

Perceived immigration. A case study for the municipality of Pozzuolo

M A R I A N N A S T E L L A *

Abstract. This study explores the perception of the residents of the municipality of Pozzuolo del Friuli, in the province of Udine, with regard to the phenomenon of foreign immigration to Italy. The study has involved a demoscopic survey conducted through a self-administered questionnaire, consisting of 60 questions divided in three thematic sections. The questionnaire was distributed by mail to a randomly-chosen population sample estimated in 10% of the total residents, proportionately distributed among the municipality main centre (Pozzuolo) and surrounding localities. The answers were analysed by the statistical software “Statistical Package for Social Science”.

The results presented in this paper constitute a fraction of the total answers, which, in the cases of interest, have been cross-checked to provide a complete and detailed picture of the residents’ perception of the phenomenon. The study reveals an interest in immigration-related issues which is generally greater among younger people and for the nearest geographical contexts, and conversely less significant among older respondents and for the most distant geographical areas. The values of solidarity and hospitality are both considered significantly important by respondents, who show a greater propensity for the former over the latter. However, answers indicate that the two sentiments are directed at different categories of people: while solidarity may be shown with “anyone”, respondents feel most hospitable towards those who are closest to them.

Moreover, attention has been paid to the analysis of the characteristics of foreign immigrants, such as their country of origin, religion, qualifications, and reason to emigrate, this last one being the variable which is most taken into account by the native respondents. It has also emerged that the immigrants’ country of origin, even if it does not appear to have influence over the acceptance, or lack of it, of a foreign person, is still relevant in determining the attitude of the native population. Regarding this, answers show that the preference given to areas of origin such as Western Europe and North America is accompanied by a tendency to reject immigrants coming from the Arab countries;

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the order of preference of the geographical areas is maintained unaltered for all the different categories of social relation proposed by the survey. In brief, even though native respondents have a propensity to prefer situations which are nearest to their own, they maintain a fundamental openness which encourages them to enter in contact with a foreign person without, at the same time, losing control over their environment and living space.

Key-words. Perception, immigration, native population, municipality of Pozzuolo del Friuli, demoscopic survey, self-administered questionnaire, hospitality, integration.

1. Scientific research on the public perception of immigration: from global to local. In recent years, immigration has been receiving increasing attention from various social agents, such as institutions and organizations dealing with the welfare and necessities of immigrants; governmental bodies which, at different levels and for different areas of competence, have been responsible for controlling, managing and coordinating arrivals; academic institutions which, from various perspectives, have analysed the characteristics and effects of immigration flows; information agencies who have kept the public updated on this issue; and finally, the local people who have acted as privileged observers of the migrants' process of integration in their adopted country.

Public perception analysis is an important component of migration studies, as it enables to find out and evaluate public knowledge and opinions on the immigration phenomenon and on a series of related aspects such as the presence or the lack of inter-ethnic dialogue, the modalities of inter-ethnic cohabitation, and the will-

ingness to cooperate, with a view to making improvements to public policies in this field.

The importance of assessing the local population's perceptions is confirmed by the existence of numerous studies on this topic conducted at intercontinental level and also on a more local plane. In the first case, the German Marshall Fund has carried out some extensive and very valuable research both in the United States and in Europe, comparing public opinion data from the two sides of the Atlantic and among individual states. Its final report represents an important tool in the study of migration perception at global level (The German Marshall Fund of The United States 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011). Besides this authoritative indicator of European and American public opinion on this subject, there are also some recent and interesting surveys conducted at national level by individual European countries with a long history of immigration, such as the United Kingdom (Ford 2012), Germany (Diehl & Steinmann 2012), and France (Di Giusto & Jolly 2008). Elsewhere, and particularly in Eng-

lish-speaking countries with high immigration levels such as Australia, Canada and the United States, opinion polls are also a very commonly-used tool in immigration studies (Espenshade & Calhoun 1993, Binder, Polinard & Wrinkle 1997, Haubert & Fussel 2006, Simon & Sikich 2007, Wilkes, Guppy & Farris 2008, Nanos 2010, Bloemraad 2012, Gallup 2012, Polling Report 2012, Vision Critical 2012). In addition to considering the whole national territory, polls might concentrate on a specific geographical area. In the United States, for instance, numerous opinion polls on the topic of migration have focussed on the areas with the highest immigration rates, such as Southern California, Texas, and the south-eastern States (Timberlake & Williams, forthcoming). Naturally this phenomenon has also been analysed in States and regions with lower immigration percentages (Hethling & Greenberg 2011). The social perception of migration, therefore, has been evaluated at different geographical levels, ranging from the very narrow to the very wide, with a preference for contexts characterized by high immigration percentages or by the presence of specific ethnicities. Frequently updated and accompanied by chronological and geographical comparisons, these surveys demonstrate an enduring and generalized interest in this particular field of research.

Studies analysing the public perception of immigration in general, and of immigrants and immigration policies in particular, are not necessarily restricted to this period in time.

In the United States, for instance, historical reports on anti-immigration attitudes date as far back as the 19th and early 20th century (Timberlake & Williams, forthcoming), even though a substantial scientific literature on the public perception of migration policies has only developed – in the United States and other receiving countries – over the past twenty-five years. In Italy an interest in this subject emerged in the 1980s, when it appeared that Italy was becoming a destination country (Bonifazi 2006, Pugliese 2006); therefore, the practice of examining public attitudes towards immigration is a very recent one in Italy.

The international attention generated by the studies on the public perception of migration demonstrates that this field of research (in addition to ensuring an objective reading of a specific social context and of individual aspects such as the degree of acceptance of foreign incomers) can be instrumental to the successful implementation of public policies benefiting the entire community (such as the modification of policies that do not assure the harmonic coexistence of different social groups).

In the spring of 2009, the desire to evaluate a native population's perception and knowledge of the immigration phenomenon led us to conduct a demoscopic survey in the municipality of Pozzuolo del Friuli, in the province of Udine. For the last twenty years a cultural centre located in the vicinity of Pozzuolo has provided assistance and accommodation facilities to migrants in need, so the mu-

nicipality could be seen to represent an emblematic case of coexistence between immigrants and natives; in addition, we were familiar with this particular context as the cultural centre had been the object of a previous research (Stella 2011).

