I paesi attraverso l'Atlantico: Early Italian Immigration & Identity Formation in Argentina, Brazil, and the United States of America

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Abstract

The very concept of "the Italian people" is relatively new, only gaining popularity during the mid to late 1800s and changing rapidly since then as Italians moved through time and space with their new country. This change—both in definition to encompass the entire peninsula, and in status to correspond with the new country—was especially prominent with Italian immigrants and their descendants in the "New World," particularly in Brazil, Argentina, and the United States. This paper aims to explore the history of this migration at its height between 1860 and 1940, emphasizing the variety of ways immigrants stayed connected to evolving Italian identities both back home and in their new countries. It will also explore how Italians engaged socially and politically in places where they were looked down on for their immigrant and ethnic identities, while also becoming accepted as white citizens in their new countries through assimilation and participating in colonial efforts. From the spread of mutual aid societies and the newspaper *La Patria* in Buenos Aires' Italian community, to rapid assimilation in Brazil and rise in self-identification as white "colonos" in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, to the attempts by the Italian government to run Italian-language schools in the United States, the Italian diaspora has been undeniably influenced by independent, governmental, and community-based actions to promote their own view of what being Italian outside of Italy meant. Through literature review and primary source analysis regarding Italian-Americans, Italian-Brazilians, and Italian-Argentines, this paper comes to an understanding that the Italian diaspora has historically been made of diverse viewpoints stemming from political and personal connections. These viewpoints then led to diverse forms of political and legal engagement, such as labor strikes among leftist workers, Catholic institutions promoting a standardized Italian language, and even fascist organizations aspiring to connect with Mussolini. Although only a sample of three

countries, the analysis of these influences and their resulting impact on Italian communities are essential in order to better understand how immigration politics are inherently tied to Italian immigrant and descendant identity throughout history, and thus how other diaspora identities can be influenced by the same factors.

Methodology

This paper utilizes primarily, but not exclusively, qualitative historical research through both primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources mainly contain archival work and historical analysis, in order to present an argument regarding their findings from diverse populations of Italian immigrants and their descendants. The primary sources are more variable, containing both wide analyses of Italian immigration as a whole as well as case studies and interviews of individuals. Some of these sources also contain quantitative information, primarily from government sources, usually accompanied by rhetoric revealing these sources' opinions on the Italians that they are studying.

Introduction & Historical Background

Italy as it is thought of today—that is, the Italian peninsula united under a shared government—officially came into existence in 1861 as a kingdom, a result of a nationalist movement called the "Risorgimento."[1] However, even in the early days of Italian nationalism, it proved to have a strong influence among those that would now be considered Italian emigrants. Although this may seem counter-intuitive, nationalism is often focused on connections through a common facet of life like language, with political scientist Benedict Anderson arguing that it

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[1] Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (University of Washington Press, 2000), 35-36.

should best be described as an "imagined political community."[2] As such, many immigrants from the Italian peninsula took to the idea of a unified Italian identity. This allowed them to find some amount of support from a community of other immigrants, despite being thousands of miles away from where they grew up. This unity among Italians of different regions was not only influenced by the typical working migrant, however: many prominent nationalists were forced into exile in the 1830s to 1850s, including Giuseppe Garibaldi, who fled to South America and began to organize in support of both domestic independence issues and Italian nationalism. He remained deeply loyal to the nationalist cause, eventually returning to Italy and becoming known as one of the "Fathers of the Fatherland."[3] In a sense, Italy as a concept to rally around was fully formed long before nationalism found ground in the Italian Peninsula.

After the Risorgimento, questions about the nationalist Italian "colonies" in the Americas that formed in the preceding decades began to rise, both in Italy among the new government and private groups, and in large diaspora communities in the Americas. How can they remain in contact with each other, if they even should? What support should be provided? What is the best way to define and promote *italianità* (Italianness) among these communities? Variants of these questions appear over and over again in sources regarding Italian immigrants in this period of time, as well as in key texts piecing together this history while creating and questioning concepts related to diaspora, emigration, and identity.

Argentina, Brazil, and the United States of America were among the most common destinations for these people in the 85 years after the Kingdom of Italy, regardless of if the immigrants were planning to settle or to return to Italy after a period of time. In the years leading up to World War I, Italian government surveys found that 1.25 million Italians emigrated to the

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[2] Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006), 18.
[3] Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas*, 49.

