

## Italian Exodus

IT IS IRONIC THAT ITALY, the classic land for expatriates, 'was the greatest of Europe' semigrating countries. While she was being discovered by a flood of foreign poets, painters and musicians in search of peace and inspiration, her own children were streaming away from her shores in search of bread. Foreign visitors settled for a season, a span of years, a lifetime; so too did the people who left. Italy's reputation as a haven for the artist rested on the example of a handful of famous people: Keats and Shelley, Robert and Elizabeth Browning, Wagner and Musset, Gogol and Ruskin. The mass exodus was composed of those unknown to history except as names on a steeragelist. 'The transplanted foreigners settled mainly in the cities and if they did not all grace palazzioni the Grand Canal as did Ruskin, nor Medicean villas like the Brownings, they were usually found in prosperous and elegant neighbourhoods, near to Italy's priceless treasures. Most of the emigrants, on the other hand, were contadini, peasants who came from a primitive, rural Italy.

Uninterested in the glories of their country's past, they were solely concerned with the task of wresting a living from a harsh and unyielding soil. The basic cause of Italian emigration was that Italy was a land of chronic poverty. By the end of the nineteenth century she had become one of the most crowded countries in Europe - and one of the poorest. Less than a quarter of the land is flat and fertile, most of it being in the Po Valley - and even there huge efforts of irrigation and drainage have been needed since Roman times to make crops grow. During her history Italy has suffered severe deforestation, which denuded the Apennines and allowed streams to carry away the topsoil. Furthermore she has no coal or iron to meet the needs of heavy industry. In short, nature has been extremely niggardly to Italy.

Her recent industrial growth springs from sources formerly untapped - water, volcanoes, natural gas - and from American aid. Conditions were - particularly bad in the Mezzogiorno - the southern half of the peninsula and Sicily. In the eighth century BC Greek colonists had made it the centre of a great civilization; during the Middle Ages too it had seen periods of greatness. But from then on the life of the region sank into torpor. The Spanish and Bourbon rulers were by turns neglectful and oppressive. (Bourbon rule was memorably described by Gladstone as 'the negation of God erected into a system of government'.) Bad administration did not cease after the unification of Italy in 1861, the new centralized government maintaining the tradition of neglect and exploitation. The Mezzogiorno remained a region where brigandage was endemic, religion was suffused with gross superstition and destitution was unique in the western world.

This was a parched region, desolate and almost barren; even the olive found it difficult to root in the heavy clay. Furthermore wholesale deforestation had created stagnant swamps which were breeding-grounds for the malarial mosquito. By the late nineteenth century malaria had become a widespread scourge, forcing the peasants to live in hills miles away from their infested plots. As in Ireland, absentee landlords - the latifondisti - regarded their estates only as sources of income, operating a system of short leases and high rents which forced tenants to exploit the land. As for the plots owned by the contadini themselves, the laws of inheritance resulted in minute subdivisions of properties - frazionamento is the expressive Italian word - on such a scale that the peasants were always at near-starvation level.

Farming methods had hardly changed since Biblical times. Most of the peasants had no ploughs, but relied on the zappa, a kind of hoe, which scarcely scratched the surface of the land. How bad conditions were in southern Italy may be gauged by their persistence into our own times. Even today, more than a century after the unification of Italy, the Mezzogiorno is far from being integrated, economically or socially, with the rest of the country. Neither land reform, nor the conquest of malaria, nor lavish government expenditure on schools, roads and dams have succeeded in modernizing a primitive agrarian economy or in preventing a massive drain of the southern population to the factories of Turin and Milan.

The first Italian emigrants were, however, from the less poverty-stricken north. Even here the pressure of numbers was enough to generate a sizable outflow. Northern Italians at first went mainly to neighbouring lands, usually as construction workers. In the course of the 1880s, however, a double change occurred: southern Italy began to supply an increasing proportion of emigrants, and the new world overtook Europe as the popular destination. Departures rose from an annual average of 100,000 in the mid-1880s to 300,000 a decade later, to reach the staggering total of half a million annually between 1900 and 1914.

The exodus from southern Italy was essentially a belated response of conservative contadini to chronic hardship. They had begun to realize that Italian unification was not going to bring the promised reforms but that indeed Rome intended to continue treating them as a conquered colony. In the late 1880s came two further blows: competition from California and Florida almost closed the American market to Italian citrus fruit thus ruining thousands of growers in the south. At the same time France built a prohibitive tariff wall against Italian wines, depriving the southern grapegrowers of their chief export market. And while pressures to leave were growing the ease of transatlantic travel was increasing daily. By the end of the 1880s regular steamship services were running from Genoa and Naples to North and South America. Of the three million Italians who crossed the Atlantic between 1876 and 1901, about two millions went to Argentina and Brazil - probably because they felt more at home there than in the United States. The climate was reminiscent of the Mediterranean and both countries were Catholic, with Latin civilizations similar to that of Italy. The bulk of the emigrants to Latin America were from Lombardy, Venetia and other provinces. Emigration from southern Italy followed a different course, because of the accident that, just as it was gathering momentum, conditions in Brazil and Argentina were temporarily uninviting. In Brazil the civil war of 1893-4 was followed by the cholera epidemic of 1895 in Espirito Santo which claimed many Italian victims and which led the Italian government to suspend emigration to Brazil for several

months. Meanwhile in Argentina labour unrest had become endemic and a militant anarchist movement had emerged. In the city of Buenos Aires there were nineteen major strikes in 1895, sixteen the following year and a huge, anarchist-led general strike in November 1902. Thus an increasing number of emigrants turned their thoughts towards North America.