The aim of the study was to assess the perception of the residents of the municipality of Pozzuolo with regard to the phenomenon of foreign immigration, at the same time obtaining factual data that could be used in a possible diachronic comparison in the future. The survey was conducted through a self-administered questionnaire sent by mail to 250 randomly-chosen residents (10% of the registered residents), including also some foreign nationals. The questionnaires were proportionally distributed among the municipality main centre (Pozzuolo) and surrounding localities, taking care that the same 10% percentage be maintained for each locality. Once completed, the questionnaires could be posted back to the sender (the municipality office) within 15 days of reception. The questionnaire included 60 multiple-answer questions divided in three sections: a first section examined the respondent's profile; the second section considered the perception of the immigration phenomenon; the third regarded the cultural centre "Ernesto Balducci".

More than a quarter (26.8%) of the questionnaires were sent back in time; the remaining percentage included the questionnaires that were never returned and those that were returned after the closing date. The

answers were analysed by the statistical software "Statistical Package for Social Science"; as the number of data collected is very large, only a fraction of the total answers are presented here.

2. The perception of the immigration phenomenon by the population of Pozzuolo del Friuli: results and discussion.

An analysis of the first section of the questionnaire, detailing the respondents' profiles, revealed that all respondents were Italian citizens of Italian origin, mostly men (66%) aged 41 to 65 (44%), followed by the over-65s (34%) and by the 26-40 age group (22%). The 18-25 age group was not represented in the sample. Regarding their occupation, most respondents were either working (49%) or retired (48%); the unemployed were a small minority (3%); no student had taken part in the survey. Regarding their education, 32% of respondents declared to possess a middle-school diploma, 29% to have a primary-school certificate, 27% to have a secondary-school diploma, and 13% to have a degree. 75% of respondents had children, 25% were childless. All participants had lived in Italy since birth (98%) or for over 25 years (2%). In addition, the majority were long-term residents of Pozzuolo, having lived in the municipality since birth (33%) or for more than 25 years (28%). The deficit percentage indicates those who had lived in Pozzuolo for less than 25 years.

Regarding their migratory experience or desire to emigrate, 16% of re-

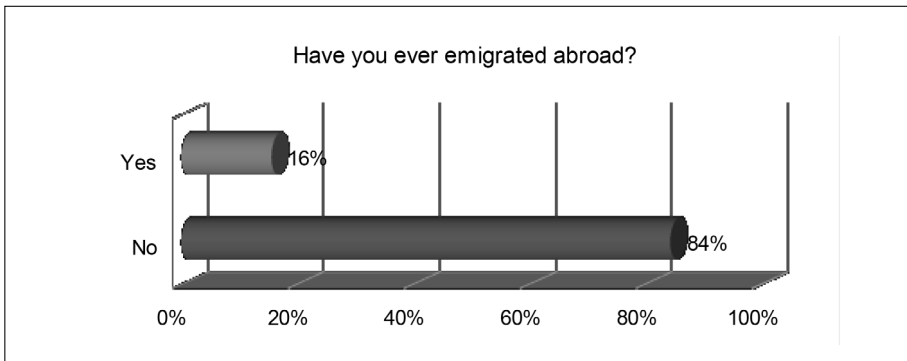


Figure 1. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

spondents declared they had emigrated abroad, while 84% said they had never emigrated (Figure 1). When those who had emigrated were asked to evaluate their experience as migrants, positive opinions prevailed over the negative ones. In fact, more than 46% judged their experience as “normal”, giving it a neuter value, while 45% viewed it as “very good” or “good”, with the “very good” answers being more numerous than the “good” ones. The remaining 9% declared they could not evaluate their experience (Figure 2).

It seemed interesting to discover if anyone felt the desire to emigrate abroad. The results showed that most participants did not want to emigrate (76%); 18% gave a positive answer and 6% were unsure (Figure 3). Even if the majority of respondents had no intention to leave Italy, the percentage of those who wanted to emigrate was high, with almost one person in five wanting to go and live in another country.

The majority of those who said

they would like to expatriate said they would do it for “other” reasons than “economic and work reasons” or “sentimental and family reasons” (50%); 42% wanted to emigrate for “economic and work reasons” and 8% for “sentimental and family reasons”. Nobody said they would like to emigrate for “reasons of study”, and this is coherent with the absence from the sample of the 18-25 age group and of the occupation category “student” (Figure 4).

When the respondents’ opinions were cross-checked against their age, it was found that in every age bracket the desire to remain in Italy was greater than the will to emigrate abroad; this percentage was understandably highest among the over-65s (91% of them would not like to emigrate) and decreased by more than 20 percentage points in the 41-65 age group and among the younger adults (26-40), who said they did not want to emigrate in the percentages of 68% and 69% respectively (Figure 5). This seemed to indicate that, in

