

Part Seven

*Testimonies on Italian Immigration*

replace with (Witnesses of)

*Adolfo Rossi*

*Mayor Des Planches*

*Dario Papa and Ferdinando Fontana*

*Giuseppe Giacosa*

*Amy A. Bernardy*

*Irene di Robilant*



## THE HUMANIST WHO SOLD FANS

We have only few testimonies on the Great Migration, one of the great tragedies of modern times but a silent one. Its protagonists and victims could not write and could barely express themselves: today, the survivors do not want to remember. When someone tries to interview them, they hide behind a wall of reticence often covered with a plaster coat of pride or shame. The success that some of them finally achieved, has become a screen for all the others, a screen behind which so many heart-wrenching stories are hidden away. This situation makes my recent discovery of a precious and rare little book even more important. On a library's shelf I found the story written by a certain Adolfo Rossi<sup>1</sup> about his adventure in the United States. Rossi was from Lendinara, a small town in the province of Rovigo, a place where he felt unhappy and irritable "like a caged bird." Entrepreneurial, full of dreams and eager to discover new things, he boarded a ship in 1870 with 400 lire<sup>2</sup> in his pocket. The money didn't last long. One night, on the ship, soon after the journey had started, his money was stolen and he arrived in New York with only three and a half lira for himself and his companion. Rossi had attended high school, which, in those days, was considered a high level of education. His first job in Italy was as a postal clerk but he was too smart to stop there and ventured further, eventually becoming the author of some novellas that were published in literary journals. He even founded a periodical, *Il grillo del focolare*.<sup>3</sup> In the course of years of traveling to many countries, he published several books, some of which are still precious testimonies of the emigrant conditions. In 1906 he was appointed emigration inspector with the unanimous vote of a commission composed of notable members of the Italian parliament, among which were Senator

1 Adolfo Rossi (1857-1921). Journalist, writer and diplomat from the town of Lendinara in the province of Rovigo. He died in Buenos Aires.

2 Approximately \$3,000 in today's money.

3 The English translation means *The Hearth's Cricket*, which is reminiscent of Dickens's Christmas novella *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845).

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Giorgio Arcoletto and Representative Francesco Saverio Nitri.<sup>4</sup> He later became vice-commissioner:

Rossi's personality is optimistic, creative and good natured. He writes in a style similar to Edmondo De Amicis: simple, direct, cordially open, with little depth, with the ability to observe a situation with clarity, but always skimming the surface. It's the style of a person without preconceived ideas, without vanity, without deep passions but with a vague desire to experience the world. He didn't leave Italy with his heart full of rancor toward the motherland, unlike the subversives of those days (who were actually quite right in their feelings); nor with total ignorance about Italian history and what it had taken to unify the country (unlike the majority of the unschooled emigrants). He didn't even feel the contempt for manual labor typical of the Italian bourgeoisie of those times. He wasn't a genius: his cultural horizon wasn't particularly broad and his style doesn't have much color or warmth, yet it is captivating. At least he hadn't been spoiled and corrupted by D'Annunzio's style;<sup>5</sup> a fate that plagued many journalists that came after him. He was kind-hearted but wasn't aware he was an amiable person, and wasn't a show off. His cultural limitations and these other qualities made him an unbiased, humane and honest observer and, therefore, a reliable and uncommon witness. When I first read his book, a long time ago, I wasn't able to compare his work to those of immigrants that left Italy after World War II (but now I have a more solid and better defined understanding of this kind of literature and, therefore, I have a more precise impression.

It would be impossible to find a man like him today because he would be tainted by bitter disillusionment hidden under humanitarian sugar coating. Rossi was a natural as a man and as a writer. He didn't write for sensationalism. He was just looking for a place bigger than Lendinara and for a horizon wider than the one offered by a post office window in a small town in the Veneto region. He read Jules Verne,

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Arcoletto (1848-1914). He was elected to the Camera dei Deputati and later appointed to the senate by the king in 1902.

• Francesco Saverio Nitri (1868-1953). Prime minister in 1919-1920.

<sup>5</sup> D'Annunzio was targeted by detractors, among which Prezzolini, for his decadent aesthetics and turgid prose.

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not Emilio Salgari. He read *Gil Blas*,<sup>6</sup> and remembered well the hero who “arrived to a new city penniless, knowing no one, knowing not what he would do.” His adventures have a bit the same flavor and humanitarian tone of *Gil Blas*.

When he first arrived in New York, Rossi didn't know English. On the ship, even before being robbed, he realized he had already been scammed by the travel agency that put him on a much worse vessel than he had paid for. In those days, immigrants were at the mercy of scammers, thieves and swindlers who latched on any prey like bloodsucking leeches. His passage took place in a huge room where he slept on the bare floor without even a mattress (cautious travelers knew better to bring their own.) There was no point in protesting as there was no one to protest with. Indeed, if someone became too strident in his protests, he would run the risk of being thrown overboard. As soon as he landed in America, Rossi was cheated once again, this time not by an Italian shipping agent but by leeches hanging out at the port. He ended up sleeping on park benches where he was robbed again. Everything would cost him ten times more than the fair price because he could not argue and didn't know how to bargain. But he never lost his optimism and confidence. In New York he was endlessly amused by the traffic of people coming and going; by the kaleidoscope of peoples; by the stupendous panorama of the bay crisscrossed by white steam ships with counterweights; by the elevated railroads and the views from their windows; by the jungle of spears and tall buildings. Even the sun seemed new every day and every beautiful day made him forget the fog of the day before. With determination he focuses on learning the language of the new country because he realized how important that was. He was living on bread, cheese and water but with the first money earned at his first job he bought a grammar book. Like all other adventurers, sometimes he had to resort

<sup>6</sup> Jules Verne (1828-1905). French author considered to be one of the fathers of modern science fiction.

• Emilio Salgari (1862-1911). Writer of adventure novels for young people, taking place mostly in Asia or other exotic locations. Apparently he was not one of Prezzolini's favorites.

• *Gil Blas de Santillana*. Published in 1715-1735, written by French author Alain-René Lesage (1668-1747). Picaresque novel narrated in the first person.

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to audacity rather than sincerity. When he was offered a position as ice cream maker in a big hotel he accepted, despite the fact he had only a few days of experience on a similar job. I was really pleased to see how the son of petty bourgeoisie didn't put up airs and, despite his high school diploma, took various menial jobs where physical strength counted more than smarts and culture. He sold Japanese fans on Coney Island in the summer; worked as a waiter in a hotel; tried to open a boarding house; became a servant in the house of rich Americans; and finally the destiny brought him into the orbit of Carlo Barsotti,<sup>7</sup> another adventurer with a broader reach and fewer scruples who, despite the fact that he could barely write anything beyond his signature, had founded a little Italian newspaper. That newspaper is still alive today and is called the *Progresso Italo-Americano*. All the details of his story are true and demonstrable, at least based on what I can surmise from comparing Rossi's to other testimonies and with reports about people and places.

In his book he talks about meeting rich Americans and their stunned reactions at discovering an Italian who didn't play mandolin, didn't sing and was properly mannered (probably even more than they were). He tells stories of usurers with a sign with three balls hanging above the door (they can still be seen in New York, although they no longer strangle people); of work-shifts of twelve-plus hours a day; of prices that compared to those of today seem incredible (one could eat ~~with 25 cents~~); of the simple life of a president of the United States whom Rossi waited on in the hotel where he was working; where that personage would stay without a personal servant; eating alone and perfectly content with a steak, a glass of milk and coffee. All these brushstrokes paint a large canvas of the customs of those days, a time that few can recall now due to the incredibly rapid transformation of the United States in the past century.

