

# CHAIN MIGRATION ETHNIC NEIGHBORHOOD FORMATION AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Migration is patently more complex than that merely mechanical reshuffling of heads which is assumed by crude economic "push-pull" models. Numerous contemporary studies in Africa, Asia and Latin America pay attention to the sociological factors involved in induction of manpower into growing economies. This paper draws attention to the possibilities of illuminating current problems by historical studies. The vast documentary material on the sociology of migration and labor force reorganization in the past in Europe and North America is largely neglected by current studies.

From the standpoint of organization, migration may occur in several ways. Among these are two contrasting extremes: "chain migration" and "impersonally organized migration."<sup>1</sup> Chain migration can be defined 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 relationships with previous migrants*.

Chain migration is thus distinct from impersonally organized

migration which is conceived as movement based on impersonal recruitment and assistance. In the postwar period, impersonally organized migration is exemplified by the arrangements for selection, transportation, reception, instruction and placement made by the International Refugee Organization; other clear examples are the century-old sequence of schemes for officially assisted migration from the United Kingdom to her colonies and dominions, and also from southern Europe to Argentina and Brazil.<sup>2</sup>

In the postwar period, chain migration is exemplified in the various forms of sponsorship of close relatives permitted by countries of large European settlement. The quota system of the United States is an outstanding case. These arrangements are subject in many cases to severe screening, however, so that having helpful close relatives in the receiving country is only a necessary condition, but may be far less than sufficient qualification. Thus recent chain migration across international borders has taken place within an elaborate framework of administrative hurdles.

European migration to the United States before the First World War was politically free by comparison. Moreover, from 1885, the impersonal organization of immigration by foreign governments, domestic employers, shipping companies, land companies and other large enterprises was banned. In effect, only chain migration was permitted for continental Europeans.<sup>3</sup> They did not know English and, in any case, they were rarely prepared to enter America simply on their own initiative and resources. At the same time, the United States' restrictions on chain migration were minimal.

In the nineteenth century, the Italian authorities took only perfunctory steps to restrain the worst excesses of the shipping companies, hotel-keepers, ticket sellers and miscellaneous racketeers attracted to the migration business. The Catholic Church did not shepherd the emigrants' worldly interests, while the emigrants, for their part, did not seek help, being among Italy's most unobservant anti-clerics.

In 1901, the Italian government set up its General Emigration Commission to take special care of the outwardbound emigrant. It is hard to say how effective this Commission was. In order not to

conflict with United States law, it could not promote emigration positively. Its competence was limited to inhibiting those who preyed upon the emigrant, and to enforcing higher standards of accommodation until he reached foreign territory. The Commission had only one weapon for fighting abuses within foreign territory, the discretion to ban emigration toward that destination. This power was never invoked against emigration to the northern United States.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently the period 1885–1914 is especially germane to an analysis of chain migration. The “internal” organization of migration, whether of the chain or impersonal type, has a strong bearing on the results of movement. The kinds of people caught up in chain migration, as well as the ways in which they land and settle or repatriate, depend in part on inconspicuous sociological developments which are not commonly recognized by the policy-maker, legislator or administrator.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the bonds between successive Southern Italian immigrants in this period, and also some of the consequences of this social structure.

Migration from Southern Italy<sup>5</sup> to the Northern cities of the United States can be explained in terms of political freedom of movement and economic “push” and “pull.” The settlement of Southern Italians in the slums of the Northern cities can be explained in terms of the ecology of the American urban class and caste structure. Neither of these valid explanations, however, answers the question: Why did immigrants from certain towns<sup>6</sup> in Southern Italy settle together in certain localities in the United States? These immigrants were not distributed among the “Little Italies” by chance (see Appendix II). Prospective immigrants needed passage money, as well as assistance in finding initial employment and accommodation. These were generally provided by earlier immigrants from their hometowns. Immigration from Southern Italy consequently occurred in interdependent waves. There were two distinctive movements: the ebb and flow of lone working males, and delayed family migration.

