

John Foster Carr, "The Coming of the Italians," THE OUTLOOK, 24 February 1906, 419-431.

"Never judge a ship from the shore," say the Tuscans, and the *contadino*, who is fond of proverbs, often quotes this bit of traditional wisdom when he finds that his wolf was only a gray dog after all. Hamlet's cloud is not a camel; nor is an honest workman a shiftless beggar buffoon. The laborer and not the organ-grinder now represents the Italian in America; but the popular idea mistakes the one for the other. Thanks to the secluded ways of Italian, the actual facts of their life among us are almost entirely unknown. In common with Mexicans and Jews, they are pilloried by insulting nicknames. They are charged with pauperism, crime, and degraded living, and they are judged unheard and almost unseen. These short and sturdy laborers, who swing along the streets with their heavy stride early in the morning and late at night, deserve better of the country. They are doing the work of men, and they are the full equals of any national army of peasant adventurers that ever landed on our shores.

To brand an Italian immigrant with the word "alien" is to curse him for being unlike ourselves. But when we know who and what he is, and why he comes to the United States, and what he becomes after he gets here, we recognize human kinship, and see what we ourselves should be with different birth and breeding. One serious misconception starts in a name. It is as misleading to dub a nation "Latin" as "Anglo-Saxon." Italians differ from one another almost as much as men can differ who are still of the same color. Ethnography now makes its classifications according to cranial formation. Most northern Italians are of the Alpine race and have short, broad skulls. All southern Italians are of the Mediterranean race and have long, narrow skulls.

Between the two lies a broad strip of country, in northern and central Italy, peopled by those of mixed blood. History has a less theoretical story to tell, and explains the differences that separate near neighbors, in the north as in the south. If a single race ever inhabited Italy to form an Original parent stock, it has borne the grafts of so many other races that all sign of it is lost. For prolonged periods sometimes one part of the land, sometimes another, and sometimes the whole peninsula and the islands, have been held in the power of Phoenicians, Greeks, the countless wild hordes of the North, the Saracens, the Spanish, French, and Germans. They all came in great numbers and freely married with native women. In the northeast there is a Slav intermixture, and a trace of the Mongol. In appearance the Italian may be anything from a tow-headed Teuton to a swarthy Arab. Varying with the district from which he comes, in manner he may be rough and boisterous; suave, fluent, and gesticulate; or grave and silent.

These differences extend to the very essentials of life. The provinces of Italy are radically unlike, not only in dress, cookery, and customs, but in character, thought, and speech. A distinct change of dialect is often found in a morning's walk, and it would probably be impossible to travel fifty miles along any road in Italy without meeting greater differences in language than can be found in our English anywhere between Maine and California. The schools, the army, and the navy are now carrying the Italian language to the remotest province, but an ignorant Valtellinese, from the mountains of the north, and an ignorant Neapolitan have as yet no means of understanding each other; and, what is more remarkable, the speech of the unschooled peasant of Genoa is unintelligible to his fellow of Piedmont, who lives less than one hundred miles away. A Genoese ship's captain can understand his Sicilian sailors, when they are talking familiarly among themselves, about as well as an English commander of a "Peninsular and Oriental" liner

can follow the jabbering of his Lascar crew. Nor can ignorant men from some of the provinces understand the pure Italian. Two classes were recently held in the Episcopal Church of San Salvatore, in Broome Street, New York, to teach Sicilians enough Italian to enable them to use their prayer-book.

The age-long political division of Italy into a number of petty States preserved all differences and inspired all intense local patriotism; nor did the narrow belfry spirit wholly vanish with the political union of 1870. Relics of it are still found. Ask a Roman peasant if he is all Italian, and he is as likely as not to say "No," that he is a Roman; and so with a Genoese or a Napolitan. In dislike or indifference toward those from other parts of the country, the Italian abroad usually seeks those of his own city or province. In the same way, little circles of friends are formed in the Italian army and navy. Question a group of sailors on shore leave from an Italian man-of-war, and you will probably find that, with perhaps a single exception, they are all of one place. Ask them how this happens, and they may tell you, as they have told me, laughing: "Friendship is for those from the same *fatherland*."

