

Brazil through Italian Eyes: The Debate over Emigration to São Paulo during the 1920s

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«Con belle promesse, con opuscoli e patti,
facendo loro vedere l'El Dorado là dove non c'era che fatica...»¹

Of all the destinations of Italian immigrants during the period of mass migration, no country captured the Italian imagination more than Brazil, and in particular the State of São Paulo. Italian perceptions of Brazil fluctuated dramatically over time inspiring lively debate among Italians in favor of and opposed to migration to Brazil. To some a vast land of the future promising wealth and prosperity, to others a backward wildness run by cruel *fazendeiros* who treated Italians as they did the slaves of the past. Much of the scholarship on Italian immigration to Brazil focuses on the early years of the Italian debate around the turn of the century². Building upon this literature, this article examines Italian perceptions of Brazil at the end of the period of mass migration in the 1920s. The re-orientation of Italian policies with the advent of Fascism along with the industrialization of São Paulo makes this a critical juncture in the history of both nations, when views towards migration were informed by ideological as well as socio-economic concerns.

From 1880-1930 approximately 1.5 million Italians immigrated to Brazil, primarily to the State of São Paulo, although significant numbers also settled in the southern states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná. From 1888-1902, the height of Italian immigration to Brazil, approximately 942,463 Italians arrived in Brazil (Bulhões Carvalho, 1925, p. 20). During these years Brazil was the most popular destination for Italians, surpassing

both the United States and Argentina; and Italians made up the majority of immigrants entering Brazil: approximately 70 per cent of all new arrivals to Brazil in these years were from Italy (*Conférence Internationale*, 1924). Brazil's vast expanse and potential as a land of opportunity lured many, as did the free passage offered by the State of São Paulo in an effort to encourage European immigration to replace slave labor on the coffee *fazendas*.

1902 was the pivotal year for Italian immigration to Brazil. After scathing consular reports on the treatment of Italian rural laborers in São Paulo, the Government of Italy enacted the Prinetti Decree, prohibiting the subsidized passage of Italians to São Paulo. (The most influential of these reports was that of the special emissary Adolfo Rossi, published under the title: «Condizione dei coloni italiani nello Stato di San Paolo», *Bollettino dell'Emigrazione*, 1902). The impact of the law was considerable: just one year before its enactment, 59,869 Italians had entered Brazil, while only 12,970 entered in 1903, the first year in which the law was in full effect. In 1913 only 16 per cent of incoming immigrants were of Italian origin, a distant third place behind Portuguese and Spanish migrants, while the United States of America emerged in these years as the preferred destination of Italian emigrants to the Americas (*Conférence Internationale*, 1924). Given the high volume of Italian immigration in the years leading up to the Prinetti Decree, many historians have tended to focus on the Italian immigrant experience during these years along with the well-publicized diplomatic confrontations between Italian consular officials and the government of São Paulo. In spite of the dramatic post 1902 drop-off, Italians still continued to immigrate to Brazil in considerable numbers. From 1903-1915, the year Italy entered World War I, a total of 225,033 Italians entered Brazilian ports. In the post-war years there was a resurgence of Italian migration to Brazil in which at least 10,000-20,000 Italians arrived annually (*ibidem*). These figures suggest the continued relevance of examining Italian-Brazilian relations regarding immigration into the 1920s.

Coming at the tail end of European mass migration, the 1920s were a key decade of transition in both Europe and the Americas. During these years both the governments of Brazil, in particular the State of São Paulo, and Italy reexamined their emigration/immigration policies. The much-publicized International Conference on Emigration and Immigration, held in Rome May 15-31, 1924, provided both parties with the opportunity of rekindling the controversial debate over the experiences and treatment of Italian immigrants in São Paulo, a debate that the Prinetti Decree had left smoldering for decades. With the largest influx of immigrants already past, writers and policy-makers of the 1920s were able to reflect back with a critical eye on the past thirty years of immigration and legislative initiatives. Drawing on statistical infor-

mation, especially from the 1920 Brazilian census, these writers were able to make informed assessments regarding the relative success or failure of immigration policies in general and the Italian immigrant experience in particular, a noted contrast with turn of the century reports which had relied largely on anecdotal evidence and speculation. While some basic conclusions on the overall experience of Italian immigrants and their success in Brazil can be deduced from the evidence, many of the issues and concerns raised by officials in these debates did not necessarily correspond to the actual conditions on the ground, nor did they necessarily reflect the concerns of the Italian immigrants themselves. These sources instead tell us much more about the changing government perceptions during the 1920s, both in São Paulo and Italy on emigration/immigration during a time of important policy re-structuring.

Although among the victors of the First World War, Italy during the early twenties was plagued by political and social unrest, ultimately leading to the Fascist seizure of power in 1922. After the war, and especially following the advent of Fascism, the debate on emigration was recast in much more nationalistic terms. In Fascist propaganda Italy's victory in the First World War was spoken of as the great spiritual redemption of her lost souls. Emigrants abandoned by Liberal Italy and losing their Italian identity were supposedly reawakened by the great crucible of war. In a 1922 message to Italians living in America, Mussolini declared, «A greater, more august Italy emerged from Vittorio Veneto and this renewed consciousness must give you pride to feel Italian and to carry tall everywhere the name of Italy» (Mussolini, 1922, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. XIX, p. 407). Later in one of his first addresses concerning the question of Italian emigration Mussolini redefined the issue, turning a supposed weakness into a strength declaring (Mussolini, 1923, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. XIX, p. 192),

Italian expansion in the world is a problem of life or death for the Italian race.

I say expansion: expansion in every sense: moral, political, economic, demographic. I declare here that the Government intends to protect Italian emigration: it cannot be indifferent to those who travel beyond the Ocean, it cannot be indifferent because they are men, workers, and above all Italians.

