The European Union’s Immigration Policy and Italian Immigrants in Latin America

Laura E. Ruberto (June 30, 2008)

Invoking Italy’s history of emigration, activists and politicians in Latin America condemn the European Union’s latest anti-immigration stand.

Earlier this month, the European Parliament passed a controversial “Return Directive [2]” immigration policy. The legislation is meant to give all EU countries a more balanced immigration policy, but in fact it opens the possibility for individual countries to adopt harsher practices toward undocumented immigrants (e.g., undocumented immigrants who do not voluntarily leave can be detained for up to 18 months, children can be detained and deported, a five-year “re-entry” ban will be implemented).

The EU's Return Directive—barely noted in the U.S.'s English-language press—has been closely followed in Latin America, especially in countries that have high numbers of citizens working in Europe today. Politicians and activists in countries such as Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador have been speaking out against the directive, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has threatened to slow oil exports to countries that implement the policy.

Like the U.S., Europe has increasingly relied on foreign workers to fill both skilled and unskilled jobs that many native-born citizens appear to have no interest in taking. At the same time, Europe's immigrant populations send home significant amounts of money, creating a complicated transnational reliance on this ever-expanding workforce. (In 2007 remittances to Latin America from Western Europe totaled over 10 million dollars, with most coming from Spain and Italy.)

Latin American critiques of the policy have again and again been couched in terms of Europe's own history of emigration. It seems that unlike many in the United States and Western Europe, Latin Americans have not forgotten that their social and economic development came on the backs of thousands of Europe's "destitute" (not to mention out-and-out colonization!). It takes just a few clicks on the web to find critiques of the EU policy that invoke this past.

Watch the extremely outspoken Hebe de Bonafini, one of Argentina's Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, on YouTube (in Spanish).

Towards the end of the speech, in her usual fervent style, de Bonafini attacks the developing anti-immigrant stance of European countries by calling attention to the shared migration experience of Argentina, Italy, and Spain. I quote a roughly-translated excerpt here:

> We refute what's happening in Italy, we refute what's happening in Spain …Don't they remember when they came to this country, where no one asked them anything? All of us are children of immigrants, people who came to this country, where no one asked them where they came from and no one threw them out like is happening now [in Europe].

She closes by creating a familial link among all immigrants: "Immigrants are our brothers and from this Plaza we declare that they all have our solidarity".

Similary, Chávez declared the EU policy a human rights violation [3], one that is particularly hurtful from a continent whose people were pushed out of their own countries by poverty; he notes the "legions" of starving Europeans who made lives for themselves in Latin America, where "none of them was mistreated or returned to Europe."

In Bolivia, President Evo Morales put out a statement that included this historical reading [4]:

> Europeans arrived en masse in the countries of Latin America and North America, without visas or conditions imposed by the authorities. They were always welcome, and they continue to be, in our countries on the American continent, which therefore absorb the economic misery of Europe and its political crises. They came to our continent to exploit its wealth and transfer it to Europe, with a very high cost for America's original population. Such is the case in our Cerro Rico, in Potosi, where the fabulous silver mines provided the European continent its coinage from the 16th to the 19th centuries. The goods and personal rights of the European migrants were always respected.

These examples (and there are plenty of others—see the brief list of blog posts and news pieces linked below) no doubt exaggerate the level of acceptance Latin American countries historically had toward immigrants.

As such, I'm reminded of what Domingo Faustino Sarmiento [5], the Argentine writer and nationalist, thought about European immigration to the Americas. In the mid-nineteenth century he traveled

throughout Europe and the United States, writing letters that were later published in newspapers in Chile and Uruguay. He was not confident that all Europeans were meant to support the development of a nation; he wrote:

> I come from touring Europe, from admiring her monuments, from prostrating myself before her science, still stunned by her prodigies; but I have seen her millions of peasants, proletarians and vile artisans, degraded, not worthy of being counted among men; the encrusted scabs that cover their bodies, the tattered rags that they wear, do not sufficiently reveal the darkness of their spirit; and in political matters, of social organization, some of this darkness reaches and obscures the minds of the wise…

Indeed, as Tomás F. Taraborrelli explains, Sarmiento, "displaying his own brand of racism, offers a word of caution to his readers in Latin America who believed that immigration would cure all of the nation's problems." Sarmiento thought that "the new wave of immigrants he sees arriving in the United States…would add an element of barbarism to an otherwise progressive nation" (in "The Conquest of the American Western Frontier in Sarmiento's Imaginary," Journal of the West, 2004).

Nevertheless, turning back to the present moment, rhetorical strategies which call attention to Europe's history of emigration in light of its position as a receiver of new immigrants helps build symbolic and (perhaps) real points of solidarity among people across national and cultural boundaries.

In the Italian example, plenty of artists who recognize the lived experiences of past and contemporary migrants form such connections in their work (think of Amara Lakhous's novel, Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio [6], Gianni Amelio's film Lamerica [7], or even Italian and Italian American hiphop artists [8]). It will be interesting to see what long-term policy changes come from political activists taking up a similar theme.

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