ITALIAN AMERICANS, EDUCATION, AND ITALIAN LANGUAGE: 1880–1921

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Abstract: Italian migrants in the United States have been often associated to the tendency to neglect the importance of culture as an instrument of upward social mobility. Traditionally perceiving culture as a hegemonic tool of the elites, Italian migrants in the United States, who had a predominantly peasant background, were supposedly uninterested in educating their children, rather preferring that they drop out school to add with their work a supplemental income necessary to face the daily necessities of migrant families. Based on a long-standing prejudice, this supposed Italian-American disinterest towards culture and education has been revisited by some scholars, who have revaluated the migrant attitude towards the cultural realm. In the first part, this essay will offer an overview of the different scholarly views on the relationship between Italian-Americans, culture and education. In the second part, it will discuss how Italian-Americans approached the usage of the Italian language, the native idiom that was disappearing in the Little Italies with the progression of newer generations, which inevitably favoured the recourse to English. Finally, the essay will take into account how Italian governments in the Liberal Age (1861–1921) connected to the communities of the Italians in the United States through programs addressed to fostering the Italian language overseas as a way to preserve the *Italianità*, namely the Italian character of migrants.

Introduction

From the 1880s to the beginning of the 1920s, the United States was a key destination for millions of Italians. Affected by harsh social and economic conditions, many Italians left their villages, aiming to improve their conditions, save as much money as possible, and eventually return to their homes. According to scholar Roger Daniels, between 1880 and 1920, over 4,100,000 Italians

landed on U.S. shores and settled mostly in cities in the northern and eastern states (Daniels 188–189). However, this mass inflow was drastically limited by U.S. Congress legislation, which, in 1921 and 1924, imposed nationality quotas for entry to the country. These particularly penalized migrants from eastern and southern Europe, including Italians, who were seen as racially inferior and consequently less welcome.

The majority of Italian migrants was composed of unskilled peasants whose illiteracy rates were very high, or whose education had been limited by being home-schooled. Figures indicate how, in 1901, approximately 44 percent of Italian migrants to the United States were illiterate, compared to 36 percent of all new immigrants arriving at the turn of the century (Vermeulen and Perlmann 132). Illiteracy ranged from the lower levels registered in northern Italians (11 percent) to higher numbers among southern Italians (52 percent), who were among the worst performers of European migrants. School facilities were particularly lacking in the economically depressed south in a country where, from its unification in 1861, the liberal-leaning ruling class (which governed Italy until Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922) had scarcely addressed the problem of mass schooling, because education had been perceived to be a vehicle of subversion and inspiration for revolutionary ideas. The Italian governments had taken more interest only after the turn of the century (Reeder, "Women in the Classroom" 102–104).

For several decades, Italian migrants to the United States and their offspring were believed to be mostly disinterested in obtaining an education because of their high rate of illiteracy and low school performance in the host country. However, over the last few decades, scholars have reviewed these considerations and have proposed a more nuanced view of Italian Americans' relationship with education and culture at large. The aim of this essay is firstly to scrutinize this relationship through an analysis of current scholarship. The second part will be based around an analysis of how Italian Americans related to the usage of the Italian language overseas. Lastly, this essay will take into account how Italian governments in the Liberal Age (the period spanning from the unification of Italy in 1861 until Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922) dealt with programs addressed to fostering the Italian language in the U.S., using it as a means to preserve migrants' *Italianità* (Italian character) in the Little Italies. Indeed, Italian policymakers aimed to keep Italian migrants bound to Italy by their capacity to speak the native tongue that inevitably would be lost by years of residence abroad and the sequence of generations. The period of analysis goes from the beginning of mass outflows, in

the 1880s, until 1921. This latter date has been chosen because it marks a first halt in Italian immigration to the United States after the legislation approved by Congress and eventually reinforced in 1924. Furthermore, it is on the eve of Benito Mussolini's seizure of power, the beginning of a new phase that would lead to the establishment of a dictatorship that, for political reasons (especially in the 1930s), would take more interest in running state-sponsored cultural programs for the Italians who settled in the United States.

