STATE THOUGHT AND SOCIAL HIERARCHIES BETWEEN ITALY AND TUNISIA. FROM HISTORY TO IDENTITY

Pensamento estatal e hierarquias sociais entre Itália e Tunísia. Da história à identidade

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Abstract

The paper draws on the notion of State though as critically discussed by Sayad and on related concepts (nationalism at a distance, integration) to analyse how the State naturalises the division between nationals and non-nationals, building unequal social hierarchies between immigrants and natives that affect the construction of the (social and individual) identities of the migrants themselves. The paper starts with a historical contextualisation of the relations between Tunisia and Italy. First, we show how the opposite migrations that have crossed the Mediterranean have been embedded in unequal racial and symbolic hierarchies characterising Italy and Tunisia, Europe and Africa. Then, we further delve into this dynamic by exploring the identity constructions of Tunisian migrants in Italy, which are sensitive to the demands of the country of immigration (seeking to maintain a given social hierarchy within its borders) and those of the country of emigration (striving to remain connected to its emigrants to extract maximum profit from them).

Keywords: Sayad; State; migration; exclusion; identity

Resumo

O artigo baseia-se na noção de Estado discutida criticamente por Sayad e em conceitos relacionados (nacionalismo à distância, integração) para analisar como o Estado naturaliza a divisão entre nacionais e não-nacionais, construindo hierarquias sociais desiguais entre imigrantes e nativos que afectam a construção das identidades (sociais e individuais) dos próprios migrantes. O artigo começa com uma contextualização histórica das relações entre a Tunísia e a Itália. Em primeiro lugar, mostramos como as migrações opostas que cruzaram o Mediterrâneo foram inseridas em hierarquias raciais e simbólicas desiguais que caracterizam a Itália e a Tunísia, a Europa e a África. Em seguida, aprofundamos esta dinâmica explorando as construções identitárias dos migrantes tunisinos em Itália, que são sensíveis às exigências do país de imigração (que procuram manter uma determinada hierarquia social dentro das suas fronteiras) e às do país de emigração (esforçando-se para permanecer conectado aos seus emigrantes para extrair deles o máximo lucro).

Palavras-chave: *Sayad; Estado; migração; exclusão; identidade*

1. Introduction. State thought: premises and consequences[1]

As extensively discussed by Abdelmalek Sayad, the categories used to study migration in different social and scientific disciplines are, to a large extent, State categories (Sayad, 1999b). Even the scientific questions asked about this phenomenon are often "questions of the State", as evidenced by studies on "integration" or "second generations". As the author states in *L'illusion du provisoire* (2006), the ethnocentrism of the State – especially the colonising one – urges the immigrant to conform to the need of the host society, "integrating" and working. Hence, migrants are described through economist language as "stock" or "workforce" or hydraulic and inanimate terms as "flows", but not as political subjects in the national order: "*c'est du travail, c'est pas du politique*" (1984) synthesised Sayad.

In this sense, Sayad discusses the State's construction of the reality of migration, highlighting the fact that migration is thought of as the State asks, and wants, it to be thought of (Avallone, 2018). Working on the symbiotic relation between the two terms, in *Immigration et Pensée d'État* (1999b) Sayad writes "that to think migration is to think the State, and therefore it is the State that thinks itself by thinking migration" (Sayad, 1999b, p. 6). Hence, immigration can be thought of as a mirror of the State which through migration define itself. In fact, as the author explains in his best-known work, *La double absence* (1999a), the State is founded on the discrimination between an inside and an outside and its way of thinking is entirely embedded in this demarcation line, starkly dividing "nationals" and "non-nationals" (*ibidem*, p. 486) On the one side, those who "naturally" have the nationality of the country ("their" country), and, on the other side, those who lack the nationality of the country in which they reside (*ibidem*). However, beyond the formal possession of citizenship, Sayad acknowledges that the stigma of being "non-national" survives one's naturalisation both "objectively because of the multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion to which they [migrants] are subjected (apparently because of their origins alone), and subjectively because of the feeling they have of being the victim of this exclusion and discrimination based solely on their origins" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 441). This dynamic of perpetual exclusion seems to persist and even reinforce against the generation of migrants' descendants (Sayad, 1994) which charged with threatening "the frontiers of national order" and "the hierarchy of these groups [nationals / non-nationals] and their classification" (Sayad, 1999b, p. 13).

