
PROBLEMS

Italian Emigrants and Argentine Society. Problems of Models and Sources

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One of the most interesting debates in current Argentine historiography concerns the characteristics of social relations between European immigrants and the host society. This debate has been particularly intense in the case of Italian immigrants, who were not only the largest migrant group to arrive in Argentina from overseas but also the one which has been most thoroughly studied. As some contemporary currents of thought remind us so insistently, history is always a problem-history. For some South American countries which hosted migratory flows from overseas and in a sense rebuilt their own population upon them, it is hard to imagine that there could be a more meaningful problem than the above mentioned. Beyond the all too evident *naiveté* of correlating European emigration with modernization, it seems certain that in countries such as Argentina and Uruguay (and also in some regions of Brazil) the social and cultural transformations brought about by the migratory flood — much more sizeable, as a percentage of total local population, than the migratory movements towards countries of the Northern hemisphere — implied a crucial break in their regular historical course. However, for reasons we have discussed elsewhere, scholars devoted to Argentine social history too often ignored or underestimated the fact that Argentina was a country of immigrants.

In the last decades the situation has changed considerably and the problem we are referring to has fully emerged. Unfortunately, although historians accept that the problem exists and is a central one, they do not agree even on the conceptual framework with which to address it. That is, there is no consensus among researchers as to the way to interpret the available empirical data and, what is worse, as to the proper approach to the subject and the techniques which, given previous agreement about basic hypotheses, could lead to interchangeable results. In our view, historical Pyrrhicism resulting

from a rejection of the use of models and a retreat into sterile appeals to the ambiguous nature of reality are of no help for solving this problem.

Anyway, history is not only made through problem-raising or through the use of conceptual models or research techniques; we forget all too often that historical knowledge is closely dependent on available sources. "*L'historien est toujours l'esclave de ses documents*": this phrase belongs, not to Seignobos (or to Bernheim), but to one of the great contemporary historians: Marc Bloch — a pioneer, incidentally, who was fascinated by the eventual transformation of the historical fact into a problem, and by model-building.¹ And while the last two decades of Western historiography have been characterized by an appreciation of completely new kinds of non-traditional sources, answers to any problem are always largely limited by the kind and quality of available sources. This is even more evident in the case of a problem such as the one we are dealing with, which affects the lives of millions of people who do not belong, for the most part, to that strata of the population used to leaving behind it a large amount of historical records.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the problem of the interaction between migrants and the host society mainly through an analysis of the conceptual models used by a number of researchers and of the kind, conditions and limitations of the sources used by them, rather than to discuss the empirical evidence they present.

If the different stages of research undertaken on the relationship between Italian immigrants and Argentine society could be ordered in a sequence, the first stage to consider would be involving the work of Gino Germani and his followers in the sixties and early seventies.² For this group of researchers the central concept was that of assimilation and their theoretical matrix was the school of American sociology prevailing after the Second World War, especially Eissenstadt.³ Thinking in *ad quem* terms implied, to be sure, a one-sided and unilinear picture of the process by which the identities of the different migrant groups and of the local population were dissolved to give place to a new joint social identity. The notion of "crisol de razas" was the Argentine equivalent for the later meaning of "melting pot" among American scholars, and it seemed to be endorsed by a retrospective approach to the problem from its end results: in the second half of the XXth century, Argentina did not show any visible traits of enduring ethnic conflicts, and the second or

¹ M. BLOCH, *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française*, Paris, 1952, XII.

² G. GERMANI, *Política y sociedad en una época de transición*, Buenos Aires, 1965, 197-210; Id., *Mass immigration and Modernisation in Argentina*, in I.L. HOROWITZ (ed.), *Masses in Latin America*, New York, 1970, 289-330; F. KORN, *Algunos aspectos de la asimilación de inmigrantes en Buenos Aires* in T. DI TELLA and T. HALPERIN DONGHI (eds.), *Los fragmentos del poder*, Buenos Aires, 1969, 439-460; F. KORN, *Buenos Aires: los huéspedes del veinte*, Buenos Aires, 1974.

