

Emigration Agents in the History of European and Italian Emigration.

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Eric Hobsbawm [1976, 244] has noted that in Europe, between 1848 and 1875, agents and intermediaries used to enrich themselves by filling the holds of the greedy sailing companies with human beings packed like animals. Giuseppe Galasso [1965, 357] has made a risky but well-founded statement: without the agents, Italian emigration would have been different in terms of total size, time frames and recruitment features. A contemporary observer from the Marche region [Nicoletti, 1909, 142] has written that emigration agents played a major role in the emigration flows to foreign countries from Pergola. In explaining the causes, he has noted that the agents, looking for women to employ in French textile factories, had long settled in the municipality of Fossombrone, which, because of the silk industry crisis, had become an excellent reservoir of female workforce. Later on, the agents scattered all over the surrounding territory. This reveals the mechanisms used by the agents to find, “fertilise” and expand recruitment areas.

At a European, national and local level, the importance of this figure is widely recognised as a crucial link of the informative and organisational struc-

ture enabling illiterate or almost illiterate would-be emigrants from small and remote Italian villages to reach the harbours of American big cities and of Europe, as demonstrated by the above-mentioned example. However, despite the importance attributed to emigration agents, only little research has been carried out on their social function and operating modalities. Amoreno Martellini, organiser of this study meeting, has dedicated a chapter of his work on emigration in the Marche region [Martellini, 1999, 165-193] to emigration agents and in the introductory paragraph, entitled *Gli approdi e i limiti della storiografia*, he has outlined the “grey areas” still characterising this issue¹. From a methodological point of view, Martellini, in order to deal with an objectively fleeting matter and to find legally indefinable matter, rightly decided to make use of some judiciary documents related to disputes between agents and their clients.

The diversified and uncertain terminology used to define those subjects operating in the “grey area” between the emigrant and the sailing company (or the body entrusted with the recruitment of workforce abroad), such as representatives of the operators, agents, subagents,

officials, intermediaries, reveals the complexity of this matter from an historical point of view. Research activities are also encouraged by a link between emigration agents and subsidised and free emigration, which explains, at least in Italy, the huge recruitment of emigrants destined to Latin America. Such recruitment involved various provinces and regions and, in different periods, it caused a sudden haemorrhage of workers, according to specific strategies defined by intermediaries and in particular by emigration agents. An example is the sudden and isolated emigration peak of San Marino citizens to Brazil at the end of the century, caused by the ban on free emigration to that country imposed by the Italian government and the resulting shift of the recruitment activity to San Marino.

Noblewomen, mayors, notaries, municipal secretaries and employees, post officials, hotel and trattoria owners, liquor sellers, café owners, station-masters, lawyers, teachers, pharmacists, parish priests, scribes, tax collectors, directors of popular banks, usurers, people without any qualifications [Sori, 1979, 307] were the social and professional positions of the agents, sub-agents, intermediaries and errand boys. At the end of the century, this small army was made up of more than 20,000 people, out of whom 7,000 were agents. With the 1901 law on emigration, they became the representatives of the sailing companies, which selected 9,000 authorised agents out of 20,000 applications, assisted by an undefined number of intermediaries and recruiters. In consideration of their number and social nature, these agents greatly influenced

Italian society between the end of 1800s and the beginning of 1900s. In this period, Italian society was undergoing a slow but constant transition following the first manifestations of capitalist economic development and of the “negative” side of the coin, that is underdevelopment. The intermediaries in the recruitment of emigrant workers, mainly in the backward and “feudal” agricultural areas of Southern Italy, played a major role in the social changes, working within the isolated local communities of the Italian countryside. In particular, their activity represented one of the ways in which the lower middle classes of the villages took part in the social turmoil caused by mass emigration. The intention was to rebuild their finances and restore their function as political and social mediators between the local upper classes and the people, being the latter not always subjects of the former.

Finally, the activity of the emigration agents should be reconsidered. Were they the authors of the “artificial” emigration, to use a word so dear to landowners and, in general, to the Italian conservatives of the second half of the nineteenth century? Can they be considered as illusionists who made peasants and farm labourers dream of a rural overseas “Eldorado”? Were they swindlers who took advantage of the large amount of money connected with emigration by sea? According to the estimates, the agents used to receive 20-50 lira per person, equal to 50% of the ship-owner’s net income from the transport price. In consideration of their reduced income, ship-owners provided services of very poor quality [Bodio, 1902, 337-338]. Can they be considered as social instiga-

tors who, in their popular position as friends and confidants of the rural classes, used to stir people up against the oppression of landowners? It goes without saying that emigration agents played all these roles, though in different ways. However, worth mentioning is also their function as “technical” assistants, which was fundamental to the almost illiterate rural masses, since an official effective assistance has never been guaranteed by the State.

The agents carried out all procedures related to passports, military authorisations and to the partially free journey to the harbour of departure. They used to write and read letters from and to foreign countries and guaranteed the would-be emigrants many other informative and organisational services. In my opinion, their activity was crucial during the initial period when they promoted emigration in the small villages, where the early emigrants were recruited. At a later stage, with “emigration chains”, prepaid tickets and direct information from abroad, their assistance was no longer necessary.

In consideration of the above, I believe that San Marino Museum of the Emigrant has largely contributed to the studies on emigration history, by promoting, I think for the first time, an international exchange of views on emigration agents.

Notes

¹ Short references to emigration agents contained in the works of Ercole Sori [Sori, 1979, 303-310], Emilia Franzina [Franzina, 1976, 170-171] and in a specific essay by Piero Brunello [Brunello, 1982, 95-122] are some exceptions.