

The Mediterranean Comes to Ellis Island: The Southern Question in the New World

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In the decades before World War I, it was not only millions of Italians – primarily from the Mezzogiorno – who traveled to the New World. What came along with them were the stereotypes and discourses about them that had been originally elaborated in the Old World.¹ Many of these stereotypes and discourses concerned the “south,” on the one hand, and the “Mediterranean,” on the other, two categories that often overlapped and interacted with one another. One hopes that on another occasion the complex story of how American social scientists, writers, journalists, politicians, immigration officials, and others reworked and redeployed these stereotypes and discourses will be told in greater detail. Such an investigation would need to situate the categories of the “south” and “Mediterranean” within a rich discursive field of other racial and ethnic categories used at the time, both with respect to Italians and to other immigrant groups.² Here, in this brief and somewhat hasty note, I offer a preliminary reflection, considering the special relevance of the categories of the “Mediterranean” and, above all, the “south,” to the cultural representation of the Italian immigrants who came to America during the years of *la grande emigrazione*.

Beginning in the early 1890s, the numbers of immigrants arriving in the United States from Italy and other parts of Southern and Eastern Europe increased dramatically. American social observers were keenly aware that these peoples represented a new type of immigrant. In an article published in 1904, titled, “The Immigration Problem,” Harvard professor Robert DeCourcy Ward voiced a widely held perception:

No one who notices, even in the most casual way, the faces of the people he sees on the streets and in the cars need be told that a most striking and fundamental change has taken place in the nationalities of our immigrants. A few years ago practically all of our immigrants were from northern and western Europe, that is, they were more or less closely allied to us racially, historically, socially, industrially and politically. They were largely the same elements which had recently made up the English race . . . Now however, the majority of the newcomers are from southern and eastern Europe, and they are coming in rapidly increasing numbers from Asia. These people are alien to us, in race . . . in language, in social, political and industrial ideas and inheritances.³

The Italians were the most visible face of this influx of alien peoples. They were, to begin, the single largest ethnic group among the “new immigrants” that were inundating America's shores.

¹ This article is dedicated to the memory of Peter D’Agostino. At the outset, I wish to acknowledge my debt here to his article, “Craniums, Criminals, and the ‘Cursed Race’: Italian Anthropology in American Racial Thought, 1861-1924,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44 (2002): 319-44. A more extended examination of the issues I discuss here can be found in my essay, “Il padrino, la Mafia e l’America,” in *Traffici criminali. Camorra, mafie e reti internazionali della illegalità*, ed. Gabriella Gribaudo (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2009), 325-51.

² To name a few, Teutonic, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Aryan, Latin, Italic, Iberic, etc.

³ *Charities* (February 6, 1904): 138-40.

The tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of Italians that arrived each year significantly altered the demographic composition of the country, especially in the large urban centers on the East Coast where most of them settled.

The vast size of the Italian immigrant population was not, however, its only distinguishing feature: the ethnic composition of the Italian diaspora was homogeneous in comparison to many other immigrant groups. The overwhelming majority of Italian immigrants to the United States came from the Mezzogiorno, and this “southernness” was one of the key categories that American social scientists employed with increasing insistence in the decades before World War I to “explain” the inferiority and undesirability of the “new immigrants” and of the Italians in particular. Often drawing on the work of racial anthropologists of the Lombrosian school, Alfredo Niceforo in particular, American scholars and social observers frequently connected the notion of the south and southern peoples to that of a Mediterranean (or, alternatively, “Italic” or “Iberic”) “race” that was inferior to the European races to the north, variously called “Teutonic,” “Aryan,” “Celtic.”⁴ In 1899, William Ripley of Columbia University published his massive study, *The Races of Europe*, which divided the continent into three “racial types”: the Teutonic, Alpine, and Mediterranean. He left little room for doubt about the superiority of the former over the latter. Of equal importance was his division between Southern and Northern Italians. Italians as a whole belonged to the Mediterranean race, but whereas Northern Italy contained a mixture of the Alpine and Mediterranean types, in the South – below the Tiber River – “the transition to a purely Mediterranean race is at last fully accomplished.”⁵

Scientific disquisitions on racial types during these decades informed discussions within the federal government and American immigration policy itself. In the same year that Ripley’s study appeared, the U.S. Commissioner General of Immigration introduced a distinction between immigrants from the North and South of Italy that would remain in force for the next two decades. The passenger lists (*registri di bordo*) drawn up by the shipping companies who ferried immigrants from Italian and other European ports to Ellis Island provide a graphic illustration of this new classification. Next to the name of the passenger and his or her nationality was written either an “N” (signifying “Italians of the north”) or an “S” (signifying “Italians of the South”). It is important to note that the Italians were the only immigrant group to be divided into two different “races or peoples” in this way. In 1911, this distinction was further legitimized by the authors of the final report of the congressional commission charged with investigating the effects of immigration in the United States. The Dillingham Report, whose recommendations lay the foundations for the immigration restriction acts of the early 1920s, endorsed the U.S. Bureau of Immigration’s division of Italians into Northerners and Southerners, different from one other “in language, physique, and character, as well as in geographical distribution.”⁶ The Dillingham Report thus sanctioned the view that the Southern Italians, who constituted the largest “new” immigrant group in the United States, were an alien and inferior people.

