

SGUARDI DAL MONDO

Prato, an intriguing place

di Loretta Baldassar

Sociologa e Antropologa
presso la Facoltà di Arte, Mestieri, Legge e Educazione
della Western Australia University, Perth

I arrived in Prato exactly one decade ago, in 2009, and lived there with my family for the better part of four years. Since then, I have visited frequently, both for personal and work- related reasons. My eldest son, in particular, has developed a strong sense of connection with Prato and he wishes to return as often as possible. My husband, on the other hand has a more bitter-sweet relationship with the place. When



Daniela Toccafondi invited me to reflect on Prato today, ten years on from when I first arrived, I was cautiously enthusiastic. Cautious, because it is difficult to maintain a real sense of the place when you are not living there, although the view from afar is sometimes enlightening for its external perspective. Enthusiastic because Prato is an intriguing place, an excellent example of how people are managing some of the most

difficult contemporary social challenges. In my reflections here, I draw on the preface I wrote for the 2010 writing competition for second generation migrant youth, jointly organized by the Monash University Prato Centre and the Province of Prato's Ministry of Culture. The competition was open to young people up to the age of 30 who were either born in Prato or had done their schooling there and whose family



background was not Italian. Participants were invited to write (in Italian) a fictional or non-fiction essay, or a poem or a collection of poetry. The theme of the writing was *'la città vista e vissuta dai pratesi di seconda generazione'*. The voices in that volume, and the one that followed in 2011, along with my family's personal experiences of visiting Prato in the intervening years, are the basis of my reflections. I don't presume to be any kind of authority on Prato today! From 2009 until 2012 I had the enormous privilege of being the Director of the Monash University Prato Centre. I never miss an opportunity to tell people that it is the only Australian university Centre in Europe, so it is a very special place and consequently being its Director is a very special role. I enjoyed immensely the challenge of developing the research and local engagement capacities of the Centre. Prato is a very stimulating place, particularly for a migration scholar, especially in its contemporary context as host to one of Europe's largest Chinese communities. I remember being somewhat concerned, back then, that many Pratesi may have found my interest in migration issues a little too controversial, but I believe the role of a university is to lead discussion, invite respectful debate and to try to contribute to the key local and global issues of the day. Migration is without a doubt one of those issues.

If I think back to that period, several things stand out. In particular, I was struck by the very different ways migrant and ethnic identities are understood in Italy compared to Australia. I remember feeling confronted by the negative media images of Chinese in Italy - *"Indagine a Chinatown"* with

a gun-toting dragon-headed Mafioso on the cover of *Il Venerdì di Repubblica* (6 Aug 2010) and *"L'invasione Cinese: ci hanno sfrattato"*, with a Chinese woman's face poking her tongue out on the cover of *Panorama* (7 Oct 2010). These popular media representations were not limited to the Italian news. Here are a few from my diary at the time:

- *'Tuscan town turns against Chinese migrants'* [8 Feb 2010 *Financial Times*]
- *'Chinese remake the 'Made in Italy' fashion label'* [12 Sept 2010 *New York Times*]
- *'Welcome to China, Italy'* [25 Sept 2010 *The Independent Magazine*]
- *'Coming into fashion: A Chinese mark on Italian clothes'* [26 Oct 2010 *BBC News*]
- *'Made in little Wenzhou, Italy: The latest label from Tuscany'* [17 Nov 2010 *The Guardian*]

None of these images and words were quite as shocking to me, however, as the headline on a Lega-nord poster, *"Loro hanno subito l'immigrazione, ora vivono nelle riserve"* with an image of a Native American Indian. The message was clear, the Chinese, and by extension all immigrants, don't belong here.

The symbolic and physical representation of this exclusionist rhetoric came to a very clear head at the altercation that took place during the annual *Corteggio Storico* in Prato in 2010. The *Corteggio* is arguably the most important calendar event of the year, comprising a historic procession - a particular manifestation of community and identity and belonging through public expressions of culture and heritage. In



that year the Chinese, and other migrant groups, were refused permission to be part of the procession. It was said that their very presence, 'snaturava' - perverted - the event. The newspaper, *La Nazione* (9 Sept, 2010) reported "*corteggio storico, polemiche per la partecipazione degli stranieri*". In addition, Chinese New Year celebrations were prohibited from the

Centro Storico.

Fast forward 10 years to today and it is a great relief to know that Chinese New Year Celebrations have become a feature of Prato's annual calendar, celebrated within the *Centro Storico*. Local Chinese people, and other migrant groups, participate in the Corteggio Storico and special dragons are flown in for the event. These healthy



signs of integration are not just limited to symbolic festivals, but are also evident in the associational life of the town. For example, Davide Finizio became the first Italian secretary of the Chinese Buddhist temple in Prato in 2017. And, importantly, Marco Wong and Teresa Lin have become the first counsellors of Chinese heritage to sit in the Prato *consiglio comunale*. The issues of migrant integration and belonging is also making progress in Italy more broadly, with associations that represent the second generation - children born in Italy - agitating for dual citizenship rights.

As I wrote in the Preface to the volume on second generation stories, I do not come to this issue solely with an academic perspective, but also with a deeply personal one. As the Australian-born child of Italian migrants, I have lived first-hand some of the challenges of the migrant's experience. I was fortunate enough to grow up during a period in Australia's history that is (or at least, should be) internationally recognized as a trailblazer in multicultural politics. I certainly benefited from this and I feel certain that my Australian-Italian background in no small measure informs my views on the challenges that Prato is

facing. Indeed, what angered me most ten years ago was the apparent amnesia about Italy's history of emigration, and the more than 25 million who left to find their fortunes abroad, among them my maternal great grandfather in the 1920s and my father in the 1950s. How could Pratesi be so anti-immigration when Italy itself had benefited from the sending its own sons and daughters abroad, a flow that has recently been reinvigorated by the departure of thousands of young people retracing the footsteps of their grandparents? But, the most bruising experience of all was the slow and painful realization that my family and I had been denied a rental lease because my husband is Asian. Herein lies the bitterness amongst the many sweet memories of Prato.... Even his medical degree was no protection from the prejudice that was bubbling over back then. Not to mention the gender struggles. My husband had suspended his medical practice so that I could take up the role at Monash Prato, and he became the primary caregiver to our children. A man performing this role back then, and an Asian man at that, was not an easy road...

Ten years ago I suggested the writing competition as a way to encourage harmonious social relations, to promote a sense of belonging for all residents. Initiatives to encourage second generation migrants to find and give expression to their own 'Italian' voices as well as providing the general community with an opportunity to hear them. These second generation migrants are also first generation Pratesi of the future, I argued. With support, they can contribute to building bridges, not only between the migrant communities

and the local Italian communities, but also into the future. Their voices and stories have enormous creative potential to help develop a new space - akin to what the philosopher Homi Bhabha calls the 'third space' - that offers a productive mix of homeland and hostland cultures but that is also something entirely new... Their stories are a window onto the struggle of these young people to find their place when a place for them to be who they are is not easily available to them... In speaking to these young people, it is abundantly clear that they hope that Prato and Italy and the new Europe develop the understanding and openness to acknowledge and accept them for who they are ... a mixture of their ancestral and homeland cultures, but most importantly and emphatically ALSO Italians. I believe things have improved, but there is still much work to be done.

Ten years ago the locals told me that "Prato is experiencing *'un momento difficile'* (a difficult time), and the overriding discourse was of anti-immigration. Today, amid the hopeful signs that social integration and inclusion are improving, many people are still inclined to lament that 'not much has really changed!'

Nino Ceccatelli ha gentilmente concesso l'uso di queste foto.