

Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

Volume 24

Article 9

2019

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Recommended Citation

Barber, Phillip (2019) "Shifting Perceptions of Americanization: Progressive Era Press Coverage of Italian Immigration," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 24 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol24/iss1/9>

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Shifting Perceptions of Americanization: Progressive Era Press Coverage of Italian Immigration

Phillip Barber

Despite the Trump administration's declaration that border patrol will "take into account certain criteria that enhance a refugee's likelihood of successful *assimilation* and *contribution* to the United States," mainstream media eschews lockstep efforts to "assimilate" the immigrant in favor of "integration" or "adaption."¹ Yet, even to integrate or adapt an immigrant to the American way, one must define what it means to be American. The concept of American identity is evasive. The United States is uniquely built on immigration and has thus been dubbed the "melting pot" and the "nation of immigrants." Despite this recognition, concern surrounding immigration is as much a hot ticket item in the United States as anywhere – and this is not a new phenomenon. But, as the "nation of immigrants," the issue of what to do with immigrants once they have settled, is particularly vexing. Progressive era publications regarding immigration and Americanization exhibit remarkable similarities to political rhetoric today, but significantly depict a pro-assimilation consensus not seen in modern-day media.

There is extensive literature on the Italian experience in America. Philip Marshman Rose's 1975 *The Italians in America* provides a comprehensive overview of Italian American history with a high-level analysis of many topics. The third chapter highlights the Americanization methods and their effectiveness as well as the social conditions that challenged Italians during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.² Giovanni Schiavo's

¹ Christopher Brennan, "Trump includes 'likelihood of assimilation' in refugee guidelines," *Daily News*, 28 September 2017, (7 Mar. 2019); Neuhauser, Alan "Trump May Want Refugees Who Can 'Assimilate.' What Does That Mean?" *U.S. News*, 4 October 2017, (7 Mar. 2019).

² Philip Marshman Rose, *The Italians In America* (Hartford Connecticut: New York and George H. Doran Company, 1922).

1928 *The Italians in Chicago, a Study in Americanization* offers insight into the areas of American society and culture in which Italians participated throughout their Americanization process including occupations, social organizations, education, music, business, and religion.³ This paper contributes to the literature regarding the Americanization process of Italian immigrants during the progressive era through the lens of the contemporary press. Analysis of progressive era texts reveals contemporary views on the benefits, challenges, and methods of Americanizing Italian immigrants and their children during the progressive era, from 1890-1916. The news and media articles reveal an almost uniform assumption that Italian immigrants should assimilate into American culture. Further analysis in this paper contextualizes the historical experience within the greater progressive movement.

One of the more surprising arguments for bestowing American culture and values upon Italian immigrants, was as repayment for their own historical contribution to humanity. In 1909, the progressive Methodist magazine *Zion's Herald*, later *The Progressive Christian*, published an account of an interdenominational conference discussing Americanization of Italians in Connecticut. Reverent C.S. Gillespie wrote of an epiphany in the room: "They have taught us that there are others besides us of who have done things. They remind us that Columbus was an Italian, and that civilization has been touched by Italian genius from the days of the Caesars down to the days of the Marconi and Victor Emmanuel."⁴ The Italian empire earned, for its descendants, the coveted right to be Americanized. The progressive magazine, *Outlook*, reinforced this idea, describing Italian immigrants as "the sons of a country to which humanity

³ Giovanni Schiavo, *The Italians in Chicago, a study in Americanization* (Chicago: Italian American Publishing, 1928).

⁴ C.S. Gillespie, "Mission for Italian Interdenominational Conference," *Zion's Herald* 87, no. 43 (October 1909): 1357.

owes a great debt.”⁵ These points were extrapolated to serve the interest of contemporary America. If the Italians had contributed so much in the past, they were certainly poised to contribute to America now.

