Part Two: The Garibaldi Effect

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The Importation of Negative Italian Stereotypes

Commentary: About twenty-five years ago I visited the Basilicata region of Italy. Among the people I encountered was a local official who had a background as a literary critic. In our conversation he asked me why the American media/literature persists in portraying Italian immigrants and Italian-Americans as undereducated, immoral, criminal types. He pointed out that the stereotype does not match the millennia old history or culture of his region. He also asserted that the region had sent to America the strongest, brightest and the most ambitious of its youth. He said, that only they had the strength to survive and adapt in 19th century America. I could only agree that Italy has long history of significant accomplishments. Italian immigrants and Italian-Americans have carried that tradition of accomplishment forward. However, all too often, those accomplishments take a backseat to the more negative and unfair profiles projected in our media.

This article reflects on the origins of the immigration experience of 19th century Italian emigres, including the evolution and attachment of negative stereotypes. I have taken as the title “The Garibaldi Effect”, appreciating that it is unusual to associate Garibaldi with the origins of negative Italian/Italian-American stereotypes.

Background to 19th Century Italian Immigration

Every immigrant group upon arriving in America has faced its share of prejudices and negativity. It has been well documented in American history that this is especially true in American recessionary economic downturns, as occurred in the 1870’s. During difficult economic times anti-immigrant sentiment can escalate, even to violent levels. Certainly, for Italians, as well as other Southern and Eastern Europeans immigrating in the late 19th century, this was the case. The prejudices encountered by 19th century European ethnic groups including negative stereotypes, often traced back to centuries old culture wars. However, the application of certain persistent negative class and moral stereotypes to Italian immigrants, and their extension to multi-generational Italian-Americans is inconsistent with the treatment of other assimilating groups. The persistent linkage of Italian immigrants and Italian- Americans to organized crime, lack of education, rudimentary culture, and racial divergence, for example, have long been applicable negative features of the Italian- American experience. Yet historically in America, negative stereotypes were not always part of the Italian profile.

The First Italian Immigrants to the U.S.

As discussed in Part One of this article, the profile of Italian immigrants in the first sixty years or so of this nation’s history was largely positive. The roughly ten thousand or so Italians who came to the U.S. between 1790 and 1850 were highly educated and skilled, many were already successful in Europe in business, academics and the arts before arriving in the U.S. It is estimated that approximately half the emigres returned to Europe after completing their American business contracts. While the numbers of Italian immigrant’s present in the U.S was quite small they were nevertheless professionally impactful. Early 19th century Italian immigrants successfully lived and functioned individually or in small social units within various American communities. As to the half that remained as permanent residents, they appear to have assimilated easily into American culture and society. Because of their very small numbers and access to higher social class standing, it is rare to find Italian or Italian-American enclaves in the U.S. prior to 1850. For those of this group who raised families, their children blended easily into the American cultural fabric virtually becoming “invisible” within a generation.

The Second Wave of Italian Immigration 1850-1880 - The Italian Unification Wars

The 1850-1880 period of American history saw a substantial uptick in Italian immigration to the U.S. This is a time associated with the civil liberation conflicts of Italian Unification. American immigration data estimates that approximately 10,000 Italians arrived in the decade of 1850 with a doubling of that number in each of the two succeeding decades for a total of about 75,000 by 1880. Many of those individuals who arrived in this thirty-year period were recognized as “political refugees”, or 1848 ers. This group, in retrospect, represented the first 2% of the estimated 4.5 million Italian immigrants who would arrive between 1850 and 1930. As the first 2% they hold a unique place in the Italian-American story.

This first 2% were recognized by American society as fleeing political persecution. Most of these individuals were of at least Italian middle-class backgrounds with substantial education. Politically, they supported and fought on the Italian peninsula for constitutionally recognized civil rights, a constitutionally based equitable legal system, and a republican or constitutional monarchy. Most self-identified as Masonic, Carbonari or “Young Italia” in terms of their political/organizational affiliations.

Their political principles were closely aligned with many American political values. They were accepted as kindred “freedom” fighters seeking temporary safety from extended European/Italian reformist struggles. They were generally held in a positive view by the American political establishment much of which held Masonic philosophic leanings. Like the earlier arriving Italian immigrants their numbers were small and the opportunity to reside in “Italian” enclaves was limited. Many of these Italian emigres were generously supported by the American public as they engaged in small American business endeavors. Their endeavors were designed for their short- term support. Most hoped for an opportunity to return to a united Italy. As many had been forced to flee Italy without the opportunity to take any accumulated wealth with them, they relied on their business/professional backgrounds for self-support.

