



Danielle Battisti. *Whom We Shall Welcome: Italian Americans and Immigration Reform, 1945-1965.* Critical Studies in Italian America Series. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. 352 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8232-8438-2.

Reviewed by Stefano Luconi

Published on H-Italy (May, 2019)

Commissioned by Matteo Pretelli (University of Naples "L'Orientale")

More than 425,000 Italians moved to the United States during the quarter century that followed the end of World War II. It was a relatively small figure in comparison to the roughly 4,655,000 people who left Italy for the United States between 1881 and 1920.[1] Nonetheless, the later immigration wave was large enough to eventually capture historians' interest. Indeed, after long focusing on the decades of the mass fluxes, scholarship on the Italian American experience has begun to shift its attention to the postwar era and to produce significant findings on this subject.[2]

Danielle Battisti's monograph aptly fits into this recent trend. *Whom We Shall Welcome* reconstructs Italian Americans' mobilization and the lobbying activities of their ethnic organizations—primarily, the American Committee on Italian Migration (ACIM) and the Order Sons of Italy in America—between 1945 and 1965 to reform US immigration legislation and, most notably, to repeal the national origins system that had discriminated against the entry of prospective Italian newcomers since its initial adoption in 1924 following the likewise prejudiced 1921 Emergency Quota Act. In particular, the book examines Italian Americans' campaigns from their support of the 1948 Displaced Persons Act, in the hope that the profile of the beneficiaries would be flexible

enough to open the US gates for a sizable number of Italian ethnics from the territories Italy had lost after its defeat in World War II, to their successful advocacy of the passing of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, which eventually marked the demise of the national origins system. Battisti's volume is not only an account of accomplishments but also a narrative of failures, most notably, Italian Americans' unsuccessful opposition to the passage of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, which reiterated existing prejudicial quotas. It is also an analysis of Italian Americans' inventiveness. For example, a little-known provision of the 1953 Refugee Relief Act, which reserved visas not only for evacuees but for the relatives of US citizens as well, was ingeniously exploited for family reunion purposes by both the ACIM and Edward Corsi, a newcomer himself who was briefly in charge of such a program on behalf of the Eisenhower administration in early 1955 before being forced to resign for his allegedly excessive liberalism in the management of immigration problems.

Battisti does not take a walk in uncharted territory. Actually, the Italian American community's position against the quota system and for the replacement of the existing guidelines with more impartial criteria are not new topics to researchers in ethnic studies. For instance, Frank J.

Cavaioli has repeatedly addressed such matters, concentrating on the ACIM and Chicago's Little Italy, while no history of the Order Sons of Italy in America could exempt itself from including at least a reference to this association's fight against restrictive immigration policies penalizing Italian nationals.[3] Yet, notwithstanding her shaky grasp of the Italian-language literature in the collateral field of refugees,[4] besides elaborating a broader and more detailed overview than previous works, Battisti must be credited for her original approach and wide perspective. Indeed, she goes beyond the mere chronicle of events and analyzes two intertwined and related issues: Italian Americans' postwar identity and their relation with liberalism in immigration reform.

Italian Americans' mobilization occurred against the backdrop of the Cold War. This context was, at the same time, an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, the international scenario enabled Italian American groups to advise Congress that the reopening of US doors to Italian immigrants would contribute to reducing overpopulation in Italy. The decrease of the demographic pressure, resulting from a renewed exodus to America, would improve Italians' everyday lives and would, consequently, help remove the causes of dissatisfaction with the US-aligned government on which the Communist Party capitalized to increase its political following in Italy. On the other hand, such organizations had to prove that prospective newcomers from Italy would not be a threat to US national security: their motherland was home to the strongest Communist Party in Western Europe and, thereby, immigrants could be suspected of pro-Moscow feelings. The thesis that Italians were "communists of the stomach," namely, occasional fellow travelers because of destitution in their native country rather than firm believers in Marxism out of ideological allegiance, helped defuse the paradigm of Italians' supposed proclivity to subversion and helped exploit the Cold War rhetoric to advocate the abolition of the restrictive quota legislation.[5] The

ACIM also made a point of highlighting that natives of Italy who resettled in the United States became assimilated and entrenched in the middle class in a short time, mainly by adhering to the adoptive society's consumer culture as both producers and shoppers. This argument was instrumental in dispelling concerns especially that the Italian immigrants entering the United States under the provisions of the Refugee Relief Act would be a burden following the stigma of distress, poverty, and wretchedness often associated with the term "refugee" itself.