US alone, roughly equaling the amount that moved to other countries in Europe.[4] Although Brazil and Argentina never reached the same level of mass immigrations as the US, they still saw considerable spikes in the arrival of Italian immigrants between 1894 to 1896 and 1905 to 1910, respectively.[5] These statistics, on top of a bubbling Italian nationalism and a desire to grow Italy through its citizens, not through land, created this intense focus on international outreach. In addition to receiving constantly-morphing support from Italy, Italian communities across the ocean featuring both immigrants themselves and their descendants assisted each other through Italian-specific papers, aid, and entertainment, creating their own identities in the process. Ultimately, Italian emigrant identity became a mixture of the Italian government's hope to keep them connected, the pull for assimilation, and most importantly, the immigrants themselves participating in politics and community to shape their own futures.

Tutto il mondo è paese

The way that Italy has seen itself throughout the ages was often connected with not merely similarities, but unity in government, language, and values. Even the word for country or nation in standardized Italian reflects that attitude in part due to nationalist efforts from the 1800s—"paese," originally the word for village in several peninsular languages.[6] This understanding of a country acting as a single village provides context for the community-based endeavors that the Italian migrants abroad accomplished throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, regardless of if the migrants surrounding them were from the same village or the other end of Italy. Even today, many Italian immigrants and their families in the northeastern United

[4] Italy, *Il Movimento dell'Emigrazione Italiana negli Anni Dal 1910 al 1926* (Ed. del Commissariato generale dell'emigrazione, 1927), 21-22.
[5] Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 238.
[6] Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas*, 174.

States will use "paesan" to refer to close friends regardless of how they met. The idea of paese as a country also gives new meaning to the proverb "tutto il mondo è paese," roughly translating to "all the world is a village" in its original context.[6] However, the nationalist idea of paese creates the phrase "all the world is a country," which in many ways reflects how nationalist members of the diaspora and Italians back home would have viewed themselves—extensions of a country.

Ideas of Italian improvement and growth through "ethnographic colonies" became government policy quickly around the turn of the century, and remained so up to and including fascist Italy.[7] The idea quickly spread across the diaspora, and was often utilized in economic and social contexts both within and without Italy itself. Immigrants to California in this time period created a wine culture branded as "Italian" to great success in the market, despite the grapes never actually touching Italian soil.[8] In Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, labor and colonization itself was considered Italian, both by those who settled in the mountainous Caxias region in the 1880s with ideas of a "New Italy," and the Brazilian government who eventually began appealing to second and third generation Italians in the country to promote further colonization and deforestation.[9] Although not necessarily carried out with the intention of improving Italy politically and socially, these "successes" undoubtedly came with major economic benefits for all of the countries involved. Knowing that they would not be alone, many Italians were encouraged by the rumoured prosperity to leave their homes for "colonies" in the Americas. A shift was occurring in what it meant to be Italian outside of Italy, as there was an increase in association with emigration and the Americas. With this association came a rise in the desire to *tutelare italianità*—literally "to guard italianness," especially abroad.[10]

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[7] Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, 66, 217.
[8] Stephanie Malia Hom, "On Italian Mobilities and Ecological Fretwork," *Modern Italy* 26, no. 2 (2021): 224.
[9] Marco Armiero and Richard P. Tucker, eds., *Environmental History of Modern Migrations* (Routledge, 2017), 45-47.
[10] Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, 40–41, 51.

Just as regional relations were still not as unified as many nationalists wanted within Italy, the migrants from the peninsula still clung on to their village and regional connections despite simply being called Italian by both the government at home and where they immigrated to. These divides could be small, like when choosing where to move to. Over the course of two or three decades of "chain migration," many southern Italian villages had what were essentially satellite locations made from pre-existing towns in the US, and new rural locations in Brazil named after the city or village the migrants came from.[11] These people are commonly described through regional identities like "piemontese" and "sambucese," although they are never entirely removed from being Italian, especially in statistical surveys from any government. Italians in different countries had different reactions to regionalism, as well. For instance, in Brazil there existed a heightened sense of regionalism in the 1890s due to the push for unified national identity coming from the elite. In Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state of Brazil, this influenced the Italian migrants coming together and forming a new regional Ítalo-Gaúcho identity, complete with an Italy-influenced food culture that carries over to this day.[12] Around this time in Argentina, Italians were largely separated both by their birthplaces in Italy as well as their homes in Argentina, but came together during work, often in the form of labor strikes, and raising money for various causes related to Italian-Argentines.[13] For better or for worse, small regional divides could easily melt away in favor of a unified front to respond to any social issue impacting the larger Italian immigrant community in these countries.

