

Between stereotypes and experience: teaching study abroad students in Florence

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Introduction: the “Bubble”¹

It should be clear from the other contributions to this issue, and especially Pisani’s, that study abroad students in Florence know *Florence*, but do not know *Firenze*. By this I mean that the context of their study abroad experience clearly corresponds to that in which many students from the same country live and socialize together, with very limited direct contact with local inhabitants of the city. At study abroad schools, students and teachers are both aware of this basic problem, so much so that it has a name: in class, we sometimes refer to it as “the bubble”. By this, we mean the fact that – as several students have described to us in detail – it is possible to avoid all contact with locals and – thanks to social media – maintain intense interactions with friends and relatives back home, so much so that it is not an exaggeration to summarize the experience of some of these students as “living at home while staying abroad”. From the point of view of international education, this fact has several consequences, which study abroad programs address in different ways.

In this paper, I try to identify and describe these effects. It is important to underline that the resulting picture is necessarily incomplete, being based on my own point of view and experience as a teacher of specific disciplines at specific institutions. My aim here is to prepare the ground for a more extensive and in-depth research: I want to identify underlying, permanent issues.

On the empirical side, much work remains to be done on teaching practices and assumptions in our programs in Florence, and all findings in this area will have to be complemented by similar studies of the indis-

1. While I am solely responsible for the final form of this article, most of the ideas and observations contained here were extensively discussed with my colleague Francesca Passeri, whom I thank for sharing her experience and extensive commentary.

pensable work of administrative staff, directors, as well as figures usually left at the margins of the study abroad experience, such as tourist guides, counsellors, or the staff of some study programs that live with the students on the same premises². I therefore invite the reader to consider the generalizations I make here as hypotheses to be tested on the ground.

On the theoretical side, I will focus on the role of stereotypes on shaping students' perception and understanding of the Italian context, and the extent to which direct experience and classroom teaching can change them. Again, I do not consider this the only, or even the most important factor at work in forming the students' perception, but it has certainly proved to be a powerful tool for teachers to guide students' awareness towards areas of Italian culture not present in their representations of the country. Even more importantly, in our experience, an explicit discussion of stereotypes in class has allowed students to question their own biases and expectations and to reflect critically on their own reactions to life in Florence.

The problem: the "Romantic Myth" of Italy

For many Italian teachers at study abroad programs, their first experience teaching American students in Florence implies becoming aware of the largely stereotyped views that dominate representations of Italy and Florence in the United States. These contemporary views are based on a tradition that by now is two centuries old, and even if it has evolved in important respects, it is still possible to detect elements in it that go back to late Renaissance depictions of Italy in Protestant England. For instance, prejudices that paint Italians as intelligent but cunning, or as experts in enjoying life to the full but not in a moral way, have a very old history behind them. That tradition, in brief, depicts

2. For example, a common scenario which is usually not recognised is the case in which some of these figures play also another, sometimes crucial, role besides their official one. For instance, as Stefano Baldassarri pointed out to us, often students turn to their Italian language teachers to share problems or difficulties they would not tell other teachers or members of the staff. This fact can be explained by the observation that students see their language teachers more frequently than others, and go out with them for organised activities, such as dinners together with Italian students their age.

Italy as a “romantic” country, a Mediterranean land full of beautiful landscapes and historic buildings; a place where the weather is always sunny, people are always friendly and where it is easy to find “romance” and overcome a personal crisis. In this image the country is just slightly pre-modern, less developed than the US, its countryside roads routinely blocked by herds of sheep, and its technology – if it exists at all – is not reliable. Italians are not entirely trustworthy either, even if they are welcoming, as they behave according to a different set of rules, and moral rules are not very prominent among them. Most importantly, this picture does not leave room for any difficulties or challenges: there is no part of the country and its culture that is not already familiar, and easily accessible.

The nature of the problem: stereotypes, biases and popular culture

It is by now standard for overviews of international education to discuss the role of these romanticized representations in the early history of international travel. Many handbooks, for instance, contain detailed discussions of the Grand Tour and its relationship to modern study abroad in Europe (Lewin 2009). Contrary to this awareness of the role of stereotypes and prejudices in the earlier history of international education, the contemporary counterparts of those views and attitudes, have not received the same degree of attention.