This diacritical demarcation is present throughout the historical evolution of the State, but it appears more explicit in the context of the republican State that aspires to complete national homogeneity (Sayad, 1999b). Through laws, education, bureaucratic procedures, and daily practices, the State disciplines the bodies and thoughts with which individuals and groups conceive the State, life and themselves (Raimondi, 2016, p. 23). However, as recalled, State thought does not live solely within State's borders but exists within a broader transnational racialised system, in which immigration control is a means used by France and Europe to impose a hierarchical relationship with the (neo)colonies. Such sensibility enables Sayad to refine previous conceptualisations of the State, partly overcoming Bourdieu's and Wacquant's conceptions, which draw on a neo-Weberian perspective (Kipfer, 2012), offering – on the contrary – a conceptualisation more transnational in the scope.

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[1] The paper is the joint work of both authors. For academic evaluation purposes only, paragraphs 2 and 4 should be attributed to Andrea Calabretta and paragraphs 1, 3 and 5 to Marianna Ragone.

Since they have accompanied the construction of State and national societies, the categories of thought nationally produced can be understood as "structured structures", i.e. products "socially and historically determined" (Sayad, 1999b, p. 5) that are offered to agents as ordinary political visions. At the same time, due to their deep penetration in common sense, they become "structuring structures" in the sense that they "predetermine and organise our entire representation of the world and, consequently, the world itself" (*ibidem*), leading social agents to think and act following State thought and ultimately reproducing it. Such dynamics shape the social world of the nation-State in its entirety, involving both natives and migrants, who themselves grew up as "children of the State" (Sayad, 1997, p. 113).

In the paper, we take the case of relations between Italy and Tunisia as an example of the State transnational construction of power hierarchies that are produced and reproduced through the migration nexus and through the body of the migrant who is managed by both the State of origin and the State of destination. The aim of the article is thus to observe how the national categories of State thought, produced by social and historical conditions, "become embodied" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 486) dividing nationals from non-nationals, generating discrimination, but also practices of resistance in the lives of Tunisians in Italy, and impacting on the identity constructions of migrants themselves.

After the methodological note, the paper briefly describes the vicissitudes of the Italian community in Tunisia in the 19th and 20th centuries and its privileged status over the native population within the colonial system. In the following section, the perspective is reversed, and we describe the characteristics of Tunisian immigration to Italy and the subaltern position imposed on this population. Three further sections follow, in which we analyse how the principles of State thought penetrate the identity expressions of Tunisian migrants living in Italy. In particular, we describe 1) the processes of exclusion from the group of "nationals" in the country of immigration and 2) of maintaining presence in the context of origin and in the emigrant community, and finally 3) the different configurations that these identity processes and expressions assume on the basis of one's social and class background. Finally, the paper ends with a conclusion section in which we propose migration studies to be more conscious of State thought pervasiveness and so to assume a critical analytical lens.

2. Methodological notes

The paper draws on forty-five open-ended interviews with first-generation migrants of Tunisian origin (33 men and 12 women) residing in the provinces of Modena (Northern Italy) and Ragusa (Sicily). Both areas are characterised by a large and stratified Tunisian presence. The interviewees were reached through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) during a research fieldwork conducted by the first author in 2021. The interviewees generally arrived in Italy between the 1980s and the 1990s and their long-term presence is a useful element to investigate whether and how the sense of temporariness and exclusion imposed on immigrants changes over- time and intertwines with their identity constructions.

