

The Italian entrepreneurs' Rush towards Romania

Lynda DEMATTEO



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Trails and tales of Gold Fever

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Lynda DEMATTEO

A researcher at the *Laboratoire d'Anthropologie des Institutions et des Organisations Sociales* (LAIOS, EHESS-CNRS, Paris), she is the author of a PhD dissertation on the Northern League, published in 2007 by the CNRS publishing house: *L'idiotie en politique. Subversion et néo-populisme en Italie* [Idiocy in Politics. Subversion and neo-populism in Italy]. She pursues research on the practices and political representations which escape institutionnal frames in contemporary Europe.

Table of contents of the Study

I - The “myth of the North-East” or wild capitalism in Europe

- 1.1 Padania, an anti-nation
- 1.2 In a league of their own
- 1.3 The “invisible secession” or the entrepreneurs’ flight to the East
- 1.4 The thrill of adventure and the lure of profits
- 1.5 Narrations and counter-narrations in the North-East

II – The Rush towards the East

- 2.1 Genealogy of the Italo-Romanian economic space
- 2.2 The return of the Italian pioneers
- 2.3 The Banat, a Romanian El Dorado
- 2.4 The Italians of Timișoara: a diffracted community

III - Globalisation made in Italy

- 3.1 The effacement of Romanian workers
- 3.2 The merchandization of women
- 3.3 Recycling, waste trafficking and “trash regions”
- 3.4 The bosses’ rebellion

As early as the end of the 1980s, quite a few Italian entrepreneurs made the gamble of setting up in Romania. The testimonies of these unlikely “pioneers” of liberalism outline the new contours of a Europe in the midst of mutation. Conducted within the frame of the *European Works* project, coordinated by Aziliz Gouez, this study throws light on the economic and cultural links forged between Italy and Romania since the Fall of the Berlin Wall. In so doing, we sought to remedy the lack of cognition and recognition affecting the new transcultural spaces surfacing within the enlarged European Union. To evoke reciprocal influences, and the spaces where borders fade and become fluid still seems problematic – as demonstrated by the wave of xenophobia which afflicts Romanians in Italy today.

Nationalistic tensions prevent us from grasping the full scope of the ongoing transformations. The opening up of borders in the Union of 27 has enabled the emergence of new transnational economic zones which shake our political conceptions. The traditional idea of territorial sovereignty is being redefined. New socio-economic ensembles appear, the contours of which are difficult to pin down. In such circumstances political anthropology shows its worth, as a way to examine these shifts happening at the infra- and supra-national levels and escaping the institutional control of states. Within the enlarged Union, it is not only politics, but also the strategies of individual economic actors, which give shape and meaning to the space: private interest frees itself from collective constraints and organises, in a novel way, new spaces. Pre-existing as well as unprecedented forms of belonging can thus be expressed as a result of this emancipation of economy.

Thus we looked into two complex regions which connect different cultural spheres: the North-East of Italy, at the crossroads of Southern and Central Europe; and the Romanian Banat, which links up Central Europe and the Balkans. These pivotal regions are today taking opportunity of the opening up of Europe’s internal borders so as to redefine their strategic position and rewrite their histories. On the one side is the Banat, on the other Veneto, Lombardy, Trentino Alto-Adige (Südtirol), and Friuli – all of which were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and today find a historic chance to renew bonds which were broken, or at least impeded, by the Iron Curtain. It is this transition that we wish to relate.

“Trevisoara”: the coming together of Treviso and Timișoara

Today the economic relations between Italy and Romania are characterised by two main movements: the establishment of numerous Italian manufacturing plants in the Banat region of western Romania; and, from 2002 onwards, the *en masse* arrival in Italy of Romanian workers (who often hail from the country's East). This space of relations is described as an “archipelago of production” by Ferruccio Gambino and Devi Sacchetto, two sociologists at the University of Padua. It is an interlacing of exchanges connecting two productive regions which are geographically non-contiguous. Such complex systems often remain understudied in comparison with those of multinational corporations, which utilize more standardised organizational and logistical procedures. Such webs of exchange – the economic scope of which is difficult to measure (either because they are less important or because they follow illegal channels) are extremely rich from a social and cultural point of view, and they come to constitute spaces which have their own structures of power.