A systematic survey is beyond the scope of this article; so, here I only note that this state of affairs has also been pointed out for other countries hosting study abroad schools for American students. Dominic Janes’s description of teaching American students in the UK about British culture is worth quoting in full:

“Many of my students are highly experienced in a range of academic fields, but know very little of the British culture, art and literature which it is my role to help them learn during their stay in this country. The reason why I want to talk about their ‘ignorance’ rather than ignorance is that the latter suggests that the students know

nothing. In fact, they know a great deal about their own culture and, moreover, have a distinctive set of stereotypes about Britain and the British. These attitudes are often hard-wired from long exposure to American popular culture [...]" (Janes 2011, 62).

Compare this description with the "blank slate" analysis explicitly or implicitly assumed by many studies, in which students arrive with no preconceived notions or even no expectations, ready for their experience abroad to determine their view of the place and its people. In particular, many authors who support "experiential learning" – as opposed to classroom learning – do not mention stereotypes at all. Even if stereotypes and cultural biases are mentioned (as in Montrose 2002), they are viewed as separate identifiable beliefs that students can become aware of and describe through introspection and analysis. This is clearly visible in Montrose's proposed learning objectives and evaluation methods concerning stereotypes and biases (based on the case of a program in Ireland):

Learning Objective:

- To understand the nature of cultural stereotyping and to address these issues more productively in my own life.

Evaluation:

- Describe in a short reflection paper the various cultural stereotypes that you have heard about people in your host country.
- Did you find yourself judging people against those stereotypes?
- Did you hear stereotypes about Americans while you were abroad?
- What are the reasons that stereotypes are used to define people?
- How did you combat your inclination to judge people by these cultural stereotypes?

- Were any of these values confirmed or denied during your study abroad experience?

Learning Objective:

- To keep a log of incidences of cultural biases that I identify in myself as an American in an international setting.

Evaluation:

- Remember a particular incident while traveling that made you aware of your own cultural biases. Write a personal essay and address the following questions:
- Describe the incident in detail.
- How was your thinking and reacting particularly “American”?
- Explain the importance of flexibility and refraining from judgment.
- How did you deal with the situation? How did you re-contextualize your values?
- If this situation came up again in the future, would you handle it differently?

(Montrose 2002, 12)

The crucial point that these proposed methods fail to take into account is the “hard-wired” nature of these “beliefs”, and the fact that they are systematically supported by the students’ own popular culture, as Janes informally – but correctly – points out. Consequently, many “stereotypes” and “biases” are well beyond the students’ self-awareness, as they actually refer to deeply internalized aspects of their own culture, aspects that inevitably drive and constrain their ability to self-analyze.

In Janes’s discussion, the issue that American students failed to grasp (but was crucial for them to acquire) is “social class”, meaning social-economic layers. This is a perfect example of an issue which is highly important and visible in the host country (the UK), but almost taboo to discuss for the type of students that study abroad. Consider the com-

mon incident in which a non-British person makes the wrong assumptions about a British person's level of education, income, and – crucially – self-identification concerning class. I wonder how many American students would be able to answer the second question in the second method above by something like:

“I failed to take into account the British social and cultural divide and did not recognize I was addressing people who clearly self-identify as working class. I extended my upper-class American bias “we are all middle class” to a different society where that claim is considered wrong and patronizing”.

How many *teachers* would be able to do that, for that matter?

The nature of the problem: the function of “romantic Italy”

For Italian teachers in Florence a “blank slate” analysis is surprising, as to them it is evident that their students come indeed loaded with a heavy luggage of preconceptions and expectations. Teachers also quickly discover that these expectations are shaped by stereotypes, the ones codified and transmitted by the traditional romanticized view of the country. Today, a large body of novels, films, TV series as well as memoirs and travel books is based on such a tradition and transmits it in an updated form to younger generations. Teachers involved in study abroad programs are well aware of such works and often discuss them explicitly in class. What is sometimes not clear to both teachers and scholars of international education is how this romanticized view is systematically linked to, and supported by, the culture at home. The crucial observation is that stereotypes and biases are not limited to “popular” culture at all.

