

Southern emigration in the second postwar period

by Andreina De Clementi

After the end of World War II, the hardship Italians had been going through was anything but mitigated by the economic policy of the new ruling class. The devastating combination of the credit squeeze and the closing down of the less competitive business companies led to an explosion of unusually high unemployment.

The Italian South suffered the harshest consequences. Once again, the only hope for survival for Italians appeared to lie in expatriation, in the footsteps of their grandparents over half a century earlier.

In this difficult conjuncture, the Italian state—which at the time of the great post-unification emigration had remained practically inert, limiting itself to cashing in on and making the most of the flood of remittances coming in from other worlds—actually promoted emigration, inviting countries with labor shortages to sign bilateral agreements, which regularly failed to be implemented, especially as regards the protection of immigrants. The state actively encouraged departures to dispose abroad of its hordes of unemployed people and the political turbulences of those years. This without worrying too much about the circumstances of the immigrants abroad.

At least two phases can be distinguished in this new wave of migration: the decade of postwar reconstruction, when old ties were renewed, especially with the principal Latin American countries, and the following decade, which saw the decline of the transoceanic routes, the alternating preeminence of one or the other European country, and the forceful rise of the epicenters of the Italian “miracle.” The consolidation of the phenomenon can be traced to the mid-Sixties, when it took on “the characteristics of a true mass emigration, a clear-cut and permanent phenomenon.”¹

1. The limits of the agrarian reform

After the Communist Party had been definitively expelled from government, first in 1947 and then with its electoral defeat the following

¹ Fortunata Piselli, *Parentela e emigrazione*, Einaudi, Torino 1981, p. 326.

year, the Christian Democrat ruling class found itself having to cope with exasperated struggles for land waged by southern peasant masses. It did so both with gunshots and with very guarded attempts at an agrarian reform, which led to a remarkable increase in smallholding in the 1948-1959 decade.² These actions, however, remained sporadic and fragmented. In May 1950, the Sila Act came into force, which granted over 4,000 hectares of land to Calabria. It was immediately followed, in October, by a transitional act, extended to include the traditional latifundium areas—Puglia, Basilicata, Sicily and Sardinia—and the Fucino basin in Abruzzo-Molise,³ regarded as “one of the most important reform areas, where practically every single town had participated in the turbulent struggle for land.”⁴

The legislator used the term *podere* (or *lotto*) and *quota* to distinguish between different land extensions and uses. *Poderi* (“holdings”) designated small plots to be shared out among landless farm laborers, while *quote* (quotas) were added to the estates of small farming businesses. In reality, quotas were used “largely indiscriminately, to distribute land among the largest possible number of peasants.”⁵ The objective was to expand the political consensus area, even at the cost of infinite fragmentation of farmland. Each holding was only slightly larger than a hectare, which is to say that it did not even come close to the minimum requirement for self-sufficiency.

Not even ten years later, the great hopes placed in what had appeared as the coronation of centuries of aspirations turned out to be nothing but illusion. Drawing a balance of governmental policy in the Italian South—on which judgments have been getting increasingly critical—lies outside the scope of the present essay. The fact is that a large part of the involved areas were gradually abandoned.

In an area in the province of Catanzaro, for example, the Ente Sila institution had granted land quotas as far as 20 kilometers from town, which

² The reform redistributed a total of 279,880 ha of holdings and quotas: in the Fucino area, 13,495 ha divided into quotas of 1.50 ha each assigned to 9,026 families; in Campania, 14,914 ha for 3,529 families with 7.40-ha holdings and quotas of 1.53 ha; in Puglia, Basilicata and Molise, 174,098 ha for 31,534 families with 8.46-ha holdings and 2.40-ha quotas; in Calabria, 77,373 ha for 18,902 families, 5.72-ha holdings and 2.97-ha quotas. In Molise, in particular, 4,700 ha were redistributed in the towns of the Adriatic littoral: Campomarino, Guglionesi, Larino, Mafalda, Montecifone, Montenero di Bisaccia, Petacciano, Portocannone, Rotello, Termoli, San Giacomo degli Schiavoni, San Martino in Pensilis and Santa Croce di Magliano. Gino Massullo, *Dalla periferia alla periferia. L'economia del Novecento*, in Id. (ed.), *Storia del Molise*, Donzelli Editore, Roma 2006, p. 490. Small farm holdings also grew, to a total of 212,148 for a total surface of 263,048 ha, of which 46,759 units for a total surface of 49,128 ha were in Abruzzo and Molise. Francesco Barbagallo, *Lavoro e esodo nel sud, 1861-1971*, Guida, Napoli 1973, p. 202.

³ The Roman banker Alessandro Torlonia had acquired it in the mid-nineteenth century and reclaimed the land there.

⁴ Sidney Tarrow, *Partito Comunista e contadini nel mezzogiorno*, Einaudi, Torino 1972, p. 323.

⁵ Ivi, p. 325.

were soon deserted by the deeply indebted assignees.⁶ The consequences were similar at Gaudio, one of the centers of gravity of the transitional law in Lucania. In this town, the 400 families that had moved into houses built by the reform agency had been left to their own devices.⁷ At Minervino Murge, the countryside had been left without electric power and water.⁸

According to Manlio Rossi-Doria, the most authoritative exponent of southern Italian studies of the second half of the twentieth century, 50% of the expropriation, for a total of 350 thousand hectares, had been carried out right where the “peasant latifundium” was strongest and “peasant poverty most acute,” but “in a capricious and disorderly fashion, depending on the casual distribution of the large expropriated estates.”⁹

Financial aid provided by the Fund for the South (Cassa del Mezzogiorno), instituted on 10 August 1950, also failed to yield appreciable results. The Biella industrialist Rivetti had established a textile factory at Maratea, but, discrimination aside, the wages of the local workers were half those paid in the North.¹⁰ As if this was not enough, local job opportunities kept thinning out. Much of the Sila forest heritage had been destroyed during and after the war. The large sawmills had been forced to shut down, leaving thousands of workers without a job.¹¹ The old peasant crafts carried on by women in the closure of the domestic sphere and aimed at the perpetuation of a subsistence economy were also on the way out. The traditional textile and basket-weaving crafts of the Sardinian countryside were becoming extinct.¹²

On 19 April 1960, the newspaper *Il Tempo* published a letter from the Christian Democrat mayor of the Lucanian town of Sant’Arcangelo, who had found no other way to inform the authorities that the landslides caused by the especially rainy winter had blocked the only road connecting the seven thousand inhabitants of the town to nearby centers, in several places. Besides, the mayor added, the periodic floods of the Agri river had devastated about a thousand hectares of fertile land, “where vegetable gardens were grown that constituted the true agricultural wealth of the population.”¹³ In his exasperated protest, the mayor protest sometimes lapses into sarcasm:

The only advantage we have had in a century is running water [...] and electric power, which, by allowing us to listen to the radio and watch

⁶ Giuseppe Pace, *Lo spopolamento della Calabria*, «Cronache meridionali», 1960, 9, p. 566.

