

## TERRITORY AND POPULATION - DEMOGRAPHIC DYNAMICS IN SICILY

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**Abstract:** *Territory and population - demographic dynamics in Sicily.* The study of the demographic dynamics represents an important approach in the contemporary societies. This paper tries to illustrate some main characteristics of the population dynamics in Sicily pointing out the particularities of this feature in the particular region of Italy. The paper is focused on the Sicilian population on the Italian scientific literature, on the migrations and its outcomes at the regional level as well as on the territoriality of population in terms of demographic density. The final part of the paper analyses the particularities of the labor market in Sicily.

**Rezumat:** *Teritoriu și populație - dinamică demografică în Sicilia.* Studiul asupra dinamicii demografice reprezintă o abordare importantă în cercetările actuale întreprinse asupra societății contemporane. Această lucrare încearcă să surprindă câteva caracteristici semnificative ale dinamicii populației în Sicilia ilustrând particularitățile punctuale ale acestei regiuni italiene. Studiul este centrat pe prezența analizelor demografice în literatura de specialitate, pe migrația demografică și efectele sale la nivel regional și pe caracteristicile teritorialității fondului demografic sicilian. Secțiunea de final a lucrării analizează piața muncii și caracteristicile sale în Sicilia.

**Key words:** *population, migration, labor market, territoriality, Sicily.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *populație, migrație, piața forței de muncă, teritorialitate, Sicilia.*



## 1. SICILIANS PORTRAIT IN LITERATURE

The several dominations that succeeded in Sicily, such as Sikels, who occupied the island during the Neolithic Age, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Saracens, Normans, and Spaniards left their influence on the island's culture and therefore not only on cultural heritage and traditions but also on people appearance and character. "Black and wavy haired short men with oriental eyes and strong legs like desert walkers" are the words used by Salvatore Quasimodo, recipient of the 1959 Nobel Prize for Literature, to explain how his countrymen's look is a mix of Mediterranean features, much more highlighted in their inner character. As a matter of fact, throughout history

Sicilians have shown a wide range of attitudes, from patience and tolerance to harshness and unfriendliness, from brightness and open-mindedness to suspect and diffidence. For instance, in Norman-Swabian time they provided the first example of peaceful coexistence among people of different civilizations, languages, races, traditions and religion. However, they also knew how to rise up against foreigners: against French in 1168 and 1282, against English in 1190, against Spanish in 1516 and in 1674, in 1848 and 1860 against Bourbons, in 1943 against Germans (Correnti, 2003). Appealing portraits of Sicilian people have been made by all the travelers attracted by this charming island. Without any shadow of doubt the period of Grand tour was by far the most productive. Artists and scholars from all over the world, such as Guy de Maupassant, Edmondo De Amicis, Jean-Pierre Houël, Von Riedsel, Patrick Brydone, Algernon Swinburne, Vivant Denon, Didier, Francis Elliot, Emerson Farjasse, Goethe, Hessemer, Knight, Emily Lowe, Claude de Marcellus, Munther and Tocqueville, described wild and outstanding landscapes as well as people. Most Sicilians appeared to them in conditions of extreme poverty and distress, but rich in spirit. They were depicted as lively, friendly, courteous, intelligent as well as instinctive, quick-tempered, quarrelsome, rude and jealous. Farmers drew attention to them for how they dressed, for how superstitious and ignorant they were, while women either for their devotion or bravery (Famoso, 1999).

Writers and scholars from different subjects fields, including anthropologists, have always tried to understand the "specificity" of the Sicilians' character, and have tried to define it. Here follows some examples and different points of view. Giovanni Verga, the well known writer of Verismo, a positivist movement in Italian literature, described its people as "defeated" by the overwhelming difficulties derived from the cultural and economic context of the rural society. The "defeated" were not limited to the people in the lower strata, such as fishermen or peasants but involved the whole society from *Mastro don Gesualdo* to *Rosso Malpelo*, from *I Malavoglia* to *La capinera*. Nevertheless, he underlined that they accepted defeat with honor and dignity, as we can infer from the words expressed by Padron 'Ntoni : "we must live as we were born; life, beautiful or not, has not been made by us as it is". Pirandello depicted the Sicilian "types" as if they were actors. According to him they "played" and wore a mask of respectability and indifference, which was sometimes exaggerated or unjustified. Indro Montanelli stated that since Sicilians lived on a island they have become five million of islands: individualistic, selfish and even violent. They could be introvert or extrovert according to their nature. Anyway he underlined that most of them were decent people. On the contrary Denis Mack Smith in *Medieval Sicily: 800-1713* and *Modern Sicily: after 1713* declared that all Sicilians are mafiosis and ungovernable.