The chain relationships which linked old and new immigrants can be classified in three broad types. First, some established immigrants

encouraged and assisted prospective male immigrants of working age in order to profit from them. These *padroni* (bosses) exploited the new immigrants directly, or were paid a commission by American employers for providing labor. Second, there was serial migration of breadwinners. Before deciding to settle permanently in the United States and bring out their wives and families, lone males often assisted other breadwinners to come to the country and get established. Third, there was delayed family migration. Lone male immigrants eventually brought out their wives and children.

In the early days of Southern Italian immigration, *padroni* brought young boys to the United States for shoeshine and other juvenile menial work. By the 1890's, this type of indenture had been virtually eliminated by the Italian and American authorities (Foerster, p. 324, see Appendix I).

Before the First World War, the great majority of Southern Italian immigrants were males of working age who intended to save money in the United States and return home. Among them were many married men, but very few were accompanied by their wives and children on their first voyage. At first, they were usually "birds of passage." It was only after some years in the United States, and one or more return voyages to their home towns, that they decided to become permanent American residents. This pattern was dictated in part by the motives which led them to leave home and also by the instability of the work which was generally open to them in the United States.

They left Italy, for the most part, in order to return to their birthplace with money to buy land and a better house and to raise their social status. They did not intend, at first, to enter American society and raise themselves in its terms. They had little contact, other than impersonal service relationships, with the host society, and it was many years before they were assimilated into it.

They were inferior in the eyes of the "Old" Americans and earlier immigrant groups, such as the Irish and the Germans. They entered the American class structure at the bottom, and they ran up against job and housing discrimination, open hostility, and even violence.

New arrivals from Southern Italy generally could find only temporary employment, usually on a seasonal basis. Most had no skills useful in urban America. Therefore, most of these immigrants spent at least their first few months as common laborers in open air work, which stopped each winter, or at other temporary jobs, such as construction laboring. The Southern Italian fruit vendor and storekeeper were familiar figures in the American street scene, but only a small proportion of the immigrants were engaged in petty commerce. Southern Italians were not outstandingly successful in commerce or other business enterprises, except in the limited number of establishments which arose to serve the "Little Italies." During the slack periods in the American labor market, a large proportion returned to their homeland.

They had little desire to learn English and become acquainted with the American scene. Remaining in great ignorance of the larger economy and society around them, they were able to find work through better established, more knowledgeable compatriots who functioned as middlemen between new arrivals and American employers.

#### MIGRATION THROUGH PADRONI

In addition to financing immigration, the *padrone* provided employment and numerous other services which isolated new arrivals from American society and kept them dependent. For example, a *padrone* might act as banker, landlord, foreman, scribe, interpreter, legal adviser, or ward boss. Moreover, his clients were buying continuing protection from a public figure who was somewhat subject to community pressure and dependent on its good will. It was therefore better to travel under his auspices than to rely on any stranger encountered along the way.

Most important of the *padrone's* functions, from our standpoint, was that he kept his *paesani* together. The continuing dependence of his wards was sanctioned by Southern Italian custom. Before serial migration and delayed family migration assumed large pro-

portions, the *padrone* system took the place of the traditional family and kinship system.<sup>7</sup> *Padroni* were often god-fathers to the immigrants whom they assisted; god-parenthood in Southern Italy was perhaps as important as the rural Spanish *compadrazgo* (see Bibliography: 42, p. 43; 44, p. 482).

The *padrone* system was not self-perpetuating. As the immigrants who had been dependent on them became better acquainted with American conditions and learned English, they were able to fend for themselves and also help later immigrants. Thus the *padroni* gradually lost their monopolistic powers as the cluster of roles with which they had been vested were taken over by the close relatives and friends of prospective immigrants.