³ S. EISENSTADT, *The Absorption of Immigrants*, London, 1954.

third generation of offspring of those who had come to the country during the mass migration period (1880-1920) did not identify themselves with any ethnic group or with their ancestors' homeland. In this case, then, what common sense told these researchers agreed with the teleological implications of the model they were using.

Germani's school not only assumed an assimilationist framework but also the methodological indicators for measuring the process derived from that same sociological tradition. The notion that the process was in fact measurable according to certain indicators was in itself evidence of an approach using almost exclusively quantifiable sources. Roughly speaking, the main indicators to be considered were the following: marriage strategies, residence patterns, occupational integration, and social and spatial mobility of migrants. On the other hand, the model put much less emphasis on membership in voluntary associations, support of certain symbolic values or linguistic ascription. Clearly the reason was that it intended to give higher priority to some structural aspects revealing the existence of fluid contacts, potential or actual, between migrants and the host society, as well as to the functionality of roles played by migrants in their new environment. Of course, this approach underestimated the importance of cultural dimensions associated with the preservation of some traditions linked to the life experience of those same migrants. Besides, this model's starting point was not the contrast between assimilation and ethnic identity, but between assimilation and marginality. This also explains why research tended to develop following another contraposition: native inhabitant/European immigrant, and not different specific national groups/local population. This dichotomy between native and immigrant was in turn based on a contraposition of another kind having larger interpretive implications for both groups' norms and values, namely, that which identified natives with traditions and European immigrants with modernization.

The approach of Germani and his followers was based on sources of a special kind: they were public and quantifiable. It is an open question whether the results they achieved derived only from their monolithic basic assumptions and their general framework, or whether the nature of the available material determined the resulting interpretation. Before dealing with this issue, however, a word should be said about the sources. The poverty of statistical and census material in Argentina and other South American countries contrasts with the relative richness in the countries where both the conceptual framework and the technical instruments had been elaborated. This poverty of public sources was a consequence more of the belated establishment of the State in the new South American nations and their meagre financial and intellectual resources, than of the careless indolence of their public officials.

Generally speaking, Argentine census data concerning the variable "migrants by country of origin" have been quite poor. Besides, general censuses

were too spaced out in time: between the first (1869) and the second (1895) the interval was of 26 years; between the second and the third (1914), 19 years; between the third and the fourth (1947), 33 years. The situation was much better in a city such as Buenos Aires, where censuses were carried out in 1855, 1887, 1904, 1909, and then in 1936; moreover, the city's statistical registry office ("*Registro Estadístico de Buenos Aires*") and statistical yearbook ("*Anuario Estadístico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*") provided abundant information between 1860 and 1923. Things were also better (though in a later period) in Rosario, a city where the migratory component was much more significant than in Buenos Aires in relation to the preexisting native population. Between the gross census enumeration of 1858 and the first municipal census of Rosario in 1900 there was a long gap of 42 years, which can only partially be bridged resorting to the national censuses of 1869 and 1895, and to the provincial one of 1887. The situation radically improved in Rosario from 1900 onwards (censuses of 1906, 1910 and 1926). This review allows us to conclude that while censuses were not carried out with the same periodicity in the different regions of the country, in almost every case the data provided were, as already mentioned, quite limited to the effect of studying processes such as social mobility or economic integration.

However, let us have a closer look at the possibilities afforded and the limitations imposed by available statistical sources for measuring the indicators that social scientists deemed significant in the sixties. First of all, the marriage patterns. Neither national nor provincial or municipal censuses provided any data in this respect. Germani's work was grounded, on the one hand, on data collected by Savorgnan,⁴ who had made a survey on Buenos Aires city based on some sources (the statistical registry office and yearbook) which enabled him to study marriage patterns, and, on the other hand, on some assumptions derived from another indicator which censuses did provide: the high male index in migrant groups. Unfortunately, both were indirect inferences, since Savorgnan had previously elaborated the data in order to construct a "homogamy index" (which was later questioned by some historians), and did not provide raw figures.

