Italian Canadiana

The Dynamics of Cultural Transition

Aldo Colangelo

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Colangelo, A. (2020). The Dynamics of Cultural Transition. *Italian Canadiana*, *34*, 35–39. https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v34i0.37447

Article abstract

The article is based on a 1991-92 research, published in Sole senza Sole (1998). In his book Colangelo retraced the journey and life of 110 Italian women, residing in Toronto. He followed the stages of their lives, successes and difficulties, including those arising from their retirement onwards. For these women the greatest difficulties began just when they could relax with their husbands and enjoy the well deserved retirement. After the death of their spouses these women often lived alone; they did not know how to drive; their children were adults and independent; they did not interact much with their neighbours: they lived in a neighborhood far from shops, supermarkets, churches, etc. This situation created an existential void, isolation and solitude, aggravated by long, unnerving climatic conditions and a silence that it is not golden nor a "blessed solitude!" In this article, Colangelo reflects on the dynamics of the cultural transition of the emigrant-immigrant, who encompasses two different experiences: first as one who leaves his country, and second as one who enters the country in which he or she has decided to settle.

The Dynamics of Cultural Transition

Aldo Colangelo

Abstract: The article is based on a 1991-92 research, published in *Sole senza Sole* (1998). In his book Colangelo retraced the journey and life of 110 Italian women, residing in Toronto. He followed the stages of their lives, successes and difficulties, including those arising from their retirement onwards. For these women the greatest difficulties began just when they could relax with their husbands and enjoy the well-deserved retirement. After the death of their spouses these women often lived alone; they did not know how to drive; their children were adults and independent; they did not interact much with their neighbours: they lived in a neighborhood far from shops, supermarkets, churches, etc. This situation created an existential void, isolation and solitude, aggravated by long, unnerving climatic conditions and a silence that it is not golden nor a "blessed solitude!" In this article, Colangelo reflects on the dynamics of the cultural transition of the emigrant-immigrant, who encompasses two different experiences: first as one who leaves his country, and second as one who enters the country in which he or she has decided to settle.

Keywords: women emigrants, retirement, widowhood, isolation and loneliness

According to the Italian emigrant-immigrant tradition, the person who decides to settle abroad for the first time has already absorbed and deposited in his store of knowledge the mythical information received, almost exclusively orally, of the situation to be expected on arriving in the country where he intends to live.

Oral traditions are still very strong with our people of Italian background and have a fresh validity which, over time, exceeds all expectations. The acceptance of the good or bad emigration experience expressed by a relative, godfather, or fellow villager, has a power of persuasion which is closely linked to the trust one has in the person consulted. When this happens, the emigrant (who is about to become an expatriate from his society of origin, and an immigrant to the host society) has, above all, his cognitive experience of origin: the Italian one, formed in Italy but circumscribed by the environment within his family, community, city, countryside, village, or borough in which he has lived until his departure.

The majority of the respondents in a study I conducted in 1991 and

in 1992[1] stated without hesitation that the information obtained on Canada and on life in this new society was based almost exclusively on what was asked of relatives and friends and transmitted by the latter based on their own experiences. That is why, during the preparation and discussion of the experiences of our women, who are now living in this North American country, there is constant reference to the "myth" that is created, or that was created, when we discuss or defend or attack the emigration-immigration phenomenon in Canada.

In this regard, it seems appropriate to ask whether this is discussed from a crucial, if not exclusive, point of view of those who live or have lived the emigration-immigration phenomenon, as actors, or those who notice and observe and criticize it as spectators.

Here we must point out that the emigrant-immigrant is an active player in two experiences: first as one who leaves his country, and second as one who enters the country in which he or she has decided to settle. For his or her part, the citizen of the host country is, at least initially, a spectator of the phenomenon experienced by the first. We will try, however, to analyze and understand both positions.

The role of actor in the emigration-immigration issue represents a different view compared to the second, formulated by those who have not experienced migration directly and in person, as is experienced by the actor. In other words, one has to take in due consideration whether one is analyzing the migration phenomenon "from within" the personal experience of those who have left their society of origin, or "from within" those who were born in the host society and who witness "the other's" arrival, to create and occupy a socio-economic-cultural space, which is otherwise non-existent–a space that, during a more or less indefinable period of time, has a life of its own, even if expressed within the context of a linguistically and culturally dominant society.

Thanks to the migration experience and, therefore, to the dynamics of those who arrive, and the experience of waiting, almost static, of those who welcome, two currents of thought are formed which depart from a point, initially of common interest; namely, the one that refers to the presence of newcomers into the host society, including a portion or plots of its territory.

These two currents then follow divergent paths, however. Each of

---

[1] This article is an extract from my qualitative and ethnographic research study conducted between 1991 and 1992 with 110 interviews of Italian-Canadian immigrant women, which resulted in my book, *Sole senza Sole* (1998). The volume has been translated into English and is in the process of being edited.

the two is based on its own specific perspective, aimed to assess the presence of the newcomers, according to a different point of view, linked directly to the issue of the presence and convenience, for this or that part of society.