Although many new arrivals first worked on railroad gangs in rural areas, they tended sooner or later to settle in cities. They were eventually able to move into factory work from temporary or seasonal employment as common laborers. This broadening and stabilizing of employment, which was particularly marked at the beginning of this century, decreased the power of the *padroni*. Many American industries did have Southern Italian foremen who functioned as middlemen, but factories did not offer as many opportunities for exploitation of dependency as the sub-contracting and "straw boss" systems in railroad and construction work.

In any case, in 1906, the major railroads curtailed the powers of their *padroni* by taking direct responsibility for engaging labor, by paying unskilled workers' wages without intermediaries, and by regulating conditions in their camps. Furthermore, a few years before the First World War, labor unions began to organize successfully among Southern Italian immigrants. American labor unions were slow to organize among unskilled laborers and in those occupations which were largely filled by recent immigrants. However, they were active among the large numbers of Southern Italian barbers employed in America's cities. Moreover, Southern Italians organized their own unions in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations such as construction laboring, mining, stonecutting and bricklaying in some areas. The labor unions diminished the importance of the *padroni* in these fields by negotiating directly with employers, op-

posing exploitation and informing ignorant new arrivals of better opportunities. The Italian General Emigration Commission, founded in 1901, may also have usurped some of the *padroni's* functions, but its effect cannot have been great.

#### SERIAL MIGRATION OF WORKERS

Serial migration, like the *padrone* system, kept Southern Italian neighborhoods relatively homogeneous because, in their homeland, kinship and friendship ties did not extend beyond the immigrants' districts of origin. Indeed, marriage, friendship and other close ties rarely linked adjacent towns.<sup>6</sup>

Before settling permanently and bringing out their wives and children, lone males often assisted male relatives and friends of working age to immigrate. This chain migration in series apparently accounted for a large part of adult male immigration from Southern Italy, even before the beginning of this century, because the *padroni* never had absolute control of Southern Italian immigration. New arrivals usually went directly to the relatives and friends who had financed their passage, and relied on them to find their first lodgings and employment. Their guardians usually lodged them in their own quarters or found a room in the neighborhood, and found them work close by, since the "Little Italies" were conveniently located near the principal markets of unskilled labor.

*Campanilismo* (hometown loyalty) was not a basis for chain migration. The "Little Italies" abounded in mutual benefit societies with membership limited to fellow townsmen. These clubs did not organize immigration, however. Furthermore, there were no associations or bodies organizing emigration in Southern Italy. Indeed there were no associations or bodies which *could* organize emigration, with the possible exception of the Mafia in western Sicily. The social structure of this section of Italy is still extremely individualistic and familistic. Bonds outside the nuclear family household were almost exclusively along a dyadic patron-client axis. Corporate organizations are still inconceivable in most of Southern Italy, except

when they are forced upon it by the centralized State.<sup>7</sup>

#### DELAYED FAMILY MIGRATION

It was only by delayed family migration that the Southern Italian sex ratio in the United States tended toward equality. An unmarried female travelling alone was inconceivable in a culture which took extremely restrictive precautions to safeguard family honor.<sup>7</sup>

Immigrants were rarely able to take home the fortunes of which they had dreamed. Also, mass emigration brought about rapid inflation in Southern Italy as money flowed back from America to its stagnant economy. Moreover, it was cheaper for immigrants to bring out their families and put them to work in the United States, than leave them in Italy and return home periodically; and, in America, they could put their women to work more profitably.

Women in Southern Italy rarely took individual employment outside the home or family enterprises. In the United States, they avoided work as domestic servants, which was regarded as a threat to their chastity. However, a large percentage broke with tradition by working in factories, especially as garment workers and textile factory operatives.

The stresses and conflicts to which traditional family life was subjected by wives' and daughters' new economic roles outside the family were minimized by adapting the family to the factory situation. A study of Southern Italian textile workers in Norristown shows in detail how wives and daughters chaperoned each other at work; how these immigrant women chose industries where they did not have to work with men; how kinship reciprocity continued as a means of getting jobs, skills and better pay; how parental authority was used by the factory as a form of sub-management whereby young girls were put to work under their mothers or aunts (see Bibliography: 18).

