

## La nuova emigrazione italiana

Cause, mete e figure sociali

a cura di Iside Gjergji

# Contemporary Italian Diaspora: USA 2014

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**Abstract** In the 21st century the small number of Italian immigrants arriving has led to an accelerated integration and non-enclave incorporation into American society. Notable are the many high skilled professionals arriving and giving us leadership in banking, automotive industry and design. The cultural richness of Italy makes it a desirable source country for the skills that are needed for the emerging economy and jobs of the United States. Yet this isn't everyone's story. There are still those that suffer and experience some downward mobility.

The contemporary Italian Diaspora in the United States engages historians and social policy professionals as both representative of significant cultural history and as a herald of social dynamics important to contemporary sociology. Here at our 150 year old university, the study of immigration, migration and immigrant integration are an increasing significant field of study. It is a discipline capturing the increased attention of social work professionals, scholars, and organizations who serve newcomers as well as social policy experts and lawyers. We are convinced that social workers are leading the way in looking at both social policy and social practice to make the migration of the world a little less threatening and a little more positive. At Boston College our heritage was first the Irish and then the Italian newcomers who enlarged the Roman Catholic community of Boston and fostered a city of inclusion.

The Italian American community is spread throughout the Nation. While the numbers have certainly diminished in terms of percentage, there remains a legacy and incredible heritage of Italian Americans. In Boston, a strong historic and contemporary Italian community thrives. Most of the major cities in the United States, including New York and Chicago have a 'Little Italy'. Many Italians have found their way up and out of an enclave to be absorbed into the surrounding communities and the suburbs. Yet, Little Italy, The North End, stills exists today with over 50 Italian restaurants side by side, many festivals, ethnic press, Italian American politicians, and now, increasingly staff support from more recent immigrant groups such as Brazilians and other Latinos.

When we talk about the Italian-American community we, of course, have to look back for one moment to appreciate the incredible burst of energy

that came to these shores at the turn of the century. In the 1880's there were very few Italians in America; the diaspora population being only 300,000. By the 1890's the US very quickly saw that population double to 600,000. As we passed over the line into the new century, we saw in the first decade over 2 million Italian arrivals. This was the great industrial age and also a time when the political situation in Italy gave rise to many people asking where they wanted to be and where there was an opportunity they wanted to pursue. By the 1920's when immigration began to taper off and by 1924 when the United States closed the border, we had already reached 4 million Italians who claimed the United States as home. Italians at this time were 10% of the US foreign-born population.

They had come from every region in Italy and for a variety of reasons. Many came looking for work as labourers but high-culture Italians entered into the arts community or others into religious leadership. It remains to this day, that the most notable contribution of Italian Americans was in the labour industry of the United States. Some would say there are dark stories but by and large it was a positive story. Huge numbers of people were entering the American workforce and the legacy of their economic contribution built America and the American union movement. From fishing to plaster work, from vineyards to corporate offices, Italians rose quickly in the economy. Business examples include the founder of Bank of America Amadeo Giannini or Lido 'Lee' Iacocca, a leading engineer in the auto industry. No segment of the economy was without a leading Italian figure.

If the United States is anything, it is a thriving economy due to its immigrant population. After World War II the percentage of immigrants dropped significantly and now has climbed back to where 13 percent of our population is foreign born. In raw numbers it is unequal to any other points in history. A look at the US population, with 43 million immigrants, is made up of people from across the globe due to the Hart Celler Act that created national quotas. This 1952 legislation curtailed European immigration but the continuing Italian contribution falls within our European population, which makes up about 12 percent of the annual flow into the United States. Of that population about 4 percent is Italian (US Census Bureau). Table 1 shows the number of Italian legal permanent residents (LPRs) each decade. In the United States we currently have a total of 1,264,000 Italians who are first generation, born in Italy.

The demographic profile of new Italian immigrants is significantly different and has changed dramatically from the Italian flow of the Industrial Revolution. Contemporary Italian immigrants are a little older, between 35-54 years of age, and thus more likely to have developed their identity. Assimilation is therefore different and Italian identity sustained. 72 percent of new Italian immigrants are married compared to the large population of single men who came in the past. Also unlike their predecessors who came as labourers, today a third of Italian immigrants are coming for management positions (32%). Interestingly, 22% are coming with a plan to remain

outside the workforce; as homemakers, children or coming in their retirement years for family reunification.

