Emigrant Nation

The Making of Italy Abroad

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Introduction: The Program of Emigrant Colonialism

Between 1880 and 1915, thirteen million Italians emigrated to North and South America, Europe, and the Mediterranean Basin, launching the largest emigration from any country in recorded world history.[1] Italy's experience stands out as an example of the globalizing processes of international migration, as emigration created a capillary network tying Italy in an intimate way to other societies across the world. It was a circulation of individuals and families, but also of capital, traditions, and ideas. Italian emigration changed Italy and the world, with a sustained impact on economic developments, social customs, governmental institutions, and political theory: historical lessons still relevant for immigration and emigration in the twenty-first century.

As a newly united nation, Italy struggled to adapt to its mass exodus. Intellectuals and politicians debated emigration's impact and implications: Was emigration temporary or permanent, good or bad? Was it a "hemorrhage" of Italy's best blood, or did it reflect the exuberance of the Italian people expanding across the globe? Should Italy center itself as the pole of Italians scattered worldwide, or should it conquer new territories for emigrant settlement under Italian rule? Intense controversy produced radically different proposals to solve Italy's domestic and international problems. By 1900, Liberal statesmen had developed a flexible set of programs to establish a network of culture, trade, and exchange with Italians outside of Italy's territory and legal reach. This idea of Italian expatriate communities to the mother country *(la madre patria)* was opposed by anti-Liberal Nationalists in Italy and anti-immigrant bigots worldwide, yet Italy reaped tremendous benefits from its emigration during a crucial period in its economic development.

From Italy's point of view, emigration presented a range of political and economic challenges and opportunities. In the first major study of Italian colonialism, published in 1874, Leone Carpi observed that the Italian word *colonìa* meant not only overseas possessions, but also settlements of emigrants in foreign countries.[2] Carpi proposed, based on this definition, that emigration itself was a type of colonial expansion, though tenuous and unpredictable. And unlike colonists in Africa who profited from exploiting indigenous laborers, emigrants themselves stood to be exploited unless protected by active intervention from their native country. With enormous human resources at stake, Italy had much to lose or gain by cultivating emigration. The state had first associated emigration with criminals, draft dodgers, or irresponsible adventurers. It was a problem for the national police. But as emigration rapidly grew, restricting population movements became impossible and even dangerous. The state began to intervene actively in migration, with the aim of extending international influence and reaping colonial benefits. The foreign ministry, responsible for Italy's possessions in Africa, also developed a policy for emigration settlements in Europe and the Americas. These official policies and related private programs I have termed "emigrant colonialism." The Italian state mobilized resources and forged alliances, even with the Catholic Church, bridging the bitter gulf between church and state. Debates over emigration, and their consequences for domestic and foreign policy, shaped Italy's place in the world. Italians became pioneers in establishing a "global nation," beyond imperial control and territorial jurisdiction, held together by ties of culture, communications, ethnicity, and nationality.[3]

How could Italy reach emigrants who had voluntarily left their homes? Italian activists and theorists emphasized the extralegal and nongovernmental aspects of Italian identity, or *italianità:* formative experiences in schools and churches; taste and tradition in food, literature, and music; ties to family in Italy; patriotic celebrations and festivals; and social clubs and organizations. In the words of Bishop Geremia Bonomelli, "Language and religion are the two principal means for keeping alive and solid the ties between mother Italy and her daughter Italy, which grows and prospers in the South American Continent."[4] This sentiment was confirmed by the work of social scientists: Lamberto Loria established the field of Italian ethnography at the height of emigration, between 1905 and 1913, by studying the behavior of Italian emigrants abroad, especially their loy-

alty to native traditions and cuisine (which required authentic Italian food imports). Loria and his colleagues hypothesized an overarching national identity over the many inevitable contradictions among the ancient peoples on the Italian peninsula, a cultural identity tried and tested through the crucible of emigration. With a scientific approach, *italianità* could be demonstrably replicated in a variety of environments and situations abroad. Emigrants' Italian identity could be proven to resist the pressures of assimilationist "melting pots" as if in a human laboratory. In defining *italianità* abroad as a sentimental tradition, rather than legal citizenship, Italians influenced their domestic identity as well. Italy is an example of what I term an "emigrant nation," an analytical category embracing population at home and also abroad, beyond territorial borders. "Making Italy Abroad" meant not just forming an expatriate community, but changing Italy itself. Emigration's impact was fundamental, shifting the roots of society and culture in the mother country and also in Europe, the Americas, and Africa, much like the mass migrations of the twenty-first-century world. While many aspects of the Italian experience were unique to an imperialist era, the theoretical questions that Italians faced still bear comparison today.