The business trips of the Italians are usually defined as of the “commuter” variety (generally with a weekly frequency). Rare are those who decide to settle in Romania, unless they marry a Romanian woman. As for the Romanian emigration to Italy, it is “circular” – either seasonal, according to economic needs, or temporary, in accordance with personal projects. These trips back and forth are facilitated by the regional airline *Carpatair* and the low-cost carriers (*Ryanair*, *Wizz Air*, etc.) which fly routes between Italy and Romania. We are looking not so much at structured communities (Romanian in Italy and Italian in Romania) as at an ensemble of criss-crossing movements which together come to constitute a transcultural economic space. Thus, for twenty years now, Italians and Romanians have been working together in ways which have benefited both sides.

Particularly violent news stories have hindered the formation of an accurate representation of these new Italo-Romanian relationships. Often the Italian media criticise the negative aspects of globalisation and stir up fears, without taking the full measure of the extent of the ongoing industrial transition across the continent. Here, conversely, by paying attention to the economic actors, we highlight that the

links forged between the two countries, despite obvious asymmetries, have contributed to a certain wealth transfer (in terms of investment, but also of technical and professional skills) and favoured a rebalancing between East and West. To what extent do Italian industrial districts constitute a development model for Eastern Europe? Is the transplant fruitful? Should we not consider the new interdependence between Italy and Romania as an opportunity for progress in both countries, rather than simply a process of deterioration – with, on one hand, the flight of Italian factories (implying a fall in quality standards), and on the other the emigration to the West of the most qualified Romanian workers (who subsequently find themselves underemployed in the host country)?

We grasped the cultural landscape within which these asymmetric exchanges are being established by means of a series of interviews with Italian entrepreneurs operating in Romania. We wanted to relate their Romanian experience and to understand how this could alter their vision of Italy and Europe. Their constant trips back and forth make of these entrepreneurs trans-migrants; this substantially modifies their point of view and determines a certain distanciation from conceptions widely held in Italy. They discuss ironically the fear of the Romanian which has become widespread in their country over the last few years, and demonstrate a renewed interest in the fate of Europe. It is not by chance that they supported Romania's accession to the EU, whereas many Italians still openly worry about the consequences of this membership.

The myth of the North-East

We wanted first of all to understand the narrative structure of this new transnational space. As a starting point we analysed what in Italy is known as the “myth of the North-East”, by looking at the writings of the Italian federalists, and the biting critical dark thrillers from authors associated with the protest movements of the 1970s. This myth can be understood as the Italian transposition of the myth of the American West. In 1996 the well-known journalist Gian Antonio Stella recounts his trip around the North-East of Italy in a book called *Schei* (“money” in the Veneto dialect). He tells of incredible economic success stories and suggests that the

Venetians have finally found America in their own country – they are no longer obliged to emigrate as in the past. This region was indeed one of the poorest in Italy until the early 1960s, and the place of origin of a good proportion of Italian emigrants. For this reason also, the myth of America is part of Veneto's culture. Venetian entrepreneurs are currently transposing this historical experience to the East and call “*Far East*” those former countries of the Communist Bloc which passed within less than ten years from “real socialism” to “real capitalism”. For them this is a “New Frontier” at the heart of Europe.

The construction of the “myth of the North-East” cannot be dissociated from the emergence of the Northern League, to the extent that the “narratives of success” go hand in hand with the separatist ideology of this party. The Northern League is the fruit of a particular kind of capitalism, that of the *Terza Italia* (Third Italy) – which is neither the metropolitan North (Genoa, Turin, Milan), nor the *Mezzogiorno*, but rather the provincial North which experienced late but spectacular development. The “myth of the North-East” is the expression of an impressive revenge against poverty, which unfortunately too often translates into a boorish selfishness and hostility towards national institutions (which long neglected these regions and scorned their inhabitants). In a sense the Rush towards Romania is a consequence of the process of political detachment of which the Northern League was the catalyst. The political scientist Ilvo Diamanti thus sees in the flight of Italian industrialists towards Romania an “invisible secession”.

