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**FROM IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP TO PLURINATIONAL FIRMS:
EVIDENCE FROM ITALY**

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From immigrant entrepreneurship to plurinational firms: evidence from Italy

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Abstract

The article contributes to the current debate on the relationship between migration and entrepreneurship, highlighting the evolution of processes and practices, from the traditional monoethnic firm towards new models, we defined as “plurinational”. It refers precisely to the cases, widespread in the evolving cosmopolitan society, where both entrepreneurs and workers belong to different nationalities. The article outlines the findings of a qualitative research study, based on interviews with a series of entrepreneurs of plurinational firms in Italy. Firstly, we found that plurinational firms originate from “weak ties” (through acquaintances and previous work experiences) rather than “strong ties” (through family and co-ethnic community networks). Secondly, far from being univocal models, we found a variety of plurinational entrepreneurships which derives from different scales of priority assigned by ownership or management to plurinationalism as “opportunity” or plurinationalism as “value”.

1. Introduction

The article is part of the current debate on the nexus between migration and entrepreneurship, and it incorporates migration research approaches to entrepreneurship, including recent contributions on the perspective of diversity as emerging field (Deakins and Scott 2021; Vershinina et al. 2021). More precisely, we adopted a socio-economic interdisciplinary approach to investigate the evolution of immigrant entrepreneurship and the conditions that favored the wide - even if not yet adequately documented – diffusion of a business configuration where immigrant and native owners jointly hold entrepreneurial roles (plurinational firm).

Usually, in the debate on immigrant entrepreneurship a clear demarcation has been adopted between firms founded by entrepreneurs born abroad (or of ‘ethnic’ origin), with their specificities and distinctive characteristics (Shane 2012; Sinkovics and Reuber 2021), and firms founded by ‘native’ entrepreneurs (i.e., belonging to the nationality of the country in which the firm was established) well differentiated from the former (e.g., Bates 1997; Tsukashima 1991; Light 1984; Yuniarto 2015; Masurel et al. 2002; Malerba and Ferreira, 2020). This interpretative scheme has some advantages on a descriptive level, and it is useful for highlighting important aspects of migrant entrepreneurship, but it is less and less accurate on an analytical level. The evolution of the migratory phenomenon and of migrant entrepreneurship itself has shown an increasing variety in the structure and business models (Ndofor and Priem 2011; Waldinger 2000; Chaganti et al. 2008; Saxenian 2002; Wadhwa et al. 2008). Some typical elements of the firm founded by immigrants, such as simplified organizational configurations based on the family and the community of origin, the prevailing ‘ethnic’ reference markets, the low profitability sectors of activity, can no longer be considered the exclusive or preeminent characteristics of migrant firms.

One of the most relevant aspects of the differentiation processes of migrant firms is precisely the overcoming of a clear, dichotomous distinction between “foreign” and “native” firms: not only do native firms hire immigrant workers as employees, but also foreign firms hire native workers as employees. And the same applies to the ownership and managerial structure: firms with an initial foreign prevalence, modify the composition of the board of directors for the entry of native shareholders and vice versa. We will call them *plurinational firms*. As there are plurinational societies (i.e., political communities

containing more than one group with a national identity)¹, there are economic-legal organizations composed of individuals who have different national origins and identities and favour the rise of plurinational firms. On this basis, the evolution of the immigrant firm shows a trajectory that moves away from the *mononational* character, i.e., an ownership either totally made up of immigrant entrepreneurs or totally composed of native entrepreneurs.

Even if not sufficiently studied, the diffusion of migrant firms with a plurinational governance has acquired considerable empirical relevance in more recent years. In this sense Mushaben (2006) notes that almost 17% of the Turkish firms in Germany have hired German workers and that 8.7% have non-co-ethnic employees. Leung (2001) shows how Chinese entrepreneurs in France, while maintaining strong ties with their community, develop forms of collaboration with non-Chinese entrepreneurs. Over time, the majority of ethnic firms tend to repeatedly go beyond the community boundaries, using non-ethnic resources to enter the mainstream markets (Pecoud 2005). Also, regarding Italy, the most recent studies have highlighted the spread of plurinational experiences in the entrepreneurial field (Arrighetti et al. 2014). In addition, focusing on partnerships and joint-stock companies, plurinational firms result to represent more than a quarter of the total number of migrant enterprises operating in 2019 (see Tab.1).

Table 1 Mono and plurinational joint migrant-owned stock companies or partnerships in Italy in 2019².

	Nr.	Percentage over total
Mono-national joint stock companies or partnerships	97,103	73.02
Plurinational joint stock companies or partnerships	35,883	26.98
Total – Immigrant-owned joint stock companies or partnerships	132,986	100.00

Source: our elaborations on Unioncamere data-Rapporto annuale 2019.

Which are the drivers that induce immigrant firms to turn into plurinational firms? Which factors allow the firms to survive in markets no more protect by community cultural and economic barriers?

¹ Requejo (2005), Keating (2006) and McGarry and O’Leary (2009).

² The percentage of plurinational firms is underestimated in these data, because only the presence of native-owners and not of born-in-different countries-foreign owners is considered. For example, according to definitions in the Unioncamere database, when the ownership of the firm is represented by 1 Albanian, 1 Russian and 1 Romanian, then the firm has to be classified as “mono-national”

To answer these questions, 40 qualitative interviews with plurinational firms operating in Italy were conducted focusing on two stages of firm development (Churchill and Lewis, 1983). The first one concerns the startup phase and analyses the relationship between immigrant businesses and co-ethnic community showing how strong ties with the family and the entrepreneur community (Granovetter 1973) is impaired. The birth of the plurinational firm, instead, results to be fueled by the resources and support provided by acquaintances and previous colleagues, thus leveraging more *weak* (non-co-ethnic) than *strong* ties³. This implies that plurinational firm could represent a significant tool in supporting the processes of social inclusion and overcoming ethnic barriers.

