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ITALIAN IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

A Thesis

Submitted to the McAnulty Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

By

Giuseppe Piccoli

December 2014

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Giuseppe Piccoli

2014

ITALIAN IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

By

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ABSTRACT

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December 2014

Thesis supervised by Professor Douglas Harper

This study is a historical research that used content analysis of secondary sources (newspapers, magazines, literature, movies and sociological studies) in order to describe Italian immigration in America. The research is focused on Italian-American communities in the areas of Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York City and Boston.

Between 1880 and 1920, Italian-Americans became one of the largest ethnic groups in the United States. For a long period, they faced discrimination and lived at the edge of the American society. Education, immigration and urban policies influenced the social structure of the Italian communities. Later, second generation immigrants started writing books and making movies that expressed a different perception of the Italian-American identity. At the same time, in 1950s and 1960s, the Italian economy boosted, and the Italy started to be associated with culture, beauty, fashion and style. Thus, in the last decades Italian-Americans became proud of their ethnic heritage.

DEDICATION

To Dr. Carla Lucente

(una promessa è una promessa...)

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Migration from Italy to the United States became a massive phenomenon in the period between 1880 and 1920, when more than four million Italians arrived in the States (Daniels, 1990). In a short amount of time, the Italian group became one of the larger ethnic groups in the USA; but after 1920, the Italian immigration was drastically limited by the “Quota Acts” approved by the American Congress (Luconi & Petrelli, 2008).

Prejudice, negative stereotypes, and discrimination against Italian immigrants were very strong in American society for many decades. However, more recently, Italian-Americans have expressed pride in their cultural heritage and ethnic roots. Thus, it is important to analyze the historical process of the Italian immigration in the United States, and the evolution of the cultural identity in Italian-American communities in order to understand the process that transformed Italians from a misrepresented and denigrated group to a group proud of its heritage.

First of all, the problem of defining the evolution of Italian-American cultural identity is complicated by the pattern of the Italian history. Indeed, Italy was politically unified just in 1861, and for centuries, local and regional identities were stronger than the common national identity. Therefore, at the end of the 19th century as well as during the first decades of the 20th century, Italian immigrants in America created communities based on the same local or regional identity they shared in Italy.

For decades, Italian communities lived at the edge of the American society. Italian immigrants were living in the “slums” (ethnic enclaves characterized by urban decline, run-down buildings, dirt, poverty, violence). Their way of life reinforced American prejudices against them. Discrimination and prejudice were so strong that racist theories were elaborated against Italian immigrants, and Italian immigrants were constantly misrepresented by movies or

newspapers. Sometimes there were extremely violent acts against them (for example, the well known episode of Italians lynched in New Orleans in 1890) (Stella, 2003).

Facing this kind of hostility, Italian immigrants needed to remove part of their own cultural identity in order to quickly assimilate into the American society.

This situation remained unchanged even after the Second World War. For instance, in the 1960's, Italian "slums" were objects of academic research aiming to sociologically analyze the peculiar aspects of the Italian-American way of life. In the 1960's, for example, sociologist Herbert Gans ([1962] 1982) published his influential study, *The Urban Villagers. Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*. He studied the Italian-American community in Boston.

Gans ([1962] 1982) noted the importance of the "second generation immigrants" (sons and daughters of the Italian immigrants, who were born and educated in the US). Second generation immigrants were decisive in the evolution of the Italian-American communities' identity because they were determined to establish a different relationship with their cultural heritage and the American culture and way of life.

Indubitably, that was the period in which the Italian-Americans could experience new opportunities, incremental improvements of their economic, social and cultural situation. Thus, probably it is the moment when they had a new perception of their own identity, paying more attention to the representation, and to the self-representation, of the Italian-American identity.

This study is a historical research project that implicates additional research questions. How did it happen that one of the lowest regarded and more discriminated ethnic groups could modify the perception of its image, becoming really proud of its cultural heritage and ethnic roots? What were the factors that contributed to this collective identity transformation?

Research Method

The study used qualitative methods, an analysis of existing documents in order to describe the perception, the public representation, and the self-representation of Italian immigrants in the United States. Indeed, it is necessary to evaluate the discourse produced by the Italian communities in America about themselves, their narratives about their way of life, shared values, culture, and social structures as recreated in the United States.

The first part of the study is dedicated to the description of the different phases and characteristics of the Italian immigration in America. This introduction is achieved using the existing literature on the topic.

After synthesizing the historical process of the Italian immigrants' settlement in the American cities, with its particular aspects, culture, values, and way of life, the evolution of the collective identity in the Italian communities is described. The study focuses particularly on the Italian-American communities in the areas of Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York City and Boston. Indeed, there is the practical necessity of narrowing the object of analysis. It is possible to underline similar characteristics in the experience of the Italian immigrants in these four cities. There is a geographical uniformity between Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York and Boston because they are all in the Northeast of the United States; moreover, they shared a similar industrial development that gives a common pattern to the immigrants' working experience.

Furthermore, because it is possible to hypothesize that a decisive shift about the Italian-American identity happened around the end of the 1960's and during the 1970's, the analysis will be focused on the decades after World War II.

In order to study the evolution of the Italian-American cultural identity, it has been used a content analysis of secondary sources (newspapers, magazines, literature, movies). Newspapers

and magazines are important to understand the evolution of the Italian-American collective identity because they contain reports, articles, and debates that discuss the problem of the Italian immigrants' cultural identity. Rudolph J. Vecoli (2003) explains that, since the last decades of the 19th century, in every "Little Italy" in the American cities there was at least one (or even more) newspaper published in the Italian language. One of the most relevant was "Il Progresso Italo-Americano", published in New York since 1880. Those publications refer news and events relevant for the communities; in addition, they reflect the public opinion and the intellectual climate through discussions and features. The way in which news about the relevant events in the community are reported, the public discussions about problems, the remarks and the opinions expressed by the media published by the group, will help to clarify how the group interacted with the new social environment.

Another relevant type of data is Italian-American artistic productions during the past World War II period. Indeed, literature, cinema and music were relevant ways of expressing, portraying (and even influencing) the collective identity of the group. Indeed, through novels, movies or songs, artists reflected and expressed the experiences in the community, the problems that the group had to face on a daily base, its way of life as well as social structures and values. Furthermore, art creates or refers stories, images, and characters that are powerful instruments in order to represent and narrate the identity of a community. An example very important about this process is the famous novel *The Godfather*, published in 1969 by the writer Mario Puzo, and adapted to the screen by the movie director Francis Ford Coppola. Thanks to this extremely successful movie, the character of don Vito Corleone, the godfather, became a kind of mythological figure. Before, the stereotypical character of the Italian gangster had been

commonly presented as a very negative image in a large number of American movies (Brunetta, 2009).

Besides newspapers, magazines, and art production, another important data source is sociological studies on the Italian-American communities (for example, the studies published by William F. Whyte in 1943, and Herbert Gans at beginning of the 1960s). Such studies are the results of field research. The authors gathered essential information about Italian immigrants' way of life, and about their perception of their own cultural identity. Hence, their books are an ineludible source of information in order to study the evolution of the Italian-American cultural identity.

In the research, the sources above presented are subjected to a qualitative analysis aiming to identify and interpret the recurring elements of the Italian-American self-representation of their own identity, reading it in a historical perspective. The idea of "self-representation" is particularly stressed because it is possible to hypothesize that a major shift in the perception of the Italian-American identity occurred when the Italian-Americans became active part of the discourse on themselves; in other words, when they became tellers of their own identity story, instead of mere object of representation (or misrepresentation).

The recurring elements of such a "self-representation" is diachronically compared with the main characteristics of the Italian culture and identity that the immigrants "left" back at home, in order to comprehend the original and different way in which they elaborated their sense of belonging to the original culture.

This study also considers the impact of immigration, education and urban policies adopted by the American government on the Italian-American identity.

The immigration policies were relevant. After a long period in which the Italians immigrated massively into the United States, in 1920 the US Congress approved the “Quota Acts” that were very restrictive towards the Italians (Luconi & Petrelli, 2008). When the Italian immigrants ceased arriving on a large scale, they were not perceived anymore as a threat by the American population. At the same time, the education policies were a decisive factor because for a long period the education system was used as a way to assimilate the immigrants’ sons and daughters to the American way of life, discouraging them from keeping their cultural and linguistic peculiarities (Greer, 1972). On the other side, the urban policies – particularly with the urban renewal in the second half of the 20th century – had a strong impact on the Italian-American communities because the characteristics of their settlements changed radically, deeply transforming the social structures of the communities.

Finally, it may be also important to underline the impact of the Italian economic development after the Second World War. Indeed, during the 1950’s and the 1960’s – a period identified by Italian historians as “the economic miracle” – the economic situation of the country improved dramatically. Some of the Italian companies became very important exporters to the United States (particularly fashion and luxury brands) while Italy became a popular destination for American tourists. As a consequence of that, Italy started to be associated with culture, beauty, fashion and style. Thus, it should not be surprising if there is a sort of connection between the economic development of the Italy and the improvement of the Italian-American image.

In conclusion, this study about Italian immigration in America may be significant because the Italian-American ethnic group (one of the larger ethnic groups in America) is still today a numerous and influential group in the American society. It contributed in a significant way to the

evolution of the American social, cultural, and religious structures. First of all, answering the question of how this ethnic group, once badly discriminated, could become so proud about its roots, may prove a theoretical model on immigrants' cultural and social integration.

Indeed, this study links to some of the greatest myths and figures of the contemporary America, created by the Italian-American culture. In other words, better understanding the evolution of the Italian-American cultural identity may improve our understanding of the very American cultural identity. In addition, the study will inform about the influence of various public policies on the assimilation and collective identity dynamics of a minority population.

Definition of Terms

“Cultural Identity” refers to the whole set of characteristics determining the shared way of life of an ethnic group, that includes values, traditions, ideas, customs, food habits, social structures and language, and the ability of individuals to recognize that they belong to that group. (Hofstede et al., 2010).

“Cultural Identity” is not a static and fixed idea; on the contrary, it is a complex concept. The Cultural Identity of a group changes with time and situations experienced by the group. As explained by Amin Maalouf, a Lebanese writer, our “Cultural Identity” is the complex result of the interaction of different elements and our belonging to different groups (1998). Usually, the hierarchy of those elements varies when we feel threatened by something. Therefore, the definition of our ethnic identity will be rigidly asserted in a condition in which we fear for our ethnic group affirmation (Malouf, 1998).

The term “Ethnic Community,” in this study, refers to the social space the group. The concept of community will be used in relation to the environment in which immigrants interact

with the rest of the ethnic group within the social structures of that group. Thus, the concept is not restricted to the ethnic enclave or to the actual physical space of a single neighborhood. The terms “First Generation Immigrants,” or “Italian Immigrants” are used in reference to women and men who immigrated from Italy to the United States. The term “Second Generation” refers to Italian Americans born in America to parents that migrated from Italy.