Italy was itself a new creation, recently united as a country between 1859 and 1871 after more than a millennium of regional divisions. Italian Liberals triumphed with the establishment of a constitutional monarchy ruling the entire peninsula, but Republicans were bitterly disappointed. The King of Sardinia, Victor Emmanuel II, now King of Italy, drew upon a long pedigree from his family's rule of Piedmont but lacked a clear vision for his new possessions. The Italian Parliament too remained uncertain on how to face the future. One of the state's first challenges was a wildly expanding and fluctuating current of emigration. Though one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, Italy lagged behind its neighbors in economic productivity and development. Italian laborers had long traveled for temporary work to neighboring regions within Italy and to Austria-Hungary, Germany, Switzerland, and France. But under the pressures of industrialization and changing markets, transoceanic emigration became more attractive and more necessary. Italian workers could double or triple their wages by working abroad.[5] The northern regions of Veneto, Lombardy, and Liguria maintained emigration to Europe, and launched a growing migration to South America. From 1898 onward, however, the United States surpassed Brazil and Argentina as a

destination for emigrants, and emigration to Brazil dropped off after 1901. Australia, which had hosted thousands of Italians, sharply curtailed its own immigration in 1901. In these years at the turn of the century, emigration from southern Italy began en masse, primarily to the United States. Year by year, steamships displaced sailing ships in the transatlantic passenger trade, making the crossing fast, cheap, and safe. Between 1878 and 1881, Italy's annual migration to the Americas doubled from twenty to forty thousand; it doubled again by 1886, exceeding consistently high continental migration, then doubled again in 1891 and again in 1904, with more than half a million Italians emigrating across the Atlantic in 1906 and 1913. From 1905 to 1907, one in fifty Italians emigrated each year; in 1913, 2.4 percent of Italy's resident population emigrated abroad. The national census of 1911 revealed that Italian expatriates numbered more than one-sixth of Italy's population.[6]

Such colossal numbers, and their impact, made emigration the most important issue facing Italy after unification. Italian society, culture, and politics relied upon a shifting population base, as emigrants moved between countries and continents or returned home, taking social and economic resources with them. Emigration galvanized a host of domestic concerns: ancient divisions within the recently united peninsula, regional underdevelopment in southern Italy, prevailing illiteracy, and organized crime. Why did so many choose to depart their newly created country? What did it mean to be Italian abroad and at home?

Emigrant settlement also molded Italy's international identity. Italy had been formed as a Great Power, alongside Britain, Russia, France, Austria-Hungary, and Germany. As a result, Italy's leaders felt pressure after 1882 to compete in the European scramble for colonies in Africa and Asia. Could Italy afford to fall behind the king of Belgium, who by 1885 had seized the Congo Basin? Italian emigration and colonialism developed together, joined by proposals to settle Italian African territories with emigrants diverted from the Americas. In the background loomed fears of Europe's Great War, cast in terms of the Darwinian "struggle for life."[7] The war was inevitable after Germany's annexation of French territory in 1871; it would explode in 1914, at the height of mass migration. Would Italian emigrants fight for the survival of their mother country?