## 2. SICILIANS AS MIGRANT PEOPLE

Sicilian emigration is by far the most studied in Italy and above all is the one that has most captured writers and cinematographers' imagination. Up to the first half of the 80s century the departures were just a few and usually related to singles episodes, like the insurrection of 1682 in Messina or the movements of 1821.

*In New York Harbor*

by  
William Carlos Williams  
O—EH—lee! La—la!  
Donna! Donna!  
Blue is the sky of Palermo;  
Blue is the little bay;  
And dost thou remember the orange and fig,     5  
The lively sun and the sea breeze at evening?

Hey—la!  
Donna! Donna! Maria!

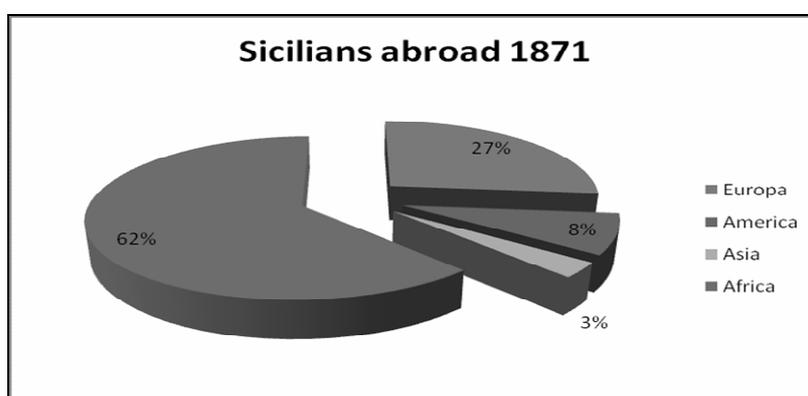
O—eh—li! La—la!  
Donna! Donna!     10  
Gray is the sky of this land.  
Gray and green is the water.  
I see no trees, dost thou? The wind  
Is cold for the big woman there with the candle.     15

Hey—la!  
Donna! Donna! Maria!

O—eh—li! O—la!  
Donna! Donna!  
I sang thee by the blue waters;  
I sing thee here in the gray dawning.     20  
Kiss, for I put down my guitar;  
I'll sing thee more songs after the landing.  
O Jesu, I love thee!  
Donna! Donna! Maria!

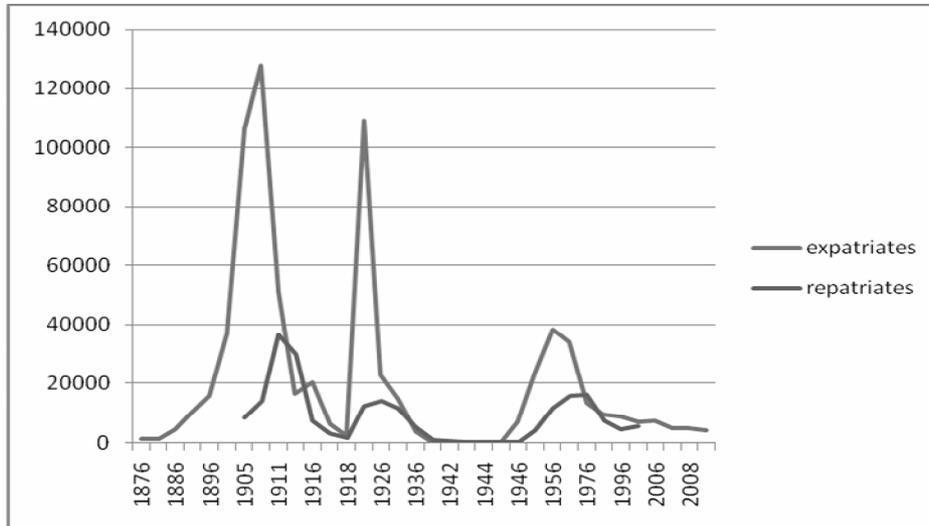
Only in the second half of the century and precisely after the Italian unification (1861), which did not prove particularly beneficial to Sicily since military conscription

became compulsory, tax burden was heavier and heavier, revolts against the new laws were quickly and brutally suppressed, criminal activity, the well-known “mafia”, became a stronghold of power, emigration intensified. About one thousand of people or a bit over left Sicily per year up until to 1880, between 2,000 and 5,000 people per year up until to 1887, between 7,000 and 15,000 up until to 1896, while 28,838 in 1900. Who embarked on the ships from Palermo and Trapani were mostly peasants, while those who left from Messina were mostly artisans and laborers. Migrants, who were mainly men, since women were only one out of six, departed for Europe, America, Asia and Africa (fig. 1).