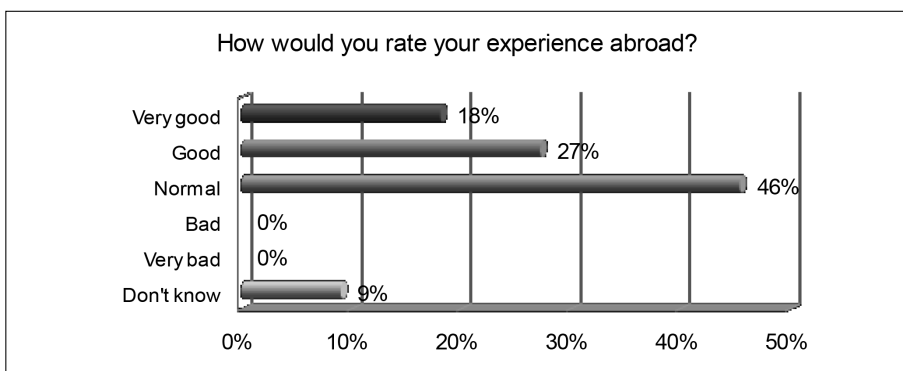


Figure 2. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

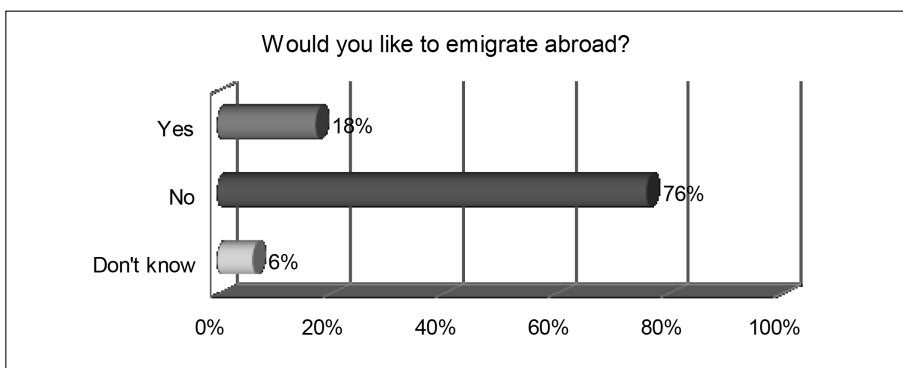


Figure 3. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

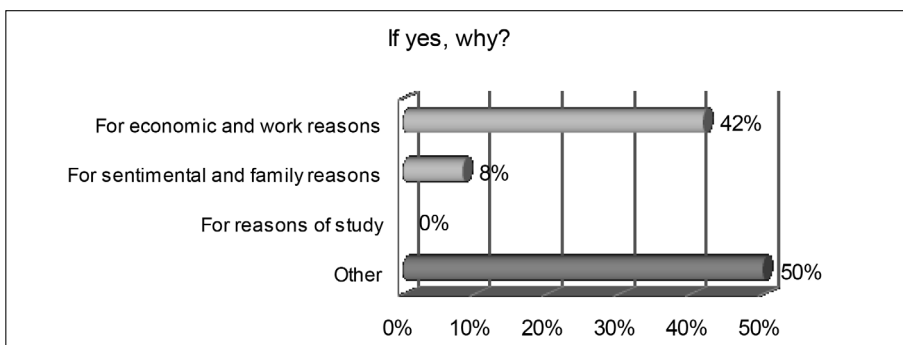


Figure 4. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

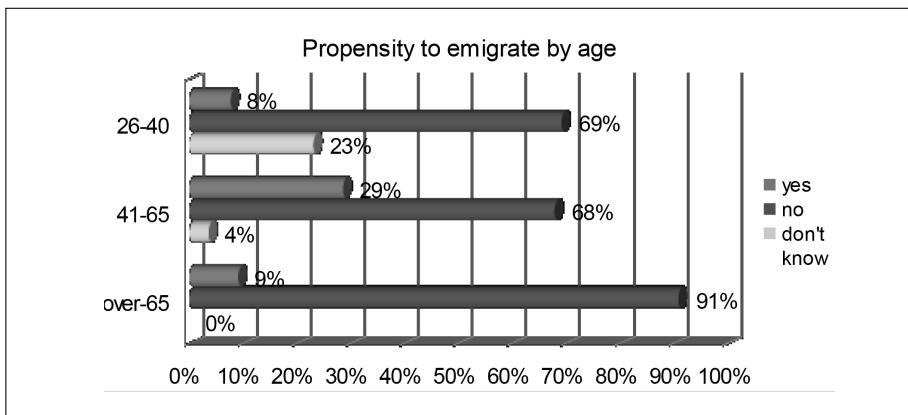


Figure 5. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

general, older respondents were the least willing to emigrate, while the younger age groups were the most keen to move abroad. However, when the relationship age/propensity to emigrate was analysed more in detail, this hypothesis was partially refuted, since the majority of those who had expressed a desire to emigrate belonged to the 41-65 age bracket (29%), while the least willing to emigrate were the 26-40 age group (8%) whose propensity to emigrate was very similar to that of the over-65s (9%) (Figure 5).

Considering that people in the 41-65 bracket generally enjoy a stable personal and professional life, making it more difficult for them to move, as well as presumably less desirable, the data regarding this category, where one in four people expressed a desire to emigrate, was a very unexpected result. Conversely, the fact that almost one in 10 people over 65 wished to move abroad could be ex-

plained by a desire to emigrate for recreational reasons, possibly for part of the year; this hypothesis is supported by practical examples of persons of retirement age with financial stability and spare time who decide to retire in exotic places: cases in point are the American pensioners who move to Florida or the German retirees who settle in the South of Spain.

Moreover, the “younger adults” (26-40) were the age group who expressed the highest degree of uncertainty regarding the option of emigrating abroad. 23% of them declared they were unsure, compared to 4% in the 41-65 group and none in the over-65 bracket (Figure 5). This uncertainty expressed by the youngest age group could be interpreted as a generational difficulty in drawing up a realistic plan for the future. This result inevitably invites a comparison with the Friulian emigrants who left the country in large

numbers between the end of the 19th century and the mid 20th century. Even if the socioeconomic context and life perspectives are dissimilar, making a comparison difficult, it appears that the migrants of the past and the prospective migrants of the present belong to different age brackets, and that people are now considering emigrating later in life (Caporacco 1983, Pagani 1968).

Having established the profile of the respondents, we proceeded to analyse their attitude to the immigration phenomenon. The first question was aimed at assessing the interest of the population in migration-related issues, which was shown to be strong for all the contexts presented (Europe, Italy, Friuli Venezia Giulia, province of Udine and municipality of Pozzuolo del Friuli). For every context, in fact, the sum of the answers "very interested" and "fairly interested" was considerably higher than the total of the answers "not very interested" and "not at all interested". In all geographical areas the interest was calculated to be around 80%, with the exception of "Europe" where it was 69%. Yet when we considered the "very interested" answers only, a clear pattern emerged, whereby the interest increased as we moved from the more distant contexts to the nearer ones; so if 17% of respondents declared to be "very interested" in the problems of immigration in Europe, the percentage increased to 33% in Italy, 39% in Friuli Venezia Giulia, 40% in the province of Udine, and 41% in the municipality of Pozzuolo (Figures 6-10).

Cross-checking the answers against the ages, it appeared that all age groups were interested (either "very" or "fairly") in the migration-related issues of every geographical context. Moreover, the interest seemed to be inversely proportional to age, with younger respondents being more interested than older respondents. In particular, the 26-40 age bracket, who were the least willing to emigrate abroad, were also the ones who expressed the greatest interest in migration-related issues (Figures 11-15).