It seems evident at this point that the lack of concern for a more careful analysis of available public statistics is less strongly linked to the weaknesses of sources than to the apparently useless need to verify what the common sense of Argentinians took for granted, namely, that marital choice had not followed predominantly ethnic lines, and that indisputably the result of that process was fusion. The adoption of the marriage indicator as a measure of the greater or lesser degree of assimilation of immigrants gave rise implicitly to other problems which were not tackled either by these researchers or by those who drew opposite conclusions from the analysis of that indicator. Was

⁴ F. SAVORGNAN, *Matrimonial Selection and the Amalgamation of Heterogeneous Groups*, in IUSSP, *Cultural Assimilation of Immigrants*, London, 1950, 59-67.

the index of endogamy/exogamy measuring sociability areas or levels of ethnic segregation? Was it proper to raise the issue as regards ethnic groups at a national level (according to the available information from the statistical registries) or should endogamy be examined at geographically more restricted levels, such as the region or the village? Moreover, was not the use of large numerical aggregates (corresponding to very wide census districts) concealing deep local differences behind a statistical average? Finally, how were the results obtained to be weighed in order to measure the immigrants' degree of assimilation? At this point, comparing the Argentine realities with those of other countries seemed appropriate; hence, the degree of social integration of foreigners became a problem related to the terms of the comparison which was implicitly made with the United States.

The second indicator used was that of residence patterns. Census data had similar deficiencies in this respect, the most serious being that groups could only be studied at a national level and on the basis of too large territorial units — except in those cases where municipal censuses were available. The apparent dispersion of Italians throughout urban areas (especially in the city on which most studies have been done, Buenos Aires) gave rise to the opinion that that indicator also showed a high degree of social interaction between the different migrant groups and other components of local society. At a more micro level, this argument was reinforced by a merely qualitative perception of the role played by Argentine tenement houses (the "*conventillos*"), which supposedly were areas of multiethnic sociability⁵.

The issues raised by the chosen indicator not only concerned the limitations of the kind of information provided by published sources, but also derived from the lack of a systematic reflection about the spatial and territorial unit of analysis which could be meaningfully taken into consideration. That is, should the researcher work on national, regional or village groups? Was he to study their incorporation into small neighborhoods, into districts or into larger urban areas? Beyond this crucial aspect, the lack of serious thinking about which levels of spatial segregation (or, inversely, of spatial integration) were going to provide a precise answer as to the assimilation levels was also felt. And here, again, the chosen rationale gave prominence to the comparison with the recurrent American example. When the degree of spatial segregation was lower than in the United States (a finding which, by the way, rested largely on a rather impressionistic view of the process of territorial incorporation in that country), it was inevitably concluded that this could be taken as irrefutable proof of the Argentine "melting pot."

As regards the other two indicators adopted (social and territorial mobility, and economic integration), the sources available in Argentina set a limit, again, to the answers that could be obtained. One conspicuous problem was

⁵ J. SCOBIE, *Buenos Aires. Del centro a los barrios (1870-1910)*, Buenos Aires, 1977.

that the use of too large aggregates as data to analyze social mobility processes necessarily led to reducing simplistically an extraordinary range of situations to one trend. A second problem derived from the indicators provided by the available census and statistical information. This information is so poor in the Argentine case that access of persons to real estate ownership had to be given great weight.⁶ However, taken by itself, regardless of its correlation with other variables, this datum is likely to be almost meaningless. In discussing the case of Italians in urban areas, Halperin Donghi has acutely remarked that one gets one picture if the global ratio of Italian real estate owners to total Italian population is compared with the ratio of native real estate owners to total natives, and quite a different picture if attention is paid to the characteristics of the urban districts in which Italians came to be proprietors before the First World War (in terms of the price of land, the available infrastructure and the location of the property within the city).⁷ In rural areas, on the other hand, the prevailing view was that there still was a rigid land market and immigrants had difficulty in becoming real estate owners, a fact that supposedly prompted their concentration in urban areas.