And wherever there is an Italian there is the tricolor, there is the Patria, there is the Government's defense of these Italians.

Rather than losing vital manpower, emigrants, by retaining their Italian identity expanded and strengthened the *Patria*, creating an «empire without borders» as had their Roman ancestors who «gave the world civilization» (*ibidem*). In a 1923 message to Italians living in North and South America, Mussolini made even more explicit his claim that Italians even after emigrating maintained their identity. He declared, «The Government does not

make its appeal to its citizen emigrants abroad in vain because it knows that distance makes love for the *Patria* more alive and cogent [...] Italy to the Americas is like a gigantic extended arm, the *Patria* extends out to its distant sons, to attract them to itself, enabling them to participate ever more in its pain, its joy, its work, its greatness, and its glory» (Mussolini, 1923, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. XIX, p. 408). This powerfully ambitious vision of an ever-expanding Italian nation on the rise triggered a flurry of debate and commentary by Fascist writers.

With passages from Mussolini's speeches on emigration as their prologues, writers expanded upon the new reorientation of the emigration debate and began suggesting the possibilities offered by the Fascist approach to the problem. Antonino Cordova and Francesco Sulpizi were the first to write monographs on the issue, to be followed in subsequent years by Alighiero Micci, Filippo Virgili, and Celestino Arena. Fascist lawyers and bureaucrats, most of these writers were familiar with the issues surrounding the emigration debate from its Liberal origins (Sulpizi, 1923). Their works taken together map out a set of policy goals built on the definition of emigration provided by Mussolini. According to Celestino Arena in *Italiani per il mondo; politica nazionale dell'emigrazione*, Mussolini's pronouncements had changed the way in which emigration was viewed: «Emigration is no longer considered from the point of view of the need for assistance and the protection of individuals, but is now considered as a collective manifestation of the national life [...] no longer a thing of shame but a vibrant expression of vigor and energy» (Arena, 1927, p. 6). With the advent of Fascism, Italian emigrants were therefore no longer an anonymous wretched mass of manual laborers, but were now ambassadors of Italian civilization abroad, or in the words of these Fascist commentators, the «pioneers of Italian civilization» (Borsella, 1925, p. 1).

Mussolini's conception of an expansive Italian emigration led to bold, if imprecise, rhetoric that was militaristic in tone. For example, Giovanni Borsella, in his work, *L'emigrante italiano e l'Argentina*, addressing emigrants declared, «In the name of Italy you move in compact legions, always advancing ever further, like the legions of Ancient Rome, to the Empire's frontiers, creating works of peace with your new empire of labor» (*ibidem*, p. 11). For, «Emigration is a battle, those who are the most tenacious and relentless in their work will win [...] conquering the world with their indefatigable energy» (*ibidem*, p. 14). Therefore, according to Borsella, «the greatness of Italy in the world lay in the memory of its fifteen battles from Isonzo to the Piave, in Vittorio Veneto, and in the valorization of our emigrant pioneers of Italian civilization» (*ibidem*, pp. 182-83). It is in the context of this new political orientation in that debate over immigration to Brazil was renewed.

In addition to this new Fascist approach towards emigration in general, two other key factors explain the renewed interest specifically in immigration to São Paulo, Brazil. One such reason was the simple fact that just as Italian emigrants began to once again flow out of Italy, immigration to other countries was being severely limited. With the introduction in 1924 of a new restrictive quota system, the United States, which had since the turn of the century surpassed both Argentina and Brazil as the most popular destination for Italian emigrants, was no longer a viable option. It was therefore in part necessity which turned Italian eyes again toward Brazil as one of the most attractive remaining options. Even before the new restrictions on immigration, however, twenty years had elapsed since the Prinetti Decree, and many Italians were aware that changes had taken place. While most Italian commentators remained critical of a variety of conditions in São Paulo, the success of many of their compatriots led some to reconsider the potential opportunities presented in São Paulo.

Equipped with nearly forty years of evidence to draw upon, and armed with the new ideological framework, provided by Fascism, Italian writers turned their gaze on São Paulo in the early 1920s. With an increased concern for national prestige and the spread of Italian influence, many of these writers had high expectations for the possibilities of immigration to São Paulo, which went beyond the earlier preoccupations of Liberal era writers with the individual immigrant's ability to improve their lot in life, a clear reflection of the newly felt nationalist sentiments that followed the First World War and led towards Fascism. The most exemplary work in this vein is Giovanni Bonacci's *L'Italia vittoriosa e la sua espansione nel Brasile* (1920). As suggested by the title, much of Bonacci's work dealt with Italian economic, social, and cultural penetration in Brazil, especially São Paulo, brought on by Italian immigration. In his prologue, Bonacci wrote, «Here the reader will find documented the superiority of Italian colonization efforts in comparison to every other people [...] to the remotest corners of Brazil, the nation which has accepted our glorious seeds in a moving spirit of fraternity» (Bonacci, 1920, p. 11). Within the text, Bonacci also stressed how welcome Italians have been: «In Brazil, the Italian is loved as a brother, greatly admired, and eagerly desired, as the most precious element to the country's future» (*ibidem*, p. 13). Echoing Bonacci's sentiments, is the letter of the Italian ambassador of Rio De Janeiro who added, «The Italian element [in Brazil] is so numerous, so active, so intelligent, and also so patriotic that it presents Italy today with a base for Italian activity to a degree which had not been possible in the past» (*ibidem*, p. 15). As suggested here, much of Bonacci's work, when not dripping with patriotic descriptions of «the Italian conquest of Brazilian society» described Brazil, and São Paulo, its «economic focal point» as the ideal land for Italian investment and settlement (*ibidem*, p. 125).