Rossi met personally Antonio Meucci,<sup>8</sup> the inventor of the

<sup>7</sup> Carlo Barsotti (1850-1927). Founder and first editor of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*; founder of the *Italian American Bank* in 1882.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Meucci (1808-1889). Inventor and a friend Giuseppe Garibaldi. Meucci invented the first telephone but could not afford to pay the fees for a patent. He died in poverty.

telephone and a personal friend of General Giuseppe Garibaldi. He even devoted a chapter to the general's memories. There is nothing new or particularly fancy in it, but it helps get closer to that heroic figure. Rossi, propelled by his crave for discovering new worlds, took a trip to the interior of the United States, in the regions recently abandoned by the Indians and, even more recently, colonized by pioneers. These were the areas that attracted adventurers in search of gold and silver in the Rocky Mountains. With just a verbal contract as assurance, Rossi with some other twenty Italian workers found himself traveling for days by train until they reached a most remote mountainous area at more than 6,000 feet in altitude. Here there was absolutely nothing to house them: they had to build a shelter and he ended up doing pick-and-shovel manual labor and work in the kitchen. Often poor European immigrants ended up in situations similar to slavery: they didn't know the language and could not rely on help from American authorities or from consular representatives of their native countries, too distant from those desolate areas and most likely ineffective and uninterested in the fate of manual laborers. These were truly circumstances where only the strongest in body and, above all, in spirit would be able to survive over time; save a bit of money and eventually run away to start a new life elsewhere. Confronted with the same dire choices, while other Italians workers became discouraged and prone to rebellion or flight; he acted pragmatically and with political savvy: he understood perfectly well what kind of injustice he was victim to, but also understood how self-damaging it would be to react or run away. Despite all these terrible experiences of hardship, Rossi never lost faith in and admiration for the United States.

The description he left about the neighborhood where many Italian immigrants first settled in New York (a place that no longer exists) is a classic.

Murders and assaults are unfortunately rather frequent in the Italian neighborhood, first of all because it is infested with lots of criminals escaped from justice in their country after they had killed, stolen and committed all sorts of crimes; and also because even the honest peasant-worker, born in a peaceful village who decided to migrate to flee hunger and lured by the mirage of money or influenced

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by the example of other people, once he arrives in America often becomes morally worse. Nostalgia: the longing for his relatives so far away; life in a filthy neighborhood; the greed of the boss who cheats him out of his salary; crime gangs that dominate among and extort from the workers from the south; all this embitters the character of the poor devil. Add to all this a lifestyle that is completely different; the change in climate; the population density; the difficulties posed by the foreign language; the greed; the envy he feels toward the paesani who stroke it rich. In these conditions the immigrant becomes irritable, irascible; lives in constant fear of being cheated, swindled, betrayed; and, even if he never did before, he starts carrying some kind of weapon. A large part of the sad scenes of blood are caused by alcohol and cheating among spouses. It's strange: the peasants who live in *tenement houses* [sic] are mostly illiterate; uncouth; thrown off-balance by hunger; bled to death by bosses; exhausted by work. However, passion is always burning in their chest. They live horrible lives; endure physical efforts so hard it stuns their brains; in jobs like cleaning sewers... They live in dark and black rooms, filthy, unhealthy; where it seems impossible the ray of love could penetrate. Women are often ugly, with busted shoes and dirty clothes: it seems that males and females should vegetate insensitively to anything that concerns the heart; but, to the contrary, those unfortunate people love with incredible intensity and when they are betrayed they become savagely vindictive and blood-thirsty.

I could go on for ever with passages like this that show the author's uncanny ability to analyze customs and social dynamics. I will confine my comment to saying that in this book we find one of the very first descriptions of the Italian American lingo, preceding by at least ten years the observations by Livingston's little study *America Sanemagnona* [America Son-of-a-gun].<sup>9</sup> Some of the expressions reported by Rossi must have disappeared, such as *frilancio* [free lunch]. This was a marketing technique of the time when the patrons of a bar who ordered a beer would also get all-you-can-eat sandwiches. Today no bar or restaurant offers the same deal and pretty soon, I am afraid, we will have to pay for peanuts and potato chips that some bars still have on the counter. And soon bars and restaurants will also charge for the air we breathe.

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<sup>9</sup> "La Merica Sanemagnona," *Romantic Review* 9 (1918): 214.

Besides the historical relevance of Rossi's memoirs, I confess that the reason I was so captured by this book was the author's personality. It was as if I could hear him talk, with a kind tone full of common sense. I wish all Italian politicians who visited immigrants in those days had the same insight. Instead, they did not have a clue about the real circumstance of those lives, and they started worrying about the best way to assist those poor people only after the phenomenon was already receding and was nearing its end. We are not talking about the end of the emigration era, rather the end of the kind of emigrant described by Rossi: a man capable of enduring the abandonment of the motherland and the abandonment *by* the motherland. I couldn't put down this book for it describes the true tragedies of emigration; so unlike the stories filtered through the rose-tinted glasses of the *search for freedom* and success; celebrated in today's official banquets in honor of high ranking politicians from Italy; senator or ministers who have the same understanding of this phenomenon as those of 1880—meaning, no understanding at all.

Emigration was a *national failure* along a road strewn with dead bodies, tragedies, destitution, madness and enslavement. The survivors and their children deserve our admiration, but not those who want to transform it into a *triumph* by means of cheap and schlocky rhetoric. Their words inevitably sound like the *communiqués* of the supreme commands of armed forces when they want to hide a rout.

*New York, January 17, 1960*

## A PIEDMONTESE IN THE FAR WEST

Emigration was, without a doubt, the most important demographic phenomenon in Italy after unification on the wake of *Risorgimento*; and yet personal accounts of their experience remain rare and mostly indirect. The emigrants' sweat and tears left no memoirs and their fate was ignored because *nobody wanted to look*. In short, it was a mass escape of rural masses from Italy. In the previous chapter I examined the testimony of Adolfo Rossi, a middle-class man from the Veneto region who became an emigrant and took a hard look at the phenomenon of emigration, *looking from down up*.

I would like to examine now the work of another person whose perspective was *from high up looking down*. Edmondo Mayor des Planches<sup>1</sup> was the first Italian ambassador ever to tour the United States, fully aware of the national and international problems created by migrations. He was of aristocratic origin; with a profound sense of duty; cultivated and well endowed with common sense; inimical to rhetoric and knowledgeable about the history of the United States. He spoke English and was a fearless observer, capable of understanding the phenomena of the social and political world without biases, tears and false outrage. His is a first-rate testimony by a first-rate observer. Born in Savoy,<sup>2</sup> I presume his family had followed the fortunes of the royal house of Italy first to Turin then to Rome. He was one thousand percent Piedmontese. I didn't spend time researching his personal history because his writings speak for themselves. His travelogue was first published in the *Nuova Antologia* and later reprinted in the volume *Attraverso gli Stati Uniti per l'emigrazione italiana* published in 1912 [sic].<sup>3</sup> It is an important document. Mayor des Planches journeyed through the United States, from New York to New Orleans, on to Texas and California and returned East through Chicago and Detroit.

1 Edmondo Mayor Des Planches (1851–1920). Born in Lyon, France. Diplomat and politician. From 1901 to 1910 he was Ambassador of Italy in Washington.

2 Western-most region of Piedmont, now part of France, and ancestral fief of the Savoy dynasty that unified Italy.

3 *Attraverso gli Stati Uniti per l'emigrazione italiana*. Torino: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1913.