In the case of Italy, its romantic myth is often conveyed by “serious” works, such as reports about Italy in respected newspapers or magazines, documentaries about the “Italian lifestyle”, or the many books written by journalists that purport to “explain” Italy and Italians. The latter, for example, by now form a well-defined genre in itself, which can be briefly

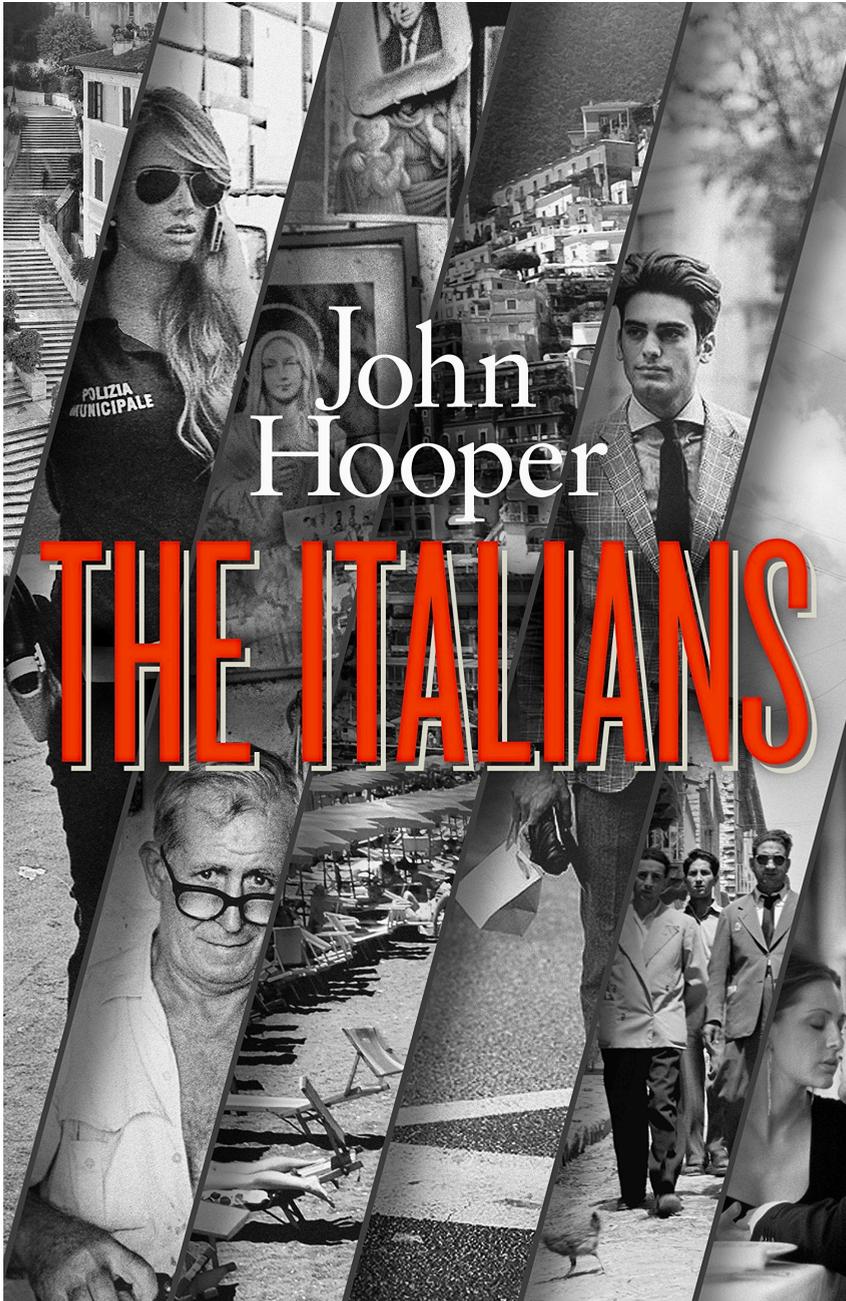
defined as glorified guidebooks, with survey chapters about history, geography, culture, art, food and so on³. They differ, of course, from the traditional stereotypical narrative in that they do examine Italy's problems and open issues in politics, the economy and society at large, but they share with it the goal of capturing and evaluating the "national character" of Italians, and compare it with that of Spaniards, Germans and so on. In doing so, of course, they necessarily fall back on generalizations, stereotypes, and the inevitable anecdotal evidence.

Take for instance *The Italians*, by John Hooper (2015): while the book, written a by long-term correspondent from Italy of *The Economist*, is largely based on figures and data about Italy's society and culture, that does not prevent the author from discussing the well-known lack of discipline of Italian children – as proved by one child attempting to play the piano in a restaurant – or Italians' deep-seated mistrust of each other – as clearly shown by the universal use of dark glasses by people walking on the street. The author even devotes a whole chapter to examine how a fundamental aspect of Italian character – self-restraint – is evidenced by Italians' not bursting into dance on the street or other public places. Needless to say, many others such examples could be quoted⁴. It is also significant that while the author does generally try to gather evidence in favor of his views, the cover (quite probably not his responsibility) is a very convenient visual summary of the myth of "romantic Italy" in its most modern incarnation: attractive, well-dressed young people, images of saints and the Virgin Mary, and – naturally – beaches and villages on hills.