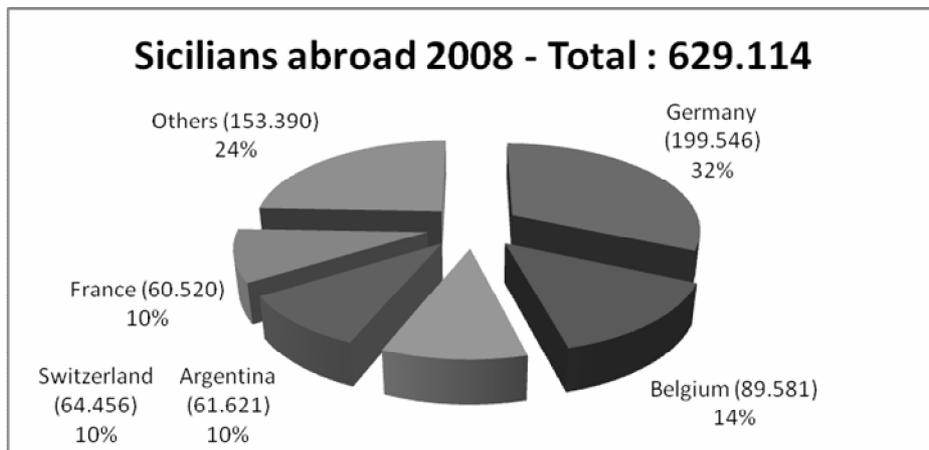


**Figure 1:** Directions of migration flows  
(source: processed data based on Pecora A., 1974)

The departures from Sicily (fig. 2) grew remarkably from 1902 (54,466) to 1914 (46,610) due to the lower ships' prices, the political tension following the defeat of the Sicilian “Fasci” in 1893-1894 and the desire of some of the less desperate farmers and smallholders to improve their economic and social conditions. These two groups emigrated temporarily to America (smallholders usually opted for farm work in the South and landless peasants for urban jobs in the North), while the unemployed from the cities and the exiles chose to move permanently to the United States, where they preserved a strong tradition of political radicalism. The war led to an end to emigration and to an increase in the number of repatriates, but after 1918 the departures began again. However in the twenty years of Fascism, they were diverted to north-central Italy. Immediately after the Second World War large migration flows started not only in the direction of the capital, the industrial triangle and the Ligurian coast, but also towards Europe (first France, then Germany and Switzerland) (fig. 3). In addition, some Sicilians opted to move to America, particularly to the United States, where large Sicilian communities still lived. In the seventies the construction sector crisis stopped the flows to Europe, later partially replaced by flows towards other regions of the Peninsula and towards the Third World. At the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century departures started again towards Germany, the United States, and the north-central Italy (Pecora, 1974). The new generation of migrants consists of young graduates and postgraduates who look for new job opportunities abroad.