In the course of his journey he ventured into side trips, particularly in the southern states. He wrote a direct, precise and incisive prose without wasting words: he truly belonged to the Italy that existed before D'Annunzio (whose great success spoiled the modest but honest language of Italian newspapers). Upon visiting a new city or locality, he would report tersely what he could observe directly, describing houses and people; taking notes on the cost of rent and other basic necessities; salaries, social behaviors and on the relations among races and classes. He also wrote succinct biographies of individual Italian immigrants thus creating a small gallery of portraits made of the humble stories of people nobody else had bothered to notice. He did not penetrate too deeply, he didn't take a chance with hypotheses and he totally lacked in empathy and poetry. His ambition was to be like a camera, not a probe, with a style more like Julius Caesar's than Cicero's.<sup>4</sup> That's why I like his book so much. His best pieces describe American trains, cars, churches and the meeting places of Italian Americans. Anecdotes are very rare; however, I found a very good one about how clueless many immigrants were in those days.

A functionary of the Italian consulate in New York finds in the elevator of the consular house, on Broadway, a fellow Italian crouching on the floor in a corner. The elevator operator, an English speaker, says: "They found him in the street and they brought him here to be taken in by the consulate. But now he doesn't want to get off. He has been going up and down for an hour." The poor man doesn't understand and doesn't respond. What to do? The functionary asks him questions. The poor devil was on his way to Philadelphia to visit some relatives. He had no idea what an elevator was and believed he was in a special kind of train that was supposed to take him to destination.

I believe this is the only anecdote told by Des Planches. Humor wasn't his strong suit: his best quality was his imperturbability in front of different customs and emotions. A major example of this is his coolness

<sup>4</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.). Writer and orator in Ancient Rome. His style, extremely elaborate and intricate, is the bane of students of Latin. The *peripato ciceroniano* [Ciceronian clause] became the model of Italian official documents starting in the sixteenth century.

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about lynching (it should be noticed that he visited several localities where Italians had been lynched.)

Lynchings in general are acts of summary and exemplary justice executed—either with cool determination or under an emotional surge—by the masses against individuals who are either factually or presumably guilty of crimes. They follow certain procedures that by now have become ritualized: hanging, shooting the hanging bodies etc. Lynchings are ordinarily carried out against Blacks with the goal of an immediate exemplary; either as punishment or vengeance for the rape of white women. In the lands on the frontier and in remote areas lynching is practiced to this very day also against white people as punishment for serious crimes.

One can sense that behind these words is a man with great legal education and training who knows how to describe a phenomenon with precision but without indignation, not even repressed, as we would expect in a person educated in a society with the moral cult of the law. To him lynching was a natural fact that in certain conditions was bound to happen, like a solar eclipse or a flooding. There is beauty in this kind of style.

I should also add that when he had to deal with cases of lynching of Italians, he was relieved he didn't have to shake hands with the authorities of the localities where those events took place. At the same time, when he tells those stories and recounts how the events developed, he clearly signals that the Italian victims had some degree of responsibility; at least to the extent that they used threats of violence or otherwise violated local norms. At the same time we have beautiful descriptions of the towns where these crimes took place. They are a pleasure to read, after seeing so many fake western movies. Here is a piece about the boomtown of MacGehee [sic] in its boom years.<sup>5</sup>

For the time being, the population is a mix of males from every corner of the world and from every walk of life. There are manual laborers who work for the railroad and the repair shops for two dollars a day; a few storekeepers, railroad clerks; and then land speculators,

<sup>5</sup> MacGehee is located in Desha County, Arkansas. Its establishment is tied to the construction of a railroad line in 1878.

adventurers, gamblers and worse. It is sunset: they hang out along the soft, muddy street with deep tracks made by car wheels, the only street in town; or on the sidewalks made with wobbly wooden planks, in shirt sleeves, with dirty hats, smoking, chewing, spitting large wads, somber, angry. The majority looks tough, suspicious. Some talk softly with one another like conspirators. This is social anarchy. Everyone does whatever he pleases. There is only one right that is recognized and respected: personal and private property. It is in the common interest to respect it. Every other aspect of life is dominated by unrestrained freedom, lack of laws and the rule of force.

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In this portrait all that's missing is the image of some Loretta Young<sup>6</sup> strolling along, with a long skirt, a hat with improbable white feathers and incredible lace on the protruding breast. Add that and we would be straight inside a movie. However, women barely appear in Mayor des Planches' reports. In his relations with American authorities and the clergy he was affable and friendly, but he became inflexible when the rights of Italians were at stake. He denied that Italians were brought to the south to replace Black labor, but when he reflected on the subject, he recognized that unfortunately southern Italians did not have the kind of sense of dignity that would prevent them from mixing with Blacks. He felt very proud when he heard from local authorities and the clergy that Italians were honest, hard-working and thrifty. Almost all the biographies he left us described Italians who brought honor to themselves, were successful and ended up with important positions in society (more in California than anywhere else).

The central goal of his book was to convince Italian immigrants not to get stuck in the big cities of the Atlantic coast and the industrial north. He thought they should spread out to the countryside in the west and most of all in the south where land was cheap and where Black labor was not very productive. (He described Blacks as lazy, hand-to-mouth and easy prey of vice: a rather traditional albeit correct perspective.) In these regions the climate is also closer to that of southern Italy. Here is, in his own words, his *dream*:

<sup>6</sup> Loretta Young (1913-2000). Actor. Screen name of Gretchen Young.

My goal is to favor the settlement on the entire territory of the United States of Italians that are now concentrated in the large Eastern cities, particularly New York, Boston and Philadelphia; where the majority lives in segregated neighborhoods in conditions that are morally unhealthy, physically unsanitary and economically depressed. Too many of them share very limited space in a state of promiscuity; always among themselves; isolated from the society that surrounds them. Here they hang on tight to the habits, traditions and superstitions of their native towns. They give a dismal spectacle of themselves, taking care only of the most basic needs with the lowest salaries. They cause damage to themselves and others with cheap competition and criminality; and they look like parasites living off the American society of which they are not an organic part, and which is tempted to reject them as it cannot absorb them. In the meantime, they are treated like alien beings, inferior, often object of disdain and condescendence, of hatred and ridicule; like the Jews in their medieval ghettos, or like the pariah cast in Indian cities. For many of those who end up living in those cities, city life is not a normal condition. It has been calculated that forty eight percent of Italians who migrated to the United States were originally peasants. They adapt to the cities with too much ease because they can get some material things they never had before; because other folks from their hometowns live there and they cling to them to feel less lost; because they don't know where else to go; because in order to get here they spent all the money and all the emotional energy they could muster and now they are overwhelmed by inertia. They happen to end up in a certain place and they stay put. They crowd the places, on top of each other like sheep in a sheepfold; the newcomers are jammed into the small space already occupied by those who arrived earlier, dozens per room, hundreds per floor, thousand per building; in dangerous agglomerations where the human ferments of destitution, vice, disease and crime develop.

Isn't this a beautiful piece? After reading this, I thought that he could have been a great journalist, had he not been a diplomat. Not even the pages written by Rossi, who was a professional journalist, reached this level of clarity. Italian immigrants, as Mayor des Planches says, were illiterate. They followed what relatives told them (in the best case) or what they were told by immigration agents (the slave drivers of the new era, who would deliver the bodies to the masters). As to

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the problem of *directing* Italian immigration, Mayor des Planches had moderate ideas. Like everyone else, he thought it made sense to have more consuls with smaller areas of jurisdiction and more resources to assist the needy. At the same time, he proposed to develop welfare agencies that combined joint initiatives of Italians and Americans: a very smart idea that went nowhere. He also reports the failure of some colonies organized for Italian farmers, such as Sunny Side, Del Rio<sup>7</sup> etc. He probably did not understand that nobody could be better at figuring out the best place to settle than the immigrants themselves.