These profound dissimilarities make sweeping generalities about Italians impossible. Yet in one point every province is alike. The poor everywhere are all crushed by heavy taxes for maintenance of the large army and navy which make Italy a first-class European power. More serious than the exactions of the tax-gatherer is the long-continued agricultural depression that has reduced a large part of the South to poverty. Nor is this all. The peasant's lot is made infinitely worse by an Irish question that is the blight of nearly all southern Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia. There are the sable huge entailed estates and the same lazy, reactionary, and absentee

landlords. Throughout large sections great tracts of fertile soil support only one shepherd or one farmer per square mile. To these idle lands must be added the vast stretches of barren mountains, and the malaria-infested fifth of the entire surface of the peninsula. No new territory has been added to the kingdom, while the population has been increasing within twenty years from twenty-eight and one-half to thirty-two and one-half millions---an average density for the whole country of 301 per square mile. And the excess of births over deaths amounts to nearly 350,000 a year---the population of a province. Through whole districts in this overcrowded land Italians have to choose between emigration and starvation.

A definite economic cause drives the poor *Meridionale* from his home, and a definite economic cause and not a vague migratory instinct brings him to America. He comes because the country has the most urgent need of unskilled labor. This need largely shapes the character of our Italian immigration, and offers immediate work to most of the newcomers. Almost eighty percent of them are males; over eighty percent are between the ages of fourteen and forty-five; over eighty percent are from the southern provinces, and nearly the same percentage are unskilled laborers, who include a large majority of the illiterates. These categories overlap, so that the bulk of our Italian immigration is composed of ignorant, able-bodied laborers from the South. They come by the hundred thousand, yet their great numbers are quickly absorbed without disturbing either the public peace or the labor market. In spite of the enormous immigration of Italians in 1903 and 1904, the last issue of the United States Labor Bulletin shows that the average daily wage of the laborer in the North Atlantic States---the "congested" district at the very gates of Ellis Island--had increased within the year from \$1.33 to \$1.39. And 1904 was not a particularly prosperous year. Equally significant, in view of the unprecedented Italian immigration of the first six

months of this year, is the announcement in the last number of the Bulletin of the New York State Department of Labor that the improvement in the conditions of employment has been so marked, and "the proportion of idle wage-earners has diminished so rapidly, that the second quarter of 1905 surpasses that of 1902, the record year."

The demand of the East for labor is first heard by the new arrival who needs to look for work, and probably a majority Italian *braccianti* never go more than a hundred and fifty miles away from New York. Immediate work and high wages, and not a love for the tenement, create our "Little Italies." The great enterprises in progress in and about the city, the subways, tunnels, water-works, railroad construction, as well as the ordinary building operations, call for a vast army of laborers. For new and remodeled tenements alone, authorized by the Building Department between April and June, 1905, the estimated cost was over \$39,000,000. This gives one measure of the demand. A labor leader has furnished another. At a recent conference, arguing that restriction of immigration would benefit American labor, he said that an authority in the building trade had calculated that with immigration suspended, common labor in New York would be receiving \$3 within a year. He had not calculated the paralysis that such a wage would inflict upon industry.

Of all that come in response to our National invitation to the worker, the educated Italian without a manual trade is the Italian who most signally fails in America. He is seen idling at the cheap restaurants everywhere in the Italian colonies. But the illiterate laborer takes no chances. He usually has definite knowledge of precisely where work is needed before he leaves home. Fifteen

thousand immigrants sometimes reach Ellis Island in a single day. Yet each Italian must earn his living in some way, and that at once, for he brings no more than eight or ten dollars with him.

This same inborn conservatism that risks nothing makes of southern Italians the most mobile supply of labor that this country has ever known. Migratory laborers, who come here to work during eight or nine months of the year, and return between October and December, are a very large part of the annual immigration. They form a stream of workers that ebbs and flows from Italy to America in instant response to demand; and yet the significance of the movement has gone almost entirely unnoticed. More than 98,000 Italians---laborers and others, but chiefly laborers---went back to Italy in 1903. In 1904, owing to a temporary lull in our prosperity and the general business uncertainty during a Presidential campaign, the demand slackened. The common laborer, who ordinarily pays a padrone fifty cents as a fee for employment, was offering as high as five dollars for a job in the summer of 1904. In the end, more than 134,000 Italians returned to Italy within the year, and we were saved the problem of an army of unemployed.