The fact that even "serious" works actually accept and spread tra-

3. Interestingly, one of the first modern books in the genre is Luigi Barzini's *The Italians: A Full Length Portrait* (1964), a book written by an Italian for an American publisher.

4. Most of the incorrect generalizations in the book seem to stem from the author's extension to the whole country of features that many Italians would consider exclusively Roman. This is a common error among foreign correspondents, as they are invariably based in Rome. Interestingly, the author does briefly discuss how a northern city like Bologna is "worlds apart" from his Italy, yet this observation is not taken to its logical conclusion: that generalizations over the whole country based on anecdotal evidence are inevitably unfounded.



ditional stereotypes affects teachers in study abroad programs in several ways. At a practical level, since the readings we assign have to be in English, we cannot be completely sure that works by non-Italians, addressed to an international public, do not convey those stereotypes in one form or another: one paper about Italian culture, for instance, quoted the personal memoir *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1996, on which the 2003 movie is based), as a realistic representation of the country. The fact that such representation is similar to that of Barzini forty years before is *evidence*, in the authors' analysis, "that cultural change in Italy is occurring slowly"⁵. At a more general level, it deprives teachers of the possibility of criticizing that traditional myth *from within*: there are few American authors we can usefully quote in class to dismantle stereotypes, reveal the power relations behind them, and provide tools to get to know the place at it is – at least in the case of Italy. It seems that for the English-speaking culture at large an Italy made of sunny weather, beaches and villages on hills (not to mention sheep on roads) is realistic enough.

It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate *why* the romantic myth of Italy is so pervasive in the English-speaking world, but it is important to remember that such myths do have a function. In Janes's words:

"The key point is that deeply held stereotypes and preconceptions of, for instance, 'Brits' or 'Blacks' or 'Jews' are, in a sense, functional. They can be deeply culturally embedded and have meanings and resonances beyond their precise dictionary definitions. For example, a racist stereotype may be a reflection of a whole host of cultural assumptions and deeply rooted cultural practices". (Janes 2011, 62-63).

As a working hypothesis, and purely on the basis of my students' own reports, it seems to me that the role of Italy in the Anglo-Saxon world

5. Martin and Rajnandini (2009, ch. 21). The whole analysis is based on a metaphorical interpretation of Italian culture in the light of Italian opera, and forms a veritable primer of stereotypical generalizations about Italy.

is that of providing a romanticized (and eroticized) setting on which to project narratives of personal (and sexual) transformation and liberation. Naturally, Italy is not alone in playing this function in today's dominant culture (and market), but it has special features in being considered exceptionally beautiful, thoroughly familiar, and just as morally and culturally defective as to put the outsider in a superior position – but not so socially and morally problematic as to be threatening. Add to this the fact that given Italy's long history and importance in the arts, this projection can be easily wrapped inside an educational discourse.

If this analysis is on the right track, the function of the romantic myth of Italy is indeed relevant to international education, as “Italy” would provide a unique combination of advantages in the marketplace of stereotypes about “national characters”.

Effects of the problem: stereotypes and experience

In this article, I submit that the existing literature on international education does not fully appreciate the extent to which an ancient and coherent stereotypical tradition such as the one discussed here represents a real obstacle to learning and becoming multi-culturally competent. The crucial mistake is to assume that stereotypes are isolated, random beliefs, which can be easily corrected through direct experience and self-analysis, as discussed above. In this view, an incorrect stereotypical belief like “Italians eat only pasta at lunch” is easily changed, through the experience of living in Florence for a few months, to a correct one like “Italians have a quick snack or a salad at lunch”. As teachers at study abroad programs we know that this is definitely *not* the case, and that experience alone cannot correct this belief⁶. We know this, because we have had students that after spending four months in Florence comment on how happy they are to go back to eating a healthier diet than the constant pasta “you Italians” eat at lunch “every day”. We

6. Nor is such a belief likely to be reported in the self-analysis assignments proposed by Montrose, quoted above, because a student who entertains this belief would consider it evidently correct.

also know that we are going to hear similar comments in the future. More importantly, we know that direct discussion of such an incorrect belief does not necessarily result in any real change. On this, I am again in complete agreement with Janes's opinion:

"If one simply treats such preconceptions and (mis)understandings as false there is the danger of setting up resistance to the 'corrective' information that one is providing. Students may think that one is being deliberately oppositional, hostile to their notions, or acting as a propagandist for Britain. Or else, the information that one provides, if it goes against received notions, may be absorbed in a surface manner, regurgitated for assessment purposes and then abandoned when back in the comfortable certainties of the home culture." (Janes 2011, 62).

