**From "second-generation immigrant" to sociologist of migration**

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I was born in Belgium in 1960 to a family of immigrant workers from the South of Italy. My father arrived in Belgium in 1947 under the migration agreements between Belgium and Italy signed in June 1946. He was supposed to work in a colliery in the Charleroi region, but he refused to go down the mine. He was arrested and jailed for having broken his work contract, and he was almost deported back to Italy. He finally ended up in a stone quarry near Namur and then in the suburbs of Liège, in Flémalle. ~~My mother and sister arrived in 1950.~~ My sister was born in Italy in 1947, 26 days before our father left for Belgium. My father didn't meet his new daughter or see his wife until three years later, under the greyness of a Belgian November sky. I was born in 1960 in the maternity ward of Ougrée hospital in the heart of Liège's steel industry, surrounded by smoky steel plants, and just opposite the Standard de Liège stadium, the team's professional soccer team.

I grew up in a working-class neighborhood where many Italian, Greek, Polish, and Spanish immigrant families lived alongside Belgian working-class families. My parents had managed to save up to buy a tiny house with four rooms in total, with no bathroom, no central heating system, and just an old coal stove. At the end of the 1960s, my father worked in a chemical factory, and my mother was a cleaner. She worked part time for a big cleaning company, cleaning some of the University of Liège buildings, where I would later study and become a professor and research director. During the school holidays, I sometimes accompanied to work her because nobody could take care of me. A striking memory for me was the day when my mother and I had lunch at a small table in the corner of the kitchen at the house where she worked. At the same time, my mother was serving a sumptuous lunch to

the wealthy family that lived there in their luxurious dining room. It was my first lived experience of social domination.

My parents never owned a car. My father worked as many holidays as possible to make more money, and, in those days, he would walk eight miles to and from the factory because of the scarcity of public transport. He would leave home at 4:00 AM and return home at 8:00 PM. We got a telephone and television. Other home comforts like an internal bathroom and central heating came, but later than in most households. The priorities were food, making the tiny house as comfortable as possible expanding the house, and our school education. The rest was superfluous, except for soccer, which I played from the age of nine and which gave rhythm to our family's life. My parents worked hard all week, but Sundays were sacred: I played football, and the whole family came to watch. Secretly, my father probably hoped that I would become the new Gianni Rivera, his favorite Italian football player in those years.

Contrary to many Southern Italian families in the area, the Catholic church was never really part of our family life, even though my mother was a committed believer. Her relationship with God, however, did not need the mediation of a priest. She rarely went to mass but often visited the local church outside service hours to pray alone. My father was a communist close to the PCI, the Italian communist party. Since I was a kid, I have heard him castigating big business, capitalists, and fascists, the former two of which exploited him. The latter had ruined his youth by sending him to occupy the island of Crete, where he stayed for about two years during WWII.

In Belgium, his friends and workmates were Italian, Greek, Moroccan, Algerian, Spanish, Belgians, and both Flemish (Dutch speakers) and Walloons (French speakers). For him, it was just standard duty to fight for his working rights, a proletarian protesting with the other workers, whatever their citizenship, ethnicity, or race. He was a union member and

**Commenté [1]:** Does he mean an internal bathroom? Did they have to use a communal toilet before? Just to clarify.

**Commenté [2]:** Making it bigger? Extending? Or more children? This jars if it means making the house bigger because it gives the idea there was money to do things, and therefore the 'poor me' sound of no bathroom and heating don't ring true.

**Commenté [MM3R2]:** There is no 'poor me 'sound.

participated in all the strikes that were going on then. He would often explain to me why this capitalist system was unjust and how the people above got rich on the sweat of those below; how they divided the working class into groups (the Belgians and the immigrants) to better dominate and exploit them.

This typical post-WWII immigrant family story is widespread in several Western European countries. Tens of thousands of migrant families share a similar trajectory. It is important and relevant from a sociological point of view because my intellectual path, career, and conception of social sciences are deeply rooted to this day in this immigrant working-class environment, materially poor but rich in humanistic values, family love, community solidarity, and socio-political engagement.

I didn't understand everything my father told me when I was a kid, but I related his words to my childhood experiences and wondered. Why were our playground football teams formed based on citizenship: Belgians against foreigners? Why, when I was doing very well at school, was I directed to vocational school while my less successful Belgian classmates were directed to high school, which is a step towards university? Why were most of my football teammates foreigners like me? Why did some of my fellow students call me 'dirty macaroni' and tell me that I should go back to my country, even though I was born in Belgium like them?