Probably the best known of these political refugees was Guiseppe Garibaldi. Garibaldi is known today as an anti-colonial South American revolutionary and an Italian Unification hero. Garibaldi briefly came to the U.S. as a political refugee in the early 1850’s. While in the Americas, he supported himself as a merchant ship Captain, his profession, and worked with his friend and fellow Italian revolutionary Antonio Meucci. Meucci is an even better example of the Italian political refugee of this second wave.

Meucci is credited by many as the actual inventor of the telephone. Upon Muecci’s arrival in the U.S. in 1850 he started a small business, a candle making enterprise in Staten Island. Garibaldi and several other Italian refugees briefly assisted Muecci in this business. Muecci’s Italian background was as an electrical and chemical engineer. His wife, who emigrated with him, became ill and invalid in 1856. It is said, he devised a communication device, the forerunner of the telephone, to connect her bedroom to his factory in order to monitor her well-being. This was twenty years before Bell’s patent in 1876.

Reviewing Trenton’s Italian immigrant data from 1860-1880 we see a similar political refugee pattern. During this period, according to U.S. census data, Trenton’s population grew from 17,000 in 1860, to 29,000 in 1880. The Italian immigrant population in Trenton was too small to be counted “officially” but our own community records indicate that the Italian immigrant population in Trenton, mostly from Basilicata, went from 3 in 1862 to about 35 by 1880.

From our Trenton records, it appears that these early Italian immigrants to the city worked primarily in self-employed small businesses. These businesses would have been dependent on support from the “non-Italian” residents of the city. The numbers of Italians were too small to suggest an independent community support structure. What is interesting is that these initial individuals did not report experiencing any local barriers, prejudices and stereotypes that hindered their business efforts. Those types of encounters did not start until the mid-1880’s.

Garibaldi’s Successful Military Campaigns Thru 1860

As we know Garibaldi did not remain in the U.S. but instead returned to Italy and participated in the final phase of the “War of Unification” in northern Italy. This brought the Royal House of Savoy to power under the constitutional monarchy of Victor Emmanuel II in the mid-1850’s.

Garibaldi’s successes in the north were followed by an expedition, with Savoy support, to Sicily. In 1860, under Garibaldi’s military leadership he landed a military force of 1,000 men on the Sicilian Island where anti-Bourbon rebellion had already been fomenting. Garibaldi was able to organize an irregular volunteer Sicilian force in the central highlands of the island. Striking from the island’s interior, Garibaldi was able to attack and isolate the 30,000 Bourbon troops stationed in fortresses along the coastal plains. He was aided by the fact that the Bourbon forces on the island could not be adequately reinforced from the mainland. Isolated, the Bourbon forces in their Sicilian fortifications fell one at a time to the insurgent Garibaldi led irregulars.

The State of Basilicata, one of the mainland States of the southern Italian Kingdom of the Two Sicilies had been in open “Briganti” rebellion since 1858. By the time of Garibaldi’s success in Sicily, the State of Basilicata had independently expelled the Bourbon Monarchy’s military from its borders. Basilicata had then established its own provisional government, and in the summer of 1860 declared its intent to unify with the constitutional monarchy of northern Italy. It is important to note that Basilicata’s provisional government was established before Garibaldi extended his military campaign to the southern mainland.

Basilicata’s Role in the Southern Unification Military Campaign

Italian history understates Basilicata’s critical strategic role in the success of Garibaldi’s Sicilian and southern Italian campaigns. Basilicata’s rebellion with its strategic central mountainous location forced the Bourbon military, 100,000 strong, to divide into three parts, with a third each on the east and west coastal mainland plains. (Note: This was done done in order to confine the rebellion to Basilicata and control the Kingdom’s greatest population centers along the coasts). The last third of the Bourbon army was allocated to the island of Sicily where civil unrest was ongoing. The division of the Bourbon forces was critical to Garibaldi’s campaign strategy. Otherwise, he would have faced the largest, best trained and equipped military force on the Italian peninsula.