In order to find a way to permanently change attitudes, we have to look closer at the content and structure of the romantic myth that constrains our students' vision. The starting point is that this tradition does not consist of random beliefs that can change from student to student, but forms a coherent whole, which is much harder to analyze and describe, let alone modify. From our specific point of view of teachers trying to dismantle this image, the main features of this romantic myth are the following:

The "Romantic Myth of Italy"

- contains a detailed and coherent stereotypical *description* of the country and its culture, including "invisible" parts like its values, norms, acceptable behavior and so on.
- That description is not static, but is embedded within *narratives* that reinforce its stereotypical content through familiar plots and characters.
- Those narratives have a precise *moral message* that often underlies attachment to the values and viewpoints of the student's native culture.

- The myth offers a specific *role* to foreigners that come into prolonged contact with Italian culture: “living in Italy” entails a precise set of experiences and achievements.

Thus, an example of this tradition would not be a simple statement like “Italians eat only pasta at lunch”, but a whole narrative like the one in the film *Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003), well known to many of our students. More precisely, it would be the basic plot of the American coming to “romantic Tuscany” to overcome a personal crisis, deciding to stay on the basis of impulse, getting to know the place in all the stereotypical clichés (from live geese at the market to the roads blocked by sheep), to *thinking* of finding romance in a love story with an Italian (which is bound to end in disappointment), to *really* finding it with a fellow American. As an exercise in class, we ask students to come up with other movies that follow this basic pattern, and we usually get several interesting answers, ranging from similar works like *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* or *Letters to Juliet* to more distant ones like *Spiderman; far from home*. This basic plot has indeed been exploited – with variations – across many types of genres, aimed at very different audiences.

Described in this way, the romantic myth is pervasive and hard to avoid, as it offers students the main part in a story that is much more vivid and exciting than the daily routine of getting to understand an unfamiliar culture.

As expected, this highly coherent and often repeated stereotypical narrative is not easily contradicted by daily experience or self-analysis: for most American students, one salad lunch is not going to change their idea of Italian food, which is itself one of the main features of “living in Italy”. That narrative – as we all know – shows gatherings of “typical” large Italian families spending hours – even at lunch – over pasta and wine, and is not going to be modified by anecdotal evidence⁷. On the contrary,

7. Notice that under this definition, a stereotypical narrative consists of both stereotypes and factually correct statements, which therefore cannot be corrected: Italians do eat a lot of pasta, after all.

I claim that this narrative can significantly shape and direct the students' experience of living in Florence, all the way down to what they see and how they evaluate it. Let us therefore examine its consequences in each phase of the students' experience.

Expectations

To begin with, the narrative influences students' *plans* on what to do in Florence even *before* their arrival. With their luggage, students pack a precise and long list of "things to do" and experiences to live. Most students share the same list, and their high concentration in the city means that deviations and original decisions are rare. As far as we can infer as teachers, there is significant social pressure on *current* students to have exactly the same experiences *previous* students have had before them. Indeed, sharing the *same* experience seems to carry positive value. Since much of their free time is taken up by travelling over the weekend, students do not have much time to do things outside their to-do list. This attitude surely contributes to the American students' reputation, among locals, of being gregarious and unadventurous, to the point of being incurious. Teachers at study abroad programs often tell each other stories of carefully crafted visits or tours that were met by the students' complete indifference. This can be understood in a non-judgmental way by remembering that "living in Italy" entails a precise set of experiences, and what the teachers offer may not be included in the list or even contradict it, thus triggering a defensive reaction, as reported by Janes above.

