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## Introduction

### Questions

Italy, long a country of emigration, has become a country of immigration in the past two decades with the arrival of nearly one million Africans, Asians, and others. This transformation has surprised politicians and citizens, who had come to regard emigration as part of Italian life. This change is particularly striking in the southern region of Sicily. For most of the last 100 years, oppression and poverty have generated waves of emigration from Sicily, first overseas and later, in the postwar period, to the Italian north and to western Europe. For much of this century, one out of every eight Italian emigrants was a Sicilian; and in the decade 1951–61 alone nearly 400,000 Sicilians left home (Renda 1989: 122–3; 18). From Brooklyn to Toronto, from Milan to Frankfurt, Sicilians have built bridges, dug tunnels, and constructed office buildings; and, as even the casual tourist knows, they have brought their shops, bakeries, and restaurants to far-flung Little Italies.

The 1970s witnessed a profound change in migratory patterns as many Sicilians returned and newcomers arrived.<sup>1</sup> Among the first to arrive were Tunisians, who toiled in the fields, vineyards, and fisheries. Cape Verdian, Mauritian, and Filipino women served as domestics in homes of the urban rich. In the course of the 1980s some two dozen other nationalities, mostly from Africa and Asia, joined them, swelling the ranks of immigrants to about 15,000 in Palermo alone (*Giornale di Sicilia*, 6 September 1990). By the end of 1990, 62,000 foreigners held residence permits issued in Sicily, making it the country's third-largest immigrant population behind the regions of Lazio and Lombardy (Montanari and Cortese 1993: 287). Sicily's total foreign population, including significant numbers of unregistered immigrants, may have exceeded 100,000 (ISTAT 1990a: 73–5).

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In an effort to fathom the contours of this new immigration, and especially how Sicilians have responded to it, I conducted anthropological research in Palermo. For most of 1990 I lived in a poor neighborhood in the decrepit old center, gathering data through participant-observation, discussion, interviews, and questionnaire responses. I aimed to determine the form, extent, and political potential of racist and other views towards immigrants held by the working classes. Later, I expanded my interest to include the responses of the bourgeoisie as well as those of the churches, unions, and associations concerned with immigration issues. I was interested in whether and how immigrant employment posed a threat – or was thought to pose one – to Sicilian workers. In addition to the obvious issue of competition, I sought answers to questions involving key features of Sicilian history and culture. What role does the emigrant experience play in Sicilian evaluations of immigrants? Do Sicilians see Africans and Asians as similar to themselves or as too different to become contributors to Italian society? Is this difference described in racial or cultural terms? How does the widespread anti-southernism within Italy – some northerners deride southerners as “Africans” – complicate Sicilian understandings of physical and cultural difference. Finally, why are anti-immigrant politics and skinhead and neo-nazi attacks on foreigners concentrated in the rich north but absent in the poor south?

A focus on everyday European responses to immigrants distinguishes this study from most current research on race and racism. Some observers have shown that while foreign workers made significant contributions to postwar economic growth, they continue to experience discrimination and institutionalized disadvantage (Castles 1984; Castles and Kosack 1985; Essed 1991). Others have argued that anti-immigrant political movements such as Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front (FN – Front National) in France constitute a “new racism” in which immigrants are portrayed as dangerous and threatening (Balibar 1991a, 1991b; Barker 1981; Taguieff 1989, 1990). Productive as these perspectives are, scholars have pursued them to the neglect of the important issue of how Europeans, on an everyday level, think about and treat immigrants, and the attendant ideologies of difference. I suggest that what is needed to complement research on inequality and political discourse is an ethnography that investigates how class and local history shape the ways people do and do not give expression to the entangled issues of immigration, race, and culture.

This book seeks to contribute to such an ethnographic enterprise. Two main concerns orient this account. The first examines the ways class and culture shape Palermitans’ views of immigrants. I take up working-class

and bourgeois responses to immigrants, respectively, in chapters 2 and 3. The goal here is to relate the material experience and aspirations of Palermitans to their views on immigration and race, and to identify tendencies and contradictions. The second concern, the politicization of immigration, is addressed in chapter 4, where I discuss the most prominent churches, unions, and associations that formulate and disseminate paradigms to guide interpretation and action with regard to immigration. Like many bourgeois Palermitans, representatives of these institutions and associations urge Sicilians to treat immigrants with a tolerance born of the memory of Sicilian emigration experience. Chapter 4 also contrasts the intense politicization of immigration and race in the north with the tepid response in the south, and relates the divergence to regional differences in economy and politics.

The remainder of this introductory chapter establishes the context of study, first describing immigration to Italy and Italian reactions to it, then considering what studies of trends elsewhere in western Europe can say about the question of the treatment and reception of immigrants in Sicily. I close with a description of the site, methods, and findings of the research.