The second stage of firm development concerns the survival and investigates the evolutionary paths pursued by the plurinational firm. Conventionally the distinctive elements of the immigrant firm (focus on stagnant marginal markets, limited orientation to size growth, absence of division of labor in the managerial structure, co-ethnicity, prevalence of employment objectives) led to the homogeneity of the business model adopted. The most recent literature on migrant entrepreneurship underlines how break out strategies (Waldinger et al. 1990; Engelen 2001; Dabić et al. 2020; Basu 2011; Canello 2016; Wang and Warn 2019) and increase in diversity and cross-cultural capabilities (Xu et al. 2019; Lin and Tao 2012) determine a proliferation of heterogeneous evolutionary paths of the migrant firms⁴. Plurinational firm moves in the same direction and contributes to increase the variety of strategic paths, mixing *goal-oriented* objectives (motivated by functional and instrumental purposes) or *value-oriented* objectives (that is cultural and national diversity being value in themselves). These conclusions are reflected in the need to review support policies for immigrant businesses and the variety of implementation tools made available. These conclusions are reflected in the need to review support

³ The theory of “bridging social capital” (Putnam, 2000) has been used just to explain the social and professional relationships between an ethnic group and external actors, though “weak ties” among acquaintances, which reinforces and completes information and skills necessary to start an economic activity and more generally for the creation of open and widespread relationships among different national groups (Davidsson and Honig 2003) and with the native population.

⁴ The enhancement of “diversity” (Ashikali and Groeneveld 2013) is recognized as a lever that can significantly contribute to increasing the level of creativity and innovation of firms and at the same time has a positive effect on the productivity and efficiency of workers, thus improving the organizational performance (Ashikali and Groeneveld 2013; Ely and Thomas 2001; Groeneveld and Van de Walle 2010; Groeneveld 2011; Pitts 2009; Downey et al. 2015; Hunt et al. 2018). Immigrant-owned firms are in an optimal position to reap the benefits of the diversity of cultures both in order to overcome internal limits and to enhance new opportunities.

policies for immigrant businesses and to broaden the variety of implementation tools made available.

2. Theoretical advancements: antecedents and current debate

Originally, immigrant entrepreneurship has been assimilated within the theories of disadvantage, according to which migrant workers entering into the labor market of the immigration country were pushed to the margins of the economy (Bonacich 1973; Jenkins 1984) and essentially occupy low-skilled job positions (Piore 1979). On the supply side, the disadvantageous conditions originate from obstacles and barriers, deriving from the characteristics of human capital, poor knowledge of the local language and difficulty in having the professional and educational qualifications formally recognized. All these factors underpinned the widespread discriminatory practices of employers, supported by ethnic, racial, religious prejudices (taste-based discrimination) or by an imperfect information on the labor market (statistical discrimination), which leads to the reiteration of negative stereotypes towards ethnic minorities (Bonacich 1973; Light 1979; Tsukashima 1991). These initial disadvantages can influence the migrant workers' choices of taking up self-employment or entrepreneurial activity as an alternative employment opportunity and pre-condition of any eventual social progression.

However, this original theoretical approach was not able to explain the growing diversification of migrant entrepreneurship in advanced economies, the adoption of complex organizational models and their position in non-niche mainstream markets (Rusinovic 2008; Aldrich and Waldinger 1990; Ndofor and Priem 2011; Ambrosini 2011; Chaganti et al. 2008; Arrighetti et al. 2012; Saxenian 2002). Also, the entry into self-employment could not be considered only as a residual choice, or as a fallback solution to employment (Clark and Drinkwater 2000).

In other words, the empirical evidence was showing a different picture of migrant entrepreneurship which made the theories of disadvantage fragile and called for new interpretative frameworks (Waldinger et al. 1990; Kloosterman 2000; Portes et al. 2002; Saxenian 2002; Zhou 2014; Rusinovic 2007; Marra 2011).

A parallel contribution, which enlarged the theoretical perspective, is provided by the theory of intersectionality (Romero and Valdez, 2016; Shinnie et al. 2019), according to which the ethnic origin cannot be considered as the only and prevalent factor to explain the birth, development or success of a firm, but it must rather be an element that interacts

both with the original social class and with family position and gender dynamics (McCall 2005; Harvey 2005). This intersectional approach is therefore understood as a crossroads of different and equally relevant social dimensions for the explanation of migrant entrepreneurship.

Moreover, one of the more powerful single theory on migrant entrepreneurship has been the mixed embeddedness (Kloosterman and Rath 2001), which reacted against the consolidated belief that the ethnic minorities firms could be originated almost only by their roots in the solidaristic co-ethnic networks. Having already implicitly incorporated a critique to the theories of disadvantage, this theory indicated that migrant entrepreneurship has to be considered as embedded in broader external contexts, which includes the characteristics of local and political institutions, the constraints imposed by law, by formal and informal social norms, and the opportunities offered by economic incentives and services to business.

In this sense the perspective of social capital of migrant entrepreneurs and their role of agency, related to the way by which entrepreneurs access and mobilize different types of resources (social, economic and cultural) became more consistent⁵. The theory of “bridging social capital” (Putnam 2000), as an example, highlights the role of social and professional relationships between a national/ethnic group and external actors, showing an increasing capacity of the extended social networks for the strengthening and completeness of the information and skills necessary to start an economic activity and more generally for the creation of open and widespread relationships among different national groups (Davidsson and Honig 2003) and with the natives.