After Garibaldi Sicilian success in late 1860, he landed a Sicilian based force of 5,000 men on the mainland of southern Italy. Basilicata welcomed him enthusiastically. (Note: the bulk of Garibaldi’s irregular force on Sicily remained behind, containing the Bourbon forces that had not yet surrendered) In fact, the territory of Basilicata became his base command center. Basilicata was also a major source of the manpower for the creation of his second irregular army. He was able to quickly create, supply and train a highly motived force in excess of 40,000 young men. Ultimately, using the same strategy he had used in Sicily of striking from the central mountains, he forced the Bourbon Monarch out of his fortresses and capitol city of Naples into the northwest corner of his Kingdom. It is only after Garibaldi had the Bourbon Monarchy trapped that King Vitor Emmanuel II made his military move southward with his “regular” army. Upon his arrival Victor Emmanual took command of the successful siege and defeat of the Bourbon King.

Garibaldi’s Fall from Italian Political Grace 1861-1863

I recited the background above to be clear that to this point, southern Italy and Basilicata’s volunteers were enthusiastic, motivated and committed to unification. Even as Victor Emmanuel and his forces moved southward Garibaldi urged him to seize the opportunity to annex central Italy, the so-called Vatican States. To do so however, would have involved historic political risk. Any past Italian civil strife which threatened Papal sovereignty had led to the intervention of the military of the French, Spanish and Austrian Catholic Kings in support of the Vatican. As a result, Victor Emmanuel avoided threatening Vatican independence on his march southward.

Upon his arrival in the south, Victor Emmanuel instead discharged Garibaldi and most of his irregular forces from the field. The irregulars, Italian unification patriots, were unceremoniously instructed to return to their homes. Regardless of what I am sure were many reasons for the dismissal, it left only Victor Emmanuel and his regular forces in control. Real political and military power in the south, as a result, was then solely under the control of the Savoy King and northern political elites.

The Beginning of the Garibaldi Effect

After the 1861 surrender of the Bourbon King, what followed was a southern Italian plebiscite in which the former citizens of Kingdom of the Two Sicilies voted overwhelmingly 95%+ to unify with northern Italy under the constitutional Monarchy of Victor Emmanuel II. However, full Italian unification with the incorporation of the central Vatican States remained out of reach.

1861 found Garibaldi a popular national and international hero. His exploits and successes had taken on legendary proportion, but his work toward full unification remained incomplete. His place in Italian history would have remained unblemished had he not taken an action which was perceived as an enormous political and international threat to the stability of the newly formed Italian Union and the King. I believe this action led indirectly to the origin of the negative stereotypes associated with later Italian immigrants, the “Garibaldi Effect”.

The Garibaldi Betrayal

The action that Garibaldi took was to secretly gather weapons in northern Italy, without the knowledge or consent of Victor Emmanuel’s regime. He then returned to Sicily in preparation for organizing independently, an expeditionary force to invade the Vatican States. As he had done in the conquest of southern Italy, Garibaldi anticipated reconstituting an irregular volunteer force of southern nationalist for this military mission.

To discuss the political intrigues that followed Garibaldi’s second landing in Sicily would take too long. By way of a short cut synopsis, he raised less than the volunteer forces he hoped for in Sicily and the Savoy government became aware of his plans to land on the mainland. Once he landed his small force on the southern mainland, the Savoy government sent regular army troops to intercept him. At the confrontation Garibaldi refused to have his men return fire resulting in several of Garibaldi’s men being killed or wounded. Garibaldi, himself was severely wounded and imprisoned in 1863.

As a result of Garibaldi’s personal popularity, his actions and his sway over nationalist volunteers the regime was obviously concerned. It could not risk the international political consequences of a southern force acting on its own. The Savoy government ordered all of the men who had served as irregulars with Garibaldi in the first southern campaign to self-report to prison. Many did and faced long indeterminant sentences mostly in northern Italian prisons, many died there. Those men who refused to self-report were sought out. Some resisted or fled into the mountains especially in rural Basilicata. A new resistance began to develop in isolated areas especially in the rural parts of the south. The failure to comply with the Government’s order to voluntarily surrender to prisons was followed by the implementation of a stringent and aggressive Government military crackdown. The military crackdown included harsh treatment and intimidation against the general southern civilian population who were viewed as sympathizers. To reinforce the military crackdown the regime and the Italian Parliament enacted legislation in 1863 known as Legge Pica. Essentially, the legislation suspended all civil rights in the south and implemented martial law.

