

Rethinking 150 Years

Joey Skee (March 17, 2011)



The living links between Italian unification and Italian emigration.



Not long after the formation of the Italian state in 1861, my paternal great-great-grandfather, Giuseppe Sciorra, left his mountain town of [Carunchio \[2\]](#) (Chieti province) in the Abruzzi to work in Argentina. According to family memory, that crossing set in motion a century of transnational movement between Italy and the New World.

My great-grandfather, Enrico, came to New York to pay his father's debts, where my grandfather, known affectionally as Gios', was born. The family returned to Italy, only to have my American-born grandfather come to New York (after serving in the Italian army during World War I) in desperate search for work. In turn, my father, Enrico, was born in the Bronx in 1922, but again [like so many Italian emigrants, he and his family "returned" to Italy \[3\]](#) (just in time for Fascism, the Depression, and World War II), only to move back to New York as an adult in 1950, again in desperate search of work.

I am inextricably linked to Italy. As Joseph Umberto, I bear the name of [the country's second king \[4\]](#) who was assassinated by the Italian-American anarchist [Gaetano Bresci \[5\]](#). I know intimately my zii and cugini, and we communicate regularly. And ten years ago, [I "reclaimed" my Italian citizenship \[6\]](#) and that of my two children.

But I am the embodiment of the Italian nation's historic failure to protect its citizens from privation and political bankruptcy. Along with the other sixty million descendants of Italian migration, the 150th anniversary of the formation of the nation state known as "Italy" is not an event to be "celebrated" uncritically. I will spend this day not waving the tricolor, but reflecting on the works of those who examined the relationship between Italian unification and Italian emigration.

"From its beginnings, Unification was a failure around which the fiction of Italian culture was constructed." (p. 155)

—Pasquale Verdicchio, [Bound by Distance \[7\]](#) (1997)

"The Italian Peninsula never had any great admiration for its émigrés, however. Italy soon forgot that half its population had emigrated, and it treated its co-nationals with derision, laughing at their awkwardness." (p. 64)

—Franco La Cecla, [Pasta and Pizza \[8\]](#) (2007)

"Italy has not developed a clear understanding of how its history of migration has defined its national history." (p.173)

—Donna Gabaccia, [Italy's Many Diasporas \[9\]](#) (2000)

"In Italian cultural history there are a number of repressed historical narratives, among them the history of Italian migration and of Italian colonialism." (p. 21)

—Graziella Parati, [Mediterranean Crossroads \[10\]](#) (1999)

"Italy's massive emigration, and the political and colonialist effort to channel this population, were fundamental to Italian history." (p. 17)

—Mark Choate, [Emigrant Nation \[11\]](#) (2008)

My Italy is not found in the official narratives infused with the glories of Rome and the Renaissance, or in the global brand that is "Italian Style." Instead, my Italy consists of the Italian diaspora's laboring histories and vernacular cultures, where the notion of "Italy" was constructed, to a large degree.

In the throes of xenophobic hysteria, Italians today are rediscovering their emigrant past as a way of buttressing the national psyche of a dynamically changing society. It is essential to our sense of identity and collective history that we explicitly link Italian emigration and contemporary immigration to Italy in our understanding of that migratory entity called Italy that emerged 150 years ago.

That's what I'm celebrating.



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