In this particular context, an attitude of solidarity and hospitality may be required on the part of the natives. Newly-arrived foreign migrants generally need to be assisted by the local social agents until they are fully settled in the new social context, and this is to the advantage of both natives and migrants. Natives, as individuals, are asked (but not obliged) to show solidarity with the migrants and to be hospitable towards them; so two sets of questions were formulated, one dealing with solidarity and the other with hospitality, to see how important these two values were for the respondents, how willing they were to embrace them, and to which categories of people they were most likely to direct them. First two questions were asked which rated the importance that respondents attributed to solidarity and hospitality respectively; both sentiments were considered important by respondents, in fact the total of the "very important" and "fairly important" answers was significantly higher than the sum of

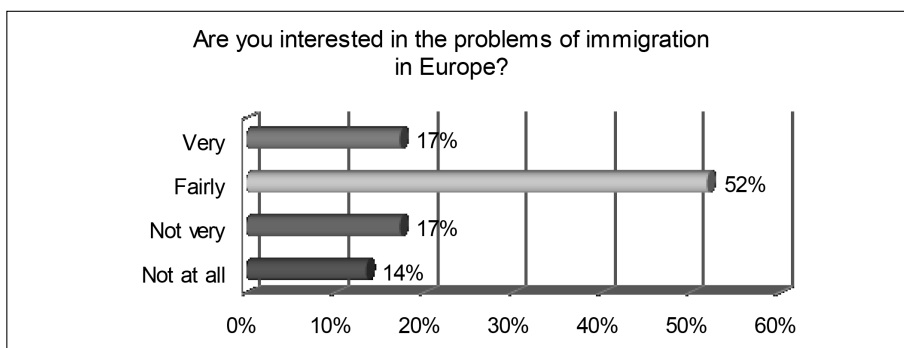


