

**Russell King and Nicola Mai, *Out of Albania: From Crisis Migration to Social Inclusion in Italy*. Berghahn Books: Oxford and New York, 2008. 281 pp. ISBN 978-1-84545-544-6. HB £45.**

All aspects of migration, emigration and return migration of Albanians from Albania, mostly relating to Italy, in the past two decades, are very thoroughly studied in this work. The book's lively style includes ample personal voice from the interviewees, as well as plenty of tables and statistical analysis. Taking the specific topic which is rarely found in book form, the authors have made a very thorough study which takes into account a number of other more specific studies, of all aspects of migration. Although publication took more than five years from the time of the bulk of the data collected through intensive interviews, the analysis of the data is still very relevant and useful.

The initial explosion in migration from Albania created headlines worldwide in March 1991, with many exploiting the image of huge and vastly overcrowded boats full of desperate refugees. Albania has been exceptional in many ways: for having the most strictly totalitarian Communist regime in Europe (1945–1991), being the poorest country (possibly equal with Romania) and the only Communist country with as many of its ethnic population living just outside its own border as within, and yet so rigidly cut off from them. All these factors played a role in the high number of migrants as the borders opened up—10% of the population emigrated in the early years, mostly to Italy and Greece. This percentage doubled in the following decade (though a number of those may have been some of the same people leaving again after being forcibly repatriated). A quotation from UNDP emphasizes the extraordinary character of Albanian migration:

The depth and range of this multifaceted change have been such as to defy both prediction and classification: a turbulent and chaotic transformation unprecedented in the history of Albania, with few parallels elsewhere. (243)

*Out of Albania* focuses primarily on emigration to Italy and notes that around a quarter of a million Albanians currently live in that country. A foremost concern of the book is the observation and examination of 'processes through which the

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stigmatization and social and economic exclusion of Albanians have occurred and are construed in Italian society' (3) and how they 'have been unfairly victimised' (12). The term *extracomunitari* was first used of black and dark-skinned immigrants, and more recently it has also been applied to Albanians. The authors comment that such an exclusionary term is not found anywhere else in Europe. Media is shown to have induced widespread misrepresentation, first for Albanians viewing a false picture of the good life on Italian TV (from Albania), and secondly in Italy, by exaggerating criminal aspects of a minority of immigrants to the point at which every Albanian may be regarded with extreme suspicion. In contrast to the Italian view of Albanians, Albanians consider themselves closely affiliated to Italians, many speaking Italian fluently even on their initial arrival, and physically looking quite similar, many even passing as Italian.

For practical reasons, the authors chose three main, but differing, sites for their field studies: Lecce in southern Italy, including rural and coastal areas, and the closest port to Albania, Modena, an urban area of Northern Italy and Rome, the capital city. Four levels of integration are identified and clarified: structural, cultural, interactive and, for those best integrated, identificational.

A useful chapter on 'The Albanian Background' gives an historical overview (from as early as 229 BC) of events which led to the massive movement of people from one of Europe's smallest countries. There is mention of the negative light thrown on the Ottoman occupation of Albania for 500 years, though it could have been mentioned that more recently there has been some much more favourable documentation (see for example, George Gawrych's *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam and the Albanians, 1874–1913*). The authors briefly discuss Albanian nationalism and independence (these were shortlived, approximately 1878–1920), the Italian occupation and the Second World War, Albanian's Communism and the 45 year Regime of Enver Hoxha (a state leader whose only travel outside his country was a single visit to Moscow). The 'golden years' of Albanian's industrial economic growth are seen to be the late 1950s, before the years of great hardship in the 1960s, and the period of the worst religious persecution. It would surprise many to read of only 'a few cases' of clergy being executed (35) (see for example, Bernhard Tönnies' *Religion in Communist Lands*, vol. 10, no. 3, for one of many testimonies of violent deaths of very many, especially Catholic religious leaders). In 1967 Albania was declared the world's first atheist state, and all forms of religious practise were

forbidden and all religious institutions turned over to other uses or destroyed. Only in 1991 were the strict anti-religious laws relaxed.