With a not so subtle agenda of promoting Italian overseas investment through the Banca Italiana di Sconto, Bonacci's presentation was a clearly one-sided and unbalanced account of Italian experiences in São Paulo. It is none-the-less important in illustrating the new found enthusiasm, which although not as pronounced in other works, is readily apparent, and is a noted departure from earlier literature on São Paulo. Bonacci's work is also significant in that, using property census data from 1910, Bonacci highlighted the industrial side of the Italian experience in São Paulo. According to Bonacci, beyond the careers of a few prominent industrialists like Francesco Mattarazzo, one-quarter of the textile production in São Paulo was controlled by Italian entrepreneurs and over half of the property held by foreigners in the city was in Italian hands (*ibidem*, p. 131). While Bonacci's conclusions were certainly overblown, this type of evidence, along with the focus on industry in addition to agriculture, was significantly absent from many of the other Italian writer's descriptions of the condition of Italian immigrants to São Paulo.

Other Italian writers also wrote glowingly of Italian experiences, although unlike Bonacci tended to be less praiseworthy of Brazil and its treatment of Italians, examining the past and present experiences of Italian immigration to São Paulo in particular with a more critical eye. For example, Arrigo Lucattini, in his work, *L'emigrazione italiana*, wrote, «in all types of productive activities one finds throughout Brazil the Italian community in great evidence, which from the most modest of conditions has recently elevated itself above the throws of fate, thanks alone to its far-sightedness and intelligently employed work» (Lucattini, 1923, p. 193). Implied in this passage is that Italians had succeeded in Brazil in spite of rather than as a result of the conditions in Brazil.

Most Italian commentators began by contrasting the present and then the future with the suffering of the Italian immigrant of the past. For example, Arena in *Italiani per il mondo* wrote, «memories of the polemics on the conditions of our compatriots living in Brazil from more than twenty year ago are still vivid, they are the saddest pages in the history of our emigration. There is not an Italian heart that is not moved by the disturbing tales of the lives of our laborers on the Brazilian *fazendas*» (Arena, 1927, p. 51). Similarly, Filippo Peviani, in his work, *L'attuale problema Italo-Brasiliano* (1922), described how in the past unsuspecting immigrants had been «the victims of abuse at the hands of the *fazendeiros* and their administrators, who, accustomed to using African slave labor, subjected [the immigrants] to new acts of cruelty demonstrating the lack of scruples associated with their former abominable profession» (Peviani, 1922, p. 23).

Regarding the present situation opinions were divided. Peviani, who based his account on extensive travel in rural São Paulo, explained that, «Those who, based on these pages of history, think this reflects today's con-

ditions, are ignoring the fact that over a period of twenty years Brazil has made such giant steps that the effects of its progress in all fields, including emigration cannot be overlooked» (*ibidem*). Throughout his work, Peviani went on to highlight many of the legal reforms São Paulo had enacted, as well as the fertility and vastness of the land, suggesting that while there were certainly obstacles and inconveniences, the overall situation was favorable for immigration. In Peviani's words, «today one can honestly recommend immigration to Brazil, especially São Paulo, because this state has in a few years made broad concessions safeguarding emigrants. It is for us to take advantage of this change in public spirit» (*ibidem*, p. 73). In contrast to such views, Arena, who did not claim to have ever been to São Paulo, responded to such positive assessments stating that, «Brazil is still a nation of recent evolution. A population of 30 million occupies its immense territory, possessing only a very modest railway infrastructure, and an embryonic communication system. It therefore lacks the necessary elements for an economic, hygienic, and moral transformation. Life in Brazil is primitive: one of isolation, pain and fatigue» (Arena, 1927, p. 52). Of the legal reforms, Arena gave little weight, insisting that despite their pretensions of modernity, «the protection of individual rights is in practice scarce, and the relationship between immigrants and employers offers no moral or economic safeguards» (*ibidem*, p. 53).

Osea Felici, who traveled to São Paulo as a journalist for *Il Giornale d'Italia*, in addition to the age-old concerns over the treatment of Italians, was particularly concerned by what he observed as the inability of Italians to advance socially into the propertied class in any significant way. According to Felici, «Ordinary labor on the *fazenda* does not seem to allow *colonos* to save enough to transform themselves into small proprietors [...] There is no doubt that some emigrants on the *fazenda* get lucky, but there are many more around who are unsuccessful» (Felici, 1923, pp. 172, 178). In response to the statistics which suggested that there were Italian landowners, Felici wrote, «the emigrant landowners do not generally begin as laborers on the *fazendas*, but rather make their money through petty commerce, becoming coffee plantation entrepreneurs» (*ibidem*, pp. 178-79). In Felici's account the blame for the difficulty Italians had in advancing socially was placed on the *fazendeiro* class. The typical *fazendeiro* was colorfully described as, «lacking any business sense and is always late on paying salaries because he does not have money, and when he has it he wastes it, he loves traveling and city life, to make merrry, champagne, and above all women [...] he is ingratiating and brutal, diffident and hospitable, a squanderer and greedy, a knight and a Jesuit, his psychology is the result of so many different bloods and contact with so many races that it sways between the virgin forests and Paris» (*ibidem*, p. 171). According to Felici, as a result of this lack of economic sense, the *fazendeiro* did

little to attend to the welfare of his *colonos*, seriously hindering their ability to advance.