Figure 6. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

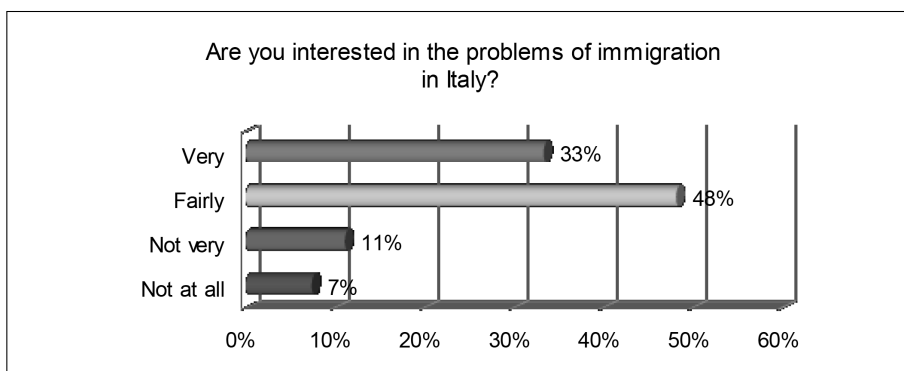


Figure 7. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

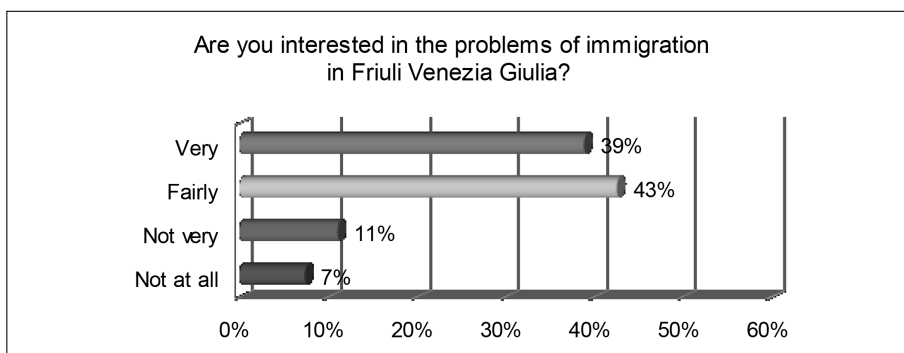


Figure 8. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

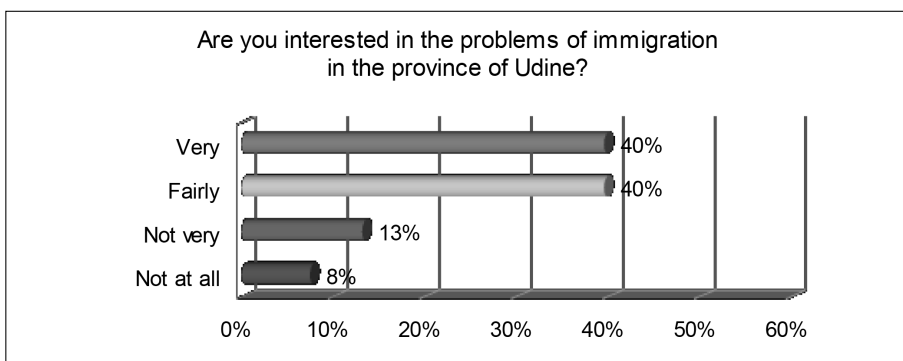


Figure 9. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

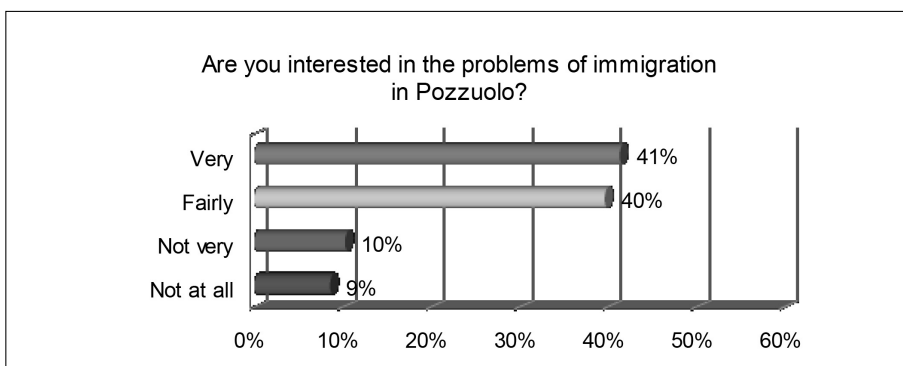


Figure 10. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

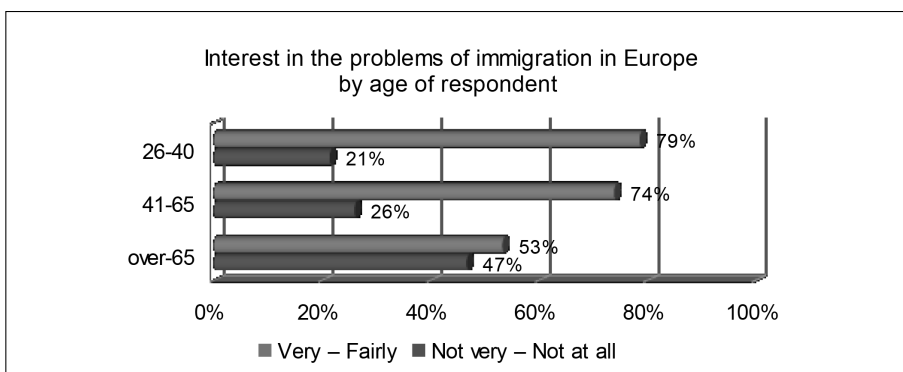


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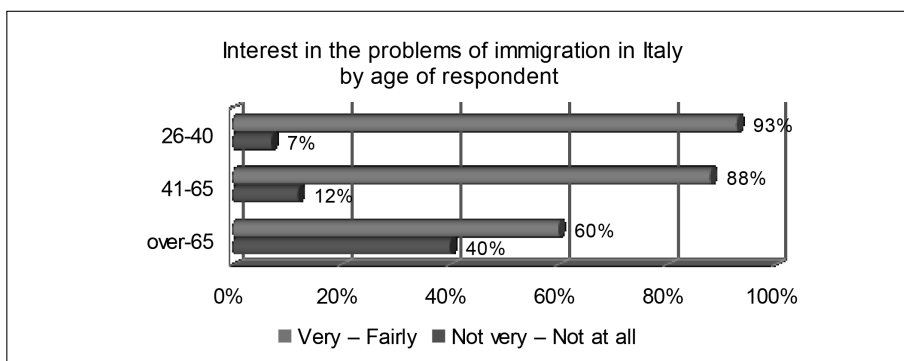


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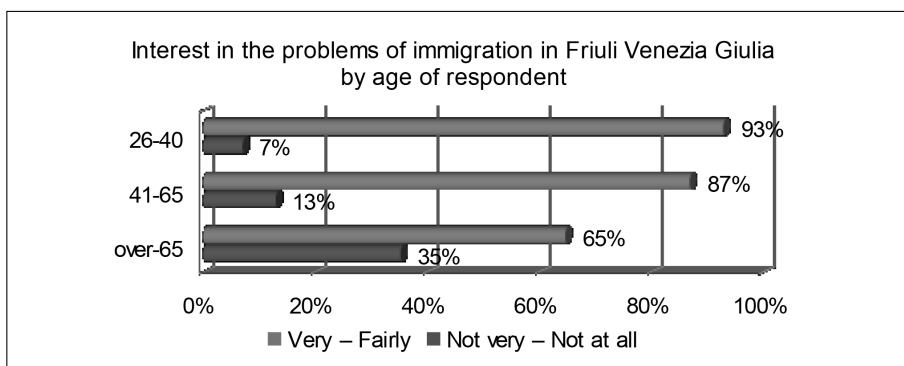


Figure 13. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

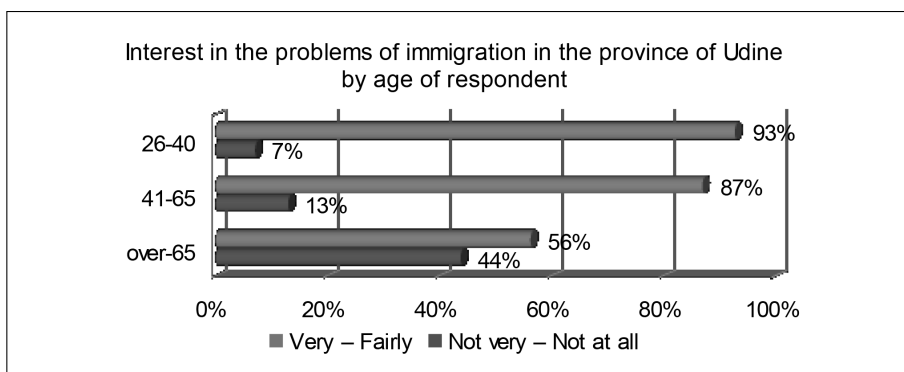


Figure 14. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

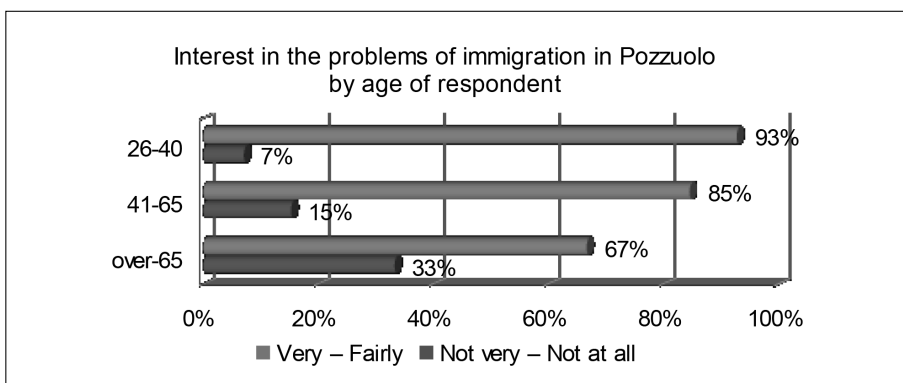


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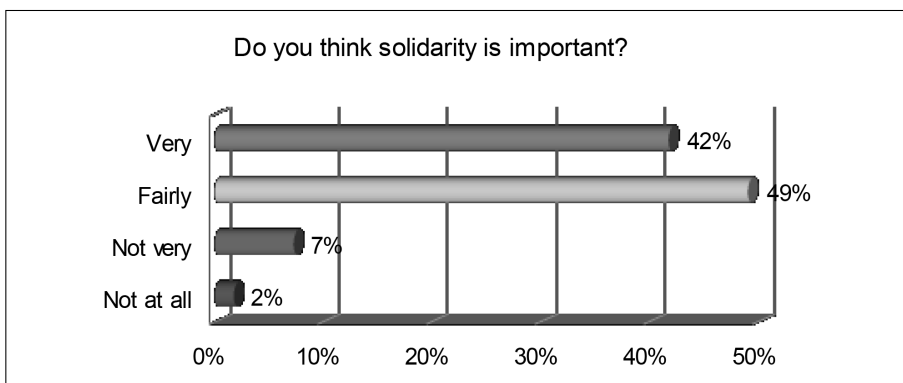


