

Arresting the *Padroni* Problem and Rescuing the White Slaves in America: Italian Diplomats, Immigration Restrictionists & the Italian Bureau 1881-1901

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This paper examines the conflict between the Italian foreign ministry and the US government over the protection of Italian immigrants in America from two perspectives: first, the crusader, Celso Cesare Moreno, who sought to end the *padrone* system of contract labor agents and tried to rescue the so called *schiaivi bianchi*, «white slaves». But his campaign to protect Italian immigrants developed into exaggerated and destructive attacks to the Italian ambassador and his staff. Second, from the perspective of the Italian ambassador, Francesco Saverio Fava, who worked to stem the influence of the *padroni* and established the Italian Bureau at Ellis Island to protect Italian immigrants¹. Ironically, the ferocity of Moreno's attacks on Italian diplomats only served immigration restrictionists, like Terrence Powderly and Henry Cabot Lodge, who wanted to eliminate the Italian Bureau as a means to restrict and eventually halt Italian immigration.

Scholar Joseph Cosco (2003, p. 8) has shown how Americans in the 1890's discarded their romantic view of Italy in a shift to what he called «italophobia». John Zucchi (1992) described the scandalous abuse of Italian children who worked as street musicians, after *padroni* masters had literally bought control over them from their parents. Luciano Iorizzo briefly examined the battle over the Italian Bureau in an article «The Padrone and Immigrant Distribution» (1970). Italian historian Laura Pilotti (1993, pp. 31-36) has examined these events from the perspective of the Italian foreign ministry; but the complex

interaction between Moreno and the Italian ambassador in America has yet to be explored.

Little has been written about the nature of the clash between the shadowy figure of Moreno and the Italian ambassador to the US, Francesco Fava (no relation to the author). Moreno's relentless campaign to rescue Italian children from the *padroni* and what he claimed was an international web controlling Italian labor, later turned into attacks on Italian diplomats who were fighting the same evils. His language became so malicious that he was jailed for libel in 1895 and then wrote a book, *History of a Great Wrong*, launching even more virulent attacks on the Italian foreign ministry². Rome also wanted to arrest the *padrone* problem in America but their efforts were damaged by Moreno's campaign. He increasingly drew support from nativists and immigration restrictionists, thus aiding those whose goal was not to protect Italians in America, but to halt Italian immigration.

The Terrence Powderly Papers and records of the US Industrial Commission reveal the central role Moreno played in destroying the Italian Bureau on Ellis Island. Materials in the Charles Sumner papers evidence his persuasive ability to draw support from politicians and advance his own legislative agenda. Moreno corresponded with presidents, kings and politicians, and his book *History of a Great Wrong*, reveals much about him and his crusade. He testified before Congressional committees, drafted legislation on contract labor, Pacific fisheries and a transpacific cable scheme, and had contacts in the Harrison and McKinley administrations.

An exploration of the Italian diplomatic records in the Archivio di Stato in Venezia, the *Bollettino dell'emigrazione*, Documenti Diplomatici, and Italian Bureau Reports well illustrates the Italian foreign ministry's battle to protect Italians in America against the *padroni* and lynching. The Italian Bureau operated for a brief five years between 1895 and 1900, but the titanic struggle between Moreno and the Italian diplomats spanned more than two decades. In the end his crusade helped American immigration restrictionists more than Italian immigrants.

In order to understand these events it is important to examine the origins of Moreno's campaign to rescue the *schivi bianchi* or white slaves in post-Civil War America, Celso Cesare Moreno, born in Dogliani, Italy in 1831 was already a global adventurer and soldier of fortune when he arrived in America (after sojourns in Sumatra, China, Vietnam and Hawaii) around 1868. He later claimed the sight of Italian children working as street musicians one cold February night began his quest for anti-*padrone* legislation. He wrote dramatic letters to Senator Charles Sumner appealing for a campaign to free the white slaves. Then in 1873 Moreno appealed to the Associazione Donnarumma, an Italian-American group, and spoke at their picnic in New York city on «the Italian slaves». He made a

dramatic plea to «bring about the abolition of this new system of slavery» and received coverage in the New York papers (Sumner, 1988)³.

By casting it as a struggle against white slavery, a powerful argument just after the American Civil War, the Donnarumma group pledged its support to what appeared to be a humanitarian cause to rescue fellow Italian immigrants. Less prominent in the resolutions was a wholesale attack on the Italian consul for not promoting Moreno's agenda. Moreno also continued to write to Senator Charles Sumner and Frederick Douglass and echoed the rhetoric of their crusade. He called upon Americans to «assist us in the deliverance of the whites» and to «see crowned with success our efforts in delivering from the most abject slavery thousands of Italian children». Moreno helped Senator Charles Sumner draft and pass the *Padrone* Act in 1874.

Anti-*padrone* legislation was enacted at the federal (and state) level in three phases: first, to protect children from apprenticeship contracts, next to halt adult labor contracting, and finally, to shut down the *padrone*-operated banks. The key piece of legislation, in 1885, the Alien Contract Labor Law or Foran Act, attempted to halt these abuses by giving US Immigration Inspectors the power to deport immigrants suspected of having signed labor contracts.

