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The Columbus People: Perspectives in Italian Immigration to the Americas and Australia

Ed. by Lydio F. Tomasi, Piero Gastaldo and Thomas Row
New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1994

This 500-plus-page anthology gathers the papers written for the New York University May 27-29, 1992, conference by the same title. Sponsored by the Center for Migration Studies of Staten Island and the Agnelli Foundation with support also from the Italian Cultural Institute of New York, the National Italian American Foundation, the Italian Welfare League and other associations, this collection is proof that the cultural networks of the "Italian Commonwealth"—as Robert Viscusi calls the future of *italianité* (cf. 483-90)—are not only varied and first rate, but that as a whole the "Columbus people" are becoming major interlocutors in the global intellectual scene. The conference is the third of this range and complexity following the 1976 *Symposium on Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity* and the 1983 symposium *Italian Americans: New Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity*, both sponsored by the Center for Migration Studies. This time the approach is global, for as the raw data on immigration have grown considerably (the volume offers new and rich information on sources, archives, bibliographies) and our own mode of doing research changes, we begin to sense the need for some more complex and overarching theoretical framework, one, I might add, that has profited from much debate about post-modernity, the end of ideologies, and technology. Although there is no

dearth of articles that explain phenomena out of hard sociological data, what distinguishes this volume is precisely the number of theory-focused contributions: see for instance Angelo Trento, "Italianità in Brazil: A Disputed Object of Desire" (251-71), Josef Barton, "The Edge of Modernity: Immigration in the Making of the 20th Century United States" (323-41), or Donna Gabaccia, "Italian Immigrant Women in Comparative Perspective" (391-405). In this sense, *The Columbus People* is an important reference point because many misguided or prejudicial interpretations of Italian Americans are definitively cast behind, and a host of brilliant new venues for interpretation disclosed.

I cannot do this book justice in this brief note, I can only mention some of its contents. Ruggiero Romano in his Prologue titled "The Long Journey of Italian Migration" (1-16) summarizes the manifold demographic movements of Italians across Europe and the Americas since the seventeenth century and emphasizes how the subtle cultural and social adaptations of the migrants reveal a more complex picture. He stresses the fact that the migration of the post-Unitary period is of a radically other nature than those that preceded it, and the fact that it happened in Italy is no longer an incidental point, but a crucial general critical concern. Economics begins to have a more dominant role, and as such it must weigh more in the historians' narrative reconstruction of the important facts and meanings of one's heritage. However, Italian intellectuals of the past twenty years have turned a deaf ear to this because if what I call "immigration syndrome" floats into the cultural un/conscious, it is disturbing:

The "rich" and vulgar Italy of the past few years has forgotten (the new rich always have short memories) that it has emerged from hunger and poverty not solely through the work of the Italians who stayed at home [a great number of whom, if I may intercalate, also had to migrate *within* the country], but also through the work of those who went away. Yet, wan-faced intellectuals, pretentious historians and economists debate the monetary 'remitances' which contributed gold, worth billions of lira, to the formation of the basis of Italian industry, reducing and denying its importance.

This may lead to some bitter considerations, with equivocal symbolism: "Italians abroad are children, on the one hand; and Italy is a stepmother, in the worst sense of the word, on the other" (12). Romano concludes by setting as a critical task the need

to measure, critically and scientifically, this important chapter in Italian history: the chapter on emigration. That is to assess what this *andar per monti e mari* (going across mountains and seas) has meant, and what it still means, on every level (political, economic, social and cultural), what it has meant for the world, and what it has brought to Italy.

In a way, he employs the actual evolutions of the several migrations out of Italy as layered critical categories with which to look at (a) national history, and suggest how it would have to be rewritten. However, as some recent studies have shown—I am thinking in particular of the important book by Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration* (Guilford, 1994)—migration ought no longer be considered as epiphenomenal to the "great forces of history" nor even as a "chapter" in a multitiered but sealed volume, but rather as an actual founding category of existence, in a vaguely Kantian sense. Philosophy has long contested the

necessity to read history off exclusivist pseudoplatonic ideals, and political theory has been questioning whether history can be understood solely in terms of left, right, center, or other categories such as republican or socialist or democrat or whatever. As William McNeil has demonstrated, Europe looked at from the viewpoint of how its diseases, and particularly plagues, have interacted and shaped the flow of energies and peoples, broadens our understanding of the complexity of the subject of inquiry, as well as of the interpretation itself.

Italian American scholars have read their social theorists and their "official" histories. They also know of Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, translation and rhizomes. On a different plane, the French *Annales* school of micro-history has also reopened the dossier on how to reconfigure notions such as identity, ethnicity, nationality/nationness in a postmodern perspective. Braudel in particular emerges as a key figure for many of the contributors to this volume, as analysis is made to relate to ever new and surprising contexts in the European mold. Usefully we discover, for instance, that ethnicity and migration are two non-coextensive concepts. In the article by Richard Alba, "Identity and Ethnicity among Italians and Other Americans of European Ancestry" (21-44)—who had employed the rich image of "the twilight of ethnicity" in his earlier studies on Italian American culture as it evolved over many generations—we find a model for linking in more meaningful ways the traits of modern-day individuals of Italian origin, who have little or nothing of "the immigrant," with those of a broadly understood "European type." This is valid because other more saliently stereotyped eth-

nic groups of the past half-century have also experienced a decline of strong common ethnic traits in their social, professional and private lives. The recurring references to what's going on in the research of similar problems in Latin American studies is a methodological plus of this and other articles. As held also by many other authors, Alba believes there is no longer an objective justification for identifying Italians in the Americas on the basis of some grounding ethnic clues or traits. This position automatically downplays certain stereotypes of the earlier generations and highlights the more complex, diffused, mutated symbolism of ethnicity within a more mobile and interconnected Anglo-European generically transnational middle-class society. This is not so different from what many critics and intellectuals of all stripes in Italy have been writing during the past five years concerning a reframed notion of the Italy-Europe relation, politologists and politicians in particular vying for "*la scelta europea*" or "*l'europa come destino*." I have to postpone discussion on this topic.