Lower costs must have been one encouragement; New York is only half as far from Naples as is Buenos Aires. Emigrants from southern Italy could reach Naples in a few hours by rail or, in the case of Sicilians, by an overnight steamer from Palermo. In 1893 an American official, G. B. Young, was surprised at the healthy appearance of the crowds who had come to Naples to embark, remarking that they afforded a pleasing contrast to the way they looked after being herded for seventeen days on shipboard, or after becoming slum-dwellers in the States. Some Italians carried very little with them; Young remembered seeing a young man whose luggage consisted of 'a handkerchief full of lemons and a green umbrella'. On sailing day emigrants were ferried in small boats to the ships in the bay of Naples.

Italian government officials, accompanied by police and health officers mustered the passengers on deck and inspected them as they filed past. This was usually a lengthy procedure, and for emigrants a trying one. As many as 1400 men, women and children had to stand on deck for hours in the full glare of the Italian sun, usually without food or water. Sometimes the medical officer fell asleep in his chair while the endless procession passed. As sailing time drew near the passengers passed by almost too fast to count. The police rapidly examined passports and checked the emigrants against their lists of wanted persons: absconding debtors, criminals with unfinished sentences, men of military age and so on. Finally came ticket inspection - often an occasion for argument about children's ages since those between one and eight travelled half fare while infants under one went free. Ages thus tended to be understated. As one observer remarked: 'the number of children under one who can walk on by themselves boasting full sets of teeth is astonishing.' The tides of Italian emigration, however, remained complex. Large numbers of Italians continued to seek work in other European countries; in 1911 there were 400,000 in France alone, Marseilles claiming no fewer than 125,000.

There was also a continuing trickle across the Mediterranean to North Africa, especially after 1911 when Tripoli and Cyrenaica became Italian colonies. But the United States had now become the Italian immigrants' first choice. After 1900 Argentina was a poor second and Brazil a bad third. Italian arrivals in the United States rose from 12,000 in 1880 to 52,000 a decade later, and to 100,000 in 1900. The flood tide occurred between the years 1901 and 1910 when more than two million Italians entered the United States - twice as many as in the previous eighty years. And between 1910 and 1916 another million were counted - though it must be remembered that these statistics include those who entered the States more than once. In turning to the United States Italian emigration remained as characteristically impermanent as it had ever been. Unlike other emigrants, the Italians who left home did not necessarily intend to become permanent residents elsewhere. Writing in 1920, Stefano Miele, by then a successful New York lawyer, described the motives, typical of many Italians, that had led him to emigrate seventeen years earlier: 'If I am to be frank, then I shall say that I left Italy and came to America for the sole purpose of making money. Neither the laws of Italy, nor the laws of America, neither the government of the one nor the government of the other, influenced me in any way. I suffered no political oppression in Italy. I was not seeking political ideals: as a matter of fact, I was quite satisfied with those of my native land. If I could have worked my way up in my chosen profession in Italy, I would have stayed in Italy.'

But repeated efforts showed me that I could not. America was the land of opportunity, and so I came, intending to make money and then return to Italy. That is true of most Italian emigrants to America... Approximately forty per cent of the Italians who emigrated to the United States did in fact go back to Italy again. However, many of those who returned subsequently emigrated once more. An American investigating commission on board the White Star liner *Canopicin* 1907, interviewed returning Italians, asking why they were going back and whether they intended to return. Of the 108 interviewed, seventy-three said they expected to return, twenty-four did not and eleven were undecided. The great majority said they were returning for a visit, or to get married, or to join the army; only three said they were going back because they disliked the United States: fourteen were returning because of illness and, of these, several were in advanced stages of tuberculosis, clearly returning home to die. But in fact these returning Italians gave fresh impetus to emigration. One day for little more than a quayside observer remarked in 1906 that it was not difficult to pick out from their keep. the *contadini* those who had spent some time in the United States: 'To one side could be seen the returned passengers, all in neat attire, unfastening their well-filled trunks preparatory to the customs inspection, while to the other side were the thousand or so awaiting embarkation, but presenting a severe contrast to their brethren returning from the States.' A landowner, on being asked in 1884 why the *contadini* emigrated, replied: 'They see their countrymen returning well dressed, with an overcoat, a cigar in their mouth, and therefore they all wish to go away.' Newly-arrived immigrants, unable to speak any English, relied upon the services of the *padrone*, an Italian labour boss.

The *padrone* system, previously unknown in the United States, passed through several phases. In Italy *padroni* were originally associated with the recruitment and exploitation of children. In the late 1870s they collected them from the hillsides of Italy and carried them to America for employment as bootblacks, wandering musicians and street acrobats. The practice was stamped out about 1880 when public outcry forced the authorities to introduce stricter controls. Next, *padroni* recruited unskilled labourers on contract, usually paying their fares. When that practice too was prohibited the system assumed its final form: it functioned as a special kind of employment agency. Though he no longer recruited or imported labour the *padrone* supplied immigrants in gangs to work in mines, on the railroads and in agriculture. He advanced the money to transport immigrants to the places where they were needed, acted as their interpreter and

provided them with food and lodging. The system gave padroni ample opportunity to cheat and exploit their gullible and ignorant countrymen. They misled labourers about the nature of the work they were to do, deducted large commissions from their wages and charged exorbitant prices for food and accommodation.