Following the fall of Communism there have been unexpected responses. Fatos Lubonja pessimistically views Albania's youth as passive and lacking in the rebellion essential to their expression of hatred of their own ineffectiveness, and this in turn directing them to preoccupation with entertainment and fast money. However, this very lack of empowerment was probably a factor in the early massive exodus of young people from the country once the borders were opened. Co-incidentally, 'the geo-political formation which had frozen Italian politics for nearly fifty year' ended with the 1992 elections as a turning point between its First and Second Republic. This also coincided with Albania's dramatic changes.

Television played a major role in shaping people's (most especially children's) enticement to reach a modern world. In the more accessible areas of Albania, by the 1980s, about three quarters of families possessed a television. Even though the watching of forbidden foreign programmes could be punished by up to eight years in prison, 89% of immigrants to Italy claimed to have learned Italian by watching Italian TV. These interviewees were unanimous in their enjoyment specifically of the advertisements because of their positive, beautiful and cheerful messages and images—the authors note that this was the 'libidinal political resistance' which was possible in the privacy of the home, where Italian television provided the only form of amusement. This was in stark contrast to Albanian dull, official 'moralised, naturalized, mediascape' (57). Later, as immigrants, many of these people felt let down by the illusory and disempowering nature of Western programmes which they allowed to completely dominate their leisure hours.

There is a brief overview of the several elections giving alternately the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party, disputed power. The development of the fraudulent Pyramid schemes (supported by the Democratic Party then in power) is analysed, whereby probably half of Albanian households lost their life savings.

Population increases in Albania were dramatic during the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the last decade. It was as much as 3% per year at mid-century, although a quarter of all children died before the age of four. In 1990, one third of the population was under 15 years old.

There is a little discussion and comparison of emigration to other countries, especially to Greece. However, no mention is made of the US Green Card lottery

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system, whereby Albanians receive approximately 2,000 Diversity Lottery visas (of the approximately 50,000 offered world wide.) Thus, this many Albanians each year are granted permanent residency in the US, automatically permitting them to work, and putting them on the road (after as little as 3 years) to full US citizenship.

The first major migrations took place in the fifteenth century, when Albanian Catholics fled Islamisation, after the death of Skanderbeg, to southern Italy where large communities of Arbëresh (descendants of these early settlers) still live, maintaining their language and culture. The authors note that *kurbet*, the act of going away and being distant from home, was traditional amongst Albanian men in the Ottoman Empire, before borders were drawn within it. *Kurbet* acquired a strong moral connotation. Towards the end of Ottoman influence, many poor and destitute peasants emigrated all over the world, forming communities in several cities.

Very detailed tables and analysis are given concerning migration since 1990, though curiously it is noted that where whole households had moved abroad, they were not counted in the statistics (presumably because the information was not considered accurate where there was no-one left to interview).

In looking at motives for migration, poverty is shown to be of prime importance. The statistic of 46.6 percent of Albanians living below the poverty line of \$2 per capita per day demonstrates how widespread is the poverty. There are maps, tables, diagrams and analysis which all go to prove the expected: that rural migrants moved to the cities—to “slums of hope” rather than remote rural fastnesses of isolation and despair’ (251), and it is the urban migrants who make up the bulk of the external migration movement. However, there is still greater and valuable detail, showing the changing regulations particularly of the Italian government and the effect it had on whether immigrants were able to gain permission to remain, and how that affected their lives. These analyses lead to the understanding of a range of exclusionary measures, including fierce stigmatization which specially affected those unable to obtain permission to stay in Italy. The authors also noted the increasing proportion of women migrating, observing that, since they rarely migrated alone, they created stability amongst Albanian migrants. Furthermore they note that between 1992 and 2000, Albanian migrants moved from being the nationality with least children to being that with the most (a further stabilizing factor). Further evidence of the increase in their number of children is seen from the registration of 1,000 Albanian pupils in the school year 1991–92, which grew to 50,000 in 2003–04. It is interesting

that Albanians in Italy are more evenly spread throughout Italy than any other immigrant nationality.

Undocumented immigrants have less difficulty in surviving in southern Italy than the north, and also find it easier to obtain working papers. There are found to be more undocumented, and less well educated migrants in Greece than in Italy, probably due to the fact that it is easier to cross a land border, and that there is a great deal of short-term casual work available there. The authors note that the situation of living without legitimating documents which has led many to criminality.