As with most immigrants, the value of Italians was measured by their contributions to the labor force. Progressive magazines began their plea to Americanize the Italians by confirming their worth to the American public. “We like the Italian as a laborer,” established *Harper’s Weekly* in an article imploring further Americanization efforts.⁶ Military magazine, *United Service*, published a lengthy article in 1894 titled “Italian Laborers.” It argued that Italians were particularly productive workers and one could: “get more work out of them on a farm than any of their labor competitors.”⁷ The press claimed a relative superiority of the Italians, in this regard, qualifying them for more public support in the Americanization process. As the best laborers, Italians deserved the first chance to assimilate. The *New York Times* expanded the value of immigrant laborers and recognized their contributions to America’s glorious gilded industry. Through Americanization, the United States may “Promote industrial greatness by a plentitude of laborers...”⁸ To Americanize the Italians would not only repay humanity’s debt to their people, but also support the country’s essential labor force.

In a progressive claim, the contemporary press suggested Americanization of the Italians would foster democracy. Upon arrival but before assimilation, Italian interest in American politics was limited. The Italian would soon be introduced to the “boss”

⁵ Gino Carlo Speranza, “Solving the Immigration Problem,” *Outlook* 76, no. 16 (April 1904): 928.

⁶ Harper’s Weekly, “The Italian Problem,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* 87, no. 33 (April 1909): 254.

⁷ Burnet Landreth, “Italian Laborers,” *United Service; a Quarterly Review of Military and Naval Affairs* 12, no. 3 (September 1894): 240.

⁸ William Michael Byrne, “Restricting Immigration,” *New York Times*, 23 March 1902, 5.

who would ““Americanize”” him for the sake of his vote”⁹ When the immigrant moved into Italian colonies of American society, he entered a unified electorate that voted for the token Italian candidate. As *Outlook* reasoned: “it is obvious that such a system tends to perpetuate race distinctions and to prevent assimilation.”¹⁰ If the Italian man did not vote for the “boss” or the local favorite, his vote was secured for the Republicans. Why? Because the Irish were democrats: “Here in politics, as a rule, Italian laborers hostile to the Irish Catholics, naturally take the opposite side, and become Republicans; and under a little persuasion nine-tenths of them could be turned over to Republicanism as they could be to Protestantism...”¹¹ Such a system was not attractive to the progressive press. Democracy required active citizenship derived from informed voters. Americanizing the Italians meant educating them on the American values of the progressive era, one of which, was civic engagement. The same *New York Times* article that called for Americanization to “Promote industrial greatness by a plentitude of laborers,” believed the process would also: “guard the safety of the Republic by an intelligent and incorruptible electorate.”¹²

Above all else, Americanizing the Italian immigrant was beneficial as part of a general effort to unify the country. The immigrant figures in the United States had risen quickly to account for a staggering percentage of the population – at least in the eyes of the contemporary press. The statistics changed over the course of the progressive era, but sentiments (and concerns) remained steadfast. With so many immigrants, America was challenged to maintain its national unity. A 1916 *New York Times* letter to the editor titled “The American Melting Pot Overwhelmed” called for Americanization on the grounds of unifying the country. The writer argued that recent press “doubtless(ly) stimulated many

⁹ Speranza, “Solving the Immigration Problem.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Landreth, “Italian Laborers.”

¹² Byrne, “Restricting Immigration.”

minds to consider anew the factors adversely affecting national unity – among them the immigration factor.”¹³ The implication was clear; a unified America was a strong America, and this required immigrant assimilation.

Assimilating and Americanizing Italian immigrants; however, posed countless challenges in the eyes of the press. First of all: the language barrier. To highlight the breadth of this issue, the *New York Times*, in 1908, reported that 75% of Italians did not speak English even after years of residence in America.¹⁴ Many articles attributed their poor English skills to a lack of basic education. In 1897, *The Arena* published an article filled with sweeping generalizations about Italians in Boston: “If we consider the Italians as a whole, we find that their ignorance is astonishingly great. Although education is not always a test of good citizenship, illiteracy is, in this case, an obstacle to assimilation. First of all, it is a hindrance to their acquisition of the English language; and then it cuts them off from such knowledge of our life and customs as might be gained by reading.”¹⁵ Attacks on Italian ignorance were frequent. The press was quick to characterize Italians as poorly educated but did not insult their intellectual capacity. As described by the popular press, Italians were smart, yet illiterate and uneducated, making it worthwhile but difficult to assimilate them.

