

## "What have I done to deserve this?". Young Italian migrants in Britain narrate their reaction to Brexit and plans to the future

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**“WHAT HAVE I DONE TO DESERVE THIS?”**

**YOUNG ITALIAN MIGRANTS IN BRITAIN NARRATE**

**THEIR REACTION TO BREXIT AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE\***

1. INTRODUCTION. – The result of the referendum held in the United Kingdom on 23 June 2016 on the country’s future membership of the European Union produced a narrow majority in favour of “Leave” (51.9%) over “Remain” (48.1%). This result confounded pollsters’ predictions (which had been for a “Remain” victory, albeit by a relatively small margin), and came as a surprise even to the leading voices of the “Brexit” (standing for “British exit”) campaign. Given the momentous nature of this decision, reversing more than four decades of the UK’s close association with the EU, an enormous and wide-ranging debate has ensued. This debate has taken place – and is still ongoing – at multiple levels: in politics (most obviously in the tortuous negotiations with the EU which still have much to resolve), in the media, in academia, and in all manner of conversations which take place on an everyday basis throughout the country.

If the referendum result was a surprise for the majority of the British population, it was even more shocking for the 3.2 million EU migrants living in the UK at the time. As part of a discourse about “uncontrolled immigration” from the EU which was at the heart of the “Leave” campaign, these migrants were central to the Brexit debate yet they were politically voiceless as they could not vote in the referendum (1). In this article, we chronicle the impact of Brexit on one “typical” group of young EU migrants in Britain – Italians (Ricucci, 2017). The research material for this paper derives from a Horizon 2020 project called YMOBILITY (“Youth Mobility: Maximising Opportunities for Individuals, Labour Markets and Regions in Europe”), details of which will be elaborated later.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section we say more about Brexit, building on the recent paper in this journal by Picascia *et al.* (2016) and on other key literature from geography, sociology and politics (especially Lulle *et al.*, 2018; Morgan, 2017; Outhwaite, 2016). We connect this analysis to studies on Italian emigration in recent years pursued by several scholars (Bonifazi and Livi Bacci, 2014; Gjergji, 2015; Sanfilippo, 2017; Tirabassi and del Prá, 2014). We resist a full diagnosis of the Brexit “event”, since this would lead us away from the main theme of this paper, which is the views and reactions of a sample of young Italians interviewed in the London region before and after the June 2016 referendum.

The subsequent two sections of the paper describe the wider YMOBILITY research project, and the methods used to elicit young-adult Italians’ perceptions and experiences of Brexit. As the title of the paper indicates, we focus on two main dimensions emerging from the

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\* This article is based on a presentation made by the authors to the session “Negotiating Brexit: migrants’ spatialities and identities in a changing Europe”, Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society, London, 29 August to 1 September 2017.

<sup>1</sup> Exceptions being UK-resident Irish citizens who, ever since Irish independence, have had full voting rights and the rights to come and go, and to work in the UK, as well as UK-resident citizens of Malta and Cyprus because of their membership of the Commonwealth.

interview narratives collected: the respondents' feelings during the making of the Brexit campaign and in the aftermath of the referendum, and the impact they thought it would have on their plans for the future.

In synthesis, our findings show that Brexit triggered a resentful and angry reaction amongst Italian migrants, who felt betrayed by the result. Moreover, the vote marked a shift in their self-perception, and in their awareness of the shift in the way they were perceived within the immigration landscape of the UK. Before Brexit, as “old” EU immigrants (i.e. from the Western European countries which were early members of the EU), Italians – like the French, Germans, Dutch etc. – had enjoyed a status of relative invisibility (Favell, 2008). After Brexit, our interviewees started to feel, and be made to feel, more visible and targeted as “unwelcome”. In an attempt to respond to the increasing stigmatisation of EU migrants apparently legitimised by the Brexit result, they employed a number of rhetorical strategies (Moroşanu and Fox, 2013; Ricucci, 2017), including emphasising their “rights to belong” but also distinguishing themselves from “other” EU migrants from the “Eastern” countries whom they associated with negative stereotypes and who they blamed for the anti-immigrant backlash which stoked the Brexit movement. Concerning their plans for the future, Brexit has not (yet) changed their perspectives fundamentally. This is because, at the time of writing, two years on from the referendum, the precise nature of their rights to stay in Britain, and what they have to do to secure those rights, are still not transparently clear. In some cases, intentions to settle longer-term are put on hold pending further clarity in the outcome of the Brussels negotiations; in other cases planned moves, e.g. to return, are accelerated. Gallo and Staniscia (2016, 358) note that the young Italians are “born European, with a sense of European identity and previous experiences abroad” and this is exactly what allows their vision of the future as open. This openness to return to Italy or to move to another country (see also Zurla, 2014) was indeed identified in our sample too.

2. BREXIT: AN EVENT OF “RUPTURE”. – We see Brexit as a moment of “rupture”, both in Britain’s geopolitical positionality within Europe and, more pointedly, given the aims of this paper, in the lives of EU migrants present within the UK (2). It has produced an outpouring of political, media and public debate ranging from extreme consternation and expressions of economic doom to jingoistic statements of national pride and self-righteousness. Just two examples to illustrate the extremes. On a recent visit to London to mark the opening of the new European headquarters of his media empire, former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg opined that “Brexit is the single stupidest thing a country has ever done to itself... apart from the election of Donald Trump as US president” (3). Contrast this iconic quote with the celebratory remarks over the planned restoration of the traditional dark blue British passport, which prime minister Theresa May lauded as “an expression of our independence and sovereignty” (4).