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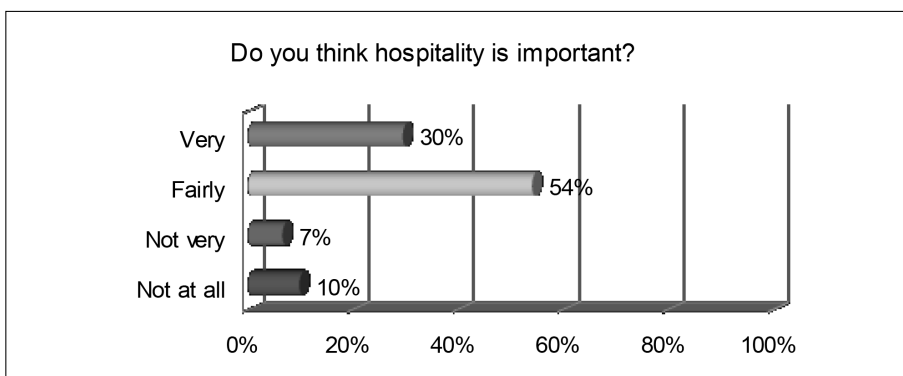


Figure 17. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

the “not very important” and “not at all important” answers (Figures 16-17). Regarding this, the increasing importance of solidarity, openness, help and support in a world characterized by processes of modification of the cultural make-up, individualization and globalization, ingenerating uncertainty and a sense of isolation, has already been highlighted (Ammaturo 2004, Cattarinussi 2006). In terms of percentage, solidarity was considered by respondents to be more important than hospitality (91% and 84% respectively). A possible explanation is that hospitality could be intended to imply a direct contact with the other party and the sharing of a common space, whereas solidarity could be meant as support from a distance. The two successive questions revealed that respondents showed solidarity with “anyone” (43%) but felt most hospitable towards those who were closest to them, such as “my family, friends and acquaintances” (46%), and only after to “anyone” (26%). So respondents

appeared to be more selective when displaying hospitality than they were when showing solidarity (Figures 18-19). This pivotal concept of “selection” is contained in the formula of “Core Solidarity”, a type of solidarity restricted to those with similar characteristics to our own, for instance belonging to the same family group or having a common ethnic origin (Zamperini 2004). Conversely, a solidarity which is independent of the characteristics of the recipient could be defined as “Civic Solidarity”, that is a form of solidarity which is extended to all members of a society, regardless of their personal characteristics and ethnic origin. This construct makes reference to the Durkheimian idea of “Organic Solidarity”, i.e. a form of reciprocal support which surpasses the boundaries of the individual social group. Even though the concept of solidarity overcoming ethnic barriers was already present at the beginning of the industrial era, only now is it able to effectively bridge cultural and ethnic differences (Zoll 2003).

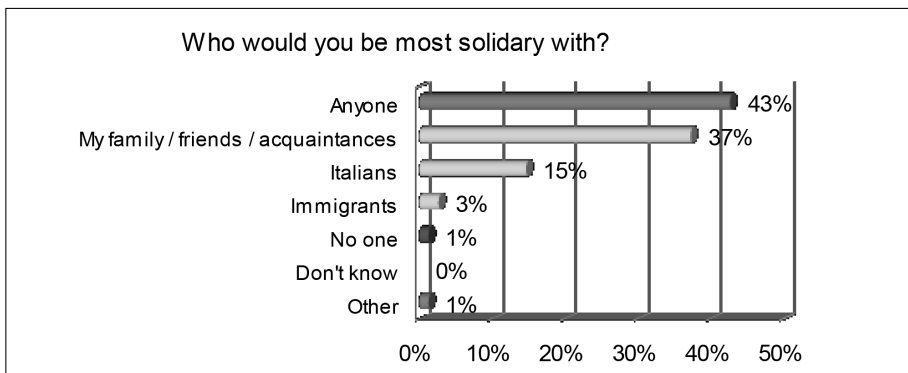


Figure 18. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

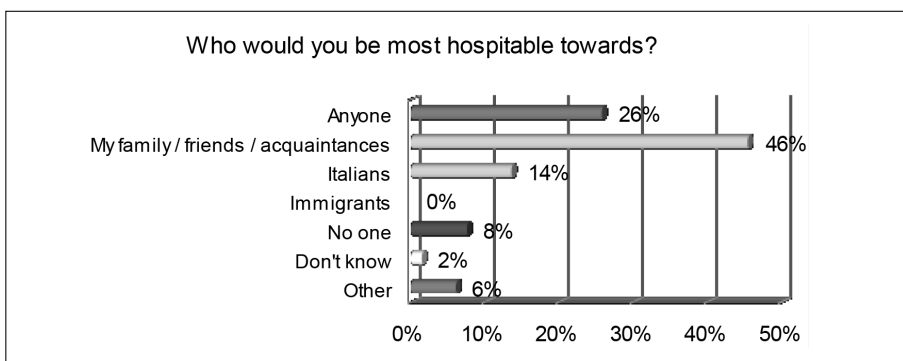


Figure 19. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

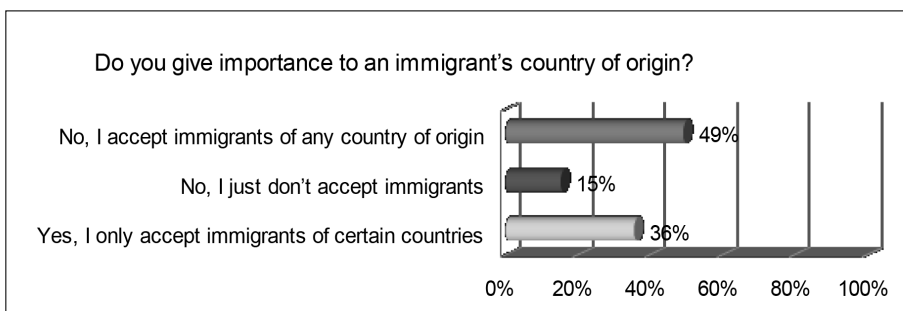


Figure 20. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

The research has also focussed its attention on the importance given by the respondents to the immigrants' country of origin, religion, educational qualification, and reason of arrival in Italy. It resulted that, of these four variables, the first three were not considered important enough to determine the rejection of a migrant; in fact most respondents declared that they would accept migrants of any country of origin, of any religion, and having any type of qualification. The educational qualification was consid-

ered the least important variable, followed by religion and country of origin. Conversely, the reason of arrival in Italy constituted a decisive factor, since respondents were only willing to accept immigrants arriving in Italy for certain reasons (Figures 20-23). It derives that "reason" compared to "country", "religion" and "qualification" represents a discriminating factor, deciding the acceptance or the rejection of a foreign migrant.