I carried these questions with me to the high-standard high school my parents had enrolled me in against the advice of the primary school guidance counselor. As a young teenager, I discovered the waning hippie movement, *Brigade Rosse*, *Rote Armee Fraktion*, the punk movement, third world problems, immigrant struggles for social and political rights, and the anti-fascist and anti-racist movements in what was a very incoherent ideological cocktail. During my early years in high school, I wanted to become a journalist and attend the then very reputable journalism school in Lille, France. But when the time came to choose, the

limited financial resources available led me to opt for the nearest university, the University of Liège. I enrolled in economic and social sciences in the hope of later switching to journalism in Lille. My first year at the university was far from a success. I found it challenging to fit in with the well-dressed, golden youth who came to class by car. The culture shock was harsh. At the university, the children of workers and immigrants were drowned out by the local middle and upper classes. I really did not feel comfortable. Everything reminded me that the university was not the typical place for someone with my social and immigrant background to be. It was not normal to choose for someone like me to be a university student; the social expectations were that I would become a manual worker like my father and mother. Migrants and their offspring moving up the social ladder was considered an anomaly in the framework of migration policies in Europe. Migrant workers were supposed to occupy the same class position at the lower end of the labor market and transmit it to the following generations (Castles & Kosack, 1985).

When I enrolled at the university at the end of the 1970s, I was simultaneously playing semi-professional soccer, which provided me with pocket money. I was playing at a national level all over Belgium. There I experienced hatred and a particular form of racism from the supporters of many Flemish teams. Many players on my team were of 'non-Belgian origin.' As soon as the stadium speaker announced the team line-up, we would hear the booing and insults of the opposing fans towards us. 'Macaroni' and 'Walen buiten' (Walloons out) were the order of the day. Every time we traveled to Flanders, this was what we experienced, and it often motivated and brought us together. Life constantly sent me back to my working-class and immigrant origins.

At the same time, the social sciences and political thinking bug really got hold of me. I was fascinated by Karl Marx (1977) and Pierre Bourdieu (1979) but also by Erving Goffman (1979) and C. Wright Mills (1967). I had a boundless admiration for the work of Antonio

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Gramsci (Macciocchi, 1974), whose subtlety impressed me. It still does today. These authors made me give up my plan to join the journalism school in Lille. I decided to stay in Liège to study sociology. The year I had to choose a theme for my final thesis to graduate in sociology, my father was forced to take early retirement. His factory was restructuring, as they used to say. The economic crisis had hit our region. It quickly became clear to me that I was going to work in the field of migration for my master's thesis. I thought that the sociology of migration would answer my quasi-existential questions. It would explain why we were in Belgium and predict what would happen to us now that my father was no longer an immigrant worker but an aberration in Belgium: an immigrant pre-retiree. As Abdelmalek Sayad (1991) explained, an immigrant who no longer works is no longer legitimate in the eyes of society. Being an immigrant without working was a total aberration. The family often discussed the idea of going back to Italy when my father lost his job. He was sometimes tempted, even though he never seemed ready to decide. My mother did not favor moving back after so many years because she expected her children to grow up in Belgium and did not want to separate from them. These discussions led to the academic questions I decided to address in my Master's thesis.

Clearly, a personal quest linked to my family's migratory history is at the origin of my choice to focus on the sociology of migration and immigrants' plans to return home. During this work, I immersed myself in the writings of Sayad, who remains, in my opinion, one of the world's greatest thinkers on migration. Methodologically, I opted for a qualitative approach, interviewing older immigrants, mainly men. Knowing this generation of Italian migrants through my father and his friends, I was convinced that in-depth interviews were the best means to gather information on such an intimate issue as the potential return to the country of origin. I needed to build trust and spend time with them to let me go deep into their

migration history at a key moment of their life that the end of their professional career represents. Working with a questionnaire would have been a total loss of time.