### **Immigration to Italy**

The transformation of Italy into a country of immigration reflects a general shift in postwar European migratory patterns. Before most western European countries imposed restrictions on immigration in 1973–4, governments and businesses in most industrial areas had actively recruited mostly young men from colonies and former colonies or, lacking these, from the northern rim of the Mediterranean basin, deploying them on a temporary basis in construction, industry, and low-level services in urban areas (Berger and Mohr 1975; Bohning 1984; Castles and Kosack 1985; Miles and Satzewich 1990; Therborn 1987). In German-speaking countries, these workers were euphemistically called *gastarbeiter* or “guestworkers.” So great was the demand for labor power in the context of the postwar boom that the number of foreign workers in Belgium, France, West Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland rose from six million in 1960 to thirteen million in 1970 (Castles and Kosack 1985: 490).

The ongoing “new immigration,” by contrast, is characterized by more permanent immigrant communities of increasingly non-European origins. By 1980, approximately 40 percent of the estimated sixteen million immigrants in western Europe hailed from non-European countries (Castles and Kosack 1985: 490–2). The new population is, moreover, unsolicited

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and often unregulated or undocumented (Castles 1984; King 1993a; Melotti 1989). Newcomers often perform menial jobs in the informal sector, reflecting an increasingly segmented labor market in which demand for temporary, unprotected, and low-wage labor proliferates in poor as well as rich areas (Calvanese and Pugliese 1988; Guarrasi 1982a; Pugliese 1993). Geographically more dispersed than the earlier immigration, the new immigration concerns not only the traditional countries of immigration such as France and Switzerland but also former sender countries such as Greece, Spain, and, most prominently, Italy.

Immigration to Italy began in significant numbers in the 1970s and grew steadily throughout the 1980s in the context of economic growth and the near absence of immigration controls (Calvanese and Pugliese 1988; Guarrasi 1982a; Montanari and Cortese 1993). During the period 1986–90, Italy replaced West Germany as Europe's largest recipient of mass immigration (King 1993b: 283). By 1990's end, 781,000 foreigners possessed residence permits in Italy, a figure that would rise to 896,767 the following year (Monticelli 1992: 64). Although present throughout the country, foreigners are concentrated in urban areas in the center and north. Regions with the largest foreign populations (in 1990) include: Lazio (197,000 or 25.2 percent), Lombardy (117,000 or 15 percent), Sicily (62,000 or 7.9 percent), Tuscany (61,000 or 7.8 percent), and Veneto (50,000 or 6.4 percent) (Montanari and Cortese 1993: 286).

Typical of current European trends, the composition of the foreigner workforce in Italy is varied. Newcomers hail from dozens of countries and from all corners of the globe; citizens of no single country account for more than 10 percent of the total foreign population. Although politicians and many observers tend to equate immigrants with the Third World, registered foreigners also include citizens of other European Union (EU) member states, citizens of non-EU industrialized nations such as the United States, descendants of Italian emigrants holding foreign passports, and non-Italian members of religious orders. In broad strokes, almost a quarter (24.5 percent or 288,000) of the 781,000 documented foreigners in Italy come from advanced capitalist countries in the EU and elsewhere. The majority (63 percent or 493,000) derive from so-called "less developed countries" (LDCs) in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and eastern Europe, with the largest numbers coming from Morocco, Tunisia, the Philippines, former Yugoslavia, Senegal, Egypt, China, Poland, and Iran (Montanari and Cortese 1993: 286). Estimates of illegally present or undocumented foreigners, most of whom are thought to come from poor countries, range from 100,000 (Monticelli 1992) to 420,000 (Montanari and Cortese 1993: 290).

This account is concerned with the condition and reception of foreigners from these less developed countries. These newcomers to Italy are typically young, single, and recently arrived in Italy; men outnumber women slightly; and Christians outnumber Muslims two to one (CENSIS 1990a; CNEL 1990). The employment of foreigners varies by sex, nationality, region, and over time, but a general pattern is evident (CENSIS 1990a; Cocchi 1989; CNEL 1990; King 1993b; Maciotti and Pugliese 1991; Pugliese 1989; Raffaele 1992; Venturini 1989). They do the most menial, low-paying, and hazardous jobs, and commonly accept undocumented or off-the-books employment, which in Italian is called *lavoro nero*, or “black work,” and does not refer to skin color.<sup>2</sup>