We then proceeded to analyse the natives' propensity to interact with

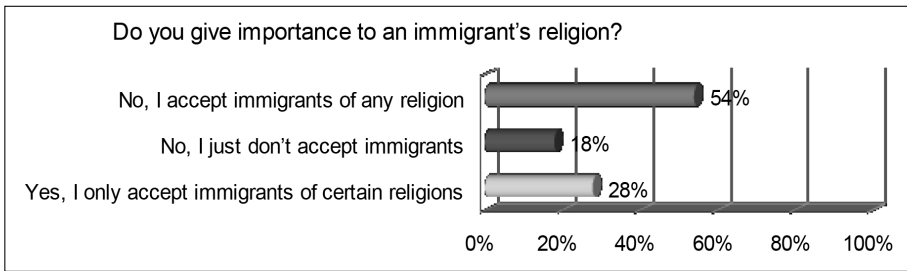


Figure 21. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009

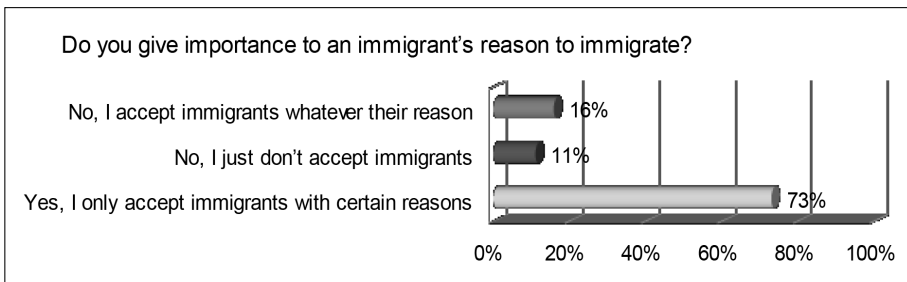


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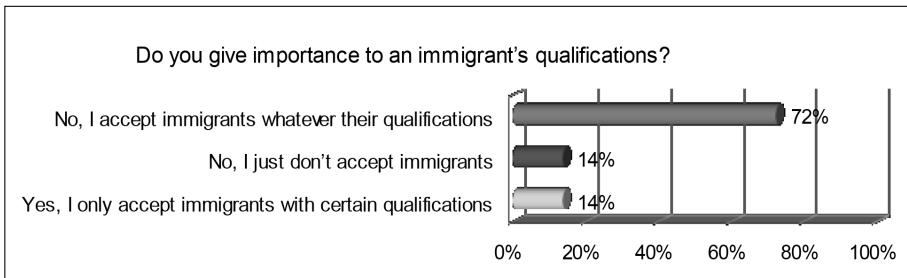


Figure 23. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

immigrants from different areas of origin. Five geographical areas were considered: “Western Europe and North America”, “Eastern Europe”, “South America”, “Africa”, and “Arab countries”; as well as four cat-

egories of social interaction: “colleague”, “neighbour”, “friend”, “husband/wife”, using elements of Bogardus’ Social Distance Scale to measure the degree of closeness that respondents were willing to accept in their

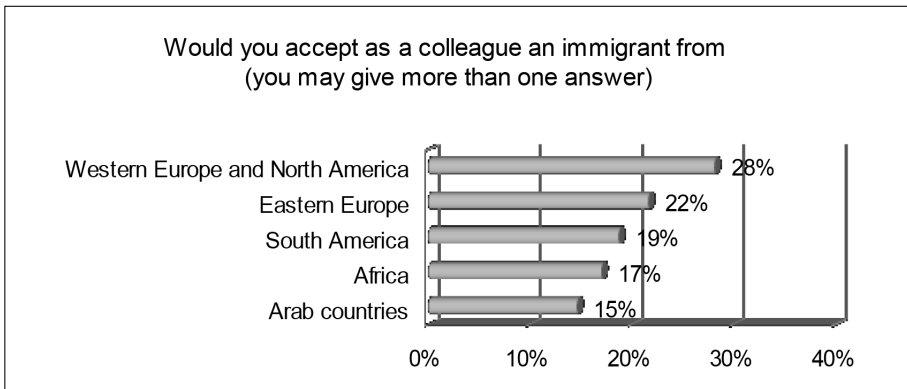


Figure 24. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

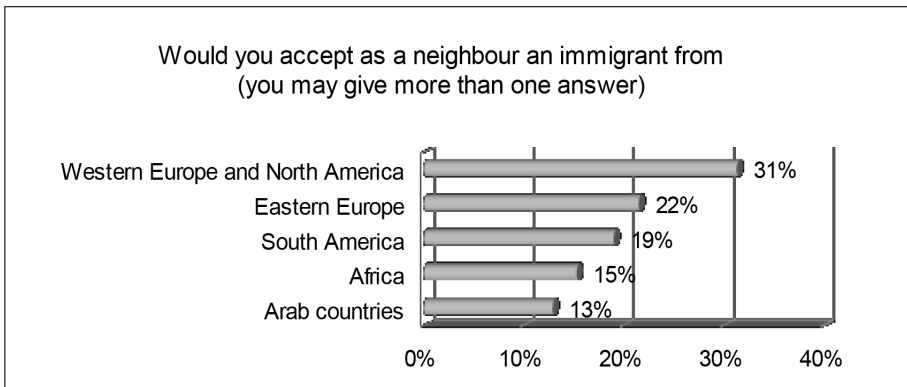


Figure 25. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

social contact with foreigners. For each of the social interaction categories, respondents indicated their willingness to accept (alternately as “colleague”, “neighbour”, “friend”, “husband/wife”) an immigrant who came from each of the geographical areas proposed (“Western Europe and North America”, “Eastern Europe”, “South America”, “Africa”, and “Arab countries” in that order), with percentage variations depending

on the category of interaction. The order of the geographical areas was inverted in the additional (and provocative) question “You would want nothing to do with an immigrant from...,” with the Arab countries appearing first in the list and Western Europe and North America last (Figures 24-28). The answers revealed that, although the country of origin did not represent in theory a decisive factor in the acceptance or