The fourth chapter focuses on the main concern of the book—stigmatization—and the role of media in influencing the very malleable public opinion, giving many lengthy testimonies of immigrants who have suffered multi-faceted experiences of social exclusion. The authors show how this in turn affects identity formation of the immigrants. The term *albanese*, although literally meaning ‘Albanian’, has come to be seen as a derogatory term (like *shiptar* in Serbian). Hence Albanian immigrants avoid the term of themselves, by using such phrases as ‘I come from Albania’. Four categories of media mythologizing of Albanian migrants are detailed: Tales of moral depravation, discourses of demonisation of atheism or essentialisation of religious difference, discourses of backwardness, exoticism and isolation, and fourthly, narratives of deception and incompetence. It is pointed out that the situation of Albanians in Italy, is similar to the situation of the Italian migrants to the US almost a century earlier

A further lengthy chapter is devoted to the detailed lives of immigrants suffering various forms of discrimination, through employment, housing, harassment and the observation that many interviewees had first to endure a period of provocation before being accepted as respected fellow workers. Although reception centers were set up in Italy, Albanians usually preferred to move in with other Albanians, no matter how crowded the situation. Single women in particular rarely lived alone, a situation which would be severely disapproved of by other Albanians. There is explanation of the ‘Prodi decree’ which granted leave to remain in Italy only to those who had a regular job. This created a very difficult dilemma for those without jobs—whether to risk returning to Albania to seek a job from afar, or to remain and work illegally. This in turn led to an increase of social exclusion and exploitation. This ruling also adversely affected Italian employers, for they often found that those who had applied from Albania might not actually turn up.

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Enquiries about how interviewees spent their free time, identified three types of lifestyle: so-called normal, family and modern—in other words, a quiet life, a family life or a socializing life (generally the preference of young people). Almost all interviewees felt that the Italian media was responsible for the stigmatization of Albanian nationals, however, as the rate of migration from Albania lessened, and other international stories attracted the media, migrants were able to feel some relaxation from the earlier high stigmatization. Students found less difficulty in integrating into Italian society, and most at ease with their counterparts. Albanian associations and newspapers helped all groups of Albanian migrants.

The authors highlight Lubonja's theories of the different foundation of Albanian nationalism to that of Serbia and Greece. He observes that Albanian nationalism emerged at the time of the Russian-Turkish war in 1878. Albanians need to create a nationalist mythology to protect themselves from the threat of division caused by more powerful neighbouring nations.

The final chapter concerns migrants returning from Italy to Albania: how it affects the family members and communities which they had left, how family income is affected, what made them return and whether this is seasonal, holiday or seen as a long term return. The authors also comment on the effect of such mass migration on the landscape and village life, particularly visible in the fertile agricultural coastal regions of southern Albania where former terraces and irrigation systems are suffering from lack of maintenance. Attention is paid to the increased vulnerability of women, especially from poor families seeking to ensure an early marriage for their daughters. Many have unwittingly passed them into the hands of unscrupulous young men who offer marriage, but involve them in prostitution. However, the authors state their desire not to contribute to 'spectacularisation' concerning the numbers of Albanian women involved in sex-work in Italy, estimating that they make up 'a very small percentage' of Albanians legally resident in the country. Maybe those who suffer most from the mass migration are the old people left behind, first they suffer from inadequate pensions as well as inaccessibility to potential meager sources, secondly from great sadness at being parted from their children and grandchildren, who often are spread across the world in different countries, additionally they are left to fend for themselves just when they most need help: 'the elderly have been left like stones in the middle of the road' (220). Traditionally their youngest son and his wife take care of their parents in old age, but the dramatic changes have lured many away from

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tradition. In more recent years there is a movement of ‘migrating grannies’, the young-old (those under 65 and in reasonable health) who go to live with one of their migrating offspring and family.

A discussion of remittances and their effect on the Albanian economy reveals that they grew from \$150 million in 1992 to over \$1 billion in 2004, and that the norm is for migrants to continue sending money home for an average of 15 years before their need in their new family, especially in for educational needs, lessens the flow to parents. Remittances are found to be highest from migrants to the UK, and least from those to Greece. The traditional status of married women ensures that their remittances home are not regular, only for special events such as weddings.

Despite the time lag between the detailed data collection and its publication, this very readable book is an important source on the subject of migration. Just one minor correction: Berisha’s origin is incorrectly given as Shkodër, whereas he has very strong ties to his clan and family in the rural area of Tropoja.

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