However, on strictly psychological and anthropological grounds, Alba's position could be contested. In her response to Alba's paper Mary Waters underscores how this category is much too broad, as it would tend to level out the persistence of deeply ingrained habits or views which even at a symbolic remove still partake in the social and individual lives of groups:

I seriously doubt, however, that European American could become an identity. This is precisely because of something else Prof. Alba describes in detail in the paper: the fact that people associate ethnicity with their own family history and with particular values, cultural traditions, or customs. It

is hard for me to imagine people actually thinking to themselves or saying out loud, "Mom uses her hands when she talks all the time because she is European American." (46)

Waters believes that despite the evident decline of objective differences among groups there are still two ways to explore one's ethnic background. One is by considering the Italians—that is, the Italian case of migration—as "special," which in fact it was in a number of well-known ways, and understand that the intriguing

coincidence of a historical ideological shift to valuing ethnicity, occurring at the same time as Italians were beginning to celebrate their identity and culture after a period of social mobility, might lead to a more stubborn identity, even in the face of massive structural changes. (47)

The other aspect is to look at how the new generations (re)claim their ethnic background, and this must be done by paying particular attention to the mass media. In this we cannot but agree that "it is true that the content of their ideas about what it means to be Italian becomes more stylized and superficial, but it does not become any less important to the individual" (47.) Although there aren't that many papers dedicated to this topic in *The Columbus People*, it is an area profitably explored elsewhere in this issue of *Differentia*, and it must be studied even further.

Lurking under the social criticism approach to representation in the public media is the disturbing dialectic of high culture versus low or popular culture. It is astonishing how many academics still harbor suspicion and disaffection toward mass and "popular" art and culture, as if it didn't affect high culture (whatever that is these days) or as if art couldn't be a general and determining experience

for all social beings. But, once again, the papers written for this conference had another agenda. Among other things, many retrace in various ways the possible reasons for the migrations of Italians to the Americas, and as such they bear upon many knotty issues that have besieged the consciousness of modernity. When the activities of various Italians and/or Italian organizations in different countries are analyzed and interpreted, it is no longer done with reference to a unitary view of progress, alleged universal moral standards, or the "glory" contributed to such-and-such a national allegory. Rather, they are analyzed in terms of their communal specificity, of the conditions of labor, the political possibilities of mobility, the economic and technological availability of certain means of communication, transportation, and the role of given institutions in dealing with the strangers, the foreigners, the homeless. What emerges is not only the stimulating depth and vast range of situations between how Italians have survived and established themselves in places such as Uruguay, Argentina, Venezuela, the United States, Australia, how and possibly why they succeeded economically and socially in certain areas and less in others, but also the crucial theoretical possibility that Italian Americans cannot any longer be looked at as unified, one-people-one-voice social agglomerate living in migration-marked hyphenated space, but rather as a social and historical construct with a multilayered essence, with an endlessly modifiable repertoire of gestures and images.

A lucid paper by Gianfausto Rosoli of the Centro Studi Emigrazione in Rome, "The Global Picture of the Italian Diaspora to the Americas" (305-22), deftly summarizes the great

number of contending theories in social, political and historical studies, and serves to illustrate the wealth of hermeneutic possibilities open to the scholar who approaches migration studies and Italian cultural studies in conjunction (being aware, of course, that each has specific and not always permutable methodologies, as Gabaccia reminds us in her article). The paper is too rich to summarize, so I'll emblematically refer to some of its subheadings: *The Residual of the Past: North and South Patterns of Migration to America, Italian Emigration in the Atlantic Economy* ("Italian migration flows provide a good example of the impact of world markets and power relationships on local populations"), *The Meaning and Use of "Global" Analysis*—which is must reading for all graduate students in the humanities, as it explores the role of paradigms of interpretation, such as that of integration—and finally how legal history might furnish us with some objective reference points in the explication of certain demographic movements. After synthetically listing a host of theoretical approaches—such as in the past have relied on methodic juxtapositions of labor versus settler migration, microanalysis of individuals versus macroanalysis of the nation or large samples of its denizens, transatlantic community studies strongly influenced by anthropology, or the "village-outward" approach—the author seems to point to the latter as appropriate to a global understanding "because it places migration in the broader world context in which the emerging industrial regions created a demand for immigrant labor. The migrant acted on a worldwide stage, moving to destinations in many continents" (312).

The richness of the information on

and interpretation of these Italian diasporas throughout the American and Australian continents is, in fact, one of the strongest points of this collection. It compels the reader unacquainted with Italian culture and Italian Americans to open up to and enter in critical dialogue with *this* background:

Today's societies are characterized by a fragmented and composed identity, no longer restricted to the state-nation dimension, but enriched by many collective cultural, ethnic and multicultural contributions. Italian immigrants have experienced a transnational situation and are protagonists not only of traditional forms of social

and geographical mobility, but also of new forms of solidarity, belonging to, and in affiliation with, a more open and universal perspective which they helped to build. Migrant communities now are, or act as, political subjects able to renegotiate their own needs and identities with both sending and receiving societies. And, this is no small contribution of the "Columbus people." (318)

Indeed: migration, metamorphosis, the faces of history.

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