Finally, extensive break-out strategies and increasing entries into mainstream markets have been empirically proven in numerous studies (Waldinger et al. 1990), with deep implications both in terms of relations among minority groups and the local economy in which they are based, and in terms of social integration (Arrighetti et al. 2014). Significantly, the origin of this phenomenon lies in the need to overcome the narrow and often highly competitive boundaries of the “enclave economy” and to exploit new opportunities provided by mainstream markets (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990; Basu 2011; Canello 2016; Wang and Warn 2019). Migrant firms who cross the enclave market

⁵The literature has shown that entrepreneurs are active agents (Van Hear 2014; Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019; Anthias 1992; Valdez 2016) in shaping their firms, and that the agency is conditioned and varies significantly according to the degree of access to different types of resources in turn closely related to their socio-economic position (Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019).

boundaries and enter the key markets need to attract additional investment, expand their management resources, integrate market information and technological knowledge (Basu and Goswami 1999; Levent et al. 2003), resources which are not always available in their original national group.

The set of aspects just summarized leads to a migrant firm model characterized by an increasing leverage of resources external to the community of origin and by highly differentiated evolutionary paths. It follows that, alongside traditional mono-national migrant firm, the creation of firms made up of entrepreneurs and workers of different nationalities is boosted. We call them “plurinational firms”.

The scarcity of studies on this phenomenon requires that the differences between plurinational and mono-national immigrant firms be investigated. In this sense, a relevant feature to be examined concerns the role of co-ethnic and family relationships in the birth of such businesses. Traditionally, in migrant enterprises, both the ethnic community and family played a central role and represented the fundamental drive of strengthening the entrepreneurial initiative on a financial level, providing information and making available production factors, such as work. In the plurinational firms the centrality of the “strong ties” (Granovetter 1973) is less evident⁶, in consideration of the hybrid/cosmopolitan composition of the corporate and government structure. The first hypothesis (Hp.1), therefore, to be verified is whether the birth of the plurinational firm is associated with the weakening of strong ties (family, parental and co-ethnic community) and whether this leads to a strengthening of weak ties (extra-family social relationships built with colleagues in school and training, or in previous jobs experiences).

A further element of differentiation between plurinational and mononational immigrant firms concerns organizational and economic strategies implemented over time. Unlike the traditional approach that attributed to the migrant enterprise objectives limited to overcoming the condition of disadvantage in the labor market resorting to self-employment and the exploitation of market niches, plurinationalism could lead to broadening and not restricting the heterogeneity of the strategic paths that migrant firms can adopt. In this sense, the paradigm of 'push' and 'pull' dynamics (Bonacich 1993), acquires renewed attention since the pull factors gain importance in explaining the birth

⁶ The empirical evidence drawn from the interviews overturns the role of these “strong ties”, traditionally conceived as the unique lever for migrant entrepreneurship. Similarly to the case of Granovetter classical studies on the functioning of the American labour market (Granovetter 1973), just the “weak ties” take on a decisive importance in explaining the transition from migrant entrepreneurship to plurinational entrepreneurship.

of the immigrant firms (Shinnar and Young 2008, Aliaga-Isla and Rialp 2013; Dheer 2018), especially in some specific markets and sectors and in contexts where high technological and production heterogeneity prevails. The increase in economic opportunities and therefore in 'pull' factors would have its origin in the cultural variety and diversity in nationalities generating, on the one hand, complementarity between the resources used (Lazear 1999) and, therefore, greater competitiveness and, from the other, allowing to expand the variety of products offered and increase market opportunities. In this context, the evolution and survival of the company depends on the ability to exploit the advantages of plurinational diversity and on the existing differences with respect to mono-national firms.

Added to this is that variety of cultures represents a value and a feature constitutive of contemporary societies and, therefore, a characteristic that progressively penetrates inside the economic organizations as well as in other social domains. "Diversity" is more and more recognized as a lever to increasing the level of creativity and innovation and at the same time has a positive effect on the productivity and efficiency of workers, thus improving the organizational performance (Ashikali and Groeneveld 2013; Ely and Thomas 2001; Groeneveld and Van de Walle 2010; Groeneveld 2011; Pitts 2009; Downey et al. 2015; Hunt et al. 2018). In this sense, plurinational firms are in an advantageous condition to reap the benefits of the diversity of cultures both in order to overcome internal limits and to enhance new opportunities. The spread of plurinational firm is an advancement with respect to the cosmopolitan entrepreneurship, as conceived by Pécoud (2004)⁷, or in the sense of openness, mobile and multi-local initiatives which downplay the role of national affiliations and cultural differences (Nummela et al. 2021), because the practices adopted by these entrepreneurs reflect the cultural diversity of contemporary society which cannot be reflected in the mono-national firm.

However, it cannot be excluded that plurinational choice is induced by exogenous contingencies (external to the entrepreneurial group and assumed by the company as constraints and not as a choice). In other words, *value-oriented* objectives (cultural variety and national diversity represent value in themselves) could be replaced by *goal-oriented* objectives (motivated by functional and instrumental purposes) (Engelen 2001). In fact,

⁷ His study showed sign of cosmopolitanism referred specifically on how immigrant shop-owners manage to overcome linguistic and ethno-cultural boundaries to reach nonethnic customers, using both coethnic and non-coethnic resources, and enlarging their cultural and linguistic competencies to a cosmopolitan environment (Pecoud 2004).

the composition of the available workforce, the presence of linguistic or cultural barriers or the access to some skills possessed only by specific ethnic or national groups could push the firm to adopt a plurinational configuration. In this circumstance, cultural diversity is not perceived as an advantage but as an external conditioning. An *imposed* plurinationalism, therefore, could increase internal communication difficulties, weigh down management tasks and enhance coordination costs. As a consequence, the efficiency and competitiveness of the firm is closely linked to the ability *to reduce the costs of plurinational diversity*, instead of pursuing it as a value or a resource.