The other main concern raised by many of the authors, most notably in Felici and in Francesco Bianco's work, *Il Paese dell'Avvenire*, was the loss of Italian identity abroad. After meeting children of Italians in São Paulo who could not speak Italian, Felici lamented, «What is the attraction of this new land that makes you forget the voice of your blood, and forget your traditions? [...] Ah! You cannot imagine the deep sensation, and emotion caused by seeing this half-extinguished, almost dead *italianità* that has emerged across the ocean» (*ibidem*, p. 110). According to Bianco, Italy needed to take a much more active role in preserving and cultivating *italianità* abroad. The solution he advocated was the establishment of more Italian schools and cultural institutions, with the purpose of not only teaching the language, but also of «maintaining in the children of Italians the spiritual traditions and way of thinking of the mother country, thus giving us greater national prestige» (Bianco, 1922, p. 177). While the loss of Italian identity became a major theme in the Italian literature of the 1920s, there is little evidence to suggest that the immigrants themselves were all that concerned by this issue. The very fact that many of the immigrants seemed to be losing their Italian identity on their own, suggests in and of itself that the question of Italian identity and Italian schools abroad was more a reflection of changing Italian perceptions on emigration and national prestige brought on by Fascism.

Whether their perceptions of the present were positive or negative, these authors shared in common an optimistic view of the future. According to Arena, if the Italian government were to take a more active role in intervening on the part of its compatriots by securing through international accords greater protections for its immigrants to São Paulo the prospects for success in the future seemed bright: «Italy has the freedom of initiative [...] the disconcerting situation of our emigrants obliges us to adopt a vigil safeguards [...] emigration policies are now headed toward jealously safeguarding the interests of our emigrant laborers as well as the dignity of the fatherland» (Arena, 1927, p. 56). For Lucattini, similar government activity, in this case greater investment and attention towards the formation of nucleo settlements, along with the negotiation of labor accords, which would provide worker benefits and insurance, were the best way to improve the condition of immigrants to São Paulo (Lucattini, 1923, p. 189). Already optimistic, Peviani, wrote of the need for more Italian rural laborers for the *fazendas*, glowingly describing the modern and wealthy São Paulo of the future. Most positive of them all was Bianco, who, as the title of his work «the Land of the Future» suggests, held high expectations for the future prosperity of Brazil. Contrasting the old world with the new, Brazil was described as a young vast country ever ex-

panding: «The first marvel for the man who arrives from the old continent is the many positive accomplishments in the most diverse of human endeavors [...] in Brazil this spectacle and marvel never stops stirring soul of its visitors» (Bianco, 1922, p. 13). As one would expect Bianco concluded his work calling for greater collaboration between Italy and Brazil towards a more prosperous mutually beneficial future.

Despite their disparities, these authors all shared a number of viewpoints in common. In each case, the past was lamented, the present debated, and the future viewed with optimism. Most of these writers discussed here, with the exceptions of Bonacci and Bianco, also focused their characterizations of São Paulo almost entirely on life on the coffee *fazendas*, ignoring not only the urbanization and industrial development of São Paulo in these years, but also the changing nature of the rural landscape with the rise of small proprietors and increasing crop diversification to meet the demands of the expanding urban market. Taken together, these writers also all exhort the Italian government, and in particular the «Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione», the government agency founded in 1901 to aid Italian emigrants, to take a more active interest in the State of São Paulo and the plight of Italian emigrants.

After years of neglect, articles and reports on the State of São Paulo once again filled the pages of the *Bollettino dell'Emigrazione*, the «Commissariato»'s monthly publication. The three main types of material on São Paulo in the *Bollettino* were: reproductions of census information and legal enactments from São Paulo; published parliamentary debate from the Italian chamber of deputies; and the work of the «Commissariato» itself, specifically its positions and the reforms it had advocated over the years. As a whole these sources served the dual purpose of providing information on the current situation in São Paulo as well as responding directly to many of the claims and concerns raised by works like the ones discussed above.

The «News and Information» sections of the *Bollettino* contest or at times corroborate the impressions of the Italian commentators discussed above. In the 1920s, much of the statistical evidence employed to depict the conditions of Italians in São Paulo derived from the 1920 Brazilian census. Allowing the statistics to speak for themselves with little commentary the *Bollettino* highlighted a number of figures, which tell us a great deal about the actual position of Italian immigrants within Brazil. Providing basic census data, it was reported that of a total population of 29,045,227 million people, 1,565,961 were foreigners, and significantly, in São Paulo 829,851, out of a total of 3,758,479 were foreigners (22 per cent). At 558,405 Italians were the largest immigrant group, followed by the Portuguese with 433,577 and Spanish, 219,142. The Italian presence was even stronger in São Paulo: 398,797 Italians, more than the next two groups combined (Spanish:

171,289 and Portuguese with 167,198). These figures, which do not include the children of Italian immigrants, demonstrate the strong presence of Italians in Brazil and their concentration in the State of São Paulo: 11 per cent of the total population and 48 per cent of all foreigners (*Bollettino dell'Emigrazione*, 1924, p. 922).

In terms of property, the *Bollettino* reported that of a total of 643,153 rural properties 79,894 (12 per cent of total) belonged to foreigners and from that number 35,894 (44 per cent) belonged specifically to Italians. In terms of size, of a total of 175,104,675 hectares, foreigners owned 10,478,987 (6 per cent of total), of which 2,743,178 (26 per cent) belonged to Italians. In terms of value, total property value was 10,568,008:691 *contos*, while foreign properties were worth 1,135,124:546 *contos*, of which the Italian portion was worth 466,683:388 *contos* (*ibidem*, pp. 922-23). These figures indicate that despite some claims to the contrary, Italians owned a significant amount of the rural property: 44 per cent of all foreign holdings. Yet, the information on size and value of the property also indicates that a majority of Italian owners were small-holders whose property was of less value than those of Brazilians and other immigrant groups (*ibidem*, p. 922).

Beyond basic statistics, news reports also indicated the job prospects of various regions. In a 1924 issue of the *Bollettino*, under the subject heading, «Regarding False Reports» the *Bollettino*, detailed the State of São Paulo's labor market, highlighting the scarcity of labor on the coffee *fazendas*, as a result of massive urban migration. According to the report, this made the job market on the *fazendas* especially favorable, since in order to keep workers on the *fazendas* it was reported that salaries were increasing and working conditions improving (*ibidem*, p. 619). Taken as a whole these sections of the *Bollettino*, while not answering many of the specific complaints on the treatment of immigrants do demonstrate, that significant numbers of Italian immigrants did manage to succeed at least moderately, seriously calling into question some of the more negative assessments of others.