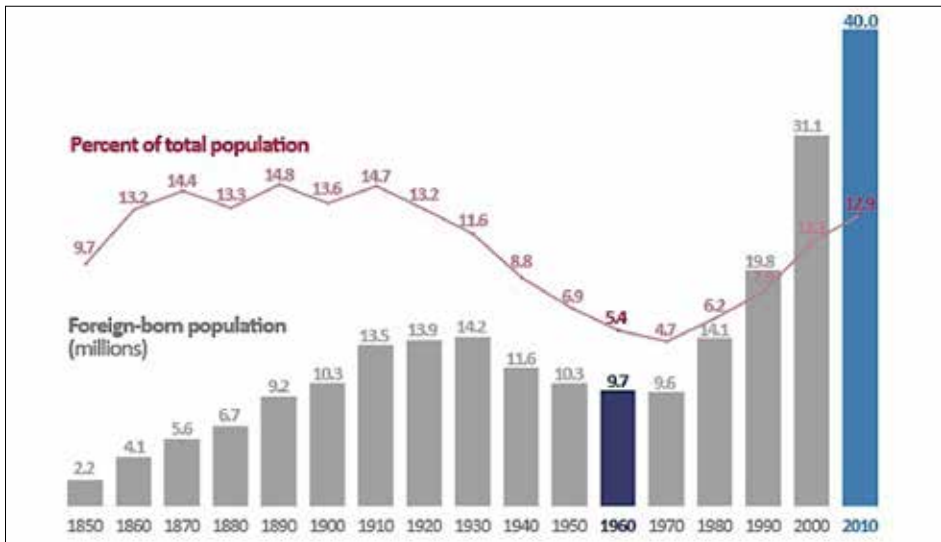
Table 1. Number of Italian Legal Permanent Residents (Green Card Holders)

Decade	LPR holders
1960's	206,700
1970's	130,100
1980's	32,887
1990	22,477
2000-2010	26,499

Source: US Census Bureau

Almost everyone with an Italian background came to the Northeast region of the US and though they have settled across the country into virtually every State, the northeast States from Pennsylvania to Maine are still the primary choices for settlement. Rhode Island is our smallest State but receives the highest percentage of Italian newcomers, at 19 percent. Connecticut comes in a close second welcoming 18 percent, New York 14 percent and Massachusetts 13 percent. A very important part of the Italian immigrant community is New York City. The city is the westernmost parish of Italy and ranks in size after San Paulo, Rome, and Milan. There are over 3.3 million people in the greater metropolitan New York area who on the census list themselves as having Italian ancestry.

Figure 1. Foreign-born Population and as Percent of Total Population



Source: US Census Bureau, 1850-2000 Decennial Census; 2010 American Community Survey

The context for receiving Italians is very important because in this country multiculturalism is not a dominant problem. It is not something foreign. It is not something new. It is the nature of the country. We define multiculturalism in different ways. We have gone from the great 'melting pot' metaphor to a 'salad bowl' metaphor, but by and large we are a country that sees itself in a hyphenated way. Everyone understands that you can be proudly American and hold on to your Greek, Polish, Russian, or Korean background with equal pride. Over 60 percent of Americans actually know an ancestor who came from overseas, making the conversation about background a celebrated subject. My observation is that it is a part of the American soul to claim roots rather than be a rootless people, desiring to be more than a newborn population, but rather a population rich in culture and rich in history.

Italian-Americans proclaim their history. It is a pronounced part of their identity. The Irish are similar, but in a particularly strong and proud way, Italians connect with their legacy and heritage. Being Italian is a brand. 17.8 million or 6% of our population claim Italian-American ethnicity. For most people in America who use it, there is a positive association, a proud identity that they are willing to stand behind and declare boldly. One need only look at our fashion magazines or advertising for anything from jewellery to wine, from furniture to models and the Italian brand is reinforced as a symbol of beauty and taste.

In Massachusetts, the Italian-American visibility is evidenced in the rise to political power. Boston had an Italian mayor, Thomas Menino, for over 20 years and he has overlapped with an Italian governor, Paul Cellucci and an Italian-American Speaker of the State House. Cellucci was one of over two dozen of Italian governors that came to leadership across the country. Italian leadership is also prominent throughout the Nation in States like New York and New Jersey where Governor Chris Christie aspires to gain the Republican nomination for the next presidential race. Italian leadership can also be found at the federal level with Janet Napolitano as the former the leader of the Department of Homeland Security, our largest government agency and Representative, Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House.

Italians are accepted in without notable prejudice in most of American society though we are still emerging from old stereotypes that were certainly negative. In a day of enclaves, when Italians settled with their own kind, it was typical to hear in white-Protestant America conversations about that uncouth, that loud, disruptive and maybe even corrupt group of Italians. The movement of Italians from being part of a questioned and sometimes despised minority to being seen as part of a mainstream and upwardly mobile middle class is a topic covered well in Stefano Luconi's book, *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia* (2002). Current sociologists have watched an emergence of Italians as a backbone on the American middle-class.