All this leads to the hypothesis that plurinationality is not a uniform phenomenon from the point of view of the strategies and values pursued by the entrepreneurial group. On the basis of these conclusions, therefore, in this paper we will verify a second hypothesis: (Hp.2a): plurinational firms do not value their characteristics and specificities in a uniform way and that consequently (Hp2b) markedly different business models and evolutionary paths emerge.

3. Research field and method

Forty plurinational firms were investigated during in-depth face to face interviews⁸ with members of the board of directors. After carrying out the pre-tests, an outline for the interviews and focus groups was drawn up with the aim of collecting information on: (a) socio-economic factors that facilitate the creation of plurinational firms; (b) the main socio-economic factors that discourage the creation of plurinational firms; (c) factors common to entrepreneurs who run plurinational firms.

The criteria adopted to identify the plurinational firms are the following: i) the legal form (joint stock companies or partnerships); ii) the ownership of the share capital (majority held by immigrant entrepreneurs - not born in Italy; but excluding OECD countries); iii) the nationality of shareholders (entrepreneurs present on the board of directors belonging to at least two nationalities); iv) the firm size (sales less than 10 million euro).

The selection of the firms was carried out in several stages. First, we have employed lists of business addresses provided by small business associations and Chambers of Commerce. Secondly, we considered candidates recommended by immigrant community associations. Finally, we adopted procedures of *snowball sampling*, i.e., interviewees

⁸ Interviews were carried out between November 2019 and February 2020.

providing the personal details for other potential interviewees (Vershina and Rodionova 2011).

Surveyed plurinational firms are localized in metropolitan areas (Milan, Turin, Bologna, Florence and Rome) and in Northern and Central Italy. Foreign-born-entrepreneurs come from a variety of countries⁹. In addition to the communities most represented in Italy (e.g., Albanian, Romanian and Moroccan), other countries of origin can be reported: Pakistan, India, Iran and Iraq, as well as Maghreb countries, such as Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt.

Focusing on the firm size, the percentages of very small (less than 10 employees) and small firms (10 to 50 employees) are high (respectively 37 and 45%). However, medium-sized plurinational ventures, i.e., with >50 employees, have been included in the survey (18%). Finally, with regard to the age, we can observe that the plurinational firms score on average a high seniority: the majority was founded between the mid-90s and the mid-2000s.

4. Results

4.1 The birth of the plurinational firm

The evidence collected indicates that the plurinational firm is founded by individuals with a high migratory *seniority*, with relevant work experience, and often with a well-defined professional profile. Without exception, the foreign-born entrepreneurs who founded or entered plurinational firms had been present in Italy for at least five years. Often the plurinational firm was started leveraging long-standing relationships of friendship or professional collaboration.

We (referring to the non-co-ethnic partner) are partners because we worked together for 13 years. It is normal that if you work together for a long time and the company grows, you say "I trust you, you trust me, let's carry on". (INTERVIEW-3)

We asked our circle of friends if anyone would be interested in starting a firm. There were eight of us: four Italian boys, three girls of Eritrean origin and a girl of Iranian origin. (...) As for background, we are quite similar and therefore we enjoyed working together because we have many similarities. The fact

⁹ For details, see International Organization for Migration (2020).

that we were friends before has helped us a lot. " (INTERVIEW-11)

All the excerpts from interviews show that having worked together, understanding each other on a human and personal level and sharing a common goal are the initial components underlying the decision to set up the firm in the form of a company. Entrepreneurs leading plurinational firms appear to be well integrated into the host society. From this study it also emerges that very often the birth of the plurinational firm is not a function of the breadth of social networks built by entrepreneurial subjects, nor of the intensity of relations with the community of origin. Indeed, we have clues that it is not the level of the social capital that is decisive for the design of the plurinational firm and in particular for the identification of the partner-shareholders. Instead, more important are elements less present in the debate on entrepreneurship, namely social networks based on the work experience of the individual and his or her (elective) friendly connections. These mostly remain limited to the context of work and do not explicitly involve either the co-ethnic community or the family sphere. From the evidence that emerged in this survey, influence and co-ethnic ties do not play such a decisive role in the plurinational firm.

We have never been interested in having customers of our own nationality. Indeed, I am happier when Italian customers arrive. We are interested in working well, not in the nationality of customers or collaborators. We have always been with our people, we have grown up with them and we have always lived in a certain way, but I also like to work with other people, other cultures. (INTERVIEW-13)

At the beginning we thought a lot about this, about binding ourselves to the communities to which we belong. As Syrians there are just a few of us, so eventually the reference community in Turin would have been the Moroccan one. However, it was precisely by studying this community that we realized that it would not financially support our project (INTERVIEW-26)

Even if no evidence seems to indicate a weakening of relations with the community of origin, there is no doubt that, as foreseen in Hypothesis 1, the role of social non-co-ethnic ties and the common work experience represent the fundamental levers for starting the plurinational initiative.

A strong incentive to start a plurinational firm derives from the exploitation of complementary skills and resources. This element is particularly present when the non-co-ethnic partner or employee has technical knowledge, administrative skills, access to information, communication skills (overcoming language barriers but not only) and negotiation styles that the other shareholder (other shareholders) does (do) not possess. As already pointed out in Section 2, the search for complementarity of resources is an already familiar element of the evolution of the immigrant-owned firm and it is characteristic of the growing operational complexity achieved by the activities promoted by foreigners, especially in contexts that involve the overcoming of boundaries of ethnic markets and entering the mainstream ones (Kloosterman 2010; Kloosterman et al. 2016). This orientation is fully confirmed in this survey as well.

It has long been emphasized how migration, in addition to a contribution in terms of labor resources, entrepreneurial spirit and knowledge, also provides a contribution to the host society in terms of connections with the markets of the countries of origin and improves economic integration on the international level. There is much evidence available in this regard (Portes 2001; Portes et al. 2002; Vertovec 2009). The contribution of Arrighetti et al. (2017) should be added to these, which shows how plurinational firms are characterized by a propensity to interact with foreign markets (compared to the host country), which is much higher than that expressed by other ethnic firms. Also, in the present research the openness of plurinational firms towards international trade is confirmed.