**Figure 2:** Flows of Sicilian expatriations and repatriations  
(source: processed data based on ISTAT data)

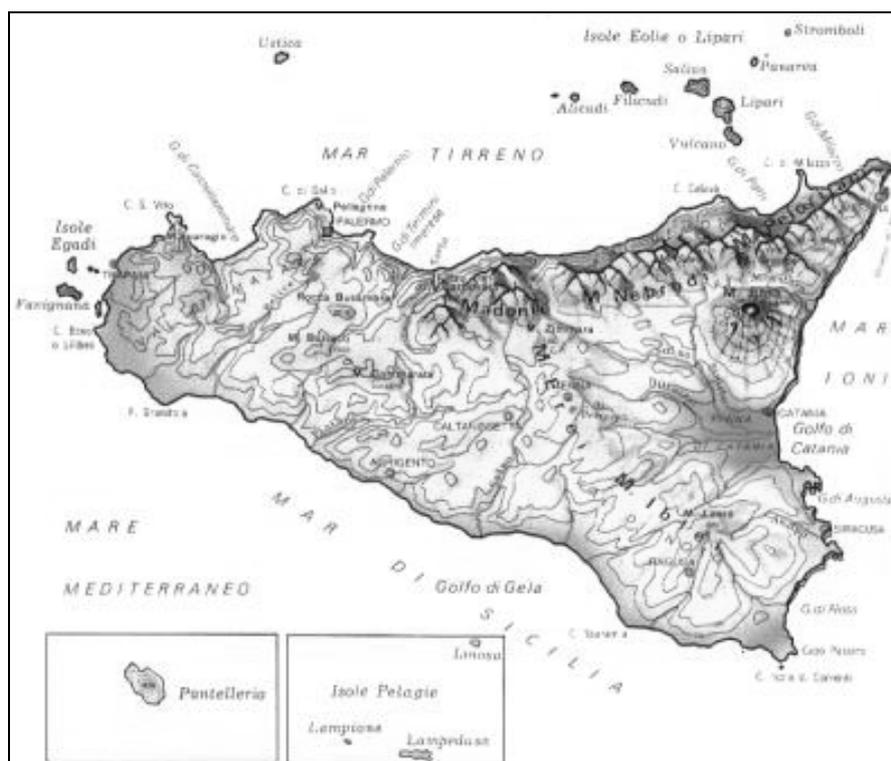


**Figure 3:** Five countries hosting Sicilians  
(source: processed data based on ISTAT data)

### 3. POPULATION AND TERRITORY

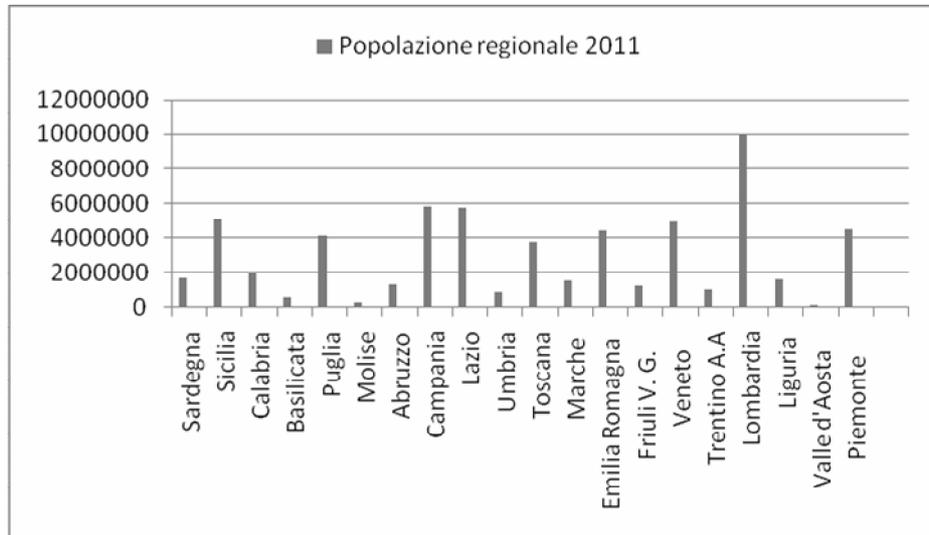
Rich of history and art, Sicily with a surface of 25,426 sq. km is the largest island in the Mediterranean. Its territory is mainly hilly with the exception of some high mountains along the Northern coast (the Peloritani, Nebrodi and Madonie) and the major active volcano

in Europe, Mount Etna (3,323 m), and apart from the fertile, large Plain of Catania. It is surrounded by many smaller islands, such as Ustica, the Eolie (or Lipari) group, comprising two more active volcanoes, Stromboli and Vulcano, the Egadi group, Pantelleria and Pelagie Isles and therefore is the most extensive region in Italy (fig. 4).