The Italian government also passed legislation, crafted by two consuls in New York City, to halt the *padrone*'s ability to take children out of Italy on labor contracts. From the Italian ambassador's perspective, the best safeguard for adult immigrants was to separate them from the *padroni* at the gates of Ellis Island. Ambassador Fava lobbied the US Treasury Secretary for permission to open an «Italian Bureau» on Ellis Island to enable the consulate to assist and guide Italian immigrants once they were ready to leave Ellis Island and move them past the *padrone* waiting at the gates. Ambassador Fava also worked with developers to establish two farming communities in Arkansas. Neither succeeded because Italians perceived that the American south bore marked similarities to the Italian south: lowland disease-prone areas rife with malaria, a problematic land tenure system: southern landowners required a delay of twenty years before immigrants could purchase the land they worked. Increased lynching attacks on Italians in the south, most notably the 1891 New Orleans lynching of eleven Italians, and others in Louisiana and Mississippi worsened the situation.

The final stages of the ambassador's campaign was to sponsor legislation in Italy to establish a government-sponsored labor agency within the Italian Bureau, and cut out entirely the web of labor agents preying on immigrants. He then planned to charter a Banca d'Italia branch to safeguard Italian immigrants' financial transactions for those both arriving and returning to Italy.

The Italian Bureau on Ellis Island would thus deal with the most fundamental needs of immigrants, and provide the services the *padroni* had used to gain power over them. But gaining both American and Italian government approval

took time. In 1894 the ambassador received permission from American Treasury Secretary Carlisle to establish the Italian Bureau to protect immigrants and to cooperate with the US Immigration Inspection staff. Maintaining the trust of the US government was critical to this plan since no other nation had such an office on Ellis Island.

Let's examine the two main actors in the drama: The Italian ambassador, Baron Francesco Saverio Fava, first served the Bourbon regime in the Kingdom of Two Sicilies. After the Risorgimento he served the new Italian government and his long tenure in Washington spanned twenty critical years in Italian-American relations, 1881-1901. He was appointed the first Italian ambassador to the United States and later the dean of Washington's diplomatic corps. During the 1891 New Orleans lynching controversy, he was recalled for more than a year as diplomatic relations were broken and war threatened, but in 1893 he returned to Washington raised to the status of ambassador plenipotentiary, and reestablished good relations with the Harrison administration. It was at this point he received approval to establish the Italian Bureau in New York and in a decade of rising racial tensions fought to have those who lynched Italians tried in federal courts. But in these years Moreno's attacks on him intensified, ultimately destroying much of the legacy Fava had worked twenty years to build (Loverici, 1977).

The legendary, almost mythic figure was Celso Cesare Moreno. An Italian adventurer, freebooter, world traveler. He claimed to speak 14 languages, to have married the daughter of the king of Sumatra and inspired a revolt against the Dutch to turn Sumatra into an Italian colony. In Hawaii he obtained both a diplomatic title and was appointed prime-minister for five days before American planters forced the king to oust him. He was secretly an officer of two companies planning to lay a transpacific cable to Asia, but failed to find enough trusting investors. He claimed the French government had decorated him for service in Tonkin. He traveled to America, resided in New York in the 1860s and 1870, then resettled in Italy, ran for parliament in Genoa. After being defeated in his Italian political quest, Moreno returned to the US and claimed he was «awarded» American citizenship in 1876. Elsewhere he claimed to have been invited to reside in America via a letter of introduction to the Secretary of State.

All of this would be merely laughable (and barely believable), except that Moreno was a persuasive public speaker and politically adroit in dealing with the press and politicians. He readily found an audience anywhere he went, he did testify before Congress, he did draft legislation, and did receive a charter to lay a cable to China.

It was when he turned his outrage against the Italian Bureau that he became truly a destructive figure. This quest had a deleterious impact on Italian immigrants whose cause he always espoused. Long aware of Moreno's dislike the

ambassador dismissed his staff's concerns about Moreno in 1892, saying «Oh, it keeps him employed, and it does not hurt me». But the ambassador underestimated his nemesis and the lengths to which he would go to destroy him.

Moreno always presented himself as the protector of Italians and enemy of the *padroni*, but his motives were never clear. Driven by extreme ambition and what might be termed «status anxiety», he had traveled to Hawaii and Sumatra in search of a diplomatic title for himself and retained an intense hatred of the former Bourbon rulers of Italy as well as the Italian nobility. In 1870 Moreno headed a the committee to celebrate the unification of Italy, which marked the defeat of the Bourbons. Perhaps his intense dislike for the Italian embassy staff was linked to its titled diplomats who had once served the Bourbons, and now filled the foreign ministry's ranks: Baron Fava, Count Oldrini, Marquis Romano, Chevalier Rossi, etc. Moreno had traveled the globe in a desperate search for power and position; but never really achieved any rank, and often styled himself Capitano Moreno (a title he had earned as an Italian naval cadet).

Over time journalists grew wary of him. «The New York Times» reported in 1892 that Moreno had leaked a phony diplomatic dispatch from Rome summoning Baron Fava to return to Italy for stealing money from embassy accounts and living lavishly. Members of Washington's diplomatic corps came to the ambassador's defense and «The New York Times» concluded Moreno had «one absorbing object in life... the political destruction of the Italian minister» and «his hatred of Baron Fava amounts almost to monomania».