Amid the many tensions resulting from emigration, two theories regarding Italian expatriates forever changed international politics: na-

tional socialism and irredentism. Enrico Corradini's national socialism characterized Italy as a "proletarian nation" whose emigrant workers were enslaved and abused by "bourgeois nations." According to Nationalists and Fascists, Italy must unite its social classes internally, and overthrow its external masters by international armed struggle. Another explosive theory was irredentism, meaning the national redemption of ethnic minorities abroad. Not all Italians had been united within the borders of the Kingdom of Italy: the "nation" of the Italian people was not yet one with the Italian "state." This missing culmination of political union fostered an enduring concern for Italians outside Italy. The term "irredentism," invented in the 1870s, evoked the redemption of Italian lands still under Austrian imperial rule *(le terre irredente)* by including all speakers of the Italian language in the Italian nation and uniting their territory to the Italian polity. Like other irredentist movements that have aimed to unite populations across political borders, Italian activists made ethnic identity, language, and religion into key weapons of political struggle across international borders.[8] The massive movement of emigrants outside the kingdom led to a union of irredentists with emigration advocates, both joining in social, cultural, and ultimately political concern for Italians abroad. Teaching the Italian language abroad was subsidized by the Italian government directly and indirectly through Italian religious, secular, and state schools abroad. Adult Italian emigrants who spoke only regional language and dialects, and their children born abroad, would learn the "language of Dante" to communicate with fellow emigrants and with the Italian state. Emigrants became part of Italy's ongoing drama of unification and Risorgimento, or resurgence, building Italy as a "global nation." The romantic fervor and dynamism of political exiles such as Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi had earlier provided vital impetus and support for Italy from abroad. Now Italian expatriates again played an integral part in shaping the face of their fatherland, much like the roles played by Chinese emigrants in establishing the Chinese republic and Polish emigrants in creating an independent Poland in the twentieth century.[9]

An expatriate network offered clear advantages to the Italian state. To extend its reach, the government collapsed the analytical categories of emigrant, exile, expatriate, and unredeemed into the single theoretical concept of "Italians Abroad." All were part of the fatherland, without distinguishing between emigrants traveling third-class and expatriate

businessmen traveling first-class. Under the banner of Italians Abroad, Italy pioneered an ethnic form of "cultural citizenship," valuing cultural belonging over formal political allegiances.[10] Beyond the idealized "nation-state" of the Kingdom of Italy, uniting all members of the Italian nation in a single state, there was the imagined "nation-superstate," a network of Italians worldwide in a supranational global nation. Drawing upon the powerful rhetoric of irrendentism, the government held censuses of Italians abroad, and sponsored congresses and expositions to showcase the accomplishments of Italians beyond the borders of Italy. Perhaps Italy could imitate the world's biggest empire. J. R. Seeley had argued in 1883 that the British empire had developed spontaneously, expanding from Britain into a "Greater Britain."[11] To forge a "Greater Italy," the Liberal Italian state deliberately treated emigration and colonial expansion as one and the same.

With a powerful resonance, Italians conflated the mass migration of workers with the expatriation of intellectual and political elites. The exile of Dante Alighieri from his native Florence, and even the emigration of Virgil from Mantua, blended rhetorically with the temporary economic exile of millions of laborers worldwide. When considering historic precedents for emigration, Liberal Italian politicians shunned the idea of "diaspora," or dispersal. The historic plight of the Jewish nation, its population scattered by defeat and decline, challenged Italy to react creatively to the dangers and risks of emigration. Before Italy's unification, the ancient nation had been regularly compared with fallen Israel. Giuseppe Mazzini characterized the divided Italian peoples as "soldiers without a banner, Israelites among the nations," and indicated that unification would remove the need for emigration.[12] Giuseppe Verdi launched his career in 1842 with the patriotic opera *Nabucco,* adapting the history of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Captivity as a parable for the contemporary oppression of Italians by the Austrian Empire. The diasporic children of Israel pine for their homes, and Verdi's chorus "Va' pensiero sull'ali dorate," based on Psalm 137, became a patriotic anthem for Italians divided under papal, Habsburg, and Bourbon rule:

> Fly, my thoughts, on golden wings,
> Go to rest on the slopes and hills
> Where breezes warm and free
> Make fragrant my native soil!
> Greet the banks of the Jordan,

> The fallen towers of Zion,
> My beautiful and desolate fatherland!
> What dear and fatal memories![13]