2. The Great Migration from Italy

2.1 The Causes

In order to understand Italian immigration in America, it is necessary to have a historical notion about migration from Italy at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The causes of that process and the immigrants’ social and cultural background as well as places of provenience are fundamental elements that we need to consider if we want a proper comprehension of the cultural identity build by Italian immigrants in their settlements in the United States.

It is particularly important to focus on the two sides of the phenomenon: the general characteristics of the Italian exodus, and the particular description of the Italian immigration in America. Indeed, the broad picture of the Italian emigration in its historical phases gives us relevant information on emigrants’ places of origins, reasons of migration, social and cultural backgrounds, etc. These preliminary understandings are crucial if we want a careful understanding of the particular way of life reproduced by the Italians once they established their communities in the United States.

This preliminary analysis can be conducted on a substantial literature that has been developed in recent years since historians and sociologists began to pay close attention to the topic. Furthermore, the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) provides detailed historical data on the phenomenon of the Italian migration.

From 1880 to 1930, what has been called by the historians “*la grande migrazione*” (the great migration) took place in Italy. More than 17 million Italians left their country (De Clementi, 2005).

These men and women were workers, artisans, professionals, but mainly peasants traditionally used to migrating in search of a job. Indeed, even before the political unification of Italy in 1861, agriculture was based on seasonal migrations: for example, the Po Valley in the Northern-West of Italy (particularly the rice fields in the province of Vercelli) attracted peasants from the Alps as well as from the coasts of Tuscany. Peasants from Umbria, Abruzzi and Calabria used to leave the Apennine Mountains to harvest cereals in the Roman countryside. In the South, fertile lands in Apulia were another center of attraction for immigrants from the surrounding areas. Moreover, Apulia and the Roman countryside were the regions where nomad shepherds from Abruzzi used to lead their flocks during winter. Hence, it can be said that seasonal migrations were inherently related to the Italian agricultural system (De Clementi, 2005, pp. 22-24).

The roots of the great migration can be found in such a continuous process of internal movements of people; indeed, migrations were massively directed over borders once that that system was shaken by an intense crisis. The population grew substantially from 18 million in 1801 to 32 million in 1901, while several factors caused a stagnation of the Italian agriculture, undermining the entire structure of that rural society. The price of wheat decreased dramatically

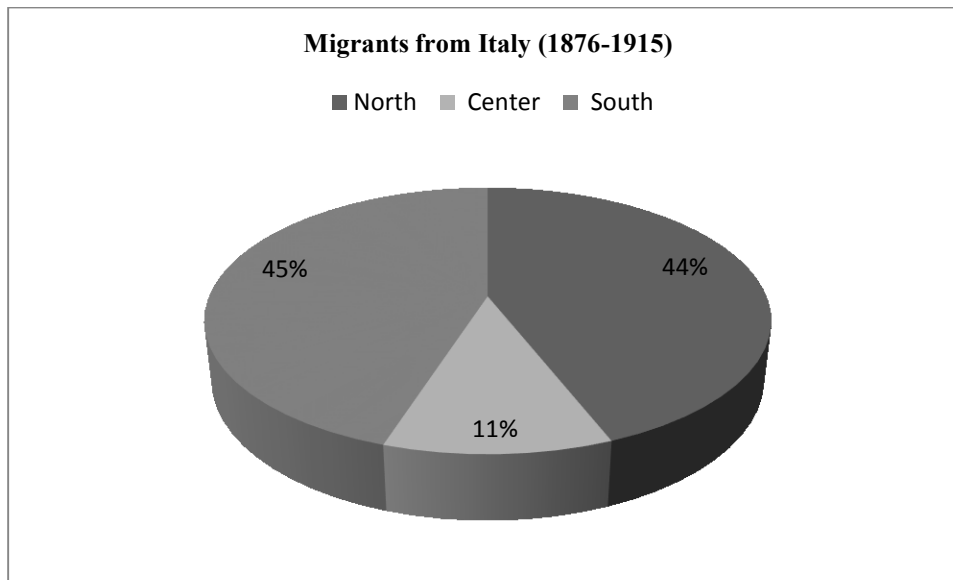
during the second half of the 19th century because the European markets were invaded by American, Australian, and Russian wheat. At the same time, the production of rice in the northern regions underwent a crisis after that the Suez Canal was inaugurated (1869), opening a way to the less expensive Indian rice.

In the meanwhile, the adoption of the new civil code in 1865 accelerated the fragmentation of the land property since it abolished the right of “majorat”. Contemporary, landowners had to face an increasing fiscal pressure from the government that was engaged in the construction of infrastructures for the newly created Kingdom of Italy.

In addition, the government adopted other policies that undermined the rural society means of living. For example, alienating ecclesiastic and public lands, it deprived peasants of charitable assistance as well as ancient rights (gathering firewood in common woods and the common pasture) that they had exercised for centuries (Bevilacqua, 2005).

Conjunctural factors weakened the proto-industrial system that granted an additional income for families living in rural areas. For example, after the unification of Italy, the rural manufacture of silk, already severely damaged by pébrine disease that affected silkworms from 1856 to 1863, succumbed to the competition with larger factories when the government abolished tariffs barriers among the pre-Unitarian Italian states, and lowered tariffs on foreign countries, leaving open space to strong British producers. The manufacture of cotton faced a similar fate. Thus the dramatic loss of income caused by those factors generated “a transoceanic mobilization never seen before” (De Clementi, 2005, p. 28).

Tab. 1. Emigrants by macro-regions



The great migration involved all the Italian regions. Donna R. Gabaccia (2000) shows that during the first phase of Italy's Diasporas, before 1880, peasants and workers were leaving primarily from northern regions (particularly from Piedmont and Veneto). Migration rate from southern regions surpassed migration rate from northern regions only after 1890, but still the highest migration rate during the period between 1895 and 1914 was from the northern region of Veneto. Indeed, in that decade, the 3.30 % of the overall population of Veneto (estimated in 1881) emigrated (Gabaccia, 2000).

Patrizia Audenino and Maddalena Tirabassi (2008) calculated that 45% of the Italian emigrants left from southern regions, 44% from the north, and 11% from the center of the peninsula. Analyzing the regional data collected by the Italian national institute of statistics (ISTAT), they pointed out that in the period from 1876 to 1900 migration was largely from northern regions, particularly from the mountain areas of Veneto, Friuli, Piedmont and Lombardy. In the following years (from 1901 to 1915), migration from the south increased

dramatically, and Sicily and Campania became the larger sources of emigrants; yet, Veneto, Piedmont and Lombardy were still among the main contributors to the total number of Italian emigrants.

Migration from the central regions was less intense compared to northern and southern regions, and it regarded substantially mountain areas of Tuscany, Emilia, Abruzzi and Marche; that is, territories that had already been characterized by a high degree of seasonal internal migrations (Audenino & Tirabassi, 2008).

Tab. 2. Emigrants by Region (Years 1876-1901)

| Region | 1876-1900 | % | 1901-1915 | % |
|------------------------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Piedmont | 709,076 | 13.5 | 831,088 | 9.5 |
| Lombardy | 519,100 | 9.9 | 823,695 | 9.4 |
| Veneto | 940,711 | 17.9 | 882,082 | 10.1 |
| Friuli V.G. | 847,072 | 16.1 | 560,721 | 6.4 |
| Liguria | 117,941 | 2.2 | 105,215 | 1.2 |
| Emilia-Romagna | 220,745 | 4.2 | 469,430 | 5.4 |
| Tuscany | 290,111 | 5.5 | 473,045 | 5.4 |
| Umbria | 8,866 | 0.15 | 155,674 | 1.8 |
| Marche | 70,050 | 1.3 | 320,107 | 3.7 |
| Lazio | 15,830 | 0.3 | 189,225 | 2.2 |
| Abruzzi | 109,038 | 2.1 | 486,518 | 5.5 |
| Molise | 136,355 | 2.6 | 171,680 | 2.0 |
| Campania | 520,791 | 9.9 | 955,188 | 10.9 |
| Apulia | 50,282 | 1.0 | 332,615 | 3.8 |
| Basilicata | 191,433 | 3.6 | 194,260 | 2.2 |
| Calabria | 275,930 | 5.2 | 603,110 | 6.9 |
| Sicily | 226,449 | 4.3 | 1,126,513 | 12.8 |
| Sardinia | 8,135 | | 89,624 | |
| Total emigrants | 5,257,911 | 100.0 | 8,769,749 | 100.0 |

Also, Audenino and Tirabassi (2008) underline that through statistics on the Italian emigration it is possible to identify circumscribed areas presenting similar geographic and social characteristics that were creating shared patterns of migration. That explains the preference of specific destination, and the type of aggregation created by the emigrants in foreign countries.

For example, workers in the silk manufacturing left the province of Como, in Lombardy, to go to work in the Northern American manufactures, where they joined emigrants from Piedmont specialized in the same activity. From the Apennine areas of Umbria and Marche, particularly from Ascoli Piceno, migrants were directed to the mines in Pennsylvania. Once arrived at the new destinations, these emigrants created abroad communities that reflected regional and micro-regional identities.

2.2 The destinations

When the great migration started, the first destinations were European countries with which Italy had a territorial contiguity. In the decade 1876-1885, more than four hundred thousand emigrants were bound to France, and more than one hundred thousand to Switzerland. European countries absorbed 74% of the emigrants, while only 24% chose transoceanic emigration. Anyway, a decade later the odds had changed: 57% crossed the Ocean, and the 43% moved to European countries (Istat, 2011; Tavola 2.9).

In the decade 1886-1905, Brazil (503,599), Argentina (414,426), and the United States (377,068) had become the main receivers. France still was the preferred European destination, but it absorbed less than three hundred thousand Italian emigrants (Audenino & Tirabassi, 2008).

Anyway, at the turn of the century, the United States became largely the preferred destination. In the years from 1896 to 1915, 36.9% of the Italian emigration was directed to the United States (more than three million and five hundred emigrants out of ten million). Switzerland, Germany, France, Argentina, and – to a less degree – Brazil and Canada attracted the rest (Audenino & Tirabassi, 2008).

Tab. 3. Italian Emigrants Destinations (Years 1876-1915)

| Years | France | Switzerland | Germany | Benelux | Great Britain | Europe |
|--------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| 1876-1885 | 406 780 | 101 571 | 71 208 | 3 524 | 5 419 | 850 219 |
| 1886-1895 | 286 054 | 96 843 | 127 986 | 2 053 | 5 891 | 970 133 |
| 1896-1905 | 396 292 | 397 374 | 434 748 | 8 221 | 23 527 | 1 890 943 |
| 1906-1915 | 569 577 | 744 504 | 591 905 | 23 691 | 34 646 | 2 426 091 |
| Total | 1 658 703 | 1 340 292 | 1 225 847 | 37 489 | 69 483 | 6 137 386 |

| Years | USA | Canada | Argentina | Brazil | Australia | Total |
|--------------|------------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|---------------|------------------|
| 1876-1885 | 83 583 | 1 198 | 157 860 | 55 936 | 460 | 299 037 |
| 1886-1895 | 377 068 | 7 557 | 414 426 | 503 599 | 1 590 | 1 304 240 |
| 1896-1905 | 1 306 083 | 23 225 | 489 748 | 450 423 | 3 440 | 2 272 919 |
| 1906-1915 | 2 385 800 | 116 585 | 716 043 | 196 669 | 7 540 | 3 422 637 |
| Total | 4 152 534 | 148 565 | 1 778 077 | 1 206 627 | 13 030 | 7 298 833 |

This pattern suggests that the Italian migration followed the international economic cycle: countries experiencing economic growth demanded workers on the international labor market, while countries experiencing economic contraction reduced the request; thus, personal choices and migration strategies reflected these fluctuations (Franzina, 1995).

