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Mobility and identity formation: an interdisciplinary approach to the 'Italian case'

Project leaders

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Short description: This series of interdisciplinary workshops will explore notions and representations of mobility emerging from the experience of migration between Italy and other countries (European and non-European) in the 20th century and up to today. The particular case of Italy offers a starting point for interdisciplinary discussion of concepts of mobility and identity formation, combining experiences of emigration, internal migration, and immigration. Workshops will centre on a key-note speaker in the area of Italian culture, with further speakers and respondents drawn from related fields.

Detailed description and rationale:

This series of workshops will bring together researchers from a number of different but contiguous disciplines and research areas, in order to explore and exploit the interfaces between their particular projects and specializations. Specifically, we plan to bring together scholars and students involved in research in both the field of Italian studies and in other significant areas, e.g. German Studies, French and Francophone Studies, Hispanic and Spanish-American Studies, Film Studies, English and Comparative Literary Studies, Translation Studies, Contemporary History, Sociology, Law. In so doing, it is intended that correspondences between disciplines which have hitherto been identified informally can be pursued in a more formal and structured manner, leading to the production of tangible research outcomes and genuine joint research activities, such as a longer-term collaboration network. A particular priority is to capitalize on the interest in mobility and identities demonstrated by students by involving postgraduate researchers in the workshops.

The workshops will explore notions and representations of mobility emerging from the experience of migration between Italy and other countries (European and non-European) in the course of the 20th century and up to today. The specific impact of mobility on formulations of identity as represented in written and cinematic production will be the focus of the initiative, which intends to use the Italian experience and its particular complexity as a basic framework through which to examine and understand other, comparable situations. This interdisciplinary approach has the double aim of allowing the Italian case to

illuminate other national and transnational contexts while also bringing findings in related fields to bear on the Italian case, thus allowing for rapid advances in this relatively new field.

The particular case of Italy offers a productive starting point for discussion of concepts of mobility and identity formation, because it combines experiences of emigration to other countries and continents (for both economic and colonial reasons), of internal migration within the country (from south to north and from rural to urban areas), and of immigration on a large scale from other countries and continents (motivated by colonial, cultural and economic links). These different migratory movements emerge both consecutively and, in the case of emigration and internal migration, contemporaneously, within a relatively short period of time (roughly, the twentieth century), and in a country characterized by late unification and by already marked regional differences and identities which impact heavily on notions and representations of nationhood. This has created uniquely mobile and transferable (or perhaps, deferrable) models of 'Italian-ness': for example, artistic and cultural representations of Italo-American identity have arguably become the dominant model by which Italian identity is understood worldwide, whilst at the same time, a prominent political minority within Italy argues that the boundaries of the country should exclude the centre and south, modelling Italy as a northern European industrial nation, and a sizeable immigrant minority lays the foundations, largely through cultural representations, of Italian society as a multi-cultural one, drawing on its geographical position extending from Europe towards Africa, and its histories of occupation by and adaptation to ruling cultures from around the Mediterranean and Europe. In other words, the physical and geographical borders of Italy have been, and remain, permeable, and the notion of Italian identity is, in direct relation to this plurality of 'Italies', an intrinsically plural and heterogeneous one. Given this context, the Italian case is not only a complex research area in itself, but can also offer original insights into questions of mobility and identity formation in other cultural contexts, and can in turn be informed by them.

Research context:

The workshop series arises from research undertaken within the Department of Italian at Warwick over the past five years. Previous initiatives, such as the British Academy funded conference 'Borderlines' (2002) and the subsequent publication of a bilingual volume on the subject of migration and Italian identities, as well as individual research projects, have highlighted the need for a more formal and structured dialogue between scholars in Italian studies and in other disciplines. In addition to existing research in Italian Studies at Warwick, the workshops will draw on established expertise and interest in other departments (German, French, English, Translation Studies, Film Studies, Sociology, Law) and on existing research links with scholars in other HEIs in the UK and elsewhere.

Methodology and outcomes:

As outlined above, the focus of the workshops will be the specific impact of mobility on formulations of identity as represented in written and cinematic production, using the Italian experience and its particular complexity as a primary framework through which to examine and understand other, comparable situations in an interdisciplinary framework. It is intended thus to create a dynamic interchange of ideas and questions, whereby the Italian context is used as a filter through which to examine other, comparable contexts, which in turn will offer new perspectives on the specific issues of Italian migration and identities. This interchange will form the basis on which to elaborate a formal but flexible conceptual framework related to the themes of migration and identities, linking concepts such as mobility and movement, the permeability and use of physical, social and cultural spaces, formulations, representations and interpretations of identity, intercultural dialogue and intercultural identities. Insights or theories established in these areas will then be tested and explored in the specific historical, geographical, cultural and methodological contexts identified with the participating researchers, with particular attention to the 'minority' contexts often overlooked in mainstream research.

The principal outcomes, in the short then longer term, of this initial series of workshops are intended to be:

- i. a fluid, creative and active interdisciplinary research dialogue between researchers in a number of disciplines and locations, informed by high levels of both subject-specific expertise and intellectual flexibility, and producing detailed, quantifiable results in terms of research concepts, questions and methodologies;
- ii. the extension and consolidation of this dialogue to form a long-term research network;
- iii. the establishment of a complementary research network of postgraduate students working in these areas;
- iv. a final two-day event disseminating the results of the previous workshops, as detailed at (i), and also inviting collaboration and comment from a still wider forum of researchers (contributing to (ii));
- v. a dedicated website allowing access to workshop programme, final report and key addresses.

Project Timetable:

The series of workshops will run from October 2006.