After all, their motivation was self interest and they knew what they were good at. It is also rather dubious that if Italy had sent more immigration agents, even if more capable and less corrupt (where could they be found in those days?) they would have changed the situation. One of the forces that kept Italian immigrants inside the cities was their sheer hatred for farming, and it would have been very difficult to convince them otherwise. Despite the fact that this pragmatic gentleman, Piedmontese bureaucrat, faithful servant of the house of Savoy, was sometimes a dreamer and was looking down from up high, he left us a prime collection of observations and data and a very precious testimony. We can see this, for instance, when we compare his observations with the attention Rossi gave to certain phenomena, thus revealing different experiences. Rossi was the first one (as far as I know) to annotate with precision the new words that immigrants created by fusing Italian and English together. Des Planches, instead, didn't even register the phenomenon. Yet some of the immigrants he interviewed (and indeed did he interview them...) must have answered with the new lingo. Only once, in the south, where he found Italians who had replaced Blacks as cotton pickers, he noticed that cotton processing was called *ginatura* (from *gin*, namely the operation of extracting seeds from the cotton). Nothing else grabbed his attention.

I have always maintained that the witnesses to history have only seen, heard and noticed what they could. Mayor des Planches was a scrupulous writer who never failed to use double *ii* as a plural for the word *studio* and to mark with an accent the word *seguito* [continuation]

<sup>7</sup> Most likely the reference is to Del Rio, Texas, where Italians settled in the late 1880s.

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to avoid confusion with *seguito* [followed: past participle of *seguire*].  
But the Italian American language was not important to him, nor was  
it worthy of his attention.

*New York, March 27, 1960*

TWO GREAT JOURNALISTS WITNESSED  
THE TERRIFYING BEGINNINGS  
OF ITALIAN IMMIGRATION

Two Italian journalists were able to observe from the very beginning the effects of the sudden, improvised, unplanned collective migration of peasant masses from southern Italy to an English-speaking world that was undergoing rapid industrialization whose consequences fell both on the migrants themselves and on the American people. Their names are Dario Papa and Ferdinando Fontana.<sup>1</sup> The first one occupies a position of great relevance in the history of Italian journalism. The journey to America marked an important moment in his life as he was prompted to change his political ideas from pro-monarchy to pro-republic. The second one, Fontana, was a well-regarded poet of the *Scapigliatura*<sup>2</sup> movement. Both were fluid and transparent writers with the sharp eye and the good memory of good reporters. Their journey through the country from New York to San Francisco took place around 1881 and lasted two years. Both were struck by the most obvious aspects of American life and many of their observations would be worth quoting, if this were the object of my interest. But I am interested instead in their insight into the lives of Italian immigrants. Fontana devoted two long chapters to the conditions of immigrants in New York.<sup>3</sup> The first chapter concerns the facilities they found when they first arrived. This was before the world-famous Ellis Island. The entry point was Castle-Garden, “a huge building where all immigrants are gathered as soon as they disembark in New York. The majority of the building is occupied by an immense hall that can easily accommodate a thousand people. Along its perimeter runs a ledge, about thirty feet up.” From that ledge Fontana was able to look down into the hall. The

1 Ferdinando Fontana (1850-1919). Poet, playwright and librettist of Puccini's first two operas: the long-forgotten *Le Villi* (1884) and *Edgar* (1889).

2 *Scapigliatura*. Literary and artistic movement centered in Milan in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was influenced by the Paris *bohemian* movement that advocated anti-conformism and originality.

3 Dario Papa, Ferdinando Fontana. *New York*. Milano, G. Galli, 1884.  
• *Viaggi*. Lecco, Rota, 1893.

impression was so strong that he stated: "I will never forget it; should I live as long as Methuselah."<sup>4</sup> In that hall the immigrants were sleeping all together, men and women, old and young, healthy and sick, living and moribund. And they were all cooking their national dishes.

When I climbed up on the ledge the hall was half empty. It was around nine in the morning. A few small groups of immigrants that had arrived a few days earlier were gathering near the heaters in the corners. Some were sleeping on mattresses lain on the floor, wrapped in raggedly blankets. They were speaking softly; once in awhile I could hear someone cough, or a child's cry followed by the monotonous sound of peasant baby cribs rocking on the floor. Together with the noises, a dull and nauseating smell was wafting upwards toward me. It's the typical smell of hospitals, insane asylums, prisons and all those places where people are segregated in large numbers. It's a smell like a miasma: of stagnant air; of foul breath and putrefying organic substances; rendered sharper by a faint odor of dust (...). Slowly, the huge hall filled up. Some ships had docked. A crowd, a true crowd of people from all nations, squeezed in. A noise like the flux of a tide was rising, followed by wafts of hot and miasmatic air. I could feel it on my face. A thin fog was condensing above the crowd. In the middle of the noise, at intervals, the voice of a young man with an official hat with golden insignia would shout. He was an interpreter who repeated in all the European languages: "We are looking for Such-and-Such from Such-and-Such country."

Scenes like these don't exist anymore, but we certainly remember seeing them during and after World War II. Isn't what Fontana described in 1881 the atmosphere of concentration camps and prison camps? Isn't this proof that emigration was born in poverty, despair, torment and anguish? This must be what was left in the adults and even more in the children: a sense of fear and anxiety that would last their entire life and would be passed on to the next generation. Isn't this the atmosphere of a catastrophic *roue*?

Fontana observed all the various groups, from Jews to Germans to Irish. The biggest and most destitute were the Irish and the Italians. Fontana noticed that, unlike the Irish, even the most brutish Italians,

<sup>4</sup> Methuselah. Biblical patriarch reported to have lived 969 years.

even the filthiest among them, at least were not victim to the curse of alcoholism. He noticed a swift Italian man trying to hide from view of the police, with whom probably he had some pending business. He saw a little old lady from Calabria who could not explain why she was there and whom she had come to visit. He heard the bad-grammar propaganda of Protestant charitable societies. Some immigrants who heard Fontana speak Italian asked him to read a letter they were carrying. It turned out they had been swindled by a hustler who had promised them jobs as soon as they landed, working for some person who had no idea what they were talking about. In a few lines there he collected a sample of the garden variety of indignities endured by the immigrants, abandoned to themselves, ignorant, surrounded by a swarm of hustlers and swindlers from their own country. Another chapter is devoted to the shame for the jobs they had to take, first of all, shoeshine. Fontana, a bit rhetorically, describes the tears of wounded pride from the eyes of the scion of a noble family in whose veins “ran the most gentle blood, the purest, the most generous that a human creature could vaunt,” and who had to kneel in front of a... Black person, “in front of the representative of the lowest of all races.” Fontana describes him in realistic terms:

This guy (...) with his large chest pushed up high, in a pose of cloying arrogance, dressed chatraun-esquely *à la fashionable* [sic], with his ramshackle mouth open in a wide smile to display to the passersby two thick rows of milky white teeth that held a big Avana cigar; that Black guy was there, stretching his neck, with his smug face, triumphant; puffing out clouds of aromatic smoke; twirling a walking cane of rare wood with gold inlays in his right hand gloved in a yellow glove, paradoxically yellow.

Luckily, Fontana wrote this racial [sic] passage fifty years before Fascism caved into Nazism: I reported it here (only a small part of it, as it goes on and on!) only because I thought that it represents the attitude of Italians. I can only imagine what would have been the attitude of a rich American, someone who made his own fortune; or maybe a former slave owner from the south; or even an American from the north that did free Black people from slavery but would

never allow them into his house. The direct effect of the docility of Italians in taking those vile jobs was the contemptuous opinion that Americans in general harbored towards them. Fontana moves from the analysis of this particular job to garbage pickers.

To see hundreds of Italians prostrated at the feet of people to shine their shoes is cause for heartbreak. But to see thousands of them bending their backs in front of mountains of garbage; rummaging through it like famished dogs; that really hurts deeply. In New York garbage is collected in busted barrels placed on the sidewalk in front of every house (...). Next to the barrels, full to the brim with all sorts of filth, there is always some bum picking through them. If he is not Irish, the bum is Italian, but not some old Italian man in poor health who could justify that vile activity with the excuse of old age and his unsuitability to a less humiliating job. No: a young Italian, strong and healthy, sometimes even with a spark of intelligence that transpires from behind the brutishness that covers him from head to toes.