Students, for instance, have not shown much enthusiasm in meeting refugees from Africa, who did the dangerous crossing over sea to Italy and are waiting for an answer to their asylum application. This kind of migration is an important feature of modern Italy, and its practical consequences are clearly visible in the many African migrants walking the streets of Florence as street vendors. The migrants' point of view is also important to teachers, as it shows the city in a completely different light. Students invariably understand the importance of the issue, but they simply have no space for it in the type of narrative they subscribed to before

arriving⁸. As a result, they often have a hard time remembering and reporting contacts with street vendors (unless students feel threatened by them). On the contrary, casual but repeated talks with waiters and other personnel working in bars and restaurants are often reported and fondly remembered. The difference seems to be that the “Florence experience” involves becoming “friends” with locals, and small talk with the bartender under your apartment seems to fulfil that role. Interestingly, while the content of those conversations may sometimes be useful and significant (as noticed by the students themselves), almost always students fail to notice that most of those waiters and bartenders are also migrants (although not from Africa).

Reflections

The narrative also affects students’ experience *after* their stay. Students are often asked by teachers and staff, both in Florence and the US, to summarize their study abroad experience. Crucially, these narrative accounts often form the “evidence” on which programs are evaluated by Departments and Study Abroad Offices. As Doerr (2019) points out, these narratives follow a pre-arranged script, that only partially reflects the students’ own experiences abroad. Important contributors to these narratives, according to Doerr, are study abroad providers in the US and the evaluators of those providers. As expected, these actors have little incentive to challenge or complete the romanticized view of Italy. For this reason, they offer a pre-packaged experience that is then reflected in the students’ own narratives. Doerr points out that these often involve a moment of personal crisis or a significant challenge, and then the overcoming of such an obstacle, resulting in a stronger, more self-confident individual. We have seen this basic plot many times in our own students’ final essays,

8. As evidence of the teachers’ attempt to show the city in all its aspects, many of our colleagues have enthusiastically joined tours organised by *MigranTour*, a Europe-wide project, sponsored by Oxfam. The project offers tours of many European cities, including Florence, led by migrants themselves. The Florence tours focus on food, shops by and for migrants, non-Catholic religions, and aspects of the city that are usually invisible to the average tourist.

and we think that the evident similarity with movies like *Under the Tuscan Sun* is not a coincidence.

This is also very important for the assessment of students' progress during their stay abroad, as it casts a doubt about the relevance – and even authenticity – of any answer to questionnaires such as the ones proposed by Montrose, and quoted above. We can confirm from experience that students by now have a very clear idea of what kind of answer is expected from them if the teacher asks them to “explain the importance of flexibility and refraining from judgment”. They also have very little incentive to provide any other type of answer, since it would upset the narrative to which they themselves have subscribed, and could be evaluated negatively by the teacher. It could even be claimed that assignments containing these types of questions *reinforce* the stereotypical study abroad narrative, as far as they subscribe to the challenge-crisis-growth paradigm. What if students never felt challenged or in crisis? Or if they never felt the need to be flexible and adapt to the new circumstances? Or if they found no problem at all in the judgement they passed on the local culture? In my experience, teachers in Florence are keenly aware of how difficult it is to extract feelings and opinions from students that would put them in any other position than that of young champions accepting a challenge enthusiastically.

The limits of experience

Between their arrival and departure, teachers and staff have a chance of influencing students' appreciation of their Italian experience. Many methods and approaches are used to make students more aware of their current surroundings, but all these endeavors face a similar set of limits: there are areas of the local culture that seem to remain systematically outside the students' “lived experience”. I refer to Birindelli's article in this issue for further comment and analysis. Here, I just want to summarize the main points. In order of increasing generality, these areas are:

1. The city of Florence

2. Everyday life and activities

3. The invisible parts of local culture

Each of these points is in need of further study. For the time being, I just want to discuss how they refer to the stereotypical narrative of “Romantic Italy”. Before proceeding, it is worth noting that a 4th point can be added to the list: the current relevance of past history and culture⁹.

The first point is not a provocation; rather, it reflects the limits and the very nature of the students’ perception of the city. As discussed in depth by Pisani’s article in this issue, there is by now a stereotypical *Florence*, which is quite different and separate from the Italian *Firenze*. For a start, the former is much smaller than the latter: the stereotypical view narrows down the concept of *Florence* so much that it basically excludes most of the historic center itself. Even inside this area, some parts and elements of the city are not included: in congruence with the sunny image of the romantic narrative, narrow, shadowy alleys are out, as well as all the parts of the city that do not immediately show themselves to be “historic”. Points that are difficult to reach – such as some paths on the hills in the Oltrarno district – also seem to be disfavored, in line with the expectations that the city is, literally, easily accessible. Of course, signs of the globalized world we live in are also left out: *Florence* does not have electric trams, security cameras, and people do not have computers or smartphones. Even more systematically deleted are all clues pointing to the heavily commoditized nature of the foreign presence in the city, which is one of the main touristic destinations in the world. In *Florence*, though, there is no mass tourism, and every visitor and American student has the squares and alleys all to themselves.

