

**LECTURE 15:
THE NEW IMMIGRATION: ITALY**

After 1890, the most important source of immigration to the United States was Italy. Roughly four million Italians came to the country between 1890 and 1920. Although Italy was the birthplace of the Renaissance and the cultural center of Europe for centuries, it lagged behind the rest of Europe politically. Like Germany, Italy was a collection of small states and kingdoms that shared a common language, culture, and (unlike Germany) a common faith in Roman Catholicism. In the north, Piedmont and Lombardy were the primary powers. Southern Italy was frequently dominated by France, Spain, and other powers. The Papal States in central Italy were controlled by the Pope in Rome. There were vast regional differences among Italians. Northern Italy was more connected to the rest of Europe socially and economically. It was more urban and industrialized than the rest of the region. Southern Italy remained overwhelmingly rural and agricultural. During the nineteenth century Italy went through remarkable changes, creating a modern, unified state but also stimulating a vast outpouring of emigrants from the country.

Early Italian Immigration

Small numbers of Italians had been in America since colonial times. The first known Italian Americans were glassblowers who settled in Jamestown, Virginia in 1622. New York was home to a small group of Italian Protestants who arrived during Dutch rule. Small numbers of Italians came with the Old Immigration. There was no sudden jump in Italian immigration to the United States. Rather, the numbers crept up slowly as the century proceeded. About 14,000 came before the Civil War, and by 1890 that figure had reached 100,000. Some came as Roman Catholic missionaries, most notably Father **Samuele Mazzuchelli**, a frontier preacher in the upper Mississippi River valley during the 1830s and 1840s. Mazzuchelli (who the English-speaking frontiersmen called “Matthew Kelly”) built 20 churches, founded an order of nuns, and designed the capitol building for the State of Iowa. He died in 1864 and is buried in southwestern Wisconsin. He is currently a candidate for sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church.

Most Italians came seeking economic opportunities. Most were Northerners who often arrived with some money and skills. Many merchants – especially Genoese – were attracted to the California gold fields in the 1850s. Italian wine makers also recognized the favorable climate for grape growing in the lands north of San Francisco. In fact, by the time of the Civil War, California had 2,805 Italian residents – more than any other state with 2,805. Italians continued to be prominent in early California agriculture, led by the Di Giorgio brothers in the Central Valley, who controlled more than 40,000 acres of land and owned their own vegetable canning company. San Francisco rivaled New York as the capital of Italian America until the dawn of the twentieth century. New York, as

the nation's largest city and commercial center, was second to California in Italian immigrants. New York's early Italians tended to be poorer, often settling in the notorious Five Points section of Manhattan. New Orleans was also an important center of Italian Americans before 1890. Unlike New York and California where northerners predominated, Sicilians predominated in New Orleans, where immigrants worked mainly in the city's maritime industry. After the Civil War and the end of slavery in the United States, there were a few attempts to establish agricultural colonies of Italians in the South, but most failed to survive more than a few years. It should also be noted that America was not the most popular destination for Italian *emigranti* before 1890. South America, most notably Argentina and Brazil, experienced more Italian immigration than did the United States.



Figure 1: Father Mazzuchelli

The wave of nationalism that swept Europe in the nineteenth century had a great impact on Italy. As in Germany, a movement emerged to unify all Italians in an independent country known as the *Risorgimento*. The Risorgimento led to a great deal of political turbulence in Italy. One of the region's most prominent revolutionaries was **Giuseppe Garibaldi**, who dreamed of uniting Italy as a republic. Garibaldi led a guerrilla war campaign to bring segments of Italy together. After the Revolutions of 1848, Garibaldi was forced to leave Italy. He took refuge in New York, sharing a home on Staten Island with an inventor named Antonio Meucci, whose work would help create the telephone. Garibaldi returned to Italy, and in 1861 began a military campaign that marched from Sicily northward toward Rome. In 1861, the whole of Italy was unified politically under King Victor Emmanuel of Piedmont. Although his dream of an Italian republic was not realized, his overall dream – unification – had come true.

Immigration after Unification

Italian unification did not bring peace to the region. The new Italian government was dominated by northerners, who pushed forward a modern, industrial economic policy. Modernization occurred in the North, but Italy south of Rome saw few of the benefits of

industrialization. If anything, the south seemed to be going backward in time. Southerners felt exploited and discriminated against. In their view, the North was ruling them as it would a colony, and favored the interests of wealthy landlords at the expense of the peasants. In addition, the population was growing. Between 1881 and 1911, Italy's population rose from 29 to 35 million people – and that after several million had already left the country. All of this put a great deal of pressure on the Italian peasant, especially in the south of Italy.

