



## **Italian Immigration to Argentina 1880-1914: Assimilation or Rejection of Argentine Society?**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the national landscape of Argentina from 1880-1914 as a means to analyze the Italian immigration experience. The central question which is posed is whether the internal factors within Argentina enabled Italian newcomers to successfully assimilate within society. A multilayered approach is utilized to examine Argentina's immigration policy, constitution, economy, social institutions, and cultural norms. Through this analysis, it is concluded that the internal dynamics of Argentina provided Italian immigrants the capacity, resources and space to thrive which fundamentally led to their assimilation within their host country.

### **Résumé :**

Cette dissertation explore la composition nationale de l'Argentine des années 1880 à 1914 afin d'analyser l'expérience des immigrants italiens. La question centrale porte sur les facteurs internes de la société argentine ayant permis une assimilation réussie des Italiens nouvellement arrivés. Une approche multidimensionnelle est utilisée afin d'examiner l'immigration, la politique, la constitution, l'économie, les institutions sociales et les normes culturelles de l'Argentine. Cette analyse permet de conclure que la dynamique interne argentine a fournis aux immigrants italiens les facultés, les ressources et l'espace nécessaires à leur épanouissement, ce qui, au fond, a mené à leur assimilation à cette terre d'accueil.

The year of 1870 marked the unification of the Kingdom of Italy. Rome was established as the official capital of the various amalgamated provinces along the Italian peninsula.<sup>1</sup> As a result of the unification, the different internal dilemmas within each province were propelled to the forefront of the newly elected Prime Minister, Giovanni Lanza's agenda. An increasing concern for the citizenry was the decline of the agricultural industry, caused by low production rates as well as various droughts along the coast. This, in turn, posed a significant threat to the livelihood of the Italians considering that the majority of the working class looked to the agricultural sector for their main source of income.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, these farmers, craftsmen and labourers experienced economic hardship and were unable to sufficiently provide for their families, which affected their quality of life. Meanwhile, Italy's domestic economy, due to unprecedented population growth, could not support the youth who were reaching an age of employment and entering the job market.<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to mitigate the byproducts of these internal dilemmas, the Italian government instituted the Emigration Law of 1888. This statute stipulated that internal and external migration was a private matter to be decided within the confines of the familial community and thus, the state did not have the right to infringe nor interfere in the mobility of its citizens.<sup>4</sup> This law inadvertently encouraged mass migration for it bestowed non-restrictive legal freedoms, which prompted Italians to actively seek employment opportunities abroad. These prospective migrants looked to the Americas as a source of hope and prosperity while the state of their own nation's domestic landscape was looking increasingly grim.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel L Baily, "Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914," (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Arnd Schneider, "Future Lost: Nostalgia and Identity among Italian Immigrants in Argentina", (New York : Peter Lang , 2000), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Baily, "Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914," 33.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

One of the largest recipients of Italian newcomers was Argentina with approximately 2.75 million people crossing the Atlantic Ocean between 1861 and 1914 in the hope of a more fruitful future.<sup>5</sup> The peak of Italian immigration into Argentina occurred more specifically between the years of 1880 and 1914; the former year marked the aftermath of the unification of Italy while the latter year saw the beginning of the First World War. Due to mass migration, this paper will utilize the 1893 Argentine Constitution and the “Manual of the immigrant to the Argentine Republic” in order to unveil the different legal and social institutions put in place to ease the transition and adjustment period for prospective newcomers. Through the critical examination of Argentina’s national landscape from 1880 to 1914, this essay will argue that this state was in an ideal domestic condition to sustain and integrate the flood of Italian newcomers within their civil society. Through the analysis of Argentina’s pro-immigration policies, newly amended constitution, ever-growing economy, social institutions, and cultural norms, this paper will conclude that these favourable internal factors fundamentally enabled the Argentine government to successfully assimilate the Italian immigrants.

### **Argentine Immigration Policies**

In the late 19th century, Argentina was actively perpetuating and reinforcing “pro” immigration ideals throughout their multiple international campaigns to attract and sustain the interest of prospective newcomers. This is exemplified in the analysis of the “Manual of the Immigrant to the Argentine Republic”, which was translated into multiple languages and then distributed internationally to foreign governments.<sup>6</sup> This manual was commissioned in 1888 by the

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<sup>5</sup> Baily, “Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914,” 54.

