

What is like to be an immigrant

A personal experience of immigration in Italy

di **Steve Shore**



The immigrant experience has always been difficult, regardless of the country. Coming as an adult to a new country and culture, it is singularly difficult – for some impossible – to change their viewpoints entirely and become thoroughly acculturated and “nationalized”. For a child, it is perhaps easier because the behavior patterns that develop over years are not as deeply ingrained, the prejudices are a naive sort, and the insertion in a community of peers is easier since the child’s contemporaries are equally ingenuous. But for an adult the situation is

far more complicated. In particular at the level of language, everyday communication is a trying experience.

It is hard to watch this country forget what happened just a century ago, when before the first World War there were waves of immigration, principally from the *Mezzogiorno* but also from the North of the country, to North America. The surviving documents tell two very different stories, perhaps facilitating the current amnesia. One is the set of letters and postcards sent back to this country from the ex-patriots. These often repeat the standard mythical descriptions of a place where the streets are paved with gold, where work is abundant and remunerative, and where the living is easier than anything left behind. The picture was often painted in such bright colors as to induce those to whom the letters were sent to follow suite, accelerating the exodus toward the other side of the Pond (as the Americans often called the Atlantic).

The reality was, however, far grimmer and frequently tragic. It’s enough to read Jacob Riis’ crusading book *How the Other Half Lives*, first published in 1890. A second edition, showing that nothing had really changed in the intervening decade, appeared in 1901 (this second edition was reprinted by Dover Books in 1971 with a brief historical introduction). Riis was a police reporter and photographer of the slums, the new arrivals, and the ethnic groups of New York. The chapter on “The Italian in New York” begins “Certainly a picturesque, if not very tidy, element has been added to the population in the “assisted” Italian immigrant who claims a large share of public attention, partly because he keeps coming at such a tremendous rate, but chiefly because he elects to stay in New York, or near enough for it to serve as his base of operations, and here promptly reproduces the conditions of destitution and disorder which, set in the framework of Mediterranean exuberance, are the delight of the artist, but in a matter-of-fact American community become its danger and reproach.”. A bit later in the chapter, Riis reports that “Recent Congressional inquiries have shown the nature of the “assistance” he receives from

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greedy steamship agents and “bankers”. The *padrone* – the “banker” is nothing else – having made his ten percent out of him *en route*, receives him at landing and turns him to double account as a wage-earner and a rent-payer. In each of these roles he is made to yield a profit to his unscrupulous countryman, whom he trusts implicitly with the instinct of utter helplessness.”

I've explained this at length to illustrate the stark similarity I've seen in the rhetoric now issuing from so many media and public forums regarding immigration. This was a time without the international conventions to which the western nations are signatories, the various codes of human rights and immigration/refugee status. The prevailing eugenic framework and racist policies were enforced without explanation and on entry, those who stepped off the boats often had no idea what was being said to them or what was happening or why. They became specimens, those who came legally (in the sense that they came off registered transport). The “receiving center” at Lampedusa is brutal, perhaps on a par with Guantanamo and worse than the newly landed found at Ellis Island (though closer to the city, located in New York harbor this port of entry was constructed with the sensibility of a prison or *panopticon*). It was harder to come illegally through the east or west coast, although there were many who did so in steerage or as stow-aways, slipping through the immigration controls to find themselves in even worse circumstances. Those who managed to illegally board the steamships, undetected by the port patrols or immigration authorities at the point of departure. The 1930s American Marx Brothers comedy *A Night at the Opera* gives a window, exaggerated but revealing, about the Italian immigrants on ship. Every ethnic group that has sought to enter the US has found the same paths and the same prejudices, often as each wave replaces the previous one (it's enough to listen to the 1950s Broadway musical “West Side Story”. I strongly recommend the Stephen Sondheim lyrics for “America”).

Now to the Italian experience. I am an *extra-comunitario*, in possession of a biennially renewable *permesso di soggiorno* from my arrival in spring 2003 to date. Within the first weeks after entering the country, I was required to go to the *questura* to start the process of obtaining residency and complete the employment procedure started in the US before leaving. At that time there was no information available on any website, and only documents written in Italian were available. For an illiterate in the language, this required that the applicant for further regularization be accompanied by either a lawyer (certainly at cost) or a friend or relative. For anyone who did not know the law, there was nothing to inform them, no lists of contacts, nothing. On the first morning, a crowd was impatiently gathering outside the offices at the rear of the *questura* awaiting the moment when, with a lot of yelling and intimidation, one of the police finally opened the gate. This initiated a disgusting chaos. I say that because a mob has its own behavior and this was nothing less. The count was loose, since the gate opened late the crowd was even more exasperated, and the result for me was that the first two times I attempted to enter I was literally elbowed and pushed out of the way. This was no queue. I'll admit, with a sense of shame, that on the third attempt I pushed a few out of the way as they cut into the line, with no damage to any party. Finally, on entering, there was again neither order nor civility on either side of the process. Any documentation on the walls that might have been informative was in Italian only, even the information on associations occupied with immigrant welfare and integration! The sound system in most public places is often almost inaudible and virtually useless for native speakers – think of those in some banks and train stations – but in this case it was far worse. Of course for security there were, and are still,