Italians in the United States and their education

Generally, it was common belief that the Italians who arrived in the United States were profoundly skeptical in regard to the value of education and its importance for social achievements. In Italy, peasants would have looked at education with suspicion, as it was perceived to be a means utilized by the ruling classes, and they generally mistrusted educated men for their supposed capacity to exploit uneducated farmers. In *Sull'oceano*, Italian writer Edmondo De Amicis described the preoccupation of migrants embarking on a ship for the United States who were afraid of being cheated during their registration by emigration officers. In that moment, illiterate migrants demonstrated the “invincible mistrust any peasant has towards all men holding a pen and a registry” (De Amicis 22–23).¹ Born in the U.S. in 1909 to Sicilian parents, Italian-American writer Jerre Mangione (*Mount Allegro* 213) recalls in his autobiographical novel his mother's belief that reading too many books could eventually lead to madness. His father, instead, cursed the U.S. educational system, which was accused of making children disrespectful of adults:

The American school system, for him symbolized everything that outraged him about his adopted country. His diatribes on the subject were of such eloquence as to make us feel daring to like any of our teachers. Beneath his fury was the conviction that they were encouraging immorality, disrupting family life, and undermining his position as the head of his family. (Mangione, *An Ethnic at Large* 18)

In his 1944 PhD dissertation (published in 1972), New York-based Italian-American educator Leonard Covello studied Italian-American pupils' antagonism

¹ Translation by the author.

towards school and argued that this sentiment had been imported from Italy as a component of peasant cultural heritage (149–391). Minimal school arrangements in southern Italy and the attitude of learning from practice rather than from books would have made education in the U.S. uninteresting to the peasants' ordinary lives; education was seen as a privilege of the upper classes. Angelo Bertocci (88), another Italian-American educator, remembered how new university enrolments of Italian Americans made the community proud, albeit someone always would be ready to remind the enrollee about how his father at the same age was already a hoe-labourer. Even the famous Italian intellectual Giuseppe Prezzolini (240–241), who led the cultural institution Casa Italiana at Columbia University in the 1930s, pointed out how anti-school attitudes had a certain role in the early dropping-out of immigrants' children from the U.S. school system. Indeed, Italian peasant culture, based on practical arrangements for daily survival, would have been undeterred by the importance of learning and schooling for upward social mobility in the host society. Consequently, peasants would have favoured children's abandoning school as soon as possible and valued children's labor as a key economic resource for migrant families.

Data on schooling effectively shed light on the low performance of Italian pupils in American schools. Italians scored poorly in terms of completing educational cycles. American educator Leonard P. Ayres (115–116) registered the tendency of the children of immigrants to drop out of school earlier than native-born Americans. In New York schools, Germans ranked the best, while Italians were at the bottom. In 1908, the U.S. Immigration Commission reported that Italians had the highest numbers of children aged 6 to 15 that were not attending school (Foner 195).

At the turn of the twentieth century, U.S. federal and state authorities conceived of public schools as being the main agent to facilitate the full assimilation of Europeans. The educational historian and superintendent of San Francisco schools, Ellwood P. Cubberly, wrote in 1909 that the task of school was to stop the isolation of ethnic communities and favour their assimilation into the U.S. cultural mainstream, according to the Anglo-Saxon conceptualization of law, social order, and democracy. This matter seemed particularly pressing because, in 1911, 57.5% of students enrolled in the public schools of 37 main American cities had been born to foreign parents (Cordasco, *Immigrant Children* 26–27). Under the 1895 Compulsory Education Act, school attendance had become compulsory until the age of 16, and students were required to learn English from teachers

without any foreign accent. Any speaking in foreign languages was strictly taboo, while history and civic lessons gave patriotic emphasis to the importance of American holidays and the morning salute to the flag. Lessons also pointed out the English roots of the nation and made no reference to immigrant cultures, which were often ridiculed by the teachers themselves (Foner 207; Cordasco, “The Children of Immigrants” 29), to the extent that ethnicity was seen as a mark of inferiority. Aldo G. Bertacchi, born in Chicago in 1916 to Italian parents, clearly explained the situation at school experienced by children of immigrants:

When I learned Italian, people were afraid to speak in Italian. They were afraid to tell people they were Italian [...]. When we went to high school, we were called “Dagos” [*sic*]. A lot of people were afraid to say they were Italian because they thought you were from the bad class of Italian people, the hoodlums, the gangsters. Maybe that’s why a lot of them, they go back to the 30’s [*sic*], they change their name. Because the Italians did not have a good name [...]. A lot of times if you told people you were Italian, they’d look upon you and right away thought you were a gangster.²

Jerre Mangione (*Mount Allegro* 209–216) described his American teachers’ insistence on performing highly in subjects such as Latin, drawing, or playing music, only because his Italian descent would ensure artistic qualities. Anthony Sorrentino was a Chicagoan who had arrived from Sicily with his family and enrolled in a local school in 1919 with his sister. He remembered all the difficulties they faced in adapting to the American school system, in which he felt alien because of deficiencies with the new language and even because of his clothes that indicated his foreign background (Nelli 68). Even the ethnic associations lamented the anti-Italian prejudice perpetuated in public schools. In his book on the Order of the Sons of Italy in America (the main Italian association in the United States with branches scattered throughout the country), Baldo Aquilano (19) highlighted school pressure on the children of immigrants to deny their ancestry while they did not provide any information on the land of their parents. Still in 1937, an Italian traveller in the United States (Ruggiero 198–199) narrated in his travelogue how he had examined a few American school textbooks in which

² Testimony of Aldo G. Bertacchi, Immigration Historical Research Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, *Italians in Chicago: Oral History Project*, box 4.

