citizenship.

In Sayad’s thought, citizenship is not a result that enshrines inclusion; instead, it is a sort of symbolic construction that – while formally attesting to the culmination of the assimilation process – brings out by difference the extent to which the social condition of immigrants remains marked by exclusion. This difference between formal and substantial evidence is fully relevant for reading the condition of young descendants of migrants in the Italian context.

As in the case of school and work, there is clear evidence of the evolution of the phenomenon and of its apparent normality, such that it does not constitute the actual issue that limits the inclusion trajectories of young descendants of migrants.

The first is that over the years the number of citizenship acquisitions has actually shown a quantitative increase, which it would be easy to interpret as a sign of “integration”. This process, however, in Sayad’s thinking is by no means conclusive, because it is also (in this case) a rhetorical construction made up of the legitimate representations that the immigration society creates of the

Descendants of Migrants in the Italian Context: The “Social Construction of Illusion”  
Davide Girardi

immigrant. On closer inspection, even in the Italian context, the increase in acquisitions of citizenship (Istat, 2023) is not the result of a systemically intervening normative revision, the result of that paradigm shift mentioned earlier. On the contrary, it represents a sort of compounding effect of many individual trajectories that, despite the reproduction of an “eternal” present made by migration policies, nevertheless reach the goal of certifying with citizenship one’s long-term residence. This formal certification, however, subtends a substantial inequality, which we have seen persist as much at the educational level as at the employment level.

What is most important for our purposes, however, is that this change in trend occurs within an institution of citizenship that has not changed in the slightest due to the consolidation of the migration phenomenon in our country.

This consolidation has not yet discussed the foundations of a system that remains anchored to *ius sanguinis*. This necessarily proves to be an open issue, and not yet debated as it should be. It should be noted, in this regard, that in Marshall’s conception (2002), citizenship rights are not just political rights, but also civil, political and social rights; a conception of citizenship that is far from any legal reductionism, but also – as Crocetta (2020) notes – such as to consider rights that are not immediately linked to the possession of citizenship. Insofar as it is of interest here, and in line with Sayad’s thinking, citizenship also remains a privileged point of observation for understanding the fault lines that divide insiders and outsiders in a society (Bertani, 2009), those who are included versus those who are excluded. As Appadurai recalls (2001), from this point of view, state borders no longer maintain their demarcation power, in the face of a strongly intensified social mobility and a cultural plurality that has become the hallmark of contemporary Western societies. To focus attention on citizenship, therefore, is to highlight its inclusive possibilities by overcoming that socially constructed limbo which, even in Italy, is still the condition of young descendants of migrants.

Put another way, the condition of young children of immigrants is that of “quasi-citizens”. Their condition of “quasi-citizenship” – nonetheless – is less the point of arrival (a complete reform of the institution of citizenship in terms of *ius soli*) than it is the confirmation, on the other hand, of the condition of indefiniteness that still concerns the legal configuration of their relevance. Although in the current legislation the provision of attribution by *ius soli* is not entirely excluded, it is today circumscribed to “very residual” hypotheses, according to a “closed and exclusionary notion, which is forced to tolerate *ius soli* because of the international principle that no one can be born without citizenship” (Crocetta, 2020, p. 5).

A review of draft laws concerning the citizenship of foreign citizens who are minors – much as the one carried out in the work just mentioned above –

clearly shows how various proposals have intervened over time to try to structurally amend an institution that remains anchored to an exclusionary vision of citizenship. What matters for our purposes is peculiarly the fact that the “perspective of observation of citizenship appears insensitive to these phenomena and, indeed, tends to be closed and exclusionary” (Crocetta, 2020, p. 5). What is more, the almost cadenced recurrence of bills that regularly fail to find a factual outlet is proof of the rhetoric of difference and exclusion well illustrated by Sayad. In deliberately provocative terms, we might say that such recurrence seems to border on an almost intentional, rather than culpable, trait, representing in almost elective terms, *in fieri*, that process of social construction of the illusion under discussion here: if the legislative proposals formulated from time to time can be understood as a sort of “genetic” moment of this process, their systematic avoidance subsequently carried out by the public debate (in the name of “other priorities”) constitutes just as precisely its specific moment, in which the illusion becomes a social category of perennial “quasi-citizenship” of the descendants of migrants. The non-effectiveness of these illusion-generating processes itself entails a performative public discourse, which intrinsically removes the collective demands for the fulfilment of their status made their own by the young descendants of migrants and crystallises them in a social condition that keeps them closer to the sufferings of their parents than they are to the experiences of those peers with whom they have had dense experiences of socialisation.

