

Soft Shell, Hard Core: Peach Culture and the Paradox of Immigrant Integration in Italy

Ceyda Durmus¹

Abstract

To the international observer, Italy is the archetype of a Peach Culture, as a society characterized by a soft, approachable exterior where interpersonal warmth and informality facilitate initial social contact. This reputation for La Dolce Vita and warmth is often cited as a primary pull factor for newcomers. However, this commentary argues that this very cultural flexibility functions as a structural trap for economic migrants. By applying the "Peach Culture" metaphor to the socio-economic reality of the Italian state, the researcher contends that the soft shell of Italian society as its reliance on informal networks and particularism lures migrants into the shadow economy, where they become what Maurizio Ambrosini terms useful invaders. In this context, the "hard core" of the peach represents a rigid, familistic welfare system that provides almost no support to those outside traditional kinship networks. Thus, the same cultural traits that make Italy attractive to tourists and expatriates serve to permanently exclude migrants from full citizenship, trapping them in a cycle of informal labour and social precarity. This piece challenges policymakers to recognize that cultural warmth is not a substitute for structural integration and that without a formalized safety net, the Italian peach remains impenetrable to those who need it most.

Keywords: Peach culture; Italy, interculturalism, social integration; Trompenaars

Migration, as a long-standing social phenomenon, can be explored and explained using binaries to construct a mental map of the field of migration studies: process and product of migration (Castles 2000), internal versus international migration (Cohen 1995), voluntary versus forced migration (Segal et al. 1993), temporary versus permanent migration (King 2002), and, legal and illegal migration (Koo et al., 2022). In the relevant literature, the concepts of mass migration (Greenhill, 2010), refugees (Douglas et al. 2019), highly-skilled migrants (Shachar 2006), seasonal migration (Triandafyllidou 2010), and even year-abroad students (King et al., 2010) have come into use in explaining newly explored contexts in migration. Despite evolving typologies of migration, the fundamental motivations remain consistent: survival, economic opportunity, education, or family reunification. Migrants are fundamentally driven by the search for resources, whether for survival, economic opportunity,

¹ Ceyda Durmus. Independent Researcher. Oslo, Norway. Email: ceydasensin@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0002-3036-0221



or personal fulfilment, i.e. life or death matters due to war conditions, in search of a better job market, in need of a higher quality of education, or simply because of love stories.

After the Second World War, Italy, which took as an example the practices of England, France, and the Netherlands that attracted immigrant workers from the colonies, brought workers from the agricultural regions; afterward, with the end of the Cold War, it became one of the countries that received the most immigration (Koçak and Gündüz 2016). What can Italy offer as a source of resources when it comes to immigrants? It frequently draws international attention due to its historical, cultural, and political developments, including Mussolini invading countries in the early 1900s (Blinkhorn 2006), having a crisis of immigration movement out of Italy in the 1960s (Bulli and Soare 2018), or Napoli winning the UEFA Cup thanks to Maradona in 1989 (Archetti 2002); and lately, being reported the first country in Europe as having COVID-19 cases in 2020 (Mavragani 2020), Måneskin, a glam rock band, winning the Eurovision song contest in 2021 (Vuletic 2022) and Giorgia Meloni, a right-wing politician, being elected as first female Prime Minister of Italy in 2022 (Cino Pagliarello and Tedesco 2022). Including Italy's tourism economy, which heavily relies on gastronomy for its convenient access to fresh vegetables, fruits, and seafood; additionally, having a wide range of vineyards, overall, thanks to coast-hugging Mediterranean culture, having a comfortable climate compared to countries with extreme climate conditions, made Italy an attraction point (Manrai et al. 2017).

In summary, a country with such a prominent reputation, Italy, has many visitors every year, either for willing reasons, like tourists, or for unwilling purposes, like refugees or asylum seekers. Arriving in successive waves from diverse regions and for various reasons, the newcomers clash, and mix, but in the end, to what extent are they integrated into the local Italian society?