Propaganda: The Second “Briganti” War

The military-based suppression of civil rights in 1863 and the resistance that followed, led to an estimated civilian death toll of between 100,000 and 1,000,000 southern Italians over the next thirty years. (The death toll is an estimate because the Government failed to keep accurate records and victims were buried in mass and unmarked graves. This record keeping failure, coupled with a mass exodus of civilians makes an accurate count unattainable). However, the severity of the suppression and the reports of the atrocities were so bad that there was public political outcry. Enough outcry to force the regime to manufacture a public justification, a propaganda war, for its unprecedented actions. Initially, those who resisted or were victims of the suppression were simply labelled in the northern Italian press, as criminals and outlaws. This was done by repurposing and applying the former Bourbon term Briganti, (brigand) to those resisting or being victimized.

The English and American press picked up on this labelling in covering the unification process. However, the term Brigand as understood by most Americans, conveys a meaning of criminality arising or motivated typically by greed or avarice. It is not a term that Americans associate with resistance to political suppression or denial of basic civil rights. As a result, you see, by misidentification, of an image being exported of the southern Italian acting in concert for a criminal enterprise, not civil rights. This “criminal” vs.” resistance fighter narrative has been largely maintained in Italy until this century. I note that recent Italian history is undergoing some revision on the matter, Briganti is now being romanticized into something akin to a “Robinhood” characterization in modern Italian pop culture.

A more accurate depiction of what a Briganti resistance fighter was can be found in a U.S. military book from the 1980’s. This book written by a retired Army officer traces the evolution of classic modern guerrilla warfare and its tactics. It identifies the origin of such tactics with these resistance fighters in the mountains of Basilicata. In fact, the “Briganti” fighter is highly associated with the resistance organized and executed in Basilicata and its surrounding regions. Basilicata’s mid-1860’s identification as a Briganti center resulted in a levelling of the government’s most aggressive assaults on this region’s population. It also marks the beginning of this region’s massive exodus of civilians, many of whom came to America.

As continued news of the increasing number of atrocities got out, the Briganti label quickly became insufficient to justify the acts being committed. There was renewed but minor, political pushback to the programs. The public knew that organized crime had existed in Italy’s coastal and urban areas for centuries but had never resulted in the military level suppression being seen in the south. Large scale summary executions, indeterminate prison sentences without trial, the burning of villages, the rape and murder of women and children were not typical governmental responses to “criminality”.

Undeterred by the renewed, if limited, public outcry the Italian government by the middle of the 1860’s decided to double down on the propaganda. Typically, the goal of propaganda in such circumstances is to dehumanize the victims and morally elevate the persecutors. The degree of separation between victim and persecutor is necessary in order to psychologically support the individuals carrying out the suppression and to justify to the public as to the why the actions are necessary. Military units who participated in the massacres of unarmed civilians such as in the Basilicata town of Auletta, over a thousand unarmed men, women and children killed, were given unit citations of valor for their actions. As it was clear that these victims had not been actively engaged in resistance the justification became, they were guilty of actively supporting Briganti criminals. The victims themselves. were characterized in the Italian press as inherently immoral unredeemable societal riff raff.

The Cafone Wars

I have come across some writers who labelled this “riff raff” propaganda phase of the of the suppression of the civil rights and wholesale slaughter of innocent southern Italians as the Cafone Wars. For those unfamiliar with the word Cafone its definition is; boorish, ill-mannered or uncouth. To those with southern Italian backgrounds you probably recognize the word as pronounced in dialect, “Ga vown”.

The point of use is to further demean the victims by implying their inherent moral, educational and cultural inferiority while reserving superior virtue in the person doing the labelling. In other words, the southern Italians deserved the atrocities being perpetrated upon them because they were not only supporting immoral criminals, but were themselves unredeemable “deplorables”. This type of labelling of Italians then also began to be exported as a part of the “new” southern Italian media profile.

Once again however, the negative rhetoric didn’t match the magnitude of the violence and aggression that was being inflicted. More of a separation between the “good” Italians and the “bad” Italians needed to be created by the propaganda mill. The time-honored next level of separation is basically a fall back to tribalism. In the case of southern Italians, you articulate in your propaganda that your opponent belongs to a different inferior tribe, culture and or race. If you can make that association, then the reason that victims are immoral, criminal and uncouth is not just in fact, but by their genetic nature.

