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Silvia Núñez García\*

# Italian and Mexican Migrants in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>

In today's complex world, differences, disagreements, and even rivalries among nations stand out. "Walls" have come into fashion for defending territories, privileges, and individuals, ratifying the position that considers setting up even more barriers to separate us and distinguish us from "the others" is a legitimate right. These circumstances surround our daily lives and are explicit in the migration that has acquired strategic importance in the international context.

For these reasons, and with the same conviction laid out by U.S. political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset when he said that nations can only understand each other in a compared perspective,<sup>2</sup> I consider it pertinent to remember the origins of the migration of two peoples to the United States whose experience is similar. They do not recognize themselves in each other, however, in the mirror of diversity that prevails in the United States and that often divides more than it unites.

Rudolph J. Vecoli's documented history relates that the largest number of Italians who emigrated to the United

States did so between 1850 and 2000, reaching six million. But it is also important to recognize that Italian language professors, musicians, and dance teachers began arriving from colonial times, and managed to inculcate local elites with a taste for Italian culture. However, by contrast, we should underline that in the nineteenth century, Italians became increasingly visible in urban spaces in the U.S. as street artists, manufacturers of plaster statues, and itinerant salespeople.

A particularly interesting story from that period involves the arrival of a group of political refugees after the failure of the movement for Italian national unity. Among them was Giuseppe Garibaldi, who lived for a time in New York. Garibaldi, who by coincidence was born on July 4, had a friendly relationship with Abraham Lincoln himself, and was invited to join the army to fight the Confederates. It is even said that the Italian hero wanted to become the head of the Union's armed forces, an aspiration he failed to achieve.

In the framework of the parallels between Italians and Mexicans that this article attempts to underline, another Garibaldi with the same libertarian vocation as his grandfather would arrive in Mexico in the first decade of

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the twentieth century, and join our revolutionary forces. Peppino Garibaldi did become a general in the service of President Madero's army.

It would be during that same era that more than 3.5 million Italians arrived to New York's Ellis Island. Most of them were young men who only emigrated temporarily, seeking to escape the extreme poverty in their homeland. Many of them were from Southern Italy (Calabria, Sicilia, and Abruzzo), and worked mainly as agricultural day laborers or construction workers in shipyards and building the railroads. It is estimated that only 20 percent came from Northern or Central Italy, although they did have in common their resistance to assimilation, manifested in their lack of interest in learning English.

One important change came about with the outbreak of World War I, since the labor market broadened out for them in the United States. They managed to become part of an industrial proletariat in steel and coal mining with the result that they gradually became more skilled due to on-the-job training. At the same time, others became tailors, barbers, and shoemakers who opened up small workshops or businesses.

It should be mentioned that imports to the United States of foodstuffs absolutely necessary in the Italian diet became more important, accompanied by the opening of fish markets, butchers shops, and the obligatory traditional bakeries. Traditional Italian cuisine made enormous headway in the destination country, giving rise to more and more restaurants. The oldest of these, according to CBS, was Fior d'Italia in San Francisco, California, founded in 1886.

No one who thinks he or she is familiar with the United States can deny the huge influence of this migration; it is clearly shown with the proliferation of pizza and pasta restaurants and shops. Even if Vecoli's opinion is that these migrants arrived to educate U.S. Americans' palates,<sup>3</sup> any realist has to say from the start that there is an immense distance between great Italian cuisine and the other kind that, geared to mass consumption, would

end up succumbing to fast food chains, where hamburgers, pizzas, and today even Mexican tacos fight for the taste of local consumers.

By 1920 there were more than 800 000 Italians in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens, while on the Pacific Coast they concentrated in San Francisco. The state government itself implemented an incentives policy for agriculture, which gave rise to what are now the famous Napa Valley vineyards, where the Italian wine tradition put down roots thanks to families like the Gallos, who, by 1993, controlled 25 percent of the entire U.S. market.

### Contrasts with Mexican Migration

Let's contrast this now with certain aspects of the origins of Mexican migration to the United States, which obliges us to recognize that between the two countries there is a border of more than 3 000 kilometers that has changed over time. The most dramatic moment was precisely the Mexican American War (1846-1848). Mexico's defeat in that war cost it the loss of half its territory, giving rise to the paradox of many of our compatriots being settled in the area, making them *de facto* the first Mexican migrants to the United States when they opted to remain in their own places of origin (California and New Mexico).

By 1853, the borders between the two countries had been established, but the entry checkpoints took four more decades to appear.