We export to many countries, but especially to Africa and, in particular, to Burkina Faso, which is the country where I come from. We import from other countries, especially technologies from the EU, the US and China. We got together for the Italian market, while looking to Burkina Faso was my idea. (INTERVIEW-29)

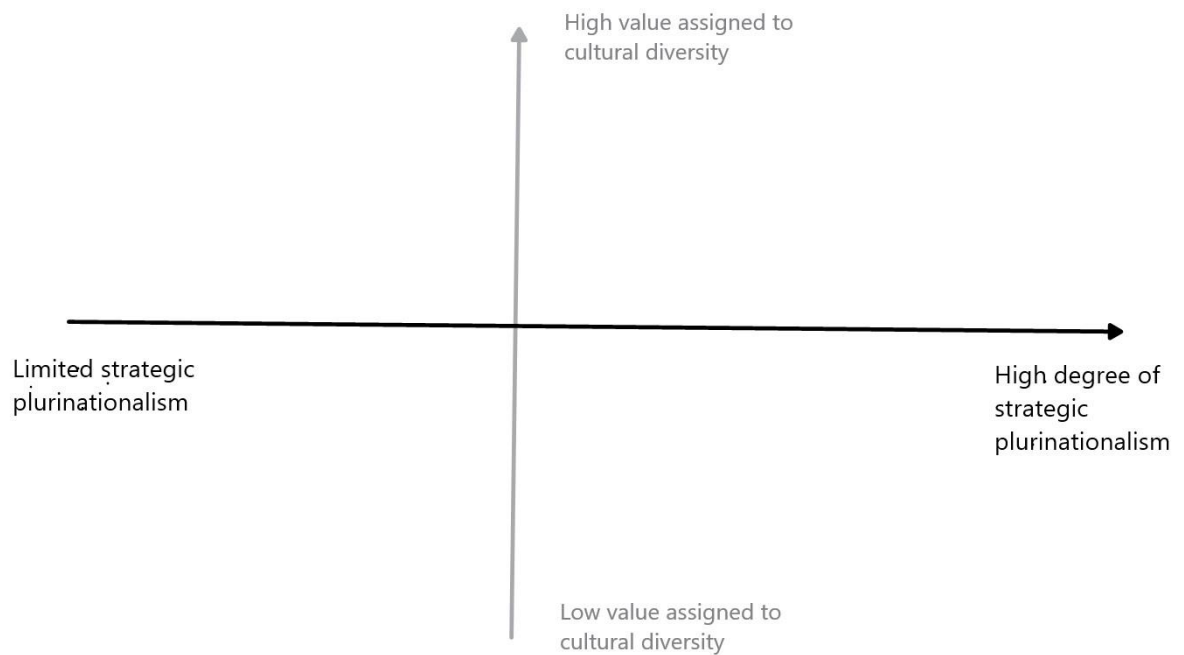
We deal with the wholesale trade of raw materials that are imported from Bangladesh, such as rice, ethnic food and soft drinks. We sell in various provinces, such as Genoa, Monfalcone, Padua, Rome. We also sell outside of Italy and especially in France. We import mainly Asian food, but not only that. Our food also comes from Costa Rica, Mexico and Africa. (INTERVIEW-14)

4.2. Strategy and identity of the plurinational firm

The firms examined are different not only thanks to their presence in a plurality of industries, for the market segments in which they operate and for the size they have acquired, but also for the ways in which plurinationalism has been interpreted and for the influence it has had on the evolution of the firm. In much of the literature, cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity are read as phenomenon essentially exogenous to the firm and deriving from the opening of international markets, the different regulations governing the exchanges and the need to include in the company individuals from different countries and cultures. For most of the observers, the main challenge that the plurinational firm has to face concerns the system of rules and values that the organization must adopt to ensure the alignment of behaviours to a common model and to guarantee a communication system that strengthens the internal cohesion of the organization (Brett et al. 2011; Glinkowska 2016). The underlying idea is that cultural diversity has different nuances and accents in the individual organizational contexts, but, in essence, can be read as a unitary phenomenon that requires uniform rules of conduct, managerial solutions and communication tools.

The hypothesis, however, that is put forward here is that, in the context of plurinational firms, the heterogeneity in terms of strategies pursued and identity values promoted is very wide-ranging. In other words, plurinationalism is a strong element of differentiation from monocultural realities managed by native or migrant entrepreneurs, but it is not enough to reduce the heterogeneity within plurinational firms. The survey seems to indicate that, confirming Hypothesis 2, plurinationalism turns out to be differentiable in relation to a double order of factors that affect both the initial organizational configuration and the evolution of the firm over time. The axes on which the plurinational character of the firm unfolds are the following (see Fig. 1). The first focuses on the strategic importance attributed to plurinationalism by the management/ownership (horizontal axis). Not all plurinational firms assign an identical strategic centrality to cultural diversity: for some this represents the fulcrum around which the evolutionary path of the organization revolves; for others it is a characteristic imposed by exogenous factors, accepted as inevitable and in many cases adopted passively.

Figure 1. The axes of a firm's plurinationalism



The evidence gathered also points out marked differences among firms in relation to a second variable, namely the identity value attributed to plurinationalism (vertical axis). Plurinationalism as a value is high when, regardless of the economic and strategic component, the diversity of cultures presents in the firm is considered in itself a feature to be valued, a factor of organizational cohesion and a significant element of identity. However, realities have been observed in which this variable appears weak or of marginal importance. In some circumstances, in fact, a strong strategic plurinationalism is associated with a low identity value attributed to the plurality of nationalities and cultures present within the organization, and vice versa.

