

Why They Came - Italy's Shame

Tom Verso (May 05, 2009)



Americans of Italian descent should demand that Italy apologize for the dehumanization and exploitation of our grandparents and build memorials of contrition and appreciation to those mighty people at all ports of embarkation.



You load them onto ships like mined ore, harvested grain.

You profit from their hard earned remittances.

You offer citizenship now to their progeny.

Forget about it!

You owe an apology!

Emigration – abstract causes

In a recent Calandra Institute presentation, "Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad" (http://www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/news/radio/podcast/lecture_196.mp3 [2]), Professor Mark Choate discussed some history of the late 19th/early 20th century Italian migration; "the largest emigration from any country in recorded history."

As with many Italian emigration histories, Prof. Choate talks about the causes of the emigration in terms of sociological abstractions such as "pushing and pulling factors". Immigrants were "pushed" away from Italy by demographic and agricultural "factors" and "pulled" by transportation and employment "factors". He says:

"Italy's agricultural economy was not able to support the high population on the peninsula...that's the push factor. The pull factor was easy transportation and opportunities abroad. This is really an economic migration because workers could earn three times as much in the US as Italy."

Similarly, Prof. Elizabeth Cometti ("Trends in Italian Emigration", The Western Political Quarterly, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Dec., 1958), pp. 820-834) writes:

"RARELY DO PEOPLE emigrate from choice, least of all the Italians, passionately in love as they are with everything in their country, from its landscape to its cuisine...Behind their departure from Italy...the act of emigration...[was] almost like a simple reflex action or obedience to an inexorable behest."

Both of these presentations, like many other scholarly and popular writings, create the illusion that the people of southern Italy, like lemmings, spontaneously began to move across the ocean. The causes of the emigration are represented in abstract terms of "push/pull factors" and "inexorable behest [force]."



Abstract 'factor' or 'force' analysis depersonalizes history and removes moral responsibility. Factors and forces are neither morally good nor evil. Like natural forces of gravity and electromagnetism studied in physics, they simply 'are'; and the job of the scholar is to identify them and explain how they 'cause' the events of history to unfold as they did.

Many of the histories of post Risorgimento pre-Fascist Italy are written from this abstract impersonal amoral perspective. Whereas the histories of Fascist Italy are often very personal and very moral: all evils (real and imagined - there are no goods) are 'caused' by Mussolini and his Fascist operatives. Impersonal forces/factors are not seen to affect the political economy of Fascist Italy. Only Mussolini!

While the histories of Mussolini's Italy, written from the Western liberal democracy perspective, are often biased by ideological presumptions ("History is written by the victors"), their moral historiographic assumptions are more valid than the amoral factor/force histories of pre-Fascist Italy.

In reality there are no impersonal or depersonalized social factors/forces. **Historic events are always the results of individual actions.** And, **individual actions**, to the extent that they affect other individuals, **always have moral implications.**

To understand the causes of Italian emigration in human/moral terms, it is important to understand that Italian emigration was a form of labor export commerce. In fact, the Italian government acted to facilitate the enrichment the Italy's northern industrial class by exporting the commodity - 'southern Italian labor'.

Interestingly, indeed ironically, Choate, Cometti and other historians of Italian emigration, provide the explicit documented facts describing the de facto and de jure commoditization of southern Italian labor. Yet they do not develop that causal hypothesis. Rather, they write, metaphorically of 'force' and 'factor' causes of emigration. Perhaps, as academicians, they function within an ideological milieu.

Emigration as labor export commerce



One can find no better-documented example of the Italian government's conceptualization of southern Italian labor as an export commodity than the following from Cometti's article:

"Late in 1922 [after the US stopped accepting Italian immigrants], Commissioner General of Emigration Giuseppe De Michelis made a futile journey to the United States to plead for a realistic immigration policy ... Let the United States indicate periodically how many workers were wanted: manual laborers, miners, mechanics, carpenters, domestics, farm hands, bricklayers, and others he proposed, and Italy, through its unique and specialized emigration service, would supply them."

Clearly, De Michelis and the constituency he represented saw the Italian workers as commodities that could be, his word, "supplied" i.e. exported at will. Clearly, he did not see migration as a 'reaction' to impersonal factors/forces. Rather, the so-called "migration" was in fact exportation; a government controlled phenomenon.

Further, the role of the government, in the mischaracterized "migration", is clearly indicated when he refers to Italy's "unique and specialized emigration service". Specifically, he was referring to a series of law, regulations and bureaucratic structures dating back to 1888 created with a mind to facilitate the export of southern Italian labor. Especially, in 1901 with the creation of the Commissariat of Emigration to unify and increase the efficiency migration services.

Also in 1901, Prof. Choate notes:

"The Bank of Naples was organized by the government to efficiently process money order remittances coming from Italians aboard so Italy could use the money to bolster its own economic development as Italy was seeking to become an Industrial country. Usually countries have to borrow a lot of money to invest in their economic plan to build factories, and buy machine and equipment. This lowers their currency and causes counter productive inflation."



Prof. Choate continues: "With the remittances from the immigrants, Italian currency is stable throughout this growth period during this economic growth spurt before WW I 1900-1914 when Italy changed from an agriculture to an industrial economy. Remittances during this period counted for one fourth of Italy's balance of payments and Italy did not suffer the negative effect of inflation with growth."

Similarly, Booker T. Washington, the renowned American educator and founder of Tuskegee Institute, after extensive travel in Italy and studying Italian labor in 1910 wrote: "Italian emigrants abroad contribute to their mother country a sum estimated at between five and six million dollars annually." Converted into today's dollar value, five and six million 1910 dollars represented an enormous amount of money coming from people who worked in sweatshops and lived in one-bedroom coldwater flats.

In sum, the above are just a couple of examples from a preponderance of documentary evidence demonstrating that officials in the Italian government, during the great migration, were essentially representing the interest of northern industrialists by exporting southern Italians as a labor commodity in order to finance the industrial development of northern Italy.

Professors Choate, Cometti and many other emigration historians have done a fantastic job in finding source documents and providing in great detail factual descriptions of emigration phenomena. However, to my mind, they need to reconsider their historiographic narrative. They need to discuss the causes of emigration in real human moral terms rather than abstract concepts like agricultural, demographic and technological forces and factors.

Further, if Americans of Italian descent are going to have a robust and ongoing culture, then that culture must be based on the reality of our history, not illusionary "nostalgic recall". Currently we are largely ignorant of the origins of our culture. We have no idea how the decisions in Milan and Rome affected the people "south of the Garigliano", and how those decisions gave rise to the great migration and the birth of Italian American culture.



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