Those they deceived found it impossible to obtain redress. Indeed they seldom thought of obtaining it. On one occasion in the States, when a travelling inspector sent by the Italian government informed a group of southern Italians that they were being cheated, they accepted the news resignedly. 'Signorino,' they said, 'we are ignorant and do not know English. Our boss brought us here, knows where to find work, makes contracts with the companies. What should we do without him?' Fortunately, however, the system only flourished during the early stages of Italian immigration. As they learned to make their own way in America, immigrants dispensed with the padrone's services; the system had had its day by 1900, though it survived for sometime longer among such newcomers as the Greeks and the Syrians. In its earliest phases Italian emigration was predominantly male. That reflected the fact that many contadini went to the United States to earn rather than to settle. They shared the attitude of a group of Italian labourers building the Simplon Tunnel in Switzerland. Asked by the historian Pasquale Villari whether they loved their native land they replied: 'For us Italy is whoever gives us our bread.' But as time passed they found, as all immigrants did, that the ties that bound them to their new lives grew stronger and the desire to return diminished. Even those who went back sometimes found it difficult to fit in, having become accustomed to American wages and standards. As late as 1910 two-thirds of all Italian emigrants were men, though that was less than ten years before. The growing proportion of women and children demonstrated that the Italian movement was gradually becoming a genuine emigration.

To an extraordinary degree Italian immigrants duplicated the experience of the Irish half a century earlier. They settled in the same parts of the United States, dominated the same unskilled occupations, occupied the same overcrowded slums. The Italians too were fated to become a despised minority. As immigration increased and the predominance of southern Italians became greater its concentration in the industrial north-east became more marked. By 1910 more than four-fifths of the Italian population lived north of the Ohio and east of the Mississippi. New York State alone held nearly half a million and Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Massachusetts a further 400,000. An extremely high proportion was to be found in the cities, especially the larger ones. New York, with 340,000, was in a class of its own but there were large numbers in places like Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston and Newark. Italians could be found in a variety of industrial employments.

In Massachusetts they worked in the shoe factories at Brockton and in the Lawrence woollen mills. In New Jersey they were silk dyers, in Pennsylvania and Illinois miners. From 1890 Italians of both sexes invaded what had hitherto been a Jewish preserve, the garment industry of New York and Philadelphia. Within a decade Italians were rivalling the Jews in this branch of manufacture; Italian women, indeed, were soon to form the bulk of New York's home-finishers. Nevertheless, the great mass of Italian workers were still pick-and-shovel labourers, thousands being scattered throughout the country in railroad construction camps. As early as 1893 one observer remarked that 'the Irish have Italian rag-pickers in ceased building railroads. . . The Italians have taken their place.' Public works afforded an equally striking example of ethnic displacement. In all the great cities Italians came to hold an undisputed monopoly of excavation, surfacing and grading streets, laying gas and water pipes, digging sewers, building bridges, harbour works and subways. Italian labour helped rebuild Galveston after the hurricane of 1900, and played the same role in San Francisco after the earthquake and fire of 1906. Even on the New York waterfront Irish supremacy met a growing Italian challenge, for although the Italians were less physically strong than the Irish, they would work for lower wages. Living conditions in the construction camps were abominable. Labourers slept and ate in dilapidated, windowless railroad cars or in shanty bunk-houses, roughly constructed of corrugated iron. Domenick Ciolli, an Italian-born student who spent some time as a railroad labourer in 1916, was appalled at accommodation which must have been student who spent some time as a railroad labourer in 1916, was appalled at accommodation which must have been reminiscent of the worst kind of steerage.

The bunk-house was filthy, the atmosphere foul. Labourers slept on boards with bed-bugs and cockroaches as their companions; the only hot meal was supper which they cooked themselves in rusty tin boxes. Yet these men worked ten hours a day, seven days a week in all weathers. In each city where Italians congregated there was a district identified as 'Little Italy'. Italian loyalties were narrowly circumscribed; they could have been summed up in the word *campanilismo*, a sense of fellow-feeling that encompassed only those within range of the village bell-tower. Hence in American cities immigrants settled according to origin in separate streets or blocks. In New York about 1900, Neapolitans and Calabrians congregated around Mulberry Bend; Genoese grouped themselves along nearby Baxter Street; Sicilians colonized part of Elizabeth Street; Piedmontese and Ligurians predominated west of Broadway in the Eighth and Fifteenth Wards; and a tiny outpost of Italian-speaking Tyrolese was located on Sixty-ninth Street, near the Hudson River. Italian neighbourhoods were uniformly decayed and congested; more so, indeed, than those inhabited by any other group of immigrants. In New York, for example, the most notorious slums lay around Mulberry Bend, where the city's worst examples of overcrowding and its highest death rates were found.

In 1890 the Danish-born journalist, Jacob A. Riis, described the district in his book, *How The Other Half Lives*: There is but one 'Bend' in the world and it is enough.... Around it cluster the bulk of the tenements that are stamped as altogether bad, even by the optimists of the Health Department. Incessant raids cannot keep down the crowds that make them their home. In the scores of back alleys, stable lanes and hidden byways, of which the rent collector alone can keep track, they share such shelter as the ramshackle structures afford with every kind of abomination rife from the dumps and ash-

barrels of the city. . .Corruption could not have chosen ground for its stand with better promise of success. The whole district is a maze of narrow, often unsuspected passageways - necessarily, for there is scarce a lot that has not two, three or four tenements upon it, swarming with unwholesome crowds. At the Elizabeth Street police station he was told that a few days earlier a dead goat had been reportedly lying in Pell Street.