Another approach to the problem of social mobility is to study the current status of Italian migrants' occupations in Argentina as against those they had in their own country or in the initial stages of adjustment to the new country. In this respect, occupational statements made by immigrants on arriving in Argentina, which are collected by the Immigration Department in its annual reports, can be correlated with data from national and municipal censuses — although many authors have expressed reasonable doubts on the validity of these statements.⁸ However, except for the Rosario municipal censuses of 1906 and 1910, the other censuses unfortunately do not classify occupations by country of origin, so that the only viable distinction is a too general one between natives and foreigners. At this general level, available data supported the views currently manifested by qualitative sources as to the high proportion of immigrants in non-manual and skilled manual sectors of urban areas.⁹ A major difficulty of this approach derives not only from the aggregate character of data but also from the fact that it rests upon an unjustified assumption about ascending social mobility, based on the passage from

⁶ H.S. KLEIN, *The Integration of Italian Immigrants into the United States and Argentina: A Comparative Analysis*, "The American Historical Review", v. 88, n. 2, 1983, 306-329.

⁷ T. HALPERIN DONGHI, *La integración de los inmigrantes italianos en la Argentina. Un comentario*, in F. DEVOTO and G. ROSOLI (eds.), *La inmigración italiana en la Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1985, 87-94.

⁸ G. BEYHAUT, R. CORTÈS CONDE et alia, *Los inmigrantes en el sistema ocupacional argentino*, in T. DI TELLA, G. GERMANI and J. GRACIARENA, *Argentina: sociedad de masas*, Buenos Aires, 1965, 59-84.

⁹ G. BOURDÈ, *Urbanisation et immigration en Amérique Latine*. Buenos Aires, Paris, 1974, XI.

non-skilled to skilled occupations, or from manual to non-manual ones. This assumption disregards, of course, any appreciation of the migrants' life strategies and of their own perception of the process.

Moreover, the analysis of social mobility processes was intragenerational, since the kind of published sources employed made it impossible to study the phenomenon through several generations. In this respect, too, "common sense" seemed to make any specific research unnecessary. Though the greater or lesser social mobility of immigrants still was (and is) a subject of controversy, most researchers were convinced of the existence of an ascending intergenerational social mobility. Only a few of them paid attention to the different mobility opportunities offered to Italian immigrants according to the period in which they arrived in the country: either in the first migratory waves, during the third quarter of the XIXth century, or much later, in the years immediately before and after the First World War.

As to the spatial mobility process, it was assumed that this accompanied ascending social mobility patterns. Generally speaking, it was thought that in urban areas the expansion from town into suburbs was a consequence of the ambition to own real estate; it not only implied a relative improvement in social status but a definitive breaking with ethnic links still surviving in the areas where the newly arrived had settled in the first place. As in the studies on rural areas, it was believed that the migrant's hope was to become the owner of the house or land where he lived. More recently, some authors have indicated that, at least during the XIXth century, the labour market (which according to these authors was characterized by high occupational instability and a strong degree of rural-urban circulation) favoured the spatial mobility of immigrants. Both interpretations preserved the notion that, for some reason, a high spatial mobility acted against the consolidation of ethnic communities and, at the same time, favoured the establishment of broader social relations with the members of the host society.

Finally, the problem of economic integration into central positions within the productive process was discussed as to its implications for the performing of functional roles in the new society. This was an outgrowth of the sociological currents that prevailed in the scientific world of the United States in the fifties and sixties, which gave too much importance to the psychological influence of respectable and relatively stable jobs on the individual.

After this review of the first stage of researches on the relation between Italian immigrants and the Argentine society, some meaningful remarks can be made. Not only was the issue focused in terms of assimilation, but it was also thought that its indicators were what may be termed "structural assimilation situations." The indicators chosen provided only indirect evidence of the facts they were meant to prove; indeed, they were only a measurable way of approaching the kind of social contacts immigrants *could* develop, but not necessarily (except in the case of marriage) the ones they *actually* developed. Their actual situation was immediately deduced from their structural

situation, as if their response to changes in their situational conditions (that is, their occupational and living conditions) were a sort of mechanical reflex. The shortcomings in these views which were evidently too simplified and schematic, were aggravated in the Argentine case by the poverty of published public sources and by the scant interest of researchers (with only a few exceptions) in the potential usefulness of other kinds of complementary materials — such as the original manuscript schedules, available, for some censuses, in the files of the National General Archives.