Some of the progressive press recognized the consequence of this rhetoric and of the resulting treatment of Italians by Americans and other immigrants. Both undoubtedly led to a resistance among Italian immigrants to Americanization. To many progressive journalists, this resistance came as no surprise. In 1904, *Outlook* proclaimed: “Indeed, many of our sins we conveniently saddle on the stranger, finding in him the responsibility for some of the evils of our own making. And so, a thoughtless majority fails to see that

¹³ E.E. Rittenhouse, “The American Melting Pot Overwhelmed,” *New York Times*, 6 May 1916, 10.

¹⁴ A. Caccini, “More Italians Than in Rome,” *New York Times*, 4 June 1908, 6.

¹⁵ Frederick Bushee, “Italian Immigrants in America,” in *The Arena*, vol. 17, 1896-1897, 732.

such procedure can result only in race prejudice and prevent rather than foster that very assimilation which we all desire.”¹⁶ The article backed this point with a description of the violation Italians felt when interrogated by border guards. But the prejudice did not stop at Ellis Island. The contempt continued even to school playgrounds: “Take the Italian...His children make good students in our public schools, for they are bright boys; but many more would attend if they did not have to face the stigma placed upon them by their classmates, who look down upon them as ‘dagoes’.”¹⁷ Similarly, the *United Service* magazine asked: “ostracized by laborers of other nationalities, unfamiliar with our language, is it any wonder that they adhere to their half-civilized habits of herding together for companionship and safety?”¹⁸

Many Italians did live together in colonies in urban America. The communities were usually called “Little Italy” and were established destinations for Italian immigrants at the beginning of their journey to the United States.¹⁹ These communities, while safe havens for many Italians, served to slow down the progress of assimilation. The Italian, according to the *United Service*, finds it convenient “to settle in communities for mutual protection and society, and as a consequent of such conditions he retains the old country habits of squalor, and is slow to learn our language.”²⁰ The colonies published their own newspapers written in Italian, about Italian matters, promoting Italian culture. An immigrant’s letter in the *New York Times* confirmed the “Italianization” resulting from the Italian press: “I have always entertained the idea that the Italian Newspapers give more space to news which tends either to obscure

¹⁶ Speranza, “Solving the Immigration Problem.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Landreth, “Italian Laborers.”

¹⁹ Donna R. Gabaccia, “Inventing ‘Little Italy,’” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6, no. 1 (January 2007).

²⁰ Landreth, “Italian Laborers.”

the mind of the newly arrived Italians, or to Italianize those already half Americanized.”²¹

Described as “probably the most complex character that comes to our shores, and the least understood,” the Italians raised concerns about how their culture would mix in with the American way.²² Certain journalists believed that being of the Latin race meant a greater challenge in assimilation: “the Latin race is as distinct from the Saxon as are the olive-trees of Italy from the pines of Germany.”²³ Particular Italian tendencies worried the press. Within the colonies, families remained extremely tight knit. As the *New York Times* articulated, “Immigrant parents are hesitant to let their children be taken away from them for as a result they lose their ties to the family and Italy.”²⁴ The progressives believed that if the immigrants failed to assimilate, their children had a far better shot of becoming Americanized through the public-school system. This, of course, was dependent upon attendance. *The Arena* wrote of Italians in the Boston school system: “The knowledge acquired beyond [English] is comparatively little, for the parent is impatient to put the child to work in order to swell the family earnings, and the child is scarcely less anxious to make the change.”²⁵

Truancy was not the only potential barrier to Americanization. Other threats included the “Black Hand,” an Italian crime organization that, like many such organizations, targeted troubled youth for recruitment.²⁶ The Black Hand represented the antithesis of progressive efforts, taking children out of the classroom and perpetuating their isolation from American culture. Competing with the Black Hand, tuberculosis stole the lives of many Italian immigrants and their children. In 1910 the

²¹ A Half-Naturalized Italian, “The Italian Newspaper,” *New York Times*, 6 September 1911, 8.