Culture and Integration in the Italian Context

Culture, as a very abstract term, can be defined and described in varied ways. While it can be defined as a collective mind programming that differentiates individuals in a group from other people (Hofstede et al. 2010; Hofstede 2011), it can also be described as assumptions and norms that determine how a society may interact with each other (DiStefano and Maznevski 2000). Defined as a learned, not inborn, collective phenomenon showing unspoken guidelines in a group (Hofstede et al. 2010), it reflects on human behaviors (Porter 2000) as well as decisions and practices (Early 2006). These reflections end up with the same two categories in mind: “us” and “them”. In other words, *othering* was eventually born as a postcolonial theory (Bhabha 2012; Said 1977; Spivak 1985; Thomas-Olalde and Velho 2011). The theory never loses its spark in Italy either, where it existed as separate regions until the mid-nineteenth century (Petruzzellis and Craig 2016), also because the country's itself is already busy with a great mixture from South to North, from dialects to different cuisines (i.e. Berruto 2018; Ricciardelli 2016; de Piccoli and Rollero 2010).

Given Italy's internal cultural heterogeneity, even native citizens may experience intra-national othering, as in raising important questions about how foreigners are perceived and treated, even if they are represented as a warmer Mediterranean society in the media (Fleming et al. 2024)? Carbone (2023) exemplifies inclusivity as the rich language Lucano of Modello Riace uses to articulate *others* without *othering*. In their study conducted in Italy, Prislei and colleagues (2024) highlighted that both adherence to binding moral principles and a preference for



cultural rigidity contribute to negative attitudes toward migrant integration. To encourage more positive intergroup relations, they suggest aligning societal values with left-wing political views, as these are commonly associated with multiculturalism (ibid). Because culture is a learned package of knowledge, negative attitudes must be taught, whereas the opposite –a positive approach- is also possible. Saying that, as social beings, the possibility of people interacting with others is inconceivable. Since this paper focuses on Italy's situation, the perspectives of migration scholars in Italy were also critically analyzed. They claim that immigrants are in great need of interacting with the host country's cultures to bond faster to have a smoother transition (Freddi 2016; Hawthorne 2021; Khaperskaia and Şensin 2019; Omizzolo 2019; Şensin and Stashina 2019; Zannoni and Sirotti 2019), even prompting some to adapt their original names to conform to Italian linguistic norms (Nitti 2021). Knowing that, in the literature, scholars have already underlined the most-frequently faced integration challenges in Italy, categorized as economic challenges, legal challenges, social challenges, and cultural challenges. According to Maslow (McLeod 2007), physical needs are expected to be met first. If one needs to feed themselves, one must hold financial independence. The first challenge immigrants face is that although they might hold skilled positions in their home country, they are now working in underqualified positions in irregular work that is not desired or preferred by Italians (Ambrosini 1999). This is because when an immigrant wishes to make their qualifications and skills recognized in Italy, they face harsh bureaucracy (Biffi 2018), as well as costly and tedious procedures. Not only this procedure, but even simple schooling and educational development can be a serious series of concerns (Capasso 2018; Catarci 2016; Colombo 2007; Natalini 2024). Integration of immigrants is a concern of management (Kyrieri 2011). Therefore, it can be said that the integration of immigrants has been, is, and will likely continue to be a significant challenge to human dignity. To understand this more fully from an Italian cultural perspective, it is necessary to consider the development of managing cultural diversity in the context of some significant occurrences in Italian history, like, the already-existed diversity of linguistic and cultural minorities (Campani 2008), Italy's lengthy history of emigration (Golini and Amato 2001), the colonial history of Italy, particularly in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, and Somalia (Schiavulli 2006), racism and persecution of the Jewish population by the Italian state under the fascist regime (Israel and Nastasi 1998), and lately, the increasing number of migrants by the route of the Mediterranean Sea as they flee the widespread consequences of persecution or violence (Fargues and Bonfanti 2014). The subsequent section aims to articulate a constructive path forward.

Trompenaars' Model of Cultural Dimensions Applied to Italy

If enduring the previously mentioned array of challenges is necessary to arrive in Italy and establish oneself, it becomes imperative to pose the pertinent question: Why do immigrants continue to choose Italy? To make a better understanding of it, this section of the paper digs into Trompenaars's (Smith et al. 1996; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2011) dimensions to elucidate Italy's "peachy" culture; a society that appears soft and approachable on the outside, yet reveals a resilient and formidable core. Trompenaars' proposed model, although criticized in the literature (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1997; Hofstede 1996), presents a seven-dimensional model of national culture. While the first five factors of the model, namely universalism versus particularism, individualism versus collectivism, neutral versus emotional, specific versus diffuse, and achievement versus ascription, describe relationships with other people, the rest of the two dimensions are orientation in time and attitudes towards

the environment (Hofstede 1996). Therefore, since this paper aims to explore and explain immigrants' logical or emotional reasons for residing in Italy, and their being social beings, only the first five dimensions were considered to be elaborated.