Italy was depicted as a land of shaking volcanoes inhabited by peoples resembling the natives of Africa and Oceania, dressed in bizarre clothes and eating macaroni with their hands.

Over the last few decades, some scholars, such as Alice Kessler-Harris, Virginia Yans McLaughlin, Stephen Lassonde, and Richard Alba, have reiterated the idea that Italians hindered the education of their own children, as they were frightened it would damage the integrity of the family. In addition, they stressed the economic necessity to rely on child labor for family survival. In his comparative study on Irish-American and Italian-American educational views and activities between 1870 and 1900, Harold Weisz argued that Italians were resistant to schooling, as proven by unsuccessful attempts to establish Italian schools or stimulate interest in the parochial school system. Thomas Sowell binds the low educational achievements of Italians to their propensity to prioritize hard work rather than education. Others, such as Stephen Steinberg, have questioned whether Italians' anti-intellectual attitudes were imported from Italy or a consequence of the life constraints they faced in the United States. Not simply a carryover from Europe, the behaviour of Italians would have been molded by the lack of school facilities in southern Italy and by the fact that their chances to go to college were limited regardless, therefore academic performance in the United States would not have been considered a priority in the Little Italies. According to sociologist Joseph LoPreato, the tendency of intellectuals in Italy to use their higher education for exploiting average people would push the latter to repulse the value of culture. In addition, the deficiency of the American school system would contribute to low school performance, and pushed Italians to drop out or establish their own parochial educational facilities. For Ronald H. Bayor, too, life conditions in Italy and the little importance attributed to education in peasant culture, together with the difficulties encountered in American schools, would all have been factors in explaining the apparent disinterest of Italian Americans towards learning.³

The long-lasting myth of the ability of American public schools to eliminate ethnic and racial differences, assimilate all nationalities, and favour migrants' upward social mobility was harshly contested in the late 1960s. In the wake of the Civil Rights movement and against the U.S. commitment to war in Vietnam, a new revisionist historiography emerged and profoundly reshaped the widespread

³ The authors mentioned here are referred to in literary reviews. For the framing of the scholarly debate on Italian Americans and education, see Vermeulen and Perlmann 125–126; Perlmann 84–85; Alba 60–61; Egelman 196; LaGumina 67–68; Bayor 15–16.

and accepted positive conception of public schools. Scholars such as Colin Greer and Michael B. Katz⁴ have remarked on the reactionary and racist nature of the American educational system, an instrument of power for an oligarchic elite meant to socially control newcomers and impose on them their own values (Weiss XV). Nonetheless, others (Olneck and Lazerson 453) have pointed out how the myth of the benefits imparted by public schools had been reiterated by scholars who tended to discard the specificity of immigrant school experiences. Conversely, Miriam Cohen depicted a different scenario in which “large segments of the American bureaucracy itself, from administrators to teachers, wanted to be rid of as many immigrant peoples as soon as possible, because they viewed the students as unruly and uneducable” (128).

While schools might also have been shaped to counteract the arrival of radicalism in America (Seller 187), from the 1890s onwards “challenges” posed in Anglo-Saxon society by the newcomers from eastern and southern Europe were faced by a multiplicity of actors pushing the newcomers towards Americanization through educational programs. Churches, religious associations, settlement houses, and citizenship and patriotic clubs set up civic and language classes or held lectures to instill in immigrants the values of the American middle class. This assimilationist movement became particularly stringent during the years of WWI and the early post-war period, when the melting-pot theory seemed to have been unsuccessful because of the tendency of ethnic groups to maintain strong ties with their countries of origin. This Americanization crusade also included companies and corporations who often forced their foreign employees to attend civic and language classes. The Federal Bureau of Naturalization had an important role in this movement and pressed for the active role of public schools in preparing candidates for citizenship. In addition, the Bureau was authorized by 1918 legislation to set up its own citizenship classes and distribute educational materials. In 1906, U.S. Congress had already imposed fluency in English as a requirement to obtain American citizenship (McClymer 98–101; King 85–126).

Other revisionist scholars have remarked on the immigrants’ ability to resist and to work to preserve their identities against cultural homologation; this was made possible also through the establishment of their own parochial and ethnic schools.⁵ Timothy L. Smith (524–526, 529, and 542–543) has stated how

⁴ Both quoted in Weiss XV.