If the ignorant immigrant is a menace, the mobility of Italian unskilled labor has conferred another blessing upon us, for it is the very element that contains a large majority of the dreaded illiterates. The whole number of them who enter the community thus gives no indication of the number who are permanently added to our population, and the yearly percentage of their arrivals since 1901 has fallen from 59.1 percent to 47 percent, and is likely to fall still lower. But there is something to be said on behalf of the illiterates who remain among us. They are never Anarchists; they are guiltless of the so-called "black hand" letters. The individual *bracciante* is, in fact, rarely anything but a gentle and often a rather dull drudge, who still has wit enough to

say that he knows he cannot be Caesar, and is very well content to be plain Neapolitan Nicola. Knowledge is power, but an education gives no certificate of character, and still less does ability to read and write afford any test whatever either of morals or of brains. A concrete instance gives a practical proof. There are more than four times as many illiterates in the general population of the United States as were found, according to the last published report, among those arrested in Greater New York between January 1 and March 31, 1905: 44,014 persons were arrested; of these, only 1,175, or a little over 2.6 percent, were unable to read or write. The percentage of illiteracy for the entire United States is 10.6 percent, and for that of the native whites alone 4.6 percent.

The very success of American schools goes far in explaining the mystery of our exorbitant demand for unskilled labor. In proportion as they fulfill their mission they are depriving us of the rough laborer. The boy who is forbidden by the New York law to leave school until he is fourteen years old and has reached the fifth grammar grade, later in life does not join a gang that digs sewers and subways. Such laborers are recruited from the illiterate, or nearly illiterate--- those who have failed in the beginning of the struggle in which brains count. For our future supply of the lower grades of labor we must depend more and more upon countries with a poorer school system than ours.

Lies have short legs, the Florentine tag has it, but the Italian is still accused of being a degenerate, a lazy fellow and a pauper, half a criminal, a present danger and a serious menace to our civilization. If there is a substantial basis of truth in these charges, it must appear very clearly in Greater New York, which is now disputing Rome's place as the third largest Italian city

in the world. Moreover, New York contains nearly two-fifths of all the Italians in the United States, and in proportion to its size it is the least prosperous Italian colony in the country, and shelters a considerable part of our immigrant failures---those who cannot fall into step with the march of American life.

First, as to the paupers. The Italian inhabitants of New York City number nearly 450,000; the Irish, somewhat over 300,000. In males---the criminal sex---the Italians outnumber the Irish about two to one. Yet by a visit to the great almshouse on Blackwell's Island and an examination of the unpublished records for 1904, I found that during that year, 1,564 Irish had been admitted, and only 16 Italians. Mr. James Forbes, of the Mendicancy Department of the Charity Organization Society, tells me that he has never seen or heard of an Italian tramp. As for begging, between July 1, 1904, and September 30, 1905, the Mendicancy Police took into custody 519 Irish and only 92 Italians. Pauperism has a close relation with suicide, and of such deaths during the year the record counts 89 Irish and 23 Italians. The Irish have always supplied much more than their share of our paupers; but Irish brawn has contributed its full part to the prosperity of the country; and the comparatively large proportion of Irish inmates in all our penal institutions never justified the charge that the Irish are a criminal race, or Irish immigration undesirable. That was the final answer to the Know-Nothing argument!

Nor do court records show that Italians are the professional criminals they are said to be. Take the city magistrates' reports for the year ending December 31, 1901---the latest date for which all the necessary data are available. At that time, using Dr. Laidlaw's estimate of additions by immigration to the population of the city to May 1, 1902, there were about 282,804 Irish and

200,549 Italians in Greater New York. If the proportion of the sexes remained unchanged from the taking of the census, there were 117,599 Irish males, and 114,673 Italian. This near equality of the criminal sex in the two nationalities makes possible a rough measure of Italian criminality.