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<sup>2</sup> Also affected are the lives and rights of the estimated 1.2 million British citizens living in the EU. Like EU migrants in Britain, they are a heterogenous population, although the largest socio-demographic group are retirement migrants living in Spain. This population is not our concern in this paper, although the ongoing Brexit negotiations have linked the outcome of their rights and futures with those of EU migrants in Britain.

<sup>3</sup> This speech was widely reported, for instance in *The Guardian*, 24 October 2017; *The Independent*, 24 October 2017; *Politico*, 26 October 2017. Bloomberg also reflected on the question: “Would I have done it [made the £1 billion investment in London] if I knew they were going to drop out [of Europe]? Maybe I wouldn’t have...”

<sup>4</sup> As reported in *The Observer*, 24 December 2017. This move was criticised even from within the Conservative Party, for instance by Charles Powell, former aide to Margaret Thatcher, who said the clamour for the old-style document was “part of the nostalgia on which the predominantly elderly Brexit constituency thrives”.

For the sake of completeness, we now sketch in some background information. Britain joined the EU, or the European Economic Community as it then was, in 1973 in the Community's first enlargement, along with Ireland and Denmark. Although the UK was cautious about the next, southward enlargement of the EU in the 1980s, fearing large inflows of immigrants from the poorer economies of Greece, Spain and Portugal (flows which did not materialise), it was a leading voice in favour of the eastward expansion of the EU, partly because a geographical widening of the EU would counterbalance any trend of deepening political integration, which Britain was opposed to. Thus the 2016 referendum brusquely interrupted a long process, lasting over four decades, of the "Europeanisation" of the UK. Geopolitically, Britain's progressive European orientation compensated for its declining influence in the rest of the world through the loss of its colonial empire in the early postwar decades; although in other respects – language, education, culture etc. – its postcolonial influence remained strong.

However, the referendum did not happen in a vacuum. On the contrary, some signs of an increasing securitisation and an emerging xenophobic climate in Europe and beyond had already appeared in 2014 with the Swiss referendum "against mass immigration" – arguably the European political event closest to Brexit. On the 9<sup>th</sup> February 2014, 50.3% of the national population approved the proposal launched by the national conservative Swiss People's Party of reducing immigration through a partial restriction on the free movement agreed in the 2002 treaty between Switzerland and the EU. More recently, further evidence of the anti-immigrant, neo-nationalist turn in European politics was seen in recent general elections in Italy, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2018, and Hungary, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2018.

Shifting back to the UK, the two main British political parties have always been divided over Europe. The right wing of the "Tory" (Conservative) Party has traditionally been "Eurosceptic", holding on to an outdated, colonialist view of Britain's position in the world, whilst the left wing of the Labour Party has periodically been opposed to the EU, which it sees as a front for free-market economics and corporate capitalism. Meanwhile the sudden rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), steered by its outspoken leader Nigel Farage, gained traction as a one-issue party – the mission of leaving the EU. In order to placate the Eurosceptic Tories, and fearful of the corrosive potential of UKIP to capture votes over the twin themes of Europe and immigration, prime minister David Cameron rashly made an election pledge to hold a referendum on EU membership. The plan backfired, Cameron resigned, and Theresa May emerged as prime minister after an extraordinary *mise en scene* in which the leading candidate Boris Johnson was metaphorically knifed in the back by his rival Michael Gove, a political act which also destroyed the latter's credibility as leader.

After this brief review of the political background to the referendum, how can we explain its outcome? Picascia *et al.* (2016) present several diagnostic correlations which we can use to explore some of the reasons for the unexpected result. The strongest correlation ( $r = 0.86$ ) is that between the "Remain" vote share and the percentage of graduates in each electoral district ( $n = 382$ ). Almost as strong is the inverse relationship: between the percentage vote for "Leave" and the share of the population with no academic or professional qualifications ( $r = 0.76$ ). Other correlations produced by Picascia *et al.* are less strong and need to be evaluated in a more nuanced way. The variable of "age" (older voters more likely to vote "Leave", younger voters for "Remain") is partly explained by its autocorrelation with education, and it also varies geographically, being much stronger in London ( $r = 0.62$ ) than in the rest of the country ( $r = 0.22$ ).

Hence we see that geography is vital for interpreting Brexit (Morgan, 2017). At the level of the UK's constituent "nations", England and Wales voted in favour of Brexit; Scotland and Northern Ireland wanted to stay in the EU. In terms of the urban-rural divide, cosmopolitan London, some other metropolitan areas in England, Wales (Cardiff, Leeds, Leicester, Bristol), and smaller university cities (Oxford, Cambridge, York, Exeter, Brighton etc.) voted "Remain"; older and smaller industrial cities, especially these in Northern and Eastern England, voted "Leave". Some of the highest rates of "Leave" voting were in traditional working-class Labour strongholds where high rates of unemployment and social deprivation caused a wave of populist alienation and protest against the political class (Calhoun, 2016; Hearn, 2016). The EU and especially immigration were seen as somehow "responsible" for this malaise, a process of scapegoating fomented by UKIP propaganda and the right-wing tabloid press (Bhambra, 2016). In other areas, on the other hand, a high percentage of foreign-born residents correlated with higher votes for the "Remain" camp (5). This included the cases of Brighton and London, where the field research for this paper was done.