There was a strong gender bias in my work as it there was in the whole emerging field of migration studies at the time. The research participants were like my father; they had all left Italy at a young age and were now reaching the end of their working lives. I wanted to understand why they were staying in Belgium and why some of them expressed the desire to move back to Italy. I spent hours and hours talking to them; I really enjoyed my first fieldwork. These men looked happy to see someone interested in their life. They knew my background; I could have been their son. Nobody was interested in migrant workers' lives and even less in learning from those nearing the end of their professional careers. I often had the impression that it was easier for them to talk with me than with their own children. Indeed, they spoke openly. Many times we shared meals and wine while continuing to speak long after the official interview time. These informal conversations very often proved rich, intense, and emotional. My thesis was very well received. I graduated with honors in sociology. My parents were very proud, even though they were not quite sure what sociology was and what I could do with that degree. At least, they were convinced that I would never need to work as a cleaner or in a factory, as they had to do all their lives. In contrast to that optimism, we were advised not to forget to register with the local job center during the graduation ceremony. The family joy and pride around the graduation was short-lived: I became an unemployed, graduated sociologist with a working-class and immigrant background in a region suffering deep economic and social crises. The dream of escaping the migrant workers' fate through formal education was challenged immediately after graduation, but with the support of my family, I never gave up.

I joined an Italian immigrant nonprofit organization close to the PCI on a voluntary basis, hoping to get a research contract on the second generation of Italian immigrants. This happened in the framework of a program to get young people into employment. I stayed in this association for almost two years. The experience was crucial for me because it was then and there that my Ph.D. dissertation project was born. I was fascinated by immigrants' social lives in cultural and political associations and the role of their leaders. It was also when, dissatisfied with our philosophical training at university, several of us active in the associative world decided to organize our own philosophy courses. They were led by an Italian priest-worker close to the theology of liberation movement and a former student of the great Italian philosopher Nicola Abbagnano. That time was intellectually and humanly rich. We were rooted in the field and theoretical debates (sociological, political, and philosophical), often inspired by Marxism but always critical of its orthodoxy. In retrospect, these two years were the cradle of my position as a researcher.

Then, I managed to obtain a one-year contract at the University of Liège to carry out quantitative research on the democratization of the opera audience for my former sociology of leisure professor. I thus returned to the university while maintaining my voluntary commitment to cultural and political associations as well as our self-managed philosophy courses. This year was also fulfilling. I learned how to conduct a large-scale quantitative survey. I began to understand the advantages and, above all, the problems of this type of research fully, which is based on, or sometimes reinforces, a tendency to give credit only to data that can be quantified. It was probably at this point that I properly became the *qualitativist* I still am today.

At that time, I was in regular contact with my former methodology teacher, Paul Minon. I told him about my desire to start a doctorate. He told me how difficult it was to obtain a grant

from the FNRS, the Belgian National Fund for Scientific research, or to become an assistant to a professor to do so. At the time, those were the only two ways into a Ph.D. One day, walking down a corridor with him, Paul's attention was drawn to a poster of the European University Institute in Florence, Italy (EUI). It had caught my eye sometime before. He said, "Why don't you try to go to Florence?" That was the beginning of a great adventure. I was an Italian citizen even though I had never lived in Italy. For that reason, Belgium refused to take my application into account. The doctoral grants that the Belgian government offered were reserved for Belgian citizens. So, I had no choice but to compete with the many more numerous Italian candidates for a grant from the Italian government. On the second attempt, I secured one of the eight Italian scholarships from 109 candidates. I was going to settle in the country my parents had left, in a city I didn't know, and in a very elitist institution, for at least three years.

This Florentine experience was going to be extraordinary and crucial in many ways. The place was magical, sumptuous, and of rare beauty. Socially, it was my first time in an international environment of the highest elite level. It did not take long for atypical profiles of all nationalities to find each other, come together, and socialize. The professors in residence and visiting professors were impressive and accessible. In 1986-7, very few doctoral students were working on migration-related issues at EUI. To fill this gap, we formed an informal, interdisciplinary group to discuss our research topics among ourselves. The immigration issue was exploding in Italian society. I was also able to get a foothold in the field thanks to the contacts I had made with Senegalese "leaders" in Florence. Through the students' soccer team we set up at EUI, I met the leader of a Senegalese team after we organized a friendly game. He was also working at the local supermarket I was shopping in. We became friends, and through him, I met many Senegalese migrants in the Florentine area. During these four years

in Florence, I deepened my knowledge of the Anglophone literature on migration and racism, which provided the theoretical framework for my doctoral thesis.