The interviews, developed in an open-ended and biographical fashion (Fedyuk, Zentai, 2018), also recall Sayad's lesson methodologically. For the Algerian author, the immigrant-emigrant social trajectory is understandable only by questioning her/his entire itinerary (Sayad, 1999a, p. 250) in interviews that allow locating the interviewee's path within a broader social horizon (Sayad, 1999a, p. 286). Hence, if supported by a sharp analytical focus and methodological rigour, does it

seem possible to employ biographical accounts without falling into superficial interpretations and "biographical illusions" (Bourdieu, 1986).

The interviews were conducted in Italian, language in which the research participants were fluent having lived in Italy for several decades. For the purpose of this article, the quoted excerpts have been translated into English by the authors, taking care to keep the meaning and syntax of the expressions as unaltered as possible. The interviews thus collected were transcribed verbatim and, through the use of Atlas.ti, coded and analysed thematically. To develop a comprehensive analysis, we thought it necessary to reconstruct the socio-historical context within which the interviewees' accounts took shape, that is those structural constraints within which perceptions of the social world develop (Bourdieu, 1987), adopting again a research approach inspired by Sayad (Saada, 2000). For this reason, the presentation of the interviewees' accounts is preceded by a historical reconstruction of Italian immigration to Tunisia and Tunisian immigration to Italy, events in which a symbolic and racial hierarchy is constructed, then persisting in individual representations about one's positioning in the social world.

3. Migratory movements between Tunisia and Italy

3.1 First act: Italians in Tunisia

In the early 20th century at least 80,000 Italians were in Tunisia, according to a report by the Italian consul Carletti (1903). Most of these, 58,000, were Sicilians. The Italian presence began to grow significantly after the Italian-Tunisian Treaty of the "Goletta" (1868) (De Montety, 1937) and especially after the establishment of the French protectorate (Treaty of Bardo 1881) and it would remain a significant presence until the 1960s when the process of decolonisation and Tunisification led most of the Italian community to leave the country (Morone, 2015).

According to Albert Memmi (1957), during the French protectorate, the Italians established a type of coloniser-colonised relationship with the Tunisian population. Despite being "Italian proletarian communities" (Cresti, 2008) and sometimes finding themselves in miserable conditions, they drew many benefits from the colonial context. Italians were protected by international laws and by the attention of the Italian metropole through the consulate; they were considered by the French as deserving greater dignity than the colonised; they accessed less precarious jobs and more schooling compared to Tunisians. Hence, Italians were hierarchically advantaged by the colonial system even though they maintained, compared to the French, less distance from the Tunisian population: they often spoke the Tunisian dialect, created friendly relations and in some cases married Tunisians (Memmi, 1957).

The Italian colonisers were amply supported by the Italian State which, since unification, nurtured expansionist and colonial desires, especially towards North Africa and Tunisia, aspirations that were undermined by the so-called "slap of Tunis" in 1881 and the establishment of the French protectorate (Conelli, 2022). At that point, however, the Italian State understood the importance of the presence of Italian emigrants and supported their arrival and protection (*ibidem*). As Choate (2008) points out, Italian emigrants were shaping a "global nation", not based on imperial control but on the presence of emigrant colonies that gave rise to an "emigrant colonialism". It is no coincidence that the foreign minister of the time was not only concerned with the violent colonisation of Africa but also with emigration arrangements (Conelli, 2022). The Italian State's objectives included the quest for recognition as a modern colonial power and a consequent

re-evaluation of its geopolitical position, but also the construction of an internal national identity that no longer excluded – at least symbolically and partially – the *meridionali* (southerners), thanks to the attribution of greater inferiority to the colonised other (Nani, 2006). These events show how the colonial fact and emigration served the Italian State both in terms of internal pacification and to reorganise its value in the international arena, confirming Sayad's lucid analysis of how the State, through migration, thinks of itself.