Each point of this summary is reflected in the observations and reports provided by our students. They are indeed so numerous and coherent that some generalizations seem already well founded: students

9. On this point, Matteo Duni provided many insightful observations in his presentation at our conference, which we would have liked to publish in written form here.

will be very surprised and unsettled by the amount of people on the (too narrow!) sidewalks, traffic in the streets, and the crowds at the main railway station. They will also be extremely surprised by any building that looks “modern” (to them), and will feel very disappointed if they have to live in one of them. All “modern” buildings are invariably judged to be “run down”, and teachers would be asked why they are not renovated. Invariably, the city feels very large, and students will only move in it by walking – tours organized by teachers are often the only time they take a bus or a tram. When moving out of the city by train, all students wonder how such extensive suburbs “were allowed” to be built around a historic city. When asked, all students report imagining the city, before leaving, as a historic core surrounded by green hills. Most of our students report being surprised to land in an airport when they arrived.

Again, teachers are aware of the importance of not being judgmental when faced with the limits of students’ perception of our city. Indeed, one of the ways we make it easier for students to share their surprise or disappointment at the sight of *Firenze*, is by pointing out how the idea of *Florence* is systematically supported by the prevailing portrayal of the city on television and online media. One activity I often use in class is to use Google to look for images of Florentine streets. The results are amazingly uniform and consistently compatible with the international image of *Florence*. In class, I have sometimes looked up several pages of results without finding a single picture containing a tourist bus, for example. This makes it clear to students that it is not their fault if they only had *Florence* in mind before leaving.

Similarly, the social life that goes on every day in the city remains outside the students’ grasp, and in most cases remains so until the end of their stay. Indeed, the first critical remarks that teachers hear from students always involve daily activities. Among the most common are the narrow and crowded sidewalks, which force you to walk in the streets, near the cars; the lines at the local supermarket, which is also incredibly small and crowded; and the absence of dryers in their apartments. The way locals do things is largely mysterious for students, and teachers are

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often asked things like the proper way to order a coffee at the bar: do you pay before or after asking for it? More importantly, they do not seem to be able to generalize from observation, so that, for instance, more than one student completed a semester without learning that you have to ask for the bill yourself at the restaurant.

This is related to the stereotypical narrative in that the “Italy” students get to know is one of culture, history and traditions, but without the social and economic structure that sustains them, at both the micro and macro levels. Films like *Under the Tuscan Sun* never show Italians talking about finding a job or making ends meet; on the contrary, everybody seems to have a kind of traditional occupation. For that matter, nobody is ever shown paying for anything. Daily life is included as far as it is colorful and “picturesque”: buying groceries at a market is in, but going through all the paperwork needed to buy a house is obviously out. Again, this is reflected in students’ reported experiences: the pace of the city invariably feels slow to them and they are surprised to learn in class that *Firenze* is at the center of a small industrial area. Similarly, all shops feel small and homely, and what many locals would deem “fake” tourist spots feel “authentic” to them. Their *Florence* is an atemporal place, where traditions live on indefinitely, without any economic or social cause: any text that claims that there are no class distinctions in Italy is eagerly quoted by students. Correspondingly, they systematically misjudge the social status of locals: it is common for them to infer that any well-dressed Italian is well off, for instance.

Finally, the limited ability to infer customs and habits from observed behavior translates at a more general level into the inability of imagining those “invisible” parts of Italian culture (values, norms, rules of politeness etc.) that are not explicitly taught in class. This, in a sense, is the least important of the limitations mentioned here, as it is most easily noticed by teachers and corrected in class. Indeed, many students would associate learning about these aspects of Italian culture with the lectures and readings for their courses.

Still, it is interesting to point out here that this constrained imagination may produce results that Italian teachers find surprising: for instance, students understand and remember the fact that different wines in Italy are strongly associated with regional cultures and identities, but they may not extend this fact to food, and try to order *pici alla senese* (a pasta dish from Siena) in a restaurant in Bologna. At a more general level, they may be baffled by a class on European identity, and its importance for younger generations, despite the fact that they spend a considerable amount of their time abroad travelling in a united Europe without borders. In another case, some of my students are surprised to learn that there is only one Lutheran church in Florence, despite being repeatedly taught about the dominant role of the Catholic faith and religion in Italy.

