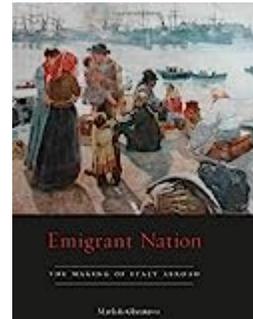




Mark I. Choate. *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad.* Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008. 319 S. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02784-8.



Reviewed by Bruno Ramirez

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M. Choate: *Emigrant Nation*

Historians have often made reference to the expression formulated by one of the founding fathers of the Italian state in the aftermath of the country's unification: "We have made Italy, we must now make Italians". This expression has served as a powerful metaphor alluding to the fact that, at its birth in 1861, the Italian nation-state was more "state" than "nation", more the result of wars of annexation and of diplomatic manoeuvres than the accomplishment of a popular revolutionary process. The metaphor acquires further meaning when one also considers that the new Kingdom of Italy enclosed within its jurisdiction a territory marked by profound geo-economic disparities and a national population fragmented by local traditions and dialects, and whose preponderant majority was excluded from the suffrage.

Not surprisingly, the efforts to "make Italians", or to mould a highly heterogeneous socio-cultural and political universe into a unified national citizenry, has long been the central theme in Italian historiography. Mark I. Choate's book, *Emigrant Nation*, throws important new light on that critical period of Italian history by focussing on one among the many challenges facing the various

governments and political elites: it was the challenge posed by a development that was neither promoted nor organized but rather resulting from the free migration of millions of Italians. In the 45 years or so preceding the Great War, they gave rise to one of the most important and geographically-scattered migration movements in history.

Initially thought to be a temporary phenomenon, the movement soon showed its chronic character rooted largely in poverty and in political neglect, and kept alive by rapidly growing global labour markets. By 1911, the nearly six million Italians living abroad equalled almost 20 percent of the population residing in Italy. Despite the immediate economic benefits that migration brought to poverty-stricken villages and towns, the movement was condemned on both moral and political ground. Some saw in it the undermining of Italy's most sacrosanct institution – the family – on account of the years-long separations that emigration entailed. To others, massive emigration was the clearest evidence of the governing class's failure to confront the widespread problem of rural poverty through an effective program of agrarian re-

forms. Still others could not remain blind to the oppression and discrimination to which the mostly unskilled and illiterate Italian migrants were invariably subjected in many host societies. Soon, however, the realisation that migration had become irreversible and its benefits to the national economy considerable, led to major shifts in perspective. The state had to take a direct role by overseeing the movement, provide for the safe and orderly flow of remittances from overseas, and use diplomatic means when necessary so as to ensure a fair treatment of its expatriates. More importantly, the movement had to be endowed with a significance that would be in keeping with Italy's search for national self-affirmation within the community of nations.

Through seven solidly-documented and well-argued chapters, Choate shows how these shifts in perspective found their articulations within an increasingly heated climate of public opinion, and how they concretized themselves in an array of public and private programs. Some of these initiatives — such as the creation and the operations of an Emigration Commissariat (chapter 2), or the pioneering efforts by Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini in the field of charity (chapter 5), or still the determination by the state-subsidized Dante Alighieri Society in keeping alive the Italian language and culture among immigrants (chapter 4) — have received considerable attention by historians. In the view of this reviewer, *Emigrant Nation's* strongest contribution lies in the author's ability to document the emergence among political leaders and opinion-makers of a positive stance toward emigration by bringing together two themes of Italian history that traditionally have been studied separately from each other: emigration and colonialism.

Italy had been a latecomer in the nineteenth-century's scramble for colonies. By the end of the century, her colonial possessions were limited to Eritrea and Somalia. Moreover, the much-coveted Tunisia had been snatched by the savvy and more powerful diplomacy of France, and the 1896 military campaign to take possession of Ethiopia had met with a disastrous and humiliating defeat. Yet, Italy's dismal experience as a colonizing country had not deterred some politicians and writers from envisioning a "Greater Italy" or even, in the words of a leading proponent of this view, a "great ethnographic empire" (p. 70). Had this notion been made to rest on Italy's overseas possessions alone, it would have been downright laughable. Even when in 1912 Italy managed to add Libya to her colonial possessions following the crumbling of the Turkish Empire, her colonial population represented a tiny fraction compared to her

overall domestic population. A "Greater Italy", therefore, had to encompass the millions of Italian emigrants spread throughout several continents. It entailed also reassessing the role of emigration by stressing its positive good for the nation. In Choate's own words, "Emigrants would be united through culture, religion, and economics, not as fugitives, but heroes; not in a diaspora or scattering, but in a consciously created, global community of Italians, under the umbrella of the Italian state" (p. 62). Choate pursues skilfully the various strands of thought that converged into the construction of this new vision. Prominent ethnographers such as Lamberto Loria reconceptualised the notion of *italianità* within the context of the dominant social Darwinism and of the White-Man-Burden discourse of the time, stressing that whether at home, in North-American mining camps, or in South-American plantations, Italians were bearers of a distinctly rich culture and agents of civilization. Italy's leading liberal economist, Luigi Einaudi, reframed emigration in terms of the ability of Italian human capital to insert itself in some of the world's most dynamic economies while also constituting precious markets for Italian exports. Colonialism itself was redefined by distinguishing between "colonies of direct dominion" (p. 70) and the free colonies that Italians created in the countries and districts of immigrant settlement, most commonly known as "Little Italies".

Yet, were ordinary emigrants aware that through their separation from their families, through their hard-earned remittances, and through the discrimination they often suffered, they were contributing to the prestige of a "Greater Italy"? How did they respond to a political rhetoric that came from the same ruling class who had been responsible for their emigration? Choate stays away from this kind of questions, supposedly because raising them and trying to answer them would entail bringing into the picture the great absent in his analytical framework: the immigrants themselves. While the reconstitution of this new colonialist discourse is impeccably executed, it fails to take into account the rich body of historical-anthropological literature that has unveiled the universe of immigrants in a variety of national contexts and that allows us to assess the degree of success or failure among those who allegedly were the principal agents of the "Greater Italy" design.

In the end, the construction of a peaceful colonialism and the diplomacy it entailed fell under the impact of a new and aggressive nationalism which took center stage from 1910 onward. It provided the main impetus behind the war for the conquest of Libya, acting also as the lead-

ing force in the radical recomposition of ideology and politics, thus preparing the terrain for Italy's intervention in the Great War. Emigration had to be reassessed once again and made functional to a program of aggressive colonialism and irredentism. One of the leading proponents of this view was the socialist-turned-nationalist Benito Mussolini.

Of course, a short review cannot do full justice to a study that is striking for its documentary and analytical richness, and that deserves the full attention of all scholars interested in this subject.

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