Like with the Italians in the nineteenth century, extreme vulnerability was the main cause of growing emigration of Mexican men to our northern neighbor. They benefitted from the demand for labor in seasonal agriculture, mines, and, according to historian Barbara Driscoll, to cover the imperious need for labor generated by the dynamism that the laying of the railroad tracks brought to the country. She argues that Mexican labor in this sphere of the economy has been just as valuable as their contribution in the countryside.<sup>4</sup>

It was precisely the construction of the railroads in which the immigration of Chinese, Italians, and Mexicans coincided, at the same time that it differentiated them. Driscoll argues that the Chinese, despite being submissive and working tirelessly, did not assimilate into the receiving society, exacerbating the mistrust of U.S. Americans, which led to a xenophobic consensus that backed

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the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.<sup>5</sup> Its impact was not long in coming, so employers began to try to attract other immigrants. However, Driscoll argues, company managers thought that Italians were prone to fighting, unless they were from the same town in Italy.<sup>6</sup>

All of this benefitted the Mexicans, who, from 1880 on began, concentrating in the U.S. border area. But even their cheap labor was not enough to make up for the lack of workers. By the early twentieth century, the economic and social situation in Mexico, with the deterioration of the countryside, precarious conditions, and scarcity of jobs, became the decisive factor for the mobility of our labor force toward the *Norte* in concurrence with the interests of U.S. railroad companies' recruiters. By 1920, crews of Mexican workers in this sector made up more than 80 percent of all the crews in Arizona and nearly 50 percent in Texas.

Today, we can understand how the work of our countrymen on U.S. railroads created the conditions for them to gradually move into and be distributed throughout its huge territory. This process also made possible their entry into new kinds of jobs; this is what happened when they reached the Midwest, where, in Chicago, for example, they would move into steel and meat packing as well as the service sector. With time, the big cities of Los Angeles, California, Chicago, Illinois, and Houston, Texas, became the places where the largest population of Mexican migrants concentrated.

It is important to recognize that, according to the Migration Policy Institute, in 1860 only 27 500 Mexican migrants lived in the United States; by 1900, there were 103 400. One hundred years later, there would be more than 9 million, and by 2017, the figure had risen to 11.2 million, or 25.3 percent of all immigrants in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

The first flows logically came from the most densely populated areas of central-western and northern Mexico (Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas), but beginning in 1980, southern states like Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas joined the list of sending states.

We cannot overlook the fact that, down through the complex history of Mexican migration to the United States, the wage gap between the two countries has always favored our neighbors. To get an idea of what that means, suffice it to say that in 2017, the minimum wage in Mexico was Mex\$80 a day (US\$4.20), while in the United States, it was US\$7.25 per hour.

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In short, we can say that the development of Italian and Mexican migrants to the United States are comparable historically and humanly speaking. A great deal could be added about their similarities: the influence of Catholicism, the community and family traditions, and even gender relations. However, given space limitations, my objective here is simple and direct: to show that these comparisons are needed, beyond identifying common problems.

We recognize that both groups have dealt with the rejection and stigmatization of mainstream U.S. society, but their work, tenacity, and effort have turned them into long-term protagonists. Are invisible barriers like xenophobia perhaps the most difficult to bring down?

The mark Italians made continues to be visible among the 16 million U.S. Americans who considered themselves Italian-Americans in 2000. To them, we must add a new wave of young talented migrants who in the twenty-first century are pursuing the American dream. For their part, many young, well-educated Mexicans are doing the same: in 2015, the United States could boast 36 million people of Mexican origin. ■■■

## Notes

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**2** Seymour Martin Lipset, *La división continental. Los valores y las instituciones de los Estados Unidos y Canadá* (Mexico City: FCE, 1993), p. 13.

**3** Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Negli Stati Uniti," in Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina de Clementi, and Emilio Franzina, eds., *Storia dell'Emigrazione Italiana* vol. 2 (Rome: Donzelli, 2009), p. 60.

**4** Barbara Driscoll, *Me voy pa' Pensilvania por no andar en la vagancia. Los ferrocarrileros mexicanos en Estados Unidos durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Mexico City: CIESAN, UNAM/Conaculta, 1996), p. 40.

**5** This is seen as the first law that restricted immigration to the United States.

**6** Driscoll, *ibid.*

**7** Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub, "Mexican-Born Population Over Time, 1850-Present," <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/mexican-born-population-over-time>, accessed January 14, 2019.



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