Yet, another factor that influenced migrants' destination was related to maritime transportation (Molinari, 2001). British and German companies – Prince Line, Dominion Line, Cunard Line, Anchor Line, White Star Line, Hamburg America Line and Lloyd Bremen – that dominated the transoceanic transportation of migrants, opened agencies in Italy, creating a web of agents and relations aimed to encourage and publicize the perspective of migration to America.

Indeed, the main ports from which emigrants departed were located in Northern Europe (Liverpool, Hamburg, Bremen, Marseille, Le Havre), and were connected with the Italian peninsula through the newly developing railroads. Genoa was the most important port in Italy involved in the process, which explains why initially the largest number of Italian emigrants that crossed the ocean was from Liguria. Later, at the beginning of the 20th century, when migration from the south became extremely intense, the port of Naples became the most important one (Molinari, 2001).

2.3 Italian Emigration: Government's Policies and Catholic Church Assistance

An important aspect of the Italian emigration that needs to be underlined is the absence of a clear emigration policy adopted by the Italian government. Ludovico Incisa di Camerana (Incisa di Camerana, 2003) contends that no efficient strategy was elaborated by the Italian political elites. In the country, there was a sort of social alarm created by the massive emigration. At the same time, the government considered emigration an essential tool in order to keep control of social unrest because unemployed and impoverished working class was leaving the country. Furthermore, there was also the awareness that the money sent back to families by emigrants was an important resource for the Italian economy. However, the Italian government never adopted a coherent political approach to such a vast problem. Basically, the emigration process was left to individual initiative.

The first law addressing the problem of emigration was approved at the end of December 1888. The dominant idea in the ruling class was that emigration represented a safety valve for social conflicts. Thus, the law approved established the complete liberty to migrate. In the

meantime, commissions aimed to protect emigrants' rights during the trip were created. Anyway, criticism arose because it lacked of an organic strategy to face the issue, and it was clear that emigrants were left to their own fate. The government attempted to reform the law in 1901, creating the General Commissariat of Emigration (CGE) that would have safeguarded emigrants, but the CGE was going to be proved ineffective because of conflicts of competition between the Ministry of foreign affairs and the new organism (Ostuni, 2009).

If the government acted slowly and ineffectively, the institution that supported in a decisive way the Italian emigrants was the Catholic Church. Fearing that migration was going to imply loss of faithful in favor of protestant churches, the Catholic Church reacted immediately in order to organize associations and parishes for the Italians abroad. Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, the bishop of Piacenza, was given the task of instituting a congregation that would assist emigrants in America and prepare missionaries. Scalabrini was supported by Mother Francesca Saverio Cabrini, founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, an order that already in 1889 was present in New York City, and later spread in all across the United States from New Orleans to Chicago and Seattle. The Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Scalabrinian missionaries opened churches, schools, orphanage, hospitals in which Italian was the spoken language. Therefore, their action was also relevant on creating an Italian identity among immigrants who had been mainly speaking dialect, and used to identify themselves with their own region of provenience instead of Italy (Sanfilippo, 2001).

2.4 Italian Immigration in America

Given the economic, political, social, and cultural circumstances of the Italian migration described so far, it is not difficult to understand difficulties and isolation experienced by the Italian immigrants in the Northern American cities.

Migration from Italy to the United States was a dynamic phenomenon that had different historical phases. For most of the 19th century, influx of Italian immigrants to the United States followed a slow pace. Only 81,277 Italians registered as migrants during the period between 1820 and 1880 (Daniels, 1990).

Tab. 4. Italian Immigrants in the United States (Years 1881-1970)

| Years | Italian Immigrants in the U.S. |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1881-1890 | 244,870 |
| 1891-1900 | 514,330 |
| 1901-1910 | 2,329,450 |
| 1911-1920 | 1,566,780 |
| 1921-1930 | 419,161 |
| 1931-1940 | 114,636 |
| 1941-1950 | 66,068 |
| 1951-1960 | 193,459 |
| 1961-1970 | 166,961 |

Italian immigration in the United States registered a steady increase from 1881; by the end of the century more than 700,000 Italians had landed in American ports. From 1901 to 1914, there was a staggering rise, with an average of more than 238,000 Italian immigrants per year (Istat,

2011; Tabella 2.9.1). This wave relented during World War I, regaining strength in the aftermath of the conflict; in 1920, almost 350,000 Italian immigrants entered the United States. In just forty years, more than 4.1 million of Italians arrived in the States (Istat, 2011; Tabella 2.9.1).

The war boosted nationalism and prejudices against immigrants, and legislation on immigration was strained. In 1917 the *Literacy act* was introduced denying access to illiterates. In 1920 and 1924, the Congress approved the *Quota acts* that notably reduced immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe (Luconi & Petrelli, 2008). Consequently, in that decade Italian immigration in the United States dropped to an average of about 46,000 per year, barely a third of what it had amounted in the previous decade (Istat, 2011; Tabella 2.9.1).

The Great Depression and the advent of the Fascist regime in Italy further restrained Italian immigration in America. Indeed, the fascist government adopted new policies aimed to stop the massive migration because it gave a negative image to a “great” and “powerful” country (Golini and Amato, 2001).

In the 1930’s, the average was about twelve thousand per year (Istat, 2011; Tabella 2.9.1). The Second World War completely arrested immigration. Soon after the conflicts, Italian immigrants would have again arrived in the United States at a constant pace – more than 400,000 Italians migrated there from 1946 to the early 1970’s (Istat, 2011; Tabella 2.9.1), but the massive migration to America was definitively over.

Thomas Archdeacon (1983) refers that the 80% of the Italians that arrived in America between 1880 and 1920 came from the southern regions of Italy. Very large groups were represented by Sicilians (30%) and immigrants coming from the area around Naples (27%). Archdeacon argues that those areas provided the majority of the immigrants because they were

lacking economic forces able to create social cohesion. Social cohesion was left to the family. He asserts that at the end of the 19th century Italy was living a contradictory situation. Indeed, the sense of hope generated by the recent political unification of the country was coexisting with the distress caused by poverty, economic underdevelopment, and social backwardness. Archdeacon asserts that 75% of Italy has hills or mountains, and some of the remaining flat fertile areas were plagued by malaria. In addition, the economic system was based prevalently on agriculture. Initially industrialization occurred in the north of Italy; but still nine out of ten workers were employed in agriculture.

Moreover, there were significant differences in the level of development of agriculture. In regions of the center-north – Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Marches, and Umbria –, or in some enclaves of the south – for example, Puglia – there were advanced and productive cultures; while, in other regions like Abruzzi, Molise, Basilicata, and large part of Sicily, the condition of the peasantry was very miserable. Thus, argues Archdeacon, at the end of the century, because of crises created by high taxation and botanical disease in vineyards, the phenomenon of the migration increased dramatically (Archdeacon, 1983).

A significant shift in the social composition and working experience of the Italian American community occurred between first and second phase of the Italian immigration in America. For example, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1963) recall that in a city like New York the first wave of migrants were street sellers of cheap statuary, artists and political émigrés. Interesting was the community of immigrant artists participated as musicians, singers, and impresario in the world of the opera that settled in New York. During the entire 19th century it was not rare to see the cases of political refugees (patriots, socialists or radicals) that were

escaping the repressiveness of the authorities during the Italian pre-unification period. After 1880, when the Italian immigration became massive, it shifted its character becoming a type of proletarian migration because now peasants, landless labors, craftsmen and building constructors were arriving overwhelming the very small number of professional immigrants.

There is an aspect of the Italian immigration that must be underlined. In the first intense phase (from 1880 to 1914), four out of five immigrants were males and 50% of them returned to Italy. That means that a large part of them was made of seasonal migrants who did not show interest in integrating into the American society, acquiring citizenship and learning the English language (Vecoli, 2005).

For instance, Bodnar et al. (Bodnar, Simon, & Weber, 1982), found that Italian immigrants in the Pittsburgh area in that period were mainly landless peasants or owners of very small agricultural properties; their goal was to make enough money in order to return in Italy and buy land once back in their regions (immigration from Abruzzi prevailed; other important groups were from Sicily, and Calabria).

Donna R. Gabaccia (2000) argues that Italian immigrants hardly found full time jobs when they arrived in America. On the west coast, in California, Italian immigrants found some stability as farmers and settlers, growing fruit and starting the California wine industry. At the same time, some of them worked as fishermen in the San Francisco Bay, or in the south, in Tampa, Florida. In the latter city, Italian immigrants were also employed in the cigar industry. Few worked in smaller economic niches as artisans, merchants, shoe repairmen, barbers and waiters. Later, they were more permanently employed in the mines of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Illinois and other states, or in the garment factories of New York City and Chicago. For a long period, the vast

majority of Italian immigrants could only find seasonal jobs. During the spring and summer, they constructed buildings, railways, streets, roads and tunnels. Of course, those jobs did not allow permanent settlement, and Italian immigrants would leave the United States in the winter; hence, the Italians entered in the imaginary as “birds of passage” (Gabaccia, 2000).

Archdeacon (1983) calculated that 1,137,100 Italians emigrated from United States between 1908 and 1924 out of the 3,820,986 Italian immigrants arrived in the period 1899-1924. The rate of people leaving the United States to go back to their own country was much higher in the Italian ethnic group than in any other ethnic group.

John Bodnar (1987) compared Italian immigrants in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and New York City. Italian immigrants in New York were predominantly from southern Italy. They were illiterate and poorer than the ones that went to the Argentina. Indeed, migrant peasants had not money to invest, so they chose New York because they thought that finding temporary unskilled jobs was easier in the northern American city.

Leaving Italy, migrants had hopes and dreams about America. Their informants (agents related to maritime companies or *paesani*, people from the same villages who had already been in the United States) had persuaded them that it was a sort of promise land where laborers earned high wages, getting the chance to become rich. Often naïve, potential emigrants would refuse to believe that generally Italian immigrants found in the American metropolises dangerous jobs and that many of them survived on charity (Mangione, 1992).