By the time the official cart came to take it away, 'an Italian had carried it off in his sack to a wake or feast of some sort in one of the back alleys.' The insanitary condition of the district was reflected in its heavy infant mortality rate. Riis learned that in one tenement, 'No. 591/2, next to Bandit's Roost', there had been fourteen deaths in 1882, eleven of them children. In 1888, when that same tenement housed a total of thirty-nine people, five children died out of nine in one year. Slum conditions were responsible too for the high rate of tuberculosis among newcomers. Native-born Americans believed that immigrants brought the disease with them. In fact it was far less common in Italy and in some regions it was said to have been unknown until Americans brought it back with them. The main cause of tuberculosis was the abrupt passage from an open air life to the close confinement of an American slum. Dr Antonio Stella, a New York physician, commented in 1904: Six months of life in the tenements are sufficient to turn the sturdy youth from Calabria, the brawny fisherman of Sicily, the robust women from Abruzzi and Basilicata, into the pale, flabby, undersized creatures we see dragging along the streets of New York and Chicago, such a painful contrast to the native population.

Six months more of the gradual deterioration, and the soil for the bacillus tuberculosis is amply prepared. Sweatshop conditions, Dr Stella added, greatly increased the danger of contracting the disease. Italian women, already weakened by excessive child-bearing, used up their remaining energy by working long hours in factories or as home-finishers. That was why, he explained, there was a higher death rate from tuberculosis among Italian women than among their menfolk. Changes of diet did little to help Italian immigrants' waning health; milk, cheese and eggs which had cost nothing but labour in Italy, were often beyond the means of immigrants in America while vegetables cost too much to supply the quantities they had been accustomed to. Hence Italians tended to live largely on starches which, according to a 1893 Chicago report, was why there was so much rickets among Italian children. The continuance of the practice of giving infants an adult diet before they were out of swaddling clothes was especially damaging. An Italian mother who brought her sick baby to a clinic insisted that she had only given the child what she and her husband had had themselves. But questioning revealed that the family diet of soup and buttermilk in Italy had been replaced by beer and coffee. Like the Irish, and for the same reasons, few Italians settled on the land. Of those who had been in farming, only about seven per cent took up agricultural work in the United States. However, Italian's did find seasonal work on farms since no capital was required; this gave alternative -and healthier -employment to those who lived most of the year in cities. Simple operations like fruit-picking, weeding and hoeing vegetables could be performed by women and children as well as by men. Thus in summer, when the schools were closed, Italian families from Philadelphia and Baltimore would take to the fields for months at a time. They would follow the berry crops northward, beginning with strawberries in Delaware in May and ending with cranberries in Massachusetts in September. In December, when construction work was at a standstill, Italians would move southwards to Louisiana for the sugar harvest. Italians who settled on the land generally chose branches of agriculture where lack of capital was less of a handicap and where their gregarious instincts could be satisfied. They took up market gardening along the Atlantic coast, cotton and fruit-growing in the South, and vine-growing in California. Large groups of market-gardeners settled in the states of New York and New Jersey.

Most of these settlements were made on poor land; hundreds bought abandoned or semi-abandoned farms in the New Jersey pine barrens, for example, and by sheer hard work brought the land back into production. At such places Italian growers united to buy fertilizers and to found co-operative marketing associations. But it was in California that Italians made their greatest mark in agriculture. From an early date they were prominent in a variety of agricultural enterprises. Considerable numbers of Ticinese - that is, Italian-speaking Swiss - became dairy farmers along California's coastline, especially around San Luis Obispo. Thousands of northern Italians, especially Ligurians, went into market gardening and fruit-growing, while California's vast wine industry was largely of Italian origin. It received a boost in 1881 when Andrea Sbarbaro, a Genoese banker who had been in California since gold-rush days, founded the Italian Swiss Agricultural Colony at Asti in the Sonoma Valley. After early setbacks these vineyards prospered, eventually coming to dominate the American wine market. One of the most celebrated vintners was Louis M. Martini, who arrived in San Francisco from Pietra Ligura in 1900 at the age of thirteen to join his father.

After some years in the family fish business he went back to Italy to study the science of wine-making at the celebrated enological and viti-cultural school at Alba. The Prohibition interlude between 1920 and 1933 was a severe blow to his career but today the Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir produced by the Martini vineyards are considered to be among California's finest wines. While their everyday adjustments closely paralleled those of their Irish predecessors, the same can hardly be said of their religious life. Between 1820 and 1920 the volume of immigration from Italy was greater than that from any Catholic country save Ireland. It seemed to bring to the Catholic Church a massive and welcome reinforcement. Yet from the 1880s onwards American Catholics were gravely concerned at what became known as the 'Italian problem'. It was commonly alleged that millions of Italians and their children were falling away from the church in America and were either relapsing into religious indifference or falling victim to Protestant proselytizers. The charge that they lacked religious conviction came most frequently from the Irish bishops and clergy who dominated the Catholic Church in the United States. A typical indictment was in a letter in the Jesuit weekly *American* in 1914; it was commenting on an article by Father Joseph Sorrentino on religious conditions in Italy: The Italians who come to this country are to a large extent uninstructed in the knowledge of the very elements of their Faith. Thousands upon thousands of boys and

girls beyond the age of sixteen knowing of their prayers, nothing of their catechism and have never been instructed for or made their First Communion or Confession.

