Italy: internal migration 1800–present

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As the crossroads of the Mediterranean and a stepping-stone between Africa and Europe, the Italian peninsula has always whetted the appetite of foreign powers. Its identity is rooted in centuries of invasion, and many different groups have inhabited its coasts and cities. The migration of Goths, Lombards, Arabs, and Turks, and, later, domination by the French, Spanish, and Austrian monarchies have left a deep mark on the cultural and genetic heritage of the Italian people. The country's political unification as an independent state (1861) meant coming to terms with a composite, variegated population that spoke different dialects from one valley to the next, and in which only roughly 2.5 percent spoke the standard Italian language. Moreover, there was a clear economic divide between regions, with intensive agriculture in the north and areas with grain-based extensive agriculture on latifundia in the south; some scholars have even seen the Italian unification as the annexation of a foreign territory by the north (Schneider 1997).

Internal Italian migration in the late modern age reflects these characteristics: an ongoing albeit variable gap between the economic performance of a stagnant south and a dynamic north, which has caused massive population shifts from one part of the country to the other; an extremely complex symbiosis between urban areas and the surrounding countryside, with a dense network of cities dating back to the Middle Ages, when the Italian peninsula was the most urbanized region of Europe after Flanders; an ambivalent connection between internal migration and migratory phenomena directed abroad, in that internal movement could fill the "gaps" left by expatriates or offer an alternative to emigration (De Clementi 1999).

Migration 1800 to 1900

The existence of borders between different states did not prevent considerable population flows within the peninsula. In the modern era, it was crisscrossed by constant migration of both the elites and the masses: merchants and peasants, artisans and buskers, shepherds and beggars, all with different patterns of mobility (Levi et al. 1990). In the first half of the 19th century, political geography took second place to the economic and social dynamics underlying systems of territorial mobility. Even when any attempt was made to control border crossings, the police had limited tools to work with. Nevertheless, the existence of borders generated conflict between the authorities and migratory systems: in the first half of the 19th century, for example, the system of local economies that revolved around the resources of the river Po was so significant that it created vast problems for managing mobility between the many states lining its shores (Meriggi 2005).

In the countryside, especially in the south, peasants often had to walk for hours to reach the fields where they worked. The distance between home and workplace was not determined by convenience, but by other factors: the concentration of the most fertile land in just a few hands, protection from attackers, or safety from diseases such as malaria, which was widespread in Italy (Snowden 2006). Moreover, at certain times of year the harvest or other agricultural activities drew many hands from outside for tasks that had to be performed quickly. At the dawn of the 19th century, the migrations toward the rice fields of the Po valley and the latifundia of the rural area around Rome were among the largest in Europe, respectively involving 50,000 and

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100,000 people per year (Lucassen 1987). Italy's first state census, in 1861, estimated that only one-quarter of migratory movements were directed abroad, while the remainder, about 140,000, took place within the nation.

In the 18th century, population growth increased movement from the country to the city, causing severe urban crowding. Local authorities, especially in the north, therefore introduced stringent measures to control the entrances to cities and send home the poor, in part by requiring the registration of residency (Davis 1988). After unification, the hierarchy of cities also changed – in particular, the status of royal capital, at first conferred on Turin, moved to Florence in 1865, and then to Rome in 1870. Each of these shifts set thousands of people in motion, following the country's bureaucratic elites; the definitive choice of Rome as the capital triggered an exceptional demographic boom in what had been a small, run-down city in the middle of the countryside: +74 percent between 1871 and 1901. Population increases in Italian cities were brought about first and foremost by factors related to administration and status, rather than economics and production (Gambi 1974; Alfani 2008).

Migration 1900 to 1950

Italy's economy took off in the first decade of the twentieth century, with major consequences for internal migration; urban services and the textile industry employed people from the municipality or province, who divided their time between the factory and the fields, while steel mills and heavy industry drew specialized workers from hundreds of miles away (Federico 1985). In the early 20th century, these activities primarily developed in the north, which also had the highest rates of internal mobility and attracted a fair number of migrants from the south. In 1901, over 200,000 southern-born Italians lived in other areas: some in the north (79,465), but most in the center (112,704), especially in Rome, the administrative and political heart of the nation. Ten years later, in 1911, the north had caught up as a pull area, with 131,658 southern-born residents as opposed to 138,371 in the center (Vitali 1974). In the period of peak emigration abroad, seasonal flows within the country also rose sharply, reaching 730,000 migrants in 1910.

World War I exacerbated the concentration of the industrial manufacturing sector in the north, causing significant population shifts. Nevertheless, internal migration from underdeveloped areas (the south and Veneto) toward major urban centers (Rome and the north) truly took off in the 1930s, at the height of fascism; after migratory flows toward other countries were halted by the international economic situation and laws passed in the United States, it reached an annual average of 1.2 million transfers and a rate of 30 migrants per thousand inhabitants (Treves 1976). These obstacles to emigration abroad brought about a sharp change in Italian migratory policies, with major consequences for internal migration. The turning point came in 1927, when Mussolini announced a new birth-promotion and anti-emigration campaign: emigration became an evil to be avoided, replaced by migration within the peninsula toward reclaimed marshland, or toward the Italian colonies in Africa; moreover, urban growth had to be arrested in order to encourage the country's ruralization.

The Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione (General Emigration Commission), founded in the liberal era, was shut down, and the new Commissariato per le Migrazioni e la Colonizzazione Interna (Commission for Migration and Internal Colonization) took its place (Ipsen 1996). Between 1929 and 1930, employment-related relocation became the province of a complex, obligatory, state-run system of aid, which put a straitjacket on internal migration; during the 1930s, a single authority took over the coordination of mobility. A complex apparatus of bureaucratic and police control was set up in train stations and construction yards, based on prefectorial decrees, permits, and expulsions. The largest land reclamation effort focused on the Agro

Pontino, a coastal area southwest of Rome, where 55,000 hectares were divided up into farms and five new towns were built, along with 17 rural villages: almost 3,000 farm families were transferred here from Veneto and Emilia-Romagna, a total of 29,000 people (Gaspari 2001; Protasi & Sonnino 2003).

Fascism's attempt to modify the demographic behavior of the populace was a failure. Colonization fell short of expectations, cities ballooned out of control (the population of Rome doubled from 660,000 in 1921 to 1.4 million in 1941), and the unemployed did not look for work only within the country or in the colonies, as one can see from the massive emigration to Germany from 1938 to 1942, when 0.5 million Italian laborers voluntarily lent a hand to the Nazi war economy.

Migration 1950 to 1990

In the Italian Republic, freedom of movement symbolized the end of the dictatorship and the war, marking a new era of greater prosperity and liberty. The push factors did not immediately encounter the proper conditions on the other side to send applicants abroad, however, given the slow pace of European reconstruction and the restrictions on immigration that were in force throughout the world. Moreover, until 1961, internal movement was regulated by fascist laws which the authorities of major cities were reluctant to lift (Gallo 2012). Still, there was an unprecedented upsurge in mobility rates starting in the mid-1950s, which reached the record figure of 2.2 million migrants in 1962 (43.6 per thousand residents).

The factories and urban services of the industrial north attracted a vast amount of manpower from the surrounding countryside and areas further afield; whereas in other European countries, the "Glorious Thirty" drew immigrants from abroad, workers in Italy came from underdeveloped parts of the country. From 1955 to 1975, over 3.7 million people moved from the south to the center and north, 1.35 million of them from 1958 to 1963 alone. Some 87 percent of the positive migratory balance was concentrated in a handful of provinces: Milan, Rome, Turin, Genoa, Varese, Florence, and Bologna. Italy's traditional rural world vanished during this period. From 1955 to 1965, the general push in the direction of urban areas and just a few parts of the countryside brought about the first "actual social and demographic unification of the country" (Lanaro 1992: 276). From 1951 to 1971, the percentage of the population residing in a region other than their region of birth rose from 8 percent to over 20 percent.

The remarkable demographic growth of cities has contributed to the growth of housing shortages. In Rome, whose population grew by 70 percent between 1951 and 1971, thousands of families lived in distressing sanitary conditions in shacks and makeshift homes: in the late 1950s, over 100,000 people were estimated to be shack-dwellers (Seronde-Babonaux 1980). In Milan, some outlying slums expanded with no regard for regulation or planning, involving investments in self-building and speculative dynamics that demonstrated a high capacity for enterprise among immigrants (Foot 2005; Alasia & Montaldi 2010). In Turin, where the relative immigration rates were the highest of all major Italian cities, workers who had recently arrived from the south played an active role in the labor struggles from 1968 to 1972, reversing the image of the immigrant as a strikebreaker.

Starting in 1972, mobility rates began to fall throughout the country. Cities in particular lost their pull, and one can hypothesize that in terms of absorptive capacity they had reached their definitive saturation point. Moreover, due to industrial restructuring, positive flows between the northwest and south were seen for the first time in 1983–84. Until the 1990s, the slackening of south–north migration, the rise of commuting, and the exponential growth of immigration from abroad seemed to indicate that Italian society had reached an equilibrium that would allow migratory stasis: immigrants, not Italians, were the ones on the move (Faini et al. 1997). The last 15 years have belied this notion, however.

Migration: 1990 to 2010s

Internal migration began to grow again in the mid-1990s (+25% from 1995 to 2008), with foreigners playing a substantial role, accounting for 15 percent. Specifically, movement from the south to the center-north increased: between 1990 and 2009, 2,385,000 people moved from the south to the north; the peak came in 2000 with almost 150,000 changes of residence, and then figures began to fall off again. One unique characteristic seems to be an increase in the average age at the first move, and a slow but steady increase in the movement of people with higher levels of education: while until about 1996, 7 percent of migrants had a university degree, from 2002 to 2007 the average grew to 12 percent (Svimez 2010). The replacement of centralized industrial manufacturing models by flexible models of relocation and outsourcing have given a new economic role to smaller cities and more highly skilled jobs, so that the regions of the "Third Italy" (Tuscany, Emilia Romagna, the northeast) now lead the way in migratory growth.

Recently, there have been recurrent signs of a vigorous resurgence of internal south–north migration, inspiring explicit comparisons to the boom years. Some demographers and historians have worked to put the scale of the phenomenon into perspective, although there is no question that interesting forms of internal mobility are emerging (Livi Bacci 2007; Bonifazi 2009; Ramella 2009). The unbridged economic gap between south and north, aggravated by the recent economic crisis, has led to the reappearance of significant interregional movement and long-distance commuting (De Santis 2010).

SEE ALSO: Africa, internal migration; Brazil: internal migration; Internal migration: an overview; Internal migration, ethnic groups in the UK; Italy: migration 1815 to present

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