In fact, expectations would face a drastic impact since the beginning of the journey. Reaching the port of departure was difficult because of the miserable conditions where the emigrants waited to embark. Crossing the ocean was a terrible experience, too. Traveling conditions were

dreadful. Maritime companies treated emigrants as something from which they could gain the largest profit with the least investment, and the Italian government acted slowly in implementing policies that could protect emigrants (Molinari, 2001).

Several tragedies happened as in the case of Utopia, a steamship that sank in Gibraltar Bay on March the 18th, 1891: more than five hundred people died, most of them Italian emigrants bound for New York City. Some of the survivors were so scared that they decided to return to Italy, and “never again braving the dangers of an ocean voyage.” (*The New York Times*, March 19, 1891, p. 1).

The cramped spaces for immigrants on steamships helped to spread diseases. Early in the morning, passengers were forced to go on deck in order to clean the ship’s hold. The cold on the deck contributed to the development of bronchitis and pneumonia in children. Children were often affected by smallpox. Contagion was very probable since the infected were not isolated. Scarcity of food and malnutrition, seasickness, promiscuity: the trip would be a debilitating experience, creating the condition for being rejected once arrived in the American ports. When it happened, particularly with children, very often return would have been fatal to the weakened organisms (Molinari, 1988).

Anyway, the real challenge, for immigrants arriving mainly from rural areas, would be adapting to urban-industrial life conditions. The “gold rush”, the fishery industry and the development of agriculture attracted Italian immigrants to San Francisco and along the state of California in the early phase. New Orleans had a direct connection with the port of Palermo, in Sicily, thus plantations in Louisiana attracted many Sicilian peasants. Also, continuing the navigation on the Mississippi, Sicilians settled in St. Louis, Chicago, and Madison. However, the

vast majority of Italian immigrants entered through the ports of Boston, Philadelphia, and especially New York City. By 1920, approximately 400,000 Italians resided in that city.

Therefore, the large part of Italian immigrants settled in the large industrial centers of the north-eastern states (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and other states of New England), and there they created their enclaves known as Little Italies (Vecoli, 2005).

2.5 Life in the First Italian American Communities

Soon *Little Italies* in American cities became notorious: they were characterized by busy, dark and dirty streets. Large families and boarders lived in overcrowded tenements; run-down apartments in which men, women, children and elderly, experienced a promiscuity that was seen as degrading by the American society (Garroni, 2005).

Three-room apartments were often busy with more than one family because economic circumstances made impossible to have a private household. It was very common to share space with kin. Every time a new immigrant was arriving in the United States, he lived in the house of relatives or friends that had already settled there. In addition, Italian immigrants shared their apartments with boarders in order to gain additional income. So, houses looked like very busy places full of siblings, cousins, uncles and aunts, and friends (Gabaccia, 1994).

If male immigrants reached stable lifestyles, and were going to remain in the United States, they tended to marry women belonging to the same community or they tried as soon as possible to reunite the family if they were already married back in Italy. That was particularly true for immigrants from southern Italy because usually they were more jealous, and they feared that being distant from their wives for a long period ended in the disruption of the family. Once that

the family was reunited, or a new family was created, it was part of the immigrants' aspiration to have a private household. They tried to realize this aspiration as soon as the economic condition of the family made it possible (Bodnar, 1987).

Often migration was an option to solve familial problems, especially among women. Sometimes, very young orphan girls arrived in the United States to find stability in life through marriage. For examples, many young girls reunited with relatives in Pittsburgh, and then married an Italian immigrant, close to the family (Bodnar, Simon, & Weber, 1982).

Family well-being was more important than personal goals. Actually, roles in the family and personal decisions were subordinated to family's goals. For example, boys had to work since they were very young in order to increase family's income; instead, daughters remained home to take care of younger children, and they had to clean and cook (Bodnar, 1987).

Obviously, immigrants bring with them cultural aspects of the place where they come from. In this way, the clusters are shaped in a peculiar way, related to ethnic and cultural background. For instance, in Italian communities, a lower percentage of females worked outside the home. Particularly males coming from southern Italy opposed outside employment of their wives because it would have diminished their authoritative control on them (Bodnar, 1987).

Sometimes, economic necessities required that women had to work outside the home. Being part of a specific ethnic group influenced job choices and opportunities. Thus, Italian women were employed less as domestics than Scandinavian or northern European women. This was due to cultural reasons as well as ethnic bias. American employers considered northern European women more adept at domestic service, and in Italian culture, being a domestic servant in somebody else's house of was considered dishonorable (Bodnar, 1987).

Italian communities in America were shaped by “chain migration”. John and Leatrice MacDonald define chain migration “as that movement in which prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged *by means of primary social relationship with previous migrants*” (1964, p. 82). Indeed, usually the first immigrants sent letters to their relatives and friends in Italy describing work opportunities and wages in the American cities. Those letters had an important function in persuading other villagers to migrate, and prepaid tickets were often attached to them. Actually, more than half of the emigrants traveled using such prepaid tickets. Once in America, immigrants would join relatives and friends, and they would help them find housing and jobs (Audenino & Tirabassi, 2008).

Groups and networks of families and friends gave to immigrants an extraordinary assistance once they arrived in a country that was completely stranger to them. Family ties were absolutely central in the immigrants’ life. In the family there was a high degree of reciprocity; incomes were shared; the cooperation between members of the family was essential in order to survive, but also to achieve other goals like improving their living conditions and obtaining economic stability (Bodnar, 1987).

Along with chains of migration, the enclaves were shaped by working opportunities. For example, immigrants from Genoa formed an enclave in downtown Chicago, where they opened restaurants. Immigrants from Ricigliano, a small village in the province of Salerno, who were occupied as newspaper sellers, shoeshine men, and street cleaners, formed an enclave in a different section of the city. Immigrants from Tuscany occupied a neighborhood around the McCormick Reaper Works because they were employed in that factory. Other immigrants from

the same region established their community in a different neighborhood because they were working at the Northwestern Terracotta Works, located in a different district (Garroni, 2005).

The fact that networking was central is related to the characteristic way in which the capitalist economy offered opportunities of employment in that phase. Indeed, at the time it was very difficult to gain access to jobs in industry on the individual base because jobs were offered to groups. Thus, because generally the kind of jobs offered were unskilled jobs, in order to find a job, it was more important to be connected to some group than to have individual skills (Bodnar, 1987).

As stated earlier, Italian immigrants mainly came from rural areas and had working experience restricted to agriculture. Thus, in the American industrial system they were largely employed in unskilled jobs. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Italian immigrants in America were largely manual laborers, receiving low wages and living in crowded and run-down tenements. They took the place of Irish immigrants in building railroads, paving streets, and constructing buildings. Additionally, background there were a large number of push-cart vendors, giving rise to the stereotype of Italians with a push-cart, an organ grinder and monkey (Daniels, 1990).

That situation remained unchanged until World War I, when the scarcity of workers opened new opportunities to the Italian immigrants in the textile industry in New Jersey and Massachusetts, in the steel factories in New England, and in cigar manufacturing in Florida (Vecoli, 2005).

In the early phase of the Italian immigration, the central figure of the ethnic labor contractor was called *padrone*. The *padrone* was an immigrant able to speak English better than many

others in a period in which very often Italian immigrants were able to speak just their own dialect. Thus, he communicated with the Americans and was contacted by employers when they needed his conational workers. The *padrone* distributed the accommodations, and sometimes he was in charge even of immigrants' savings. Very often, the *padrone* took advantage of his influence and power, and exploited workers, raising public indignation. Later, when family ties were reinforced by successive waves of migration, and immigrants became more experienced, his power diminished (Daniels, 1990).

The *padrone* in the social structure of the Italian immigrant communities was similar to the pivotal figure was the "boss". The figure of the boss appeared in the American political and social life at the mid of the 19th century, in a period in which the United States was subject to a dramatic transformation. Industrialization, massive immigrations, and urbanization changed the face of America. The American cities quickly became metropolises in which hundreds of thousands of immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds were arriving every year. Social and public structures were not able to answer to the needs and necessities related to the new situation. In that chaotic period, the boss was the local leader of a political party, and his personal interest was power. Once gained, he was able to mediate between industrialists' interests and workers' needs; between economic enterprise and local government (Haeger & Weber, 1979).

Elmer E. Cornwell (Cornwell, 1973) argues that massive immigration gave great power to the urban political organizations dominated by bosses. Immigrants, indeed, exchanged their votes with favors and aids provided by the political machine. Bosses provided jobs, loans, assistance with the bureaucracy. Also, there was that nonmaterial need of social recognition, friendship and solidarity: the idea to be close to someone powerful was psychologically useful. Moreover, Cornwell underlines that bosses provided immigrants with those practical services in a time in

which there was a lack of social security legislation, and there were not welfare departments or social workers that were performing the necessary activities of assistance (1973).

Hence, even in the Italian immigrant communities the figure of the boss was very powerful. Besides providing immigrants with services, he managed saloons, shops, grocery stores, and bank offices. And he was in charge of securing the votes of his mates to the political machine (Luconi & Pretelli, 2008).

As argued by Michael Barone (1997), Italian immigrants for a long period did not intend their participation in the political process as a confrontation of ideas or principles; they just used to promise their votes to the political machines in exchange of favors and material assistance for family members.

However, that disenchanted vision opened a space for a small but significant current of radicals. Individuals with a revolutionary cultural background, socialists as well as anarchists, had migrate from Italy to the United States. Militants in radical movements arrived in America kept ties with homologue movements on the other side of the Ocean through publications, newspapers, and correspondence. Indeed, there was a continuing exchange between radical groups in Italy and in the United States. Anarchists and anarchic ideas arrived from Europe to the American cities, as well as money was transferred from radical Americans to the groups back in Italy. Anyway, a conspicuous part of the Italian socialists and anarchists in the U.S. had become radicalized during the experience of the migration because they were facing obstacles and lack of opportunities, and the upward mobility was very slow and difficult to realize (Cannistraro & Meyer, 2003).

A different pattern to politics was represented by unionization. Actually, as argued by Luconi & Pretelli (2008), the Italian immigrants met the hostility of the American Federation of Labor

(AFL) because they were unskilled workers and they were considered too compliant. The union that traditionally was representing skilled workers (Irish or German, or those born in America) was not really open to unskilled southern and eastern Europeans. The Italians were recruited by the *wobblies*, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical union that used passive means as sabotage and civil disobedience in its union demands. Luconi and Pretelli (2008) recall the episode that remained famous: the strike in the wool mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912, where a large number of Italian workers engaged in the fight, and the IWW found its leadership in Italian radicals as Joseph Ettor, Arturo Giovannetti, and Angelo Rocco.