But the ambassador had much more serious matters to deal with in America. Lynching, once a crime committed almost entirely upon African-Americans, was increasingly used against Italians (Iorizzo, 1970, pp. 50-52; Gambino, 2000). The first Italian lynching was in 1874 but occurrences intensified in the 1890s. A study of mob violence against Italians in the US, between 1874-1915 identified 14 major incidents of lynchings or murders, totaling 42 dead, many injured, and over \$50.000 of indemnities paid by Congress. The worst anti-Italian lynching in New Orleans during 1891 took eleven Italian lives and remains the largest mass lynching in American history (A.A. V.V, 1969, p. 777; A.A.V.V, 1933, p. 1181).

During the New Orleans incident, in which crowds were invited to gather, police did nothing to halt the tragedy and the perpetrators were not punished. In a string of incidents in Louisiana, Mississippi, Colorado violence against Italians went unpunished by local and state courts. Ambassador Fava, recalled by his government in 1891, could gain nothing save monetary compensation for those immigrants who remained Italian nationals. He campaigned for federal jurisdiction over lynchings, arguing that since «state courts are absolutely ineffective» in protecting foreign citizens Congress should move jurisdiction to federal courts. This effort ran into Congressional opposition since any anti-

lynching law which protected aliens resident in the US raised questions about equal protection for African-American citizens⁴. Fava's principled stand was unsuccessful. Strong southern political opposition to federal anti-lynching legislation prevented such action. America was unique in the prevalence of lynching in these decades and Italians were the primary target of southern lynchers, after African-Americans. The last lynching of an Italian in America occurred in 1944 (Hamman, 2007)⁵.

How race played into the New Orleans incident became clear when London's *Punch* magazine published an insulting satirical poem «A Fair Exchange», which took aim at Ambassador Fava and the Italian protests over the New Orleans lynchings. The *Punch* satirist complained of those «who shriek in Italian, across the waves» and minimized the military threat posed by the Italian navy (then the fourth largest navy in the world). Dismissed the recall of Fava: «Let Fava stay, Take the *Mafia* away, and we'll call it a right square deal!» *Punch* inserted a small squib: «What the Italians seem to want in Louisiana. – An *unfair* field or no FAVA!» (Bigelow, 1891, pp.173-74)⁶. This was a pun on the demands of American traders in China – a fair field and no favor.

Fava's recall occurred after Secretary of State Blaine informed the embassy that despite an 1871 bilateral US-Italian treaty that specifically offered protection to foreign nationals resident abroad, he had no power to right the injustices (Rimanelli and Postman, 1992). Yet when two US sailors were killed in a knife fight outside a Valparaiso saloon, President Harrison demanded an indemnity and a US navy commander threatened to «shoot any and every man who insulted me or my men or my flag in any way». The key problem for Washington was that if lynching of foreigners was made a federal crime then what about the murders of African-Americans?

After Fava was recalled, Senator Plumb of Kansas announced: «Who cares? His departure is of no more consequence... than if the banana vender who presides over a pushcart at 15th & F Streets... decided to go home»⁷. Senator Lodge of Massachusetts, a leading immigration restrictionist, defended the New Orleans mob, arguing the lynching had «no race feeling whatever...» and advised «intelligent restriction» of immigration was the solution (Cabot Lodge, 1891, pp. 602-04). The southern response was different. Former Confederate soldiers pledged themselves willing to defend America if war with Italy came. One historian of the south wrote in 1942 that southerners viewed the threat of war with Italy as a key event in the reconciliation of north and south after the Civil War (Karlin, 1942).

American bluster quickly evaporated when Washington realized the Italian navy was a powerful opponent. The Secretary of the Navy told the press the American fleet was «In no shape for war», and concluded an enemy fleet could shut down New York city. He ruled that the US had only one battleship, ironi-

cally, in drydock to have new guns installed. The US considered «buying and building a fleet» but determined it would take six months⁸. Washington paid an indemnity once war with Italy was on the horizon, but that was all. Nearly a decade later Fava still continued his protests terming another lynching: «effectual grounds for pressing the Louisiana authorities to fulfill the contractual obligations of the confederation to which they belong and... with the general principles of universal justice» (Fava, 1900).

Race remained a key element in the 1890's. For the opponents of immigration and for Moreno as well. He chose to launch his most blatant attack against the ambassador in a Washington paper, *The Colored American*. This time the target was not just the ambassador but the entire Italian embassy staff. He wrote an article which claimed they worked with *padroni* and operated a «nefarious traffic in human flesh» including «Italian slaves of both sexes». Moreno also charged Fava, Count Oldrini, and the Italian consuls had «received millions in money from the Italian padroni as their share of the spoils derived from this traffic of Italian slaves...». He turned to anti-semitism, saying Fava was «a Hebrew, [with] superlative degree all their faults, such as meanness, greediness, profit and niggardliness». This attack may have been prompted by Fava's renown for having rescued Romanian Jews decades earlier when ambassador in that country⁹.

Since the charges were in print rather than spoken Moreno was open to a charge of libel, but Fava refused to press charges. Instead, in an unprecedented action, the United States Attorney won a grand jury indictment against Moreno for libel in July 1895. The case presented by him cited the ambassador's 1884 correspondence with the Treasury Secretary Carlisle seeking a means to «effectively suppress» the *padroni*; and his appointment of Alessandro Oldrini as chief of the Italian Bureau with the charge «to interview and advise» immigrants, and to «promote their welfare and give information to the officials of the [US] Government of any violation of the immigration or contract labor laws...» as evidence of the ambassador's innocence.