In fact, emigration from Italy was overwhelmingly southern in nature. Of the two million Italians who came to the United States between 1900 and 1910, 1.9 million came from the areas south of Rome. Most came from the provinces of Abruzzi, Apulia, Campania, Calabria, and Sicily. New York was by far the most important point of entry for Italian immigrants, accounting for fully 97% of Italian arrivals. Many Italians became *ritorani* – returning to Italy. Of the Italian immigrants who came to America between 1899 and 1924, 46.6% of Italians went home again. Accounting for remigration, the net number of Italians who came to the United States permanently between 1890 and 1920 was slightly more than two million.



Figure 2: Italian "emigranti"

New York would remain the U.S. city with the largest Italian population. In 1910, New York had 340,000 Italian immigrants. Major Italian cities like Florence, Venice, and Genoa did not have as many Italian-speaking residents as New York. Following a long-established pattern among immigrants, Italians often settled in distinctive ethnic neighborhoods, most notably in lower Manhattan along Mulberry Street – an area known today as “Little Italy.” But as more and more Italians came, they began to spread out across the city. The Bronx and Brooklyn also absorbed significant numbers of Italian immigrants. Over time, Italians began to spread throughout the New York area. In 1900, Manhattan contained 71% of New York City's Italian immigrants, but by 1920 Manhattan had just 47%. In 1920, Brooklyn contained 35% of the city's immigrants, and

the Bronx had 10%. Substantial numbers of Italians settled across the Hudson River in New Jersey as well.

From New York, Italians spread to other cities and regions of the country. Many headed north to New England. Boston's Italian population had reached 31,000 by 1910, concentrated mainly in the city's North End. Italians also became an important presence in smaller industrial cities in southern New England like Springfield, Worcester, Hartford, and Providence. Philadelphia had 45,000 Italian immigrants in 1910. Midwestern cities like Cleveland, Detroit, and Milwaukee also attracted Italians. Chicago had 45,000 Italian immigrants in 1910, concentrated on the city's west side. San Francisco and New Orleans remained important centers of Italian American culture, but had been surpassed by the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest – although San Francisco's Italians remained the most economically prosperous of any American city. Poverty was the rule for most Italian immigrants after 1890. In these cities the Italian neighborhoods were even further subdivided along regional lines. In fact, people from the same villages in Italy lived near each other in America. Like the Germans, many Italians thought of themselves as Calabrians and Sicilians first, and only thought of themselves as “Italians” in the United States.

Most Italian immigrants had been poor peasants in Italy, and had few resources left once they got to America. Italians were often forced to settle in run down homes and tenements nearby the factories and other places they worked. Because the Italian immigrant population was so large, it is hard to generalize about their economic functions. Italians performed a variety of jobs. Whenever possible, Italian immigrants often gravitated toward agricultural employment. Given their poverty and decreasing availability of land, Italians could seldom afford to buy land. In the West, some Italians did manage to purchase farms, especially in California. Italian immigrants commonly worked as farm laborers, however, migrating from place to place as the seasons dictated. Many were engaged in “truck farming.” Immigrants sometimes obtained small plots of land in or near urban areas, on which they could grow modest amounts of fruits and vegetables. These farmers then brought their produce into the city and sold them from a truck or a push cart on a city street. Truck farming seldom generated enough money to support a family, although it nicely supplemented the wages from other kinds of work.

But most were common laborers. Many Italians came to America as contract laborers. A *padrone* was the person who arranged work for the Italian immigrants. Usually an Italian himself, (although not always), he would help hook up workers with jobs. Before 1885, a *padrone* would recruit workers in Italy itself. He and his agents would scour southern Italy looking for men who wanted work in America. The *padrone* would then make all the travel arrangements to America, as well as the necessary contacts with American employers. For his work, the *padrone* usually took a percentage of the immigrant workers' wages. American companies often recruited Italian workers overseas as strikebreakers, and organized labor fought for halting the recruitment of contract laborers overseas. In 1885, Congress passed the **Foran Act**, making the importation of contract labor illegal. Afterward, the *padrone* would have to work the docks in America looking for immigrants who wanted or needed work, but increasing numbers of immigrants

arrived and *padrones* had little difficulty finding immigrants willing to work. Some continued to recruit workers overseas in violation of the law.

The contacts of the *padrones* were often widespread across the country. *Padrones* in New York could arrange to have workers sent to Chicago and the Midwest, or into the deep South. Italians were often associated with the railroad and construction industries; Italian immigrant labor built a substantial portion of the United States in the years between 1890 and 1920. The *padrone* performed a useful and valuable function. He was an intermediary between workers and employers of very different cultures; workers rarely spoke English and employers rarely spoke Italian. Many *padrones* looked after their workers and treated them well, helping them send money back home and even helping them avoid problems with local law enforcement if trouble arose. However, the *padrone* sometimes gained an unsavory reputation. They sometimes took advantage of immigrants who did not speak English, or understand American culture. They might shortchange them of their wages, or knowingly send men into inhumane working conditions. Some were even known to arrange for women to come to America as prostitutes. Most did not do such things, of course, and provided a valuable service both to Italian immigrants and American employers.