⁷ Donato Scutari, *L’emigrazione dalla provincia di Potenza*, ivi, p. 572.

⁸ Svimez, *Ricerca sull’emigrazione interna nel Mezzogiorno. Indagine su Minervino Murge*, Roma 1963, p. 11.

⁹ Manlio Rossi-Doria, *La riforma agraria sei anni dopo (1957)*, in Augusto Graziani (ed.), *L’economia italiana 1945-1970*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1972, p. 253.

¹⁰ D. Scutari, *L’emigrazione*, cit., p. 566.

¹¹ G. Pace, *Lo spopolamento*, cit., p. 567.

¹² Svimez, *Ricerca sull’emigrazione, Indagine su Lodè*, Roma 1963, pp. 6 e 65.

¹³ D. Scutari, *L’emigrazione*, cit., p. 573.

*television, makes the citizens aware that elsewhere in the vast world, including Italy, there are airplanes, jet planes faster than sound, helicopters, railways, splendid, luxurious and expensive highways, which induces them to comparisons and contrasts with the Biblical donkey they are now reduced to after so much praise of progress!*¹⁴

Television had indeed arrived in Sicily four years before. It can hardly be denied that as a window on the world it was a powerful stimulus for people to change their lives.

2. The modes and timeline of the exodus

Things standing thus, it is hardly surprising that a significant part of the southern Italian population sought their sources of subsistence elsewhere. It is our task to reconstruct their migratory strategies to reach an approximation that is not too far from the truth.

I will start from a few preliminary considerations:

1. The abandonment of agriculture preceded migration.
2. Migration abroad preceded internal migration.
3. The main destinations were in European countries and migration to them had a temporary, often seasonal character.
4. The decline of migration abroad was compensated by the growth of internal migration.
5. What caused whole families to move definitively away and the depopulation of the countryside was internal migration.

From 1950 to 1970, agriculture lost about two million workers. It would be misleading, however, to ascribe this loss to migration. According to the more attentive studies, the severance from the land was the result of a passage to non-farming activities, i.e., a transfer from one sector to another. Only subsequently did emigration set in.

The new industries of the Italian South had stirred up expectations that far exceeded their actual potential. Their labor demand had only absorbed the supply in the province capitals. All that was left for people coming from the countryside were the scraps, short-term and occasional jobs. Besides, since the local economic fabric and the pre-existing jobs had been destroyed, there had been a transition from “covert unemployment or underemployment to overt unemployment. Hence the recourse to emigration.”¹⁵

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

¹⁵ Guido Cella, *Industrializzazione ed emigrazione: il caso del Mezzogiorno nel decennio 1961-1971*, «Rassegna economica», 1974, 4, pp. 1067-1088. Salvatore Cafiero and Giovanni

The construction sites opened in 1955-56 by the Cassa del Mezzogiorno had played an important role in this dynamics. The fact that the jobs on these sites were temporary did not make a return to agriculture any easier. Once these jobs had reached their term, people preferred to look for another one.¹⁶

However, this model, although prevalent, was not universal. According to Cella, “*in two cases out of three, inter-sector transfer, mostly of temporary jobs, precedes actual emigration.*”¹⁷ As in the case of the Foggia area, where emigration had been the only form of exodus from agriculture, “not public works or anything else.”¹⁸

According to Barbagallo, between 1956 and 1964 the moving out of the surplus population caused a remarkable expansion of agriculture and a significant change in employment composition, with a decline of males and an increase by many percentage points of females working in family businesses and as self-employed workers.¹⁹ This optimistic assessment, however, collides with the conclusions of the SVIMEZ Investigation, according to which the decrease in demographic pressure only led to the abandonment of less productive land,²⁰ and tended to conceal some disquieting local situations, such as a lack of investments in the province of Chieti,²¹ scarcity of labor and eternally low productivity in the Tavoliere,²² the abandonment of agriculture in areas in inland Sardinia in favor of shepherding, which however was made increasingly difficult—and in Molise simply impossible²³—by the fragmentation of land ownership.²⁴

From the Sixties onward, long distance emigration—especially definitive emigration—declined irreversibly. Some old routes on the transoceanic migratory map had become impracticable, first and foremost that to the United States. Other destinations had again become inviting, even enticing, such as Brazil, but especially Argentina, demagogically extolled by its new caudillo, Juan Perón. Some new viable possibilities had opened up, namely, Australia—whose increasing popularity belied its many fragilities, and where abyssal cultural distances were developing—, Canada, and later Venezuela as well.

Enrico Marciani also argued that the abandonment of agriculture preceded the abandonment of homes, in, *L'emigrazione dalle zone povere*, in: A. Graziani, *L'economia italiana*, cit., p. 275.

¹⁶ Svimez, *Ricerca sull'emigrazione*, cit., *Rapporto generale*, p. 15.

¹⁷ G. Cella, *Industrializzazione*, cit., corsivo mio.

¹⁸ Svimez, *Indagine su Biccari*, cit., p. 16.

¹⁹ 1951-6: from 726,814 men to 581,593, and from 362,201 women to 405,572; among free-lance professions, women went up from 75,170 to 90,289. F. Barbagallo, *Lavoro e esodo*, cit., p. 206.

²⁰ Svimez, *Ricerca, Rapporto generale*, cit., p. 36.

²¹ Svimez, *Ricerca, Indagine su Guardiagrele*, cit., p. 21.

²² Ivi, *Indagine su Minervino Murge*, cit., p. 38.

²³ William A. Douglass, *Emigration in a South Italian Town. An Anthropological History*, Rutgers Univ. Press, New Brunswick 1984, p. 179.