The ambassador was subpoenaed, but could not be located by the court officers. His reluctance proved wise. Moreno enthusiastically informed «The New York Times» he «rejoices in the opportunity... he long has been waiting for... he will be his own attorney, and will put Baron Fava upon the stand and cross-examine him for a week, if necessary». It was not necessary.

The US attorney concluded his case against Moreno by charging he was «a person of evil and wicked mind, and of a most malicious disposition» whose actions had «wickedly, maliciously and unlawfully [contrived]... to aggrieve, vilify and defame» the ambassador and the Italian foreign ministry staff. In the *Colored American* article Moreno accused the ambassador of enriching himself by taking «the lion's share of the spoils» from the *padrone* system in

the US and Count Oldrini was his «go-between» with the *padroni*. Moreno also named the consuls in every US city as well as the Italian Foreign Minister as members of the gang.

But the most dangerous accusation was aimed at the Italian Bureau: Moreno claimed the staff worked to «delude, deceive and mislead policemen» and had deceived the Commissioners of Immigration. This was the most dangerous charge for it undercut the one reason the Italian Bureau had been permitted special access to Ellis Island: Fava had personally promised to staff it with «onesti agenti» [honest agents] and that the Italian diplomats would work *with* US immigration inspectors, not assist Italians to evade them.

The jury returned a guilty verdict, jailed Moreno for ninety days and fined him. After his conviction «The New York Times» reported an ironic twist: Moreno «denied having any malice toward Baron Fava and admitted that he did not know him» and noted that Moreno claimed to have earlier made similar allegations before a Congressional committee with no response from the ambassador. Interviewed later, during his incarceration, Moreno announced to the press his willingness to sell an island of Sumatra to the US Congress for \$750.000¹⁰.

Sometime after the court issued its verdict in the libel trial, Moreno took up his pen yet again and wrote a book that summarized his battle against the *padroni*, *History of a Great Wrong*. Its full title is his thesis:

Italian Slavery in America (Schiavitù italiana in America.) The Italian Representatives, Ambassador Fava, Corti and Blanc, the Italian Padroni, Their Accomplices and Go-Betweens. Its Horrors, Its Miseries, Its Cruelties, Its Atrocities, Its Robberies, Its Delusions, Its Tears, Its Desolation, Its Sorrows, Its Crimes, Its Demoralization, Its Torments, and Its Tormentors. Homo Homini Lupus. A Deplorable Mistake.

He describes how he first fought to protect Italian street children, then Italian laborers. He reprints in full the article which led to his trial, then moves beyond his violent antipathy against one Italian diplomat and expands to take in the entire foreign ministry and prime minister Crispi for good measure. Gradually his book becomes a scream of outrage at a world that first listened to him and then turned away. Pages of reprints of newspaper articles in the US and Italy, open letters to King Umberto, and what he claims to be excerpts from his testimony to various Congressional committees and the Italian Parliament, letters to American presidents, Secretaries of State and Treasury, and Italian politicians. He includes letters of praise from Frederick Douglass as well as the office of the mayor of New Orleans, shortly after the lynchings, thanking him for his statements to a Senate Committee. While Moreno denounces lynching he garners praise from Mayor Shakespeare who helped shield the lynchers.

He condemns Ambassador Fava and every Italian diplomat in America, the Foreign Ministry and Foreign Minister Blanc, who were berated as «ignorant, servile... immoral, depraved, fearful, corrupt... full of pride, dishonored, extortion, scandal», and he accuses Blanc's wife of selling state secrets. He inexplicably concludes the ministers have done all of this «at the command of their wives» Moreno pleads with King Umberto to sweep them all out of office, and then shifts back to condemn the Italian Parliament and the Italian Geographic Society (referred to as the Italian Society Ignorant of Geography) for refusing to back his attempt to lure Italy to seize the island of Sumatra from the Dutch. He saves particular venom for Prime Minister Crispi «who has great rapacity» but is «without backbone, honor or pride».

The book also predicts the following March Parliament will open and the cabinet «will find their downfall» and «Italian representatives abroad», will suffer as well. This book encapsulates his lifelong quest for power and influence, and illustrates his failings. At first his charges almost sound credible. But seeing them repeated over and over is like listening to Joseph McCarthy rant about Communists. The charges initially attract attention, but the lack of evidence undercut his wild claims. In another way he resembles McCarthy: the numbers never add up. First there are 17 000 Italian slaves, then in another place 2000 slaves, then 80 000 slaves. He variously claims his anti-*padrone* crusade began in 1867, or 1871 or 1869.

His jealousy of Italian diplomats as anti-*padrone* activists comes across clearly in an 1875 letter denouncing King Victor Emanuel's decoration of Consuls Corti and DeLuca for drafting legislation to protect Italian children from the *padroni*, «abolizione del traffico dei piccoli schiavi Italiani...» Corti and DeLuca's work was credited at the time with giving the Italian government the power to act against *padroni* before they took children out of Italy. It was a major advance, but Moreno protests.

His accounts of walking the streets of New York at night in search of the *schiavi bianchi* or white slaves are fascinating, but having trailed the children back to their *padroni*, he is unable to give evidence of their link to the diplomats. Instead in dramatic prose he blames it all upon a massive plot where Italian diplomats «continue to blind the American police and continue to mislead the US Commissioners of Emigration at Ellis Island... violate the American laws... like giving lambs unto the custody of wolves...». By page 23 he offers the core of his accusations: Italian diplomats masterminded the system and profited from it and the means of profit were certificates they gave the *padroni* «stating that the slaves were their (the *padrone*'s) sons and daughters or relatives». Thus immense profits, «the division of the spoils», from the white slave trade were to be earned by Fava and his consuls. In the end Moreno can only claim «this traffic could not have lasted... without the

complicity of Italian representatives». He condemns these «bad Italians in America» and pleads with Commissioner of Immigration Herman Stump and Secretary of the Treasury Carlisle to «demand their recall» to Italy.