Over the years, *voice* (Hirschman, 1970) experiences have multiplied in an attempt to widen the meshes of quasi-citizenship; to finally bring to fruition a process that has been consolidated through horizontal ways, certainly not through “vertical” interventions. More specifically, reference is made here to the instances represented by the associations (Mantovan, 2007; Frisina, 2007) born from the initiative of young descendants of migrants: by carefully observing their proposals, one can see how the issues recalled in this essay – from better and less exclusive participation in school to the issue of work, up to the reform of the institution of citizenship – have constituted cornerstones in the attempt to deconstruct the rhetoric of assimilation and overcome the dichotomy as a feature of their participation in Italian society: either (illusorily) Italians or “foreigners” forever. Of course, the bottom-up nature of such initiatives is quite evident, as is the fact that, so far, they have failed to overcome the most obvious constraints of the *narrow space* that still largely disqualifies the *far-sighted view* that the descendants of migrants demonstrate (Girardi, 2012). Nevertheless, the attempt to widen the space of substantial citizenship and, at the same time, to not forget the critical issue of formal citizenship also implies an attempt that, with Sayad’s approach, takes on an even more strategic significance: deconstructing the rhetoric that feeds the illusion, that symbolically

## Descendants of Migrants in the Italian Context: The “Social Construction of Illusion”

Davide Girardi

*and* concretely defines the social field (Bourdieu, 1979) of migrants’ descendants in Italy.

This field is rooted, precisely, in segmented scholastic paths that feed the illusion, in the tension between dense socialisation with peers (on the one hand) and in scholastic paths structurally debased by the different social capital of immigrant families, indicating a *habitus* that for students descended from migrants is still frequently marked by marginality. Furthermore, in a labour market that is beginning to glimpse the result of a (now) stratified participation of the descendants of migrants, though the prodromes of social mobility are the result of many individual efforts rather than the result of a change of outlook on the part of the actors of labour demand, thus feeding the *illusion* that the questions posed in this essay are easily refutable because, in the long run, the emerging mobility will strengthen anyway (forgetting, on the other hand, that the pathways to exclusion are fuelled by an unequal education system that places migrant descendants at a structural disadvantage). Finally, in an apparently unreformable institution of citizenship, a permanent situation *in fieri* is rooted, which on the one hand attests to an (illusory) presence of the issue on the political agenda and on the other, the failure to complete the process, replicates that *intergenerational transmission of illusion* that from parents passes down to children.

### 5. Deconstructing the illusion? Possible paths of recognition

The arguments put forward so far have tried to substantiate the concept of “social construction of illusion”, in the light of Sayad’s thought, in order to propose a critical interpretative key regarding the condition of young descendants of migrants in Italian society. The concluding notes of this essay will now be dedicated to identifying possible paths so that the “rhetoric of the impossibility” of being citizens not only on documents does not condemn the descendants of migrants to a *conditioned* social space for a long time to come.

The first aspect to point out is also indebted to Sayad’s thought, and refers to the need to punctuate the discourse on migrations in Italy with counter-narratives that overcome the symbolic polarisation between migrants and natives that, as mentioned above, continues to populate the public discourse. Counter-narratives that restore practices and situations that see students descending from migrants as, like their “Italian on paper” peers, excellent students and not incompetent or deficient by definition; skilled workers and not only in the “3Ds”; *de facto* and *de jure* citizens (when in possession of citizenship) participating as protagonists in the public debate and not just “missed voters”. These counter-narratives do not in any way hypostasise an alleged numerical

scarcity in the face of a majority of situations that would confirm the *inferiorising* discourse. On the contrary, they assume that these practices and these paths are today expressed by a large part of young descendants of migrants in Italy, and that it is, on the contrary, the *inferiorising* public discourse that confines them to a sort of perennial state of exception. This essay argues that a change of outlook is not only nourished by best practices, but is even preliminary to them. Indeed, it would make it possible to make the outlook of key social actors more legitimate for the future of migrants' descendants in Italian society: such as teachers responsible for guidance councils; or employers whose indications are fundamental in deciding on workers' potential mobility paths *via* work. In other words, such a paradigm shift would allow the subjectivising aspect of the *habitus* embedded in the descendants of migrants in our country to be enhanced, even amid top-down public policies that – as we have seen – are still fundamental vectors for the reproduction of the socially constructed illusion.

Certainly, however, the latter are also necessary: beyond the predictable observation that more inclusive policies would (perhaps) factually improve the social condition of young descendants of migrants in Italy, such policies could themselves become the other lever of that liberating discourse that the young generations born out of immigration need in the Italian context today. More specifically, a reform of the citizenship institution would deconstruct the illusion for several reasons: first of all, it would highlight that citizenship is not a prize obtained for individual commitment, but rather the recognition of a collective co-responsibility shouldered by the descendants of migrants, those who Italian schools represent as being equal to their “Italian on paper” peers; it would also be immediately liberating for parents, because it would give public recognition to the daily individual efforts they make so that the illusion of the immigrant does not become an immovable feature of their children's condition. Lastly, it would be liberating for Italian society as a whole, since it would allow the deconstruction of the otherness that continues to provide the descendants of migrants with incomplete citizenship; an attribution of legitimacy that is only apparently different from that assigned to their parents, so as to not completely disavow the otherness that in Italy continues to be the perfect scapegoat for not healing the ills of Italian society as a whole, according to that “mirror function” masterfully illustrated by Sayad.

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Descendants of Migrants in the Italian Context: The “Social Construction of Illusion”

Davide Girardi

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Descendants of Migrants in the Italian Context: The “Social Construction of Illusion”

Davide Girardi

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