<sup>6</sup> Mariano A Pelliza, “Manual of the Immigrant to the Argentine Republic by M. A. Pelliza the Victorious flag of the richest nation on the earth will be seen wowing on the walls of our fortresses and above the Ocean with such Majesty as to Compel Universal Respect.” *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Buenos Aires, (1888),

Argentine government, with the mandate of promoting immigration from abroad and easing the migrants transition to their new host country.<sup>7</sup> For instance, within the manual, it expressed that the Federal Government was committed to encouraging European immigration, and therefore would not discriminate or restrict the flow of newcomers.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, taxes or penalties would not be imposed on those who were looking to cultivate the lands, improve domestic industries, and teach the arts and sciences.<sup>9</sup> These ideals signify that Argentina was seeking to engage and promote immigration by instituting a process that would ensure prospective newcomers that they would be treated in a fair and transparent manner. However, it must be noted that this Manual was a guideline and the potential negative and positive ramifications were not recorded. Consequently, it is not clear whether all of these stipulations and ideals were carried out on the institutional level, hence it is increasingly difficult to measure their success(es) and shortcoming(s). Nevertheless, the intent behind the Manual demonstrates that Argentina was actively attempting to mitigate the obstacles that might have obstructed the Italians' integration within the host society. The spirit and ideals of the Manual was perpetuated throughout the local and federal levels of governments, which facilitated the assimilation and adjustment of immigrants within Argentina.

### **The Argentine Constitution of 1893**

The Argentine Constitution of 1893, administered by President Luis Sáenz Peña, was the fundamental backbone in enabling the integration of not only Italian immigrants but also

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<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/MMLP?af=RN&ae=DT106556291&srchtp=a&ste=14>. (accessed March 12 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Pelliza, "Manual of the Immigrant to the Argentine Republic by M. A. Pelliza the Victorious flag of the richest nation on the earth will be seen wowing on the walls of our fortresses and above the Ocean with such Majesty as to Compel Universal Respect," 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

foreigners from all over the world to live and prosper within South American civil society. The Constitution outlined several rights, freedoms and obligations that ensured the protection of immigrants, regardless of their citizenship status. This is clearly demonstrated within article XX, where it declares:

Aliens shall enjoy in the territory of the National the same civil rights as the citizens: they shall be allowed to engage in industrial, commercial, and professional occupations; to own, hold and sell real estate; to navigate the rivers and travel along the coasts; to practice freely their religion to dispose by will of their property, and to contract marriage according to the law. They are neither bound to become citizens nor to pay extraordinary taxes. They can obtain naturalization by residing two consecutive years in the Republic; but this period of time can be shortened upon application and sufficient proof that the applicant has rendered services to the Republic.<sup>10</sup>

There are two components of the above mention article, which perpetuates the idea of inclusiveness. First, it grants all foreigners (non-neutralized residents) and citizens the same rights and opportunities, no matter their country of origin, racial background or socio-economic status. This means that the migrants had the opportunity to participate and engage in the domestic economic and social realm, without the fear that their civil rights would be institutionally encroached upon. Secondly, Italians—and immigrants in general—had the opportunity to naturalize and obtain Argentinian citizenship within a mere two year time span, which would then allow them to vote and participate in local and national elections.<sup>11</sup> In essence, by equipping the Italian immigrants with irrevocable legal rights and freedoms, it fostered a sense of inclusiveness within all facets of Argentine society, which simultaneously led to their assimilation to the South American way of life.

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<sup>10</sup> Bureau of the American Republics, Washington, USA. *Argentine Republic*. (1892), 162. <http://www.heinonline.org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/HOL/Page?collection=cow&handle=hein.cow/arrepuc0001&type=Image&id=1#204> . (accessed March 12 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Bureau of the American Republics, Washington, USA. *Argentine Republic*. (1892), 162. <http://www.heinonline.org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/HOL/Page?collection=cow&handle=hein.cow/arrepuc0001&type=Image&id=1#204> . (accessed March 12 2014).

### **The Naturalization of Italian Immigrants**

If newcomers decided to become naturalized citizens, the Constitution exempted them from mandatory military service for an extended period of time. This was codified in article XXI, where it specified “citizens, by naturalization, are free to render or refuse military service during the ten years following the day of their naturalization.”<sup>12</sup> The naturalization of immigrants was the first legal step in consolidating their newfound Argentine identity, which enabled them to further pledge their allegiance and loyalty to their host country. This law inadvertently placed naturalized citizens in a more favourable position than native Argentinians since the latter was under the strict “obligation of arming themselves in defense of the country and of the constitution.”<sup>13</sup> It is therefore reasonable to assume that this South American government highly valued their new citizens and were looking to give them the opportunity to further explore and immerse themselves into society before enlisting them in mandatory military service. Last are the extended exemption, embedded trust and transparency within Argentina’s naturalization process, which in turn ensured the confidence and cooperation of the Italians. As a result, the freedom of choice given to these Italian-Argentine citizens encouraged them to adapt and assimilate their political and ideological views to that of their host country.

