

18 Ius Soli: Addressing Citizenship in Modern Day Italy

Natasha Lardera (May 22, 2012)



The award-winning grassroots Italian documentary by Fred Kudjo Kuwornu about the issue of citizenship for the 1.000.000 children born in Italy whose citizen status is denied because - born of immigrant parents - they have no Italian "blood" was presented at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò on May 25th.

On November 15, 2011 Giorgio Napolitano, President of the Republic of Italy, addressing a delegation of the new citizens at Quirinale, the Presidential Palace, called for reforms of the citizenship law to grant citizenship to children born in Italy of immigrant parents. "I hope that Parliament can address the issue of citizenship for children born to foreign immigrants in Italy," he said, "It is important to remember that children of immigrant origin at school and in society are a challenge we have to deal with but also a fruitful stimulus, precisely because they come from



different cultures. It should not be a source of concern.” “Denying citizenship,” he added, “is a true folly, an absurdity.”

Second generation immigrants are an integral part of the Italian society, “societies need new energy, especially ours, which is aging and fossilized,” the president added. More recently, in a letter to the Mayor of Nichelino (Turin) who on 6th May 2012 awarded honorary citizenship to 450 children born in the area of immigrant parents, President Napolitano said awarding honorary citizenship is a precious contribution to raising public awareness about the issue.

At present there are thousands of young people who were born in Italy, speak Italian fluently, have studied in Italian schools and have lived only in Italy and yet are not entitled to Italian citizenship.

Out of 100 children born in Italy, 42 remain non-citizens when they turn 18. Supposedly, migrants and their children acquire citizenship after 10 years of residence in Italy. In many other countries, being born there is enough to become a citizen. Birthright citizenship in the United States, for example, refers to a person's acquisition of US by virtue of the circumstances of his/her birth.

Ius soli (the right of soil) is a right by which nationality or citizenship can be recognized to any individual born in the territory of the related state. It prevents persons born and raised in a state from remaining foreign nationals with limited rights to residence and political participation. In 2010 it existed “in some form in 19 of the 33 European countries included in the EUDO Citizenship study. Ius soli has, for example, been introduced or strengthened in Germany (2000), Portugal (2006), Luxembourg (2009) and Greece (2010), while ius soli was removed in Malta (1989) and qualified in Ireland (2004). Ireland was the last pure ius soli regime in Europe, and here it has been made subject to additional conditions.”

The topic has been thoroughly addressed in [18 Ius Soli](#) [2] an Award-winning grassroots Italian documentary directed by the Italian-Ghanian director Fred Kudjo Kuwornu. Questions are raised on the issue of citizenship for the 1.000.000 children born in Italy whose citizenship is denied because - born of immigrant parents - they have no Italian “blood”. Meanwhile someone who “was born and raised in Brazil and has never been in Italy but who has a grand father who was from Italy can get citizenship in a blink of an eye.”

The film was presented at [Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò](#) [3] on Friday, May 25 at 6.00 PM. The director addended the screening.

The film puts together the stories of 18 guys and girls of Asian, South American or African descent who were born and raised in different regions of Italy. If you watch the film with the eyes closed there is no way to tell they come from immigrant families, their accents are so thick, so Italian that, some of them say, people on the bus or in restaurants are so surprised to hear them speak that way and they do ask. Yes people ask why they speak Italian so well. Let's make it clear to them all... they are Italian, that's why.

“We are not immigrants,” one of them says, “we do not come from another country, we did not cross any border. We are here since the beginning of our life.” Yet they have to walk around with tons of paperwork, renew their residence permits continuously while being careful of not falling out of status because of slow bureaucracy. They cannot participate in national contests or join the army. They cannot be out of work or out of school. Every day they are afraid of being sent to a country that they most likely have never visited, where they do not know anybody and whose language they barely speak.

I-Italy had a chance to ask director Fred Kudjo Kuwornu a few questions before the screening.

Why did you decide to address this topic?

A couple of years ago, here in the United States, I read an article online about those who are born in Italy from foreign parents who are not automatically considered Italian at birth as it happens in other countries. This was food for thought. I never had to face citizenship issues as one of my parents is



indeed Italian, so I never asked myself what this actually means. I needed to find out.

Generally speaking, are Italian citizens aware of this situation?

When I produced the documentary very few knew much about this issue. Napolitano's speech back in November raised some awareness so more and more people got intrigued. This is a civil right that was mostly ignored, but it is becoming incredibly controversial.

Your film starts with Napolitano's speech that is followed by insults to Italian soccer player Mario Balotelli, how come?

The president's speech is heartfelt, beautiful and inspiring to all while Balotelli represents a new generation of young Italians who can and must become champions in their field by always trying to be the best they can be.

How did you select the guys who are in the film?

The guys in the film were selected during a long casting process organized in collaboration with several associations, including Anolf (Associazione Nazionale oltre le Frontiere, an association that helps immigrants in creating a culture based on integration, tolerance and respect). We put ads all over the place, including social networks. I was looking for guys who had interesting stories and who were also involved in social services.

How does the audience react to the film?

They all agree that it is now time for things to change and let Italy move forward by changing the citizenship laws thus enabling these kids to have the same chances their contemporaries have. They will be able to become whatever they want: doctors, lawyers, magistrates, cops or soldiers. We need them to break through all cultural barriers by being able to blend in those work environments that, as of now, only welcome Italian citizens.

Why do you think Italy is behind other countries who have already overcome this issue?

I believe it is only because Italy is a country that is slow in keeping up with changing times on many different issues, not just on this one. It is due to the scarce foresight of our ruling class, whether it be political, entrepreneurial or cultural.

Here in the US we have birthright citizenship, but there are groups who fight to abolish it, do you think this will influence things in Italy?

Those trying to abolish it are a minority, and mostly they are just trying to put some limitations on its application. I agree with this. The meaning of IUS SOLI is not cut and dry, it's not how it used to be in the past. It has evolved. Today's immigration is not the same of the 1900's. In the past it was normal to think that the offspring of an immigrant born in the US would have stayed, just like his parents, in the country. Now the challenges are many and it is right to have a short period of time where the intentions of the family living in the country are analyzed. Italy could set the example and move in that direction.

How does all this affect you personally?

As I mentioned earlier, this is a situation I did not experience personally yet it is affecting me as a citizen. I have thought about it and all Italians should do so. If the law does not change, Italy will lose all the 1 000 000 future citizens, and along with them, their talents and abilities to improve quality of life and the economic situation of Italy. I believe that whoever is a patriot and loves Italy should join this cause and fight for its application.



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Links

[1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/18-ius-soli-trailer-italianowmv>

[2] <http://www.18-ius-soli.com/>

[3] <http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/>