²⁴ Ivi, *Indagine su Lodè*, Roma 1963, p. 5.

Once the myth of the Land of Cockaigne was buried once and for all, transoceanic migration was soon reduced to insignificance, crushed as it was by restrictive policies, financial collapses, and all sorts of disillusionment.²⁵

3. *The South takes the lead*

Ever since the beginning of the new migratory cycle, southern Italy had the lion's share. The northern exodus, with the exception of Veneto, was a thing of the past. Whatever the destination, everywhere the South took the lead. The new arrivals in Argentina "mainly came from northeastern and southern Italy."²⁶ Of the 500 thousand immigrants to Canada until 1975, 70% came from the South (Calabria, Sicilia, Abruzzo, Molise, Lazio, Veneto e and Campania).²⁷ From 1959 to 1979, "56% of Italian immigrants to Australia came from southern Italy, and 25.5% from the Italian islands, Calabria and Sicily being the regions with the highest percentages."²⁸ The South and Sicily also crowded Venezuela.²⁹

Migratory workers were prevalently employed in the urban construction industry and infrastructural works—the heart of the ambitious projects of Perón's Argentina—, in the later stage of Venezuelan modernization, and in postwar urban reconstruction in Europe. Even in countries where major industrial development had taken off, such as the German Federal Republic and northern Italy itself, adjustment to factory work was a laborious process, as the whole immigrant population had completely different competences, having up to then been mainly employed in short-term jobs in agriculture.

The resuming of transoceanic emigration began immediately after the war, following in the wake of the late-nineteenth-century migrations, except for that to the United States, which however for a short period did not stop accepting new arrivals. Argentina and Brazil opened up their frontiers again. Thanks to background political maneuvering, two agreements were signed with the Argentinian government,³⁰ which seemed to pave the way for a promising future. But this was not to be. The boasts of the dictator, however popular he may have been, proved empty. The country sank into a dramatic

²⁵ For the overall structure of the present essay, see Andreina De Clementi, *Il prezzo della ricostruzione*, Laterza, Roma 2010.

²⁶ Fernando Devoto, *In Argentina*, in Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, Emilio Franzina (eds), *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana. Arrivi*, Donzelli Editore, Roma 2002.

²⁷ Gabriele Scardellato, *A Century and More of Toronto Italia in College Street Little Italy*, «Studi Emigrazione», 2007, 166, pp. 273-294.

²⁸ Adriano Boncompagni, *In Australia*, in P. Bevilacqua, A. De Clementi, E. Franzina, *Storia dell'emigrazione*, cit., p. 116.

²⁹ Vittorio Cappelli, *In Venezuela*, ivi, p. 108.

³⁰ "The success of the agreement was assisted by the promotion of Argentina as a destination by the Italian Catholic world, first and foremost the Vatican and the Christian Democrat Party, and, in general, the Right, which saw Peron's Argentina as better suited to preserve the 'values' of Italians than France, which was preferred, instead, by the Left" (see F. Devoto, *In Argentina*, cit., p. 51).

economic crisis, and there were heavy repercussions on immigrants, including unemployment, drastic cuts to the sending of remittances back home, an unprecedented housing crisis, and a farewell to all hope of bringing the family over.³¹ With the bad news from overseas, arrivals began to shrink, down to 10,000 a year in 1955 and then to almost nothing from 1959 onward. Immigration to Brazil knew a similar decline, inevitably, since as early as 1902 the Italian government had put a stop to migration to that country following alarming reports. Since then, there had been no substantial change that could have boded for an inversion of the trend.

At any rate, in spite of having lost much ground, long-distance migration had gained new spaces in emerging countries. Immigrants got the hardest and worse-paid jobs, shacks and precarious lodgings, the contempt of natives, and ongoing discrimination. Besides being branded with racist stereotypes depicting them as sluggards, disloyal competitors for jobs, and womanizers, Italians were reproached their Fascist past and the lost war. In Australia and Canada, where workers arrived alone, women kept well clear and the days off were passed in inertia and boredom.³² Returns home were hence very common,³³ indeed, much more frequent than the scarce traces found in censuses suggest.

The Italian community in Australia had formed between 1941 and 1961 through the effect of chain migration, but the interning of 4727 of their own during the war had plunged it into a state of deep prostration. The fragile Australian economy had turned out to be less prosperous than expected. In the long inactive periods, the only available employment, even for the more specialized workers, was cutting cane in Queensland.³⁴

In Canada, instead, Italian immigrants were placed at a disadvantage by their urge to leave the countryside for the towns, and the fact that the natives missed the Belgians, which they regarded as excellent farmers and hard workers. Especially in 1952-54, Belgium was often a stopover for migrants waiting to find passage on a ship or fleeing the mines.³⁵

Remittances, letters, newspapers, new arrivals and new departures, all this coming and going of people and information kept alive relationships that were always threatening to break. Those who had gone across the ocean, or even just the Alps, had to deal both with their relatives and townspeople at home and with the host society. The channel with the former was always

³¹ Andreina De Clementi, *Il prezzo della ricostruzione. L'emigrazione italiana nel secondo dopoguerra*, Laterza, Roma 2010, pp. 15-18.

³² Ivi, pp. 73-89.

³³ In the 1960-69 period, 33.5%, which decreased to 25.8% in the long 1947-1980 period. The highest percentages were in Venezia Giulia (77.5%) and Veneto (71.3%), the lowest in Calabria (14.1%) and Molise (14%). In Stefano Luconi, *I paradigmi recenti dell'emigrazione italiana e il caso australiano*, «Studi emigrazione», 2009, 46, pp. 793-816.

³⁴ Francesco Cavallaro, *Italians in Australia: Migration and Profile*, «Altreitalia», 2003, 26, pp. 65-87.

³⁵ Maccari-Clayton, *From 'Watchdog' to 'Salesmen': Italian re-emigration from Belgium to Canada after the II World War*, «Studi emigrazione», apr.-giu. 2007, pp. 327-336.

kept open by recurrent confirmations of enduring bonds of affection and equally recurrent requests for money—for the town festival, the hospital, the kindergarten, the victims of epidemics, earthquakes, the war—which were never left unheeded.³⁶ From the latter, immigrants needed to defend themselves, and place their trust in past or found-again solidarities.