3.2 Second act: Tunisians in Italy

Sayad acknowledges that much migration to Europe originated from the historical, material, financial, economic and symbolic effects of colonialism (Bourdieu, Sayad, 1964). Indeed, Tunisian emigration – initially to France, Germany and Libya – began in the post-colonial period (Simon, 1973), in which deep social changes and massive internal migrations prepared the ground for international movements. It was only from the 1970s onwards that a new "migratory wave composed of specialised workers and unemployed agricultural labourers, the 'victims' of the failed agrarian reforms" (Daly, 2001, p. 190) emigrated towards Italy and in particular Sicily, exploiting in some cases previous social ties with former Italian colonisers (Fleri, 2022) and the absence of border controls in Italy (Pugliese, 1992). In the following years, the Tunisian presence in Italy grew steadily until it reached 200,000 in the 2000s (OTE, 2012). This process of numerical increase was also connected to a dispersed settlement throughout the Italian territory (Calabretta, 2022) and a variegated labour insertion, although always confined to the secondary sector (Daly, 2001). The history of Tunisian migration to Italy accompanies the political and social changes that take place around the migration phenomenon in Italy. In terms of policies, the process of regulating entry underwent an important turning point in 1990 with the approval of the Martelli Law (l. 39/1990), which allowed Italy to accede to the Schengen Agreement with other European States (Paoli, 2014). The law introduced a visa system for entry into Italy, creating the basis for "a legal system in which migrants are potentially deportable […] which allows for differential inclusion of migrants in the Italian social context and labour market" (Piro, 2020, p. 247). The Turco-Napolitano (1998) and Bossi-Fini (2002) laws definitively consolidated this trend. The first introduced *Temporary Residence Centres* (currently CPR – *Centres of Permanence for Repatriation*) in which to imprison – without having committed any crime – foreign citizens to be expelled. The second made the residence permit dependent on the work contract with the general aim of "making the foreign presence more precarious and less protected by legal and social protections" (Colucci, 2018, p. 141).

The Tunisian State actively supported the closure of the Italian (and European) borders, as from the 1990s it began to sign agreements with European partners to control its borders, also with the aim of tightening the grip of control over its national population (Suber, 2019). Today, the criminalisation of migratory movements in the Mediterranean persists and increases (Schmoll, 2018). Legal entry channels in Italy have been emptied for years now – with a few exceptions for family reunification – forcing Tunisian migrants to reach Italy without documents. Despite the awareness of the ineffectiveness and brutality of repatriations (ASGI, 2022) they continue to be acted against thousands of Tunisian people every year (Palma, 2021). Finally, the criminalisation of Tunisian migration, with its stereotypes and stigmatisation, is experienced by the old community as a stigma, opening deep fractures between old migrants and newcomers (Calabretta, Romania, 2022). Since the autumn of 2022, Tunisia has overtaken Libya in the number of people leaving by sea for Italy and this has led to the agreements with Tunisia in the summer of 2023, which

stipulate that the European Union provides financial support to Tunis "to improve its system of search and rescue at sea, patrolling of territorial waters and border control" (Camilli, 2023). In other words, European and Italian financial aid prevents, with violence, international migrants and Tunisians themselves from reaching Italy from Tunisia, following the Libyan model. These agreements confirm how State thought and international relations between States use migration to define financial and political international hierarchies. The events just mentioned thus allow us to understand, as mentioned by Bouamama (2006) commenting Sayad, that the characteristics of the coloniser/colonised/colonial system relationship are reproduced in the social relationship between the majority (national group)/minority (non-national migrants)/capitalist system. In particular, they show how, in post-colonial migration, Tunisians experienced anew the status of subalterns compared to Italians.

4. Identity thinking or thinking about oneself in the State

4.1 Being non-nationals for life

Migration is a "fundamentally political" act (Sayad, 1993, p. 409) because it brings "non-nationals" into the State, and by doing so, it challenges the separation between them and the "nationals" (Sayad, 1999b, p. 6) and disrupts the congruences that underpin the nation-State (Brubaker, 2010). As a synecdoche of the entire migratory process, the individual migrant thus becomes personally "guilty" for the assault brought to the social order (Sayad, 1999b, p. 13) and must justify his or her presence in State of arrival through "an intense and continuous work of legitimation" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 393). Playing a central role in this process are "the illusion of the provisional and the alibi of work" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 139) since "emphasising only the economic aspect [of migration] is a way of making both emigration and immigration acceptable while concealing their political significance" (Raimondi, 2016, p. 40).