The Italian, as a rule, will work on Sunday and outside of a display at baptisms, marriages and funerals, a large proportion of them have little attachment to the Church, its services or its sacraments. Father Sorrentino says that at home the bulk of the Italian people are good, practising Catholics.... In that case their religion must be dropped root and branch in the Bay of Naples, for 99 per cent of them stay away from Mass when they come to this country.... In fact the Italians... come... not infrequently with a hatred of the Church and the priesthood in their hearts. Such criticisms betray an ignorance of the religious background of Italian immigrants. The contadini were in fact profoundly religious but their religion had little in common with American Catholicism. Nominally Catholic, theirs was a folk religion in which pagan rituals and beliefs were fused with Christian doctrines and sacraments. Southern Italians believed themselves to be surrounded by a host of supernatural beings with powers of good or evil who had to be propitiated. This involved both a recourse to sorcery and magic and the worship of madonnas and saints who were associated, as ancient deities had been, with particular localities. Thus the contadino would seek to offset the power of the evil eye (mal' occhio) by means of amulets, potions and magical rites, at the same time invoking the aid of a particular 'madonna' known for her power to cure headaches or produce a good harvest. Italian Catholicism did not, as in the case of the Irish or the Poles, define a national identity; on the contrary Italian nationalism was strongly opposed by the Catholic clergy. The fact was that Catholicism retained its hold on the contadini by providing a vehicle for popular religious sentiments.

The most important Church festivals were the holidays dedicated to saints, especially the local patron saint. An elaborate mass was followed by a procession in which a gorgeously attired statue of the saint was borne through the streets. Such feste were only in part religious: they were also secular holidays characterized by dancing and other forms of revelry that were anything but solemn or reverent. Small wonder, then, that the contadino found the church in America a cold and puritanical institution, irrelevant to their needs. They resented Irish domination and the efforts of Irish priests to Americanize them. Their demands for clergy of their own nationality were not easily met for Italian priests did not generally accompany their flocks across the Atlantic. Controversy within the Catholic Church over the 'Italian problem' encouraged Protestant proselytizers to focus their attention on Italian neighbourhoods.

But the results of their labours were meagre: only about 25,000 Italians could be persuaded to join the Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians. However, in time the contadini set up their own parishes and built churches like those in Italy. Meanwhile, though casual in attendance at mass they were zealous in observing church holidays and saints' days. An immigrant festa followed traditional patterns and generally bore a local or provincial character. The great Neapolitan festa honoured the martyred San Gennaro; Sicilians from Palermo feted Santa Rossalia; those from Catania Sant' Agata. On such occasions Italian neighbourhoods such as New York's East Harlem were transformed. Altars were erected on the sidewalks, the streets were decorated with flags and illuminated arches and dense crowds led by a brass band followed the image of the saint as it was paraded through the streets. Dollar bills showered down from tenement windows to be pinned to the saint's robes. As in the old country, the bands played tunes from Verdi and Rossini, pizza-sellers did a roaring trade and the day ended with dancing and a display of fireworks. If Italian immigrants were cool toward the church they were violently antagonistic toward the American public school. In education as in religion an 'Italian problem' emerged, which left the native-born baffled. As early as 1883 the teacher in charge of the West Side Italian school in New York outlined the problem to the Children's Aid Society. One very perplexing feature of our work among these poor Italians is the avarice of the parents.

Children of tender age are compelled to work, often at night as well as during the day, thus preventing them from attending school, and were it not for the aid of the truant agent, who visits the parents and threatens them with the law (of which Italians as a rule, are in great dread) a great proportion of the children who are now forced into school would be growing up in total ignorance. When the parents are not avaricious, they are too often perfectly unconcerned as to a child's education. When spoken to on the subject they reply, with the characteristic shrug of the shoulders: 'I cannot read or write, and I earn my own money just as easy; why should my children know any more than I do? I don't want them to go to school!' In contadino society the basic social and economic unit had been the family; the need to preserve it had guided every endeavour. In such a society there was no place for the notion of parental responsibility; children were seen as sources of material benefit, prized for the contribution they could make to the family economy. Italians felt there was no need for more than a smattering of education since the basic arts and skills could be learned at home. So could the moral code. These notions, carried to America, ensured the immigrant's antagonism to the public school. In his eyes education beyond a certain age was not only unnecessary but damaging, and doubly so: in the first place it meant the loss of the children as economic assets for years after they had become capable of earning; in the second it proved a threat to the family since children might pick up at school ideas hostile to those of their parents. The New York school attendance law of 1903, which raised the school-leaving age from fourteen to sixteen, was particularly unpopular. One Italian declared it had 'ruined all our hopes of a decent living, kept us poor and destroyed the sanctity of the home.' At bottom it was not avarice that led Italian families to complain bitterly that 'America took our children'. It was the fear that education was the enemy of la famiglia. Such apprehensions were all too often well-founded. The school came to rival the parents as a source of authority, inculcating a different and more individualistic set of values. It also enabled the child to speak English fluently which gave him a practical superiority over them, making it impossible to hold him to traditional ideas of subordination and propriety. Parental control was in any case difficult to maintain because traditional social patterns did not have the legal sanctions in America that had sustained them in Europe. In many cases things went beyond mere

indiscipline. In their anxiety to be accepted as Americans by their school-mates the children of the contadini often rejected both their oldworld heritage and their parents who symbolized it. Immigrant parents found that their values were belittled by their offspring, their loyalties scorned, their speech and appearance made a matter of ridicule. The pressures which led the second generation into such attitudes and the painful tensions which resulted were poignantly described in a celebrated short story, *The Odyssey of a Wop*, by the Italian-American novelist John Fante.