4. *The Italian neighborhoods*

A typical institution of transoceanic immigration had been the Italian neighborhood, hastily dubbed “Little Italy” everywhere, whereas the designation is actually only used in the United States. It is true that there were differences from one destination to another, but the US model had the advantage of linearity and reproducibility. Garroni summarizes the definition drawn up in the 1930s by the Chicago school as follows: a “social formation with its own form of inner organization connected to a spatial, geographical dimension [...] playing an autonomous role characterizing the whole group connected to it.”³⁷ We could add that Little Italy was capable of meeting a very broad range of demands, from assistance to new arrivals to the availability of services, the satisfaction of affective needs, and the many forms of reciprocity. It goes without saying that all this could hardly exorcise tensions and conflicts, first and foremost, intergenerational ones. The Italians were certainly the new arrivals, but they brought with them a cultural background—their origins, their history (Fascism and the war), and their social context—that were often such as to estrange them from their fellow citizens of long residency. Conflicts occurred regularly. The new arrivals were always poorer and less evolved, and tended not to identify with the goals achieved by earlier immigrants.

The primary prerequisites of the ethnic community were based on family-centered immigration and a molecular geographical identity founded on kinship and town networks. Thanks to this, the very recently created regional institutions of the new Italian republican state found it easy to forge ties with overseas associations and promote a large number of twinned federations. A special role was held by festivals of patron saints, which were identical—or at least so the participants imagined them to be—to those celebrated back home, and thus served as a catalyst for a strong identitarian need.

The vitality of these self-sufficient micro-societies was harshly put to the test in the second postwar period. The prosperity that came with the late 1950s completely changed the face of cities, modernized transportation, spawned new neighborhoods, and increased the variety of services, inducing

³⁶ Douglass gives a detailed account of the generosity of the Agnonesi abroad. *Emigration in a South Italian village*, cit., pp. 120 and *passim*.

³⁷ Maria Susanna Garroni, *Little Italies*, in P. Bevilacqua, A. De Clementi, E. Franzina, *Storia dell'emigrazione*, cit., p. 212.

Italians to scatter in suburban residential areas. The fortune of North American “Little Italies” thus proved to be inversely proportional to the gradual integration and social success of their inhabitants.

But inhomogeneous migratory policies could have equally inhomogeneous effects. This is borne out by Bruno Ramirez’s comparison of the USA and Canada.³⁸

The Canadian alternative had partially made up for the closing of US frontiers. Arrivals had increased from 152 thousand to 750 thousands, largely concentrated in Toronto and Montreal. By then, the USA were only accepting 25 thousand Italians a year, a drop in the ocean of 6-7 million old immigrants—now going back several generations—who had been completely Americanized by the war and then the Cold War. The new arrivals were now introduced to the American way of life without ever setting foot in the old neighborhoods. These neighborhoods, already suffering from the crisis, had been made even more precarious by their proximity to Afro-American neighborhoods formed of a recent, imposing migration—three million and a half from 1940 to 1966—and were thus often a theater for interracial conflicts. This situation induced the old inhabitants to leave the field, thus dealing “Little Italies” the death blow.

Compared to this debacle of the melting-pot, Canadian multiculturalism seemed better equipped for survival. Here the traditional role of old neighborhoods in welcoming new arrivals was revived, to the point that the Little Italy of Toronto had to expand its boundaries.³⁹

The effectiveness of this model was proved by its replication in the new postwar destinations. Regionally based residential groups had appeared in Australia, where people of Sicilian stock had distributed themselves in different areas and towns according to their places of origin—Messina, Naso, and Vizzini.⁴⁰

There was little doubt, however, that the availability of a network to refer to could pave the way for social success, as a number of examples bore out. Drawing on a study published in 1992, Fernando Devoto recounts the case of two groups, respectively from Molise and Basilicata, that had come to the Argentinian town of Rosario in the second postwar period. Within a few years, their destinies had gone separate ways. The first group, thanks to support from relatives and townspeople who had long managed to establish themselves in the bread baking trade, had worked their way up into the middle class. The immigrants of the second group, instead, completely

³⁸ Bruno Ramirez, *Decline, Death and Revival of Little Italies: the Canadian and U.S. Experience Compared*, «Studi Emigrazione», 2007, 166, pp. 337-354.

³⁹ G. Scardellato, *A century and More*, cit.

⁴⁰ F. Cavallaro, *Italians*, cit.

lacking contacts, had remained stuck with the first jobs they'd found in a steel works in the periphery of the town.⁴¹

"Little Italies," or whatever Italian neighborhoods were called, were an exclusive feature of transoceanic countries. The reasons for this can be easily imagined: the dominant characteristics of European emigration were temporariness and masculinity. In many cases lodgings were provided by the employers themselves to stack together whole teams of workers. In Belgian mining basins and, later, in the German Federal Republic, the men were amassed in the camps built by the Nazi occupants for Russian prisoners. Given the misery of these arrangements and the obstacles placed against family reunions, it goes without saying that a "grab-and-run" approach tended to prevail over long-term planning.

Vice versa, in a country like France, with a well-established immigration and a very high demand for farm labor, a country that had eventually opened up to Italians even the exclusive cultivation of sugar beet, Italian immigrants had a free hand, and could opt for scattering in the countryside or seeking refuge in urban enclaves, depending on their needs.

5. *The European pole*

The Rome treaty signed in 1958, which liberalized intercontinental circulation of people, boosted European countries' capability to attract immigration. Unlike their northern compatriots, southern immigrants had never had much familiarity with other European countries. A pioneering community, like that of Agnone in Molise, had moved over to Argentina in the old days, and had built its fortune there. Europe, instead, was only discovered in the second postwar period.⁴²

In the first postwar period, Switzerland and the large French-Belgian coal-mining region requested additional labor. France continued to accept Italian immigration in any form: assisted, free, or illegal, keeping up a double standard of strict laws and blatant tolerance of illegal immigration.

The experience in Belgium, which traded coal for men, left a deep scar. Coal by then was an obsolete source of energy, about to give way to petroleum. The two large cartels that controlled the mines were trying to exploit them to the limit without the least investment. Previously abandoned shafts were reopened and accidents, often deadly, followed one another without respite. The prospect of good wages prevailed over the dread of those humiliating conditions of life and work, but many still turned on their heels and left after the first descent into the shafts, or even before going down into them. This went on until the Marcinelle tragedy, when 262 workers died, 132 of whom were Italian, and which marked the end of that wave of Italian immigration.