The focus of his anger, Ambassador Fava, is relentlessly referred to as «Don Basilio Fava» after a character in the *Barber of Seville*. Moreno apparently drafted a Congressional resolution attacking Fava in August of 1894 which was most likely ignored, but may have ultimately led to the libelous article in *The Colored American*. During the trial he argued he had already made those charges in testimony before Congress, but libel must be in print to be prosecuted¹¹.

Moreno also included an ominous exchange of correspondence with Commissioner of Immigration Herman Stump in 1894 on «the Italian slave trade» where he claims the Italian Bureau «recently established at Ellis Island by Baron Fava» was created «to keep the matter more secret and to blind the American people». He concludes Fava and Oldrini take the «lion's share of the spoils derived from this traffic in human flesh». Stump responded by requesting specifics on August 14, 1894 and his secretary wrote in October acknowledging the receipt of a letter. Moreno did not reprint that text and Stump had generally maintained a good relationship with the Italian Bureau even praising them in one of his Washington reports.

What evidence could Moreno present? He accused Fava and Consul Branchi of involvement in a plot to mistreat Italian labor connected to a railroad project in Jamaica, comparing their treatment of the laborers as «tortures by vampires», but there is only the wild charge without specifics as to how Fava might have profited from it (Moreno, 1896).

Moreno claimed Fava's support of the planning of the Arkansas farming community, Sunnyside, was part of the plot but that was never more than a failed charitable plan to put Italian *contadini* on a large tract of farmland. Sunnyside lost money from the very beginning and although Fava supported the plan in the hope Italians would move out of the New York slums. Sunnyside never appealed to immigrants as most Italians were unwilling to live in the south as lynching intensified in the 1890's¹².

Moreno's personal charges against Fava are revealed here in a way that rarely appeared in the America press. Ironically, Moreno's only rationale against the ambassador in a letter to King Umberto was to describe the ambassador's poverty. He claimed Fava resorted to moving his diplomatic residence from one «garrett» to another in Washington, and then lists every flat and describes the neighborhood which was, he claims, so low and shameful the Italian flag could not be displayed. Here he has the details: every house number, descriptions of his flat situated between a small store and a barbershop on Connecticut Avenue. He claimed he knew the name of Fava's Irish cook Brigid who lived

in the attic. Moreno reminds the King he is paying Fava \$16 000 a year but is being badly represented and discredited¹³.

It particularly annoys Moreno that the ambassador visits with other diplomats and takes lunch, claimed he cadges meals. Moreno ignored the fact that one of the chief activities and expenses of diplomatic representatives is entertaining. In fact, Fava traveled to visit the Italian community in New York and to Massachusetts to escape heat and tropical disease then rampant in the city.

Perhaps the ambassador had incurred personal expenses due to the continuing ill health of his wife Nicoletta. At this time that Fava took a leave of absence to personally escort her back to Italy to convalesce. It was at the moment when the ambassador was out of the country that Moreno informed the American press the ambassador had been recalled for «malversation of funds» and photographs of his «palatial residence» had been supplied to the Italian Foreign Ministry (conversely condemning the ambassador's apparent poverty while accusing him of profligate spending). The rumor was immediately squelched by the Washington diplomatic corps who rose to Fava's defense, and by his son, Frank R. Fava Jr., who explained that the ambassador was unwilling to let his wife sail back to Italy alone not in response to having been recalled by Rome¹⁴.

Moreno had obviously taken a great deal of interest in tracking (one might term it stalking) the movements of the ambassador and his household, and used the ambassador's trip with his ailing wife as an opportunity to attack. Moreno proved to be a determined nemesis whose antipathy for the ambassador never abated. Taken as a whole, his book *History of a Great Wrong*, reveals the mentality and the *modus operandi* behind the attacks. In retrospect the book can be read as an explication of the great wrong perpetrated by Moreno on the ambassador, his staff and their anti-*padrone* creation, the Italian Bureau.

Ambassador Fava had not defended himself against Moreno's charges in the courtroom; but afterwards he publicly defended the Italian Bureau arguing it was «The only means to protect the Italian immigrants against the rapacity of the *padroni*...». He concluded unless immigrants were «directed» then they would inevitably fall into the hands of the *padroni*. He was well aware that in 1894 he had won Treasury Department approval by pledging to staff the Italian Bureau with those he called «honest Italian agents» who would be trusted to work inside Ellis Island in close contact with US inspectors.

If Moreno's charges could gain traction with the new McKinley administration then the ambassador must have known expansion of the Italian Bureau was in jeopardy, as well as its very existence. By 1898 Fava was near to establishing the last two stages of his plan: legislation was moving through the Italian Parliament to establish a labor agency and to charter a branch of the Italian National Bank in New York to handle transatlantic financial transactions and

foreign currency exchange for Italian immigrants. Both were to be linked to the Italian Bureau.