It tells of the cruel dilemma in which Italian immigrant children were placed when forced to choose between the two opposing sets of values; of the self-hatred and shame produced by denial of one's origins. I am nervous when I bring friends to my house: the place looks so Italian. Here hangs a picture of Victor Emmanuel, and over there is one of the cathedral of Milan, and next to it one of St Peter's, and on the buffet stands a wine-pitcher of medieval design; it's forever brimming, forever red and brilliant with wine. These things are heirlooms belonging to my father, and no matter who may come to our house, he likes to stand under them and brag. So I begin to shout at him. I tell him to cut out being a Wop and be an American once in a while. Immediately he gets his razor-strop and whales hell out of me, clouting me from room to room and finally out the back door. I go to the woodshed and pull down my pants and stretch my neck to examine the blue slices across my rump. A Wop! that's what my father is! Nowhere is there an American father who beats his son this way. Well, he's not going to get away with it; some day I'll get even with him. I begin to think that my grandmother is hopelessly a Wop. She's a small, stocky peasant who walks with her wrists criss-crossed across her belly, a simple old lady, fond of boys.

She comes into the room and tries to talk to my friends. She speaks English with a bad accent, her vowels rolling out like hoops. When, in her simple way, she confronts a friend of mine and says, her old eyes smiling, 'You like go the Seester scola?' my heart roars. *Mannaggia!* I'm disgraced; now they all know that I'm an Italian. My grandmother has taught me to speak her native tongue. By seven I know it pretty well, and I always address her in it. But when friends are with me, when I am twelve and thirteen, I pretend to ignorance of what she says, and smirk stiffly; my friends dare not know that I can speak any language but English. Sometimes this infuriates her. She bristles, the loose skin at her throat knits hard, and she blasphemes with a mighty blasphemy. Conflict between generations was the common experience of immigrant families generally. Yet it was exaggerated among the contadini, who attached special importance to the primary family group. This same may have been true of conjugal ties. The fluidity of American society, the existence of divorce, the greater equality between the sexes, the absence of the social and religious restraints that had existed in Europe - these were among the reasons why marriage partners were more readily cast off in America. At the same time the male character of Italian emigration placed greater strains upon marriages than among groups emigrating as families. Protracted separations often led to the involvement by one or both partners in irregular sexual liaisons. The reports of Italian consuls in the United States to the government at Rome cited numerous cases of abandoned spouses and matrimonial tangles: Nicola Del P., from Taranta Peligna, a resident of Rock Springs, Wyo., killed himself on 28 June 1910 on discovering that his wife, who had deserted him, was living at Louisville, Ky., with another Italian, Augusto P. di Mafalda from Campobasso, who had a wife in Italy and who was living in Louisville under the name of Camillo di D. Family disorganization had serious consequences. In the great cities problems of crime and juvenile delinquency were closely associated with the children of immigrants.

Those engaged in immigrant welfare work were agreed that the waywardness of immigrant children was traceable, not to an inherited lawlessness, but to the circumstances of immigrant life, and especially to broken homes and the erosion of parental authority. The relationship between immigration and crime has excited a good deal of controversy in America. And while immigrants generally were associated in the popular mind with lawlessness, a special stigma of criminality came to be attached to Italians. It was widely believed by Americans that a large proportion of Italian immigrants were criminals, that newcomers from southern Italy and Sicily in particular possessed an innate leaning towards personal violence. Such impressions originated from the frequent murders - especially stabbings and bombings - in Italian neighbourhoods. Yet the crime statistics did not bear out these impressions.

A Massachusetts enquiry in 1912 revealed that the Italian-born, who comprised eight per cent of the population of the state, made up only 4.2 per cent of those confined in penal institutions. Children of Italian origin may have contributed disproportionately to crime, yet the immigrants themselves did not. But to be Italian was to be regarded as a dangerous desperado, as a second-generation immigrant, Professor Francis Ianni, has shown: On one occasion my father had bought a candy bar and was clutching it in his pocket. He was stopped by the police, and since he couldn't speak English and they couldn't speak Italian they assumed it was a gun or a knife of some sort because he was Italian, and they arrested him because he had a candy bar and couldn't explain where he got it. However, as reports multiplied of blackmail and violent crime in America's Little Italys, the image was conjured up of a mysterious criminal organization, usually known as the Mafia or the Black Hand.

It was thought of as a vast international conspiracy, controlled from Sicily and extending to every sizable American city with an Italian community. This notion, originating in the 1890s, was firmly established by the time of the First World War. That the older stereotype took on gangster overtones during the 1920s and 1930s was due to the fact that many of America's best-known gangsters, such as Big Jim Colosimo, Johnny Torrio, Al Capone and Lucky Luciano had Italian names. In the past twenty years the Mafia concept has been revived. In the 1950s it was dramatized by the Kefauver investigation into organized crime. Senator Kefauver paraded Italian-American gangsters in front of the television cameras and alleged that the Mafia was the 'shadowy international organization that lurks behind much of America's

organized criminal activity'. A decade later another Senate subcommittee heard melodramatic stories from a convicted murderer named Joseph Valachi concerning the structure and operations of the organization he referred to as Cosa Nostra. More recently the immense success of books and films such as *The Godfather* have helped disseminate the Mafia stereotype still more widely. Such popular conceptions are, however, far removed from reality. Like all in myths that of the Mafia has some foundation in fact. A secret criminal society of that name undoubtedly existed in the United States. Moreover the techniques of extortion and blackmail it employed were patterned upon those of the Sicilian Mafia. But most of the Mafia stereotype is based on misconception or hearsay.

