

Tunisian workers in Sicily Fishing economy at the origins of foreign immigration to Italy (1960s-1970s)

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ABSTRACT

In the second half of the 1960s, foreign immigration in Italy underwent a process of transformation. One of the Italian geographical areas in which this process is particularly visible is the area of Trapani, in Sicily. One of the occupational contexts in which this transformation is rapidly maturing is the fishing sector, especially as far as the fishing fleets based in the port of Mazara del Vallo are concerned. Their crews consist mainly of workers from Tunisia. This paper is complementary to the [video](#) presented by the author at Blue Planet Economy (BPE) European Maritime Forum 2021.

KEYWORDS: fishing workers, contemporary Italy, history, migration, Sicily, Tunisia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 1960s, the history of foreign immigration in Italy underwent a process of progressive and intense transformation.

In the second half of the 1960s, something new happened: migration flows began, essentially linked to male and female workers who arrived in Italy from areas that we can define as border areas, with the aim of working in specific occupational sectors.

These flows – initially poorly significant in quantitative terms but destined to grow rather rapidly – are of decisive importance, as they help to redraw the geography of international migration. Thus, in a much more complete way than in the past, Italy represents a growing pole of attraction for the mobility of populations, especially from the point of view of work, or rather of some specific jobs that foreign immigrants are beginning to carry out.

One of the Italian geographical areas in which this process is particularly visible is the area of Trapani, in Sicily, and one of the occupational contexts in which this transformation is rapidly maturing is the fishing sector, mainly within the fishing fleets based in the port of Mazara del Vallo.

2. MIGRANT FISHING WORKERS

According to the 1979 Censis survey (Censis, 1979, p. 8), workers began arriving from Tunisia to Mazara between 1968 and 1972 at a constant rate of around 60 to 80 people per week. Initially, they stayed mainly in the Mazara area to work in the fishing sector, but within a few years they also moved to other Sicilian areas, mainly for working in the agricultural sector.

The Trapanese and Tunisian coasts were not unfamiliar with commercial and cultural exchanges even before the end of the 1960s, but the shift towards the fishing sector generated a new migratory season. The organisation of such a constant and specialised recruitment stemmed from the interest of Mazara's shipowners in expanding the basin of origin of their workforce, as a consequence of that crisis of the fishing industry which in Mazara, as in other Italian ports, was already particularly visible in the mid-1960s.

In order to contextualise the penetration of immigration into the fishing sector, it is necessary to outline the characteristics of this sector in the years between the 1960 and 1970. Through the internationalisation of fishing, Italy intended to obtain a twofold advantage: on the one hand, to extend the sector's potential by expanding its markets; on the other hand, to boost its political presence in the Mediterranean area in the context of cooperation with Arab countries, which would become even more central during the 1980s. The fisheries agreements signed by Italy with other countries (not only Tunisia) underwent a turning point in the 1970s, when the commitment of Italian governments became more pressing in order to guarantee an international expansion of the opportunities provided by the sector. During the 1970s, there was a close link between the effects of the international economic crisis that exploded with the 1973 oil shock and Italy's attempt to develop a process of diversification of its economic production, not limited to the prevalence of a large manufacturing industry but also aimed at favouring small and medium-sized enterprises and local industrial districts. Within this perspective, the potential offered by the fishing sector was very attractive.

Looking at the origins of the flow, we can point out that the movements towards Trapani initially originated from the coastal areas of Tunisia. But as the demand for labor intensified, they extended to the Tunisian inland areas of , involving a workforce less experienced in fishing.

The spread of North African immigration in the Trapani area has some characteristics that make it a paradigmatic case. The first Tunisians arrived on tourist visas, without the work permit, and were generally employed without a contract.

To contextualise the first arrivals in Sicily, we need to look at the Tunisian situation. At the end of the 1960s, both internal and international migration increased significantly in the country.