Today the patriotic Fontana would be happier: Italians don't pick up garbage anymore! it is mostly Black people. Indeed, Italians own many of those companies and they hire Blacks for these jobs; and, as if this weren't enough, this industry is involved in a racket [sic] that is, at least according to the local press, primarily Italian. They are probably the grandsons of the people that Fontana saw sifting through the garbage and that Giacosa, later, will see do the same in Chicago. Fontana continues:

The rag traders in New York receive their supplies almost exclusively from the Italian colony that lives in the Five Points' section of town, a neighborhood in a very central location in the city; not far from the *dawn town* [sic] and with a very sad reputation. Here the houses are only three-storey high; with walls dripping with

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<sup>5</sup> The neighborhood of Five Points was in Manhattan, in the section that later became Little Italy, and now is extension of Chinatown. Its boundaries were Centre Street to the west, the Bowery to the east, Canal Street to the north and Park Row to the south. The name derived from the intersection of five city streets. It was considered the worst of all slums, infested with disease and dominated by criminal gangs.

humidity and the plaster disintegrating; with busted windows and no glass panes. The narrow streets are in horrendous conditions, paved and perennially covered with layers of muck and trash. To walk through Five Points at night, they say, is an act of courage (...)

Almost every week some kind of bloody incident or aggression or street fight ends up in the newspapers and focuses the attention of the city on the terrible Five Points. It is true that the most horrendous crimes in New York are caused with the same frequency by people of other groups. However, the desperate and deranged look of our co-nationals; their miserable and despicable jobs; the quickness in pulling a knife; the filth where they live; plus the aggravating factor of legendary, melodramatic brigandage; all contribute to placing them, for the right or the wrong reasons, among the most likely to commit crimes; and, therefore, to being always the first suspects when crime is an issue.

Fontana also noticed the merciless attitude against Italian immigrants, from the American press to street urchins. But, intelligently, he understands that part of the blame goes to the motherland that allowed the peasant masses to languish in a state of brutishness; and part of the blame also goes to America that let the landlords of those hovels make gigantic amounts of money by allowing the buildings to decay into the state of primitive caves. Even today, despite the fact that the conditions are better, the same complaints are raised against the owners of *slums*. Today Italians don't live there anymore; now it's the turn of Blacks and Puerto Ricans. Fontana was also one of the first ones, in the face of the hostility of the press and the public opinion, to take the risk of declaring that one could understand, albeit not justify, the use of knives by Italians; the only weapons they could use against aggressive and threatening mobs.

How can the poor Italians defend themselves against this huge enemy mob; without deadly weapons; and, moreover, with their hot temper rendered even harsher by centuries of suffering? The only defense they have is terror: the knife... And they use knives the way the meekest animal would use its teeth when pushed to the extreme limit.

At the end Fontana goes through the Italians who managed to climb into relevant positions in business; the owner of luxury restaurants or the celebrities of the cultivated society. He observed that the conditions of the Italian community were already improving, and he had words of praise for the Italian consul and for a journalist named Adolfo Rossi. I noticed that none of the names of the prominent Italians was known to me, and neither were their restaurants. None of them, it seems, was able to get established long enough to be passed on to the next generation and stay in business for at least thirty years. Maybe many went back to Italy after making their fortune. Maybe their children, educated in American schools, didn't want to or didn't know how to continue. Maybe their descendants were chewed up by American life. Fontana's reportage is an important document. It is a pleasant reading even to this day. And it shows that Italian immigration began in the midst of fear, anguish and contempt.

## HE PREFERRED HAPPY ITALIAN DRINKERS TO THE LONELY NEW YORK DRUNK

In 1891 Giuseppe Giacosa wrote *La Dame de Challant* for Sarah Bernhardt's upcoming debut in North America. For the occasion he traveled to the United States where he resided for few months during which he took notes for what would later become a volume titled *Impressioni d'America*.<sup>1</sup> Seventy years after its publication I doubt it would be worth publishing a new edition; but at least it is a book worth reading. Giacosa's testimony is more relevant than his theories (just the same way as his eyes are more valuable than his brain. In his prose, I sense quite clearly the intention to emulate Edmondo De Amicis. At least, the literary model that inspired this book is better than the models he followed in his production as a playwright. The choice of materials, the framing of the scenes, the rhythm of time, the moderate tone, the lexicon taken from everyday's language: they all take us back to that *respect for the public* that later D'Annunzio-inspired journalism would eventually discard and ignore, with the excuse of ennobling the columns of periodicals. This book contains a message that the author wants to communicate; thus, in order to help his readers, he writes in a way that makes sure they will understand; with his own ego kept under tight control. He also avoids the facile parochialism of exalting our co-nationals and putting down foreigners. The light of the author's intelligence and culture are focused on understanding and interpreting with impartiality; to the point that I would call this one of the most honest products of bourgeois literature of the period. Literally, Giacosa resists the temptation to write about Niagara Falls or the abattoirs in Chicago; the topics of *beautiful prose* that in those days, for foreign correspondents in America, were the equivalent of

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<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Giacosa (1847–1906). Playwright and librettist. He wrote the librettos for some of Puccini's most famous operas: *La bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*.

• *La Dame de Challant*. New York, Rullman, 1891. Based on a short story by Matteo Bandello (c. 1480-1562), it was first produced in New York in 1891.

• Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923). French stage and early film actor, nicknamed "The Divine Sarah."

• *Impressioni d'America*. Milano, Cogliati, 1898.

Niccolò Paganini's sonatas.<sup>2</sup> He was saved from the typical traps where many others, with more talent but a larger ego, would fall; probably because he was already accomplished and also knew how far he could stretch the strings of his violin. His tone is never too high and this allows him to avoid playing out of tune.

There is an aspect that should and could attract the attention of today's readers, namely the comparison between America then and America today. This is not what the author planned, obviously; but it has the positive effects of giving us contrasting snapshots. We can find this contrast even in the lexicon, with words like *mono* [Moor]<sup>3</sup> instead of *negro* [Black person]; or *viale* instead of avenue. This latter one is a word we don't translate anymore knowing full well that, in Italian, *viale* stands for a tree-lined double-wide street, while American avenues rarely have trees. The snapshot quality of his observations also appears in the description of things he saw and that are now obsolete. It is sort of pleasurable reading about them; the same way it is pleasurable to look at a fifty year old photograph.

The chapter on bars is definitely the most successful in the entire book. Giacomini caught immediately the difference between Italian-style drunkenness and the American version.

In Italy drinkers reveal their vice even in the moments when they are trying to control themselves. The moment he pours the only drink he will allow himself, and the moment he brings the glass to the lips, his eyes shine full of anticipation. It is a glance like a caress, full of tenderness, ready for joy; a bit constrained and contained by the heroic resolution not to exceed. When he puts back on the table the empty glass after a few delicious sips, one understands that temptation and resistance hang on the wire of his willpower

<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840). Composer and one of the greatest violin virtuosos of all times. His *Capricci* are some of the most technically challenging pieces ever composed.

<sup>3</sup> *Mono* is the adjective used to indicate people of dark complexion in ancient Italian. It was also used for Africans. As an example, Shakespeare's character Othello in Verdi's opera *Otello* is described as *il Moro di Venezia*. *Negro* came into use in the colonial period (late 1800s) and became the default term for Black person. Different and evolving sensibilities now prefer the use of *nero*, while *negro* has taken a negative, quasi-racist, connotation.

in an unstable balance. He dodges the glances of the bartender to avoid the temptation of sin. He places the little chalice on the edge of the counter without pulling back his hand, as if hesitant about the decision. Nobody can guess whether he wants a refill or if he is putting it down, satiated. He leaves it up to the intuition of the bartender or to the supreme god of all drinkers and gamblers: chance.