⁵ See Weiss XV.

immigrants in the United States, including southern and eastern Europeans, had largely promoted schooling within their migrant experience. According to Smith, concern for education was a value that was already widespread in the villages from which many had departed and it had been exported abroad. While emigrants had often experienced schooling at home, families valued education especially in view of the preparation for migratory journeys. Returnees might also embody the importance of education for achieving social mobility, while young adults showed an interest in investing their time in learning English at school in the United States.⁶ The role of ethnic associations was also pivotal, since

[t]he records [...] indicate that the laymen and clergymen who established programs of parochial education in Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant immigrant congregations linked their efforts closely to the social aspirations which had drawn the newcomers from the villages far away. (Smith 525)

Regarding the experience of Italian Americans, over the last decades a few scholars have contested Italian-Americans' supposed disinterest towards education. In 1970, Humbert S. Nelli (70–72) argued that Italian adults in Chicago had shown remarkable interest in educational achievements, as proven by high rates of attendance in classes organized by settlement houses, public schools and institutions such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Local Italian leaders saw education as key to accelerating the process of immigrant adjustment to the new world. Moreover, the ethnic press had been particularly laudatory of the educational accomplishments of scholars of Italian descent. Additionally, Nelli saw successful returnees to Italy as capable of encouraging emulation in the native communities where illiteracy was still perceived as a handicap to upward social mobility; interest in their offspring's education would have been particularly present among skilled labourers or union militants (Matthews 139).

Among revisionist historians, John Briggs (191–192 and 242–244) has reversed former theories on the relationship between Italian Americans and culture. In particular, Italians would have departed from Italy still believing in schooling as a vehicle for social mobility. This would have been demonstrated from the very beginning by the Italian ethnic press's strong concern with the educational

⁶ Italians leaving for the United States sometimes had a handbook to learn basic English (see Wiam).

achievements in the Little Italies. Briggs also questioned the belief that the peasant background had been a factor in mistrust in education among migrants. While he was ready to accept migrants' minor interest in culture in the earliest phases of mass migrations from Italy—when Italians would return seasonally to Italy to find work opportunities in the harvesting periods—by the time anti-immigration laws had limited their mobility, Italians chose America as their land of residence and started to fully value education. Also, with regards to the high rates of school drop-outs, Briggs has argued that children of Italians generally completed their degrees.

These considerations may be endorsed by the writings of a few Italian-American women—such as Clara Corica Grillo, Rosa Cavalleri and Grace Billotti Spinelli—who, in their memoirs, strongly emphasized their willingness to challenge ethnic prejudices against female schooling and through their efforts finally had the chance to improve women's rates of education (Parrino, 126–146). Gender is pivotal also in a contribution by scholar Linda Reeder (“Women in the Classroom” 101–124), who has studied the Sicilian village of Sutera and showed how emigration profoundly impacted the educational rates in the community. In particular, despite the remarkable deficiencies of the school system in southern Italy, agricultural workers and artisans recognized education as a means for social mobility and turned to it whenever they could. Parents might even have been interested in improving their daughters' education so that they could become teachers, since teaching was a respectable job and assured enough money for their marriage dowry. While their emigrant husbands were abroad, women were keen to get an education because they believed that it would help them manage the family businesses that men ordinarily ran. Literacy was also instrumental for reading and writing letters without any intermediation, thereby allowing families to save money and preserve family privacy. From 1904 to 1908, the years of booming emigration from Sicily, the rates of women in Sutera who were attending weekend schools rose drastically, as did attendance at adult schools, while the number of children enrolled in primary schools had doubled from 1900 to 1910.

Overall, Reeder demonstrates that primary school attendance in the whole of Sicily increased by 30 percent in the years of mass migration from the island.⁷ These considerations are supported by data provided by Vermeulen and Perlmann (132) related to the rates of illiteracy of Italians at home and in the United States.

⁷ Reeder's study is now in Reeder, *Widows in White*.

In 1901, 44 percent of Italian migrants in the United States were illiterate, compared to 48 percent of those residing in Italy. If we disaggregate these data, we can see that illiteracy among southern Italians was 52 percent in the United States and 68 percent at home, while that of northern Italians was, respectively, 11 percent and 34 percent. These figures suggest that at least part of the more educated native population could undertake the transatlantic journey.

An additional factor contributing to the decreased performance by Italian pupils in the United States was the poor condition of the educational facilities available to immigrants. At the turn of the century, in New York, classrooms were exceedingly dirty and overcrowded, and having 60–70 pupils in the same room was the rule. Disciplinary problems and lack of concentration resulted from malnutrition or a poor command of English. Only in 1910 were classes established to grant six-month English lessons to foreign students before placing them in regular classrooms. Students may have experienced difficulty in getting accustomed to subjects such as geography or arithmetic, which were alien to their cultures. In addition, because of a shortage of inspectors, it was quite easy for immigrant parents to bypass the New York state legislation that aimed to reduce child labour (Berrol 226–227; Berrol, *Growing Up American* 42–46; Foner 193; Cohen 127; Matthews 138). Italian pupils attended school in the morning, but they often might have been asked to work in the afternoon to contribute to the family budget. All in all, the poverty of many unskilled peasants from Italy had an impact on the schooling of Italians. In his study focusing on Italians in Providence, scholar Joel Perlmann (91) points out that, by 1915, indigence was harshly affecting the entry of Italians to secondary-education establishments to the point that the number of Italian graduates was noticeably low.