### **The Labour Market in Argentina**

One of Argentina’s various pull factors for immigration was that it possessed a prolific amount of fertile land, however, in contrast to Italy, this land was largely under populated and uncultivated.<sup>14</sup> This turned out to be a favourable condition for the Italians as the majority of the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>14</sup> Herbert S. Klein, "The Integration of Italian Immigrants into the United States and Argentina: A Comparative Analysis," *The American Historical Review*, 88, no. 2 (1983): (320), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1865404>

male population who migrated overseas were farmers, artisans and day labourers;<sup>15</sup> the “pull” and “push” factors of each country thus coincided with one another to satisfy the needs of both demographics. Moreover, the high demand of farmers in Argentina facilitated the transition from the Italian job market to that of the host country because the immigrants were able and encouraged to practice their trade, which led to their assimilation within the Argentine job market.

In an attempt to further integrate immigrants within the national economy, the Argentine government established a “National Labour Bureau” which was tasked with assisting newcomers in finding long or short term employment within their desired field.<sup>16</sup> More specifically in 1889, even though the Labour Bureau had over 80, 821 job openings within various fields, ranging from the banking sector to the agricultural industry, only 48, 668 immigrants utilized these services.<sup>17</sup> As such, the rest of the 212, 241 immigrants who arrived that same year<sup>18</sup> were able to find employment without the aid of this government service. These statistics clearly demonstrate that there were an abundant number of available jobs within the Argentine economy so immigrants were able to successfully integrate themselves within the domestic job market.<sup>19</sup> This further solidified the Italians’ financial ties with their host country as it enabled them to uphold and strive towards their own individual financial independence, while simultaneously stimulating and contributing to Argentina’s domestic economy.

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(accessed January 19, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Arnd Schneider and Peter Lang, “Future Lost: Nostalgia and Identity among Italian Immigrants in Argentina”, (New York : PeterLang , 2000), 65.

<sup>16</sup> Bureau of the American Republics, Washington, USA. *Argentine Republic*. (1892), 151.  
<http://www.heinonline.org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/HOL/Page?collection=cow&handle=hein.cow/arrepuc0001&type=Image&id=1#204> . (accessed March 12 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Bureau of the American Republics, Washington, USA. *Argentine Republic*. (1892), 151.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

Once the Italian immigrants found employment, their standard of living substantially ameliorated especially since the wages in Argentina were strikingly higher than those in Italy.<sup>20</sup> For example, agricultural workers—often called *golondrinas*— would earn “five to ten times more than at home, netting between 150-300 gold pesos.”<sup>21</sup> This was an enticing prospect for the immigrants as it enabled them to progress in the socio-economic hierarchy of Argentine society, while also being able to sufficiently provide for their families. Furthermore, the cost of living in Buenos Aires was significantly lower than some of the rural provinces of Italy; in the host country, the relationship between wages and the cost of food was approximately 25 percent while it was 60 percent in Italy.<sup>22</sup> This ultimately provided the Italians a substantial amount of financial flexibility that allowed them to invest their earnings into the local economy. A census conducted in 1909 in Buenos Aires announced that Italian immigrants “owned 38 percent of the 28,632 commercial establishments in the city.”<sup>23</sup> These statistics illustrate that the Italians were not only able to assimilate into Argentina’s economic landscape, but also to advance their own financial prosperity.

### **Social Institutions in Argentina**

Social institutions played an instrumental role in integrating Italians within the legal, educational and political systems of Argentina. Mutual aid societies were established as early as the 1850’s. They conducted a variety of functions such as creating and supporting Italian schools, hospitals

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<sup>20</sup> Arnd Schneider, “Future Lost: Nostalgia and Identity among Italian Immigrants in Argentina”, (New York : Peter Lang , 2000), 66.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert S. Klein, "The Integration of Italian Immigrants into the United States and Argentina: A Comparative Analysis ," *The American Historical Review* , 88, no. 2 (1983): (321), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1865404> (accessed January 19, 2014).



and economic organizations.<sup>24</sup> One of the main adversaries of the mutual aid societies was former Argentine President Domingo Sarmiento, who perceived these institutions as an obstacle in achieving Italian assimilation.<sup>25</sup> In response to his critic, the Italian schools made a concerted effort to include “the Spanish language and Argentine history and geography in the curriculum.”<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, this enabled children from Italian descent to become familiarized and acquainted with their host country’s language, norms and values.