⁴¹ F. Devoto, *In Argentina*, cit, p. 52.

⁴² W. A. Douglass, *Emigration in a South Italian village*, cit., p. 198.

Britain's ostracism is surprising. The Labor government and the powerful trade unions had made an iron deal. The working class was to bear the whole weight of the reconstruction in exchange for closing down the country's frontiers in defense of full employment. Within a few years, however, a labor shortage that it was by then too late to fill for caused the United Kingdom to lose its scepter as the world's top coal exporter. The power to enforce the deal depended on the power of each union, especially of those of the embattled local "lodges," which did not intend to minimize what the government had granted them in return. On the contrary, the less well-protected sectors of female employment opened the gates to foreign women. There was a large demand for women employees as textile workers, domestic helpers, and hospital orderlies. For the first time in the history of Italian emigration, throngs of young women crossed the Channel on their own, surpassing male immigration.⁴³

After concluding an unpredictably successful reconstruction, the German Federal Republic jumped to the top of the list of labor-importing countries. In the early 1960s it absorbed 40% of total Transalpine migration. At the end of the decade, it wrested first place from France.

The war defeat had caused an interruption in Italian-German work relations, which had previously been very intense. But the memory of this past collaboration must have been still alive, if in September 1961 the CEO of Volkswagen declared that the demand for foreign labor should be met exclusively with Italians, who had already worked there in 1938-39 building the factory and the city of Wolfsburg itself. This preference for Italians was reinforced by difficulties encountered by the Germans in cohabiting with groups of other foreign nationalities and the go-between role played by the Vatican with the parish priests and the ACLI Catholic associations to guarantee the docility of the selected subjects. The immigrants worked to their limit to earn as much as they could and speed up their return home,⁴⁴ multiplying several times the high turnover rate that was already so typical of this migratory cycle. Theirs was a true record: "In no other case," writes Enrico Pugliese, "had the difference between those who lived the migratory experience and those that remained in the countries of arrival been so small, or the number of returns home so high." Between 1955 to 1999, almost four million Italians went to Germany, and 466,370, or 12% of the total, stayed behind.⁴⁵ All this took place with the greatest satisfaction of the German authorities, which, until very recent times, had obstinately rejected the definition of Germany as an immigration country, insisting, against all evidence, on the formula of temporary hospitality, and had thus devised a

⁴³ In the British census of 1951, out of 34,000 Italians 21,000 (60%) were women. Lucio Sponza, *Gli italiani in Gran Bretagna. Profilo storico*, «Altretalia», January-June 2005, pp. 4-23.

⁴⁴ Katuscia Cutrone, *Italiani nella Germania degli anni '60. Immagine e integrazione dei "Gastarbeiter"*. Wolfsburg 1962-73, «Altretalia», 2006, 33, pp. 19-44.

⁴⁵ E. Pugliese, *In Germania*, in *Storia dell'emigrazione*, II, cit., p. 124.

variety of intimidating stratagems, from obstacles to family reunions to the imposing of limitations on access to schooling for the children of immigrants.

When northern Italy stepped in, competing with West Germany and Switzerland for labor, the southern migratory culture seized the opportunity.

6. *The unstoppable cataclysm*

During what Augusto Graziani defined as “the most brilliant period of expansion of Italian economy,”⁴⁶ that is, 1950-1963, the Italian demographic map was completely rearranged by what could be termed an unstoppable cataclysm, which knocked down barriers, remodeled the urban landscape, mixed up the dialects, swept away tastes and habits, and reawakened hopes and fears. All this happened as if a giant hand had emerged from nowhere had taken delight in subverting the order of things. Floods of men and women left their native villages for ever to move to less constricted centers, small and large cities that seemed to promise a better future. A dizzying industrialization drove this feverish mobility. As is known, it was not only the South that was emptied, and not just the capitals of the industrial triangle that were filled.

According to available statistics, between 1951 and 1971, the migratory balance reduced the population of the Italian South by four million. The most affected regions were Molise and Calabria, followed by Basilicata and Abruzzi, as opposed to an overall growth in Campania and Puglia. Only in the first two regions, however, was the drain on population roughly homogeneous. In Basilicata, the discovery of methane gas revitalized Matera. In Abruzzi, part of the emigration was directed within the region, to Pescara. Finally, not even the two regions that had suffered no depletion of their population actually came through unscathed. In Campania, the inland areas of Irpinia and Sannio had been depopulated, as had the province of Foggia in Puglia. To further complicate this picture, Pescara, Salerno, Bari, Taranto, Potenza and Cosenza had become destinations for urban migration.⁴⁷

In those twenty years the whole demographic distribution of the country was radically altered, partly as a result of road improvement. The Svimez investigation ascertained that the general trend to move towards larger and less isolated centers was determined by the most disparate reasons, including matrimonial exchanges between neighboring communities, demand for construction workers in expanding cities, demand for domestic workers,

⁴⁶ A. Graziani, *Introduzione*, in *L'economia italiana 1945-1970*, cit., p. 13.

⁴⁷ F. Barbagallo, *Lavoro e esodo*, cit., p. 187.

which attracted young peasant women, a wish for better services, such as schools, and the search for less taxing and precarious jobs, such as janitor.⁴⁸

As the same source showed, a secondary emigration of sorts was observed at Lucera. Here the inhabitants of the town of Biccari, in the province of Foggia, took over the services and land of inhabitants of Lucera who had left for the North.⁴⁹ The Svimez report also highlighted a decline of poorer centers and gradual abandonment of scattered housing in the province of Chieti.⁵⁰

The range of migratory opportunities was public domain, so that in every town emigrants used just about all of them.⁵¹ The underlying strategies must thus have reflected specific calculations and complex judgments. The alternative was the departure only of the men with the plan of returning, or the departure of the whole family to a location a little more than five hundred kilometers away.

It is hard to say what the decisive argument for one or the other option was in each case. Certainly their bond with the land made small landowners reluctant to leave for good, burning all bridges behind them. No such qualms, instead, retained the day laborer class. When, in 1958, the *imponibile di manodopera*, an obligation for farmland owners to hire workers, was declared unconstitutional and large landowners consequently hurriedly dropped intensive agriculture, the only alternative left was to go away.