Brazilian and Paulista legal reforms pertaining to immigration were also documented and reproduced in the *Bollettino*. For example, a 1919 report listed the laws pertaining to entrance into the port of Santos as well as services to be provided for immigrants, while a 1923 report reproduced «São Paulo Law of October 18» which instituted rural tribunals to enforce labor contracts (*Bollettino dell'Emigrazione*, 1923, p. 138). In addition to their main function of providing information for prospective emigrants, these decrees portray a São Paulo which is changing and enacting reforms to improve rural relations. Therefore, even without much commentary, the *Bollettino's* information sections present a different image of São Paulo than the Italian travel accounts of the same period.

In addition to providing its information services, the *Bollettino*, as the official mouthpiece of the «Commissariato», also presented governmental perceptions of São Paulo, mainly in the form of Italian parliamentary debate on emigration. In *Bollettino* issues from 1924-1925, São Paulo figures prominently as a result of United States restrictions on immigration. Comments from a series of particularly lively sessions from the Italian Chamber of Deputies during this period tell us much about the views and preoccupations of Italian officials concerning São Paulo.

From the minutes of these sessions, the age old debate over the mistreatment of Italians at the hands of cruel *fazendeiros* was a frequent theme. As Deputy Libertini for example explained, «The question is old, with a number of important variations that we should begin with its origin: many of our laborers, incautiously, and without guarantees, went to that land [São Paulo] where on the *fazendas* they were treated with the same abuse as the negroes, and lived like slaves» (Senato del Regno, 1924, p. 1047). Not entirely pessimistic, Libertini recognized that the situation was changing and held out the possibility of improvement, declaring: «Now it seems as though conditions may have improved, and I do not think that the government should overlook the possibility of negotiations to regulate and redirect the flow of our migration to Brazil, which is still a great country to be explored» (*ibidem*). Other deputies were less optimistic, one lamenting: «What misery! These workers came to take the place abandoned by slaves, and their lives were just as hard. No house, no school, no protection» (*ibidem*, p. 1059), while another, speaking of the present, not the past, declared, «In São Paulo, in the coffee zones the immigrant remains always a “laborer” without the possibility of becoming an owner, land remains in the jealous hands of the *fazendeiros* who do not cede anything [...] on the *fazendas* Italians lose their conscience and their human dignity, and have become miserable things *res nullius*, subject to a modern and cruel form of slavery where the only liberty is death» (*ibidem*, p. 1024). The strong words of these deputies illustrate the persistence of impressions and images of Brazil first formed over twenty years before, most striking is the continued allusion to Brazil as the great land of slavery.

In spite of the persistence of these negative images, most, though not all, of the Deputies recognized the reforms that had been taking place in São Paulo, and expressed a renewed interest in future migration. As deputy Rava explained, responding to Libertini's comments, «Brazil is of great and vital importance to Italy and should not be spoken of lightly. Brazil is an immense fertile territory, with a good climate, although different from that of Italy, and it holds out the possibility of providing Italians the work on the land that they are looking for and love [...] There is land, and from us there are capable laborers. Lets unite these forces!» (*ibidem*, p. 1058). Interestingly, this positive

side of Brazil's image as a vast land of potential opportunity and future development also traces its roots to the debates of the past.

Both the positive and negative images of São Paulo in the parliamentary debate shared a misconception of Brazil all too common in the Italian debate: Brazil, and especially São Paulo, is seen as a monolithic land of large coffee plantations controlled by big *fazendeiros*, and worked on by poor immigrant contract laborers. In reality, while large coffee plantations were of unquestionable importance, there were also, especially in the 1920s, other types of crops, varied sizes of rural properties, and multiple types of labor arrangements, not to mention the major urban industrial complex emerging in and around the city of São Paulo. Furthermore, Italian immigrants were actively involved in all of these other economic pursuits (Dean, 1969).

In addition to the persistence of these old, and in some cases anachronistic, images of São Paulo, from the Italian parliamentary debate there were a number of new concerns that reflected the new nationalistic preoccupations of the Fascist regime. Beyond simple concern over the working and living conditions of the emigrants these Deputies were particularly concerned with the loss of Italian identity abroad, and obsessed with spreading Italian prestige and influence through their emigrant communities. The remarks of Del Croix and Soderini illustrate this new feature of the debate over São Paulo emigration. Soderini declared, «I believe that consular officials must no longer consider immigrants as mendicants, but as our pioneers [...] they must get together and form important nuclei of Italianità» (Senato del Regno, 1924, p. 1048). With this new objective in mind a number of new issues concerning immigration to São Paulo became of central importance. These issues include: the need for more Italian schools in São Paulo, the instruction of the Italian language, culture, and history to the children of Italian immigrants, even to those attending Brazilian schools, as well as recognition from the Brazilian government that the children of Italian immigrants be considered Italian citizens, and required to serve in the Italian, rather than Brazilian Army. In an era before dual citizenship was commonplace this last initiative was complex since Brazil adhered to a *jus solis* (based on birthplace) definition of citizenship while Italy favored a *jus sanguinis* (based on blood) one. The main priority therefore was one of cultural as well as material expansion. As Soderini explained (*ibidem*, p. 1058),

I believe that there is a duty to educate, as much as our resources permit, this Italian population living abroad; I would like that Italians abroad identify themselves as nothing but Italians, and not have internal dissention or division within the community [...] [that] everyone of us when leave Italy clean all of our defects and present to the foreigner the purest image of an Italian citizen.