The words of Medhi, an agricultural worker in Sicily, show how the work – a hierarchically subordinate job in continuity with the power relations between Italy and Tunisia – becomes not only a legitimisation of one's presence in immigration but, over time, a dimension of personal identification:

> M. Young people nowadays are different: they don't want to work in greenhouses, they don't want to work under plastics, because it's a hard job, it's not a clean job. Look at me, I'm 49 years old now, if you look at me what age would you say I am? 60 years old? Because this is the work under the plastic, heavy work…
>
> Int. And who does such heavy work now?
>
> M. It's the foreigners, do you understand? Foreigners, Tunisians, Africans, they do everything on the job. Until now, our family, we do it because there is no other way [...] I only think of the work inside the greenhouses. I close my eyes, I don't have another chance, I just do the work and that's it. (Mehdi, man, 49 years old)

If work is – at least initially – "the only reason to exist in immigration" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 255), a social and existential overlap between workers and migrants appears. However, Sayad argues, as time passes the illusion of the provisional fades away and the migrant opens up to a different temporal perspective in which he/she becomes "a worker for posterity" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 521). However, neither considerable migratory seniority nor obtaining citizenship seem sufficient to guarantee inclusion among the "nationals", as Taoufik, who has been in Italy for 23 years and is awaiting naturalisation, tells us:

> Maybe it's the Italian mentality, I'm not saying everyone, but most people believe the TV. Then I don't know what's behind it, if the Lega Nord party, but there's this big title 'Tunisian drug dealer'... OK, there are also them, but can you talk a little about good families, those who work, who pay taxes every month like Italians? Give a chance to those too, make them feel like Italians too! The same way you tell on TV about this criminal, you tell about that father who wakes up at four o'clock in the morning to go to work, and then the people decide what these extra-EU [extracomunitari] immigrants here are like, what they are! (Taoufik, man, 57 years old)

Parenthood, the construction of social networks among natives, the acquisition of new habits and habitus, and naturalisation thus seem to feed a process of social ageing that, while making migrants perceive their rootedness in Italy, does not erase the sense of "guilt" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 247) for the absence from the country of origin:

> At least for a future retirement I would like to go back to Tunisia, because the kids unfortunately I don't think they will go to live down there because they are now more Italian than Tunisian, so they see their future here, it's normal. In fact, when we go down in the summer, after a week the kids would say: 'but when are we going home?'. That is, when I'm here I say, 'when am I going home?' and there they say 'when are we going home?'. (Yahya, man, 57 years old)

If the dynamics of exclusion from the nation are coupled with the persistence of social and symbolic barriers that segregate migrants and their descendants in subordinate positions, it is possible to understand the bitterness of feeling condemned – and seeing their children condemned – to be "workers for life" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 289), i.e. forever immigrants:

> I've been here since 1990, I worked legally until 2008 in ceramics, everything was fine, then the crisis started, and we are now out. From that moment on it got worse, not only for me, it's worse for all the foreigners because if you look inside the offices there are only Italians, and the manual workers are only foreigners. [...] I am also afraid for my children. They study like everyone else, they have applied for a lot of jobs, but they never call them, even for work with the municipality, at the office, they never call them, they even apply for a neat office job, like all Italians, but they never call them. They only call my son to go and work in ceramics, to do ugly work, even though he was born here and that is awful. My son stopped studying in 2016, now he works in ceramics. Six months, then one year, always a temporary contract. Even if he studies a year or two at university, it's no use, always foreigners, always workers, even if they have citizenship. (Mounir, man, 60 years old)