4.2.1 Plurinationalism as a strategy

Continuing to refer to Fig. 1, we find on the right side of the horizontal axis the firms that, in the evolutionary strategy, consciously attribute a central role to the variety of nationalities. Economic and organizational advantages are expected from a plurinational model on various levels, but in particular the enhancement of the cultural diversity of human capital appears to be relevant. Especially in reference to transactions on foreign markets, the plurinational choice seems to help reduce information costs regarding the

characteristics and trends of local markets and sectoral dynamics. It also facilitates the absorption of the regulations governing exchanges among countries and appears useful in enhancing knowledge regarding styles of negotiation and methods of personal contact that are characteristic of a country.

Before establishing my business, I worked in many countries, from Lebanon to Colombia, and I noticed that being multicultural is a fundamental issue: when you go into a country and you have to relate to local companies, you somehow have to know the territory where you are going to carry out an activity. (INTERVIEW-4)

We didn't want people of the same nationality. We have always looked for people of different nationalities because it is better. Having all [employees] of the same nationality "ruins your job". To do it right, the work must necessarily be mixed. It is better to have problems with the language but have workers of different nationalities (INTERVIEW-19).

Very often, plurinational model is seen as a response to the needs of a global world: it reflects, within the firm, the variety of cultures present in society and at the same time it is a tool that facilitates economic (and non-economic) interaction with reality and distant markets. It is an approach which is especially necessary for the small size firm that must possess sufficiently varied skills within it, to avoid being penalized in exchanges on foreign markets and in the recruitment of its workforce.

For me it is necessary to have employees from different cultures, and I am truly pleased to see that other entrepreneurs think the same. Thirty years ago, when I established my company, I saw that the world was already moving towards multi-ethnic firms, which even precede the multi-ethnicity of the population. (INTERVIEW-21)

In addition to a decrease in information costs and a reduction in barriers that slow down, and in any case limit, exchanges in international contexts, strategic plurinationalism is a lever for innovation and for the identification of market spaces for hybrid products/services that combine transcultural skills in an original way. The

products/services offered are the result of a design intentionally based on the interweaving of different cultures.

The products we use are mostly of Middle Eastern origin, but we are not of Middle Eastern origin, except the Iranian girl. She brought a certain know-how, she helped us elaborate the recipes, also because her mother knew them well, who always had us over to eat. Monocultural firms lose some of the possibilities given by the broader notions that occur when there are members in the firm, both among shareholders and employees, coming from countries of other cultures, because the differences are "pluses" and therefore there is a lack of this knowledge, provided precisely by differences. ... (INTERVIEW-11)

The project started with the idea of bringing "Modest Fashion" to Italy, a fashion that was suitable not only for Muslim women in particular, but also transversal and that concerned all women interested in maintaining clothing that was not too flashy. We have thought of a "modest" clothing production that has a very strong tinge of Italian design. So Italian designer, name with an Italian brand. We speak to all women, but we respond to the needs of certain women because mainstream fashion goes in the opposite direction. (INTERVIEW-26)

Sometimes the plurinational choice corresponds to the need to complete or integrate the internal skills of the firm with other knowledge possessed by non-co-ethnic collaborators. In this sense, being able to leverage the complementarity of knowledge and experience represents a significant incentive for the creation of firms based on a mix of different nationalities and cultures.

I believe that different mentalities and ways of conceiving of the firm are particularly advantageous for business management. Furthermore, having an Italian employee is particularly advantageous, especially from a linguistic point of view. In fact, commercial relations with Italians are carried out by this person, who is of particular help to us (INTERVIEW-14)

The opportunity was to connect skills on the Italian market and the Balkan market. I take care of the sale and the administrative part related to contact with the foreign countries where I come

from. I think our formula is positive, as it allows for a greater knowledge of markets, countries, the local mentality, the places where you go to collaborate and sell. ... On the other hand, to manage administrative and banking relations, someone is needed who instead knows the country in which the firm is based. (INTERVIEW-20)

If in some cases plurinationalism is a primary ingredient of the firm strategy, in others it has a lesser importance strategically (limited strategic plurinationalism). Also, in these businesses the variety of nationalities of the shareholders and employees is marked but is not intentionally sought. Instead, it derives from factors related to the local labor market and the characteristics of the labour supply. The firm employs workers of different nationalities because the labour supply - for the skills required and the willingness to accept specific contractual forms and working conditions - is essentially (or to a significant extent) made up of migrants of different nationalities and to a lesser extent of indigenous workers. The migrant firm becomes plurinational, in essence, because the labour supply for some jobs is in itself plurinational.

Furthermore, in correspondence to medium-small or medium-large firms, the supply basin of the family and community networks may be insufficient to satisfy the demand. And therefore, workers belonging to nationalities other than one's own are employed. The level of qualification of workers is variable but, in most cases, it appears very low. The work is frequently manual, and the bargaining power is clearly asymmetrical and generally in favour of the firm.

A limited strategic plurinationalism is often associated with the creation of standardized goods or services that are not subject to the introduction of variants of a cultural derivation. The production is destined for the local market, rarely for exportation. It responds to given technological constraints (mechanics, systems design), to consolidated practices (construction) and to defined contractual schemes (cleaning services, logistics). In these circumstances, the variety of cultures and experiences is not perceived as an advantage or as a lever to be used, but as an element of initial heterogeneity to be overcome by standardizing individual and group behaviour to the needs of the organization and to the corporate hierarchy.

My branch of activity (mechanics) is particular because if you come to work for me you have to do what needs to be done, regardless of where you come from. [...] In my company the division of roles is important. Cultural factors do not come into play (INTERVIEW-1).

In this approach, it is the skills acquired that count, together with the attitude and orientation towards work.