Italian immigrants and the Italian language

It has often been argued that overseas Italian migrants in the United States reproduced a babel of dialects imported from their local communities in Italy. The relationship between those who left and their native language is yet more complex. According to the classic interpretation of linguist Tullio De Mauro, at the moment of Italy's unification, only 2.5 percent of Italians were capable of speaking standard Italian. Other scholars' research yielded more nuanced results: Arrigo Castellani has increased the number of people who had a full command of Italian to 10 percent; Francesco Bruni has made the dichotomy between using

Italian or dialect less sharp by proposing the idea that the Italian population very often intermingled Italian with dialectical forms. Consequently, peasants might converse in Italian or dialect or mix the two idioms; generally, low rates of education hindered a capacity to speak in standard Italian, even though a passive understanding of the language was possible. In foreign contexts, migrants reproduced their native dialects, though Camilla Bettoni believes bilingualism in Italian and dialect was widespread. Nonetheless, when writing home, migrants always tried to use Italian to the best of their ability, despite their likely utilization of dialect in ordinary life (Colombo and Kinder 109–117).

Still, Mangione (*Mount Allegro* 51) notes how, in his Sicilian enclave, standard Italian was unlikely to be spoken, because it would have been used only to show off erudition. As soon as two interlocutors became familiar, they immediately would have switched to Sicilian dialect; whoever continued in Italian would have been considered either a socialist or a prig. The historian Nancy C. Carnevale argued that the nature of languages is dynamic and it is not possible to understand them through a single model. In this regard, Italian-born migrants living in the United States exported their own dialects overseas and, in order to facilitate their reciprocal understanding, developed a sort of creole language that combined English, Italian dialects, and standard Italian (Carnevale 36–37). This linguistic complexity was embedded in Eduardo Migliaccio's *macchiette coloniali*, comic plays that made fun of several typologies of migrants in their daily lives and which were very popular in the Little Italies. According to Carnevale (116),

[...] Migliaccio's singular contribution to the Italian American theater was his use of the Italian immigrant idiom. He, along with others whose songs he performed, wrote in this idiom. The interviewing of standard Italian, Italian dialects, English, and Italianized English reflected the actual speech style of his audience rather than mere caricatures.

Testimony of this form of oral communication is present in the travelogues of Amy Bernardi, the daughter of an American consul in Italy and an Italian woman who did important reportage from the United States. She particularly referred to a *lingua del iesse* spoken by Italian Americans, in which English words were Italianized, such as “car” becoming “carro.” This language tendency became pervasive in the Little Italies:

It is a matter of fact how immigrants, after a few years or even a few months of sojourn, do not speak English and surely do not speak Italian either anymore; this sort of ‘lingua franca’ is so diffuse and so mightily invasive in including everyone that leaders of the New York community drive the ‘carro’ through the ‘quattordici’ or the ‘ventidue strade’ (14th or 22nd streets), while it is convenient also for the consul, the priest or the banker to comprehend the *lingua del iesse* and to be understood in that language. For the same reason, Italian colonial newspapers printed in an American format use [this language] in the news, the announcements, or the advertisements; without its usage, semi-literate immigrants would not understand. (Bernardi 92)⁸

In his study on the *Gazzetta del Massachusetts*, Franco Pierno (76–77, 92–94) pointed out how Boston’s Italian newspaper tended to utilize Tuscan literary standard Italian and deride the hybrid language that was so common among Italian Americans. Yet the newspaper yielded to a sort of compromise and used words taken from English or dialects, which were considered components of regional heritage and through which journalists added colour to their articles. Alberto Menarini (153–154, 180–200) stresses how Italian newspapers eventually published in standard Italian but also used the Italianized American words mentioned by Bernardi, which could be re-imported to Italy by emigrant returnees. This linguistic complexity was further complicated by children born in the United States to Italian parents. Indeed, language usage might have been a factor in generational clashes, as carefully described by Mangione (150) in *Mount Allegro*:

My mother’s insistence that we speak only Italian at home drew a sharp line between our existence there and our life in the world outside. We gradually acquired the notion that we were Italians at home and American (whatever that was) elsewhere. Instinctively, we all sensed the necessity of adapting ourselves to two different worlds. We began to notice that there were several marked differences between those worlds, differences that made Americans and my relatives each think of the other as foreigners.