In these columns of crime the most striking fact in the Italian's favor is a remarkable showing of sobriety. During the year, 7,281 Irish were haled into court accused of "intoxication" and "intoxication and disorderly conduct," while the Italians arrested on the same charge numbered only 513. With the exception of the Russian Jews, Italians are by far the most sober of all nationalities in New York, including the native born. Next, noticing only offenses committed with particular frequency, the Italians again appear at a pronounced advantage in: Assaults (misdemeanor), 284 Irish and 139 Italians; disorderly conduct, 3,278 Irish and 1454 Italians; larceny (misdemeanor), 297 Irish and 174 Italians; vagrancy, 1,031 Irish and 80 Italians. Insanity is here listed with crime, and there are 146 Irish commitments to 35 Italian. Irish and Italians are nearly at an equality in: Burglaries, 63 Irish and 57 Italians; and larceny (felony), 122 Irish and 94 Italians. On the other hand, Italians show at the worst in: Violation of corporation ordinance (chiefly peddling without a license), 196 Irish and 1,169 Italians; and assault (felony), 75 Irish and 155 Italians. In homicides, quite contrary to the popular impression, the Italians are only charged with the ratio exactly normal to their numbers after taking the average per 100,000 for the whole city, while the Irish are accused of nearly two and one-half times their quota: Irish 50, Italians 14. The report for 1903, the last published, after important changes effected by almost two years of immigration, shows an unchanged proportional variation: Irish 59, Italians 21.

The one serious crime to which Italians are prone more than other men is an unpremeditated crime of violence. This is mostly charged, and probably with entire justice, upon the men of four provinces, and Girgenti in Sicily is particularly specified. It is generally the outcome of quarrels among themselves, prompted by jealousy and suspected treachery. The Sicilians' code of honor is an antiquated and repellent one, but even his vendetta is less ruthless than the Kentucky mountaineer's. It stops at the grave. Judged in the mass, Italians are peaceable, as they are law-abiding. The exceptions make up the national criminal record; and as there is a French or English type of criminal, so there is a Sicilian type, who has succeeded in impressing our imaginations with some fear and terror.

The Mafia is the expression of Sicilian criminality, and here, as in Italy, the methods of the Sicilian criminal are the same. For some of his crimes he is more apt to have an accomplice than most other criminals. But there is no sufficient reason for believing that a Mafia, organized as it often is in Italy, a definite society of the lawless, exists anywhere in this country. No one who knows the different Italian colonies well will admit the possibility of its existence. The authorities at police headquarters scout the idea. As with the Mafia, so with the Black Hand. I went to Sergeant Petrosino, who is said to know every important Italian criminal in New York. He disposed very summarily of the bogey: "As far as they can be traced, threatening letters are generally a hoax; some of them are attempts at blackmail by inexperienced criminals who have had the idea suggested to them by reading about the Black Hand in the sensational papers; but the number of threatening letters sent with the deliberate intention of using violence as a last resort to extort money is ridiculously small."

It is important that two or three other truths about the Italian should be known. Like all their immigrant predecessors, Italians profess no special cult of soap and water; and here, too, there are differences, for some Italians are cleaner than others. Still, cleanliness is the rule and dirt the exception. The inspectors of the New York Tenement-House Department report that the tenements in the Italian quarters are in the best condition of all, and that they are infinitely cleaner than those in the Jewish and Irish districts. And the same with overcrowding. One of New York's typical 'Little Italies' is inhabited by 1,075 Italian families---so poor that only twenty-six of them pay over \$19 monthly rent---and yet, when a complete canvass was made by the Federation of Churches, the average allotment of space was found to be one room to 1.7 persons. Like the Germans and Irish of the fifties, our Italians are largely poor, ignorant peasants when they come to us. But by the enforcement of the recent law our present immigrants are greatly superior physically and morally to those of the Know-Nothing days. The difference in criminal records is partly the proof of a better law. The worst of the newer tenements are better than the best of the old kind, and every surrounding is more sanitary. Better schools, recreation piers, public baths, playgrounds, and new parks are helping the Italian children of the tenements to develop into healthy and useful men and women.