Maybe the distinction between a historical *Firenze* and a stereotypical *Florence* can be extended to the state as a whole: there is an *Italia* and a separate *Italy* that only partially overlap. Students may learn and remember without any problem facts about *Italia*, but may find it difficult to relate them to their *Florence* and their *Italy*¹⁰.

Conclusions: solutions to the problem

In conclusion, our experience as Italian teachers at study abroad programs in Florence has shown us repeatedly that American students in Italy do indeed come with a vast and detailed amount of knowledge about the country. I hope I also made a persuasive argument that if this knowledge is largely stereotypical, it is so because of an ancient, coherent and constantly updated romanticized view of the country in the English-speaking world, a view that is shared by both popular and “serious” culture. The main point of my argument here is that the influence of this tradition on the students’ perception and evaluation of their own experience in our country is vast and profound, and is not correctly described as a list of separate stereotypes and biases. In my view, the “romantic myth

10. Notice that by Italy I refer here to a stereotypical but plausibly realistic country, complete with borders, passports, a national government and so on. Strictly speaking, this *Italy* is different from the completely idealised romantic notion of “Italy” in the traditional myth.

of Italy” is a living, engrossing narrative which offers young students a much more exciting role than the “real-life” alternative of getting to understand how a foreign culture works.

If all this is correct, then it has serious consequences for the way Italian teachers and staff approach the education of American students abroad. As a teacher of courses based on sociology, my greatest worry is that we are offering an interesting but escapist introduction to Italian culture, where by “escapist” I mean “completely detached from the social and economic interests that shape and sustain that culture”. Naturally, it is possible and legitimate to teach art, cinema, literature without reference to society at large, and there are valuable lessons to be gained for studying and enjoying art for the pleasure of art. But if it is correct that the romantic representation of Italy plays an escapist function within the English-speaking world, then it is only logical to ask ourselves how much our own work sustains that function.

Here I only want to report that most of my colleagues are keenly aware of this issue and try hard to counterbalance the “picturesque” image of the country with some relevant facts: from tours guided by migrants, visits to women’s centers, workshops hiring developmentally disabled youths, to carefully organized meetings with fellow Italian students, we take every opportunity to put our students in contact with those parts of Italy not shown in the standard Hollywood movie. Similarly, it is by now standard for courses about fashion or wine-making to include in their syllabi, lectures on the economy behind the products, and at ISI Florence, a course about representations of the mafia in movies includes a visit to the anti-organized-crime police headquarters in the city. We definitely cannot be blamed for spreading the myth, but of course the question is whether we succeed in providing a different, alternative view.

A detailed answer requires much more empirical investigation, but my teaching experience definitely shows that it is possible to make a difference. The key point is to remember that students do have their own views about the country and us, and it is counter-productive to correct them directly. Instead, we have to engage them, and make them engage

with the culture and the place they are living in. We also have to be aware that a seemingly innocent stereotype about Italian food may have many ramifications into the students' American culture, and involve deeply held beliefs, as discussed above. If we really strive for an intercultural learning experience with our students, it is only natural that teachers be familiar with the students' culture, and be able to draw comparisons and underline differences. Indeed, most of the faculty and staff at study abroad programs in Florence have experience studying and teaching in the US. Yet, what I am talking about is not knowledge of American culture itself, but rather those "invisible parts" (values, norms, symbols of identity and so on) which our own students find it difficult to discover in Italy. This is much more difficult than learning lacrosse rules, or the process to get accepted into a sorority or fraternity.

My own personal solution to the problem has been a very rewarding one: every time I feel I do not know what my students are talking about, I ask them to explain it to me. Over the years, I learned a huge amount about things like cheer-leading, playing in a brass band, playing competitive hockey at college level, mock United Nations, countless TV shows, and a myriad of other issues I would have never learned about had they not been mentioned by my students. But most importantly, I learned from them what all of these things *mean* for them and what their *value* is. This they can do, clearly and sometimes even eloquently, if you give them your attention and make sure you understand it is something important to them. It may be time-consuming and not fit exactly into the syllabus, but I claim it is fundamental. After all, the greatest compliment we can receive from our students is that our courses are "eye opening", but we get this result only if we keep our own eyes open as well.

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