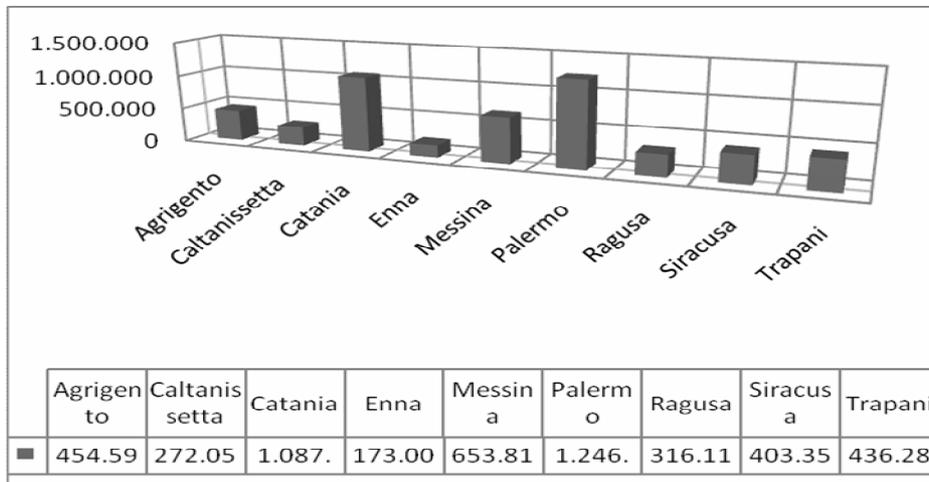


**Figure 4:** The physical map of Sicily  
 (source: <http://www.globalgeografia.com/italia/sicilia.htm>)

However, it is in the fourth position for population number, after Lombardy, Campania and Lazio. The resident population is 5,042,992 inhabitants at the end of 2010, superior of 5,193 units compared to the previous year, due to both natural and migration components. The number of births (48,083) has a natural increase of 108 units compared to the number of deaths (47,975). The distribution of population in Sicily is not homogeneous, indeed the majority of the population live in the coastal belt near Catania and Messina, around Palermo, Syracuse and the hinterlands of Agrigento and Licata. On the contrary the inner areas, which are rural territories, such as the province of Caltanissetta and Enna, the highlands of the Sicilian Apennines, Etna, the Erei and Iblei, are greatly underpopulated (fig. 5).



**Figure 5:** Distribution of population in the Italian regions (source: processed data based on ISTAT data)



**Figure 6:** Distribution of population in the Sicilian districts. (source: processed data based on ISTAT data)

The population distribution (fig. 6) is not only highly influenced by the territory morphology but also by the economic activities, which are widespread across the territory according to their typology. The Sicilian economy is mainly based on agriculture, fishing

and tertiary sector, while industry is still underdeveloped. In regard to agriculture it is worth mentioning that the production of cereals, including wheat, is remarkable. That's why in Roman times, the island was well-known as the "granary of Rome". The area around Acireale and the plain of Catania is characterized by the cultivation of citrus fruits: lemons, oranges, and tangerines, along with mandarin, bergamot, grapefruit and cedar trees, figs of India and carobs. Since the sixties vegetables have gained a wider market, such as the famous Pachino tomatoes produced mainly in the South East of Sicily. Nuts, hazelnuts, almonds, and pistachios – the best well-known are planted in the vast territory of Bronte (25000 acres) - are the main ingredients of many typical products, like chocolate, imported directly from America when Sicily was under the Spanish control. The Sicilian chocolate, especially that one made in Modica, is prepared according to ancient recipes and makes a very special use of exotic spices.

An important contribution to the economy comes from the intensive cultivation of Kiwi and Mango in the area of Fiumefreddo (CT). Moreover, Sicily produces a wide range of wines and in recent decades the wine industry has improved a lot. The most famous Sicilian wines, well-known abroad, are Corvo from Salaparuta, Marsala, from the province of Trapani, Moscato from Pantelleria, Nero d'Avola, Malvasia from Lipari, Cerasuolo from Vittoria, and Zibibbo. Goats, sheep and horses are bred in large quantity, while cattle, once present in small numbers, are raised in large numbers today especially in the province of Ragusa and are mainly used in the production of fresh cheese. Along with agriculture, fishing is an important economic resource for Sicily. There are many ports with large fleets of fishing boats in Mazara del Vallo, Sciacca and Licata. They most-fished species are swordfish, sardines, tuna, anchovies, mackerel, bluefish, which are the typical fish of the Mediterranean Sea.

