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# The Migrant Family as a Basis for Political Expansionism: Italian Colonies in the Americas, 1900-1913

by Mark I. Choate, Ph.D.

The history of migrations is as old as the human family. The rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century gave emigration and immigration a new dimension. By the end of the nineteenth century, many emigrants traveled with more than their families and their cultural heritage – they traveled from one national environment to another, with political baggage and political identifications. This paper will look at the political context of one of history's greatest migrations, the movement of Italians into North and South America, in the years of greatest migration.

Unlike the Poles, Jews, and Irish who came to the Americas in these years, the Italians emigrated from an established state. This state had every interest in encouraging its citizens to send money back to their families and return home after a profitable career abroad. In this way, Italy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was like Mexico in the twenty-first century. Mexico encourages its emigrants to return home after earning money abroad, to send money home in remittances and to buy Mexican products to maintain their Mexican culture and heritage. Italy did the same thing, encouraging Italians to send money home, to buy Italian agricultural and industrial products, and to return home after working in the Americas.

The Italian government naturally built upon the family, the strongest unit in Italian society, to encourage patriotism in Italian emigrants. Italian nationalists referred to Italy not as the home country, but as the fatherland, *la patria*, or often even as the mother-fatherland, *la madre patria*. Emigrants were referred to as the children of Italy, and as brothers and sisters to those Italians still on the peninsula.

## Teaching the Italian language to Italians Abroad

To tie Italian emigrants into Italian society,

the Italian government devoted money and diplomatic resources to subsidizing Italian language schools. Many Italian emigrants spoke regional dialects, not standard Italian. Language divided Italian migrant families. If husband and wife were from different regions of Italy, they learned to speak Spanish at home in Argentina, or English in the United States.<sup>1</sup> But if emigrants learned to speak and write standard Italian, the shape of expatriate Italy would change at a fundamental level.

If first-generation migrants who spoke different dialects learned standard Italian, the Italian community could unite instead of fall into regional divisions. Emigrant families could become truly Italian, instead of merely Sicilian or Lombardian or Neapolitan. If second-generation Italians also learned “the language of Dante,” they would be moored to Italian culture and society no matter where they lived, whether they came back to Italy or moved from South to North America. Retention of national language and culture, especially by emigrants' children and grandchildren, became the Holy Grail of expatriate colonialism.

However, Italians often lost their native language both in North and South America. When emigrants scattered across the frontier of southern Brazil, in towns of less than one thousand people, the efforts of Italian consuls and traveling school inspectors were too diffuse to be effective.<sup>2</sup> When emigrants concentrated in cities, Italian schools and charitable institutions were quickly overwhelmed. By 1899, the Italian schools in Buenos Aires could hold four thousand pupils, but needed space for eighteen-thousand Italian children.<sup>3</sup> Immigrants were hard pressed to maintain their language and culture in cities, “where they have greater contact with the indigenous peoples, out of necessity.”<sup>4</sup>

The situation only worsened with time. Many

Italian politicians had preferred South America to North America as a site for Italian colonialism, in part because Italians thought there would be less anti-Italian bias in Latin America, as compared with North American countries dominated by the English. Italian politicians also felt that the Latin languages were less alien than English. For immigrants speaking dialects, however, Spanish or Portuguese were just as easy to learn as standard Italian, and a lot more useful.<sup>5</sup> Italians could retain their language as well, or better than, in English-speaking countries.

### **Developing Emigrant Italianism**

For Italian nationalists, everything went together: expatriate patriotism, maintaining Italian family units abroad, supporting the Italian language abroad, encouraging Italians to send money home, and boosting Italian exports among Italian migrant colonies. In May 1913 the leading Italian newspaper of Argentina, *La patria degli italiani*, published the “Ten New Commandments of Italian Emigrants,” to link all these concerns with a charge of expatriate nationalism. In a blasphemous mix of politics and religion, this decalogue parodies and paraphrases the biblical scripture:

- 1) There is only one Fatherland, and your Fatherland is Italy. You shall love no other country as much as Italy.
- 2) You shall never name your fatherland without reverence. Exalt the glories of your Italy, which is one of the most ancient and noble nations in the world.
- 3) Remember the national holidays, wherever you might be. On these occasions, at least, forget your political party and religious faith, to remember only that you are Italian.
- 4) Honor the official representative [consul] of your fatherland, and respect him as a symbol of the faraway fatherland, even if sometimes he displeases you.