The urge to change their lives was also fueled by forms of emulation and reciprocal reassurance that turned individual expectations into collective behaviors. The most popular destinations were suddenly set aside for other very promising but still unexplored ones. Information ran from mouth to mouth. No decision was ever taken blind.

If seasonal commuting beyond the Alps was preferred to a leap into the unknown in the industrial triangle, it was because it offered not only higher salaries and very low mobilization costs, but especially the certainty of returning home, keeping ties with the land unbroken, and an immediate improvement of the standard of living. On the other pan of the scales was the glum everyday life of those who spent most of the year in solitude and skimped and scraped to save as much as possible. And since such

⁴⁸ Svimez, *Ricerca su le migrazioni interne nel Mezzogiorno. Rapporto generale sulla ricerca*, cit., pp. 19-20.

⁴⁹ Id., *Indagine su Biccari*, Roma 1963, p. 15. In Altopiano, in the province of Cosenza, farmers moved into town “to replace the inhabitants of the old neighborhoods.” F. Piselli, *Parentela e emigrazione*, cit., p. 322.

⁵⁰ Svimez, *Ricerca ... Indagine su Guardiagrele*, cit., p. 4.

⁵¹ Of the 11,035 inhabitants of the town of Guardiagrele, in the province of Chieti, 3,000 had gone for 9-10 months to Switzerland, Germany or France between 1951 and 1961, and had returned home at Christmas time, following a “seasonal flow that is typical of many southern regions.” Ivi, p. 11. At Agnone, in the 1946-1972 period, 708 men and women had gone out to France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium or England. W. A. Douglass, *Emigration*, cit., p. 197.

circumstances were fit to be borne by a male member of a stable and efficient family, ultimately “the success of emigration depended on the wife.”⁵²

The Turin or Milan alternative appeared to be more fraught with peril. One did not save as much, and integration—first and foremost in the form of finding a home—was far more onerous and preceded by solitary departures and late reunions, or else the family would join the immigrant ahead of time, at the price of sharing his hardship. But in the long run, once the hardest trials had been surmounted, things could balance out and the new life maintain its promises. Returns to the home town became increasingly rarer, and memories tended to fade. In any case, as is usual in any migratory phenomenon, there were countless changes of mind.

The first impact on passing the Gothic line was shocking. A young male, whether married or not, would leave to scout the feasibility of the plan and make the necessary arrangements for the coming of his wife and children, or other relatives. But he did not find any Little Italy to receive him, no community of fellow countrymen to guide his first steps in that unknown world. There was no previous migratory history to build upon. What they found, instead, were corrugated shack towns known as “*coree*” and exclusion and rejection mechanisms activated by the host society and the Italian State itself.

The harshest of these mechanisms was the Fascist law against urbanization. This law remained in force until 1961, which is to say that for almost the whole duration of the 1958-1962 quadriennium—the most critical period—the inflow into the large industrial cities of Italy was totally illegal. No official residence meant no employment card, with all the attending consequences: unregistered and underpaid work, and no access to medical care or council housing. Member of Parliament Terracini had actually presented an abrogative bill, which was unanimously approved by the Senate on 17 February 1960⁵³, but the Chamber of Deputies only passed it a year later.

This forced marginality exacerbated spontaneous hostility of earlier immigrants against new arrivals. Stereotypes became like hard-to-remove stones: “We are from southern Italy,” argued Alessandro, a twenty-four-year-old porter from Poggio Reale, in reply to Franco Alasia’s questions, “they call us *terroni*, [they tell us] we are dirty and do not like to work [...]” Someone says to me: “You are a *terrone*, you do not want to work [...] you people come here to steal bread from the Milanese’s tables.” I reply: “We’ll see who gets tired first. Because here they are all used to working in

⁵² Amalia Signorelli, *Migrazioni e incontri etnografici*, Sellerio Editore, Palermo 2006, p. 139.

⁵³ Alvo Fontani, *L’emigrazione meridionale. Un bilancio negativo*, «Cronache meridionali», 1960, 9, p. 557.

factories. They have their nice clean work, they are specialized, they have gone to school, and they don't do anything."⁵⁴

Mobility turned differences into an ethnical hierarchy: "I am still not convinced that a Southerner can become an honest and loyal person like everybody else [...] When it is time to act they are quick to draw knives [...] Girls look at a person's culture, and we in Upper Italy can talk better," said twenty-five-year-old Siro, from Polese, outlining the terms of of his poor-man's sense of superiority.⁵⁵

7. Roles and gender paths

Male absence heaped upon women the most disparate tasks, from taking care of small holdings to managing the family and administering remittances. The doors of places that up to then had been off-limits to them, such as banks, post offices, and notarial studies, were now thrown open. Even the most exclusive roles became accessible to them. The Lucanian village of Satriano celebrated the festival of Saint Antony on June 13, a period where the absence of able-bodied men was so absolute that the statue was shoulder-borne by wives, daughters and sisters.⁵⁶

Most agricultural work now fell to women. In 1960, while the national average was more or less balanced—31% was done by men, 30.6% by women—one only needed to narrow down the focus to find that the percentage was 19% vs. 12.3% in the North, and was reversed in the southern regions.⁵⁷

The data on gender-related extra-domestic work was discomfoting. In the whole peninsula, more than 50% of workers were immigrant males, a percentage that rose to 65% in the industrial triangle, while immigrant females accounted for 10-20% of the total workforce. The gap grows when one looks at industry separately from agriculture. Female workers in the industry were 46.8%, twice as many as southern female workers.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Franco Alasia and Danilo Montaldi, *Milano Corea*, Donzelli Editore, Roma 2010 (Feltrinelli 1960), p. 199.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 225.

⁵⁶ D. Scutari, *Emigrazione*, cit., p. 571.

⁵⁷ Campania m. 31%, f. 52.3%; Abruzzo-Molise m. 46.7%, f. 61.6%; Puglia Basilicata Calabria m. 44%; f. 59.8%; Sicily m. 40.9%, f. 29.5%; Sardinia m. 46.6%, f. 19.5%. The total is m. 41.8% and f. 44.5%. As regards the active population, the natural average of 37% grew to 42.9% in the Triangle and descended to 31.4% in the South as a whole. These data are drawn from a research published by Nora Federici in the Journal *Statistica*, extensively quoted in Antonio Gerace, *Gli elettrodomestici nella società meridionale*, «Nord e Sud», July 1961, p. 98.