There is no proof that the highly organized international conspiracy in which many people believed has ever existed. Between the Sicilian Mafia and American criminals of Sicilian descent there is certainly a network of informal relationships, but the organization whose headquarters is in Palermo has never controlled the American underworld. As Luigi Barzini has pointed out, its writ did not even run in Catania, a few miles away, still less in Chicago. When Lucky Luciano, the reputed mastermind of the American narcotics ring, was deported to Sicily he was allegedly welcomed by the local Mafia not as a blood brother but as a chicken to be plucked; the story is that they swindled him out of fifteen million lire. Even within the United States the Mafia has not been the tightly-knit crime syndicate of popular imagination; all that has ever been proved is the existence of a small group of criminals behaving in similar ways but operating independently. The Black Hand, for example, was not a centralized, cohesive organization. Nor was it responsible for more than a fraction of the violent crimes committed by Italians. In fact Black Hand crime flourished only when local conditions favoured it. It was unknown in Boston and Milwaukee, for example. In Chicago a combination of a frontier mentality, official corruption, and police venality produced a situation conducive to the spread of crime. That was why Chicago was a magnet for such a large number of Italian-born criminals. Yet the most notorious of Chicago's Italian-American gangsters in the 1920s were the product of American rather than Italian conditions. Moreover, few of them were of Sicilian birth or descent. Al Capone was born in Brooklyn of Neapolitan parents; James Colosimo was born in Calabria but arrived in Chicago as a boy; Johnny Torrio, born in the province of Naples, was taken to the United States as a child of two by his parents and grew up in Brooklyn.

Gangsters such as these had very little in common with the Sicilian *onorata società*, and the same can be said of more recent Italian-American Mafia leaders. They made fortunes out of activities which old world mafiosi would have considered unworthy: prostitution, gambling and drugs. There was another difference too. In Sicily the Mafia had employed violence, ostensibly at least, as a means of providing justice for the oppressed. In the United States, on the other hand, the Mafia has never pretended to be anything but an association of self-seeking criminals. Its members would not have shown any of the paternal concern for the weak that is characteristic of Don Corleone, the fictional American Mafia leader depicted in Mario Puzo's best-seller *The Godfather*. Fear of the Mafia, together with the reputation Italians had acquired as bloodthirsty criminals, accounted for the frenzied character of the anti-Italian sentiment that developed in the 1890s. Italians now joined Negroes as the principal victims of American popular violence. Time and again native-born mobs administered rough justice to Italians charged with crime. In March 1895 at a time of labour unrest in the southern Colorado coalfields, a group of miners lynched six Italian labourers accused of the murder of a saloon keeper. A year later, in the small Louisiana town of Hahnville, a mob dragged six Italians from gaol and hanged them. The best-known incident occurred at New Orleans in 1890. On 20 October, the New Orleans superintendent of police, David O.

Hennessey, who had been waging war upon Italian gangs, was ambushed and shot. Before dying Hennessey was said to have murmured, 'The Dagoes did it'. Orders went out to the police to comb Italian neighbourhoods; they rounded up and arrested hundreds of Sicilians believed to have associations with the Mafia. But when nine of these suspects were put on trial the jury refused to convict. Public opinion was outraged and there were allegations of bribery and of intimidation of witnesses by the Mafia. With newspapers calling for action to remedy 'the failure of justice', a mob forced its way into the parish prison and lynched eleven Italian prisoners. The New Orleans incident had international repercussions.

The Italian government demanded the punishment of the lynch mob and financial compensation for the families of the victims. When the United States returned an unsympathetic answer there was talk of war, but early in 1892 Italy accepted an American offer of an indemnity. No steps were taken, however, to punish the murderers. Nor did the authorities take effective action on the many other occasions when Italians charged with murder were summarily executed by vigilante bodies. Mob violence against Italians continued well into the twentieth century, most of it occurring in the rural South and West. One of the worst incidents took place in August 1920 in the mining town of West Frankfort, Illinois. After a series of bank robberies, followed by the kidnapping and murder of two boys, suspicion fell on the Black Hand. Mobs swarmed into the Italian quarter, attacking anyone in sight and setting fire to homes. The rioting went on for three days and was quelled only when 500 state troopers were sent to the town. Even in the comparatively peaceful later decades of this century the Italian-American writer, Angelo Pellegrini, bitterly recalls his youthful feelings about his fellow Americans: Many of them had come maybe a generation before us, maybe they were second generation immigrants - Norwegians, Irish and Germans - and yet they soon made us understand that the attitude of the 'native American', as we called them, towards us was roughly what the attitude of the American has been toward Negroes..

We young men were forbidden to associate with American girls. And if one of us ventured to go out with one she would have to be of a poor-white-trash derivation. Otherwise she wouldn't be going with him; and being such a girl, she would surely have a brutal brother to clobber the hell out of the wop who dared! The popular tendency to see Italians as a

menace to the stability of American society was intensified by the belief that they were steeped in revolutionary radicalism. It is certainly true that before the First World War men of Italian origin were among the most prominent activists in American left-wing movements, especially anarchism and syndicalism. The silk-weaving city of Paterson, New Jersey, where Luigi Galleani founded one of the first American anarchist papers, was a leading centre of anarchism; Gaetano Bresci, the anarchist who assassinated King Umberto I of Italy at Monza in 1900, also came from there; Enrico Malatesta, the famous Italian anarchist, was shot at in Paterson during a tour of the United States - proof that the city contained more than one kind of Italian-American radical. The leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World, the revolutionary syndicalist trade union popularly known as the 'Wobblies', was also in part Italian.