²² Speranza, “Solving the Immigration Problem.”

²³ Landreth, “Italian Laborers.”

²⁴ “Characteristics of Italian Immigrants,” *New York Times*, 18 May 1902, SM12.

²⁵ Bushée, “Italian Immigrants in America.”

²⁶ Caccini, “More Italians Than in Rome.”

Board of Health opened a new clinic in the Italian quarters of New York as part of their “extensive plans to stamp out tuberculosis, particularly among the Italians, who have been shown among all aliens to be most subject to the disease.”²⁷ Tuberculosis itself posed a threat to Americanization because immigrants who survived the initial infection were sent back to Italy.²⁸ The challenge was convincing Italian immigrants to receive treatment in America. The *New York Times* reported: “...we know that tuberculosis is more prevalent among the local Italians than among natives or the people of other alien races, and yet the presence of Italians in the hospitals for treatment or their visits to infirmaries is not in proportion to the disease among them.”²⁹ According to the same article, “During one year only six Italian consumptives were treated in three of the largest clinics, four of them being Italian-American and two Italian Immigrants brought to the clinic by the district nurses of the Charity Organization Society.”³⁰ In addition to fears of deportation, there was a strong resistance to American medicine. For instance, children were born at home. The sick were treated in house or shipped back to Italy where treatment was more trusted.³¹

Italians were suspicious about many American efforts to interfere with the lives of their people. The contemporary press expressed concern about this cultural phenomenon but not surprise. According to the *United Service* magazine: “The Italian...does not assimilate with Americans as quickly as foreigners of Saxon blood...because he is forced to take the defensive the moment he places his foot upon our shores.”³² The progressive *Outlook* magazine described the welcoming committee for the Italian immigrant. First the immigrant is interrogated by the federal border

²⁷ “Battling with Tuberculosis,” *New Yorke Times*, 15 July 1910, 3.

²⁸ Antonio Stella, *Some Aspects of Italian Immigration to the United States* (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1924), 68.

²⁹ Caccini, “More Italians Than in Rome.”

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Stella, *Some Aspects of Italian Immigration*.

³² Landreth, “Italian Laborers.”

officials in a manner that “you would refuse to answer...or else [would] assault the official” and then,

having passed this necessary examination, his first experience in the land of the free is likely to be his acquaintance with the boarding-house “runner.” Who will force him to go with him, or the crook who will exchange his foreign money into Confederate notes or take him to the banker and padrone who want to sell his labor, or the district boss who will “Americanize” him for the sake of his vote.³³

The first step to Americanize the Italian was to get beyond their justified suspicion of Americans. Standing in the way of this goal were the corrupt systems causing the suspicion to exist in the first place. One the most influential of which was the Padrone.

The Padrone (“Boss” in Italian) would act as a middleman between American employers and the immigrant laborers. As soon as immigrants arrived on American soil, they were tucked under the wings of Padrones who introduced them to the American way of work. With no money, no alternatives, and children who depended on them, Italian immigrants were at the complete mercy of the Padrones. Some Padrones were well intended. There was certainly a market for their service as labor was in high demand and immigrants needed help navigating their new work environment. Unfortunately, the system was easily corruptible, and the Padrones took advantage of the vulnerable new arrivals. Immigrants were exploited for their labor. The abuse of power was not lost on American journalists. The *Outlook* reveals “An even greater difficulty [than labor exploitation] lies in the fact that a successful labor bureau for Italians in competent American hands means the breaking up of the much talked of padrone system. The padrones recognize this and are actively using their great influence against the Italian labor bureau.”³⁴

³³ Speranza, “Solving the Immigration Problem.”

³⁴ Ibid.