3. "YMOBILITY". – Material for this paper was collected as part of the UK's participation in the H2020 YMOBILITY project, which involves a comprehensive and multi-method programme of research exploring issues relating to young people's migration within the EU. The project runs for three years 2015-2018 and is coordinated by the University of Rome "La Sapienza": see [www.ymobility.eu](http://www.ymobility.eu) for full details. The research consortium covers nine partner-countries: three are countries predominantly of youth immigration (the UK, Germany, Sweden), three are countries mainly of youth emigration (Latvia, Slovakia, Romania), and three (Italy, Spain, Ireland) have a combination of inflows and outflows of young migrants, partly related to the impact of the post-2008 economic crisis.

For the qualitative interview part of the YMOBILITY programme of research, the age criteria were that participants should have migrated to the UK between the ages of 18 and 35 years and be no older than 39 at the time of the interview survey, which was carried out between late 2015 and early 2017 (6). Interviews were administered in the London region which, for our purposes, includes not only the metropolis itself but also a wider area functionally linked to the capital by daily commuting. The research considers three categories of migrant: students (including doctoral researchers), highly skilled workers (mainly graduate-level professionals and those with intermediate socio-occupational status), and lower-skilled workers (unskilled, semi-skilled or skilled manual and service workers) without higher-level qualifications (7).

One of the key objectives of YMOBILITY has been to investigate, via a total of 820 in-depth interviews carried out across the nine countries, the reasons why young people move,

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<sup>5</sup> The relationship between presence of migrants and referendum voting trends varies geographically. The highest "Leave" votes were recorded in Eastern towns where there had been a rapid growth in the presence of Polish and other East European agricultural and food industry workers since 2004. By contrast, some high-immigration cities such as London, Leicester and Leeds voted "Remain". Picascia *et al.* (2016, p. 625) calculated an overall negative correlation of -0.30 for the relationship between percent foreign-born and voting "Leave".

<sup>6</sup> The age definitions are not unproblematic but are used to set the broad parameters of the migrant population under investigation. We, and the YMOBILITY project at large, recognise that "youth" is an extremely flexible notion and that life-stage, especially in an age where the transition from "youth" to "full adulthood" is often delayed and subject to stasis and even reversals (see Worth, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> The matching of education level with skill level in the labour market is potentially problematic too, especially when young migrants face language barriers and migrate across sharp economic and wage gradients. Thus it is common for highly educated migrants from the post-2004 and post-2007 "accession" countries like Poland and Romania to accept low-skilled jobs in the "West".

the channels through which they do so (the education system, the labour market, family and friendship networks), the nature of their experiences in terms of material and emotional wellbeing (career progress, personal development, identity etc.), and spatial and temporal perspectives on the future – do they intend to stay in their chosen host country or do they plan to return-migrate to their origin country or to onward-migrate to another European or, possibly, non-European country? In the migrant-sending countries, quota-samples of return-migrants were also interviewed.

For the UK, 120 interviews were collected from six nationalities of migrants: 20 each from Italy, Spain, Ireland, Latvia, Slovakia and Romania. According to the time-line of the overall project, these interviews were programmed for the period September 2015 to May 2016. One of the obvious dangers of primary research is that data collection becomes a victim of its own timing. So it was with this research, as the unexpected Brexit result threw up into the air some of the findings of the interviews, as well as disrupting the migrant-lives of the interviewees, many of whom, as we shall see, entered an existential crisis with the “Brexit moment”. Accordingly, we decided to re-interview, post-Brexit, a share of the original interviewees.

Our article aims at providing an overview of young Italian migrants’ perceptions on Brexit. The project was conducted using exclusively qualitative methods. Therefore, more than providing an analysis on how Brexit changed Italian migrants’ migration plans, our objective is to explore the informants’ feelings during the making of the Brexit campaign and following the outcome of the referendum. Our hypothesis was that the strong sentiments and reactions provoked by this crucial event would also reflect on the participants’ plans for the future.

4. METHODS. – For this paper we draw on the narrative contents of 35 interviews with 28 Italian migrants who were living and either working or studying in the wider London region. The main location for interviews outside of London was Brighton, which is less than an hour by train from the capital. We need to bear in mind this regional specificity, especially in the context of Brexit, for much of London, and even more so Brighton, voted in favour of “Remain”, as noted above.

As part of the main YMOBILITY interview survey, 20 young-adult Italians were interviewed in the London region during late 2015 and early 2016. These interviews covered a rather full range of topics relating to the participants’ life-histories, migration trajectories, and experiences in the UK. Those interviews administered in 2016, when the date of the referendum was already known (it was announced in February), included some reference at the end of the interview schedule about the possible outcome of the vote, but since at that stage it was widely anticipated that Britain would vote to stay in the EU, this question generated scarce data.

On average, these first-round interviews lasted about one hour. They were set up and digitally recorded subject to the participants’ approval under the principle of “informed consent”. The sample was equally divided by gender and, reflecting what was understood from other literature about the social and educational status of recent young Italian migrants in the UK (Colpi, 2017; Conti, 2012; King *et al.*, 2016; Scotto 2015), contained more graduate-educated workers (10) than lower-educated (5) or students (5). The non-student interviewees worked in a variety of occupations including chef, waiter, architect, accountant, and postdoctoral researcher. The participants’ geographical origin was evenly distributed in the Italian peninsula, both in terms of the North/South divide and in relation to big cities or small towns. Several scholars (Banifazi and Livi Bacci, 2014; Caneva, 2016; Gallo and Staniscia,

2016; Montanari and Staniscia, 2017) point out how Italian emigration in recent years has actually changed from the traditional paradigm which framed the Southern underdeveloped areas as the main location of outward migration. On the contrary, even areas that were prosperous prior to the 2007–2008 economic crisis (mainly the Northern regions) have become territories of emigration.