But once the Kingdom of Italy had united the peninsula, except for lands still under Austro-Hungarian rule, Italian subjects were no longer the slaves of foreign empires. Italy's liberal rulers believed the new home country would meet its children's needs abroad, and there would be no more diaspora.[14] Instead, the word became a politically loaded invective to attack the government of Liberal Italy. Enrico Corradini, who founded the Italian Nationalist party and rallied support for Benito Mussolini's Fascism, condemned Italy's support for emigration in 1909: "The Jews of antiquity always mourned their emigration which they called dispersion, *diaspora.* But we have become used to boasting of it. . . . this appears a sign of our blindness and meanness of spirit, from which the Jews did not suffer."[15] Some scholars today have applied the term "diaspora" to Italian emigration in this period, but unlike the Jewish and African diasporas, Italians were never stateless. Italy offered diplomatic aid abroad and support for return home. The state aimed to bring all Italians together to recreate the international prestige, power, and wealth of Italy's former glories.

Italy's history offered two very different models for achieving imperial greatness based upon population settlement. Ancient Roman legions had conquered and then settled colonies in the Mediterranean, spreading Italian language and culture by force as well as by persuasion. The vision of a reborn Roman empire in Africa promised power and influence for "Greater Italy," and was the basis of Italy's African empire in the nineteenth century. Its principal architect was prime minister Francesco Crispi, who in 1890 pioneered state-sponsored settler colonialism in East Africa along the Red Sea, with emigration as his justification:

> What is our purpose in Eritrea? Our purpose is the institution of a colony that can accommodate that immense emigration which goes to foreign lands, placing this emigration under the dominion and laws of Italy; our purpose is also to do everything that can help our commerce and the commerce of the country we have occupied.[16]

Crispi promised to Parliament to protect emigrants on conquered Italian soil in Africa. His disastrous error was to assume the African lands were blank slates awaiting occupation by Italy's surplus population of would-be emigrants.

An alternative model for imperial power and wealth recalled the medieval trading empires of Venice and Genoa. Some Liberals argued that Italy could support Italian emigrant communities worldwide in a cooperative, patriotic synergy. Instead of exploiting foreign populations by force, Italy's "colonies" of emigrants would voluntarily maintain ties with their mother country, at less expense and with much less bloodshed. To encourage this transnational relationship, Italian state rhetoric maintained that emigrants were an organic part of the nation and part of the expanded state, linked through a shared cultural background. This somewhat artificial identity was deliberately constructed, subsidized, and elaborated through a variety of channels for young and old, including schools, patriotic banquets, choirs and bands, gymnastic groups, the Dante Alighieri Society, the Italian Geographic Society, the Catholic Scalabrinian missionaries, and Italian Chambers of Commerce Abroad. Liberal Italy looked to emigrant settlements or colonies in the Mediterranean and the Americas, whether of wealthy traders in Cairo, construction workers in Tunis, or the growing Italian populations of Buenos Aires and New York, to bring territories within Italy's sphere of influence.

For Italy to gain benefits from its emigrants, the fruits of their sacrifices would have to return home. The state encouraged and welcomed all return migration, be it from patriotic loyalty, economic disappointment abroad, or visits to family at home. Approximately half of Italian emigrants returned, bringing capital and experience with them. Upon return all emigrants regained Italian citizenship automatically, even if they had previously renounced it.[17] With the support of United States regulators, Italy set up a special channel for emigrants to send home remittances, accumulating in the millions of dollars, through the nonprofit Banco di Napoli. Italian emigration provided economic returns that African imperialism could never match. As Italy transformed from an agricultural to an industrial economy, emigrant remittances steadied the Italian currency and contributed substantially to Italy's international balance of payments on the gold standard.[18] At the grassroots level, the infusion of money helped end usury in the countryside and fund new homes and new businesses. Those returning to their hometowns from overseas were called "Americans" [*americani*] with the stereotype of wealth, independence, and exotic mystique. Thanks to chain migration building upon family connections and local friendships, many Italian towns produced a mirror community of emigrants concentrated in a town or neighbor-

hood overseas. But could these advantages be sustained on the national level for Italy? What were the long-term risks and advantages of developing emigration as colonial expansion?