⁸ Translation by the author.

The difference that pained me most was that of language, probably because I was aware of it most often. Child that I was, I would feel terribly embarrassed whenever my mother called to me in Italian while I was playing on the streets, with all my playmates there to listen; or when she was buying clothes for me and would wrangle in broken English with the salesman about the price.

Italy's state-sponsored Italian language programs in the United States

During the Liberal Age (1861–1922), Italian policymakers mostly oriented cultural diplomacy—the state process to promote national culture abroad—towards the establishment of language schools teaching the Italian language. They were principally designed to keep the language alive among emigrants and their children. An 1889 law promoted by Italian premier Francesco Crispi encompassed governmental schools directly managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome, or financially supported (by the same Ministry) religious or lay schools in the communities whenever they fulfilled curriculum requirements indicated by Italy and accepted inspection by the Italian authorities. Rome focused on schools in the Mediterranean, where it concentrated its political ambitions, but subsidies were allocated to schools that were spread all over the world. In 1910, there were 94 state-run schools with 17,045 students; the 454 subsidized lay schools enrolled 33,491 students and the 248 religious institutions taught 29,621 students (63,112 overall; Medici 4–5). In the United States, former Catholic schools were recognized by the American educational system and delivered some teaching hours in Italian; later, schools of Italian were set up by ethnic associations.

The relationship between Italian migrants who had settled abroad and their native language has been the object of study of many Italian travellers observers who visited the United States in the earliest decades of the twentieth century. Adolfo Vinci (3–13) indicated a substantial disinterest from the Italian government towards Italian schools in the United States. Nonetheless, he suggested concentrating resources on the school facilities in South America, where Italians were more educated, wealthier, and capable of influencing local politics. In addition, children of Italians who had already attended school in Italy found it easy to adapt to the local schools because of the many similarities between the two educational systems. Conversely, in the United States, the push for Americanization alienated pupils from their native country and culture. Vinci (9, 11) and Giovanni Preziosi

(191–204) report that Italians in the United States rarely took the chance to make petitions (as usually asked by schools) requiring the introduction of Italian-language classes in the American schools given their willingness to Americanize themselves as quickly as possible. Furthermore, their children appeared utterly uninterested in the native language and spoke only English. Vinci compared this scenario to the case of German Americans, who showed a national cohesiveness, a capacity to be tied to the homeland, and a lobby for fostering their native language, either through the introduction of classes in the American educational system or by setting up their own ethnic parochial schools. Preziosi then pointed out the necessity to promote Italian for mere economic purposes, since spreading the language would have boosted sales of Italian-language books and improved trade between Italy and the United States through the mediation of Italian Americans' speaking the idiom of their ancestors. Regarding this goal, Preziosi imagined that Italians might be assimilated into the American mosaic via U.S. citizenship without losing their cultural markers.

Even the Italian Ambassador to Washington, D.C., Edmondo Mayor des Planches (150), pointed out the importance of improving trade and culture overseas by making Italian a language that was useful commercially. This belief would be reiterated by another ambassador, Vittorio Rolandi-Ricci, who, in 1921, exhorted Italian teachers in the United States to intensify their teaching of the Italian language. To him, together with the use of English, fluency in Italian would have helped Italian Americans keep business relations in the homeland, and it would have made them feel closer to the cultural heritage of their native country. Bernardi (134, 234–235) proposed that Italians should have Americanized themselves to improve their status overseas. According to her, the improvement of schools in Italy was a priority. Moreover, with regards to Italian schools outside of Italy, she thought curricula should be modulated to preserve the pride for Italy in the children of migrants.

The establishment of state-run Italian schools in the United States slowed down with Italy's scant interest in allocating resources overseas and owing also to the nature of American society itself. The American correspondent of *La Tribuna*, Alfonso Arbib-Costa, reported the opposition from the American press, authorities, and public opinion to having schools in the United States ruled by Italy. Furthermore, still according to Arbib-Costa, generally, American children born to Italian migrants, as well as those who arrived from Italy very young, were uninterested in the Italian language because they aimed to learn English to be considered

full-fledged Americans. In this sense, they perceived the English language as a means for assimilation.⁹ Against this backdrop, while governmental schools might not have been accepted, there was more tolerance of parochial schools and colonial lay schools. According to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 1914 annual report on Italian schools abroad (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Annuario delle Scuole italiane all'estero governative e sussidiate, 1913–1914* 28–32), those subsidized in the United States were 96, counting 20,340 students (17,787 males and 2,553 females). Approximately one-third of these schools were based in the states of New York and New Jersey; New York City and Brooklyn had 18 schools with nearly 4,500 students.¹⁰