They could increase the family's earnings in less disruptive ways, by taking in home work from the garment, textile, embroidery, hat and glove industries, by boarding lone males or relatives' families, or



by running the family store while their men worked out for wages. Boarding and lodging with families were practically unheard of in Southern Italy, but in the United States it was a common device for profiting from the great excess of lone males in the Southern Italian population while keeping wives and daughters in the house.

There was very little intermarriage between Southern Italians and "Old" Americans or other nationality groups in the United States (see Bibliography: 16 among others). They definitely preferred to marry Southern Italian women. Paradoxically, their insistence on a bride who had never been kissed was the very reason for the shortage of marriageable Southern Italian women in the United States. The number of marriageable women very slowly increased as unmarried daughters accompanied their mothers to join their fathers. Consequently, most bachelors had to return home to marry, or bring out proxy wives.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The clustering of fellow townsmen from Southern Italy in the cities of the northern States cannot be adequately understood without analysis of chain migration. In this case, chain migration was an adaptation of the familism and dyadic patronage which were the crucial forms of the contributing society, providing a "feedback" of information and assistance from immigrants in the United States to prospective emigrants in their home towns.

Chain migration not only led to the growth of "Little Italies," but also produced "chain occupations," particular niches in the American employment structure to which successive immigrants directed their fellows on the basis of their own experience. The evolution of ethnic succession in this country is a reflection of this "chain occupation" process.

If we study chain migration, we must also study its logical opposite, that is, when chains do not operate. Banfield<sup>8</sup> reports on a town in Basilicata where prospective emigrants could not leave because their numerous fellow townsmen abroad had severed all ties

with home. The social organization of this town was extremely atomistic—even more so than is the rule in Southern Italy—making chain migration impossible. Associations, community organizations, clans or other forms of segmental solidarity are conspicuous by their absence in Southern Italy. Moreover, the nuclear family household, the multilateral kinship system, and dyadic patronage—the basic forms of social organization in this part of Italy—are precarious. Chain migration based on a hometown society of the Southern Italian type necessarily runs the risk of leaving some prospective emigrants out on a limb. A potential sponsor abroad may desert his family, friends and clients when he assimilates to his host society, or when the frequent conflicts in this kind of society rupture bonds. Another possibility: a sponsor may fulfill his obligations to those few fellow townsmen who are close relatives, friends or clients, and not give any thought to the majority to whom he has no customary obligations. We have found such cases of “broken” chain migration among Southern Italians in Australia. The information available for the United States provides only positive instances of chain migration.

A further approach to understanding chain migration would be to study contrasting societies where reciprocal obligations and corporate solidarity have a different scope. We might examine the role of the Southern Slav and Albanian *Zadruga* and clan in emigration. Chain migration derived from clans and extended families is certainly crucial to an explanation of ethnic group formation and chain occupations among the Chinese in South East Asia and the United States.<sup>9</sup>

## APPENDIX I

This paper is based on a survey of American secondary sources on Italian immigration in the period 1880–1914, undertaken with a Population Council Fellowship. The principal sources are R. F. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, (Cambridge, 1919), and U. S. Immigration Commission, *Reports* (Washington, 41 vols., 1911), which are referred to simply as Foerster and Im. Com. The sources cited in the text and the references are subsidiary, except on those particular points. Some of the same material is discussed from a different standpoint in our “Urbanization, Ethnic Groups and Social Segmentation,” *Social Research*, 29(4). Winter, 1962.

## APPENDIX II

DEFINITIVE EXAMPLES OF CHAINS AND NEIGHBORHOODS  
(*Numbers in parentheses refer to the Bibliography following*).