4.2 Being nationals from afar

State thought, however, must not be reduced to a simple device of discrimination against non-nationals present in the country of immigration, but has to be understood as a system of thought incorporated and shared between the dominant and the dominated, a characteristic that explains its invisibility and naturalisation (Sayad, 1999b). Politically active agents in disrupting the order of the State – and for this reason segregated as non-nationals – the interviewees are also inscribed, albeit at a distance, in the national citizenry of origin. It is precisely to preserve this ascription that they are required to "sacralise (in the strong sense of the term) the community and the indefectible membership (a form of eternal allegiance) to the community as a social group" (Sayad, 1999a, 407). This dynamic is evident in the accounts of the interviewees, who – through a series of metaphors – emphasise the immutable and natural character of their Tunisian-ness. For example, Kadira resorts to a parallelism with the vegetal world:

> Tunisia for me is my roots, which I take care of. I water them every day, in the morning for example when I think of my parents, my sisters and my daughter. It is the land I come from, where I was destined to be born. (Kadira, woman, 49 years old)

Tunisian belonging is thus described as inscribed in one's biological dimension, in that body which is intended to symbolise one's identity (Bourdieu, 1977) and ensure the personal continuity required by the social order (Bourdieu, 1986):

> I am Tunisian in DNA. I am as jealous of Tunisia as I am of Italy because my years were spent in Italy more than in Tunisia. But there is something that pulls me about Tunisia, it's that symbol that you are Tunisian. (Lina, woman, 52 years old)

The essentialisation of one's national identity, described as sempiternal and monolithic in becoming culture (Baumann, 1999), therefore recalls a nationalist representation of the world (Sayad, 1999b) and a reification of cultures that conceals the power relations between them (Sayad, 1979). In this sense, migration has significant impacts on the emigrant community, which – through the experience of exile, i.e. of minority existence – experiences a renewed political and national commonality (Sayad, 1999a).

Tunisia actively participates in keeping its emigrant communities tied to itself. In fact, since the 1960s, the Tunisian State has supported emigration and the relationship with the diaspora, both to get rid of the non-absorbable workforce, and to obtain, through remittances, significant foreign exchange earnings (De Bel-Air, 2016). Even today, Tunisia promotes investment programs in the country for the benefit of the emigrants, Arabic language courses for their descendants, cultural events abroad and has expanded voting abroad after the 2011 uprising (Pouessel, 2020). In this sense, practices of reproduction of cultural belonging seem to be a means for sustaining the attachment to the country and its economic implications: "both [States] speculate on the temporariness of migrants: the first [of origin] to bring wealth into the country without losing workers, the second [of arrival] to produce new wealth, getting rid of workers in case of crisis. Two States, the same thought" (Raimondi, 2016, p. 40). Participating in this work of reconstructing transnational ties are the "Tunisian" associations on Italian territory:

> Our initiatives were based on the relation with the Tunisian consulate [...] We asked for an Arabic language teacher for our children, because the families in Modena were already quite numerous. And the government responded and gave us teachers. Among the other most important and visible things was the fact that we created a football team, it was called the Tunisian Star [...] I had organised three or four concerts, but at a high level, I used to call famous music groups from Tunisia. (Driss, man, 56 years old)

Therefore, even migrants – having incorporated the national/non-national order of thought (Raimondi, 2016, p. 49) – are not exempt from participating in the same State thought that excludes them in immigration, reproducing a link – understood as natural – with Tunisia and its social networks (Sayad, 1981). The processes of exclusion suffered in Italy can thus lead to a subversive (Sayad, 1999a, p. 449) and transnational "nationalism" (Kastoryano, 2006), proving that it is almost impossible to imagine oneself outside of national container. Zouhair, for instance, who arrived in Italy when he was only a few months old, reports:

> When I was a child, I thought I was Italian, because I lived here, I liked Italy so much, I studied here... then as I grew up, with all the experiences you have, all the things you hear, all the things you see, you realise that it's not like that. And then you start to love your country more, even if it threw you away. Because my country didn't give me anything, Tunisia didn't give a damn about me, because Tunisia didn't tell my father, 'you have to go back home to work because this is your home', Tunisia didn't give a damn. But you find yourself in a place [Italy] where you work, you give your best, you bear fruit, you're not a burden on society, I'm not someone who brings trouble, someone who doesn't work, but you find yourself that you're not wanted [...] I can't have a loan, I can't have anything, because I'm not Italian... I don't know what I've been doing here for 34 years,