To start with, Italy leans towards particularism, where relationships and unique circumstances often take precedence (Petruzzelis and Craig 2016), over strict adherence to rules. This characteristic creates a flexible and adaptable social environment, appealing to immigrants who seek a society that values personal connections and tailor-made solutions to individual challenges. The "peachy" aspect of this culture is evident in the initial friendliness, openness, convivial demeanour, and warm interpersonal style of Italians (ibid; Omirbekova 2024), making it easier for immigrants to form connections and navigate through the complexities of settling in. However, balance is always needed. Italian culture strikes a delicate balance between individualism and collectivism. While there is a strong emphasis on personal achievement and expression among Italians (Colombo et al. 2022), there is also a profound sense of community and family ties (Giordano et al. 2005; Manacorda and Moretti 2006; Marè et al. 2020; Petruzzelis and Craig 2016; Santarelli and Cottone 2009; Tos and Assirelli 2013). This duality offers immigrants the opportunity to pursue personal ambitions while being embraced by a supportive communal network. The soft exterior of the "peach" culture means that immigrants are often able to find it easy to make acquaintances and form a social circle, even if these connections might initially be more superficial. It is undeniable that Italy is predominantly affective, with open displays of emotions being the norm (Duncan and Grazzani-Gavazzi 2004; Grazzani-Gavazzi 1999). This emotionally expressive culture fosters warm interpersonal relationships and vibrant social life (Petruzzelis and Craig 2016), making it an attractive destination for immigrants who value emotional connections and expressive interactions. The welcoming nature of Italians (Petruzzelis and Craig 2016), allows newcomers to feel included and emotionally supported from the outset. Again, in Italy, interactions tend to be more diffuse, meaning that personal and professional lives often overlap (Giordano et al. 2005; Mari et al. 2016; Mare et al. 2020; Santarelli and Cottone 2009; Tosi and Assirelli 2013). This integrated approach to relationships allows for deeper connections and a more holistic understanding of individuals, making it appealing to immigrants who prefer a less compartmentalized and more interconnected social fabric. The soft outer layer of the "peach" culture helps immigrants to blend their personal and professional lives smoothly, facilitating a more cohesive and satisfying experience. It needs to be highlighted that Italian society values recognized personal accomplishments (Haskell 1980), and respects social status while respecting traditions (Omirbekova 2024). This provides a dynamic environment where immigrants can be acknowledged for their achievements while benefiting from the stability of a society that values tradition and respect for established roles. The initial softness of the peach culture helps immigrants to be recognized and appreciated quickly, even if deeper acceptance requires proving one's merits over time.

Conclusion

Italy's cultural traits offer valuable insights into why it continues to attract immigrants from diverse backgrounds. The unique blend of flexibility, emotional expressiveness, strong communal ties, and a deep respect for personal achievement and tradition creates an environment that is, at first glance, socially inviting. Italy's culture, characterized by its warm and friendly exterior, facilitates initial connections and social integration for newcomers. This openness allows immigrants to feel a sense of belonging from the outset, helping them



establish relationships and navigate their new environment with greater ease. However, beyond this approachable nature lies a more complex and deeply rooted cultural identity. The resilient, tradition-oriented aspects of Italian society provide a dynamic space where immigrants can grow and thrive, but this requires adaptability and a willingness to engage with the cultural nuances of their new home. Through the lens of Trompenaars' cultural dimensions, it becomes evident that Italy's appeal to immigrants extends far beyond economic opportunities and quality of life. The interplay between Italy's inviting social culture and its deeper, more structured traditions creates a compelling reason for immigrants to endure challenges and commit to long-term integration. This perspective underscores the vital role cultural values play in shaping the immigrant experience, demonstrating how the intricate relationship between tradition, modernity, and migration continues to define Italy's evolving multicultural landscape.

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