When we contacted the first-wave participants for a second interview post-Brexit, eight agreed and were duly interviewed again; the remaining 12 had either already left the UK, did not reply, or declined a second interview. In order to counteract this somewhat disappointing result, another seven new respondents were added. Like the initial interviewees, these were approached via a variety of methods, including the authors' personal friendship and contact networks, Facebook groups, and snowball sampling. Like the initial wave of interviews, these second-wave interviews must be regarded as a "convenience sample", useful for identifying trends and reactions to the "event" of Brexit but not a statistically representative sample. For these new interviewees, the same ethical guidelines were used to ensure informed consent and permission to record and transcribe. Given that long first interviews had already taken place, the re-interviews were focused solely on questions relating to Brexit, and hence were fairly short, 20-30 minutes on average. For the new post-Brexit interviews, some background biographical and migration questions had to be covered before the Brexit-specific ones. Therefore these interviews were of intermediate length: 30-40 minutes.

Despite attempts to keep the sample distribution broad across the three categories (students, higher and lower skilled), an element of respondent self-selection was unavoidable in the second-wave, post-Brexit interviews. The "respondent-driven" sample was almost entirely made up of higher-skilled and somewhat older migrants, aged 23-36 years old. We posit that this socio-demographic profile was more receptive than others to the request for a (re)interview because of a greater familiarity with academic research (cf. Staniscia, 2018).

The post-Brexit interviews were organised around five main questions:

1. Did you expect the result of the referendum?
2. What was your immediate reaction and how do you interpret the result?
3. What do you think of the new socio-political situation in Britain?
4. Has your sense of "home" or "belonging" changed?
5. Has Brexit changed your plans for the future, for instance about staying shorter or longer term, or returning home?

Two final methodological points. All interviews were carried out in Italian, and then simultaneously translated and transcribed into English for future comparative analysis (8). Second, in the quotes that follow, pseudonyms are used in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

After the interview, we kept in informal touch with nearly all the interviewees through social media. While, before the interview, Facebook had been used to simply check their interest and availability in taking part in the study, after that it became an easy means through which to monitor important changes in their life, such as transfers to other countries or simply

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<sup>8</sup> The first-named author carried out all the interviews and transcriptions, and also produced a preliminary analysis for this paper. The second author's role was to design the project and the interview schedule, to assist with interviewee contacts, and to work further on the empirical analysis. The actual writing of the paper was a shared effort.

their opinions on Brexit-related political events. At the time of writing, all the participants have “kept their word” in relation to their future plans (cf. also Zurla, 2014): those who planned to move have done it (two of them – a couple – have moved back to Italy and one has moved to Edinburgh), those who were not sure on what to do are still evaluating their next move and the one participant who envisioned his life in the UK has not changed his mind; on the contrary, his partner has recently had a second baby and they are well settled in Britain.

5. FINDINGS. – We organise the results of our analysis of the interview narratives in three subsections corresponding to the key themes signalled in the title of this paper: Italian immigrants’ initial reaction to Brexit; their subsequent strategies of interpreting and coping with the new situation; and their plans for the future. Under each of these broad headings a number of narrative subthemes and repeated key-words clearly emerged: shock and horror at the result; the “stupidity” of the British electorate; the cynicism and hypocrisy of the pro-Brexit politicians (and yet an appreciation of why Britain still feels itself to be “different” from the rest of Europe); post-Brexit feelings of betrayal and rejection; a culture of “blame” projected towards “East European” immigrants; and continuing uncertainty over what the future holds, both politically for Britain within Europe and for themselves as migrants whose security of stay has been dislodged by the “Brexit moment” and its lingering aftermath.

5.1 *Reactions to the referendum: Brexit as shock and betrayal.* – In response to the first question, which was about anticipating the Brexit result, nearly all of the interviewees thought that “Remain” would win. In doing so, they reflected the general view of the “informed” media (in the event not so well informed!) and the poll predictions. Their apparent confidence in the “stay” outcome was rooted partly in their own experience of “free movement”, including many who had been Erasmus students, and partly in their belief that Brexit would not happen “because it seemed so stupid”, prefiguring Michael Bloomberg’s iconoclastic remark quoted earlier.

One exception to the general expectation was Gabriella (age 32), who was combining working in a shop in Brighton with doing a part-time PhD. She based her prediction that “Leave” would win on a comparison with Italy under Berlusconi and the way that the witty and charismatic “Leave” politician Boris Johnson (currently foreign secretary in the May government) was known affectionately by his first name, just like “Silvio”. Here is an extended extract from her insightful narrative:

“Well, I talked to different people... both English, so people who could vote, and non-English – people at the university, even customers in the shop. And everyone said ‘Remain’ would win. For me, being a true pessimist, the feeling that ‘Leave’ would win was strong. Obviously not in Brighton but, for example, watching a few debates on TV and seeing a few things that I had seen in Italy, what happened with Berlusconi... For example, that debate on BBC... I watched just 20 minutes of it and then started crying; in those 20 minutes I realised ‘Leave’ would win. Every time that Boris spoke he was consulted as a friend, as the one who puts on a good show... while instead all the others were called by their surname in a more formal way. Which is exactly the same thing they used to do with Berlusconi... calling him Silvio... that’s the best way to make Silvo triumph, and it was the best way to make ‘Leave’ triumph”.