⁴ For a discussion of the Lombrosian school’s influence on American racial thought and immigration policy, see Peter D’Agostino, “Craniums, Criminals, and the ‘Cursed Race’: Italian Anthropology in American Racial Thought, 1861-1924,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44 (2002): 319-44.

⁵ William Z. Ripley, *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1899): 270. It is worth noting the language Ripley uses to characterize the difference between northern and southern Italy in his introduction to the passage just cited: “The Tiber River really marks the boundary between competitive Italy and isolated Italy, so to speak” (269).

⁶ D’Agostino, “Craniums, Criminals, and the ‘Cursed Race,’” 331-32.

What we see, then, is that the north-south distinction, which had been elaborated over the course of the nineteenth century both in Italy and Europe more broadly,⁷ was transplanted and redeployed in the geographically distant and culturally different environment of the United States. How can we explain this? Certainly the special receptivity of American intellectual and political culture to the discourses and theories of the Lombrosians played an important role in this.⁸ But what must be stressed, at the same time, is the “supply” side of the equation: namely the extraordinary force of the discourses and representations of the north-south division in Italian culture, which the Lombrosians had inherited and then re-elaborated with renewed intensity at the fin-de-siècle. Thus, both due to the “facts on the ground” – the great number of dark-skinned Italian immigrants from the Mediterranean arriving in America – and to the power of southernist discourse itself, the Southern Question was transplanted into the culture of the United States, where the graft “took well,” informing and shaping a racist discourse on immigration within scholarly, political and administrative discourse. The effects of this transplant were significant indeed, for the anthropological discourses on north-south difference, which, as noted above, informed the 1911 Dillingham report, would also play a role in the formulation of immigration restriction acts that would finally close the doors of America to Italians and other “alien” peoples in 1924.

Concepts and the different paths they travel

In this note I have paid relatively little attention to the “Mediterranean” as a concept, and to the specific ways it interacted with “south” in American intellectual culture during this period. This is a task that remains for another occasion. In conclusion, I want to shift focus from America back to Italy, calling attention to a striking and thus far unexplored discrepancy between the history of the concept of the Mediterranean in the United States, on the one hand, and in Italy, on the other, during these decades. If in the United States the “Mediterranean” had a primarily negative value in scholarly and public discourse, in Italy, instead, there were intellectuals – even among the so-called Lombrosians – that sought to valorize it. This was the case, above all, with Giuseppe Sergi, who, as Fabrizio De Donno argues in his essay in this volume, linked the Mediterranean to the idea of regenerating the Italian and Latin people. Mediterraneanism also played a significant role in Italian colonial and Fascist discourse.⁹ Thus, on the one hand, racist discourses on the Mediterranean were reformulated by American intellectuals in a predominantly negative sense. This is what they “took” from the Lombrosians. On the other hand, racist discourses in Italy were more variegated in their articulation of the Mediterranean. If, in the work of Alfredo Niceforo, the Mediterranean is integral to his conceptualization of the inferiority of Southern Italians, in certain writings of Giuseppe Sergi the Mediterranean is, instead, central to a broader project of cultural renewal of Latin peoples, in opposition to

⁷ See my *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

⁸ An additional factor which merits exploration is the extent to which discourses on the north-south difference in the United States may have interacted and overlapped with those on the north-south difference in Italy (thus contributing to American intellectuals’ receptivity to such a dualistic vision of the “New Immigrant” peoples at the fin-de-siècle). An essential source for this line of inquiry is Don H. Doyle’s *Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 2002).

⁹ See, to begin, Fabrizio De Donno, “La Razza Ario-Mediterranea: Ideas of Race and Citizenship in Colonial and Fascist Italy, 1885-1941,” *Interventions* 8:3 (2006): 394-412; and, with reference to the Futurists, Claudio Fogu, “Futurist *mediterraneità* between *Emporium* and *Imperium*,” *Modernism/modernity* 15:1 (2008): 25-43.

Aryanism. What my observations here suggest, then, is that research on such geographical imaginings as the “south” and the “Mediterranean” can benefit from a dual, transatlantic perspective. In the first place, we need to take into account how such concepts travel, how intellectual currents are translated and transplanted into new contexts. In short, how in the case discussed here, Italian and American intellectual history are interconnected. But, at the same time, we need to consider the divergence between these histories and the way such concepts travel in quite different directions, playing different roles in different cultural and political histories.

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