For immigrants, work in the tertiary sector predominates, followed by work in the primary sector, and, less commonly, in the secondary sector. Domestic work is the most stable, most often documented, and best paying of service-sector jobs; this is typically found in cities and often involves living with the employer. These servants are called *colf*, the acronym for the euphemistic term, *collaboratrice familiare* or “family helper.” Christian women from the Philippines, Cape Verde, and other countries tend to work as *colf*, although some Italians returning from Somalia and Ethiopia in recent decades have brought servants back with them. All groups, but especially North Africans and Middle Easterners, work in low-level positions of varying stability in service jobs, in restoration work, in restaurants, bars, hotels, and gas stations. Many Moroccans and Senegalese ply the unstable trade of the itinerant street vendor, known as *vu cumprà*,<sup>3</sup> selling Africana and inexpensive seasonal objects from seashore to city throughout the country. Because the street vendors work in public and typically lack required licenses, police monitor their activities and occasionally confiscate their stock (Khouma 1990). Employment in the primary sector is particularly important in the south. Mostly North and sub-Saharan Africans find unsteady work and low pay as agricultural day laborers. An exception to the unsteady work in this sector is found in Mazara del Vallo in Sicily, where many in the large (5,000-strong) Tunisian community work in the fishing industry. Finally, some immigrants find fairly stable work in construction and manufacturing in the north of Italy.

### Italian reactions

Italian debate on immigration dates from the late 1980s, when it became clear that Italy lacked an administrative and even cultural framework for the ever-increasing influx of foreigners. By 1988, the topic had captured

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national attention. The media, from serious newspapers to weekly magazines to television variety shows, reported attacks on and discrimination against foreigners, and surveyed Italian attitudes to foreigners. Intellectuals worried over the potential for Le Pen-like xenophobia in Italy and called for tolerance of diversity. An increasing volume of social-science research on immigration issues also began to be published (e.g., Balbo 1990; Bassetti 1990; Cocchi 1989; Calvanese and Pugliese 1988; Caritas Diocesana 1985; Gallini 1989; Giardesco 1988; Manconi 1990; SIARES 1988). As churches established programs to aid immigrants, unions and associations sponsored “anti-racist” events such as conferences, rallies, and concerts. In Rome, scholars and parliamentarians drew on the example of “SOS Racisme,” an anti-racist organization associated with immigrant and French youth in France, to found “Progetto Italia-razzismo” (Balbo and Manconi 1990). Immigrants themselves formed associations, both along lines of nationality and across them, as in the case of the Federazione delle Organizzazioni e Comunità Straniere in Italia (FOCSI—Federation of Foreign Organizations and Communities in Italy). They also found representation in some Italian associations. The Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association), for example, formed an office devoted to immigration matters and staffed by immigrants (Coordinamento Immigrati Sud del Mondo, or ARCI—CISM). This concern peaked in 1990, after decree #416 became Law #39 in January, and after the six-month registration period for foreigners closed in June.

Law #39, also known as the “Martelli law” after its sponsor, the Socialist Claudio Martelli,<sup>4</sup> concerns the entry, residence, and employment of refugees, foreign students, and foreign workers. The law allows for the expulsion of foreigners who are illegally present or who commit crimes. Its enactment also temporarily closed the border by prohibiting entry to all but refugees, family members of registered immigrants, and those employees expressly summoned by employers (see Forti (1990), Nascimbene (1990), and Zanchetta (1991) for full descriptions of the law and its implementation). For immigrants present in Italy before the end of 1989, the law provides the opportunity to *regolarizzarsi*, or legalize their status, with residence and work permits of two years’ duration, the right to enroll at public employment offices, and various social services. The Martelli law, Italy’s first comprehensive legislation regulating resident foreigners, brought Italy into conformity with the laws of other EU member states in anticipation of the 1992 opening of internal borders. The law facilitates the legal absorption of immigrants at the same time as it closes borders



2. Benetton ad, central business district, Palermo. This is an example of Benetton's campaign for racial tolerance.

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3. Poster, immigration legislation. The poster appeared in cities throughout Italy and in a number of languages. It exhorts the immigrant to register under Law #39, and reads, “You Can’t Go On Like This. Request Your Residency Permit by 28 June. For Equal Rights, Do the Right Thing.”

until further laborers are deemed necessary. In effect, it enables the state to manage foreign labor as a resource.<sup>5</sup>

In retrospect, the Martelli law served as a turning point in Italian reactions to immigration. The tone of the early debate was mostly set by left-of-center intellectuals and activists, as well as a few politicians, and their tone was essentially positive. Rare were warnings such as that issued by the well-known economics professor Paolo Sylos Labini (1988: 147), that North Africans “bring with them problems of terrorism and public order.” Rather, many activists set out to aid immigrants and to publicize their cause. They called for responsible legislation to regulate immigration, and established structures to assist immigrants with jobs, housing, health care, and permits. In general, activists regarded immigrants as more a resource than a problem, seeing in them the potential for a new and pluralistic Italy.