Apart from the sheer surprise element of the referendum result, the other immediate reactions were shock and outrage, which quickly developed into a sense of victimhood and betrayal. Many participants gave detailed descriptions of their behaviour on the night of the referendum; of how they followed the vote count with close attention and mounting anxiety; and then, the morning after, sharing the disturbing news with partners, housemates and friends. Flavia (29, postdoctoral researcher) described her immediate reaction in the following words:

“I woke up in the morning and... we had a WhatsApp group, and a friend texted us: ‘Sorry guys, we’re all out!’ And I felt... like shit”.

Like Flavia, many other interviewees used “embodied” terms to refer to their physical reaction to the result – “a kick in the stomach”, “a slap in the face” etc. Matteo (23, university student) echoed the feelings of many participants when he said he felt that Italians “were not welcome anymore” and had started to experience a new and unpleasant sensation of now being “visible”, or perhaps we should say “visibilised” by the referendum vote, in contrast to their “invisible” status previously (cf. Favell, 2008). Looking back a year or so to the referendum, Gabriella said:

“Those were bad days, very bad days... because you try not to take it personally. You think: ‘What have I done to deserve this?’ because it was clearly not a vote against the EU, it was a vote against immigrants”.

This shock and disappointment over Brexit was not only reserved for our Italian participants, it was also experienced by their fellow EU migrants (Lulle *et al.*, 2018) and shared by nearly half the UK population, especially those living in multicultural and cosmopolitan cities like London and the major university cities, where strong connections exist to the EU via business, student exchanges and staff appointments. As an illustration of this solidarity between sections of the UK population and EU migrants, Flavia reported, “My professor burst into tears in front of me!”

However, other sectors of British society were not so upset, and there has been a sharp increase in racist speech and hate crime since the referendum – documented by police statistics presented in reputable media sources such as *The Independent* and *Time* magazine (see Bulmar, 2007; John, 2017) (9). This issue was perceived at a general level by all interviewees, some of whom had friends, generally living elsewhere in the country, who had been the victims of racist slurs and attitudes. And one of the participants – Matteo – had been the target of a violent hate crime episode. Late one night, in a park in Brighton, he had been asked for cigarettes by a gang of local British teenagers: noticing his foreign accent and the fact that he was “not from here”, they beat him up and told him to “go back where you come from”.

The assault on Matteo was at the extreme end of Brexit-“legitimised” violence against Italians and other EU migrants (10), but all participants noticed a “change in the atmosphere” after Brexit. They attributed the higher visibility and frequency of aggressive behaviour to a tacit acceptance of racist speech and attitudes at the political level. Many of our informants

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<sup>9</sup> The terrorist attacks in London and Manchester, which coincided with the aftermath of Brexit, yet which were politically unconnected with it, probably also contributed to a climate of heightened xenophobia targeting immigrants in general and Muslims in particular.

<sup>10</sup> The incidence of racist language and physical attacks against the two largest and most stigmatised “Eastern” EU migrant groups in Britain, Poles and Romanians, has been much higher.

inscribed Brexit in a wider political framework, drawing parallels with the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in November 2016 and the rising support for far-right and nationalist parties across Europe.

5.2 *Strategies for dealing with the reality of Brexit.* – Once the initial shock had been digested, participants reacted by voicing several other narrative themes. One was anger, vented not just at those who voted for Brexit, but also at those supporting “Remain” who had not been assertive enough. This was often linked to a parallel narrative of self-righteousness, contrasting hard-working Italian and EU migrants with feckless locals who criticise migrants yet are lazy and live off benefits. Some extracts with the interview with Elisa (35), who came to England at the mature age of 32 and now works as a chef in a restaurant, are typical and revealing. First she sounds off about those who voted “Remain” but are seemingly in denial:

“... those who excused themselves because their nation behaved like shit... I met a lot of those people... I started to defend myself. And my self-defence consisted of ‘You say you’re sorry?’ Because this country doesn’t represent you anymore... Honey, I have 27 countries where to go, I have 27 destinations because I’m still a European citizen, I’m still part of Europe. You: where can you go?”

Then, in another angry rant, she remembered an incident when she was told off for speaking Italian to a friend by a passer-by in the street:

“He was one of those guys drinking beer from a can at 5pm, one of the classic ones who lives off benefits and criticises immigrants. Let’s be clear: I pay your benefits with my NINO [national insurance] and with my taxes. So you cannot tell me anything, really! Because immigrants here make a net contribution to the UK’s GDP, a big percentage!”

Gabriella reinforced this important narrative theme of “right to stay” because of her economic contribution, and the fact that she is not exploiting the UK health system in any way, ending her interview extract on a typical note of exasperation which reprises the headline title of this paper:

“We work, we study, we pay our taxes; it’s not true that we want your NHS [health service] because, if I could, I would fly home every time I have a cold. [...] So, the idea that I am in a country that I consider European and yet I am seen as an immigrant who steals your job, who comes here because this is a wonderful country [cynical tone]... I don’t know... and I don’t deserve it just because I wasn’t born here”.

Two other linked narrative tropes emerged as part of the participants’ strategy of dealing with, and explaining to themselves, their victimisation as a result of Brexit. These are the notion of Italians having a decades- (if not centuries-) long “culture of migration” (Sanfilippo 2017, 360), and, secondly, a line of argumentation that distinguishes them as “vintage” migrants from the post-2004 Eastern European *arrivistes*.