It is especially remarkable that the Italian regions which are projected most towards the outside world are also those which produce the most xenophobic discourse. But this contradiction between internationalisation and xenophobic reactions is only superficial. Populisms indirectly serve certain economic interests, even when they deny transnational realities. In refusing to grant the most elementary rights to foreigners, in trying to limit their movements and in keeping them in clandestine situations, they favour low wage policies meant to encourage discipline and a hard work ethic in the battle against Chinese competition. This aggressive conception of trade relationships makes of the economic system a zero-sum game (what one wins, the other one loses) and leads to economic nationalism and imperialism.

The “return” of the Italian pioneers

We also looked into the history of Italo-Romanian links. Indeed these connections go back further than one might imagine: Italians have been present in the Banat since this territory was seized from the Ottomans by the Austrians, at the beginning of the 18th century. Venetians and Friulians in particular participated in the process of colonisation and economic development encouraged by the Empress Maria-Theresa, which made the Banat a multi-ethnic and prosperous region. These economic and cultural links were further strengthened during the second half of the 19th century (the first period of globalisation) up until the Second World War. Timișoara was thus home to a large and active Italian community.

The defeat of fascisms, and the advent of communism in Romania have considerably hindered these historic ties between the two Latin countries, without completely obliterating them. Italians were quick to “return” to the Banat, even before the fall of Ceaucescu’s regime. Already in the 1960s, Timișoara was a sex-tourism destination for Italian men. From the 1980s, the textile industries of the North-East made deals with Romanian state factories, subcontracting to them part of their production, which would then be finished and branded in Italy. With the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the economic relationships primed due to the communist regime’s corruption have intensified, to the point where today they represent a veritable cross-border production system – a catalyst for the spectacular development of the Timișoara region. Having been isolated for years by the communist dictatorship, the Romanians of the Banat today celebrate the presence of foreign investors, and they reassert the value of their multicultural past in order to better affirm their European vocation.

“The pioneer spirit” that the Italian entrepreneurs have demonstrated in their move to the East of Europe is certainly admirable, but one cannot condone some of the social consequences of the economic asymmetries which characterize this Italo-Romanian sphere. Thus this study highlights some of the most worrying aspects of globalisation as it unfolds in Romania. In particular the lack of recognition affecting Romanian workers in foreign production units, and the economic

exploitation of women – a phenomenon which is not reducible to prostitution but also encompasses a wide range of domestic jobs nowadays externalised (child and elder care, etc.)

Globalisation *made in Italy*

As the Romanian anthropologist Smaranda Vultur puts it: “In Romania, ‘global’ equals ‘Italian’”. Romania’s Italian factories are places of professional acculturation, a phenomenon analysed in the economic anthropology of Cristina Papa and Veronica Redini. Romanians who work for Italian companies become “invisible”, much like their emigrant compatriots, since they must conform to Italian working models and standards, and also renounce all signs of their involvement, since the products they make are stamped “Made in Italy”. In the minds of Italian technicians working in Romania, their home country is the pole of beauty, while Romania is the pole of ugliness. One word sums up this idea: the “*romenata*”. This is what Italian technicians call a badly made thing. The expression conveys the low esteem in which Romanians’ work is held, even though many prestige Italian brands (*Armani, Max Mara, Prada, Geox*, etc.) entrust the making of their goods to Romanian hands. Paradoxically, the more production becomes internationalised, the more the marketing emphasises the geographic origin and local identity of products (it is a certain image of Italy which is being sold). Company relocations are thus concealed: products move across borders anonymously, to be then re-localized through marketing signs for commercialisation on the global market. Is the Romanian destined to remain in the shadow of the Italian?