5) You shall not kill a citizen of the Fatherland by erasing in yourself the Italian consciousness, feeling, and citizenship. You shall not disguise your name and surname with a barbaric transcription.

6) You shall not attack out of envy the authority and prestige of your compatriots who hold honorary appointments.

7) You shall not steal citizens from thy fatherland, letting your children squander their Italianism to become absorbed by the people among whom you have emigrated.

8) Be proud to declare yourself always, everywhere and on every occasion, Italian in origin and in sentiment, and be not servile, be not despised by those who host you.

9) You shall always buy and sell, consume and distribute goods and merchandise from your fatherland.

10) You shall marry only an Italian woman. Only with this and by this woman shall you be able to preserve in your children the blood, language, and feelings of your fathers and of your Italy.<sup>6</sup>

These ten commandments from the Italians of Argentina were widely circulated in Italy and within the Italian-language press abroad. The commandments covered the gamut of scenarios in which Italy hoped to profit from its emigrant representatives abroad. Emigrants were commanded not to replace their love for Italy for love for their adopted country. Even if they left Italy in poverty, emigrants were to remember Italy's cultural wealth, and celebrate the solemnity and rituals of Italian patriotic holidays: the birthdays of the Italian king and queen, the anniversary of the Italian constitution, in preference for any local governmental holidays. Italians were to maintain relations with the Italian ambassadors and consuls. This allowed the Italian government to keep track of

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how many Italians and Italian children were abroad, so they could be called on to contribute to the homeland in times of crisis, such as earthquakes and natural disasters. Male emigrants were also officially required to return to Italy in times of war, such as in the First World War.

Some of the key commandments deal with the Italian emigrant family. Italians were not to change their family names; Italian merchants who had adopted Scottish or English surnames were excoriated in Italian patriotic literature. Italian parents were charged with the responsibility to cultivate Italian sentiments in their children, born abroad; if parents failed in this responsibility, their sin was comparable to murder. The final commandment is to marry a full-blooded Italian woman, either abroad or back in Italy. This familial bond would be the most lasting tie between the expatriate family and the fatherland of Italy.

### Encouraging Economic Ties with the Fatherland

The commandment to buy, sell, and distribute Italian exports was nearly as important. Besides representing Italy effectively abroad, the emigrants were supposed to build up Italy's economy at home, by sending remittances and buying Italian products. Italy came to rely upon its ethnic expansion overseas to support its economic progress at home. The expatriate colonies, as they were called, of Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Boston, and New York City were counted as ethnic bridgeheads into the American economies.

To encourage these colonies to send money home to their families and friends, the Italian government offered special privileges to the non-profit Banco di Napoli. This Italian state bank was meant to beat out the illegal, small-scale bankers or *banchieri* who defrauded Italian migrants and supplied money to the criminal underworld. Banking authorities in the United States thus welcomed the Banco di Napoli, as an honest competition and replacement for the *banchieri*. The Banco di Napoli offered other advantages: the Italian government could now better gauge the flow of emigrant remittances. These statistics grew to be the key

justification of migration's national importance. Remittances were sent in the regular mail, deposited in postal savings banks, sent as international money orders, and sent through the branches of the Banco di Napoli. Many emigrants carried their money home on their person, especially the "swallows" who migrated seasonally every year back and forth between Italy and Argentina.<sup>7</sup> Hundreds of millions of dollars, reis, and pesos poured into Italy and revolutionized economic life in countless towns and villages. The injection of capital collapsed local lending rates, permitted the construction of new homes, allowed for richer pageantry for the feasts of local saints, and financed tax payments.