The Terroni Phase of the Conflict

For those unfamiliar with this term its etymology is associated with the root, terra, (dirt or earth). It is a term applied by northern Italians to southern Italians and is considered in Italy to be extremely derogatory. I see the term coming into use from the late 1860’s onward. While the use of the word encompasses all of the negative traits mentioned above, it also has a racial component. During this time frame you find northern Italian propaganda suggesting that southern Italians are a mixed inferior race attributable to a genetic heritage which includes sub-Saharan African.

This additional attempt, to further separate and denigrate southern Italians by racial profile is actually easy to track as an export. I found a surprising source in former African-American slaves. A number of notable former American slaves travelled to Europe in the late 19th century on speaking tours regarding topics of freedom and their former status as slaves. Several wrote books and articles on their experiences and observation on European societies. Among them, a few travelled as far as southern Italy. More than one describes the population of the south of Italy as a “mulatto” race. It is clear that this is a racial observation which was suggested from within northern Italian society.

My point is that the genesis for the negative stereotypes that our ancestors encountered was incubating in the propaganda generated in Italy from this post-unification 19th century civil conflict. This propaganda-based stereotyping, which was fed to the Italian media, became exported to the English-speaking press. In turn, the American public began to be introduced to these southern Italian stereotypes and applied them to the newly arriving Italian immigrants. However, Americans didn’t differentiate Italian immigrants regionally and applied the stereotypes to all arriving Italian immigrants.

The Lombroso Final Phase

Dr. Cesare Lombroso was an Italian physician who joined the northern Italian army in 1859 and served as an army surgeon in the south thru 1866. He credits this time in the Italian army as the experience that helped him develop his concept of “criminal atavism”. It is a theory that postulates that criminals represent a reversion to a subhuman type. Under his theory criminality was genetic and can be detected by human physical features such as, cranium shape, distance between eyes, etc.

Much of his “research” came from forensic examination and measurements of “criminal” heads collected from the bodies of alleged “Briganti” in southern Italy. As his theories of eugenics developed and gained substantial scientific acceptance, he was able to place about 400 “Briganti” heads on display, as confirming examples, at the University of Turin Medical School. His theory was useful as applied against southern Italians. It allowed a narrative for export of a subhuman unintelligent species genetically predisposed to criminality and immorality. This then can be used as justification for purging or genocide. This ultimate “specie” theory was exported, not just to Italy but worldwide. While the most notable tragic application of his theories came under the Fascist and Nazi regimes you can find many other applications elsewhere including the U.S. His suppositions have connections to 19th century treatments in the U.S. of the “criminally” insane, the mentally defective, and forced sterilizations of undesirable groups. (Note: I understand that in 2011 as part of the 150th anniversary of unification southern Italy requested the return of the exhibit’s preserved heads for proper burial. The request was denied).

For a much more extensive look at the impact of the Italian Government’s post-unification policies on southern Italy and more importantly the southern Italian psyche, I recommend you read Italian author Pino Aprile’s 2011 book titled “Terroni”. Although the book is focused on Italian society the export of the damage caused by Italian government programs is important to understanding the larger Italian-American social picture.

Conclusion

The physical and economic mistreatment of southern Italians post-unification led to the mass emigration of Italians starting in 1860. In all, some 4.5 million emigrated to the U.S. and 12 million worldwide. 80% of those who emigrated came from southern Italy. The Fascists stopped the emigration in 1930 out of a looming WW II concern for loss of military age men and labor in the south. (They “needed” soldiers from south. In W.W. I Italy suffered 600,000 KIA. Southern Italy which comprised one third of Italy’s population, suffered 50% of those KIA).

Basilicata’s emigration numbers are dramatic. Basilicata experienced the greatest emigration per capita of any region of Italy. This is not surprising given the violence perpetrated on the population. Additionally, while only 20% of Italian emigration to the U.S. occurred prior to 1900, 35-50% of Basilicata’s emigration occurred pre-1900. This resulted in many early Basilicata immigrants being among the first to contend with the Italian stereotyping in America. It also makes them among the first to have to adjust their assimilation to the rise in prejudices and stereotypes that were being exported from Italy and adopted in America.

My intent going forward in the next several articles is to look at some of the fusion of Italian and American organizational mechanisms that these 19th century Italians and Italian-Americans employed to cope with American barriers. These next articles will come under the title,” The Fratellanza”, (brotherhood), a term I think that captures the unique early Basilicata-American organizational structures. My focus will be primarily on the Trenton Basilicata community for which we have the most data.