On the contrary the secondary sector is not so much developed. Chemical, energy and oil processing industries are concentrated in the districts of Augusta, Gela and Milazzo, industries, while the Fiat automobile factory is located in Termini Imerese, in the province of Palermo. Concerning the tertiary sector, the tourism field is the island's diamond point that, if rightly exploited, could turn Sicily into one of the most visited regions in the world. The Sicilian tourism, in spite of the current economic recession, is an important reference point for the region due to the outstanding coastal areas and beaches, the large quantity of archeological sites and the art centers. However, the Sicilian tourism industry is still very limited in comparison with Sicilian's potential. Recently the province of Enna has been the Region's focus of interest with an interesting project for the creation of a Sicilian-Greek-Roman district also including Aidone, Morgantina, Caltagirone and *The Villa Romana del Casale* of Piazza Armerina.

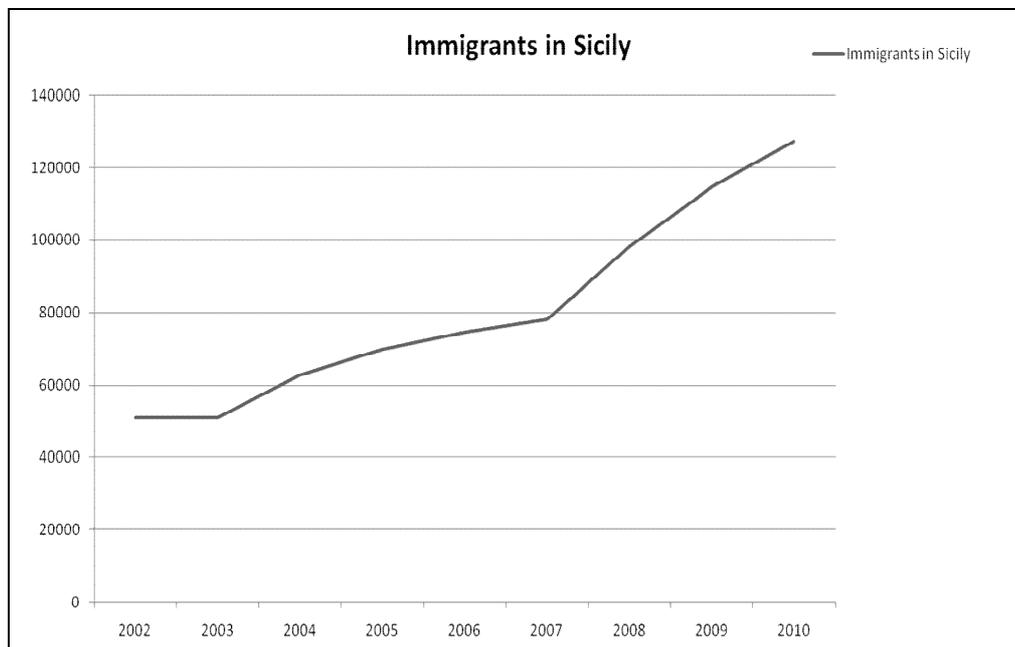
#### **4. POPULATION AND LABOR MARKET**

The ISTAT data of 2008 reveal a critical situation to what concerns the labor market. Compared to the previous year the data collected show a slight decrease of the number of employees (0,6%) and a more remarkable increase of the number of job seekers. There is a decrease in the agriculture (-8,7%) and in the industry (-4,2%) sectors, on the contrary there is an increase in the construction sector (+2,7%), while the occupation number in the tertiary sector is steady. As it has been reported, there is a large gap between those from Sicily (9,3%) employed in the industry and those from the rest of Italy (21,3%). The primary

sector is by far the most prominent in Sicily and this is highlighted by data showing that 7,5% of the population are employed in agriculture, while in the rest of the country the employees in this sector are just 3,8% out of the total. In addition, data demonstrate that in Sicily (73%) as well in Italy (66,5%) the highest concentration of employees is in the tertiary sector. In the last few years moving to the three largest cities has become an intense phenomenon due to a wider range of job opportunities.