In Manhattan, Sicilians from the town of Cinisi were concentrated in Midtown (31). Immigrants from Avigliano (Basilicata) clustered in East Harlem (14, 15). Park and Miller found separate enclaves from different towns and districts in the “Little Italy” near New York’s Bowery, where the blocks were heterogeneous but each building housed distinctive clusters (31). Jacob Riis also found Calabrians on Mulberry Street grouped according to their town of origin (37). In Utica the great majority of the Southern Italians came from Laurenzana and adjacent towns in Basilicata (43). Southern Italians from different towns settled in different parts of

New Jersey (8). Most Southern Italians in Norristown (Pennsylvania) came from the town of Sciacca in Girgenti province, Sicily. They were highly concentrated within Norristown's Italian section (18, 20). In New Haven immigrants from the Salerno coast of Campania were concentrated in one neighborhood. They were drawn in the main from the towns of Amalfi and Scafati Atrani. Those from the mountain provinces of Campania settled in a second "Little Italy" (7, 22, 29, 33). In Middletown (Connecticut), the greater part of the large Italian population came from the Sicilian town of Melilli in Syracuse province, and concentrated in one neighborhood (40). Most of the Italians of Stamford (Connecticut) were drawn from Avigliano (Potenza) and S. Mango sul Calore (Campania) (10). In Cleveland there was a large concentration of Sicilians from Termini Imerense, in Palermo province (13). The largest Southern Italian neighborhoods in Chicago derived from the Sicilian towns of Altavilla Milicia, Bagheria Vicari, Monreale and Termini Imerense, in Palermo province (31). Milwaukee's "Little Italies" were peopled by immigrants from the coastal towns of northern Sicily, between Palermo and Milazzo (23). "The Bagnolese migration (from Abruzzi-Molise) to Detroit is a typical chain effect. . . . The Detroit cluster sprang from a single migrant (and his family) who persuaded others to follow."<sup>10</sup>

There are many more cases of "Little Italies" which were not cross-sections of the total Italian or Southern Italian movement to the United States. Presumably their peculiar provenance was due to chain migration. But the information on the composition of these neighborhoods is given only by region or province, not by district or hometown of origin.

No indication of the genesis of chains was found except in two cases. The Southern Italians of Utica stemmed originally from itinerant street musicians who simply happened to settle there. The ubiquitous street musicians of Basilicata planted numerous colonies around the world. The Southern Italians of Middletown can be traced back to a sailor and a circus act. Presumably all the chains derived from such fortuitous occurrences. Chance, however, cannot explain the continuance or discontinuance of chains.

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<sup>1</sup> We hesitate to hypothesize two polar ideal types and an intervening unilinear continuum.

<sup>2</sup> Analytically purer examples of impersonally organized migration would be the transatlantic slave trade, the deportation of convicts from Europe to penal colonies, and the Nazi "extermination-through-work" programme.

<sup>3</sup> Im. Com., "Contract labor and induced and assisted migration," vol. II, pp. 14-15; "Emigration conditions in Europe," vol. IV, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> For appraisals of the General Emigration Commission and earlier sanctions on Italian emigration, see Bibliography: 26, 52.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, Southern Italy comprises the regions of Abruzzi-Molise, Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily, a basically agricultural area with few cities, negligible manufacturing and mining, and fairly homogeneous traditions and social structure. The definition of Southern Italy by the U. S. Immigration Commission of 1907 is based on arbitrary racial grounds, and includes the regions of Liguria, Tuscany, Umbria, the Marches and Latium (Rome). These regions are commonly classified together as Central Italy, because of their distinctive traditions and economic and social structure. In any case, the very great majority of Southern Italian immigrants, as defined by the U. S. Immigration Commission, did come from Southern Italy in the sense used in this paper; very few immigrants came from Central Italy.

<sup>6</sup> "Town," not "village," is used here because the rural population of Southern Italy resided almost entirely in agglomerations of 1,500 or more inhabitants.

<sup>7</sup> For an introduction in English to Southern Italian society and culture, see Bibliography: 2, 4, 24, 26, 33.

<sup>8</sup> *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> See Bibliography: 6, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Personal Communication from Leonard W. Moss.

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