I graduated in 1990. My Belgian partner, who later became my wife, and I decided to return to Belgium after a Florentine experience that changed our lives forever, but not our passion for research. Research that is as theoretically sound as possible, research that is always rooted in the field, research that is increasingly collaborative and international, research that is critical but never destructive, research that allows for dialogue with the authorities but is never subservient to them, and research that is nourished by the respectful debate of ideas. These values have dictated my conduct in my profession over the past 30 years.

I did a lot of work from a classical political sociology perspective on the political participation and mobilization of immigrants and their descendants. The question of the emergence of candidates and elected officials of foreign origin in local elections interested me a lot, as well as the research of possible particularities of the vote of immigrant populations or of immigrant origin, where they had the right to vote. After a few years, I felt I had covered all the ground. Developing new hypotheses and going much further in theoretical reflection became difficult. I was increasingly tired of the tendency of political scientists to confine the debate on the mobilization and participation of migrants and minorities to the framework of conventional political institutions. It seemed appropriate to return to the study of unconventional forms of political expression and mobilization. Among them, arts and culture occupy an important place. Subsequently, I asked myself other questions: how does immigration contribute to changing the artistic and cultural landscape of countries of permanent or temporary settlement; do the arts and culture allow the different populations of our super-diverse societies to meet and form society? How can cultural and artistic policies respond to the cultural diversification of society? I had no idea when I started working on

music as a form of political expression for ethnic and cultural minorities that I had opened Pandora's box, something I am still happily struggling with today.

Our conception of research at CEDEM, the Centre for Migration and Ethnic Studies I created in 1995 at the University of Liège, highly values the combination of theoretical reflection, empirical work, and civic engagement, whatever the specific theme on which we are working. In our work on arts and culture in relation to migration and minorities, we have given a lot of thought to the practices of co-creation of knowledge and, more broadly, to the different modalities of partnership with actors in the cultural world. I have always thought that the encounter between the academic world and other social worlds should go far beyond a furtive interaction between a researcher and an interviewee in the context of a survey. I assume that the interviewees always have better things to do in life than to answer our questions. So, we must give them something back and value their knowledge and expertise. The least we can do, and what we always try to do, is to inform them first of our research results. In addition, we want to involve them in our reflections and the dissemination of our results. In most of our colloquiums and conferences, artists and operators from the arts sector have been invited to speak, and not only in a decorative capacity. Conversely, we are regularly invited to participate in projects from the artistic and cultural world. For example, during the celebrations for the 70th anniversary of the bilateral agreements between Belgium and Italy on migration, I found myself on stage for more than two hours in front of 600 people as master of ceremonies of a multidisciplinary evening (music, cinema, lectures, readings, interviews, etc.) organized on the initiative of the Théâtre de Liège. This is also how I found myself one day in the studio of young rappers from Liège, listening to the song they had been inspired to write by reading one of my articles. In my experience, the human links forged at the start of the research can become stronger or looser. But they survive the test of time.

My personal experiences have always informed my research strategies in different ways. It has influenced the choice of the topics and issues I wanted to study at various stages of my career and not only the methods I have decided to use to do it but also my conception of social research. I've explained how my personal experience informed my choice to work on issues related to Italian labor migration at the beginning of my career. This personal approach was widespread among immigration researchers in Europe at the time. Most migration scholars were either migrants or descendants of migrants. Migration was deemed a minor sociological topic that wouldn't lead to high-ranking careers. It was expected to attract minor scholars, at least in terms of social and migration background. For migration scholars with a migrant background , them, entering migration studies was almost the only way to enter academia. In other words, what was seen as a free choice by migration scholars with a migration background could also have been seen as a structural channeling for these unexpected scholars.

The structural academic channeling resulting in keeping scholars with a working-class and immigrant background in the marginal academic field of sociology of migration went even further and took a sort of ethnic twist. Not only was it considered normal that immigrant sociologists would specialize in migration, but it was also expected that they would focus exclusively on the study of their own community. In my case, as an Italian sociologist in Belgium, it was expected that I restrict myself to the study of Italian migration and the Italian community. It was the only domain in which I could claim some legitimacy. One of the first times I presented my thesis publicly on elites, leadership, and power in the Italian community in Belgium, a participant asked me if I thought that my work could also apply to the Moroccan community. As I was starting to articulate an answer, I was violently interrupted by a Moroccan scholar shouting at me that I should refrain from saying anything about Moroccan

**Commenté [6]:** the migration scholars?

immigration because I was not Moroccan. As an Italian scholar, I was not allowed to develop any legitimate and valid knowledge about Moroccan migration.