In comparison, American drinkers are gloomy and dominated by the will to drink.

If one enters a bar around ten in the evening he will find more or less the same crowd that was there in the afternoon... Same men, tall, lanky, elegant and royally posturing. Yet, to a keen observer it will be obvious that their composure is due to an effort of volition rather than natural grace. They are no longer straight but rigid and stiff, their faces with a violent expression. One would guess that they are drinking with disgust, as if they were forced; for most of the time they stand there in a state of inertia: surrounded by a crowd; in total loneliness; unaware of what surrounds them. Nobody talks with the person next to him, not even in a whisper. Those brightly lit places, full of taciturn people, are more sinister than our dives.

Beautiful description, isn't it? And just as valid today, despite the fact that New Yorkers were different back then. The kind of Anglo-Saxons Giacosa met in those places in those days, today are aristocratic exceptions hidden behind the doors of exclusive clubs. However, as often happens with Giacosa, he didn't dig deeper into the subject. He had the right intuition but he missed that Italian drunks in general drink wine, while Americans drink whisky. There is a huge difference in terms of time, quantity, quality, measure and character in these two kinds of drunkenness. Generally, wine drunkenness is slower and convivial. With whisky, it's quicker and lonely. Should we say that whisky is Protestant and wine Catholic? The Irish would complain...

A couple of chapters in Giacosa's volume (a total of 285 pages in small format) are dedicated to Italians. Giacosa's testimony here is even more valuable. He could access direct sources of information since he knew both languages, Italian and English. He immediately understood the difference between the Italian immigrants who had

the foresight, or the good luck, to settle in the countryside and those who got stuck in the cities without professional skills.

In Texas, Italians are held in great esteem, contrary to what happens in the rest of the United States; possibly with the exception of California (...). The most serious issue Americans raise with Italian immigrants is the sordid, degrading and incurable passivity and resignation to the worst activities, to the lowest and worst-paying jobs. The Italian plebs in New York and Chicago give a spectacle of supine resignation to poverty and cynical indifference to the pleasures of life. This shows in their dresses, their abodes and their food. The only ones who are in worse shape perhaps are the Chinese.

Giacosa's initial conclusion was that hostility toward Italians was caused by the fact that Italians were content with low-level lifestyle; but then he examined other possible reasons for the alleged antipathy. A co-national explained to him that "Yankees resent the money that Italians send back to Italy." Another, an educated American, enamored of Italy, found a reason in the fact that, of all foreigners, Italians were the slowest to become Americanized. Giacosa concluded by blaming the American ruling class that taught Italian immigrants that "votes are merchandise that can be traded"; and that by trading them they could improve their station in society, get higher salaries, obtain expedite and righteous justice. I wonder: in Giacosa's times, weren't votes also bought and sold in elections in Italy? Anyway, I don't believe anyone left a better description of the debasement of Italian immigrants than the page he devoted to Italian women working in the garbage industry in Chicago.

As far as I know Chicago does not have neighborhoods that are exclusively Italian. Therefore, the spectacle of our miserable condition can be found everywhere and in particular in activities in the lowest industries where only our co-nationals end up working. The most common is rummaging through the garbage accumulated near huge grain depots, leather-tanning shops, railroad stations and piers. This is the activity of old women from southern Italy who came to America with a husband and children. While the men tend to their professions or jobs, the women spend the whole day with garbage, in any kind of weather: rain, snow or wind. If they are lucky at the

end of the day they bring home a few cents. Paper, leather waste, rags, nails, metal sheets, rivets and metal wires: these are the final discards, the vilest refuse of the wasteful industrial-mechanical civilization. They pick everything and put it in sacks. A pair of slippers; a ripped blouse; a small bottle with the remains of some unknown medication: to their eyes these are true treasures. Who can draw the line between the usable and the unusable? They will probably put on those slippers and wear that blouse. The eternal feminine in them has no fashion demands. Aren't they also nourished by the dumpsters?

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Giacosa also saw American filthiness. When he visited the world-famous Chicago slaughterhouses, he protested against their reputation for cleanliness and order.

Blood vapors impregnate all the pores of walls and ceilings. Sprays and rivulets of blood infiltrate troughs, barrels, counters, columns and floor boards where they are converted into brownish, evil-smelling mud, slimy and sticky; that frequent washes cannot dissolve and cannot sweep away; and instead push even further into wood fibers until it penetrates them completely. The rooms are low-ceiling and crammed, thus the workers always bump into each other and visitors must suffer stomach-churning contacts. There are few windows. A faint light comes from them onto the dark walls obscured by the vapors exhaled from water-boiling cauldrons and pulsating cuts of meat. In this environment hundreds of workers move around; each assigned to a particular function and forced by the mechanical rhythm of the operations to a furious pace without pause. Those unfortunate don't have faces and bodies of men. The faces are congested into an expression of overwhelming disgust by a determined stiffness of will; and by the bloody inebriation that bites them. Their eyes are constantly forced open by the greasy and shiny redness that birdlimes forehead and cheeks; by the coagulated blood that hardens beard and hair; in the visual effort to discern in the shadow the precise point where to land the harter's blow. All this gives them appearances that have nothing to do with those of human beings; that are below the very ferine animality they butcher in such formidable carnage.

We are not yet where Upton Sinclair<sup>4</sup> would take us in 1906 but we are pretty close. Giacosa in these circumstances isn't the romantic poet or the pathetic realist who portrays the joys and sorrows of northern Italian bourgeoisie. He is a good reporter: He left us a testimony of America in those days that has only one defect: it's short, quick and without the foundation of historical culture. His opinions, in general, drift toward the adoration for the United States, almost in anticipation of what will soon become the general tone of reportages by Europeans in that period (for instance Albert Houtin's)<sup>5</sup> and that will reach a peak after World War I (*Amica America* by Jean Giraudoux, 1918).

In Giacosa, for instance, we can see the beginning of the idealization of American women. "American women, the young ones, are more full-of-life than ours. They are in better health, taller, skinnier. From their brisk stride and diffused cheerfulness transpires a *joie de vivre* that pervades the face and the entire body." At that time Europe had not yet discovered the *mammismo* and *piorismo*<sup>6</sup> of American women (or, to be fair, of *many* American women.) This discovery, moreover, will be made by Americans, not European writers.

*New York, August 1, 1960*

<sup>4</sup> Upton Sinclair, Jr. (1878-1968). Novelist and essayist. He achieved great notoriety with the book *The Jungle* (New York, Doubleday, Page & company, 1906) that denounced the working conditions in the Chicago stockyards.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Houtin (1867-1926). French priest and philosopher. He was excommunicated for his positions in favor of modernism. He is the author of *L'Americanisme* (Paris, Librairie Émile Nourry, 1904).

• Jean Giraudoux (1882-1944). French writer and diplomat. Author of *Amica America* (Paris, Émile-Paul Frères, 1918).

<sup>6</sup> *Mammismo* [mama boy-ism]: excessive attachment to one's mother in adult age. *Piorismo* [octopus-ism] is a neologism not reported by Italian dictionaries.