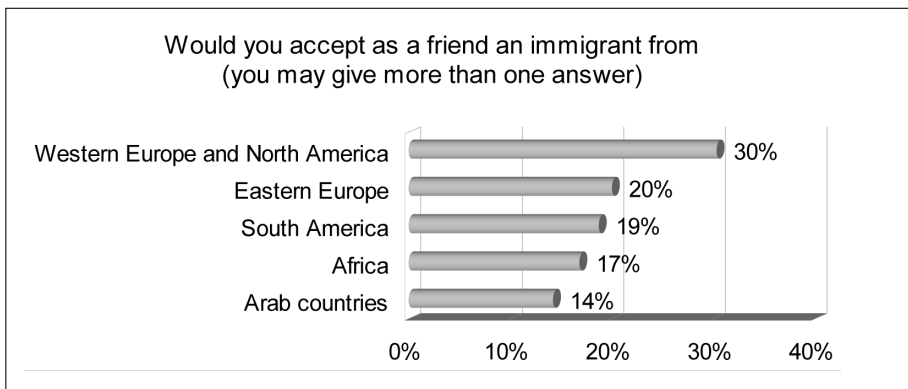


Figure 26. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

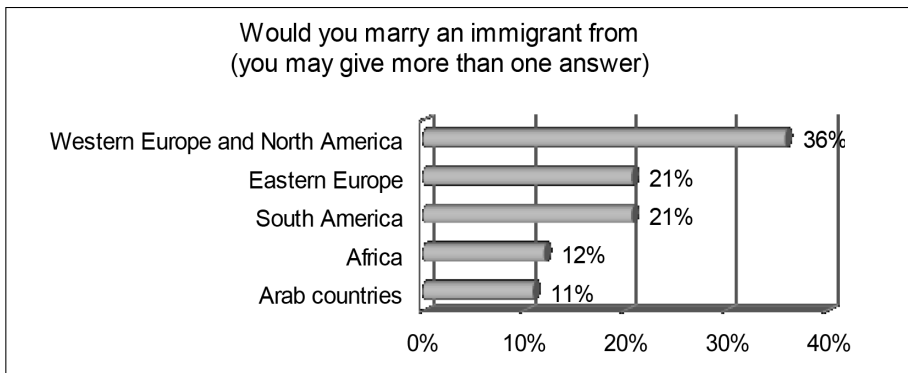


Figure 27. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

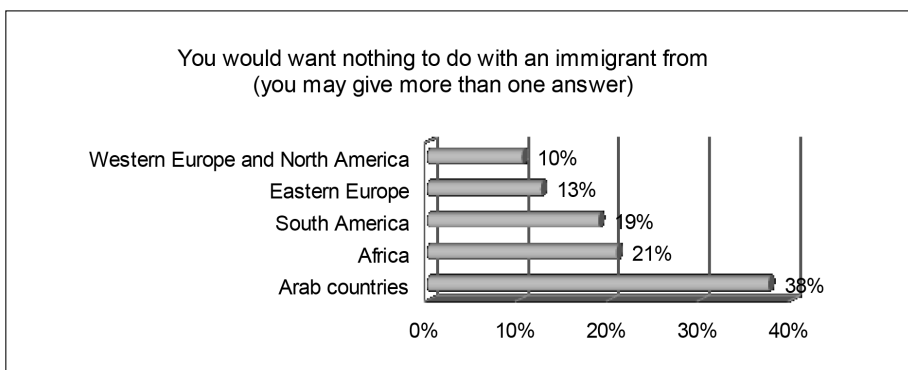


Figure 28. Source: Demoscopic survey 2009.

rejection of a migrant, in practice it was taken into account; similar results were reported in previous studies where the migrants' country of origin was shown to be linked to their acceptance by the natives (Higham 1998, Zolberg 2008). Different explanations could be found for the respondents' negative attitude towards the Arab countries; one of the most likely causes could be the influence of media reports on the conflicts in the Middle East. This hypothesis is supported by researches carried out in the United States, which have found similarly negative attitudes to migrants from this area – although it does not appear to be the least preferred area – after 9/11 and the American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq (Timberlake & Williams, forthcoming).

3. Conclusions. The results presented in this paper are only part of the data collected by the survey; still the general impression is that of a population who is not indifferent to immigration, who has a different degree of attachment to the various territories proposed by the survey, who recognizes the importance of social sentiments such as solidarity and hospitality, and who makes choices that appear to try and reduce possible social conflicts.

Particularly now that immigration is at the centre of the public debate, it is fundamental to monitor the perception of the native population so as to detect any change in its attitude, and thus in its ability to adapt to the new social, cultural and ethnic context. If we are to achieve integration,

we must try to understand the part of society which is most deeply rooted in a particular territory – that is, the natives. Only if we bear this in mind can we avert the defeat of multiculturalism which is being experienced by countries such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany, where natives and immigrants are left to live in parallel worlds without real interaction between them. In February 2011 the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, publicly acknowledged the breakdown of a system where the different cultures have been encouraged “to live separate lives”. A statement in a similar vein had been made in October 2010 by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who had remarked that her country's attempts to achieve a side-by-side coexistence between natives and foreigners had “utterly failed”. Thus, an active participation of all components of society is absolutely necessary; regarding this, in February 2011 Nicholas Sarkozy, then President of France, declared that “we have been too concerned about the identity of the new arrivals and not enough about the identity of the country receiving them” (Collins 2011).

Only if we take into account the perception of the local population can we develop a strategy that will help us achieve successful integration, which is not alienation or assimilation; a strategy that sees the active involvement of both natives and foreigners will also help us avoid possible nationalistic degenerations. In other words, integration should be achieved as fusion or collaboration

between equidistant parts and not as the introduction of individuals in a social context which is too often represented as depersonalized.

In psychology, when talking about social perception, perception is given an instrumental value; and in fact for Stadler, Seeger & Raeithel, perception – seen as a sequence of processes unravelling inside the subject – “prepares a person to act”. In this way,

shedding light on perception would also enable us to decode the decisions of the perceiving subject and to anticipate certain actions. Perception takes up a central role and, in Borning’s words, “although based on feelings, it is more than a feeling”; and in fact, the etymological meaning of the word “to perceive” in German is “to *take in reality*” (Stadler, Seeger & Raeithel 1979).

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