This effort was aimed at the two reasons Italian immigrants were most often rejected by US Immigration Inspectors: when an immigrant entered the US, under the Foran Act, the inspectors were required to ask if he had a job promised or awaiting him. If the immigrant in any way implied a labor contract, whether written or oral, existed then he or she could be immediately sent back to Europe. Immigrants were also asked for the amount of money they carried, to assure they would not fall into the category inspectors termed «liable to public charge». In other words persons unable to support themselves. If unable to show evidence of self-support then they also could be deported.

These rules put Italian immigrants in a double bind: evidence of a guaranteed job or a signed a labor contract was illegal and grounds for rejection, as was the lack of sufficient funds to support oneself. Most immigrants were coached to learn answers that would satisfy the inspectors by the more worldly «birds of passage» on board the ships, but fear of answering incorrectly at the very gates of America put many at risk. With the planned expansion of the Italian Bureau both of these risks would be eliminated and more Italians admitted to the US. Fava intended to have new immigrants deal directly with the Italian Bureau staff to secure jobs without being signed to labor contracts and to receive funds sent by their friends and family.

Ambassador Fava argued «The only means to protect the Italian immigrants against the rapacity of the *padroni*... [will be] an office of Work-Labor». He concluded that unless immigrants were «directed» by the consuls then they would inevitably fall into the hands of the waiting *padroni* once outside Ellis Island. The Italian Bureau would «cut out» the *padroni*, and answer the Immigration Restriction League's critique by producing what Fava called «a better class of immigrant». The key was «agenti italiani onesti» [honest Italian agents] to channel them to safer places than New York's slums or the volatile southern states and the western mining camps where Italian lynchings raged in the 1890's¹⁵.

Following the Spanish American War in 1898 Americans viewed the world differently. Issues of race, military power and America's role on the global stage were seen from a new angle. Industrialists wanted an endless supply of cheap labor while the American labor leaders resented immigrants as competition. The rise of the Immigration Restriction League in 1894 signaled a more organized opposition that joined with American labor to work against the Italian Bureau.

The drive for immigration restriction linked the interests of labor leaders like Terence Powderly with that of imperialists like Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. President McKinley was elected in 1896 with the support of Knights of

Labor Grand Master Terence Powderly, who then sought the post of Chief of Immigration at Ellis Island. From an exploration of his personal papers as well as his two memoirs, *The Path I Trod* and *Thirty Years at Labor* it is clear that Powderly held two deep fears: that the growing wave of immigration from southern Europe was a threat to American labor and that Italian anarchists were among them¹⁶.

Newspapers increasingly focused on the activities of Italian anarchists in a string of political assassinations in Europe, which created a highly negative image of Italians in the American mind. In response Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and the Immigration Restriction League championed literacy tests, health inspections, and pre-emigration inspections to stem the tide.

The conflict over Italian immigration to the US played out as this volatile mix of American expansion in the war with Spain, US entry into an increasingly globalized commercial market, a highly mobile foreign unskilled labor force competing with nativist skilled labor, an expansionist administration in Washington, and a small but highly visible international anarchist movement.

Powderly, as Chief of Immigration, was the key witness when the US Industrial Commission examined the status of American labor in 1899 (Powderly, 1967; *Ibidem*, 1940).

Powderly focused his testimony on the threat of Italians, and claimed they evaded the Alien Contract Labor Law. His testimony was particularly anti-Italian, but even Powderly did not go as far as some of his questioners: one referred to immigrants as «a lower race», «Powderly: I would hate to say they were a lower race... Put it this way: Less desirable»¹⁷. Powderly said he had once abolished the Italian Bureau (in 1898) because of «reports made to me from inspectors there that agents of this Italian Bureau would prompt [immigrants] to evade our laws...». He was asked if he suspected that the *padrone* system was linked to it and noted «I have been told that it was». These were Moreno's libels. The question was where did Powderly get his information?

Powderly went on in his testimony to identify Moreno as his informant, but his testimony took a strange twist as he first admitted Moreno was wrong about some things but argued he was correct on the issue of the *padroni*: «From him I have heard that that Bureau is simply an agency of the *padroni*, and many of the things he told me, I know, were not borne out by the facts or by the circumstances as they transpired under my own observation at New York; others, I have reason to believe, he is pretty well informed on».

Powderly's accusations against the Italian Bureau redounded in Rome. The American ambassador William Draper reported that the attacks on the embassy staff were unfounded, offensive and relayed the Italian government's «sense of wonder» that evidence from Moreno, had been accepted as Congressional testimony after he had been convicted in Washington for libel.

The Industrial Commission also heard from Prescott Hall of the Immigration Restriction League, who argued immigrants depressed wages, were undesirable, and complained that Ellis Island «shut out the skilled mechanic with \$100 in his pocket and let in the Italian peasant with 52 cents». Hall focused on the number of southern Italians and said they had the highest illiteracy rates and were «very undesirable»¹⁸.

Herman Stump, former chief of immigration under Harrison from 1885-1889, took a softer line as he explained how the *padroni* agents kept «the poor Italian... a debtor and slave for years». More recently *padroni* had begun to «call themselves bankers». A few years earlier Stump had praised the Italian Bureau cooperation with Ellis Island staff was «bringing to the US a far better class of Italian immigrants»¹⁹.

The Industrial Commission later reported Italians were used by the *padroni* as strikebreakers, and «take the places of the union men». Conversely, a few became skilled workers, but then «as an artisan he comes into conflict with American workmen». They concluded that Italian labor, whether skilled or unskilled, represented a threat to American labor²⁰.