> I don't know... Italy needs me to work because it needs young people because it's full of old people. It suits them, but you have to remain of your nationality: you work, you tear yourself apart, and when you finish, you're no longer needed. (Zouhair, man, 34 years old)

4.3 Immigrants and foreigners

As seen so far, immigration-emigration develops within national frames of meaning supported by a State thought that naturalises and de-historicises itself, presenting national containers as natural. In this framework, the migrant is subjected to the contradiction of the provisional that lasts, that is, the contradiction of still being Tunisian (despite absence) and simultaneously of not being Italian despite presence (Sayad, 1999a). A contradiction that takes place within unequal power relations between national identities and cultures, in which the migrant is called to recognise the symbolic dominance of the framework she/he should (but can never completely) "integrate". Indeed, Sayad argues: "The discourse on integration, which is necessarily a discourse on identity, one's own or that of others, and ultimately on the unequal power relations in which these identities are involved, is not a discourse of truth but a discourse made to produce a truth effect" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 380). Subjected to such symbolic domination, migrants are "condemned to oscillate between strategies of recognition and strategies of subversion, without having the means for either one or the other" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 448).

In the interviewees' accounts, these opposite possibilities are evident and, while intertwined, prevailing tendencies can be observed within specific groups. For example, some interviewees represent themselves as strangers to the Italian context despite having spent many years in the country:

> I tell you the truth, my country of origin is Tunisia. My second is Italy, it's the truth because as I told you I don't complain here in Italy. I've made my life, maybe I've worked a lot, but that's life. But the truth is that it's my second country. (Mohsen, man, 55 years old)

In general, such expressions are found in interviewees from lower social backgrounds, characterised by positions of economic fragility that threaten the definition of themselves as workers and therefore the justification of their presence in Italy. These same interviewees maintain strong relations with their co-nationals' networks - an intermediate element in the relationship with the country of origin (Sayad, 1977) – and make a strong essentialisation of the Tunisian national identity. By investing the nationality of origin with strong symbolic dimensions (Sayad, 1999a, p. 404), the naturalisation process is diminished as much as possible (*ibidem*, p. 405):

> I am Tunisian and I never forget that I am Tunisian, and there is nothing to change. Italian citizenship is fine, this is for documents, for work, but I am happy that I am Tunisian, Muslim, all that. (Hamza, man, 63 years old)

For these interviewees, who, due to their lack of resources, have to cope with the dominant definition of their identity as immigrants (Sayad, 1999b), the temporariness of their presence seems to perpetuate, generating plans to return to Tunisia:

> I miss everything, I miss everything. I also like being here in Italy, I'm used to Italy, I'm used to many things here in Italy, but when I remember Tunisia I want to go back there immediately, the country is always the country... (Noura, woman, 57 years old)

At the opposite end of the spectrum is another group of interviewees who seem – sometimes even before migration itself – to be "seeking assimilation" (Sayad, 1999b, p. 10). Often associated with secularised political orientations, these interviewees show an average high cultural capital

and seem inclined to build solid social relations with natives even outside the work environment (Sayad, 1993), placing fewer barriers to the process of legal naturalisation and social "integration". For example, Mejdi, a worker in Modena and trade unionist, tells:

> M. For instance, my wife has always been the class parent representative, always done it, so it's a way of integrating because class representative means talking to 30 parents. And there you can already change someone's ideas; in our small way we've worked.
>
> Int. And I guess you too...
>
> M. Yes, yes, I was also a [union] delegate for 16 years, and they voted for me, I got most of the votes when we had assemblies, most of the votes three times! (Mejdi, man, 60 years old)

These dynamics are reflected in a self-definition in which Italian belonging, sought in everyday life, is claimed and added to, without necessarily replacing, Tunisian belonging (Sayad, 1999a, p. 405):