To understand our Italians we need to get close enough to them to see that they are of the same human *pasta* --- to use their word --- as the rest of us. They need no defense but the truth. In spite of the diverse character that all the provinces stamp upon their children, our southern Italian immigrants still have many qualities in common. Their peculiar defects and vices have been exaggerated until the popular notion of the Italian represents the truth in about the

same way that the London stage Yankee hits off the average American. Besides, as the Italian Poor Richard says, "It's a bad wool that can't be dyed," and our Italians have their virtues, too, which should be better known. Many of them are, it is true, ignorant, and clannish, and conservative. Their humility and lack of self-reliance are often discouraging. Many think that a smooth and diplomatic falsehood is better than an uncivil truth, and, by a paradox, a liar is not necessarily either a physical or a moral coward. No force can make them give evidence against one another. Generally they have little orderliness, small civic sense, and no instinctive faith in the law. Some of them are hot-blooded and quick to avenge an injury, but the very large majority are gentle, kindly, and as mild tempered as oxen. They are docile, patient, faithful. They have great physical vigor, and are the hardest and best laborers we have ever had, if we are to believe the universal testimony of their employers. Many are well-mannered and quick-witted; all are severely logical. As a class they are emotional, imaginative, fond of music and art. They are honest, saving, industrious, temperate, and so exceptionally moral that two years ago the Secretary of the Italian Chamber of Commerce in San Francisco was able to boast that the police of that city had never yet found an Italian woman of evil character. Even in New York (and I have my information from Mr. Forbes, of the Charity Organization Society) Italian prostitution was entirely unknown until by our corrupt police it was colonized as scientifically as a culture of bacteria made by a biologist; and today it is less proportionately than that of any other nationality within the limits of the greater city. More than 750,000 Italian immigrants have come to us within the last four years, and during that entire time only a single woman of them has been ordered deported charged with prostitution.

So far from being a scum of Italy's paupers and criminals, our Italian immigrants are the very flower of her peasantry. They bring healthy bodies and a prodigious will to work. They have an intense love for their fatherland, and a fondness for old customs; and both are deepened by the hostility they meet and the gloom of the tenements that they are forced to inhabit. The sunshine, the simplicity, the happiness of the old outdoor ways are gone, and often you will hear the words, "Non c'e piacere nella vita"---there is no pleasure in life here. But yet they come, driven from a land of starvation to a land of plenty. Each year about one-third of the great host of industrial recruits from Italy, breaking up as it lands into little groups of twos and threes, and invading the tenements almost unnoticed, settles in the different colonies of New York. This is a mighty, silent influence for the preservation of the Italian spirit and tradition.

But there are limits to the building of an Italian city on American soil. New York tenement-houses are not adapted to life as it is organized in the hill villages of Italy, and a change has come over every relation of life. The crowded living is strange and depressing; instead of work accompanied by song in orangeries and vineyards, there is silent toil in the canons of a city street; instead of the splendid and expostulating *carabiniere* there is the rough force of the New York policeman to represent authority.

There is the diminished importance of the church, and, in spite of their set ways, there is different eating and drinking, sleeping and waking. A different life breeds different habits, and different habits with American surroundings effect a radical change in the man. It is difficult for the American to realize this. He sees that the signs and posters of the colony are all in Italian; he hears the newsboys cry "Progresso," "Araldo," "Bolletino;" he hears peddlers shout out in their

various dialects the names of strange-looking vegetables and fish. The whole district seems so Italianized and cut off from the general American life that it might as well be one of the ancient walled towns of the Apennines. He thinks that he is transported to Italy, and moralizes over the "unchanging colony." But the greenhorn from Fiumefreddo is in another world. Everything is strange to him; and I have repeatedly heard Italians say that for a long time after landing they could not distinguish between an Italian who had been here four or five years and a native American.

Refractory though the grown-up immigrant may often be to the spirit of our Republic, the children almost immediately become Americans. The boy takes no interest in "Mora," a guessing match played with the fingers, or "Boccie," a kind of bowls---his father's favorite games. Like any other American boy, he plays marbles, "I spy the Wolf," and, when there is no policeman about, baseball. Little girls skip the rope to the calling of "Pepper, salt, mustard, vinegar." The "Lunga Tela" is forgotten, and our equivalent, "London bridge is falling down," and "all around the mulberry-bush," sound through the streets of the colony on summer evenings. You are struck with the deep significance of such a sight if you walk on Mott Street, where certainly more than half of the men and women who crowd every block can speak no English at all, and see, as I have seen, a full dozen of small girls, not more than five or six years old, marching along, hand in hand, singing their kindergarten song, "My little sister lost her shoe." Through these children the common school is leavening the whole mass, and an old story is being retold.