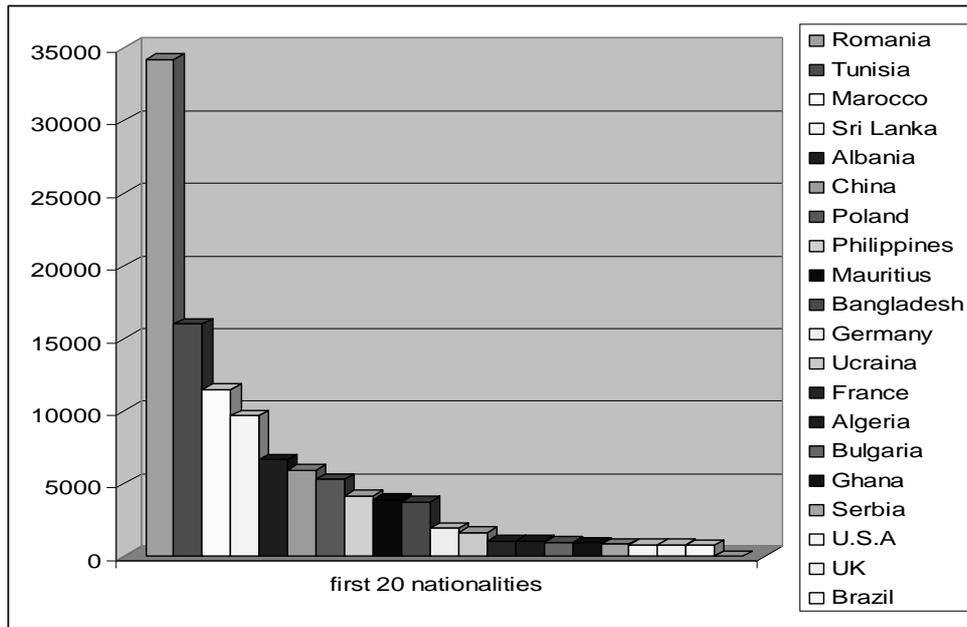
However, the unemployment rate is extremely high and consequently migrating either to the north of Italy or abroad is a constant trend. It is widely believed that the statistic data concerning this aspect are not always accurate because lots of people do not change their residence, even if they move from south to north for a long period of time, and therefore cannot be statistically analyzed. Nevertheless, this unfavorable condition, which has been worsened by the present economic crisis, has not discouraged immigrants coming from developing countries and Eastern Europe.

The available statistics, even if they are rarely extremely accurate due to the illegal nature of most immigration, show an increase in the number of immigrants in the last years. Today, they represent on the one hand an essential workforce for low-remunerated and unqualified jobs in the domestic services sector, in agriculture, in the construction sector, in many small industries, as well as in the informal economy. On the other hand lots of them succeed in carrying out alternative forms of work in spite of the difficulties. Consequently, Sicily is not only a transit area of non EU immigrant flows but also a land where immigrants can settle (fig. 7).



**Figure 7:** Increase in the number of immigrants in the last years  
(source: processed data based on ISTAT data)

As a matter of fact, the largest immigrant communities coming from Romania, Senegal, North Africa, the Mauritius islands, China, Albania and the Philippines are no longer looking for employment, but are adopting a businessman's outlook and setting up self-employment activities (fig. 8).



**Figure 8: Immigrants' nationalities**  
(source: processed data based on ISTAT data)

An evident example of this tendency is provided by the numerous wholesale and retail shops and stands opened by the Chinese. The Senegalese also seem to be more interested in self-employment with the creation of international phone and money transfer centres, numerous retail shops and stands. North Africans run ethnic shops and take away kebabs shops with favourable results. Finally, it is worth mentioning that Sicily, like the rest of Italy, owns a widespread shadow economy which attracts large amounts of illegal migrants. The growth of an irregular workforce has been facilitated by the sector of domestic and personal services and the diffusion of small businesses.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The Sicilian population has experienced epic migrations to the Americas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Emigration continued, in other directions, in the period 1951-1971, when the migration affected nearly one million inhabitants, one fifth of

the population. The poor economic development of Sicily, determined by historical and political factors, was the main reason for this exodus. Today once again economic hardship is the engine of the new wave of migration. The economic indicators show that 47.6% of families are in a worse economic condition than in 2009 and that the employment rate, which does not even reach the 50%, maintains a strong negative deviation from the National average of 56.9%. The new migration from the South to the North of the country might soon take a severe character. In fact, all operations and programs implemented by the various postwar governments failed and the great migration have been resumed, after a few decades of break. From Sicily alone over 60 thousand people have emigrated to other cities, especially to the Northern cities, in search of job opportunities. The new migrants are mostly young graduate who, like their grandparents' generation, emigrate after losing all hope of finding a job in their country and territory, and after living through years and years of insecurity.

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