While Boston saw Catholic churches built nearly back to back to accommodate the Northern and Southern Italians, contemporary Italians are perceived as no longer from a region but from Italy. They've gone from being simply Italian to European. From being Catholic, who faced minority status, to now being Christian. Italians are no longer country nationals but part of our greater immigrant community. This progression and mobility is typical in the United States. As we categorize all immigrants from Latin America as Latino, and all Asians in the same way, we increasingly lump Europeans into the same identity mix.

In Richard Alba's work *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity* (1985), the author looks at the way in which that progression took place and people began to see the Italian as part of many immigrant groups blended together. First finding their way through enclaves into a greater larger community, then after their children excelled in school they took their place in American plethora of leadership. The children allowed themselves to assume a role in every sector of society where they were no longer a part of an ethnic identity but simply drew on their roots. The miracle of the United States is our ability to absorb so many different populations. The first generation suffers, the second generation succeed where their parents could not, in leadership and throughout the rest of society. By the third generation almost everyone in the US is seen on equal footing.

One interesting phenomena has been to see Italians as they might not have been in their home country. Here Italian Catholics might seem conservative because of their ties to the Vatican, but in fact Italian Catholics have found themselves generally part of a progressive Catholic view. Their leadership in San Francisco, for example, that was once very homophobic, became very inclusive (Issel 2012). As you look at the tradition of Italian Catholics in the United States, you see real leadership that has risen above some of the stereotypes of the past.

The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of Queens College in New York City is conducting research on the contemporary under-40 Italian-American community. They have found a population that is doing very well, in part because they have gone directly into professional roles or into significant careers after arriving to the US. They have contributed in substantial ways in the arts, music and culture. Now when we think of an Italian American we tend to think of a society that is being enriched by people who are tasteful, who are fashion conscience, and who love good food and wine. To be Italian is to be a welcomed part of the American hegemony.

In the 21st century the small number of Italian immigrants arriving has led to an accelerated integration and non-enclave incorporation into American society. Notable are the many high skilled professionals arriving and giving us leadership in banking, the automotive industry and in design. The cultural richness of Italy makes it a desirable source country for the skills that are needed for the emerging economy and jobs of the United States.

Yet this isn't everyone's story. There are still those that suffer and experience some downward mobility before their children take it back up. More than a few bakers and tradesmen are still up at dawn and pursuing a new life with the same ingredients of hard work and persistence that one for their grandparent's generation the acceptance and appreciation that is enjoyed or even taken for granted.

The twenty first century ease of transit and social media as well as networks fosters new patterns. There is little challenge to follow the news back home, participate in politics, and keep dual bank accounts - one in each country. For many of the new Italian-American Diaspora they are truly 'transnational' in the highest and best sense of that word.

Current arrivals are coming at a time when the United States is very unsure about its own future with immigrants. The US is continuously dependent on immigrants and their skills. For the last 25 years there have been about a million newcomers to the US each year. With 11 million undocumented immigrants, the Nation is very uncertain about those who come without authorization and this has bled over into greater hesitancy about immigrants in general. Despite the public debate, however, the legal flow remains open. Both of our leading national parties have already agreed that the children of immigrants - not only the ones who were born here but those that came without volition on their own part (DREAMers) - are going to be granted opportunity for higher education, work authorization and pathways to citizenship. Another priority for the US is to grant more professional immigrants, especially STEM graduates (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) the opportunity to come. If you come for a graduate degree in the United States, both republicans and democrats are considering giving you a visa as well as your diploma. This is a new day for the professionals and the one that will draw a certain kind of educated, elite part of Italian society that is interested in being global citizens, or taking advantage of the opportunity in the US.

Our two countries remain close. In the United States when citizens are asked where they want to go in the world for a vacation, Italy is always at the top of the list of destination countries. When we think about where we come from, there is an enormous amount of people who claim Italian heritage. When we take pride in ourselves as a Nation, we are also sharing that pride with others around the world. You may know the name Julia Mancuso. Julia has won Olympic medals in 3 Olympic meets. The US is proud of her as an accomplished skier. It was her grandparents who came to the US and made the contribution of those Italian genes that have done so well. She is not only an all-American girl but also a member of the Diaspora whose Italian-American grandmother stood proudly watching at Sochi. Julia takes pride in her ethnic root. The Italian Diaspora is alive and well here in the United States. We are continuing to live and thrive because of the Italian-Americans who have contributed their life blood, their hopes, their drive, and their rich cultural taste to all that is America.

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