If my partner had been Italian, it would have changed little. The important thing is to have the same values. You have to find a person who wants to work, who has few issues, who is serious, and I don't care about nationality. Neither nationality nor religion, none of this. I think that when it comes to work one should not look at anything else. You can be Jewish, Chinese, Muslim. The important thing is that you have a purpose, you just carry it out: the rest doesn't matter (INTERVIEW-8)

Correlated to a low level of strategic plurinationalism, there is a managerial orientation aimed at containing the diversity of the individual conduct of the employees. The variety of cultures in these contexts is seen as a source of entropy. Generating limited organizational advantages, cultural variety determines costs and misalignments of behaviours that can be reduced to unity only by imposing a uniform and rigid protocol of conduct.

In the company where I work there is the woman with the veil, there is the woman without, and they are from the same country. There is the believer, there is the non-believer, there is the Catholic, there is the Muslim, there is a bit of everyone but what guides us are the regulations. As I say with everyone, inside the company we are obliged to communicate all together, when we are outside, if we are not friends, you go here, I go there. But inside, we have to communicate and collaborate. You have to respect the internal regulations, because that is our guide. (INTERVIEW-9).

4.2.2 Plurinationalism as a value

In addition to the axis that represents the relevance of strategic plurinationalism, as previously reported, there is a second (vertical) axis that represents plurinationalism as an identity value of the firm and of the entrepreneurial project. The value component of plurinationalism does not circumvent the constraints of economic sustainability to which the firm is subject. However, when it is sought, it constitutes an additional factor of cohesion and a guide to the realization of the strategic-programmatic choices that the managerial team must define. Plurinationalism as a value also has a significant impact on the organization and the structure of governance, and it often affects the configuration of the product/service offered.

Our employees are of mixed nationalities. On the one hand, it is a coincidence, on the other, we really like having this environment made up of Italians, second-generation people and people born abroad. (...) We actually like to keep some variety. I believe that cultural diversity enriches us, sends a message to our customers and allows us to work well. (INTERVIEW-11)

In Africa it is very common to go to the tailor to have a tailored suit made. In fact, in all the immigration reception facilities there are corners with sewing machines and there are many young people who come here with strong skills regarding the creation of clothing, but then they always end up doing low-level, disqualified jobs. At the same time, Italian sartorial craftsmanship has an important tradition, but it is suffering from a serious problem of generational handover. Few young Italians want to be a tailor. So, we thought: migrants are opportunities to recover in some way the relationship with crafts, and also to give new impetus to this sector. (INTERVIEW-28)

In other experiences, the diversity of cultures and nationalities present in the firms is not perceived as a distinctive value or an objective to be pursued. In these cases, professionalism in the execution of tasks and the ability to adapt to the requests made by customers plays a central role, putting both one's origin and the cultural diversity context in which the business is carried out in the background.

For seven years I worked alone. Then I hired a girl who worked with me for 10 years, then I took on the second one. Now there are three of us working, an Albanian and a Moroccan, like me. I have always selected the girls who work with me by looking at what they know how to do and not where they come from. For me

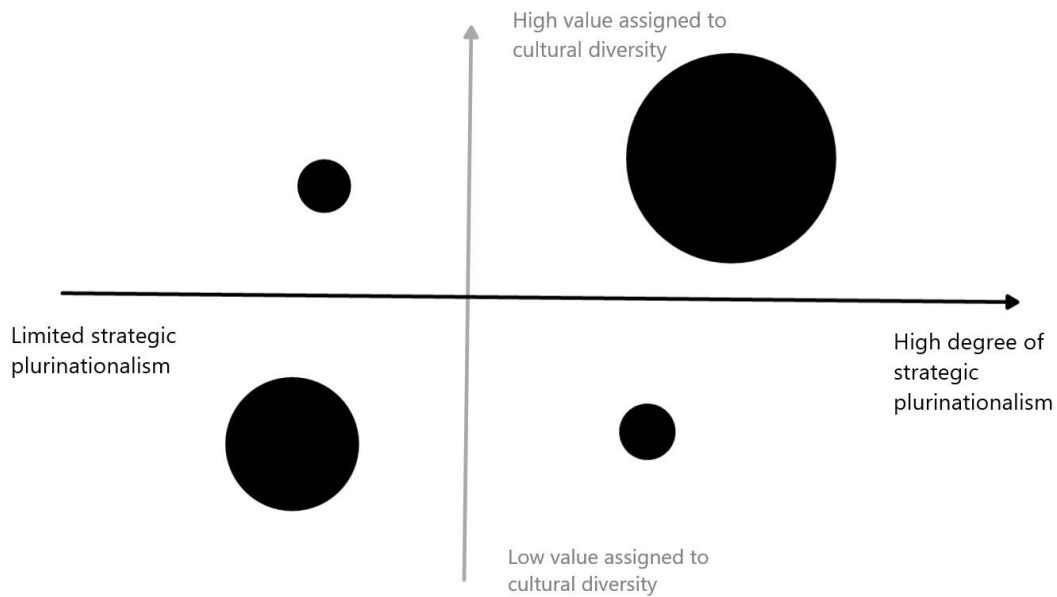
where people come from doesn't make any difference. [...] What I look at is the ability to work and to respect the work that our clients ask us to carry out. (INTERVIEW-27)

In conclusion, the analysis of the cases highlights how plurinationalism is associated with very diversified experiences, organizational models and business strategies.

An initial proposal for the interpretation of this heterogeneity revolves around the influence exerted on the firm by the choices made in terms of plurinational strategy and values attributed to cultural diversity. The empirical analysis has revealed a wide variety of combinations of the two variables, even if a positive correlation seems to prevail, however, between the high (low) level of plurinationalism as a strategy for enhancing internal resources and strengthening identity, on the one hand and, on the other, a high (low) exposure to international trade and low (high) standardization of the products and services offered on the market. In other words, the more marked the innovativeness of the products (also in the context of traditional productions) and/or the propensity to exportation, the higher the plurinationalism both on a strategic-economic level and on a value level. On the contrary, the greater the correspondence of the product/service to a conventional standard, the higher the manual and medium-low qualification component of the required work performance, the less significant is the strategic and identity plurinationalism.