Within the circumstances of the campaigns against the national origins system, the necessity to emphasize that Italian expatriates would become good Americans also offered opportunities to reshape the image of Italian newcomers and their progeny. Since the 1920s, restrictive legislation had purposely affected Italian people because they were regarded as inferior to individuals of Anglo-Saxon heritage and were viewed as inassimilable. Therefore, the most effective strategy to repeal the prejudicial quota was to show that Italians had been an asset to the United States. Consequently, as Battisti persuasively points out, these endeavors hardly resulted from liberal attitudes and were aimed less at the implementation of equality and fairness for all potential immigrants than at Italian Americans' attainment of older-stock whites' privileges. In Battisti's brilliant appraisal, therefore, the call for immigration reform was part of Italian Americans' longing for full membership in a still prevailing white society. Since this movement began roughly a couple of decades before the black freedom struggle came to a climax in the mid-1960s, the backlash at African Americans' alleged encroachments cannot account by itself for Italian Americans' conservatism and so-called whitening. Instead, the volume suggests that the roots of such phenomena should be traced to the previous race-oriented commitment of the members of the Little Italies to immigration reform.

In this respect, Battisti's investigation reflects state-of-the-art literature on ethnic minorities from Eastern and Southern European backgrounds. Conversely, the book is rather impervious to the transnational turn. *Whom We Shall Welcome* cursorily acknowledges the fruitless attempts of Italy's postwar governments at securing a larger quota for its citizens to encourage emigration as a safety valve for the country's economic and social problems. But it overlooks the fact that Italian Americans' mobilization against the national origins system was in part stimulated and coordinated by Rome's diplomatic and consular personnel in the United States. Battisti could have realized this transatlantic dimension of Italian Americans' quest for immigration reform if she had consulted Italy's archival documentation, primarily the records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome. Regrettably, her probe into as many as thirteen US repositories and thirty-eight collections comes hand in hand with the neglect of Italian sources. While one might reasonably question this one-sided research methodology, as for the US shore of the Atlantic Ocean Battisti makes, nonetheless, a relevant contribution in re-assessing Italian Americans' ethnic and racial identity as well as their participation in both the politicking of the Cold War and the movement to amend Washington's immigration policies.

Notes

[1]. Patrizia Audenino and Maddalena Tirabassi, *Migrazioni italiane: Storia e storie dall'Ancien régime a oggi* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2008), 138, 69.

[2]. See, for example, Silvia Cassamagnaghi, *Operazione Spose di guerra: Storie d'amore e di emigrazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2014); Laura E. Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra, eds., *New Italian Migrations to the United States*, 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); and Silvia Cassamagnaghi, "L'adozione dei bambini italiani negli Stati Uniti: L'operato del Catholic Relief Service e

del Catholic Committee for Refugees, 1951-1961," *Italia Contemporanea*, no. 284 (2017): 67-93.

[3]. Frank J. Cavaoli, "Italian Americans Slay the Immigration Dragon: The National Origins Quota System," *Italian Americana* 5, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1979): 71-100; Frank J. Cavaoli, "Chicago's Italian Americans Rally for Immigration Reform," *Italian Americana* 5, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1980): 142-56; Frank J. Cavaoli, "ACIM, Italian Americans, and Immigration Reform," *Italian Americana* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 6-27; Ernest L. Biagi, *The Purple Aster: A History of the Order Sons of Italy in America* (New York: Veritas Press, 1961), 86-91; Louis C. Anthes, "'The Search for the Order': The Order Sons of Italy in America and the Politics of Ethnicity," in *Industry, Technology, Labor and the Italian American Communities*, ed. Mario Aste, et al. (Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1997), 19-21; and Jennifer M. Guglielmo and John Andreozzi, "The Order Sons of Italy in America: Historical Summary," in *Guide to the Records of the Order Sons of Italy in America*, ed. Jennifer M. Guglielmo and John Andreozzi (Minneapolis, MN: Immigration History Research Center, 2004), xxiv.

[4]. Conspicuously missing from Battisti's bibliography—whose section on published sources is surprisingly titled "Manuscripts" (p. 327)—are, for instance, Raoul Pupo, *Il lungo esodo: Istria: Le persecuzioni, le foibe, l'esilio* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2005); Patrizia Audenino, *La casa perduta: La memoria dei profughi nell'Europa del Novecento* (Rome: Carocci, 2015); and Patrizia Audenino, ed., "Fuggitivi e rimpatriati: L'Italia dei profughi fra guerra e decolonizzazione," *Archivio Storico dell'Emigrazione Italiana*, 14 (2018): 7-128.

[5]. Battisti draws on Marina Maccari Clayton, "Communists of the Stomach': Italian Migration and International Relations in the Cold War Era," *Studi Emigrazione* 41, no. 155 (September 2004): 575-98.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

Citation: Stefano Luconi. Review of Battisti, Danielle. *Whom We Shall Welcome: Italian Americans and Immigration Reform, 1945-1965*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. May, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54102>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.