In the context of Brazil, somewhat envious comparative references were often made to the German community which seemed to have been more successful in maintaining its identity abroad (Bianco, 1922, p. 179).

In the midst of this parliamentary debate, Mussolini weighed in voicing many of the concerns discussed above. As true of most, Mussolini focused his discourse on the treatment of laborers on the coffee *fazendas* explaining, «It is the condition of the workers on the *fazendas* that leave the greatest impression on us because the *fazendas* of the State of São Paulo produce seven-tenths of the world's coffee supply, and is the preponderant element of Brazil's economy, always finding therefore its detractors and its most steadfast supporters» (Mussolini, 1924, p. 1041). Of the actual condition of Italian emigrants Mussolini asserted that as a result of its still recent evolution, «the public protection of immigrants is scarce, and the economic and moral state of immigrants is exclusively determined, without the possibility of safeguards or sanctions by the relationship established between the *fazendeiro* and the laborer» (*ibidem*). To resolve this problem, Mussolini urged the more active involvement of the Italian government in promoting and protecting Italian emigration to São Paulo through the use of international and bilateral accords with Brazil and specifically the State of São Paulo. According to Mussolini, these accords would not only promote emigration to São Paulo, but also guarantee the well-being of its emigrant laborers, solving a problem which is «of vital importance to Brazil which needs a productive laboring population, and vital to Italy which needs to expand itself through the productive emigration of its children» (*ibidem*, p. 1046). With these words, along with those of the members of Parliament, the Italian government accelerated its especially energetic efforts of negotiating concessions and guarantees with São Paulo and Brazil which had begun to take shape with the Italo-Brazilian Accord of 1921, but reached their climax at Mussolini's much publicized international conferences on immigration and emigration in 1924 and 1925.

With ready access to the Italian debate via the *Bollettino dell'Emigrazione*, Brazilian, and especially Paulista officials were indignant over the overall manner in which the condition of Italian immigrants to their state was being portrayed. A pamphlet, published in French for international consumption, by José Luiz Bulhões Carvalho, head of the Brazilian *Directoria Geral de Estatística*, directly challenged many of the more harsh assumptions and critiques of his nation found in the Italian literature. In reference to the aforementioned debate in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Bulhões Carvalho wrote (1925, p. 8):

These vehement expressions are entirely unjust [...] The prosperity of the Italians living in the most flourishing state of the Brazilian Federation [São Paulo] is living testimony to this [...] Anyone who has the good fortune of visiting São

Paulo, the state's flourishing capital cannot but recognize that the Italian element dominates the foreign population, nor could one not be familiar with its fertile territory explored and cultivated by Italian hands, where numerous subjects of the Crown of Savoy have profited from agricultural and industrial ventures [...] after years of honest labor and with the esteem and support from Brazilians that they deserved for their efficient labor.

Bulhões Carvalho's counter-argument relied on two main types of evidence: the São Paulo legal codes protecting immigrants, and statistical information derived from the 1920 Brazilian census. The laws highlighted by Bulhões Carvalho included the guidelines pertaining to the *Hospedaria* and its free services available to recently arrived immigrants, the *Patronato Agricolo* and its function of enforcing the Paulista civil codes, which ensured the protection of immigrant laborers and enforced the terms agreed upon in contracts. Additional laws discussed included: Article 750 of the 1916 Brazilian Civil Code, which stipulated that the payment of agricultural worker's salaries should have priority over all other debts, as well as, the Sanitary Code of 1917, designed to ensure a healthy work environment, and federal decree n. 3.724 of 1919 which established some form of compensation for job related injuries, and finally, State law n. 1.743 of 1920, promising legal representation free of charge for those without means. As true of early legislation, laws in the books do not necessarily mean they were being enforced, however just the fact that they were enacted, is effective in challenging the Italian assertion that the Brazilian and especially Paulista government had ignored the concerns of immigrant laborers (*ibidem*, pp. 5-7).

The statistical evidence marshaled by Bulhões Carvalho, more than anything else, made his rebuttal especially persuasive. Calling on the «the impartial eloquence of numbers» Bulhões Carvalho presented a statistical profile of the Italian community in Brazil, with a focus on São Paulo. Interestingly many of the statistics he included had also been provided in the *Bollettino* (discussed above), and both were based on the 1920 Brazilian census. His tables for example list the number of Italians living in Brazil, and the amount and value of rural property held by Italians. There were, however, some significant differences both in terms of content as well as in the way in which the information was presented. The most significant difference between the two is that Bulhões Carvalho highlighted the industrial, as well as, the agricultural character of Italian immigration which many Italian sources including the *Bollettino* overlooked. According to the figures provided by the 1920 census, Italians in São Paulo owned 1,446 industrial establishments with a total production value of 72,077:851\$ (*ibidem*, p. 18). For Brazil as whole, Italians owned 2,119 establishments with a production value of 105,159:754\$, more than twice the number of industrial establishments that the next foreign group (the Por-

tuguese with 891). These figures are even more impressive given that native Brazilians owned 4,084 industrial establishments worth 278,394:598\$. All in all Italians controlled 23 per cent of Brazil's industries, but comprised only 4 per cent of the total population of Brazil (*ibidem*, pp. 17-19).

With the expressed purpose of demonstrating the success of Italians in Brazil, Bulhões Carvalho stressed in his text those figures that place Italian progress in the best light. While the tables in his appendix are quite comprehensive, his exposition of these numbers emphasized the preponderance of Italian progress and ownership compared to other immigrant groups, highlighting for example the fact that nearly half of rural property owned by foreigners belonged to Italians, by far more than other immigrant groups. These figures are somewhat less impressive however if we take into account that Italians were also the largest group in terms of numbers. Furthermore, Bulhões Carvalho did not mention that while greater in number, the value of Italian rural property and industrial establishments was proportionally lower than that of a number of other immigrant groups (*ibidem*, pp. 17-18). Another factor impossible to determine from the figures provided by Bulhões Carvalho is upward mobility: that is how many of these rural landowners and industrialists cited by Bulhões Carvalho, actually started out as contract laborers and worked their way up, and how many came instead to Brazil with resources of their own to invest. Despite these considerations the numbers referenced by Bulhões Carvalho do demonstrate at the very least that a significant number of Italian migrants were successful in Brazil, and despite the Italian fixation on rural contract labor, by 1920 a substantial number of Italians owned rural property or industrial establishments.