Young Italians today grow up in a country which has both a long history of emigration and a contemporary culture of youth migration and mobility (Parati, 2011; see also Horvath,

2008; Timmerman *et al.*, 2014). Specifically, Gjergji (2015), Ricucci (2017, 96) and Sanfilippo (2017, 367) point out that this tendency of the youth to migrate does not interest high-skilled migrants only – as the narrative of “brain-drain” suggests – but “simple talents” too; which we found reflected in our informants’ variety of backgrounds. Our interviewees were aware that, coming from one of the founder-members of the EU, they have long held the right to be freely mobile within Europe, and hence regard themselves as “old” migrants enjoying, until now, relative “invisibility” in the UK (Colpi, 2017; Favell, 2008; Ricucci, 2017). Moreover, Ricucci (2017) points out that, during her research on young Southern European migrants in London, not a single one of her interviewees used the word “migrant” or “immigrant”, thus deliberately detaching themselves from this category. The situation of migrants from the more recent members of the EU, especially Bulgaria and Romania, which joined in 2007, has been very different. Their reception has been characterised by a rather hostile attitude in Britain and other receiving countries in Western Europe (Moroşanu, 2012). Romanians, in particular, were often singled out for negative and offensive remarks by the far-right wing of the “Leave” campaign. In Luciano’s (34) words, the Eastern Europeans, especially the Romanians and the Poles, “are the immigrants who really annoy the Brits”. In order to counteract the tendency of the British public and media to lump all EU migrants together as part of the problems of what were regarded as “excessive numbers of immigrants” and “failing to control our borders”, our Italian interviewees deploy discursive strategies to draw their own borders, distinguishing themselves as “old, deserving” migrants, and “Eastern Europeans” as the real source of the “problem” of immigration thrown up in the background to Brexit. Above all, by stressing their intellectual, moral and cultural capital – their university qualifications, command of English and refusal to claim benefits – some young Italians construct a social boundary between themselves as “first-class” immigrants, and the “others” (Eastern Europeans), designated as “second-class” (cf. Wimmer, 2008). It was Elisa who gave the most thorough articulation of this “thesis of distinction”:

“We are Italian and we are a certain kind of immigrant, A-rank immigrants. If you talk to a Brexit supporter, they are not afraid of Italians or French or Spanish; if you talk to someone who voted ‘Leave’ to clean this country... they are people who do not want Romanians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks... and Turks!”

She referred to Turks because part of the alarmist rhetoric of the UK Independence Party was the spectre of Britain being open to an “invasion” of Turkish migrants coming from a large (population 80 Million) and Muslim country which was also host to some 3 million Syrian refugees (11)

For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to stress that this “A and B rank” division was generally presented in a sarcastic tone, as if it were a division commonly established by the British mainstream media and society, rather than a classification invented and shared by the interviewees. Nevertheless, the fact that this rhetorical device of drawing boundaries was used by several interviewees helped them to make sense of their changed position in the context of Brexit. Identifying in “others”, namely Eastern Europeans, Turks and Syrian refugees, the

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<sup>11</sup> As a long-standing associate member of the EU, there is the theoretical possibility of Turkey joining, which has been much discussed in EU political circles over the years. Whilst the EU is divided over the putative question of Turkey’s accession, it is extremely unlikely given the political complexion of the country’s current authoritarian and Islamist government.

threat depicted by the “Leave” campaign, they were simultaneously able to re-establish their legitimate position within British society (Smith, 1989).

5.3 *Plans for the future.* – For a perspective on how young Italian migrants perceived that Brexit would affect their plans, we compared their answers between the pre-Brexit interviews and those carried out post-Brexit. There are three geographical options theoretically available: wanting to “stay put”, going back to Italy, or moving to a different EU country (or, possibly, to a non-EU country). A fourth option, which actually proved to be relevant in several cases for the post-Brexit sample, was indecision or “wait and see”. Gallo and Staniscia (2016) envision in this variety of options an open disposition of a generation that is “born European” but that has also been harshly hit by the economic crisis that started in 2008.

However, when we analyse the interview transcripts in detail, we find that the pre- and post-Brexit comparison is less easy to make. Across the entire sample of 35 interviews, most respondents did not envision staying permanently in the UK; they found it hard to imagine not returning to live in Italy at some point in the future (12). The reasons put forward for this perception of the inevitability of return were mostly connected to cultural and family reasons – their nostalgia for Italy, the Italian way of life, food, climate etc., and their feelings of solidarity and duty, especially towards their parents in the latter’s old age. The emerging strength of these bonds was also very revealing in differentiating the informants’ need to move (connected to socio-economic reasons) at the origin of their migration from their “desire” to move to experience a cosmopolitan and fulfilling lifestyle (Gallo and Staniscia, 2016; Raffini, 2014; Staniscia, 2018).

During the post-Brexit interviews, especially in the (admittedly small) matched subsample of re-interviewees, we were able to witness how certain participants had broadly kept the same ideas they had before the referendum, although in a few cases these plans had been accelerated – for instance, returning home quicker than originally planned. A typical case was Roberto (29 at first interview, 30 at the second) who came to England aged 26 in response to a job advert. A graduate in geosciences, he had sent his CV to several Italian and international engineering companies, and one in Crawley (a mid-sized industrial town south of London) had been the first to reply and offer him a job. Yet Roberto had never felt really at home in the UK, and already in his pre-Brexit interview he was hinting at being fed up and wanting to go back. Part of the background to Roberto’s difficulty of settling was that he had only limited experience of travelling outside of his region of Italy before he arrived in England. Whilst he appreciated the opportunity to broaden his horizons, improve his knowledge of English and earn a good salary (significantly higher than he would have got in Italy), he had difficulty adapting to the “English way of life”, especially as he experienced it in Crawley, a largely working-class dormitory town. Here are some pithy excerpts from his first interview:

“I was naïve, I absolutely didn’t know what to expect... I knew they would pay me well, and that was it... My job is in Crawley, the shining star of Sussex [said with heavy

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<sup>12</sup> The very few exceptions usually involved commitments and relationships which were now stronger in the UK. For instance Giulio was waiting for his Polish girlfriend to give birth to their first child. Both had permanent jobs in London and could not easily envisage relocating to Italy. Our findings, in general, contrast to some extent with those of Conti and King (2015), who found a general reluctance amongst their interviewees (all graduates) to return from the UK to Italy because of the poor prospects there and their disillusionment with the Italian “mentality”, and especially with the practice of “*raccomandazione*” in the professional and academic job markets.

sarcasm]... And I mean, I'm almost 30 and I share a flat with other people... it really breaks your balls... to live with other people constantly changing.