Since then, the trend that personal experience is the only valid and legitimate way to academic knowledge has expanded to other fields of research. It is sometimes considered in academia and activist circles that only Black scholars are legitimate to study and to talk about racism, only scholars who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community can study and talk about anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination, and only Jewish scholars can research and talk about antisemitism, etc. Just to take one example, in the summer of 2019, an article written by a young white American scholar called Adam Szetela (2020) on Black Lives Matter in the journal, Ethnic and Racial Studies, created a controversy on Twitter. Among the many critics of Szetela's work, some were making the point that, as a white scholar, he should not be allowed to write about an antiracist movement because he has never experienced racism himself and, therefore, he cannot understand and explain the difficulties and limits of the antiracist movement.

This type of hyper-valorization of both subjectivity and personal experience as the pillars of the only valid and legitimate form of knowledge and expertise is not dominant in academia. However, it still is problematic for various reasons. First, it accentuates the segregation of academic social research into different closed circles between which conversation is no longer possible. Second, it can lead to a rejection of the fundamental sociological ambition to try to decipher the social world using a set of established qualitative and quantitative methods and by moving beyond our own individual perceptions and experiences. Social sciences are based on the idea that scholars can, to a certain extent, understand and explain social dynamics they do not necessarily experience themselves. Third, by positing the equivalence between experience and knowledge, or more precisely, the fact that no valid and legitimate knowledge of a phenomenon can exist without personally

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experiencing it, makes the effort of thinking reflexively on one's own positionality totally irrelevant. Fourth, it leads to the idea of the existence of an ultimate, unique, and indisputable truth concerning the phenomena and dynamics under study. This belongs more to a radical religious perspective than a scientific one based on the confrontation between different perspectives and points of view. The problem is not to acknowledge the potential positive importance of personal experience and subjectivity in the development of social science research. As I have tried to show in this article, my personal history, experience, and subjectivity have indeed played an important role in my development as a social scientist and my understanding of migration-related issues. But jumping from that acknowledgment to the claim that only scholars with a migrant background, experience, and subjectivity are allowed to write about migration because they are the only ones able to understand and explain them is counterproductive. It is more fruitful to encourage debate, conversation, and dialogue between researchers with different experiences, life histories, points of view, and, therefore, perspectives on the same research object.

The possibility of having that type of conversation depends on the modalities of inclusion and exclusion as well as power in academic institutions. Historically, it has been harder for scholars with working-class and migrant backgrounds to make an academic career in highly socially valued areas of knowledge. This is even more so the case for women and racialized scholars. They have often been trapped in second-class academic status working on topics perceived as second-class academic topics. Therefore, increasing the inclusiveness of academic institutions and staff diversification at all levels and disciplines would be a strategy and opportunity to promote honest debates, conversations, and exchanges among scholars from all social, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Presently, the unequal access to academic careers leads minority and immigrant scholars to engage in defensive struggles to protect the micropower positions they have reached and claim the monopoly of expertise in the field of

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minority and migration studies teaching. In turn, this contributes to reinforcing the academic inequalities they suffer.

As a reaction to the ~~trend~~trend, I have described above, soon after my graduation, I decided I would refuse the single label of an expert in Italian migration, a tag sometimes used to categorize me. I refused to remain in the box that the academic system had envisaged for me: Italian migrant scholar and, therefore, logically, a specialist on Italian migration. Of course, I had developed some knowledge of Italian migration, and I still claim it today. Or course, my history and subjectivity influenced how my knowledge was built. But there is no valid reason why I should dedicate all my career to researching only Italian migration, and even less reason I should think only scholars sharing the same type of personal history would be legitimate to study that topic. The diversity of points of view, and the diversity of subjectivities in action in research, help us to produce comprehensive explanatory schemes of social dynamics and phenomena. A reflection on the impact of our own experience and subjectivity on our research strategy and therefore on our results is mandatory. Considering that subjectivity and personal experience are the only pillars of valid knowledge is an intellectual trap I have always refused to fall into also because it can run the risk that scholars with a working-class and migrant background contribute to their own academic marginalization.

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