Like the Italians, the Irish and the Germans had to meet distrust and abuse when they came to do the work of the rough day-laborer. The terrors and excesses of Native Americanism and Know-Nothingism came and went, but the prejudice remained. Yet the Irish and Germans furnished good raw material for citizenship, and quickly responded to American influences. They dug cellars and carried bricks and mortar; they sewered, graded, and paved the streets and built the railroads. Then slowly the number of skilled mechanics among them increased. Many acquired a competence and took a position of some dignity in the community, and Irish and Germans moved up a little in the social scale. They were held in greater respect when, in the dark days of the Civil War, we saw that they yielded to none in self-sacrificing devotion to the country. Thousands of Germans fought for the Union besides those who served under Sigel. Thousands of Irishmen died for the cause besides those of the "Old Sixty-ninth." "Dutch" and "Mick" began to go out of fashion as nicknames, and the seventies had not passed before it was often said among the common people that mixed marriages between Germans or Irish and natives were usually happy marriages.

From the very bottom, Italians are climbing up the same rungs of the same social and industrial ladder. But it is still a secret that they are being gradually turned into Americans; and, for all its evils, the city colony is a wonderful help in the process. The close contact of American surroundings eventually destroys the foreign life and spirit; and of this New York gives proof. Only two poor fragments remain of the numerous important German and Irish colonies that were flourishing in the city twenty-five or thirty years ago; while the ancient settled Pennsylvania Dutch, thanks to their isolation, are not yet fully merged in the great citizen body. And so, in the city colony, Italians are becoming Americans. Legions of them, who never intended to remain

here when they landed, have cast in their lot definitely with us; and those who have already become Americanized, but no others, are beginning to intermarry with our people. The mass of them are still laborers, toiling like ants in adding to the wealth of the country; but thousands are succeeding in many branches of trade and manufacture. The names of Italians engaged in business in the United States fill a special directory of over five hundred pages. Their real estate holdings and bank deposits aggregate enormous totals. Their second generation is already crowding into all the professions, and we have Italian teachers, dentists, architects, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and judges.

But more important than any material success is their loyalty to the nation of their adoption. Yet with this goes an undying love for their native land. There are many types of these new citizens. I have in mind an Italian banker who will serve for one. His Americanism is enthusiastic and breezily Western. He has paid many visits to the land of his birth, and delights in its music, art, and literature. He finds an almost sacred inspiration in the glories of its history. Beginning in extreme poverty, by his own unaided efforts he has secured education and wealth; by his services to the city and State in which he lives he has won public esteem. Perhaps no other Italian has achieved so brilliant a success. But as a citizen he is no more typical or hopeful an example of the Italian who becomes an American than Giovanni Aloï, a street-sweeper of my acquaintance.

This honest *spazzino* of the white uniform sent a son to Cuba in the Spanish War; boasts that he has not missed a vote in fifteen years; in his humble way did valiant service in his political club against the “boss” of New York during the last campaign. And yet he declares that we have no meats or vegetables with “the flavor or substance” of those in the old Country; reproaches us

severely for having “no place which is such a pleasure to see as Naples,” and swears by “Torqua-ato Ta-ass” as the greatest of poets, though he only knows four lines of the *Gerusalemme*. Side by side over the fireplace in his living room are two unframed pictures tacked to the wall. Little paper flags of the two countries are crossed over each. One is a chromo of Garibaldi in his red shirt. The other is a newspaper supplement portrait of Lincoln.

A man like Giovanni Aloï, yearning for the home of his youth, sometimes goes back to Italy, but he soon returns. Unconsciously, in his very inmost being, has become an American, and the Prophecy of Bayard Taylor's great ode is fulfilled. Their tongue melts in ours. Their race unites to the strength of ours. For many thousands of them their Italy now lies by the western brine.