### **The Language Shift**

The Italian and Spanish languages originate from Latin, sharing similar linguistic and grammatical rules, but language remained a major obstacle for Italian immigrant assimilation in Argentine society.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the Italians decided to learn and communicate in Spanish, the dominant language of Argentina, which resulted in an evident language shift. Among the Italian migrants, Spanish was viewed as the more “prestigious” tongue because it allowed the newcomers to advance in the political and economic realms of society.<sup>28</sup> As such, the Italians started to speak Spanish with a slight Italian accent and this phenomenon hereafter began to spread throughout the majority of the Argentine society.<sup>29</sup> The language assimilation was an

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<sup>24</sup> Samuel L Baily, "The Role of Two Newspapers in the Assimilation of Italians in Buenos Aires and São Paulo, 1893-1913," 324.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel L Baily, "Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914," (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 192.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel L Baily, "The Adjustment of Italian Immigrants in Buenos Aires and New York, 1870-1914," *The American Historical Review*, 88, no. 2 (1983): 299, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1865403> (accessed January 20, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Maria, Italiano-McGreevy, "The Linguistic Experience of Italians in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1890--1914: Language Shift as seen through Social Spaces." Temple University, 2013, (5-8) <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/docview/1294900411?accountid=15182> (accessed March 16, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

integral component of adapting within the host country and, as a result, presented the Italians with increased employment opportunities.

### **Italian New Mediums in Argentina**

The second half of the 1800s marked the rise of different news mediums in Buenos Aires as mass communication played an increasingly important role in connecting and uniting society within Argentina. The free reign of media outlets to publish controversial opinions was endorsed and protected in Article XXXII of the 1893 Argentine Constitution, where it stipulated that “The Federal Congress shall not pass any law restriction of the liberty of the press or placing under Federal jurisdiction.”<sup>30</sup> The media’s free pass in that event facilitated the duties of journals and newspapers in catering to the interests of different demographic groups, which ranged from the social elite to the working class. The year of 1876 marked the birth of one of Argentina’s most influential and important Italian language newspapers, *La Patria degli Italiani*.<sup>31</sup> Established by Basilio Cittadina, *La Patria* played a significant role in encouraging Italian newcomers to embrace and participate in Argentina’s political system, social customs and cultural festivities.<sup>32</sup> The popularity of *La Patria* was so widespread that, in 1904, it was estimated that approximately 70 percent of Buenos Aires’ Italian population were frequent readers of the journal.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bureau of the American Republics, Washington, USA. *Argentine Republic*. (1892), 164. <http://www.heinonline.org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/HOL/Page?collection=cow&handle=hein.cow/arrepuc0001&type=Image&id=1#204> . (accessed March 12 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Samuel L Baily, "The Role of Two Newspapers in the Assimilation of Italians in Buenos Aires and São Paulo, 1893-1913," *International Migration Review*, 12, no. 3 (1978): 326, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2545546> (accessed January 21, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Samuel L Baily, "The Adjustment of Italian Immigrants in Buenos Aires and New York, 1870-1914," *The American Historical Review* , 88, no. 2 (1983): 294, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1865403> (accessed January 20, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Samuel L Baily, “Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914,” (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 195-196.

For this reason, it is reasonable to assume that *La Patria* had a longstanding influence in shaping and molding the Italians' perception of Argentina. For instance, one of the principle mandates of *La Patria* was to manifest and foster support as well as a sense of allegiance to the host country while ensuring that the Italian migrants did not lose touch with their home country.<sup>34</sup> To that end, they would publish articles that commended the achievements of Argentine leaders while also defending them when they were under the scrutiny or attack by foreign actors.<sup>35</sup> For example, in 1898, Chile attempted to threaten Argentina with the prospect war. As a means to show their support, *La Patria* applauded the efforts of Presidents Julio Roca and Roque Sáenz Peña while prompting their readership to embrace and support their host country.<sup>36</sup> As such, *La Patria* played an important role as an advocate for Italian acculturation within Argentina.

## Conclusion

From the onset of Italian immigration, permanent and short-term newcomers were the long-standing backbone of Argentina; they facilitated the advancement of the domestic economy while also inhabiting the various sparsely populated regions. The analysis of Argentina's immigration policies, newly instituted constitution, domestic economy, societal and cultural norms unveils that the South American state was an ideal location for Italians in the year of 1880-1914. As such, this inadvertently enabled the federal government to successfully assimilate Italian immigrants within the nation landscape. Argentina in the late 20th century was a perfect example of how policy coupled with progressive social and financial institutions can facilitate

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<sup>34</sup> Samuel L Baily, "The Role of Two Newspapers in the Assimilation of Italians in Buenos Aires and São Paulo, 1893-1913," 333.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

the integration of immigrants into society while simultaneously advancing the interests of domestic country. As such, it is clear that Italians had and will continue to have a tremendous influence in Argentina—a country where many of them now call “home.”

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