This association seems to be reflected in the polarization of the distribution of the cases examined. As it can be seen from observing Figure 2, the positioning of the cases studied on the axes of plurinationalism based on strategy and identity leads to the identification - with a wide approximation - two main aggregations that correspond to the correlation illustrated above and that collect a large majority of the firms examined.

Figure 2. The distribution of plurinational firms



5. Discussion: the key factors of plurinational entrepreneurship

In a very preliminary way, the polarization of the behaviours just described can be explained by a set of factors that influence the choices of entrepreneurs (as individuals or as a team). Among these, the main ones seem to be:

1. *The sector of activity and skills acquired* – The experiences gained as an employee and/or the skills acquired during the formal educational process circumscribe the sectoral area in which a new firm can be started. And this obviously applies to both native and migrant entrepreneurs. The restrictions present in the choice of the sector in which to start a new business affect the adoption of different plurinational models. In some sectors, a plurinational option can be tried out overcoming relatively modest difficulties; in others the spaces are much smaller. In sectors such as mechanics, construction, logistics, systems design, cleaning services - just to name a few - it is very difficult to develop an innovative project based on plurinationalism. The product or service provided must meet compliance constraints that reduce the scope for innovation linked to plurinational strategies. In other sectors, such as restaurants, fashion and tailoring, some personal services - on the other hand, the feasible alternatives are wider, and the enhancement of plurinational solutions generates opportunities for product differentiation or identity recognition. For this reason, the sector significantly affects the spread of plurinational strategies and the value assigned to the diversity of cultures.

2. *The characteristics of the local labor market* - In some territorial areas and in some professions, the job supply is mainly made up of migrant labor. The assumption of plurinational characteristics in these circumstances is not linked to a choice of the entrepreneur but depends on variables external to the firm. It follows that the firms may show a limited level of strategic plurinationalism and at the same time assigns a limited value to cultural variety (lower left quadrant): a plurinational business in these circumstances is basically a fact of necessity, not an explicit choice. In professions that have a higher bargaining power and in areas where the supply of indigenous labor is higher, the plurinational choice must be associated with an explicit advantage in terms of product quality or as a distinctive factor with respect to competitors.

3. *The size of the firm* - Initiatives that are born and are designed to remain very modest in size and close to self-employment tend not to make the evolutionary strategy rotate around the enhancement of cultural diversity. On the contrary, they attribute greater importance to the reliability of and adaptability to customer/buyer requests, elements that do not in themselves have a cultural root. On the other hand, larger and more complex initiatives find in plurinationalism and a cosmopolitan business model a strong identity lever and trajectory of convergence capable of containing the centrifugal forces, characteristic of more complex organizations, and facilitating the coordination of the structure towards shared objectives.

4. *The role of immigrant associations*- Participation in social networks, especially the experience within the different forms of associations of migrants, represent important factors of differentiation. This shift in perspective leads one to imagine the entrepreneurial project as an opportunity to involve the 'diaspora' more than the single individual, the 'migrant' more than the 'co-ethnic'. In this vision, migration is an episode of life which, through associations, becomes plurinational in itself. Entrepreneurs with significant associative experiences tend to promote initiatives that go beyond the co-ethnic border, attributing a strong value as well as a strategic importance to national and cultural diversity. For those who have followed a path of integration into the host society limited to the family or to a few members of the community of origin, on the other hand, the chances of developing strategic plurinational initiatives are significantly lower.

6. Conclusions

The spread of experiences of plurinational entrepreneurship appears to be associated with the evolutionary processes of migrant entrepreneurship which, in the last few years, have become more intense even in context such as Italy with a relatively recent immigration. More and more frequently, the strategies for overcoming the boundaries of the enclave economy and the entry into mainstream markets have imposed significant economic and organizational transformations on immigrant-owned firms. In many circumstances these changes have led to the birth of plurinational firms in which entrepreneurs of different origins and nationalities value the complementarities of individual skills and resources. Numerous evidences testify that the spread and the economic and social relevance of immigrant firms with plurinational characteristics is significant in Italy, but not only.

In this article, we verified whether the development of the plurinational firm model is associated to the weakening of the so-called “strong ties” (such as family and community relationships) in the initial support to the firm. The empirical evidence seems to partially confirm this hypothesis: even if we find no evidence of a weakening of co-ethnic relations, there is no doubt that, as foreseen in Hypothesis 1, the role of social non-co-ethnic ties and the common work experience represent the fundamental levers for the rise of plurinational initiatives.

The second research hypothesis concerned the unitary nature of plurinational entrepreneurship and the presence of drivers that push towards uniformity in the behaviour of the firms examined. We found that plurinationalism is not a homogeneous phenomenon. The presence of different combinations of plurinationalism as a strategy or plurinationalism as a value amplifies (and does not reduce) the variety of solutions adopted. The dynamics of plurinational immigrant entrepreneurship have led to markedly differentiated choices and evolutionary paths.

These differences play a central role in the policy design. The strengthening of the plurinational businesses increases the social integration of immigrants and opens up relevant opportunities and innovations at the economic level. It should therefore be sustained by appropriate institutional support measures. However, it should not be forgotten that plurinational firms are highly heterogeneous in terms of economic objectives and values pursued. This implies that the obstacles to growth that some firms encounter are not the same as others; the degree of innovation and risk of the

entrepreneurial initiative is variable and some experiences, more than others, represent important tools for social inclusion.

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