A concern with race also figured prominently in the activists' ideas (Pugliese 1991). They asked: who are these "immigrants of color" (*immigrati di colore*) and "blacks" (*neri*), and how do Italians treat them? The title of an early book by the noted journalist Giorgio Bocca (1988) posed the lightning-rod question – *Are Italians Racist?* The question preoccupied many because since World War II Italians had learned to condemn as inhumane any form of *razzismo* ("racism"). Seldom defined, this term is used to mean hostility, violence, or intolerance directed against culturally and physically different populations.

Two kinds of answers emerged. Not a few assumed that Italians were in fact "immune to racism." As Dacia Maraini (1990) recalls:

I always remember having heard, from my childhood on, that Italians "by nature are immune to racism." "Italy was Fascist," it was said, "out of ignorance, out of conformism, out of fear, but it was never blinded by racist hate." "How many Italians in Africa," someone added, "paired off with black girls, and even had children."<sup>6</sup>

Others sought to puncture what they regarded as a complacent myth of "good" or tolerant Italians (*italiani, brava gente*). They condemned the "racist" exploitation of foreign workers, and cited a disturbing number of attacks on foreigners in addition to opinion surveys revealing unanticipated hostility towards foreigners (e.g., Comunità di Sant'Egidio 1989, cited in Bassetti 1990: 44). Yet neither was this view free from the optimism of Italian society's ideals of tolerance and diversity. The prominent sociologist, Franco Ferrarotti (1989), for example, entitled his 1988 book *Beyond Racism: Towards a Multicultural and Multiracial Society*.<sup>7</sup>

Idealism and a certain *naïveté* distinguish the early debate. Perhaps the role of the partisans in the liberation of northern Italy from the Italian Fascists and the Nazis at the end of World War II has a bearing on this tendency. The importance of the Communists<sup>8</sup> in the liberation movement and in postwar politics, particularly in the "Red Belt" of central Italy, may explain the prominence of ideologies of racial equality and the lack of Italian guilt over the Jews and gypsies surrendered to the Germans in the war. Laura Balbo, co-founder of Italia-razzismo and a Member of Parliament, characterizes much of the early debate as "facile anti-racism." These anti-racists simply declare themselves for what is good ("anti-racism") and against what is bad ("racism," "all the racisms") without defining or justifying their terms; or they romantically and uncritically embrace the descriptive term "pluralism" as an ideal (Balbo 1989, 1990). Enrico Pugliese (1991) has drily observed that the supposed lapses of the "facile" opponents of racism hardly constitute a danger to immigrants or

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to the emerging debate when immigrants are daily subject to exploitation and violence. At any rate, a high idealism does indeed typify much Italian debate. Up until the passage of the “Martelli law” and the subsequent closing of the borders, for example, many progressives dismissed as folly even the notion of officially closing the borders because the demographic, economic, and political forces driving immigration were clearly too compelling for regulation. (According to Balbo, institutions such as churches, unions, and associations embarked on more pragmatic initiatives from 1989 even as they continued to voice a naïve optimism. Several of these were important in bringing about legislative change.)

Bitter debate over the Martelli decree did much to darken the mood of Italian debate on immigration. As anticipated, the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI – Movimento Sociale Italiano; now the National Alliance) and the Lombard League (LL – Lega Lombarda; now the Northern League<sup>9</sup>) objected to the legislation. In their view, immigrants take jobs away from deserving Italians, provoke an understandable if lamentable defensive reaction among them, and present insurmountable problems of cultural difference. More significant were objections to the law made by the Republican Party (PRI – Partito Repubblicano Italiano), a small but influential member of numerous postwar coalition governments. As an outspoken opponent of the decree, the PRI’s respected leader, Giorgio La Malfa, made anti-immigrant views acceptable to many. As the decree was being passed into law merchants in Florence organized a march that was in effect a thinly veiled claim that immigrants had brought drugs and disorder to that historic city. Several days later in the same streets, a gang of masked young men beat immigrants under cover of Carnival celebrations. Opponents of the law supported the merchants’ protest, which would become a model for similar protests elsewhere in the north. Though they condemned the Carnival assault as “racist,” they insinuated that more violence would result from continued immigration, which they implied would result with the implementation of the Martelli law.

Once the law was passed, its opponents successfully enacted a provision that closed the borders until further consideration. Despite its prominence in the immigration debate, the PRI failed to achieve electoral gains. More successful were the MSI and LL, who called for the repeal of the law, and mobilized working people against the plans of various city governments to provide temporary facilities for immigrants. The government’s commitment to closed borders, strikingly exemplified by the 1991 expulsion of Albanian refugees, found reflection in opinion polls showing increasing intolerance (Bonifazi 1992) and in a series of violent attacks on foreigners.