The commission heard from Chief of the Italian Bureau, Egisto Rossi. The commissioners appeared in New York to take his testimony but their tone was hostile. This testimony was gathered *after* the first effort to close the Italian Bureau and during a brief reprieve. It was apparent that the Industrial Commission was gathering evidence to close it. Rossi was under oath as he explained the Italian Bureau was created to protect Italian immigrants from «the *padrone* system and its evils, and to warn them...». Rossi denied there were special privileges: «We have only the right to mingle with the immigrants as soon as they are discharged...». He reiterated the Italian staff had «No access» to immigrants before they met with U.S. inspectors. Powderly had accused the Italian Bureau of coaching immigrants, but Rossi demanded proof. Rossi argued the Italian Bureau had «done much to reduce the evils of the *padrone* system... we have prevented our immigrants from coming into contact with the *padrone*».

The Industrial Commissioners told Rossi: «We do not see why you have any right to do any business in the Barge Office». They argued no other nation had such an office on Ellis Island, to which Rossi responded, «No other nation has it, but no other nation has an immigration of our kind...». He was then asked if he had been engaged in the *padrone* labor and banking system or «Have you had friends in it?» Under oath Rossi testified «No, I have been engaged in no business whatever except this of the bureau». They pointedly asked: «What good has your Bureau accomplished?»²¹.

The circumstances of Rossi's testimony, however, led to an explosion in the Italian embassy. The ambassador waited a month for a transcript, which never arrived, then requested the text direct from the Secretary of State. A week later,

transcript in hand, Ambassador Fava protested the way in which Rossi was questioned and the charges leveled against the Italian Bureau. Noting the Italian Bureau's goal was to «eradicate the *padrone* weed» and how it had worked against «self-styled bankers, lodging-house keepers and saloon keepers».

He dramatically described the vulnerability of immigrants: «Wherever there are lambs to be eaten, there are always wolves ready to eat them up. It is true, not only of New York, but the world over». Despite these charges the Italian Bureau «still succeeds in neutralizing... the pernicious influence which the *padrone* system freely exerted in the past under the very eyes of the Federal authorities...». He requested the Commissioners «be called upon to furnish proof of their charges».

The US Industrial Commission hearings gave Powderly the material he needed to convince the Secretary of the Treasury to close it. He had tried to shut the Italian Bureau two years earlier; but protests from the Italian embassy staff and the American Ambassador to Rome reversed the decision, but only briefly.

While the battle raged on, Assistant Commissioner of Immigration Thomas Fitchie wrote to his friend Powderly. In a letter preserved in Powderly's personal papers Fitchie laid out his objections to the employment of an Italian-American at Ellis Island: «I am sorry to learn there is even the remotest intention of appointing of Jas E. March (or Marchetti) – to any position... I am afraid the large numbers of public charges would not be discovered, much less the murderers & thieves»²², here was a US immigration official telling Powderly that Mr. March would abet the entry of Italian criminals into the United States (Tiffit, 1990, p. 65)²³.

There was an ironic coda for Fitchie. In 1901 newspapers revealed that US immigration inspectors at Ellis Island had sold forged immigration papers to an estimated 10 000 illegal aliens. Fitchie ordered an investigation, but his own staff was implicated in the scandal, which received broad press coverage. President Theodore Roosevelt ousted Fitchie and his staff.

These events occurred in the midst of a chaotic, violent era both in America and Italy. In 1900 an Italian-American anarchist assassinated King Umberto. President McKinley offered his condolences. Less than a year later the Italians sent condolences to the White House after a Polish anarchist shot McKinley. Immigration restrictionists feared anarchists and stereotyped Italians as knife-wielding, quick to anger, and a threat to the jobs of American workingmen.

But was there another reason why the Italian Bureau was shut in 1899? Powderly's papers contain an English-language report written by Egisto Rossi heralding the achievements of the Italian Bureau. In it Rossi promoted the bureau's success in aiding the growing number of Italian immigrants – citing a 35% increase over the numbers in 1898 (Rossi, 1899, p. 3). From Powderly's

perspective, that signaled Italians would arrive in greater numbers, and be more competition for American labor. He had long expressed fear of anarchists and Italians were more prominent in this movement after a series of assassinations in Europe²⁴.

The report also discussed their plans to establish the labor office and charter the Italian national bank branch. Powderly knew well what methods could legally be used to restrict Italian immigration: the contract labor and the «liable to public charge» questions were the keys. Rossi's report made it clear what the Italian foreign ministry's strategy was aimed at eliminating these issues, and they were close to achieving their aims. The Italian Bureau was ready to facilitate the renewed, and probably expanded, entry of Italians after the Spanish-American War in 1898. Powderly attacked the Italian Bureau, using Moreno's information, and convinced the Treasury Secretary to shut the Italian Bureau just as Italian immigration promised to increase.

The twin threads of Moreno's anti-*padroni* crusade and the Italian ambassador's career closed together in 1901. Moreno collapsed on a Washington street, alone and impoverished, then died a few days later. Upon his death «The New York Times» wrote of Moreno's nature that he was «relentless in opposition... once aroused [he] would fight all the world...»²⁵. Ambassador Fava retired a few months later and returned to Italy where he wrote *I linciaggi agli Stati Uniti la questione giuridica* [Lynching in the US: the Legal Questions] arguing the lynching of foreigners in America should be under the jurisdiction of federal courts. He observed two Presidents had called for such legislation and «our countrymen labor to increase the riches and wealth of the Great Republic» (Fava, 1902, pp. 644-49)²⁶.