In 1906, there were 48 Italian parochial schools teaching 13,838 students, and that number increased to 80 in 1917, with 29,815 students and 621 teachers. The highest enrolment was in New York with 8,101 students, followed by Philadelphia (2,795), Chicago (2,522), Buffalo (2,394), Brooklyn (1,945), Newark (1,468), Boston (1,162), and Rochester (1,076; Bertelli 98). All in all, Italian parochial schools were the most prominent in the United States because of the social respectability of Italian Catholic priests in the eyes of migrants. In addition, many observers highlighted their ability to foster patriotism within the Little Italies. Conversely, schools run by migrant associations had more difficulties because of the little support from the Italian government. However, Vecoli argued that parochial schools were unpopular among Italian Americans whenever they were run by the Irish, who discriminated against or even humiliated Italian-American students in class because of their ethnicity. Where Italian priests or nuns were present, migrants definitely had increased interest in the parochial schools, although many still preferred to enrol their children in public facilities, especially when parochial schools required an entry fee (Bertelli 90–91, 97–100; Vecoli 249–250). Vecoli concluded that, despite efforts “to bring the Italian children

⁹ Alfonso Arbib-Costa's considerations are cited in the communication by Richard Child, U.S. Ambassador in Rome, to the Secretary of State, 13 Dec. 1921, National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park II, Maryland, Record Group 59, Department of State Records (1910–1929), 811.43765, box 7545.

¹⁰ For a comparison, see the 1925 annual report that indicated the presence of 37,789 students (25,089 males and 12,700 females) in Italian royal and private schools in the United States. See Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Annuario della Scuole* (Rome: Tipografia Riservata del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 1925): 15–23.

into parochial schools, only a small minority of them ever received a Catholic education” (251).

Italy’s support for parochial schools overseas came despite harsh tensions between the Italian state and the Papacy following the occupation of Rome by Italian troops in 1870, which opened up the “Roman Question,” a tension that was resolved by Benito Mussolini in 1929 through the Lateran Pact. Widespread anti-clericalism in Italian politics during the Liberal Age could hardly be applied outside of Italy, where nationalist Catholic priests were perceived by Italian politicians to be the best actors to keep *Italianità* alive within the Little Italies. As early as 1899, Geremia Bonomelli, a bishop among the most active in granting assistance to Italian emigrants through his devoted Catholic association *Opera Bonomelli*, linked language and religion as keys to maintaining migrants’ ties to the homeland. He believed that preserving the use of the Italian language in the United States to be a priority, since English would inevitably transform migrants into Americans.¹¹ Generally, the Catholic Church made the defence of the Italian language overseas a goal to preserve migrants’ religiosity against American Protestantism. To this end, the Church established *Italica Gens* in 1908, a Catholic association charged with delivering social assistance to Italian communities overseas, including building schools to educate the offspring of Italians (Tomasi 319–341). In his 1912–1913 report on the advancement of teaching the Italian language in the city, New York Italian vice-consul Giuseppe Gentile pointed out the predominance of parochial schools and their patriotic fervour, to the point that a sizable number of them were financially supported or received books. He also noted that, overall, “teaching the Italian language in the New York consular district, where there are estimated to be one million Italians, is not only limited, but it is even delivered inconsistently and deprived of rationality.”¹² In the early 1920s, the situation was still chaotic, since the parochial schools lacked a joint coordinated program to be effective against

¹¹ “L’Emigrazione: Conferenza di S.E. Rev.ma Monsignor Geremia Bonomelli,” *Gli italiani all’estero: Emigrazione-Commerci-Missioni* (Turin: Tipografia Roux Frassati, 1899) 17.

¹² Report by the royal vice-consul Cav. Giuseppe Gentile, *L’insegnamento della lingua italiana nel distretto consolare di New York durante l’anno scolastico, 1912–1913*. Archivio Storico-Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri [Historical-Diplomatic Archive of the Italian Foreign Ministry], Rome (hereafter Asmae), Archivio del Personale — Serie V — Miscellanea Relazione dei Consoli (1899–1920), box 390/892, folder “Giuseppe Gentile, Vice Console di 1a Classe.” Translation by the author.

pressures imposed by the American society on foreign students, while they still lamented their limited support from the Italian government.¹³

The activities of the Dante Alighieri Society, a cultural association that had its headquarters in Rome and that, since 1889, had been entrusted with spreading the Italian language and culture in the world, did not improve the standing of the Italian language overseas by much. In the United States, the Dante Alighieri Society was unable to put effective activities in motion; this was due to the precariousness and instability of its branches, internal jealousies, or unsatisfactory achievements in Italian communities because of the lack of coordination from Rome's headquarters and the difficulties of working within heterogeneous and fragmented communities. In this regard, the association clearly showed the inadequacy of its activities in comparison to those of other mighty foreign cultural associations, such as the Germanic Society of America and the Alliance Française (Choate 112; Salvetti 77–197).