In fact, what was underlying this interpretive model devised by Germani — which has numerous followers among social scientists even today — is a deep belief in the exceptional character of the Argentine case, derived from a notion which was primarily “physical”: in proportion to the preexisting population base, the European migratory flood in the three decades previous to 1914 had been of such an extent (approximately twice as much as that in the United States in the same period) that the host society was disrupted by it. Although Germani had been using the assimilationist model, he preferred to speak of “fusion” at this point in order to describe what had happened in Argentina. The exceptional character of the process was also derived from the supposedly greater degree of openness of Argentine society in comparison to other host societies, as well as from the greater affinity between the largest immigrant group (the Italians) and the native population in terms of religion, language and culture. Finally, the whole scheme rested on the belief in the disruptive effects of the social environment on the culture of different social groups — a belief grounded in the illusion that increasingly urban and industrialized societies are likely to become socially (and not only ethnically) homogeneous with time.

New approaches, originated in diverse historiographical traditions, began to examine critically Germani’s interpretation and eventually came to be supported by most scholars concerned with Argentine migratory problems (though not by those devoted to the general history of the period). Starting in the late seventies, a series of researches were undertaken in the United States by specialists in Latin American history which revised within two different theoretical matrices the conclusions reached until then. On the one hand, some young scholars such as Mark Szuchman and Eugene Sofer, following the suggestions provided by Thernstrom’s work and by the new American urban social history, attempted to discuss the conclusions reached by previous scholars¹⁰ through the re-appraisal of different kinds of sources. On

¹⁰ M. SZUCHMAN, *The Limits of the Melting Pot in Urban Argentina: Marriage and Integration in Cordoba, 1869-1909*, in “Hispanic American Historical Review” (HAHR), 57, 1977, 24-50; M. SZUCHMAN, *Mobility and Integration in Urban Argentina. Cordoba in the Liberal Era*, Austin, 1980; E. SOFER, *From Pale to Pampa: Eastern European Jewish Social Mobility in Gran Buenos Aires, 1890-1845*, PhD Dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1976.

the other hand, the ideas derived from the new American ethnic history led Sam Baily¹¹ (a specialist in the history of the Argentine labour movement) to reexamine the relation between immigrants, specifically Italians, and Argentine society. Finally, there were some other Argentine and European scholars less directly concerned with the issues raised by the models on the relations between immigrants and host society, but who were instead more interested in the potentialities of a new social history which was able to reexamine less schematically the problem of social identities in modern Argentina.

Most of these researchers (at least those from the United States, who played an important pioneering role) had as one of their aims to assess the value of new sources as a first step in order to discuss the conclusions previously drawn. Did they also aim at discussing the conceptual framework with which the problem had to be analyzed? Only partially, for even when the approach used did not assume a final assimilation of the immigrant to the host society and tended, as we will see, to appraise some other aspects of the immigrant's experience, it continued to give primary importance, in the characterization of the process, to the same kind of quantifiable indicators employed by Germani.

The main variable used by new historians was also marriage. Baily, and after him other Argentine researchers¹², utilized the same kind of sources as Savorgnan, namely, the "*Anuarios Estadísticos*", while accepting at its face value the framework suggested by Germani. After verifying a higher proportion of endogamous marriages, he drew conclusions which were the opposite of the ones reached by the previous thinkers: he denied that there had been a "melting pot" in Argentina and said that the existing situation could be defined in terms of "cultural pluralism." Even more boldly, basing his arguments on very indirect evidence, he also suggested that the increase in marriages between Argentinians over time concealed the existence of marriages between offspring of people of the same origin. Some time before Szuchman had also questioned the notion of the Argentine "melting pot," though in his case the novelty was the use of another kind of source: the Church Archives of Cordoba. From a sample of marriages which had taken place there, he finally concluded that among the different European groups living in Cordoba there were high levels of endogamy. Thanks to the data recorded in the source, such as the country of origin of the couple's parents, Szuchman went