AN ITALIAN WOMAN IN AMERICA  
AN EDUCATED NATIONALIST

Since I started reading and re-reading books about the United States written sixty, seventy or eighty years ago by Italians, I have had the impression I am leafing through a family album full of daguerreotypes and old, faded photographs; but also the collection of a photo magazine, with sharp snapshots of old and obsolete customs. Since the United States was born after a revolution against England—indeed, against Europe—it has attracted the attention of many observers and millions of readers. There are now hundreds of books about this nation and the crescendo of publications is not abating. Books are available in all languages. There are reports, investigations, impressions, studies, pacans, criticisms, invectives, diaries, memoirs; with illustrations, drawings, photographs in black and white and in color; statistics; books sporting a white beard and books that contain poison ivy. Books by Italian writers are not very numerous and none of them achieved world fame like the essays by Alexis De Tocqueville.<sup>1</sup> Most recently I re-read a book published just before World War I. This event marked America's entry into European politics and a fatal milestone in the relations between America and Italy: It was also the sign that modern communication technology had shrunk the distance between the two continents, with the result that Europe's war and peace now also concern America. It was a fatal date for Europe and also for the United States in that it marked the end of the American period of isolationism from the European world. The author of this book, *America vissuta*,

<sup>2</sup> was Amy A. Bernardy. I normally don't pay much attention to the biographies of individuals. Italy does not have a very good library reference system for biographical and bibliographical information; thus, I could only surmise that the author was probably a student of

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1 Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859). French historian and political thinker. His most famous book is *De la démocratie en Amérique*, published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840.

2 Amy A. Bernardy (1879-1959). Journalist and historian.  
• *America vissuta*. Torino, Bocca, 1911.

Pasquale Villari,<sup>3</sup> in love with classical studies and with the nationalist ideology that had sprung up around that time. It was published under the aegis of the Florence Institute of Higher Studies.<sup>4</sup> If we go by her last name, we can also guess that she was a foreigner, an impression confirmed by the first name. None of this matters much. Apparently she was well off and could count on solid introductions as shown by the fact that she was received by the Italian ambassador and by President Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>5</sup> She collaborated with the journal *Il Marzocco*<sup>6</sup> and authored books on the history of the relations between Venice and the Turkish empire and other powers in the seventeenth century. I bet my head (metaphorically) that she was wearing eyeglasses. (See note at the end of the chapter.) She wasn't a very compelling writer, although she was a rather apt observer and an eager researcher. She also enjoyed hyperboles. Here is the portrait of the United States found in the opening pages:

[T]his great Republic is like a Harlequin costume in the positive sense of the term: thousands of pieces are stitched together into a dress; fraying and patched up; in bits and pieces; and yet able to endear itself to the public more than old clunky armors of antique paladins. Beautiful and horrible; infantile and generous; skeptical with a tragic and scary cynicism; obsessed with a grotesque fanaticism worse than the medieval kind; the result of mixing heroic and rebellious bloodlines; depraved and chaste; uncontaminated and filthy; descendant from puritanical ancestors and daughter of outlaw fathers. This bastard, cosmopolitan race is the American race, the race that more than any other one should have in itself the seeds—and more than just the seeds—of all the virtues and all the vices from the North and the South; from the Orient and the Occident;

3 Pasquale Villari (1827–1917). Historian and politician. He taught at the *Reale Istituto di Studi Superiori Pratici e di Perfezionamento* in Florence from 1870 to 1876. He was also president of *Società Dante Alighieri* from 1896 to 1903.

4 Most likely the *Reale Istituto di Studi Superiori Pratici e di Perfezionamento*. Founded in 1859, it was a post-graduate research institute. It was the original nucleus that later became the *Università degli Studi di Firenze*.

5 Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919). He served as the 26<sup>th</sup> President of the United States from 1901 to 1909.

6 *Il Marzocco* (1896–1932). Cultural and literary journal.

all gathered here by ways of immigration: transmitted by foreign medleys; generated by indigenous hybridization; determined by hereditary tendencies; excited by climate and nature. All this could turn this race into the only race in the world from which we could expect all that the world can give, magnificent or unbearable. "*Nisi imperasset*" [If it didn't already rule the world].<sup>7</sup>

I reported this short passage because it is a nice piece. We can see here the culture and taste of those days; and we can see the watermark of the author's erudition that, as she does frequently in the book, culminates in a Latin quotation. It also illustrates a sententious spirit that shows no shame in proffering moral judgments that are tautologically indisputable. However, this nice piece is based on the wrong pre-supposition that in those times an American race actually existed (it doesn't exist even in the present); and that it was the result of many European, Asian and African races. This is not the case today and was even less so back then.

In America there are certainly offsprings of the mixture of different races, generally northern races, because they were the first ones to colonize this country. Yet, a true *American race* does not exist. In its place we have the Anglo-Saxon concept of social life, that is, the social model that all the other races adopt and that constitutes the form, the *structure* of this country. This country is not dominated by an Anglo-Saxon race; rather by Anglo-Saxon concepts. The constitution, with its preoccupation for individual liberty, state rights and private education, is Anglo-Saxon. The justice system, based on open debate in court, is based on the criterion of *casae by casae* jurisprudence and not that of statutes. The role of police; and the freedom of assembly and freedom of the press are Anglo-Saxon. The form of marriage and divorce; and the position of women in society are of Anglo-Saxon origin. Even non-Protestant religions conform to the criteria of Anglo-Saxon churches. Any Catholic who seriously analyzes the structure of his Church in the United States will agree that, in many respects,

<sup>7</sup> "*Omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset*" ["If he wasn't already ruling the world, everyone would have pronounced him worthy of heading an empire."] Tacitus, *Historiae*, 1,17. The comment refers to Emperor Gallia who reigned for only one year after the death of Nero.

it resembles Protestant churches) more than the southern European Catholic churches that were not directly influenced by Protestantism.

This book was composed in a rather uninhibited way and without an agenda (which makes for captivating reading); mixing together interviews with presidents, personal diaries, gossip columns, art notes, discussions on theories, quick sketches about Greek and Chinese communities etc. At the foundation is the concept of *race*. Ms. Bernardy maintains that Americans and Italians had nothing in common and, therefore, there was no chance they could fuse into one entity. This is rather questionable if one takes the word *fuse* literally: of the two elements required for a fusion, the Italian supplied the moldable matter; while the Anglo-Saxon provided the die. One gave it the body; the other, the soul. Up until now America is an operation performed by the Anglo-Saxon race on the masses that did not have a distinct national identity. And here we come to the other mistake made by Ms. Bernardy. She believes that Italian *paesani* from the south were *Italian*. At most, if they had a collective identity at all, this was the *Catholic* identity; but they lacked a national consciousness, education, language and affection (they loved their little native hamlets, but not Italy as a nation and state.) On the good side, Ms. Bernardy shows she had a very sharp eye and independent judgment toward our co-nationals who, she believed, could never become *fused* with America. (Indeed they *fused*, did they ever! In general they were reduced to the bare minimum, like a denominator.) Her book contains two chapters on Boston's Little Italy that constitute one of the most important testimonies on the quality of life of Italian immigrants in America.

Here is a passage about two characters of the colonial world that have disappeared: the *paesano* and the *banchista* [banker] of our Little Italies.

In this Little Italy we basically find a series of small villages, gathered around a couple of bell towers. The immigrant mass at this time is all concentrated around different nuclei; polarized around as many leaders as there are villages, bell towers and small churches in Italy.