2.6 American Prejudices against the Italians

The reality of the tenements where Italian immigrants were living was absolutely disturbing, and the reputation of Italians and their neighborhoods was very sad. By the end of the nineteenth century, those slums were represented as sinister places in which immigrants' lives were governed by an alternative set of rules, based on passionate behaviors and mistrust of the official authority. Indeed, in 1890, the photojournalist Jacob A. Riis gave a famous description of the Italian immigrant in his report on the slums of New York City:

Ordinarily he is easily enough governed by authority – always excepting Sunday, when he settles down to a game of cards and lets loose all his bad passions. Like the Chinese, the Italian is a born gambler. His soul is in the game from the moment the cards are on the table, and very frequently his knife is in it too before the game is ended. No Sunday has passed in New York since ‘the Bend’ became a

suburb of Naples without one or more of these murderous affrays coming to the notice of the police. As a rule that happens only when the man the game went against is either dead or so badly wounded as to require instant surgical help. As to the other, unless he be caught red-handed, the chances that police will ever get him are slim indeed. The wounded man can seldom be persuaded to betray him. He wards off all inquires with a wicked 'I fix him myself,' and there the matters rests until he either dies or recovers. If the latter, the community hears after a while of another Italian affray, a man stabbed in a quarrel, dead or dying, and the police know that 'he' has been fixed, and the account squared. (1957, pp. 40-41)

The reproachable image of the Italian slums that Riis depicted in the report had a wide impact that was depressing, embittering, and gloomy. Very soon, those characteristics of the Italian immigrants' life would be perceived as incompatible with the values of the American society, and denigrated in stereotypes and prejudices.

Gian Antonio Stella, a famous Italian journalist, underlines that prejudices and stereotypes against the Italians were rooted in the description of Italy given by writers and travelers during the eighteen and nineteen centuries. Back in that period, the declining Italian cities were a common destination for European intellectuals, poets and writers. Usually, they described the peninsula as a decadent place entirely populated by "prostitutes, thieves, beggars, priests, unkempt people, beguines and stabbers." (Stella, 2003, p. 56).

The characteristics of the Italian migration so far analyzed corroborated those stereotypes. First of all, the humiliating description of the Italian slums tied the Italian immigrants' image to dirtiness, and degrading hygienic and moral conditions (Stella & Franzina, 2005).

An article published on the *New York Times* on December 1881, for example, was disheartening: "There is not a person in New York blessed with sight" – wrote the reporter describing the army of junk dealers – "who has not observed dirty, ill-clad, wretched-looking beings going about with coarse gunny bags, sometimes full and sometimes empty, on their shoulders and iron hooks in their hands" (*The New York Times*, 1881, December 4).

According to the author of the article, those "scavengers" – men, women and children – were "almost entirely Italians" who lived in dirty and disgustingly smelling neighborhoods, where as much as twenty people would live in a single room, eating food found in the waste: "They use no furniture, and sleep among the rags. The sexes are indiscriminately mixed, and cleanliness is disregarded entirely. The people are peaceful, but a great deal worse in their habits than the Chinese" (*The New York Times*, 1881, December 4).

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Italian immigrants were associated also to the issue of human traffic: the *New York Times* and later the *Philadelphia Times* published reports claiming that about 80,000 children (males and females) had been smuggled in America in order to be used as workers, beggars and prostitutes (Stella & Franzina, 2005).

Moreover, the Italian immigrants were commonly described as superstitious, violent, brawlers, seditious and mobsters: "from America to Australia, the most common and ignominious label given to them was 'dago', that according to the most reliable hypothesis was a 'Latinization' of *dagger*" (Stella & Franzina, 2005, p. 225).

The Italians in America were continuously associated to the crime. Richard Gambino (1974) deals with this issue in his relevant book, *Blood of my Blood: the Dilemma of the Italians-Americans*. He refers that in the American society it was strongly rooted the view that the “*Black Hand*” was a serious threat against the American society, and that it was spread among the Italian communities. However, he argues, crime rate in Italian communities was not higher than it was among other minorities.

Gambino explains a factor that influenced that prejudice against Italians. Crimes perpetrated by Italians usually were against other Italian immigrants, and they were not reported crimes to the police. This habit, according to Gambino (1974), was related to centuries of mistrusting the authorities, but the American population saw it in a suspicious way.

Such biases against the Italians were so strong that at some point they would have been seen as an undesirable group in discussions about posing restrictions on immigration. By 1899, the Bureau of Immigration attempted a classification of the new immigrants by race. The Italians were divided geographically: northern and southern Italians. Immigrants from South of Italy were not considered as fully belonging to the white race, therefore their ability to be assimilated to the American society was doubted (Vallon, 2010).

In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a Commission on Immigration, led by Senator William P. Douglas. By 1911, the Commission published its findings: southern Italians were in between white and black people. They were believed to be inclined to committing crimes and getting diseases. The Commission regarded them as a group that would hardly assimilate; therefore, the Italians had to be considered undesirable immigrants (Vallon, 2010).

The self-defined scientific evidence that the Italians were unfit to become American citizens was supported once again in 1922 by Arthur Sweeney in an article published in *The North*

American Review. That article acquired a certain degree of influence on immigration policy since it was adopted as appendix of the hearings of the House Commission on Immigration and Naturalization chaired by Representative Albert Johnson (Kamin, 1974).

Arthur Sweeny (1922) recognized the necessity of immigration in order to supply man-power to develop American economic resources, but insisted on finding a method to keep undesirable immigrants out of the country. He defined acceptable immigrants those who met moral and intellectual standards to become good citizens; therefore, to select the immigrants, he supported the examination through aptitude tests similar to the ones used in the army to select the men fit to be soldiers (Sweeny, 1922).

In his paper, Sweeny claimed that immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean world scored the lowest on tests. Thus, it was inferred that those immigrants had to be considered undesirable, and restrictive quota had to be applied against them. He asserted:

We can, however, strenuously object to immigration from Italy with its proportion at the lower end of the scale of 63.4 per cent; of Russia with 60.4; of Poland with 69.9; of Greece with 43.6; and of Turkey with 41.6 per cent. The Slavic and Latin countries show a marked contrast in intelligence with the Western and Northern European group. It is largely from this source that the stream of intelligent citizenship is polluted. So long as this emptying of undesirables into this country continues, there is decreasing hope of improving the standard of our citizens.

(Sweeny, 1922, p. 603)

Sweeny's argument was widely accepted in American public opinion; indeed, when Congress introduced the Quota Acts in 1920 and 1924, immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe was severely restricted, and the massive arrival of Italian immigrants in the United States was dramatically reduced (Luconi & Petrelli, 2008).

Prejudices against Italians greatly influenced employment policies. For example, in Buffalo, Italians were considered less industrious than Poles, so they had fewer opportunities to be employed in indoor mills. Because Jewish garment owners thought that Italians were less inclined than Jewish to be unionized, they preferred to hire workers belonging to the first group instead of the second one. Generally speaking, Italians, as well as southern and eastern Europeans, were considered less industrious and reliable than western and northern Europeans. Consequently, they got lower wages (Bodnar, 1987).

Prejudices and stereotypes, added to the inevitable difficulties experienced by all the immigrants groups, created a hostile environment in which the Italian-American communities could not fully integrate. The sociologist Robert Merton (1968) theorized a different approach to the Italian-American way of life. He thought that for decades, in order to achieve the goal of protection and help, the Italian immigrants accepted and used structures that otherwise the rest of the American society was considering morally wrong. According to Merton, racketeers and political machines, for example, had a necessary function for the Italian immigrants. They were providing the indispensable help to survive in an environment in which the Italians did not have the legitimate means to face the hostility of other groups of the society.

3. The Evolution of the Cultural Identity in the Italian-American Communities

3.1 The Early Age (1883-1910)

The journalist of the *New York Times* that interviewed in 1908 Edmondo Des Planches, ambassador of Italy in the United States, was well aware of the way in which the Italian immigrants were portrayed in the American press. The interviewer pointed out from the first paragraph that the reports overwhelmingly covered the issues of the Black Hand, the vendetta, the Mafia and the Camorra. Furthermore,

the general impression entertained of the Italian who comes to the United States is that he is of a low order of intelligence, only capable of grinding an organ of working as a laborer in street or railroad construction, and ambitious to secure enough money to return to his native land, where he can live comfortably upon the savings he has made. (*The New York Times*, 1908, May 31, part 5, magazine section, 2)

The point of the interview was to reframe the image of the Italians living in America. In order to do that, the ambassador faced all the main questions related to the topic: why the Italian immigrants preferred to settle in the north-east urban centers instead of rural areas? What was the real role of the Black Hand? How diffuse was anarchism and socialism among Italians?

Ambassador Des Planches explained that, even if the large majority of the Italian immigrants had an agricultural background, they stayed in the industrial cities once arrived in America because there they could find jobs at good wages through their previously immigrated friends and kin. There was another main reason: farming conditions in America were completely different than in Italy. The ambassador underlined that “the great mass of our Southern people at home, while engaged in agricultural pursuits, are congregated in towns. They have small love for

the country as a place of residence” (*The New York Times*, 1908, May 31, part 5, magazine section, 2).

Therefore, the attempt to promote a redistribution of the immigrants toward the rural areas was not very successful: “We realize it would be much better if they could be located in the country. Naturally, as they find work immediately in the cities, they stop there. They are with friends in a strange land” (*The New York Times*, 1908, May 31, part 5, magazine section, 2).

The Italian diplomat tried to see in the true light the issue of the Black Hand. He acknowledged that it was originated in Sicily, but also denied it was a powerful and large organization. In fact, he stated, “there are small groups of swindlers who should be caught and punished” (*The New York Times*, 1908, May 31, part 5, magazine section, 2). Anyway, “the Italians are thoroughly law-abiding and make excellent citizens” (*The New York Times*, 1908, May 31, part 5, magazine section, 2).

In regards to socialism and anarchism, ambassador Des Planches explained that those ideologies represented a form of “discontentment”, but they were not prevalent in Italy, and the Italian government was adopting numerous efforts to eradicate them.

In conclusion, Italian immigrants in America were beneficial to the relations between the two countries: “Those Italians who became American citizens naturally retain a love for their fatherland, and their children have an affection for it. So, on the whole, there is distinct gain all around” (*The New York Times*, 1908, May 31, part 5, magazine section, 2).

Thus, the official representative of the Italian government was attempting to portray a different and positive image of the Italian immigrants.

Indeed, analyzing articles published on *The New York Times* in earlier years of the Italian immigration in America, it is possible to find that often the press referred negative stories about the Italian immigrants, using stereotypes to characterize them.

For example, on May 16, 1893, a report on crimes committed in the Italian sections of Brooklyn and Harlem, in New York City, illustrated the “lawlessness” and the “vindictive” nature of immigrants from Southern Italian regions (*The New York Times*, 1893, May 16).

The article recalled to story of Filippo Vetro, an Italian laborer from the region of Calabria, who had assaulted a young man, John Brennan, in Harlem. The two men were involved in a violent quarrel because of passionate reasons since they were both courting the same Italian girl. However, the journalist explained that the difference between the two of them was that John Brennan followed “American impulses”, reporting the violent behavior of his rival to the police. Instead, Filippo Vetro had impulses “dominated by the traditions of the Mafia,” and tried to resolve the fight in a “true Palermitan Style”; which is, ambushing John Brennan and attempting to kill him with a gun. (*The New York Times*, 1893, May 16).