Bulhões Carvalho's pamphlet, aimed at a foreign audience, with the goal of demonstrating the success Italians had had in Brazil, provides us with just one facet of Brazilian responses to Italian immigration and the issues raised in the Italian literature. More telling, are the comments of the presidents of São Paulo in their annual reports of the 1920s. Similar to Bulhões Carvalho, São Paulo's presidents at the time, Washington Luis Pereira de Sousa (1920-1923) and Carlos de Campos (1924-1926) discussed the work of the *Hospedaria* in accommodating immigrants during their first days in São Paulo, as well as, the work of the *Patronato Agrícola*, in enforcing contract obligations, and the *Departamento Estadual do Trabalho* in assisting immigrants find employment (São Paulo, *Mensagem*, 1918, pp. 57-60). However, from the reports it is clear that efforts thus far did not adequately resolve conflicts between *colonos* and *fazendeiros*. As Washington Luis Pereira de Sousa wrote in 1922, «One of the most serious obstacles hindering our organization of foreign agricultural labor is the difficulty in finding a *rapid and inexpensive* way of resolving controversies between *fazendeiros* and *colonos* over the

execution of rural contracts» (São Paulo, *Mensagem*, 1922, p. 61). To resolve this «most important of all problems related to immigration» Washington Luis Pereira de Sousa called for the establishment of traveling rural tribunals to augment the current efforts of the *Patronato Agrícola*. This suggestion makes it clear that, its propaganda notwithstanding, contract problems and the abuse of immigrant labor remained a problem in the 1920s. Other shortcomings highlighted in the reports were poor communication and transportation networks, as well as, the need to make more land available for coffee cultivation. These concerns listed here help counterbalance the rosy portrait of São Paulo in Bulhões Carvalho's pamphlet.

By far the most pressing concern in all of the presidential reports of the 1920s was the need for more immigrant labor to the coffee *fazendas*, as well as, the urgent need to slow the outflow of laborers from the *fazendas* to the city. These reports recognized the advancements of immigrants in commerce and industry: with one report stating, «In numerous municipalities, more Italian names can be found than those of Portuguese origin in industry» (São Paulo, *Mensagem*, 1921, p. 71). The Presidents of São Paulo were however far more preoccupied with obtaining immigrants to work in the *fazendas*, for according to Washington Luis Pereira de Sousa, «To direct the flow of immigration to anywhere but the *fazenda*, would be to destroy the nation's wealth and retard Brazil's progress for many years to come» (*ibidem*, p. 68). Another stated that, «with conditions as they are here indicated, São Paulo must open its ports to immigration destined for agriculture, that is agriculture on the *fazendas*» (São Paulo, *Mensagem*, 1922, p. 50). With some urgency, the 1922 presidential report highlighted the alarming trend of immigrant migration off the *fazenda*, replaced inadequately by Brazilian migrants from the North. Therefore in order to continue to attract immigrants a variety of solutions were suggested, including parceling out portions of large estates, establishing immigrant *nucleos*, and extending the rail networks to develop more virgin lands for coffee cultivation (São Paulo, *Mensagem*, 1921, p. 51). Interestingly this emphasis on rural labor on coffee *fazendas* at the expense of all other agricultural and commercial pursuits is a major point in common with the Italian literature.

The most significant areas of disagreement between the Italian government viewpoint and that of São Paulo, involved the issue of Italian diplomatic intervention in labor negotiations among laborers and *fazendeiros* within São Paulo, as well as the more recent Italian preoccupation of preserving and promoting Italian identity abroad. Beginning with the Italo-Brazilian Treaty of 1921, the government of Italy began pressuring São Paulo to sign a separate agreement, which would lay down the specific guidelines for labor contracts between Italian *colonos* and *fazendeiros*, thus providing Italian emi-

grants with special extraterritorial protections while living in São Paulo (*Bollettino dell'Emigrazione*, 1925). In response, Washington Luis Pereira de Sousa in his 1923 report wrote that, «it must be clearly stated that the government cannot, nor wants to negotiate agricultural contracts directly with immigrants [...] we desire accords which will establish the flow of immigration, within which *colonos* and *fazendeiros* make their own contracts of which they are obligated to adhere to» (São Paulo, *Mensagem*, 1923, pp. 34-35). In terms of citizenship laws, the Presidents of São Paulo also made it clear that they desire that immigrants obtain Brazilian citizenship. To facilitate naturalization, emigrants who own real estate in Brazil, marry a Brazilian, or simply have arrived in Brazil after 1889 without declaring within six months their desire to preserve their original nationality would be granted Brazilian citizenship (São Paulo, *Mensagem*, 1922, p. 50). Assimilation, loyalty to Brazil, and an education in Portuguese were also stressed, in obvious contrast to the Italian government's desire to preserve *italianità* abroad, as Washington Luis Pereira de Sousa explained, «It is true that we are a nation of immigrants, but more than that we are a nation, a fatherland» (*ibidem*, p. 46). These divergent views on Italian immigration would find their ultimate expression at the International Conference on Emigration and Immigration held in Rome, May 15-31, 1924.

Inaugurated with much publicity by Benito Mussolini himself, the expressed purpose of the conference was nothing less than to establish an international accord regulating the flow of immigration and standardizing legal protections and services for immigrants, although the underlying goal was without a doubt to enhance Mussolini's international prestige.