The two phenomena are often overlapping. One of the most rapid effects of the policies developed immediately after independence (obtained in 1956) was the liberalisation of the 'internal borders'. These previously determined the obligation to reside in the places of birth, significantly restricting movement. This liberalisation resulted in a high rate of mobility: first, towards the production centres around the big cities; then, abroad. Already in the aftermath of independence, and then even more rapidly in the 1960s, migration was encouraged both by the urbanisation process that followed independence and by the precarious living and working conditions in the central and southern areas of the country. The first Tunisian migratory contingents of a certain consistency left for three different directions: the first and prevailing one headed towards France, the second towards Libya, and, the third and lesser towards Algeria. The largest flow towards France was based on bilateral pacts on the transfer of labour that established the conditions of employment and residence.

The Tunisians who began to arrive in Italy were following two directions: one characterised by routes concerning the centre-south, the other one characterised by routes concerning the centre-north. In the first case, they arrived through Sicily following the Mahdia-Tunis-Trapani/Mazara del Vallo axis and, in the second case, they arrived from the Ile de France following the Paris-Lyon-Turin-Milan-Bologna axis. Initially, only Tunisians from the North-East coast, mainly fishermen, but also labourers with experience in construction and agricultural workers, headed towards Mazara.

3. 1979 CENSIS INVESTIGATION

In order to retrace this history, we can use the material published in the 1979 Censis Investigation. According to the authors of the study, the condition of isolation of immigrants, their professional placement in sectors defined as "less guaranteed" (Censis, 1979, p. 11), and their low participation in trade union structures determine the fact that

the perception of the dimensions and characteristics of the phenomenon is completely approximate, insofar as it is linked on the one hand to official data that record, not even exactly, only 'regular' immigration, and on the other hand to impressionistic and alarmist estimates that, upon initial verification, seem equally unfounded (Censis, 1979, p. 14).

The Censis research also includes a section dedicated to seafarers in the fishing sector recruited in Tunisia by shipowners from Mazara. This paragraph opens with a very harsh description of their working conditions. The section on fishing closes with a detailed description of the considerable mobility of Tunisians. This mobility could be defined as multilevel: between one job and another, but also between one territory and another. For most of them fishing represented only one of the possible occupations in the Trapani area during the 1970s.

The history of the Tunisians in the Trapani area from the end of the 1960s and for the following decade is an essential reference point for all those who intend to deal with the development of immigration in Italy from a historical perspective. As stated above, this concerns the beginning of a migratory flow that has then undergone further and multiple developments. This flow has developed and taken root in Western Sicily, an area that in the same historical phase was the protagonist of other migratory movements, mainly outgoing, as it was happening in the rest of Sicily and in Italy, too. Emigration, immigration, commuter mobility and internal migration intertwine and mix with great frequency: this is a typical feature of many social and economic contexts in the Mediterranean area, starting from the 1960s. Moreover, in this case, the specialisation and the peculiarity of a flow originating from a mobile work par excellence, the fishing one, emerge significantly.

But there are further elements of interest.

First of all – and this is a novelty in post-war Italy – the Tunisians' case began as an active recruitment of labour carried out by the shipowners of Mazara. This was part of a conscious choice, even though it took place within a general legal framework that lacked an organic

framework: until 1986 Italy had no specific legislation on immigration and foreign labour. Partly because of this absence, the path of Tunisians – both in the context of the fishing sector and in the other fields in which they are inserted – has been characterised by a continuous slippage between regularity and irregularity.

Secondly, it was an insertion into the labour market and into society that has led to multiple forms of conflict and multiple forms of integration, as we have been able to highlight from the documentation produced by some observers of the phenomenon (Colucci, 2018; Di Sanzo, 2020; Fortuna, 1984; Hannachi, 1998; Saitta & Sbraccia, 2003, Vizzini & Accardi, 1983).

Thirdly, it represented an element of re-composition in the Italian-Tunisian relations and more generally in the Italian economic and political projection on the Mediterranean. Sicily and Tunisia – united by very ancient commercial and cultural relationships – have experienced an additional opportunity for confrontation through the difficult story of immigration, which came at a time when the mass emigration from Sicily to Tunisia had just ended.

This is a decisive path in the history of contemporary Italy and it could be further investigated from the points of view, for instance, of labour market, international relations, economic history, social history, migration policies, the history of Italy, the history of Tunisia, and the history of Euro-Mediterranean relationships.

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