According the author of the article, if such violent habits were casting a shadow on the rest of the laborious Italian American immigrants, it was to blame the easiness with which criminals could pass inspections on Ellis Island:

Aliens who place but slight value on human life have hitherto found easy entrance through the port of New York, and many of them have carried with them the criminal habits and propensities acquired in the haunts of bandits and the home of the vendetta. It is for this reason that the newspapers have to record

so many shooting and stabbing affrays among person of Italian nativity. (*The New York Times*, 1893, May 16)

Of course, those people came from Southern Italian regions, dominated by Camorra, Mafia, *omertà* and vendetta, as explained by an anonymous city official born in Italy, who was interviewed in the article: “We Italians speak contemptuously of the Neapolitans and Sicilians. We call them Calubriani, or what not, but they are none of ours.” (*The New York Times*, 1893, May 16).

The city official’s words were presented as an objective view, since he was born in Italy himself, but actually they were strongly discriminatory against Southern Italians; that is not surprising if we consider that Italy was politically unified only in 1861, and, as noted previously, regional and local identities prevailed on a national identity for a long time.

He concluded with a drastic statement: “When I hear that a man has been found dead on the sidewalk and that no witnesses have been secured, I say to myself, ‘Sicilians!’ . When there has been a sudden brawl, like milk boiling over, and wounding or death results, I say, ‘Neapolitans!’ See the distinction?” (*The New York Times*, 1893, May 16).

The other issue that was associated on the American press with Italian immigrants’ communities, as seen in Ambassador Des Planches’ interview, was the one of the Black Hand. Just one year earlier, investigators had uncovered the plot of a secret society that was widely extorting money from Italian immigrants in Western Pennsylvania (*The New York Times*, August 11, 1907).

The Society, based in the town of Hillsville, between New Castle and Youngstown, was led by Rocco Racco and later by Giuseppe Bagnato, and was influential on the workplace as well as in the social structures of the Italian-American community. It had the function of “power broker between quarry owners and workers”, and also, in return for “loyalty and dues payments”, it provided its members with assistance in case “of unforeseen debts, illness, and injuries.” (Warren, 1997, p. 37).

The leader of that organization was a prominent figure in the town’s religious life, since Racco was president of the St. Lucy Society as well as the St. Rocco Society, and was godfather to a large number of children in the Italian-American community.

That secret society dominated community life through violence, coercion, criminal behaviors, but it had also a functional purpose since “the slightest compensation for illness or injury, the least help with obtaining and keeping a good job, was more than most immigrants could expect from their employers or the government.” (Warren, 1997, p. 37).

However, when *The New York Times* reported the story of the successful investigation that uncovered the secret society active in Hillsville, the author of the article simply underlined the cruel aspects of its activity.

It is particularly interesting that victims of the secret society are portrayed as defenseless ignorant and superstitious people:

The price of \$7 per week has been exacted from some of the families in order that spirits might be kept away from the house. When they refused or were slow in paying, the most unearthly noises would be sounded round the house at night, and all sorts of mysterious lights would be flashed – the work of angered spirits – and

the terrorized and ignorant Italian was glad to pay the bosses and be able to live in peace for another week. (*The New York Times*, August 11, 1907)

Indeed, other articles and initiatives of benevolent societies echoed the idea that Italian immigrants' ignorance exposed them to the victimization by the Black Hand or by the *padrone* system, and kept them out of the American society.

By the beginning of the century, the Children's Aid Society, a philanthropic organization based in New York City, had pointed out that schooling was necessary to the integration of Italian children in the American social system. According to the organization, public and private schools in Little Italy were failing to provide opportunities for education to immigrants' children:

And these Italian children, entirely ignorant of our language, and without any conception of the requirements for admittance into the society of children of better habits, are roaming the streets and will become, if not placed under restraint and influences of an uplifting character, unmanageable and proper candidates for a reform school. (*The New York Times*, February 11, 1901)

Education and knowledge of the English language also were considered necessary for adult Italian immigrants. Indeed, it was believed that they engaged in violent and lawless behaviors because of their ignorance. Moreover, it was recognized that "the Italian laborer who cannot speak English is at the mercy of the *padrone*, through whom, as contractor and interpreter, all business must be done." (*The New York Times*, October 6, 1907).

Camp schools for Italian laborers were firstly used in the Pittsburgh area. The Filtration Company requested a plan to the Society for the Italian Immigrants, which sent a teacher, Miss Sarah Wool Moore, to the construction camp. She opened a night school in which English was taught to workers.

Apparently, the experiment conducted by Miss Wool More was so successful that schools were soon opened in other camps in Pennsylvania and later in New York City and in the construction camps of the Erie Canal enlargement. (*The New York Times*, October 6, 1907).

In a few years, that initiative generated a camp school movement, supported by States' laws in Pennsylvania as well as in New York State. Teaching English was still the primary goal of such night schools, but they also became social centers for immigrants, and reached two main results: "Not only does the school decrease police duty, but it lessens the number of accident cases," since very often they involved workmen who didn't understand the orders. (*The New York Times*, February 20, 1910).

3.2 Roseto, an Italian Town in Pennsylvania

Lorenzo Falcone and three friends left the small village of Roseto, in the northern area of Apulia, and landed in New York City in 1884. Then, they travelled further west, founding employment in a slate-quarry in the town of Bangor, Pennsylvania. Uneasy to mingle with the Scottish and Welsh communities, they settled on a nearby hill. Within a few years, that small group started a chain of migration that attracted relatives and friends from their original town, and by the Mid-nineties, more than one thousand Rosetans were living in the area (Bruhn & Wolf, 1979).

In 1896, the Archbishop of Philadelphia sent to the settlement an Italian priest, Father Pasquale De Nisco, who took care of the spiritual and civic needs of the community. Father De Nisco dedicated himself to the improvement of life condition of women and men in his parish, promoting their acquisition of the American citizenship, schooling for children, and beauty of the town. He also acted as a mediator between quarries owners and laborers in order to gain increase of wages (Bruhn & Wolf, 1979).

In the meantime, grocery stores and other shops were opened as the inhabitants became larger in number. Then, in 1912, their petition to become an independent borough was accepted, and the town was named Roseto, after the small village they had left in Apulia (Bruhn & Wolf, 1979).

When Samuel H. Auerbach, a journalist of *The New York Times*, went to visit Roseto in December 1919, he found a town that could “boast of being the only town in America whose population is 100 per cent Italian.” (*The New York Times*, December 19, 1919). All the people living there emigrated from Italy or were born and raised in families originally from Italy.

The report that Mr. Auerbach published on his newspaper is a valuable resource to understand the evolution of the Italian-American cultural identity on many aspects. Indeed, the community that he was writing about was not experiencing the degrading life conditions of other immigrants’ enclaves; therefore, the article did not indulge on the usual stereotypes on Italian-American immigrants.

The town was described as a quiet and peaceful place; the only reasons why the inhabitants had petitioned to become an independent borough, separate from Bangor, it was referred, was the opportunity of having their religious celebrations and parades without incurring in “restraint and

interference of the local officials who did not understand.” (*The New York Times*, December 19, 1919).

Men were employed in slate-quarries and construction works, while women were engaged in housekeeping or worked in a shirt factory. Two bosses (a Republican saloon keeper, and a Democrat, also a saloon keeper) dominated the political life of Roseto, with a small group of socialist voters was present there. Of course, all the elected officials in the town were Italian. (*The New York Times*, December 19, 1919).

The Italian language was spoken in town, on the street as well as in court or in other bureaucratic places, was Italian. The author of the article does not explain if they spoke proper standard Italian, but most likely they spoke the dialect of the village they came from. Few adults were able to speak English, and there was no night school to learn. Indeed, as an inhabitant explained to the journalist, “we have no need of English here.” (*The New York Times*, December 19, 1919). Instead, children used English in the public school, where they received “a good American education.” (*The New York Times*, December 19, 1919).

However, the process of Americanization for the Italians in Roseto, even in those peculiar circumstances, was not limited to the youngest generation. Mr. Auerbach was surprised finding that benevolent societies and secret orders in town were branches of American national orders, while Sons of Italy or other Italian orders did not have followers there. In fact, when he asked a young boy if he belonged or not to the Italian nationality, the answer was: “I am American.” (*The New York Times*, December 19, 1919).

3.3 Understanding Italian-American Communities: W. F. Whyte and Herbert Gans

At the end of the Thirties, when the sociologist William Foote Whyte decided to study a slum inhabited by Italian immigrants in Boston, that district had a reputation of a depressed and dangerous part of the city, dominated by corrupt politicians and racketeers. It was seen as a place in which subversive beliefs, crime and illegal activities were very widely diffused. In addition, when Whyte completed the research and was in the process of publishing his findings in a book, the Italian fascist government had declared war against the United States, raising the question if Italian immigrants were more loyal to their native country or to the country in which they were living.

Planning his research, the scholar was aware of the two different perspectives adopted to look upon the Italian-American community. The first perspective was the one that saw the Italian slum as a problem area. People living in that community were considered “as social work clients, as defendants in criminal cases, or as undifferentiated members of the ‘masses’.” (Whyte [1943], 1993, p. xv). The second perspective was the one used by the press that focused on members of the community that perpetrated crimes:

But the newspaper presents a very specialized picture. If a racketeer commits murder, that is news. If he proceeds quietly with the daily routines of his business, that is not news. If the politician is indicted for accepting graft, that is news. If he goes about doing the usual personal favors for his constituents, that is not news. (Whyte [1943], 1993, p. xvi).

Anyway, both of those perspectives gave a distorted idea of life in the Italian-American community, presenting it as a disorganized and deviant social group. Therefore, he thought that, in order to properly understand the way in which that social system was functioning, the correct method was field work; so, from February 1937 to May 1938 he went to live with an Italian-American family in the slum.

That is the reason why the sociological study *Street Corner Society*, published by Whyte in 1943, provides us with essential information in order to understand the evolution of the Italian-American cultural identity.

In his book, Whyte renamed Boston “Eastern City” and called the North End slum “Cornerville”. The first Italian immigrants arrived in the 1860’s in the district then predominantly of Irish ethnicity. At the beginning, the Italians settling in Cornerville were migrants from the Northern regions of the peninsula (particularly from the city of Genoa), but the larger wave of immigrants came from the Southern regions (mostly from the area of Naples and from Sicily) between the 1890’s and the first decade of the new century.

Initially, that different regional provenience characterized the slum sections; indeed, within the Italian community there were smaller communities aggregated around local identities. It was possible to indicate almost precisely the demarcation lines of the different place of provenience in which the overall Italian community was divided. Social life was actually organized upon such boundaries because people coming from the same town settled together, celebrated the patron saint of their village, and created mutual aid societies.