However, certain regional divides also proved to be a challenging barrier that got in the way of community, like speaking mutually unintelligible dialects without knowing English or the

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[11] Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, 24, 26.
[12] Gina Louise Hunter, "Galeterias: Serving Up Ítalo-Gaúcho Heritage in the South of Brazil," *Gastronomica* 15, no. 4 (2015): 63-65.
[13] David Aliano, *Mussolini's National Project in Argentina*, (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), 55.

standardized Italian language that was becoming popular. In Broughton Brandenburg's 1904 account of living in an Italian tenement in NYC, he talks about his struggle with communicating to people in the Italian quarter. Initially believing it was due to poor pronunciation, he learned that he picked up a different dialect than what most of the immigrants spoke, simply because he lived in a building composed mostly of Milanese migrants.[14] Brandenburg also states that he saw the Milanese dialect he learned as "better Italian," accidentally providing an example of the frustrating language-based divide he had noticed among many Italians. Statistical information taken about 10 years after Brandenburg's book came out explains some of the communication issues and pretentious statements: 75% of Italian emigrants in the United States at that point were from Southern Italy, especially Sicily, Calabria, and Campania, far from Milan and often stereotyped as poor criminals.[15]

Brandenburg's account of his time in the tenements and in Italy is overall arrogantly opinionated, making assumptions of immigrants' intelligence based on brief conversations and acting superior to the people he claimed to be helping. However, it is quite possible that this particular statement regarding dialect differences was influenced by a combination of prejudice from the northern Italian immigrants he spent time with, an unnuanced view of the creation of standard Italian, and the early attempts of the xenophobic United States government to separate Italians into two groups. Beginning in 1905 and made official in 1910, the United States Immigration Commission declared Northern Italians as "desirable Keltics" and Southern Italians as "undesirable Iberics," with an expansive definition of the south that includes most of Italy but grouping Lombardy, where Milan is located, into northern Italy along with other regions not

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[14] Broughton Brandenburg, *Imported Americans: The Story of the Experiences of a Disguised American and His Wife Studying the Immigration Question* (F. A. Stokes Company, 1904), 12.
[15] Italy, *Movimento dell'Emigrazione*, 30.

considered to be "in the peninsula proper."[16] This groups the different regional cultures as Italian while separating them out based on perceived ability to contribute to society. These small and large differences, both natural and man-made, had potential to divide a united "Italy" outside of the peninsula. Instead, these migrants from different Italian regions continued with their same attempts at solidarity and the creation of a "village" out in the world.

Versions of *italianità*

Argentina, Brazil, and the US each had Italian communities with similar, but never the same, challenges with moving to and surviving in a sometimes hostile country. It is these differences in barriers, as well as the composition of people within the community and reactions by people outside of the community that created variations of *italianità*. Concepts of Italianness were already very complex in the state of Italy at the time of peak emigration, although heavily involving ideas of emigrants and "little Italies" in the Americas.[17] Something Italians in all three countries had in common was the slow process of assimilation into its dominating white European culture and ideals, with changes to Italian identity in the Americas (especially for those born there as opposed to immigrating there) shortly following, whether they involved merely incorporating ideas of whiteness into being Italian or minimizing Italian heritage altogether. In the US, there was an extreme push to shed one's native language, to the point where many Italians supposedly chose to be imprisoned to give them more time to learn English and acquire a job.[18] The desire for assimilation among Americans appears to have been so strong that they did not give any immigrants the support they needed after stepping off the boat, lest anyone be reminded that they even exist.

[16] United States et al., *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, (Government Print Office., 1911), 81-82.
[17] Eva Garau, *Politics of National Identity in Italy: Immigration and "Italianità*," (Routledge, 2015), 185-186.
[18] Brandenburg, *Imported Americans,* 301.

Regarding language specifically, the idea that "what limits one's access to other languages is not their imperviousness but one's own mortality"[19] as posited in the book *Imagined Communities* is key to understanding both disagreements over Italian language: the arguments between promoting standardized Italian and allowing "dialects" to flourish, and the debates about whether one should abandon their native language in favor of the lingua franca of their new country. The former debate seemed to heavily lean towards the promotion of standardized Italian: both Italian anarchists in the 1890s and the fascist government in the 1930s chose to make Italian newspapers and propaganda internationally as an attempt to unite others through both ideals and the standardized language, and even the more country or city specific newspapers in Buenos Aires or New York City faded out "dialect."[20] Meanwhile, the debate on teaching children Italian, the language of the country they are raised in, or both was answered very differently in the US than in Argentina and Brazil, both often involving the Catholic Church, which played a large role in community and teaching efforts. In the US, opinions among Italian religious figures were split between those of a few groups: Bishop Giovanni Scalabrini's heavy-handed involvement in the US Catholic Church and view that Italian should be retained as much as possible (including in schools and sermons at Italian-specific churches), the American Catholic Church's promotion of English-language sermons in parishes not tied to any ethnicity, and Mother Frances Calabrini's attempts to create an Italian identity in bilingual (but majority English-taught) schools.[21] Meanwhile, most communities in South America were in agreement that national parishes were essential to building community and identity, and unlike the US, allowed foreign governments to establish schools there.[22] Promoting *italianità* through language

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[19] Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* 166.
[20] Gabaccia, *Many Diasporas*, 121–124, 140–145.
[21] Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, 135–137.
[22] Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, 141.

was definitely a divisive subject within the US, while there was more cohesion and cooperation in Brazil and Argentina. However, much of this cohesion may not have existed if the governments and public of either country had pushed against Italian-government schools and foreign-language learning in general, or if the Catholic Church had gotten more involved in the lives of Brazilian and Argentine immigrants.