Throughout many of the discussions the Brazilian delegation was on the defensive. More often than not, when they were not reminding the other delegates of the legislation their government had already passed protecting its immigrant laborers, they were justifying their inability to do more by citing the vastness of Brazil and the difficulty of rural supervision, as well as, the federal nature of the Brazilian nation in which individual states had a significant level of legislative autonomy, limiting the ability of the federal government to impose standardized legislation related to immigrant labor (*Conférence Internationale*, «Travaux de la Conférence», 1924, p. 255). In the final acts of the conference, the Brazilian delegation approved most of the resolutions including those providing for the passage of emigrants, their reception in the host country, and the assurance of sanitary conditions and medical attention, the protection of women and children traveling alone, as well as the measures providing for the cooperation between immigration and emigration services (*Conférence Internationale*, «Acte Finale», 1924). The Brazilian delegation, however, opposed those articles, which it perceived as infringing on its sover-

eignty. This was especially the case for those resolutions, which gave foreign consular officials in nations of immigrants the authority to intervene in judicial proceedings of their nationals as well as resolutions pertaining to the establishment of “patriotic organizations” within the various immigrant collectivities (*ibidem*). In sum, the Brazilian delegation insisted that its immigrant laborers were treated the same as native Brazilians, and therefore opposed resolutions granting immigrants special privileges within their adopted country (Ministero das Relações Exteriores, 1925, p. 54).

After the International Conference interest in the debate over emigration/immigration to São Paulo began to fade, as the outflow of Italian emigrants began to slow. Despite the historic conference of 1924, the trend toward restricting immigration begun by the United States continued, and despite its bluster, the Fascist regime was ultimately unable to obtain many of the more ambitious concessions that it had wanted from the countries of immigrants. With his nationally charged expansive definition of Italian emigration becoming a liability, Mussolini soon abandoned his original policy toward emigration. Comments made by Mussolini as early as 1926 provide a clear sign of the changed direction the regime was headed: «To tell you the truth, I am not an emigration enthusiast; it is a sad and painful necessity that we can endure, but emigration at its core is nothing but the pauperization of the people and the Nation itself. Millions of the strong most courageous and audacious Italians are emigrating» (Mussolini, cited in Cantalupo, 1940, p. 301). On March 31, 1927, in a dramatic speech to Parliament, this reorientation was made official by the Italian Foreign Minister Dino Grandi, who dissolved the «Commissariato Generale dell’Emigrazione» declaring, «From now on there will no longer be *emigrants*, only *Italians living abroad*» (Grandi, 1927, p. 132). Interestingly, at the very same time as this reorientation of policy in Italy, the State of São Paulo also began to redirect its policy toward immigration. In 1927 it eliminated its program of subsidized passages to São Paulo (Holloway, 1980, p. 168). Ultimately it would, however, be the dramatic socio-economic throws of the Great Depression that would mark the end of the age of mass Italian migration to São Paulo, as well as, the end of a forty year old debate.

The Italian debate on emigration was both a reflection of the perceived condition of Italians living in São Paulo, as well as, a product of the changing Italian views towards emigration in general. The latter being especially true during the 1920s when writers under the Fascist regime became more interested in spreading Italian influence and prestige abroad, as well as, preoccupied by the perceived loss of Italian identity by its emigrants. Nevertheless, Italian perceptions of the immigrant experience to São Paulo also tell us a great deal about São Paulo’s image abroad.

Throughout the course of the debate over Italian emigration to São Paulo, a number of telling images reoccurred in the literature. Constant reference

was made to Brazil's slave past, as the plight of Italian *colonos* was characterized as a new form of post-abolition slavery. The contrasting image of Brazil, which also occurred frequently, was that of Brazil as a «land of the future» which thanks to its natural resources and vast territory, always held out the promise of potential prosperity, forever a great nation in the making. For São Paulo specifically, throughout the literature there existed a fascination with the coffee *fazenda*. While there certainly were some writers, such as Bonacci and Bianco, who recognized the commercial-industrial side of the State, most Italians, especially government officials were obsessed with life on the coffee *fazenda*. Italian judgments about the treatment of Italian immigrants and evaluations of São Paulo in general relied almost entirely on impressions of the *colono* experience on the big *fazenda*. Consequently, for the most part, much of the diversity of the Italian immigrant experience in São Paulo was overlooked in the Italian accounts.

Over time, São Paulo underwent major transformations both in terms of legislative reform as well as socio-economic development. New legal codes were enacted with the purpose of providing protections and services for immigrant laborers, and by the 1920s, while coffee remained its major agricultural export, São Paulo's economy was diversifying as industrialization and urbanization accelerated. That many of the negative images first formed around the time of the 1902 Prinetti Decree persisted for years in the face of such changes is testament to the compelling nature of such graphic characterizations. It also suggests that the somewhat exotic lure of life on the coffee frontier captured Italian imaginations far more than the commercial-urban immigration experience, which unlike the *fazenda*, was not unique to Brazil. It was therefore this aspect of Brazil which made it different from other emigration destinations which attracted most interest. Perhaps even in today's world it is this unique aspect of Brazilian life and culture which continue to attract the attention of tourists and scholars alike.

Notes

- ¹ «With beautiful promises and pacts, making them [Italian immigrants] expect to find an El Dorado there, where there was instead nothing but fatigue...». The Italian Finance Commissioner in a speech to Italian Parliament, December 11, 1924.
- ² See for example: Holloway, 1980; Trento, 1988. For works discussing the Italian immigrant experience in Brazil see also: Trento, 2000; Tedesco, 2001; Ducatti Neto, 1979; Battistel, 1982; Guimarães, 1962. The works of Warren Dean: 1969, and 1976, also provide useful insights on the Italian immigration experience.

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