Remittances were unpredictable from year to year, but the Banco di Napoli carefully gathered and reported annual statistics of its success. While the bank offered a variety of services, most remittances processed by the Banco di Napoli went directly from emigrants to their families back home.<sup>8</sup> In 1902, its first year of activity, the Banco processed 9.3 million lire in remittances, or nearly two million dollars. Volume nearly tripled to 23.6 million lire in the following year. Prewar levels of remittances held at 84 million lire. After 1916, because of wartime inflation and currency fluctuations, remittances soared to a peak of 980 million lire in 1920. For the period 1902 to 1915, a full 70.4% of the remittances came from the United States. The United States Federal Immigration Commission reported that in 1907 alone, fifty-two million dollars were sent back to Italy through 2,625 private banks.<sup>9</sup> The Italian Parliament had originally involved the Banco as a way to fight injustice, but the Banco created a smooth system for remittances just in time for an unprecedented boom in Italian emigration to the United States, and an unprecedented capital transfer into the Italian economy.

### Return Migration to Italy

Italians sent a lot of money home because many of the emigrants planned to go back home and retire in their native land. However, return migration from the Americas varied drastically by country between 1905 and 1915. This reflected prevailing

trends in Italian emigration: entire Italian families had settled in Brazil, while male workers migrated temporarily in North America and Argentina. From Brazil, between half and three quarters of the returning Italians traveled with their families. The Italian government found that three quarters of emigrants returning from the United States traveled alone, and two thirds of repatriates from Argentina traveled alone.<sup>10</sup> Women returning to Italy comprised between a tenth and a fifth of return migration from the United States and Argentina, but more than half of the return migration from Brazil, in the years 1905 to 1915.<sup>11</sup> Also, more Italians returning from the United States said they were returning to Italy permanently, as compared with Italians returning from South America. These characteristics of American migration changed only in 1922, when anti-immigration legislation in the United States reduced Italian immigration to a trickle.<sup>12</sup> Italy's cyclical and temporary transatlantic migration became a diminutive one-way migration. Because immigrants who left the United States would not be allowed back into American ports, return migration to Italy virtually ceased.

Why such high rates of return before 1922? To the genuine surprise of many Americans, many Italians left their villages intending to return.<sup>13</sup> For them, America was "the land of the dollar," a place to make money but not a place to live with one's family.<sup>14</sup> Strong ties to extended family networks brought many people back home. Also, Italy's impressive economic development between 1890 and 1920 doubtless persuaded many Italians in South America to return home. If the Italian economy had collapsed, or if Brazil and Argentina had outperformed Italy over the long term, many Italians would have remained on their lands in South America. In the twentieth century, however, the *bel paese*, or *beautiful country*, lured its migrants back home with simplified citizenship laws, a supportive political establishment, a strong economy, and the ties of individual emigrants to their local communities' traditions, landmarks, and fair weather. Return tickets were inexpensive, as steamers usually had plenty of room for the transatlantic voyage to Italy. Drawn by

ties to their homeland, migrants were also pushed back across the ocean by business cycles of boom and bust. Immigrants to the United States worked in the growing sectors of the industrial economy, and were the first to be unemployed with economic downturns. The return of Italian laborers provoked worry and consternation, but brought important long-term benefits. Return migrants brought back their cash savings, social experience, and job training to Italy's developing economy.<sup>15</sup>

### **Political Attitudes in Italy Found Emigration**

Many of Italy's economists and moderate liberals supported emigration as an expansion of Italy's political influence and economic wealth. Many of Italy's conservative politicians, however, said wealth was not the most important factor. They claimed that migration cut at the fundamental fabric of Italian society, and compromised the integrity of Italian families. Luigi Villari, who served as Italian consul in Philadelphia, claimed that the Americas corroded the moral health of emigrants, and undermined the bases of Italian society:

We hear a lot about emigrants' remittances, but we do not think of the myriad cases of emigrants who, after a year or two of America, lose all interest in their family remaining in Italy, and, though already married, take a new wife in the new world. The wife who stayed at home cannot imitate her husband, because our laws prohibit bigamy, but she consoles herself with other loves, so there are two scandals instead of one. . . . Morality is in general lower in America than in Europe, and in the colonial environment it is even more scarce. . . . The bad seed returns to the fatherland.<sup>16</sup>

Villari relied on anecdotal evidence to claim that emigration destroyed Italian families, and that dollars were less important than societal decay. In reality, most marriages survived the separation and displacement of emigration.<sup>17</sup> Villari also blasted Italy's mass migration without proposing an alternative. Without

question, however, any remittances were earned at tremendous personal sacrifice. While the Italian state and Italian industrialists might profit from emigration, the emigrants suffered.

What would be the future of Italian colonies in South America? Optimistic liberals had predicted in 1900 that Italians would eventually outnumber the non-Italians, especially in Argentina, and that Italy would simply take over the government to form a New Italy like Britain's colonies of New England, New Britain, and New South Wales. The Argentine government refused to cooperate with this Italian project, and the Italian government did not know how to react. To secure goodwill concessions for its emigrants, the Italian state was forced into ever more gracious, unilateral, and unrewarding capitulations. The director of Italian Schools Abroad, Angelo Scalabrini, described his policy to Pasquale Villari, father of Luigi Villari:

The centers of a future Italy are there [in Argentina] and have formed spontaneously. What could they not become, if aided by the mother-fatherland's organized and intelligent action? However, I am equally convinced that this action will be much more effective if it is silent. . . . Those peoples [of South America] are dark and distrustful: they have a boundless national pride, like the size of their countries. . . . Silent activity is the maxim that I have adopted . . . I hope to show you that silence does not mean inertia. . . . Given the state of things, the less one speaks of Argentina and our aspirations there, the better, and if one talks of Argentina it should only be to praise it or maybe admire it. In this way we will get what we want. The peoples of Latin America must be treated a little like women and spoiled children: one must caress them and praise them; in reality, especially the Argentines have good qualities so the caresses are not thrown away and the praises are not always mere adulation.<sup>18</sup>

Scalabrini's silent plot to change the hearts and minds of Argentina's government was ill-conceived and unlikely to succeed, especially with its basis in condescension and dissimulation. The lack of discussion and debate in Italy did not help; instead, the Italians of Argentina were simply forgotten. Rather than negotiating with Argentina, Italy was reduced to supplicating for cultural concessions, always fearing that the situation for emigrants could grow worse. What grand designs could Italy accomplish in the Americas without the willing cooperation of foreign governments?

### Conclusion

In the end, Italy gained economic and cultural benefits from emigration, but failed to establish lasting centers of political influence in its colonies overseas. Due to political circumstances, the unit of Italian emigration remained the individual migrant family, moving within networks of friendship and regional connections. The government failed in its attempt to recreate this network on a greater scale, of Italians moving within a greater international community of Italians in North America, South America, and Europe.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Luigi Rava, "L'insegnamento dell'italiano nella Repubblica Argentina," *La Patria* 1, no. 4 (1912): 282.

<sup>2</sup>Bonaldo Stringher, "Relazione del Consiglio Centrale, XVI Congresso dei rappresentanti dei comitati a Palermo (21-24 October 1905)," *Atti della Società "Dante Alighieri" per la diffusione della lingua e della coltura italiana fuori del regno. Bollettino trimestrale*, no. 21, December (1905): 32.

<sup>3</sup>Piero Barbèra, "Impressioni argentine. Da un recente viaggio," *Nuova Antologia* 167, 83 of series 4, no. 667 (1899): 440-64.