Following a pattern that we have underlined earlier, immigrants from the Northern and Central regions, who had a slightly better educational background and had already improved their economic situation, disregarded their country fellow from the Southern regions.

The first generation of Italian immigrants in Cornerville relied essentially on family links. Kin and close friends provided support to families and individuals during downturns and hard times. Also, they kept strong ties to their *paesani*.

However, Whyte points out that that situation was changing while he lived in the Italian-American community. As the second generation grew up, ties with *paesani* faded; consequently, the distinctive lines between identities related to the original towns and regions faded, too. Also family roles were modified: younger generations still respected and were attached to their parents; but the older lost most of their authority, and their younger children grew more independent from their influence.

In the period that Whyte spent in Cornerville, he could observe the hierarchical structure of the community. Few of the older immigrants maintained prominent positions in that hierarchy. The “big shots” of the hierarchy were racketeers that controlled illegal gambling activities, and political bosses. At the bottom of that society, the second generation immigrants could follow two different patterns to interact with other individuals in the community: Whyte distinguished between “street corner boys” and “college boys”.

“Street corner boys” were the majority of young men in Cornerville. They had little formal education and spent most of their time in streets activities because they did not have steady employment. Corner boys belonged to gangs that had the center of their social interaction on street corners of the district, in the proximity of saloon, barbershops or poolrooms. To them, the street corner was almost more important than their homes; most of the entire day was spent there.

Each corner group had its own leader who was respected in the group as well as outside the group. He represented the interests of the group when he was dealing with racketeers and politicians.

“College boys” were in a smaller number. They were young boys who attended college and had the opportunity of improving their social condition following professional careers (Whyte, 1993).

Whyte concluded that “Cornerville’s problem is not lack of organization but failure of its own social organization to mesh with the structure of the society around it.” (Whyte [1943], 1993, p. 273). According to him, the slum was not a disorganized place, dominated by chaos. The real problem was that the organization of the Italian community did not fit the structure of the rest of the American society. Indeed, in the American society the idea of social mobility was very valuable as obtained thanks to intelligence, creativity, talent and hard work. Italian immigrants, in that society, did not have the same opportunities of the rest of the population because they had to face prejudices and material obstacles. Thus, the promise of social improvement and material gain in the Italian community was related to careers in politics or as racketeers.

That system strongly discriminated against Italian immigrants, and it rewarded “those who can slough off all the characteristics that are regarded as distinctively Italian and penalizes those who are not fully Americanized.” (Whyte [1943] 1993, p. 274). Indeed, if an Italian American remained loyal to his group, climbing the hierarchical structure of his community to the point of being a leader as racketeer or political boss, he would have become an outcast of the American society; if he had succeeded following the opposite pattern of education, becoming a professional

person, most likely he would have left his original community in order to move to a better neighborhood apt to upper social classes.

Another sociologist, Herbert J. Gans ([1962], 1982), used ethnography in order to describe the life of Italian-Americans in the West End of Boston. From October, 1957, to May, 1958, he was participant-observer among the Italian community in the area. The purpose of his study was to understand the social pattern of the group life. Indeed, the neighborhood had been declared a slum in 1953, and therefore would have been redeveloped under the federal urban renewal program between 1958 and 1960. Gans' study is an exceptional historical document because when his book went to the press in 1962, the neighborhood had already gone through the renewal projects and it was turned down to be redeveloped ([1962], 1982, p. xiii).

Gans' direct observation provided an important insight on the evolution of the Italian-American cultural identity in that community. First, he undermines the public perception of West End as a single disorganized group. The perception was not consistent with the reality. Indeed, Italian-Americans households constituted the 42% of the population. The Italian group predominated, but other ethnicities and groups of people were living in the area. To inhabitants of the West End, there were lines of demarcation between the different groups (Gans [1962], 1982).

Gans contested the approach of planners and social workers that considered the way of life in the West End as a deviant form of the dominant American middle-class way of life. Italian immigrants were mainly arrived from southern provinces of Italy and from Sicily. The majority of them had a low level of formal education and was employed in manual occupations. Gans explained that "the West Enders were not frustrated seekers of middle-class values. Their way of

life constituted a distinct and independent working-class subculture that bore little resemblance to the middle-class.” ([1962], 1982, p. xiv).

The author claims that the criteria used by Italian immigrants to identify and evaluate themselves were different than those used by the American middle-class. To them, loyalty and the conformity to the group were very important in personal behavior, life choices, and interpersonal relations. A person had to be able to control his own needs and wishes, and often he had to subordinate them to the necessities of the group. Hence, the highest social status was attributed to those who contributed the most to the group’s needs, with material and nonmaterial help (Gans [1962], 1982).

Making money was not considered as important as friendship and family ties. West End Italians ignored each others’ incomes. They judged the material well-being by families’ style of life. Women’s abilities as wives, mothers and housekeepers were very valuable. Marriage outside the ethnic group – particularly with people from different religions – was not easily accepted (Gans [1962], 1982).

According to Gans ([1962], 1982), the assimilation process of Italian immigrants into the American society was very slow. At the end of the 1950’s, immigrants’ social relations were limited to relatives and close friends. Friendships were usually intra-ethnic because such relations were created since the childhood. Families and community life had not been very permeable to the American social structure, therefore in the West End, the Italian social system had not disappeared: “thus, whereas the children who became adults of the second generation retained little of the Italian culture, they did retain most of its social structure.” (Gans [1962], 1982, p. 208).

If the assimilation process had been slow, “acculturation” of Italian immigrants had happened quickly, and had already started with the first generation. At the time when Gans conducted his research, first generation immigrants represented the elderly of the group. Since the beginning they were prone to Americanization because their experience with Italian life was often associated with hardship and sacrifices. However, first generation immigrants often manifested a sort of nostalgia of the older time, when the group was more cohesive and cooperative, and individuals were less self-centered (Gans [1962], 1982, p. 208).

Moreover, Gans noticed that there was a substantial difference between the first and the second generation. In the 1950s, second generation immigrants (born in the States, or arrived in America when they were children) were already grown up. They had lost much of earlier Italian culture. Second generation immigrants did not identify with Italy and the towns where their parents’ came from, and only a small group of intellectuals had preserved a connection with the Italian culture.

The earlier culture was surviving in some aspects of the daily life. For example, food traditions and habits had survived. Second generation women were still making their own pasta, cooking for their families exclusively Italian dishes. Also language had survived in the second generation, at least in the form of the local dialects. Indeed, generally first generation Italian immigrants did not learn English, so they needed to use their original language in order to communicate with their children. However, by the third generation, the Italian language and dialects had disappeared (Gans [1962], 1982, p. 208).

Indubitably, the main structure that played a decisive role in the process of second generation immigrants’ acculturation to American way of life was the school. Indeed, as suggested by Colin Greer (1972), beyond the rhetoric of preparing students to be responsible citizens, economically

prosperous, the education system intended to “Americanize” immigrant families’ children according the dominant white Protestant culture. Symptomatic of similar approach to the ethnic diversity is that textbooks used in public schools during the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century often depicted ethnic minorities in a negative way. Moreover, the ineffectiveness of public education was revealed by the fact that the number of immigrant children failing at school was significantly high and few of the immigrant children were successful (Greer, 1972).

3.4 The Second Generation and the Italian Americans Identity

‘When I grow up I want to be an American,’ Giustina said. We looked at our sister; it was something none of us had ever said.

‘Me too,’ Maria echoed.

‘Aw, you don’t even know what an American is,’ Joe scoffed.

‘I do so,’ Giustina said.

It was more than the rest of us knew.

‘We’re Americans right now,’ I said. ‘Miss Zimmerman says if you’re born here you’re an American.’

‘Aw, she’s nuts,’ Joe said. He had no use for most teachers. ‘We’re Italians. If y’ don’t believe me ask Pop.’ (Mangione [1942], 1952, p. 1)

The opening dialogue of the book *Mount Allegro*, written by Jerre Mangione, and published in 1942, exemplifies the identity dilemma experienced by second generation Italian-Americans.

Mangione was one of those authors that give us a deeper understanding of the difficulties that immigrants “faced in pursuing their version of the American dream.” (Gardaphé, 2004).

The author recalled his childhood in a family that had immigrated to Rochester, New York, from a small town in Sicily. The strife between the multiple identities of the immigrants’ children emerges through their simplified language and naïve concepts. Their daily life was animated by bizarre relatives that had peculiar habits and very often were not able to speak English. Although they understood that they belonged to a different group, teachers in school taught them that they were Americans because they were born in the United States.

Mangione’s memories enlighten the prominent aspects of his experience as a second generation Italian-American. The second generation children experienced conflicts with other ethnic groups as well as against other Italians from different regions or towns. They also attempted to disprove stereotypes and waned to be fully American. At the same time, they wanted to remain connected to culture, traditions and language of their family.

Regarding language, the reflection on the immigrants’ creation of a new vocabulary made of English words and Italian vowels’ sound is amusing. For example, the word *baccauso* that “used when referring to ‘toilet’ and was obviously derived from the American ‘backhouse’ that flourished in earlier and more rural America” (Mangione [1942], 1952, p. 55).

The pages in which close relatives indulge in nostalgia for the beauty of Sicily are absolutely interesting because it is possible to feel the bittersweet feeling of the immigrants that left their familiar landscapes in search of a better life, fleeing from poverty and hardship. (Mangione [1942], 1952, p. 19-20).

Consequently, the complex immigrants’ identity appears clearly. While the second generation desires to become fully American, the first generation is aware of being foreigners in

the new country and remains isolated in its own ethnic enclave. In the community, immigrants can live according to their social habits, values and culture. However, some of them acknowledge that it would be impossible to readjust to the social structures of the country that they have left. Explicative of that regard is the experience of Rosario Alfano, a distant relative of the author, who moved back to Sicily: “There is beauty here,” he says when Mangione goes on a trip to Sicily at the beginning of the Forties, “but it no longer has the same meaning. I wish I had never left America.” (Mangione [1942], 1952, p. 292).

Mario Puzo was another writer that belonged to the second generation of Italian-Americans. Born in New York City 1920 by Sicilian immigrants, in 1969 he published his famous novel, *The Godfather* that soon became a bestseller. It stayed on *The New York Times* bestseller list for 67 weeks; probably, the enormous success of the book was facilitated by televised criminal investigation of Joe Valachi, a member of the *Mafia* (Gardaphé, 2004).

Mario Puzo, as well as Jerre Mangione, had directly experienced the Italian-American way of life. Puzo understood the cultural origins of behaviors, actions and attitudes. He broke the common narrative of organized crime when he portrayed the characters of his novel. The result was an epic history in which the main character, Don Vito Corleone, was a negative figure, but was presented as a sort of modern mythological figure (Brunetta, 2009).

Analyzing the novel, we can find numerous passages supporting this hypothesis.