barriers but the slits are impossibly small, especially when some transaction requires passing thicker documents, and the verbal communication takes no account of the uselessness of the loudspeakers and the ambient noise. In a short time, the officials became exasperated and intolerant, abrupt and uninformative in their responses. The result was that on the first pass I lacked a document, a *marca da bollo*, and a photograph. Those were easy enough to obtain but required leaving the queue and there was no allowance for precedence on returning. I saw this happen many times while in line, the process took about three hours. The first renewal was even more difficult since there was no notification sent about the procedure or filing deadlines. Again I saw that those who were alone or with family and/or friends were far more confused by the process and more likely to be sent away from the window than those with what appeared to be lawyers (and even then there were complications). I'll note that I am in a singularity privileged position, being a state employee (*tempo indeterminato*) from a ministerial appointment, so my experience has been the absolute best that can be expected, an example of which was the facilitation of my second audience with one of the officials to complete the first registration process.

Then came Bossi-Fini Law progressively into force and what was a difficult experience became actually degrading for all concerned. Two years ago I again had to renew, at the end of my fourth year. The publicity by the ministry presented a simplified and streamlined procedure, the documents no longer required the step at the questura but could be sent from any post office to Rome with a relatively light cost (relatively, that is, for those who have an income). Now there are instructions in several languages, but at least the last time I went through the procedure there were key points in the instructions and explanations in Italian only. Even though the documents were sent with plenty of lead time, the notification to return to the questura arrived after the expiration of the then active *permesso*. Without being told where, at first I returned to the original office, waiting about an hour on line only to be told to go to another office, with no additional information about procedure. That day was particularly brutal, a driving rain and wind, and along with about a dozen others I waited in the rain (or under an apartment terrace on the other side of the street, a position that was exchanged among those in the queue) until an officer came out, shouted a few names, and then turned his back to re-enter the building. There were several Turkish families, eastern Europeans, several from the Middle East, and two nuns who, despite their umbrellas, were fairly soaked by the end of an hour under those conditions. Again, without guide or explanation, when someone heard their name called they scrambled to enter, being ushered into a long corridor where it was finally possible to be seated for a while. The next step was again giving data (the usual sort, that which was already entered in one database so I have yet to understand how the same bureaucracy would not have access for two separate operations to the data). Perhaps this was the most revealing moment of the process. After the usual questions, I was asked "profession" to which I responded "*università*", rather than providing a more precise but confusing answer. The woman entering the data who, to this point, had not looked me in the face, looked up with a distinctly skeptical, silent stare to which I responded "*professore*" and again, it was clear that this reply provoked some cognitive dissonance. I recall that she started to ask why I was there but, I guess, thought better of such a question. Then came criminal-type photographs. It was not enough to have the photographic identification used for a standard carta d'identità this was a series of mug shots using the same angles as for those accused of a crime taken with the applicant seated in a barbershop-style chair. The final step, which I can only assume is not a normal experience for a citizen, was to be fingerprinted (this in

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itself caused a moment of almost amusement since, as a pipe smoker, my prints are particularly distorted). This meant a second scan, with hand held down harder. No documentation, no explanation. Finally, the micro-chipped card arrived at the *questura* but there was no mechanism to inform the applicant of it's transfer from Rome, no postcard, no telephone, no email, no sms. It was only because I needed to leave the country and was without documentation that I tried to find the information and was told that it had been sitting in the *questura* for three months.

I repeat. Mine is a trivial example. It is enough to look at the back issues of *Metropoli* (which, some time back, was published weekly by *la Repubblica* for immigrants) to see that the mean case is far, far worse. Waits as long as years without responses for just the *permesso*, without which an *extra-comunitario/a* cannot legally work. Without this document, and no residence, which may happen in the first period before the first renewal, it is impossible to establish a primary healthcare physician or establish residency, and even a legal immigrant risks becoming a *clandestino/a*. All this would be just standard bureaucracy were it not made a harsher reality by a coincidence: every immigrant who passes through the *questura* to get or renew documentation must pass the PdL meeting hall in Pisa. And on the side facing the entrance to the *questura* there's an anti-immigration poster, not as vile as the usual Lega *trash* ("They didn't restrict immigration and now they're on the reservation" showing a plains-headdressed native american) but still enough to produce a twinge. The recent incident in Prato of a notice posted in a shop window restricting entry to Italian speaking clients could just as easily be replaced by a standard signage from the period of anti-immigration sentiment in the United States, "no dogs or ... allowed" (fill in your favorite ethnic and/or religious group). It's so terribly easy to forget the past.