In retrospect, the outcome of the dramatic battle over the protection of Italian immigrants reflected the deep seated Italophobia that had developed in America during the 1890's. Only in such an atmosphere could wild, unsustainable charges as Moreno's be used so effectively to close the one agency that might have arrested the *padrone* problem and rescued the *schivi bianchi*. The twentieth century dawned on January 1, 1900 with all safeguards for Italian immigrants removed from Ellis Island – on that morning the Italian Bureau was closed.

Notes

¹ Francesco Saverio Fava, often titled Baron Fava, before his elevation to ambassador, is no relation to the author. Research for this work completed in the Archivio di Stato, the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana and Querini Stampalia in Venice, Italy, as well as the Harvard University Library System, New York Public Library, Boston

- Public Library special Collections, and George Washington University special collections.
- 2 Celso Cesare Moreno, *History of a Great Wrong*, in Boston Public Library special collection, labeled Gift of the Immigration Restriction League in 1900. Undated, internal evidence suggests publication circa 1895-1896. The Immigration Restriction League was founded in Boston and its supporters included Henry Cabot Lodge and others who were prominent critics of Italian immigration and the Italian Bureau at Ellis Island.
 - 3 Sumner must have followed Moreno's career since in 1869 he also donated a book by Moreno on the Hawaii controversy to the Harvard College Library.
 - 4 Over 100 African-Americans were lynched in the year 1890, and in the decade prior 1400, and nearly 1000 in the next decade.
 - 5 August 1944 an Italian POW, Pvt Guglielmo Olivotto was lynched in Seattle by a white Army policeman.
 - 6 Emphasis and spelling as in original. An allusion to the American policy on China, later summarized as «a fair field and no favor». The rhyme was based on a mispronunciation of his name.
 - 7 Plumb quoted in unsigned «The Week» *The Nation*, April 23, 1891.
 - 8 *In no shape for war, defenseless condition of American coasts*, «Washington Post», April 2, 1891, and *America in the Right*, «Washington Post», April 4, 1891.
 - 9 *United States v. Moreno*, Record Group 21, District Court of the US, DC, file 20399; and *Libeled Baron Fava*, «Washington Post», Oct 30, 1895.
 - 10 *Has an Island for Sale*, «Washington Post», Dec. 16, 1895.
 - 11 Moreno reprinted letters, the *Colored American* article and other materials in *History of a Great Wrong*.
 - 12 The communities of Sunnyside and Tontitown both began with good intentions but failed. Ambassador Fava encouraged both developments, but the combination of malaria and financial losses destroyed them. Lynching of Italians also made immigrants wary of settling in Arkansas. For the ambassador's view see (Fava, 1904 and Martellini, 1999).
 - 13 «The New York Times» reported in September 1892 that Moreno had leaked a phony diplomatic dispatch from Rome which supposedly summoned Fava to return in disgrace. Moreno's letters in Moreno, 1896.
 - 14 *Baron Fava's Trip Home*, «The New York Times», Sep 19, 1892.
 - 15 Author's translation of «Memorandum», annesso A and B «le precarie condizioni» in *Camera dei deputati Documenti Diplomatici*, 7 luglio 1894, 21 and *Ambasciatore in Washington, al Ministro degli Affari Esteri*, 14 giugno 1894, p. 40.
 - 16 Italian anarchists murdered a French official in 1894, the Spanish prime minister in 1897, an Austrian empress in 1898 and King Umberto of Italy in 1900. The king's assassin was an Italian who had emigrated to work in Paterson, New Jersey.
 - 17 «Testimony of Hon. T.V. Powderly», Commissioner-General of Immigration, February 10, 1899, *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, including testimony... and special reports, xv, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901, pp. 32-46.

- 18 «Testimony of Mr. Prescott F. Hall», Secretary Immigration Restriction League, April 8, 1899 and Appendix submitted thereafter, *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, xv, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901, pp. 46-67.
- 19 «Testimony of Hon. Herman Stump», Ex-Commissioner-General of Immigration, January 10, 1899», *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, xv, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901, 3-15. *Stump, Report of Immigration Investigating Commission*, p. 25.
- 20 «The Padrone System and Common Labor», undated and unsigned report in *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, xv, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901, pp. 430-32.
- 21 «Testimony of Dr. Egisto Rossi», Chief of Italian Bureau, Port of New York, July 26, 1899, *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, xv, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901, pp. 154-160.
- 22 Text as in original, see Fitchie to Powderly, July 14, 1898 <http://libraries.cua.edu> in *Terence Powderly Papers*, Catholic University of America. Mr. March, was a prominent Italian-American in New York City.
- 23 Barbara Booth, Ellis Island, 53. Tiffitt noted Powderly, with his aides Fitchie and McSweeney were vulnerable when «new scandals broke in 1901, and charges of fraud and ineptitude once again erupted against the Fitchie administration».
- 24 At this point Italian anarchists had murdered a French official in 1894, the Spanish prime minister in 1897, an Austrian empress in 1898.
- 25 *Five Days a Premier – Once headed revolt in Sumatra*, «Washington Post», March 13, 1901.
- 26 *Ex-Ambassador Fava Dies*, «The New York Times», Oct 4, 1913.

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