¹¹ S. BAILY, *Marriage Patterns and Immigrant Assimilation in Buenos Aires, 1882-1923*, HAHB, 60 (1), 1980, 33-48; Id., *Patrones de residencia de los italianos en Buenos Aires y Nueva York*, "Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos", 1, 1, 1985, 8-47; Id., *The Adjustment of Italian Immigrants in Buenos Aires and New York: 1880-1914*, "The American Historical Review", 88, 2, 1983, 281-305.

¹² R. SEEFELD, *La integración social de extranjeros en Buenos Aires según sus pautas matrimoniales: ¿Pluralismo cultural o crisol de razas? (1860-1923)*, "Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos", 1, 2, 1986, 203-231.

even further and correlated the bride-groom's country of origin with that of his father-in-law. This allowed him to find that not only were most European women married to men of their own national group, but that men, too, given the shortage of women of their own nationality, would rather marry the Argentine-born daughters of parents of their own national group.

What is of interest here about these two researchers' views is that they did not question the validity of the indicator used, nor did they ask themselves what kind of process could in fact be inferred from data on marriage as regards the social relations between migrants and their host society, or whether that process could actually be analyzed in polarized terms such as those of the "melting pot" vs. *cultural pluralism*. Similarly, the sources they resorted to did not solve the issue as to whether national groups were the most meaningful unit for studying social interactions. In this sense some Argentine researchers have recently gone further and, through a reappraisal of the extraordinary possibilities afforded by another source, the archives of the Argentine Civil Registry (which gathers key information not only about the country of origin of married people but also about their town or village of origin), they have been able to set the issue on new grounds.¹³ That is, they have placed the subject of social interrelationships within the context of regional and village groups, which in many cases turn out to be more meaningful than national groups as far as Italian migration is concerned, at least in the second half of the XIXth century. Recently, studies covering more than one generation have also been undertaken, offering new answers as to the different strategies employed by migrant parents and their Argentine offspring. Although these studies are still very fragmentary, they are promising and show that some widespread preconceptions existing in Argentina should be questioned; for instance, the assumption that assimilation, measured by marriage indicators, was quicker in urban areas than in rural ones — a view inherited from old sociological currents of thought which held that changes in social identity and in cultural traditions are inevitably more rapid in cities.

But whatever the potentialities of new available sources, they also have evident limitations. One of them, for example, concerns the difficulty in verifying secondary spatial mobility of migrants or their offspring. This makes it extremely difficult to study longer processes by means of marriage records in order to compare the migrant parents' behaviour with that of their offspring — though perhaps a study such as this could be undertaken on small villages or towns of the rural hinterland, where that change could be more easily detected. However, this is not the main objection that may be

¹³ N. PAGANO and M. OPORTO, *La conducta endogámica de los grupos inmigrantes: pautas matrimoniales de los italianos en el barrio de la Boca en 1895*, in F. DEVOTO and G. ROSOLI (eds.), *L'Italia nella società argentina*, Roma, 1988, 90-101; D. MARQUEGUI, *Aproximación al estudio de la inmigración italo-albanesa en Luján*, "Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos", 3, 8, 1988, 51-81.

raised to these sources. More important is the fact that a thorough debate about the meaning of the marriage index, its universal and uniform validity (or the need to correlate it with some other variables of the host society) and the kind of processes and social relations it is apt to describe has not yet come to the fore. Finally, there is a problem of representativeness. The marriage indicator excludes from analysis those immigrant families which arrived in the host country as already formed family units — the number of which was quite significant in some periods in the case of Italians travelling to Argentina (v. gr., around 50% of the total in the 1880s) — as well as those family groups whose members came in different moments but after some time were living together again in the new country. Neither does it consider the situation of those migrants who remained single, among which a good number surely had a shorter and very different experience in the host society, for them a temporary place. All this does not mean that the marriage indicator should be discarded. It is one of the most meaningful of quantifiable indicators, and the latter have in many cases a crucial (though not exclusive) role to play in the study of popular sectors. But it should be stressed that advances in empirical research were only sparingly and superficially accompanied by a debate on the potentialities of the new sources, and what is even more important, on the implications of the framework within which certain tools of analysis become functional.