For every benefit that Americanization suggested, there were multiple challenges to overcome. With such an expansive and complex set of roadblocks, the contemporary press generated a range of strategies to Americanize Italian immigrants. The default solution was to promote public schools as tools to Americanize immigrant children. According to *Harper's Weekly*, "Schooling in our public schools will make an enormous difference to those who get it."³⁵ *The Arena* agreed: "The work of assimilation must be done principally with the children, hence we look to the public schools for a leavening influence which can scarcely be exercised by other means."³⁶ The *New York Times* concluded, "For complete assimilation and Americanization we will have to wait for their children's children to pass through our schools."³⁷ The public-school system exposed the Italian child to the American way and provided an opportunity to reinforce American culture. Peer pressure was presumed to play a huge roll: "Their dread of appearing strange before their playmates stimulates them to imitate American ways, and soon their home becomes the single link which binds them to Italy. Even their euphonious names become distasteful to them, and a Marondotti wishes he were a Smith or a Brown."³⁸ This process occurred even beyond the public-school system. In 1916, the *New York Times* reported that Catholic schools in Chicago were discontinuing textbooks printed in the native language of the children, "thus, unifying and Americanizing the teaching in the schools which come under the control of the Roman Catholic School."³⁹ The press, in agreement about child education, also suggested adult school and night classes as additional help to Americanization. The *New York Times* proposed "a special school of citizenship for foreign adults," claiming, "the

³⁵ Harper's Weekly.

³⁶ Bushee, "Italian Immigrants in America."

³⁷ Rittenhouse, "The American Melting Pot Overwhelmed."

³⁸ Bushee, "Italian Immigrants in America."

³⁹ "To Americanize Schools," *New York Times*, 12 May 1916, 22.

duty of teaching these newcomers what their public responsibilities are seems imperative...”⁴⁰

Educational proposals went beyond the classroom. The *New York Times* lauded the benefit of libraries as Americanization tools. Libraries served two functions. First, to give a space for the Italian immigrant to learn English and American culture. Second, “so that he would not become the victim” of the Black Hand.⁴¹ The *New York Times* later suggested educating the Italians by compiling and distributing information relevant to Americanization: “Print and distribute information by newspapers, circulars, booklets, correspondence, conferences, etc. in the languages which peasant immigrants understand...” Relevant information included employment opportunities, banking practices, educational facilities, and general “means to become Americanized.”⁴²

Progressive magazines supported an institutionalized system for Americanization. *Outlook* hailed “The Society for the Protection of Italian Immigrants” whose paraphrased objective was to advice and inform the Italian immigrant by 1) educating on language and customs of the country, 2) matching the immigrant with fitting employment, 3) investigating and remedying any abuses against the immigrant, and 4) familiarizing the immigrants with their rights. Such organizations would make the immigrants, in the words of a member, “feel that their advent into a strange land does not mean their coming among those who wish them ill.”⁴³ The goal was to change the Italian perception of the American and not just the other way around. This would be accomplished by improving the immediate experience of the Italians upon arrival, fighting against injustices that the Italians encountered in America, adding credibility to the Italian people, and fighting anti-Italian prejudice. As a result, Italians would

⁴⁰ Rittenhouse, “The American Melting Pot Overwhelmed.”

⁴¹ Caccini, “More Italians Than in Rome.”

⁴² Lajos Steiner, “Reaching the Immigrants,” *New York Times*, 12 November 1910, 8.

⁴³ Speranza, “Solving the Immigration Problem.”

lessen their resistance to Americanization and embrace American culture.

As with today, the conservative press suggested legislation and law enforcement as a means to assimilation. To some, this meant harsher immigration policies. The military magazine, *United Service*, supported the end of immigration altogether: “further immigration of the peasant class should be positively prohibited while giving all protection, rights, and opportunities to those now here.”⁴⁴ In 1892, *The New York Times* suggested making the process expensive: “A substantial head money tax, in no case amounting to less than the cost of a steerage passage, is the remedy *The Times* has long been advocating....Such an imposition would undoubtedly accomplish the purpose of restricting immigration, and it would restrict immigration by sifting it.”⁴⁵ By 1908; however, *The Times* offered a new message: “a man’s character rather than his ability to show \$60 shall make him ‘persona grata’ in this wonderful country...”⁴⁶ To these journalists, the best way to Americanize the immigrants was to filter, at the gates, those ripe for Americanization. Suggested legislation was not left at the border. The *United Service* supported laws that limited “the number of inhabitants to a given area of house space,” to prohibit overcrowding in Italian homes and colonies.⁴⁷ Others proposed literacy tests at the ballot box. In order for the Italians to have a voice in politics, one *New York Times* article argued, they must be able to read.⁴⁸ This would incentivize the Italians to pick up their English dictionary.