> I belong, I am both: one is the country where I was born and the other where I grew up because I grew up here, in Tunisia I just studied, I worked three years, four, from '83 to '87 [...] In the sense that I am a Victorian[2], that I belong to this city! (Akram, man, 55 years old)

Differences in social origins, migratory projects, economic capital, social resources and status thus mark the distinctions between being would-be foreigners in search of assimilation into the Italian context or immigrants excluded from it (see Raimondi, 2016, p. 28). However, Sayad recalls, both of these strategies of symbolic struggle lead inevitably to recognising only the native identity as legitimate (Sayad, 1999b). If the first group, in endorsing its estrangement from Italy, seems to align itself with the representation of otherness, the second group, aiming at acceptance on an equal footing in the Italian identity spectrum, seems particularly sensitive to the symbolic exclusion that hinders this ambition. Olfa relates in this sense:

> It still bothers me when I start to say... and someone says, 'but do you understand what I am saying?' But what language am I speaking in? Of course, my Italian is not perfect, but I speak it better than some Italians honestly. So that bothers me. (Olfa, woman, 44 years old)

Hence, whether they tend towards subversion or assimilation strategies, the interviewees share the condition of symbolic dominants, or "sub-proletarians of the identity order" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 450), always subject to processes of exclusion from the symbolic and social containers created by State thought, always subject to the negation of their political significance for the sake of the monopoly exercised by nationals and the "politesse" imposed on non-nationals (Sayad, 1999a, p. 139).

Conclusions

In developing our study, we retrieved some of the concepts discussed by Sayad, in particular the notion of State thought, to observe how, through a work of historical amnesia and of concealment of power relations, the State manages to naturalise the division between nationals and non-nationals, deeply penetrating into the social fabric. To uphold our analysis, we developed a historical contextualisation of relations between Tunisia and Italy, observing the construction of opposed migratory hierarchies depending on the migratory movement. Indeed, the social subalternity imposed on Tunisians since the time of colonisation seems to reproduce in their

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[2] Citizen of the city of Vittoria, in Sicily.

trajectories of life and work in Italy. Through the analysis of the narratives of several Tunisian migrants we observed how, despite their long presence in Italy, they remain non-nationals, symbolically and socially excluded from full participation in the life of the country of settlement and reconnected – but only virtually – to their country of origin.

Sayad's arguments have been pivotal to interpreting our data and reconnecting in a holistic reading past and present dynamics as well as visible social phenomena and invisible structures behind them (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 1409). As the author states, discrimination against non-nationals is possible since the migrant "belongs to or comes from a country, a nation, a continent that occupies, in the international sphere, especially in relation to countries of immigration, a position that is dominated and dominated in every respect" (Sayad, 1999a, p. 300). In this frame, the division between nationals and non-nationals within State's borders is connected to the relations between States with asymmetrical statuses and different positions of power, and thus form part of a broader economic, political, financial and social system that fuels the divide between the global North and the global South.

Through the study of migration, "the best introduction to political sociology" (Saada, 2000, p. 42), Sayad allows us to question the intrinsic nature of the State, which produces the difference between "nationals" and "others", a discrimination necessary to sustain its very existence and legitimised by its naturalisation (Saada, 2000). The State cannot do anything but discriminate. As pointed out by Pérez (2009), Sayad's great contribution was not only to study the social function of the reproduction of the dominated and dominant national culture, but to unveil the "taken for granted" and investigate the social meanings that appeared neutral.

For these reasons, the Algerian sociologist's work must also question us about the function that sociology and the social sciences play in the dominant representation of the migrating subject, since, as Palidda (2002) writes, Sayad was "sarcastic, if not hostile" towards scientific analyses that seemed not to focus on the migrant's perspective but only on the dominant one of State thought. Hence, Sayad's example shows us a path towards "a critical sociology that is empirically rich and normatively sensitive to the power asymmetry" (Boudou, 2021, p. 19) and his studies invite us to "go beyond the visible actors, going beyond 'the immigrant'" (Bouamama, 2006) in order to put the economic and social structure produced by colonialism, the State's actors, its interests and its violence at the centre of the analysis.

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