When a humble person, Nazorine the baker, asks Don Vito Corleone to interfere in order to avoid repatriation for his daughter’s fiancée,

He gave the baker a Di Nobili cigar and a glass of yellow Strega and put his hand on the man’s shoulder. That was the mark of the Don’s humanity. He knew from

bitter experience what courage it took to ask a favor from a fellow man. (Puzo, 1969, p. 16)

Describing Don Vito Corleone's first steps in the criminal activity, the author writes:

But, more important, he acquired knowledge and contacts and experience. And he piled up good deeds as a banker piles up securities. For in the following years it became clear that Vito Corleone was not only a man of talent, but, in his way a genius. (Puzo, 1969, p. 224)

Later, Michael Corleone, Don Vito's son, talking about his father to his girlfriend, Kay, a girl from an American middle-class family, will use the following words:

I don't mean my father deliberately influenced me. He never did. He never wanted me in the Family business. He wanted me to become a professor or a doctor, something like that. But things went bad and I had to fight for my Family. I had to fight because I love and I admire my father. I never knew a man more worthy of respect. He was a good husband and a good father and a good friend to people who were not fortunate in life. (Puzo, 1969, p. 389)

Finally, in the passage in which the author describes Don Vito Corleone's funeral, we find the greatness of the boss:

It was time for the cemetery. It was time to bury the great Don. Michael linked his arm with Kay's and went out into the garden to join the host of mourners. Behind him came the caporegimes followed by their soldiers and then all the humble people the Godfather had blessed during his lifetime. The baker Nazorine, the widow Colombo and her sons and all the countless others of his world he had ruled so firmly but justly. There were even some who had been his enemies, come to do him honor. (Puzo, 1969, p. 443)

In conclusion, Don Vito Corleone is a lawbreaker, a murderer, a Mafia boss; but he is a great person in his way, very intelligent, wise, fair, devoted and loyal to his friends and family, and will help humble people of his communities in need. Actually, his criminal life can be understood using Whyte's theory; we can hear an echo of that in Michael Corleone's words to Kay:

'The trouble is all that damn trash in the movies and the newspapers,' Michael said. "You've got the wrong idea, of my father and the Corleone Family. I'll make a final explanation and this one will be really final. My father is a businessman trying to provide for his wife and children and those friends he might need someday in a time of trouble. He doesn't accept the rules of the society we live in because those rules would have condemned him to a life not suitable to a man like himself, a man of extraordinary force and character. What you have to understand is that he considers himself the equal of all those great men like Presidents and Prime Ministers and Supreme Court Justices and

governors of the States. He refuses to live by rules set up by others, rules which condemn him to a defeated life. But his ultimate aim is to enter that society with a certain power since the society doesn't really protect its members who do not have their own individual power. In the meantime he operates on a code of ethics he considers far superior to the legal structures of society.' (Puzo, 1969, p. 390)

The epic story of Don Vito Corleone, his son Michael and the Family became a corner stone of the American popular culture when it was adapted to film. *The Godfather* was released in theaters in 1972. The movie was acclaimed by the critics, won the Academy Award for Best Picture, and had an astonishing success at the box office. It was directed by second generation Italian American Francis Ford Coppola who also wrote the screenplay with Mario Puzo. Puzo and Coppola won the Academy Award for best adapted screenplay. Marlon Brando won the Oscar for best actor in leading role for his interpretation of Don Vito Corleone. Michael Corleone was played by Al Pacino. Other second generation Italian American actors as Richard Castellano and John Cazale were part of the cast; the music was scored by the Italian composer Nino Rota, famous for scoring the music for Federico Fellini's movies (Ruddy, 1972).

The sequel was released in 1974. *The Godfather Part II* starred Robert De Niro as a young Don Vito Corleone. The scenes in which a young Vito, at the beginning of the century, arrives in New York City on the boat (all the immigrants are enchanted and impressed by the view of the Statue of Liberty), lands on Ellis Island, and goes through immigrant inspection, are particularly accurate as well as the ones portraying the vivacious religious feast of San Rocco, and life on crowded streets and in tenements of Little Italy (Coppola, Frederickson, & Roos, 1974).

When *The Godfather Part III* was released in 1990, the characters of the Corleone saga had become icons of the American culture, extremely popular not only in America, but all around the world. *The Godfather*, as noticed, changed the narrative of gangster movies and influenced a generation of Italian American actors and directors as Martin Scorsese and Robert de Niro.

Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* was based on the real story of Henry Hill, a member of the Lucchese crime family in New York, who later became a police informant (Pileggi, 2011). In the movie, over three decades of *wise guys'* lives are portrayed with a well managed balance between violence and irony.

Born in an Irish American family, Henry Hill started to be attracted by the Italian mobsters of his neighborhood from his early teenage years: "As far back I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster," he says at the beginning of the movie, because he thought that that life would have given him the chance of being "somebody in a neighborhood full of nobodies." (Winkler, 1990).

After acting in *The Godfather Part II* and in *Goodfellas*, Robert De Niro himself directed a movie of the same genre, *A Bronx Tale*. Italian American actor Chazz Palminteri was the screenplay writer. (Gatien, Kilik, & Rosenthal, 1993).

A Bronx Tale is the story of a young guy who is conflicted by two opposing role models; his father, a hard working bus driver, and the mob boss of that community, in the Bronx, New York City. The opening scene is a marvelous visual representation of the street corner society described fifty years earlier by William F. Whyte. A gang of young men is standing on the street corner teasing girls; older men are sitting in front of a bar, gambling; women are buying fish and fruit from street vendors; on the frantic sidewalks, there are also pizza sellers and a young shoeshine boy (Gatien, Kilik, & Rosenthal, 1993).

The main character, Calogero, is a high school guy, and is fascinated by Sonny, the boss, because he is rich and powerful; but Sonny is also an inspiring figure because of his wisdom. Thus, Calogero finds in him a model figure that teaches him valuable lessons not only about power, but about love and life in general. Once again, the mobster can be a sort of positive hero because he is intelligent, fair, strong, and devoted to his friends and his community.

It has to be said that some second generation Italian American intellectuals criticized that genre of movie because it reduced the Italian American experience to the Mafia element: Richard Gambino, for example, wrote that “*The Godfather* myth has had a great impact on art about Italian American coming after it, as well as on how Italian Americans are understood, by guiding people in how to look at Italian Americans.” (Gambino, 1997, p. 274).

In fact, the Mafia element always cast a shadow on the Italian American experience. The most successful and inspirational Italian American, Frank Sinatra, was often scrutinized for his relationships with mob bosses, and was subpoenaed several times in state and Congressional commissions investigating the Mafia. He never was formally charged for being part of the mob, but his links with mob’s leaders put his career at risk on many occasions, and had an influence in the public’s perception of him (Rojek, 2004).

Nevertheless, Sinatra was considered a living legend of the American popular culture in the Twentieth century. He was one of those public figures that revived the pride of being Italian, and helped to shape the cultural identity in the Italian American communities.

Times were changing, and an ethnic group that was always considered at the lowest bottom of the American social hierarchy, started becoming proud of its heritage and cultural identity, and contributed to the creation of some of the most meaningful and prominent icons of the American popular culture.

Conclusions

Maria Laurino, an Italian American journalist, wrote in her memoirs that her father was “mesmerized” by Governor Mario Cuomo when the politician, during a televised interview, recalled an episode that occurred just before he delivered his keynote address in front of the Democratic convention in 1984. “‘Ma, there may be forty to fifty million people who’ll be watching,’ Cuomo said to his mother. As he retold the story, the old Italian woman responded cautiously, ‘Oh *marone*, you better not make a mistake.’” (Laurino, 2000, p. 36).

Hearing the word *marone* (a dialect term for *Madonna*, the Virgin Mary) had a strong sentimental impact on Laurino and her father because they had the impression that “the peasant word shifted out of [their] private lexicon,” and “gained a legitimacy.” (Laurino, 2000, p. 36).

It was a symbolic moment, the shifting point in which all the hardship related to the Immigrant experience had turned to the pride of belonging to an ethnic group and its culture.

The essential problem, in studying the evolution of the cultural identity in the Italian American communities is that the first generation experience did not have a voice. Hard conditions in which their migration occurred explain why they were not able to publicly express their cultural identity. The large majority of the first generation immigrants were illiterate; they did not speak proper Italian and did not learn English. The accounts published on their communities, their values and their way of life was always presented by outsiders of the community (newspaper reporters or politicians). Those outsiders were very often racist and prejudiced; they failed to understand the immigrants’ society organization, and represented those behaviors as a deviant pattern and a tendency for law breaking.

Later, sociologists like William F. Whyte (1943) and Herbert Gans (1962) took a different approach. They went to live in those communities and, through their essays, introduced in the

public debate a deeper understanding of the Italian Americans' values, social structures and way of life. Their theories were more coherent with the real experience of those immigrants.

In the meantime, a second generation of Italian Americans grew up; among them there were scholars, writers, journalists and artists who presented to the American public a representation of the Italian American cultural identity based on their own personal experience. Their essays, memoirs, novels and movies give us an insight of the community life. They attempted, as said by Richard Gambino, an “interpretation” of the Italian Americans and their identity dilemma (1975).

Moreover, after World War II, the cultural climate in the United States had changed in regard to assimilation theories. The idea of assimilation based on the Anglo-conformity model – that required the immigrants to lose their cultural identity, and assume completely American values and way of life – had lost its predominance in the debate. The melting pot model, in which a peculiar American culture would have been the result of the merger of different cultures, and the pluralism model, in which an ethnic group could preserve its original culture in the context of a plural and tolerating American life, acquired a wider popularity (Greer, 1972).

Two other factors contributed to the evolution of the Italian American Culture: immigration policies adopted by the American government, and the economic “boom” experienced by Italy in the Fifties and Sixties. With the introduction of the quota acts, the number of Italian immigrants arriving in the United States declined drastically from 1920; therefore, the group lost its image of a threatening horde. Later, when Italy went through a fast industrial development and became one of the richest countries in the world, its international image was tied to the ideas of art, beauty, fashion, and luxury (Barzini, 1964).

In that context, when the younger Italian American generations elaborated a symbolic cultural identity, they could find several suitable and appealing references in their ethnic background.

Revising his book on Italian Americans in West End Boston, in 1982 Herbert Gans wrote:

I believe that among middle-class adults of the third and fourth generation, a new – and perhaps not-so-new – ethnic involvement is developing which I call ‘symbolic ethnicity.’ Ethnicity, now a voluntary status which people can choose to accept or reject, is valued primarily as a means for maintaining some degree of ethnic identity and feeling, rather than a set of group membership and cultural values and practices. (Gans, 1982, p. 235)

Cultural identities, as well as personal identities, are extremely difficult to define because they have a high degree of complexity and are in a continuous evolution. In our study, we did not attempt to say a definitive word on Italian American cultural identity, but we tried to point out the process that brought one of the most disregarded ethnic groups in America to become very proud of its heritage and cultural identity. And that process, not surprisingly, coincided with the very period in which Italian American artists became incisive in shaping the American popular culture. Finally, now they had a voice.

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