It included such figures as Giuseppe Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti, who organized the violent strike of textile workers at Lawrence in 1912. Giovannitti, an Italian-born poet, was the editor of the New York labour paper *Il Proletario*, to which Mussolini, during his Socialist phase, had contributed fiery articles. In the course of the Lawrence strike Ettor and Giovannitti were arrested and charged with having been responsible for the death of a striker who was killed during a clash between the police and pickets. Among those who campaigned to free them was the anarchist, Carlo Tresca, who had emigrated to the United States from Italy in 1904. By the time Tresca was mysteriously assassinated in a New York street in 1943 he had become the leading folk hero of the Italian-American Left.

Italians, along with the Jews, bore the brunt of the anti-foreign hysteria that characterized the Red Scare of 1919. Intolerance also marked the cause célèbre of the 1920s, the Sacco-Vanzetti case. The paymaster and his guard at a shoe factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts, were murdered on 15 April 1920. The murderers escaped by car, taking with them \$15,000 in cash. Three weeks later the police arrested two Italian immigrants, on suspicion of having committed the crime. They were Nicola Sacco, a shoe factory worker, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler. Both were anarchists, active in radical movements and both had been draft dodgers in the First World War. The evidence against them was inconclusive, but they were convicted and sentenced to death. Both men pleaded their innocence and the more articulate Vanzetti told the court that he believed he was being punished, not for the crime, but for his origins and his radicalism. World-wide public protest was inspired by the belief that the convicted men had been victims of prejudice. But the commission set up after years of argument to hear the case, concluded that they had been rightly convicted and they were electrocuted on 23 August 1927.

Their death provoked anti-American demonstrations throughout the world. Until the rise of Mussolini, Italians had not been particularly concerned with what was going on in Italy. While they had become less village-minded, their loyalties were still provincial, and they thought of themselves not as Italians but as Sicilians, Neapolitans or Piedmontese. But the victory of Mussolini's Fascism reverberated in every Italian-American community, blurring regional loyalties and generating a bellicose Italian-American nationalism. Soon after the march on Rome in 1922 Italian-Americans had become enthusiastically devoted to the Duce, their press being overwhelmingly pro-Fascist. Radicals like Carlo Tresca and political exiles like Gaetano Salvemini loathed Mussolini and waged an incessant campaign against him, but they cut no ice with the immigrant masses. The Fascist sympathies of Italian-Americans were in part the result of Mussolini's attempts to woo them.

He was anxious to counter anti-Fascist agitation in the United States and even believed that many of the four million Italians living in America might return to fight for Italy if war broke out. Hence propaganda emanating from Rome attempted to indoctrinate Italian-Americans with Fascist ideas and to encourage them to remain Italian in thought and feeling. But propaganda was less influential than the social pressures generated in the United States. Italian-American Fascism was essentially an attempt by an unpopular alien minority to derive from across the Atlantic the security and the status they were denied in America. Mussolini came to power when the morale of Italian-Americans was at its lowest. The Sacco-Vanzetti case had revealed to them the full extent of the hostility they faced; it had left them feeling inferior and rejected, while the immigration restriction law of 1924, which virtually halted Italian immigration, seemed to brand them as undesirable elements. In these circumstances Mussolini, by making Italy respected abroad, conferred respectability upon Italians everywhere. To quote Angelo Pellegrini: 'Mussolini had made America understand that Italy had had a great civilization ... and that he was going to return the glory of Rome to Italy, re-establish the Roman Empire, so every Italian stuck out his chest, saying: "That's my boy, you know, that's my boy".' Italian-Americans took enormous pride in Fascist achievements, especially those which were widely publicized in the United States: Marshal Balbo's mass formation flight from Rome to Chicago in May 1933, for instance, and the capture of the Atlantic Blue Riband by the Italian liner *Rex* the following August. Devotion to Fascist Italy reached its peak with the Ethiopian War of 1935-6. Huge crowds turned out to express their support; men contributed money to the Italian war effort, many women answered Mussolini's appeal to send their wedding rings. A few hundred Italian-Americans left to fight in the Italian Army, despite warnings that they would lose their American citizenship if they took the Fascist oath. In 1936 Italian-American organizations staged an effective campaign against changes in the Neutrality Act which would have hampered Italian military operations. The campaign produced a remarkable display of political solidarity. Even Fiorello La Guardia, the Italian-American mayor of New York, who was privately anti-Fascist, found it expedient to support it. For more than a decade after the march on Rome Mussolini enjoyed a remarkable vogue in the United States. Conservative businessmen praised him as a bulwark against Communism; some of the most prominent people in America - they included William Randolph Hearst, Cardinal O'Connell, Will Rogers and Ezra Pound - were his warm admirers. So long as that situation continued Italian-Americans felt free to express Fascist sympathies untroubled by the problem of reconciling divergent loyalties. But as American opinion turned against Mussolini and relations between the United States and Italy deteriorated, Italian-

Americans were obliged to reconsider their attitudes. The need to do so became more urgent with the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis and the vicious anti-American campaign in the Italian press in 1938. From that point on Italian-American views of Mussolini became increasingly ambivalent. As late as June 1940 he was still sufficiently admired for Roosevelt's 'stab-in-the-back' speech, criticizing Italy's entry into the war, to be angrily resented in Italian-American neighbourhoods. But thereafter it became increasingly evident that support for Fascism was inconsistent with American patriotism. Once the issue came to be thus defined there was no doubt that Italian-Americans would discover, that they were more American than Italian and that their ultimate loyalty could only be to the United States. It could be argued that the United States, having treated Italian immigrants with singular disdain, had not much deserved that loyalty. But she was given it just the same.

Note: ITALIAN EXODUS

[http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~africam/italian\\_exodus.pdf](http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~africam/italian_exodus.pdf)