Very often, the two positions are opposed, especially when political factors come into play, tending to greater inclusion or exclusion of new immigrants. These expediencies help neither newcomers nor those who consider themselves the eternal, exclusive landlords. Moreover, the latter are the ones who take advantage of a "political ownership" of the issue because they seek to put pressure on the "other," those on the "outside," as outsiders, but not at all accepted by those who do not feel and no longer want to behave as outsiders. In fact, associating the immigrant with "permanent estrangement" maintains a cultural malaise born into the host society. If this is not understood, and we do not succeed in eliminating the causes, it can lead to the division of a society, not to mention a nation. The centuries-old rivalry between Anglo- and Franco-Canadians is irrefutable proof of an existing division, in Canada, as is that of the two Euro-Canadian societies towards Native People and vice versa. Moreover, it should be noted that these cycles of denying "others" consistently coincide with the negative economic cycles of the linguistically and culturally dominant host society (Brinley 1961).

In any case, when the immigration phenomenon is presented and disclosed by mass media in the host society, a debate ensues that establishes a public opinion wherein the immigrant's presence is widely discussed, but only from the perspective of someone who wants to see the new arrivals as permanent, and sometimes undesirable, strangers, or even as intruders who cause problems. Immigrants, constantly identified as "immigrants" although they've been residents in the country for decades and naturalized, remain in the box of the accused ethnics. There are no conditions and no means to refute criticism, insinuations, or accusations addressed to them.

Although some reaction appears here and there, it is limited to weak organs of information produced by random groups. Moreover, the convenient ethnocultural identifications multiply and become heavier if we add explicit references to skin colour or country of origin from different parts of the world. This happens, in particular, when the immigrant (and the group he belongs to) brings over and diffuses a culture (or a way of thinking, expressing and behaving) that is neither understood nor accepted because it is so far removed from that of the host

society. That which is not familiar is new and strange, different and incomprehensible; it can be seen as a threat to the "local" way of life.

In such situations, a public opinion is formed and perpetuated that sees the different cultural groups as elements that disturb the social and cultural balance that the society is accustomed to. The "other"– the individual or group – is tolerated if it bends to one's own designs, and if it tacitly accepts submission, stimulating either subtly or openly the social docility, the accompanying subordination of those who claim to represent it, and the economic and political conditioning that seeks to perpetuate a limited presence to the space that was assigned to it.

On the other hand, these attempts to keep the "other" in his place meets fierce resistance from those who do not want to play the game of "landlord and tenant." Little by little the immigrant becomes aware of his rights and how to redeem them: he gradually stakes his territory. He has already understood the rules of the new game which was created to keep him at the bottom, in the lower rungs of the socio-economic classification that understands power as a function of initiative and material assets acquired through daily hard work (Porter, 1965). He no longer accepts as he did in the early years of hesitation, uncertainty, fear and insecurity (Porter, 1979).

When the immigrant reaches the desired level of economic security, he no longer wants to be seen as an outsider, an intruder, a stranger, a social outcast, conveniently identified with random identity cards, always provided, even in this case, "from within" the host society. From this realization begins the transition from a liminal space (the immigrant is no longer an "Italian citizen" and is not yet, or does not feel, "Canadian") to where he has already delimited his sphere of action. After economic consolidation, he moves into the social, which is indispensable to rise further, even though he may be limited to remaining within his own group for several years.

Next comes the political and cultural, through choices and loyalty to this or that party or trade union; to this or that candidate or representative of the trade union, which better reflects the aspirations of the groups; here we are talking about institutions and structures for the whole group, which begin to attract the attention of the host society, even with mixed apprehension and barely concealed admiration.

By now it is clear and demonstrable that immigrants have houses, apartments, buildings, their own centres that house social and sporting clubs; homes for the elderly and the disabled; property and possessions scattered everywhere; and that the family income is at the level of the

national average (Statistics Canada, 1988), that the children and grand-children of immigrants, born and educated in the host country have broken through as professionals in almost all sectors of Canadian national life; that travelling for pleasure or business is now part of the "social norm" for the majority of our families; that the transient issue of immigration had ceased a long time ago to make way for the integra-tion of all, born or not born in the country, thanks to the human matu-rity of the latter, who accepted the first, although knowing that for a long time they were not appreciated, not to mention ignored or rejected. It was common to hear, in Toronto, "You ethnics are taking over."

It goes without saying that the host society has finally understood and accepted, though reluctantly, that among those who came from Italy during the last six or seven decades, a very strong group had formed: they were determined to remain in Canada, to put down roots, to grow and to expand. From that moment the host society and that society which stems from the hundreds of thousands of our people, who arrived here, came together to understand each other better and to recognize the history of so many of our compatriots, and the society which they formed.

From that moment, the individual stories of our emigrants-immi-grants "entered the collective myth," a "myth" that is a little bit the col-lective consciousness of Italy, the myth of the Americas, where one can-not "lose," even though many of our people had to give up the success that the "myth" demanded and hope for it for their children and descendants: a real myth, a "myth of another world." It remains so because, until now, access to the history of our country or of Canada was denied.

Works Cited

Brinley Thomas. *International Migration and Economic Development.* Paris: UNESCO, 1961.

Colangelo, Aldo. *Sole senza Sole.* Toronto: Edizioni Docet, 1998.

Porter, John. *The Vertical Mosaic, An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965.

———. *Canadian Character in The Twentieth Century.* Toronto: Gage Press, 1979.

Statistics Canada. *Current Demographic Analysis, Income of Immigrants in Canada. A Census Data Analysis. Statistics Canada.* Ottawa: May 1988 (data confirmed by the 1991 Canada Census).