⁵⁸ More specifically: in Campania 19.0%; in Abruzzo and Molise 14.8%; in Puglia, Basilicata and Calabria 18.7%; in Sicily 21.4%; in Sardinia 14.6%. National average: 19.7%.

This gap was in its turn both the cause and the effect of an unequal sharing of the most representative products of early mass consumption society, viz., electric appliances. It is not that their introduction into family homes stopped short of the most disadvantaged areas of Italy; indeed, here remittances from abroad would have been more than sufficient for their purchase. What was unequal was their typological distribution. In southern regions there were few washing machines and dishwashers, but many more television sets.

According to an unusual investigation conducted at the time,⁵⁹ one of the most evident causes of this was the inadequacy of the electric power network in the Italian South, which drastically limited the use of electric power for any other purpose than illumination. Another not negligible aspect was a typically peasant mistrust of innovation. The author also ventured to hypothesize that the rarity of appliances replacing human (more specifically, female) work was also due to the low numbers of women working outside of the home. There was thus ample availability of labor for domestic chores, and none of the need for labor saving that was felt especially in cities.

Changing our viewpoint, I would add that, as the mayor of Sant'Arcangelo quoted above clearly saw, the dissemination of the televised Word could awaken a desire for another life and other worlds. Actually, when we think about it, even nineteenth-century emigration had been fueled by the narration of other people's experiences. Traveling craftsmen and workers would astound their fellow townspeople on their return with their stories about faraway places and indescribable riches. These accounts would gnaw at the minds of their hearers until they induced them to action.⁶⁰ What had changed compared to those times was the medium, but not the message, and oral accounts still prevailed.

Female unemployment in the South kept getting worse. In a study promoted by the Committee of Ministers for the South, one reads:

The current situation is especially serious for the female population, whose activity rate is very low, especially in the South, where only 15% of the women perform paid work out of the home. Rates of female employment have suffered from the buoyant male work offer and the very scarce professional training of women, which prevents many women previously employed in agriculture and many housewives from finding a place in productive processes. There are nevertheless some clues [...] suggesting that employment of women in the southern area of the country would be higher if there were more job opportunities, and more adequate ones.⁶¹

These clues included "a growing percentage of women in the total number of migrants for work reasons, a significant quota of entries into workforces

⁵⁹ A. Gerace, *Gli elettrodomestici*, cit., *passim*.

⁶⁰ Andreina De Clementi, *Di qua e di là dall'oceano. Emigrazione e mercati nel meridione (1860-1930)*. Carocci Editore, Roma 1999, pp. 26-33.

⁶¹ A. Fontani, *L'emigrazione meridionale*, cit., p. 563.

abroad by women who had originally migrated as non-workers, and, above all, an increase of women looking for their first employment.”⁶²

At the time of the great emigration, women had certainly not stood by and watched, but the rule was that they would either travel with their fathers, husbands or children, or catch up with them later. This did not constitute an obstacle to their entry into the foreign labor market once they had gotten across the border. In other words, they left cocooned in a family role and arrived ready to assume a social role. But at the time few women traveled alone.

The novelty observed by the Committee of Ministers for the South had already caught the eye of the more attentive observers even before it appeared in official reports. In a short investigation on Irpinia published in 1960, one reads: “[A] conspicuous participation of women and girl in emigration first occurred in the province of Avellino only after the last war. This had never happened in the past, although even before World War I there had been periods of intense emigration.”⁶³ One only needed to look at the figures: From 1948 to 23 April 1957, 1,000 out of the 1,860 inhabitants of the town of Scampitello in Upper Irpinia had emigrated. Of these, 450 were men and 550 women, headed for various domestic and foreign destinations. In 1953, the author goes on, the Labor Office had hired 2,360 immigrants. 1,584 of these were aged between 14 and 30, and comprised 1,081 men, 729 unmarried, and 503 women, 382 unmarried. Out of another group of 5,771 individuals, 1,500 were women, all classified as housewives. Girls mostly headed for Switzerland, where they would be employed as domestic workers. Emigration kept increasing. In March and April 1960 alone, Switzerland had received 2,000 young workers, male and female. Another 1,500 headed for Germany in the summer months, when agricultural work intensified: “[...] the consequence is that, even after such an incisive drain on human energies, Irpinia nevertheless remains an inexhaustible repository of unutilized productive forces.”

At the time of the cutting of the Suez Canal, many women had left the province of Catanzaro to work as “nannies for the children of wealthy foreign women living in Alexandria, with a salary of about one hundred lire a month, while in their towns on average they earned ten.”⁶⁴ This had been a hundred years earlier, and must have been a rather exceptional occurrence, if the fact that “dozens of girls of eighteen years of age and above are moving, alone, to northern Italy to look for a job in the factories” was indicated as

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ Enrico Vuotto, *L'esodo dai comuni irpini*, «Cronache meridionali», 1960, 9, pp. 575-581, esp. p. 575.

⁶⁴ G. Pace, *Lo spopolamento*, cit., p. 567.

one of the new events of the last three years.⁶⁵ In Molise, Agnone did not lag behind: of its 708 emigrants to Europe in 1946-1972, 316 were women.⁶⁶

8. *How savings and remittances were used*

In an essay of 1967, Pasquale Saraceno affirmed: “For the first time in its history, the South appears to participate in the general process of expansion of the country, at a pace that is not any slower than the very intense one the more advanced regions have enjoyed.”⁶⁷ This was proved by a growth of per capita income at an average yearly rate of 5.1% over the previous fifteen years. Since all of this increase had been destined to consumption, it was logical to ascribe all of it to the inflow of external resources, that is, public expenditure, private investments, and the remittances of immigrants.

According to reliable calculations, these last averaged half a million lire a year, twice the average individual income back home.⁶⁸ This gap was much higher in the poorer areas, such as the province of Avellino, where in 1958 the average per capita income was 106,473 lire.⁶⁹

A chapter in a research promoted by Formez in 1975—“Progetto di studio operativo sull’emigrazione meridionale nelle zone di esodo”—tells us a lot about remittances. The investigation was carried out by the ISVI of Catania on the basis of 594 interviews with as many families variously involved in emigration. The interviews were collected in inland Sicily, more precisely, in fifteen towns in two provinces, those of Enna and Caltanissetta, that “have some of the highest emigration rates and are possibly the less developed territorial aggregate in the whole South.”⁷⁰

The investigation essentially dwells on two fundamental themes: the saving capacity of migrating subjects and the use of remittances, around which emigration revolved.