The same problem is found when observing the way other indicators and sources were used in the study of social interaction between Italians or other European groups and Argentine natives. One source employed by Szuchman and Baily (and many other scholars after them) were the records of mutual aid associations, many of which were established by different immigrant groups. One of the first findings in this respect is that, unlike public sources, the records of voluntary ethnic associations (of Italians, for instance) are much richer, in Argentina and other South American countries (v. gr., Uruguay) than the ones existing in North America.¹⁴ The reason is quite simple. In comparison to similar associations in North America, those in Argentina were quantitatively and financially stronger and had a more sound institutional life. This, in turn, allowed for a better administrative structure, which generated a larger amount of documents and, of course, guaranteed their preservation over time. Thus, the institution's archives were more likely to survive.

The usefulness of the membership records of these associations for elaborating quantifiable indicators of the integration process derives from the fact that they enable us to work with non-available variables when using the census information. Generally, though not always, these records include key information about the town of origin of immigrant members, their current

¹⁴ G. PRATO, *La tendenza associativa fra gli italiani all'estero*, "La Riforma Sociale", XVI, 1906, 724-743.

place of residence (and sometimes its changes over time), and their successive occupations. Based on this information, Szuchman, who was the first in making use of it, analyzed social mobility processes by means of the records of a Spanish association of Cordoba, and found that most of their members had had a small degree of ascending mobility.

Samuel Baily turned to this subject again some time later, taking advantage of the extraordinary richness of the archives of the *Associazione Italiana di Mutualità ed Istruzione*, where all the documents from a score of mutual aid societies (most of which had already disappeared at that time), had been gathered¹⁵ including the most important one in Buenos Aires, *Unione e Benevolenza* (still existing). With the material provided by the membership records of those archives, Baily wrote numerous articles, many of which are relevant in our case. In one of them, on Italian settlement patterns in Buenos Aires and New York, this Rutgers University professor discussed one of the crucial indicators used by previous researchers: residence patterns. His study revealed that a very different picture was obtained if, instead of studying the problem at the level of the Italian national group, it was examined at the more restricted level of the village of origin or some other smaller local area. In the latter case, there appeared a very marked ethnic concentration in clusters and, what is more important, this trend persisted even when secondary mobility towards the urban periphery took place.

These conclusions were important, for two reasons: first, they challenged the picture of the immigrants' spacial dispersion postulated by some other authors based on more global sources; second (though this point was not made by Baily), they enabled us to question the validity of what we have called "structural assimilation situations" as accurate indicators of actual behaviour. In his article, as well as in a preceding one, Baily conveyed a much less simplistic picture of comparative adjustment of Italians in Buenos Aires and New York, tending to weaken both the polar interpretations previously made and the widespread belief in the radically exceptional character of the Argentine case.¹⁶

Finally, Baily also dealt with a subject which had already played a role, although a secondary one, in Germani's model: the place voluntary ethnic associations had in Italian immigrants' adjustment to the host society.¹⁷ How could the strong and long-lasting character of Italian mutual aid associations in Buenos Aires be interpreted? Did they slow down assimilation, by giving the Italians a well articulated ethnic-cultural identity? Or, instead, did they favour their adjustment to the new society by acting as containment struc-

¹⁵ R. DE FELICE, *Gli archivi delle associazioni italiane in Argentina*, "Affari Sociali Internazionali", IX, 3, 1981 and X, 4, 1982.

¹⁶ S. BAILY, *Patrones...*, cit; Id., *The Adjustment...*, cit.