[...]

And then Crawley, you know, is not an easy place to live, it's quite *rough* [said in English], there is no university... You go to work, you go to sleep, and then you go to work... that's it. You can go out on a Friday night but the quality of your night out is the same as going out in [names a small boring town near his home city in Italy]... The food is crap... the mentality of the people... the weather... and so it's not so easy.

[...]

Really, my home is in Italy, in [names his home city], no doubt about this!"

By the time we contacted Roberto for the follow-up interview, he was already back in Italy, so the second interview was by Skype. It had been a hasty decision to return, especially because he had to give up his well-paid job and his savings had been eroded by the sharp fall in the value of sterling against the euro. The "atmosphere" of Brexit had only hastened his departure, but did not fundamentally affect his decision to return which, after four years in England, had already been made. Like nearly all of our research participants, Roberto had been surprised at the way the vote went, but he said he could see the mindset of the "Leave" voters in the population of Crawley, who were not able to appreciate the benefits of migration, only the threats:

"The true Crawley people, the English from Crawley, in my opinion, they don't see immigration in a positive way... even if it's a high-level immigrant... They see him as a stranger, a foreigner... as if immigrants steal their jobs".

The second spatial option – to move to another country – was being considered by half of the post-Brexit interviewees, including one (Alessandro, 28) who had already moved to Edinburgh; part of his argument being that Scotland voted by a large margin to stay in the EU (even if it is, for the time being, legally bound by the overall UK vote for Brexit). However, in most of these cases, the decision to "move on" was not dependent solely on Brexit but was subordinated to other commitments, above all the next career move. Hence, for Gabriella, following the forthcoming completion of her PhD, "my idea... is wherever I find a job corresponding to what I want, possibly in Europe". In the case of Elisa, her future plans were related to her business ambitions in the catering sector:

"So, in a year and a half I complete my first five years in the UK. And before Brexit I thought to stay here, open my own business, save some money to buy a place instead of having to rent... Eh, but now I don't see the point of it".

She was considering moving to France as an alternative. But in reality her decision to move to a different EU country was not motivated by the actual impossibility of staying and opening a business in the UK; rather it could be seen as an act of revenge against a population that apparently no longer wants to welcome EU migrants.

As for Roberto, if his recently accomplished return to live in his home region in north-east Italy did not work out, and if his girlfriend, who had followed him back to Italy, was also willing, then there were other European options on the table:

“We are continental people – that’s it. It has to be near enough to Italy... and it should be a country where there are cities that I can visit and the food is good... where I can find a social fabric that welcomes me in a more open way... Austria and Germany have a culture that is similar to mine [he comes from North-East Italy] ... or Switzerland perhaps, we’ll see”.

The final option – “wait and see” – was motivated by the lack of reliable information on the consequences of Brexit for EU citizens. It is true that, as the deadline approached in December 2017 for the conclusion of the first round of EU-UK negotiations on the terms of Brexit, some clarity has emerged, with a more positive outlook for EU migrants in Britain wanting to stay. But at the time the post-Brexit interviewees were carried out, there was huge uncertainty. Hence, the respondents who picked this default option were wanting to wait for clarity on the legal, political and economic effects of the Brexit process. At the same time, nearly all of these “wait and see” participants intended to return to Italy in the future, even if the time-frame was rarely specified beyond “one day”. The main obstacle to a more concrete return plan was the precarious Italian job market. In the words of Nicoletta (31), who is for the time being settled in Brighton with her Italian husband and their one-year-old son:

“The idea is not to stay here forever... I would like to go back to Italy, but if we don’t find any jobs in Italy, we will be forced to stay here... and this whole situation makes me anxious”.

Nicoletta’s anxiety is reflective of the extraordinary delay in achieving clarity with regard to immigration controls, the rights of EU citizens to stay, and future movement into Britain; issues which are closely linked to ongoing and as yet unresolved negotiations over free trade and membership of the (or “a”) customs union. Hence it is unrealistic to expect clear and consistent answers to our third research question about changed plans for future mobility.

6. CONCLUSION. – This article is one of the first (following Lulle *et al.*, 2018) to investigate the reactions of a group of EU immigrants living in the UK to the realities of Brexit, based on analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews to a strategically selected but statistically non-probabilistic sample of young Italians.

To summarise, the results of our interview surveys show that young Italian migrants initially reacted with shock at the surprise outcome of the Brexit referendum. Fairly soon, the shock gave way to longer-lasting emotions, such as anger, a sense of betrayal and feelings of victimhood. In a third stage, the participants articulated rhetorical strategies to deal with their new situation as apparently unwanted EU immigrants, aggregated together with the large influx of post-2004 migrants from the new accession countries. The main strategies were twofold. The first consisted in a rhetoric of justifying their worth and “right to be here” in terms of their contribution to the British economy and society – a kind of “tactics of belonging” (Lulle *et al.*, 2018; Moroşanu and Fox, 2013). The second discursive strategy has been to deflect the stigma and guilt of being an immigrant somehow “responsible” for the Brexit result on to someone else. A new social boundary (Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Wimmer, 2008) between A and B class immigrants was drawn to re-assert Italians’ (and other “old” member-state migrants’)

status in British society as “legitimate” and “deserved”, as distinct from the “real targets” of the hostile political climate towards immigrants – Eastern Europeans and asylum-seekers.