The former showed two different dynamics: on the one hand, a trend to accumulate as much money as possible to the detriment of consumption, typical of temporary male emigration, on the other, the high expenses of moving and integrating a whole family, which allowed little or no saving. Even in cases where family reunions were put off, a “very well-paid job” was needed. In sum, moving within Italy was very different from moving abroad. And, in any case, “abroad” designated anything but a homogeneous reality.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ W. A. Douglass, *Emigration*, cit., p. 197.

⁶⁷ Pasquale Saraceno, *Il Mezzogiorno quindici anni dopo*, in: A. Graziani, *L’economia italiana*, cit., p. 265.

⁶⁸ S. Cafiero and G. E. Marciani, *L’emigrazione dalle zone povere*, cit., p. 277.

⁶⁹ E. Vuotto, *L’esodo dai comuni irpini*, cit., p. 578.

⁷⁰ Nanda D’Amore, Emanuela D’Andrea, Maria Scuderi, *Bilanci familiari e rimesse degli emigrati meridionali*, «Studi emigrazione», 1977, 45, pp. 3-37.

Whereas money sent from Switzerland and Germany remained constant over time and even grew, “in Frances, Belgium and Great Britain overall remittances are declining. This is a sign that the situation is becoming increasingly difficult for immigrants, both from an occupational standpoint and due to the increase of the cost of living.”

As to how it was employed, half of that money was spent to meet everyday expenses (food, clothing, etc.), while the other half could be used:

- to repay debts incurred to build one’s house, to support the family during periods of forced unemployment, etc.;
- to purchase durable goods, first and foremost a car, which “for many emigrants [...was] concrete proof of the economic prosperity achieved in emigration,” a status symbol. All the more flaunted when the emigrant was a bachelor, which proved the “strong consumerist drive characterizing younger emigration.” These goods included house furniture and electric appliances, which I discussed above.

Marriage was its own chapter of expense, not only and not so much because of dowries, which could actually induce fathers to expatriate, but were no longer compulsory, but because of “expenses for wedding celebrations, [which] require[d] many years of saving.” At Altopiano “there are some who spend the savings of ten years of emigration in a single day for a daughter’s wedding.”⁷¹

As to real estate investments, housing accounted for 60 to 80% of the total, whether it was a purchase, a renovation, the enlargement of an old building, or a do-it-yourself proposition with the assistance of family members. Land had lost all its real and symbolical value, and was now being monetized by using it for construction. To draw the sums, “the fundamental objective of emigrants is still the family home, which is the principal investment, and they are not satisfied until they manage to save enough to buy or build it.”⁷²

Overall, this objective was achieved. At the end of the interview, a large majority of the interviewees (84.4%) declared themselves satisfied with their decision and its results. With great disconcertment of the authors:

It seems that only very few realize that their savings, the fruit of their sacrifices while in emigration, have managed to improve their living conditions only slightly and transitorily, but have not changed their environment of origin in any way, nor have they triggered any process whereby it is easier to find a job without having to emigrate.⁷³

⁷¹ F. Piselli, *Parentela*, cit., p. 269.

⁷² D’Amore, D’Andrea, Scuderi, *Bilanci familiari*, cit., p. 30.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

9. *The future in the past*

This upheaval did not result in the palingenesis of the departure areas that many had hoped for. The undeniably most conspicuous results were the wave of affluence deriving from this unprecedented increase of expense capability, and a colossal demographical drain resulting in a systematic or definitive relocation of the best energies.

In spite of this, southern society remained essentially unchanged, with its agriculture still firmly anchored in subsistence. From 1948 to 1959, another 212,148 new micro-holdings were added to the already innumerable existing ones. Since their total surface was 263,048 hectares, their average extension was little more than one hectare each.⁷⁴ The fragmentation of the land seemed never ending,⁷⁵ and agriculture accounted for an ever decreasing share of the overall income. “The simultaneous presence of multiple sources of income,” the Svimez investigation⁷⁶ concluded, “results in a high standard of living, but at the same time determines a situation of static equilibrium, due to which no radical transformation of economic, social and cultural structures is enacted.”⁷⁷

What few changes there were altered community hierarchies. “In many escape areas,” there was a growth in “the relative importance of the smallholder,”⁷⁸ now freed from dependence on temporary farm work. Local notables became the shadow of themselves, being now surpassed in wealth and prestige by the more enterprising among the immigrants. Craftsmen, the second pillar of the local economy, experienced a similar decline. Since it was always the more educated and ambitious who left, “the local people now form a residual category of sorts, haphazardly lumping together the elderly, the handicapped, and the less creative.”⁷⁹ A harsh judgment, and a rather excessive one, which did not spare even Agnone, a town that had known a brilliant season at the time of the first emigration wave but had now plunged back into insignificance.

⁷⁴ Distributed as follows: Campania: 77,851 units for a total surface of 64,213 hectares; Abruzzo and Molise: 47,759 units for a total surface of 49,128 hectares; Puglia: 58,325 for a total surface of 98,952 ha; Basilicata: 17,461 units for a total surface of 36,220 hectares; Calabria: 10,732 for a total surface of 14,535 ha. F. Barbagallo, *Esodo*, cit., p. 220.

⁷⁵ Douglass calculates that in Agnone in 1816 there were 7,838 individual plots, which in 1950 had increased to 41,753. W. A. Douglass, *Emigration*, cit., p. 176.

⁷⁶ Svimez, *Indagine su Guardiagrele*, cit., p. 28.

⁷⁷ A diagnosis that is anything but obsolete, as illustrated by a recent book edited by Bruno Amoroso, *Il “Mezzogiorno” d’Europa*, ed. Diabasis, Reggio Emilia 2011.

⁷⁸ Svimez, *Le migrazioni interne, Rapporto generale sulla ricerca*, cit., p. 31.

⁷⁹ W. A. Douglass, *Emigration*, cit., p. 204.