<sup>4</sup>Tancredi Castiglia, "Paraná, Brasile," in *Emigrazione e colonie. Raccolta di rapporti dei rr. agenti diplomatici e consolari*, ed. Ministero degli affari



esteri. Commissariato dell'Emigrazione, vol. 3, part 1 (Roma: Tip. Nazionale di G. Bertero & C., 1908), 190.

<sup>5</sup>Pasquale Villari, "Discorso, X Congresso dei rappresentanti dei comitati in Messina (24-26 October 1899)," *Atti della Società "Dante Alighieri" per la diffusione della lingua e della cultura italiana fuori del Regno*, no. 9, March (1900): 12.

<sup>6</sup>The decalogue was republished widely in Italian newspapers. Quoted in Angelo Filipuzzi, ed., *Il dibattito sull'emigrazione. Polemiche nazionale e stampa veneta, 1861-1914* (Firenze: Felice Le Monnier, 1976), 397-398, emphasis added. This blasphemous mix of politics and scripture can be compared with Gabriele D'Annunzio's bellicose "New Beatitudes" presented two years later in May 1915. See his "Orazione per la Sagra dei Mille," in *Per la più grande Italia: Orazioni e messaggi di Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Milano: Fratelli Treves Editori, 1915), 33.

<sup>7</sup>[Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione], *Notizie sulla emigrazione italiana negli anni dal 1910 al 1917. Estratto dalla "Relazione sui servizi della emigrazione dal 1910 al 1917" in corso di stampa. Bozze di stampa destinate alla "Commissione per lo studio dei provvedimenti occorrenti pel passaggio dallo stato di guerra a quello di pace" Sezione XXIIa* (Roma: Tipografia Cartiere Centrali, 1918), 104.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 1646-51.

<sup>9</sup>Ministero di Agricoltura Industria e Commercio. Direzione Generale della Statistica, *Statistica della Emigrazione Italiana per l'Esteri negli anni 1902 e 1903* (Roma: Tipografia Nazionale di G. Bertero, 1904), 102.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 676, 688, 791-99.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 739-42. See also Alberto Beneduce, "Saggio di statistica dei rimpatriati dalle Americhe," *Bollettino dell'emigrazione* 11 (1911): 33-43.

<sup>12</sup>Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione, *Annuario statistico della Emigrazione Italiana dal 1876 al 1925*, 677, 803-05.

<sup>13</sup>Motives for return, including interviews of later return migrants, are analyzed in Betty Boyd Caroli, *Italian Repatriation from the United States 1890-1914* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1973), 75-99; for an excellent comparative perspective, see Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip to America: The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880-1930* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 75-80.

<sup>14</sup>Giovan Battista Penne, *Dall'America all'Africa. La missione coloniale del popolo italiano* (Roma: tip. Naz di G. Bertero & C., 1908), 21; Adolfo Rossi, *Nel paese dei dollari (3 anni a New York)* (1893).

<sup>15</sup>Luigi Villari, at the Philadelphia consulate, ranted over discussion in parliament of obstructing the return of migrants. See his letter to Pasquale Villari, 13 January 1908, Villari 58, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana [hereafter BAV], 39v - 40v.

<sup>16</sup>Letter of Luigi to Pasquale Villari, 1908, Villari 58, BAV, f. 61, 64, 67.

<sup>17</sup>Infidelity among emigrants was always held up as a scandal and a cautionary tale. On families and migration, see Linda Reeder, "Widows in White: Sicilian Women and Mass Migration, 1880-1930" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, 1995); see also the touching letters of emigrants to their wives and families in Emiliano Giancristofaro Lanciano, *Cara moglie... Lettere a casa di emigranti abruzzesi*, ed. Eide Dedicato Iengo (Editrice R. Carabba, 1984); Augusta Palombarini, *Cara Consorte. L'epistolario di una famiglia marchigiana dalla grande emigrazione alla grande guerra* (Ancona: Il Lavoro Editoriale, 1998).

<sup>18</sup>Angelo Scalabrini to Pasquale Villari, 30 December 1899, BAV, Villari 43, ff. 447r-v.