Regarding participants’ ideal plans for the future, the options were basically threefold: returning to Italy; moving on to a different European country; or staying put, either with a view to settling long-term, or simply biding their time to wait and see how the rights of EU citizens would be dealt with in the drawn-out negotiations between the UK government and the EU’s representatives. At the time when the re-interviews and the new post-Brexit interviews were carried out (late 2016 and early 2017), the situation was unclear since the bilateral negotiations were stalled over three fundamental issues – the residual budget contributions to be paid by the UK (the so-called “divorce bill”), the issue of the Irish border between the Republic and Northern Ireland, and the rights of EU citizens to stay and enter in the future. Because of this ongoing lack of clarity (only in December 2017 was significant progress made), the “wait and see” strategy was widespread (13). The other main finding under this heading was that, in comparison to the pre-Brexit interview round, the attitudes and plans of the participants had not really changed. If anything, Brexit had merely given them an extra incentive to think much more concretely about moving back to Italy or onwards to somewhere else.

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<sup>13</sup> At the time of writing (May 2018), the linked issues of the Irish border and the UK’s membership of a customs union remain unresolved and fiercely debated within the UK government.

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**SUMMARY:** The aim of this article is to describe the reactions of young Italian migrants in Britain to “Brexit”, the 2016 referendum decision for the UK to leave the European Union. Brexit is seen as an historical moment of “rupture” which is not only reorienting Britain’s relationship with Europe and the world but is also deeply affecting the lives of its 3.2 million migrants from the EU. The empirical material comes from 35 in-depth interviews with young Italian migrants living and either studying or working in the London region: 20 interviews carried out pre-referendum and 15 post-Brexit. The analysis documents their immediate reactions and interpretations of the result (surprise, shock, anger, a sense of betrayal), their coping strategies (stressing their “rights to belong” and drawing a social boundary between themselves and “other”, i.e. East European migrants), and their plans for the future. On this last question, Brexit has not fundamentally changed their ultimate plans to return home “one day”, but in some cases it has accelerated this decision, as well as making them think about moving to another European country.

**RIASSUNTO:** Lo scopo di questo articolo è di descrivere le reazioni di giovani migranti Italiani residenti in Gran Bretagna rispetto alla “Brexit”, il Referendum del 2016 che ha stabilito l’uscita del Regno Unito dall’Unione Europea. La Brexit è vista come un momento storico di “rottura”, che non solo sta riorientando le relazioni tra Regno Unito ed Europa (e il resto del mondo), ma sta anche influenzando profondamente la vita dei suoi 3,2 milioni di immigrati europei. L’articolo si basa su 35 interviste in profondità con giovani migranti italiani che vivono nell’area di Londra per studio o lavoro: 20 interviste sono state condotte prima e 15 dopo il Referendum. L’analisi riporta le loro reazioni spontanee e le interpretazioni date al voto (sorpresa, shock, rabbia, tradimento), le loro “strategie di sopravvivenza”. Esse sono, da un lato, volte a sottolineare il loro diritto di “appartenenza” al contesto di residenza mentre, dall’altro, tracciano un confine tra loro stessi ed “altre” categorie di migranti, in primis quelli provenienti dall’Est Europa. Un terzo focus dell’articolo sono i piani per il futuro dei partecipanti. Riguardo quest’ultimo punto, la Brexit essenzialmente non ha cambiato i loro

piani di tornare a casa “in futuro”, anche se in certi casi ha accelerato questa decisione o ha costituito un incentivo per spingerli a trasferirsi in un altro stato europeo.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Cet article a pour objectif de décrire les réactions de jeunes immigrés italiens en Grande Bretagne vis-à-vis « Brexit » – la décision résultant du référendum de 2016 selon laquelle le Royaume Uni quittera l’Union Européenne. Brexit est perçu comme un moment historique de « rupture » non seulement réorientant les relations de la Grande Bretagne avec l’Europe et le monde mais aussi affectant très profondément les vies de ses 3.2 millions d’immigrés de l’Union Européenne. Le matériel empirique résulte de 35 entretiens en profondeur avec de jeunes immigrés italiens résidant et travaillant ou étudiant dans la région de Londres : 20 entretiens d’avant le référendum et 15 post-Brexit. L’analyse documente les réactions immédiates de ces jeunes et leurs interprétations du résultat (surprise, choc, colère, un sentiment de trahison), leurs stratégies d’adaptation (soulignant leur « droit d’appartenir » et démarquant les limites sociales entre eux-mêmes et les « autres », c’est-à-dire des immigrés de l’Europe de l’Est), et leurs projets d’avenir. En ce qui concerne cette dernière question, Brexit n’a pas fondamentalement modifié leurs projets ultimes de retourner « un jour » chez eux, mais dans certains cas il a accéléré cette décision, leur obligeant également à songer aller vivre dans un autre pays européen.

*Key words:* Brexit, interviews, migration plans, London region

*Termini chiave:* Brexit, interviste, progetti di migrazione, area di Londra

*Mots-clés:* Brexit, entretiens, projets de migration, la région de Londres