The comparative lack of argument regarding language, however, does not mean that Italians in Brazil and Argentina did not have their own diverging views on what being Italian meant. In southern Brazil, this was more a question of practicality and survival. Italian workers there made a name for themselves in the Serra Gaucha (Gaucho Highlands) through lumber and agriculture, increasing Brazilian society's acceptance of them through colonizing the area and pushing out indigenous people in the process.[23] This way of life did not come without consequences for Italian business. Their methods of farming did not involve fertilization efforts and wasted a lot of land, rapidly shrinking what was available to them and raising alarms from an Italian consul member about profit and sustainability.[24] Despite initial uncertainty at the possibility of losing the identity they created for themselves, a pivot into wine production with specific grape cultivars allowed their businesses to thrive and create a "Mediterranean" environment that allowed them to retain identity terms like *colonos* and *gaucho*.[25] Identity creation in Rio Grande do Sul largely revolved around livelihood and some amount of separation from the idea of being Brazilian without seeming like an outsider. With time, this insistence on terms usually associated with whiteness like colonos allowed Italian-Brazilians to become accepted into society, ironically becoming more Brazilian.

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[23] Hom, "Italian Mobilities," 224–225.
[24] Claudio de Majo and Samira Peruchi Moretto, "From Slash and Burn to Winemaking: The Historical Trajectory of Italian Colonos in the Uplands of Rio Grande Do Sul, Brazil," *Modern Italy* 26, no. 2 (2021): 147–148.
[25] Hom, "Italian Mobilities," 226.

Italian-Argentine migrants and their descendants, meanwhile, were the target of fascist identity campaigns once Mussolini came to power. The late 1920s saw a massive shift in diaspora communications as a whole, when the fascist government shut down the General Commission on Emigration and ending the *Bolletino dell'Emigrazione* which documented Italian migrant journeys throughout the Americas with an emphasis on making people feel more connected to Italy as a whole.[26] Like the kingdom that came before it, Fascist Italy saw the Italian diaspora as a method of expansion into "colonies." Argentina was a prime "colony" to target at least in part because in the years before Mussolini became the prime minister of Italy, between a quarter and a third of Argentines were thought to have some Italian ancestry, if not to be Italian themselves.[27] Beginning at the end of the 1920s, Mussolini's government sent an onslaught of Italian propaganda to Argentina in the form of education, press, and physical representatives, only to find the campaign falling completely flat with very little success.[28] As it turned out, this form of fascist nationalism was merely one narrative that competed for Italian-Argentine identity, with others featuring antifascist, religious, or even Argentine focuses. This failure and the discourse that followed it proved that Italians were not the monolith that the Italian government, or even other Argentines, thought they were. Identities naturally incorporate a variety of cultural practices and ideals, and the way they influence and do not influence each other prove that any identity, including Italian diaspora identity, fluctuates between countries, time periods, and even people.

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[26] Robert C. Smith, "Diasporic Memberships in Historical Perspective: Comparative Insights from the Mexican, Italian and Polish Cases," *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 739.
[27] Robert F. Foerster, "The Italian Factor in the Race Stock of Argentina," *Quarterly Publications of the American Statistical Association* 16, no. 126 (1919): 360.
[28] Aliano, *Mussolini's National Project,* 3–5.

Conclusion

Through the early Italian communities of the US, Brazil, and Argentina, one is able to see how an ethnic identity built outside of its people's "home country" is influenced by a number of constantly-changing factors both within and outside of the community's control. The Italian ethos of village-centered life allowed for the creation of "villages" of migrants within entire regions coming together for a cause or activity, while simultaneously promoting isolation among Italians of different regions even within the same city. Ideas of *italianità* were just as diverse as well, constantly being influenced by political events and a desire to evade discrimination. Italians abroad could be Catholic or anticlerical, ready to return home or desiring to make a new home, leftist labor workers or even fascist Mussolini supporters. Understanding that there is never one opinion a group of people necessarily share, or one way that they are viewed by outsiders throughout history, helps with remembering the struggles that they faced, the positive and negative ways in which they moved through society, and how oftentimes, a seemingly stagnant and one-dimensional view of one group's values like Mussolini had is simply not true and worth fighting to make people recognize.

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