They came from places identifiable by those landmarks and—on the other side of the Atlantic—*paesani* and *compari* rebuilt the same places repeating the echo of the names. The concept of *paesano* is

elaborate (!)

the fertile creator of colonial nuclei. Any attempt to embrace wider concepts and ideas of renewal and moral changes among the masses fails against this bastion. An example comes from the banking business. Immigrants blindly trust only the *paesani* and for this reason they end up losing everything to the bankruptcies—alas, real ones—of so many apocryphal banks that exist only because the *paesani* trust and support them. And, for the same reason, larger impersonal institutions encounter resistance and distrust when they try to open up branches in Little Italy. If you ask an immigrant where he keeps his money, he will tell you that *lu paesano* has it. Try to persuade him there is a better way: impossible. The *paesano* who keeps his money is also his confidant, his lawyer, his personal adviser, his protector, his federal agent. When *lu paesano* goes belly up or runs away with the money, the poor victim cries, curses or resigns, depending on the individual personality. Then, he goes back to working and saving. And he hands his savings to the next *paesano*. If this one happens to be honest, all is well. If not... This explains the tremendous power of the little retail banks in comparison to institutional banks; and the enormous difficulty in the form of passive resistance encountered by the *Banca di Napoli*<sup>8</sup> with immigrants who do not want to use its services for commercial operations. In effect the *Banca di Napoli* is an impersonal financial institution. That's it. For the cosmopolitans among us that is enough: indeed, that's what makes it more secure. But for the immigrant it is unquestionably inferior to the typical traditional bank which, like at the time of Dante, is located in the neighborhood's drug store; the emporium *de omnibus rebus* [of all possible things] and related *quibusdam aliis* [and all kinds of other things]. Sure, it is more than a bank. It is a bookstore, a newsstand; often with a printing shop (culture and finance are fused in one civilizing *trust* [sic]). The colonial bank is also notary office, travel agency, shipping company, navigation, *express* agency, pharmacy and employment bureau. Often it includes a *groceria* [grocery store], a warehouse for imported foodstuffs, even a pasta factory and sometimes a bakery oven. The banker is also a landlord who owns lots of buildings rented to great profit thanks to his extensive connections. His name, in the colony, is *banchista*. All this is traditional, legitimate, familiar, smart, profitable, very respectable and honest... when it is an honest arrangement. When

8 *Banca di Napoli*. One of the oldest banking institutions in Italy. It was founded in 1539 as a *banco di carità* [charitable bank], namely, a pawn shop that made loans without interests.

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it is not honest, he uses his client's money to buy foodstuff for his own *grosseria* and will sell at double the price to the flattered client. Not only, but he sells to him on credit with an interest; or he mortgages the salary that the client earns working for an allied contractor, from whom he has already received a percentage that is inversely proportional to the wage the client is earning after the *banchista* himself convinced him to take a job at a lower pay. This way the *banchista* receives a cut from everyone he has helped earn money by using his clients. He also lends money to show off how his generosity; but he will do so only when he is already sure he has under his nails enough profit generated by the employment of his client; and enough profit to cover possible losses. In the financial contracts with his employes, he inserts a clause requiring that they drag into his net all the *pescani*. He is also involved in murky deals about putting up bail money for people in trouble with the law. He rents or sublets homes that he reports as assets worth \$10,000 in real estate, while in reality 70 or 80% of it is mortgaged. He accepts deposits of \$10,000 although he knows full well that he only has reserves to cover a minimal part of it. And nobody will be surprised if the home sublet to a boarder is put to a different use by an entrepreneurial Madame... It is a fatal closed circle, a diabolical net that imprisons the immigrant who cannot rebel. If he rebels, the organization comes down on him and he ends up being blacklisted. The blacklisting of workers reaches the level of atrocity. It is painful to admit it, but the worst enemy of an Italian is usually another Italian.

I would also like to quote another nice passage by Bernardy, full of interesting observations and passion:

To be happy in America one needs an aptitude for mechanical things; an opportunistic and entrepreneurial spirit, sharp about business and dull and primitive in everything else. One needs to be conventional and follow all *approved standards* like a sheep. One must show great interest for everything American and superior contempt for everything Latin, even the things that made Latin life great and beautiful. The Italian immigrant, to the contrary, is full of rural vitality, individualism and regionalism. His business sense is rudimentary. Although he doesn't know and cannot express it, his soul is burdened by the ancestral traditions of his bloodline. This soul, renacious and constantly challenged, impalpable but omnipresent,

is what we feel in Little Italy (the nickname given by Americans to the neighborhoods where Italian immigrants live). You are moving across American life and then, suddenly, you feel that something is going through your spirit, and penetrates it, and bares it under the attacks of hyper-civilized barbarism. You feel a little tear in the fabric of your being: a regret, a longing for everything that was, for everything that is and that maybe will be. It is the wail of exile, cold and thin; it is a moment of void, loneliness and pain. Everything around you seems to break up into smithereens, collapse, suddenly fall down, in the incurable nostalgia of your lonely heart. Then, with its boredom, with its travails, American life takes over again. What was it? It is the soul of Italy that passed you by.

This piece describes both a period and a woman writer with her illusions and her acute perceptions. But also with blind spots. Forty years later I visited the same neighborhood in Boston. There is no longer any trace of the Italy she describes, except for a few faded restaurants. All the Italians who found success adapting to industrial society and the opportunistic and entrepreneurial spirit; to the business acumen, limitations, conventionalism and acceptance of approved Americans standards; they all fled to try to make a *new face* for themselves in upper-middle-class suburbs. In general they are caught in mid-air, no longer Italian and not yet American. <sup>9</sup>“*Color che son sospesi*.” Bernardy didn’t see the responsibility of the Italian ruling class for this state of affairs. Italian leadership gave to these *adaptable* neither a national consciousness nor a technical education. Undoubtedly these were wonderful people: suffice it to say that they survived and solved their economical problems. Here the original stock helped: by that I mean the southern peasant stock that for centuries fought against an impoverished land, against an unfertile land and the *barons*.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps,

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9 Dante, *Inferno*, Canto II, 52. “*To era tra color che son sospesi*.” [“I was among those who are suspended [in mid air].”] Vergil describes this way his personal condition in the *Limbo*, the anti-chamber of Inferno, where worthy souls that died without baptism are relegated without hope of ascending to heaven.

10 The reference is to the aristocrats that owned immense tracts of land, the *latifondo*, that constituted the majority of estates in the south. These were almost always absentee landlords who lived around the royal court, either in Naples or Palermo, extracting wealth from their possessions in a merely parasitical way.

despite her ideas about race and stock, Ms. Bernardy didn't realize that there were differences in the patterns of Italian immigration to America. Maybe these were due to race and stock, or maybe to history. Let's take Tuscans and Ligurians on one side and southern Italians on the other. The Tuscan-Ligurian immigration to California created different outcomes than that of southerners to Boston. Tuscans emerged as *contractors*, builders and entrepreneurs (though not architects); Ligurians as bankers and wine makers.

It would be unreasonable to expect correct prophesies from a writer motivated by a patriotic spirit with great observation skills and style—a bit frondose, yes, but still a *style*. She left us a couple of books that are important testimonies. Due to the unusual circumstances of her life, she was one of the few Italians, and certainly the only Italian woman of her time; who understood the phenomenon of Italian immigration unknown and ignored by all with the exception of a handful of politicians and journalists of that period. The visits of politicians to the United States began when the immigration phenomenon was about to end. Today lots and lots of them, now that immigration is over, keep coming. The Italian ruling class is always late.

*New York, September 4, 1960*

[Endnote in the original] Amy A. Bernardy, a valiant scholar of popular traditions, died quietly in Rome on October 25, 1959. She was born in Florence where her family, originally from Savoy, had moved. She graduated from the University of Florence in the Faculty of Letters with a thesis on Venetian-Turkish relations in the XVII and XVII centuries.<sup>11</sup> The thesis was published with an introduction by Pasquale Villari.

A very erudite woman with a vast culture and a polyglot with a reserved but enthusiastic personality, she traveled frequently in particular to North America where for several years she was a lecturer at Smith College in North Hampton [sic], Massachusetts. She became interested in Italian immigrants and produced investigations, reports,

<sup>11</sup> Amy A. Bernardy, *Venezia e il Tirro nella seconda metà del secolo XVII*. Firenze: Ciuffelli, 1902.

publications and broadcasts. She was particularly interested in women and children living in industrial centers, and participated actively to the activities of the Dante Alighieri Society and other similar institutions that tried to assert the values of Italianness.

Giovanna Dompè, Commemoration of Amy. A. Bernardy  
June 15, 1960, Università di Roma