Romanian women are the first to undergo this process of effacement – those making up an obedient workforce in Romania’s Italian factories, but also all those employed as home helpers in Italy today. It must be remembered that in 1989 Romania’s economic situation was comparable to that of Western Europe in 1945. Under such conditions one can imagine how families might envisage selling all the services that women can provide. Even today, care work done by women abroad is seen as a valuable resource by Romanian leaders, as a response to the needs of Western countries whose population is ageing and where women tend to offload domestic work. Women from Eastern Europe, often illegally employed, provide

cheap labour for domestic work and care for the elderly. In Italy these foreign women, the *badanti*, are now part of the family landscape, just like the maids of the past. They are intimately familiar but socially invisible.

Romania's development is sustained not only by the money that expatriates send home but also by a whole economy of recycling, which reveals both positive aspects and more worrying sides. Infrastructure from towns in the West is reused in Romania: the trams in the streets of Timișoara come from Bremen, and the buses were bought from the town of Padua. Western companies recycle their obsolete machinery by selling it or transferring it to factories in the East. They also commercialize in the East products which no longer have a market demand in the West. Mafias are amongst the main beneficiaries of these economic logics, and they prosper in the East through various recycling activities (stolen goods and cars, money laundering, etc.). Finally, one must mention the problem of waste transfer and re-treatment, in a country without the suitable infrastructure and where the elite is more concerned with economic growth than by environmental quality. This trafficking of industrial waste runs the risk of transforming whole swathes of Romania into "trash regions". Certain facts seem to justify the words of one entrepreneur we interviewed: "Romania is Naples made nation".

Perhaps surprisingly, we heard many criticisms from Italian entrepreneurs operating in Romania – the very actors in the process of capitalistic transfers to that country. To give voice to a plurality of views – often discordant – instead of the statistics or ideological rhetoric that we are used to hearing whenever the subject of industrial relocation arises was a main objective of this ethnographic study. The entrepreneurs wanted to share with us their concerns, such as Antonio Gambirasio, a textile businessman based in Romanian Moldova, who worries about the effects of the economic crisis unfolding in Romania:

"Looking at the situation of this country, one can get quite an accurate idea of what is happening in the world today. We went into a country, we "liberated" it from a tyrant who up till then had been rather convenient for everyone, and we passed to them a system which was already going under in our own country. In the end we created a country where people live like refugees, only in their own land. We deprived them of their autonomy. Now, with this

crisis, there will be plenty of work for psychologists in Romania. Because if we in the West are used to crises, to the fluctuations of the economy, in the East they have the illusion that everything is easy, that it's El Dorado, and today they are indebted to the point that they risk bankruptcy. Until now their main source of income was money transfers. Until last year, all the honest Romanians in Europe sent home 400 or 500 Euro each. And now that they're going to be laid off, what will become of Romania?"

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The testimonies we gathered over the course of our research raises a number of new questions. The imperialistic projections of some Italians, in association with an often-proclaimed feeling of cultural proximity, make for a surprising phenomenon. Italians present themselves as the Romanians' "American cousins". In a sense they reprise the role that the latter have played in their own country in the aftermath of the Nazi-Fascist defeat. Perhaps the Italians see a symbolic revenge in this – a revenge over their own prior poverty, and also over the defeat of 1945. The tendency to identify with Americans has the effect of obscuring the policies of Fascist Italy in Eastern Europe. This strange reworking of collective memory might help in understanding how Italians today see their past, after the historic watershed of 1989. We have not yet fully measured the full political and cultural implications of the disappearance of the communist system. As the Italian sociologist Devi Sacchetto reminds us on the subject of company relocations: "Behind the entrepreneurs and the managerial staff there is a great black hole: the end of real socialism, but even before that the loss of all forms of emancipation which do not derive solely from the acquisition of money and power" (Sacchetto, 2008, p. 142). The decline of the great utopias is omnipresent and today overhangs the expression of the possible in the politics of Europe.