Emigration directly affected Italy's strategic situation, just as migration shapes international security in the twenty-first century.[19] The massive numbers of male emigrants, and their male children, were all reservists or prospective soldiers in the Italian conscript army. Consuls abroad maintained records of male emigrants so they could be recalled to the Italian army. The debate over dual citizenship for emigrants turned on the military obligations of universal conscription. Even males born abroad to Italian fathers were by Italian law held responsible for military service in wartime.[20] The Italian state's eagerness to appropriate emigrants as subjects of the Italian King, and to claim emigrant settlements as Italian colonies, influenced how migrants were perceived in their new communities, even if individual immigrants had broken ties with their native land. Nations receiving Italians in North and South America and Europe, such as the "immigration-states" of Argentina and the United States, viewed Italy's designs with suspicion, as the Italian state planned for Italians in America to remain loyal to their mother country in affection, culture, and trade even during military hostilities. Italy's policies could run directly counter to emigrants' best interests.[21]

Controversies over colonialism engaged Italy's most prominent politicians, including the founder of Italian Socialism Filippo Turati, the foreign minister Antonino Di San Giuliano, and the prime ministers Luigi Luzzatti and Benito Mussolini. This crucial debate in foreign policy and societal vision proved a potent dialectic in Italian politics from 1890 through World War II. Emigration shaped history within Italy and beyond, affecting European colonialism in Africa, the international economy, the birth of national socialism, and the societies and cultures of the Americas and Africa influenced by the emigrants themselves.

Like gender, race, and class, migration affects all aspects of history, including social, diplomatic, political, economic, and cultural histories. The international history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries must incorporate migration trends and their fundamental impact. Yet the chronology of emigration resists the standard narrative of historical turning points in sending and receiving countries. Emigration's timetable depends upon the decisions of millions of individuals, choosing to leave

their homes; and the decisions of a few legislators, who set the limits of emigrants' choices. Apart from the business cycles of boom and bust, for Italian emigrants the major turning points were 1901, the date of Italy's second emigration law, with its farsighted provisions guiding the peak years of emigration; 1915, when Italy entered the Great War; and 1924, when the United States Congress all but ended Italian immigration under a harsh quota regime.

The story of one individual migrant illustrates many of the transnational issues of politics, family, economics, religion, and war connected to migration. On Columbus Day, 1905, Vincenzo Di Francesca entered New York City, after crossing the ocean aboard the steamship *Città di Napoli* and passing the federal inspections at Ellis Island. Seventeen years old, he had emigrated at the invitation of his brother Antonio, leaving the rest of his family behind in the village of Gratteri, Palermo province, Sicily. Vincenzo remained firmly within Italian spheres even as he traveled the globe. In New York City he converted to Methodism and became a pastor in an Italian Protestant congregation. In November 1914 the Italian consul notified Vincenzo that he had been called to military duty back in Italy. Vincenzo gathered his savings and returned to his homeland. When Italy entered World War I in May 1915, he began service on the front lines with his infantry regiment. After the war he returned to New York, and then was sent to Australia as a pastor to the nascent Italian community in Melbourne. He returned to Italy in 1932 and married a Sicilian. When Italy launched its imperialist invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, Vincenzo was recalled to the army. He was a civilian by the time of World War II but was nonetheless terrified by the Allied bombardment and invasion of Sicily in 1943. Afterwards, Vincenzo decided to retire to a house so remote that no invading army would ever again embroil him in fighting. Miles away from his native village, in the Sicilian interior, he lived the rest of his life in peace.[22]

Vincenzo Di Francesca's story is, of course, unique, but it reflects specific currents in the larger history of Italian migration. The date of his arrival in New York, 12 October, had recently become Columbus Day thanks to the political activity of the city's Italians. The public commemoration of Christopher Columbus, the Italian who united Europe and the Americas, signaled the coalescence of individual immigrants into an influential community, under the leadership in part of Italy and its state-sponsored organizations. Vincenzo's adoption of Protestantism was not