Finally, taking the Theodore Roosevelt approach, certain journalists suggested the key to Americanizing the Italian was to “center all their interest in America.”⁴⁹ “I regret a tendency on the

⁴⁴ Landreth, “Italian Laborers.”

⁴⁵ “Restricting Immigration,” *New York Times*, 6 March 1892, 4.

⁴⁶ Caccini, “More Italians Than in Rome.”

⁴⁷ Landreth, “Italian Laborers.”

⁴⁸ Byrne, “Restricting Immigration.”

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

part of the Italians to amass money here and return to Italy to spend it,” wrote the *New York Times* writer who proposed ballot box literacy tests.⁵⁰ The immigrants needed to be instilled with a sense of national pride: “It is a problem of subordinating every personal ambition, every class interest and policy, every race attachment, to the one dominant idea of an America, free, just, powerful, forward-facing, etc.”⁵¹ In the words of Theodore Roosevelt, “there is no place here for the hyphenated American...Some of the very best Americans I have ever known were naturalized Americans born abroad. But a hyphenated American is not an American at all.”⁵² Italians were Americanized when they embraced America as their exclusive nation and to do this, they must relinquish the ties of their Italian identity.

Progressives viewed America as a nation with incredible potential for continuous improvement. Strategies for reaching America’s full potential were diverse, unrelated, or even contradictory. The many ideals of progressivism are seen within the benefits, challenges, and methods of Americanizing the Italian immigrants. The padrone system and unethical borders fed the anti-corruption spirit in progressive magazines. The gilded age of American pride rings through Roosevelt’s impassioned words. Elements of scientific management, the progressive era belief that societal problems could be solved if solutions focused on system efficiency, are reflected in the approaches to educate the Italian people through distribution channels and organized societies. The press revealed a willingness to identify and address issues in a way that is characteristic of optimistic and impassioned Americans, and a consensus that assimilating the Italian immigrant was proper course.

While many challenges to the Americanization of immigrants are similar today, the context under which they occur is different. Unlike progressive era popular press, public opinion today does

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Rittenhouse, “The American Melting Pot Overwhelmed.”

⁵² “Roosevelt Bars the Hyphenated,” *New York Times*, 13 October 1915, 1.

not reflect a unified belief of what assimilation means. In 2019, *The Washington Post* published an article criticizing Tom Brokaw for his claim that “Hispanics should work harder at assimilation.”⁵³ *The Washington Post* questioned what it meant to be Americanized: “So let’s say you’re an immigrant from Nigeria, and when you come to America you take a tae kwon do class and start eating burritos. Is that assimilation? You bet it is, even if it’s not exactly what some people have in mind.”⁵⁴ The sense of a single unified national identity is less pervasive today than 100 years ago. As a result, the questions: “What does it mean to be American?” and “What does it mean to Americanize?” are even more challenging. A universal intention to assimilate immigrants no longer exists, in part, because the American identity is increasingly recognized as broad and diverse. Donald Trump’s claims that immigrants are unassimilable violent criminals who threaten American safety are increasingly rejected as “fearmongering” and thinly veiled xenophobia.⁵⁵ The nation’s increasing celebration of America’s diversity, as a tossed salad rather than a melting pot, is revealed by the stark contrast in press coverage today when compared to that of progressive era media.

⁵³ Paul Waldman, “Tom Brokaw blew it on assimilation. But we can get it right,” *The Washington Post*, 28 January 2019, (7 Mar. 2019).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ David Smith, “Donald Trump fuels immigration fears in TV address on ‘border crisis’,” *The Guardian*, 9 January 2019, (9 Apr. 2019).