Conclusion

During the period of mass migration, Italians in the United States had some performance problems within the American educational system, as well as in reconciling with the study of their native language. In 1921, some Italian associations mobilized to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the death of the renowned Florentine poet Dante Alighieri: they wished to have a Dante Memorial Day declared officially in the United States and to promote studies on Dante (or spread his books) in American schools and universities. Yet, in March 1921, the New York Italian magazine *Il Carroccio* lamented the lack of direction and centralization of the activities and the absence of consulates in the coordination of activities.¹⁴

However, it seems unlikely that Italian Americans had an anti-intellectual attitude in general. Together with setting up facilities to assist immigrants (such as schools of citizenship, recruitment or information offices, and orphanages), the

¹³ Padre Giovanni Semeria, "Per la lingua italiana negli Stati Uniti," *Il Carroccio* (Feb. 1922) 206–208; "Discussioni del Carroccio," *Il Carroccio* (Jan. 1923) 118.

¹⁴ Carnovale, "Discussioni del Carroccio," *Il Carroccio* (Mar. 1921) 343; *Italy America Society: Meeting of the Executive Committee*, 13 Jan. 1921, Baker Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, *Thomas W. Lamont Papers*, box 42, folder 17, "Italy America Society, 1921."

Order Sons of Italy increased its prestige in the Italian community when it offered scholarships to students who distinguished themselves in the study of the Italian language and prizes to children enrolled in public schools who had written the best essays on Italian subjects (Aquilano 37). Italian Americans' knowledge of their native language was damaged by their inability to act as a united ethnic group, as in the case of German Americans who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, had capitalized on their ethnic and political power and had fiercely and successfully reacted against the attempted suppression of teaching German in New York primary schools.¹⁵ According to the aforementioned report by Gentile, by 1906, the New York Board of Education had allowed the teaching of Italian in public primary schools, but it had been possible to establish only eight classes in two schools for a total of 250 students. The Italian language seemed alien to many American-born children of migrants or those who had arrived in the United States having had reduced schooling in Italy. While U.S. school principals hindered the establishment of classes in foreign languages to favour pupils' Americanization, Italians missed the opportunity to submit petitions to require the introduction of Italian classes. Besides this negligence, there were a willingness to accelerate integration into local society, a disdain for Italian as a language useful in ordinary life, and a lack of ethnic leadership keen to stimulate Italian-American activism.¹⁶ Despite these difficulties, on a few occasions the Italian communities had been able to overcome their divisions and to work jointly to impose the teaching of their native language. Ethnic movements were successful and had Italian introduced in public schools in places such as Milwaukee, Wisconsin, or Belleville, Illinois, and also in the state of California (Bernardi 134). Remarkably, in 1922, the Italian Teachers Association (led by its president, Professor Mario Cosenza, and vice-president, Leonard Covello) convinced the New York Board of Education to recognize the teaching of Italian in high schools at the same level as French, Spanish, and German. Before this resolution, in the event that school principals decided to introduce Italian as a subject of study, students could have chosen it only after taking a year of Latin, French, or Spanish. This change was crucial in extending the teaching of Dante's language in the high-school educational system, to the extent that enrolment rose

¹⁵ *Lingua tedesca nelle scuole di N. York*, Washington, D.C., 21 June 1903, Asmae, Ambasciata Washington [Italian Embassy in Washington] (1901–1909), box 168, folder “Agitazioni delle colonie tedesche e italiane a New York per l'insegnamento delle rispettive lingue nelle scuole elementari. Richiesta alla Sezione italiana dello Smith College di una bandiera italiana, 1903.”

¹⁶ Report by the royal vice-consul Cav. Giuseppe Gentile, cit.

from 898 in seven schools in the academic year of 1921–1922 to circa 16,000 in 55 schools in 1937–1938 (Fucilla 263, 288). During the 1926–1927 school year, Cosenza's association was also successful in having Italian recognized alongside the other foreign languages for university admission.¹⁷ However, it was only by the beginning of the 1930s that the Fascist government would undertake a full campaign to foster the Italian language and culture in the United States with the aim of creating a loyal Italian-American community integrated into American society but able to speak the native language. This was a project that would be drastically reframed by Mussolini's declaration of war on the U.S. on 11 December 1941, which led to a drastic reduction of the Italian language in schools in the United States (Pretelli 171–192; DiStasi 303–312).

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¹⁷ *Italian Teachers Association: New York*, Asmae, Rome, Archive Schools (1929–1935), classe [series] IV, box 865, folder "Italian Teachers Association."

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