¹⁷ S. BAILY, *Las sociedades de ayuda mutua y el desarrollo de una comunidad italiana en Buenos Aires, 1858-1918*, "Desarrollo Económico", 84, 21, 1982, 485-514.

tures and as intermediate institutions facilitating the migrants' speedy fulfillment of their functional roles? Baily favours the first interpretation, that is, he put emphasis on the cultural dimension, while Germani had rather endorsed the second, emphasizing the structural-functional dimension.

Again, I think that these approaches, all of which reappraised the potential value of alternative sources, such as the voluntary associations' archives, have not sufficiently examined the limitations and possibilities of those sources. Certainly in the Argentine case the archives of mutual aid societies might be taken, in principle, as a representative sample of the migrants' universe. Their members amounted to at least between one fourth and one fifth of the total Italian population (and the proportion rose to one third if only male members as a percentage of total adult Italian males were computed). But what about the remaining 3/4 or 4/5? These associations did not seem to be fully representative at least in two aspects: occupation and residential patterns. As to the first, we have argued elsewhere that these kind of associations tend to overrepresent certain occupational strata (non-manual, and, secondarily, skilled manual workers), as well as urban workers in relation to rural ones. Do occupational differences influence residential patterns, in particular, and adjustment patterns generally? We think that it is very likely. Moreover, mutual aid societies give account of those Italians who had already regrouped themselves in the country or whose links with ethnic social networks were strong enough to induce them to join those associations. Should we infer that Italians who did not take part in them would manifest necessarily a different kind of behaviour? The answer cannot be conclusive. Let us say once more that belonging to an ethnic association points to a structural situation that in itself does not tell us much about the real meaning of that membership for an immigrant. One could ask whether the great majority of the associations' members shared the patriotic ideals about Italy of its leaders or whether, with more instrumental aims in mind, they rather sought to cover their basic health and welfare needs.

In the search for more representative data, some authors (including myself) have suggested another possible source for studying immigrants' settlement processes in urban areas: I am referring to manuscript census schedules stored in the National General Archives. Scobie with a qualitative approach and Szuchman with a quantitative one had already shown how they could be usefully exploited. I believe I was the first to use systematically the forgotten manuscripts of Buenos Aires census carried out in 1855, which, exceptionally, include data on the migrant's town of origin.¹⁸ Since then other researchers have emphasized how fruitful the work with that census could be.¹⁹

¹⁸ F. DEVOTO, *The Origins of an Italian Neighbourhood in Buenos Aires in the Mid-XIX Century*, "The Journal of European Economic History", 18, 1, 1989, 37-64.

¹⁹ J. MOYA, *Spaniards in Buenos Aires. Patterns of Immigration and Adaptation (1852-1930)*, PhD Dissertation, Rutgers University, 1988; M. BORGES, *Los portu-*

Unfortunately, other manuscript census schedules lack this crucial information about the town of origin, limiting usefulness in spite of their representativeness.

But the problem derived from the limitations of the sources is not the only one. The validity of the residential indicator should also be discussed. Again, we are faced with a "structurally open situation", which provides only an indirect indicator of the kind of social relations the migrants had. Certainly it is much more likely that those who lived in an ethnic quarter would more easily perform all their social interchanges with members of their own migrant community. But while it is more likely, it is not necessarily or inevitably so. Furthermore, how can the ethnicity of a neighbourhood be measured? Is it a merely quantitative problem, that is, do we just calculate the percentage of persons of the same national ethnic group out of the total number of inhabitants of the neighbourhood? In an excellent work in which he examines, mainly by means of qualitative sources, an Agnonese neighbourhood in Buenos Aires, Gandolfo suggests that the kind of social relations that take place in an urban neighborhood is determined by the capacity of the leaders to establish hegemony over a certain social space.²⁰ I have expressed similar points of view in a study on another neighbourhood of Buenos Aires peopled by Genoese. Finally, the relative value of the opposite situation must be stressed; that is, spacial dispersion of migrants does not necessarily prove that they had broken their ethnic links. As some immigrants' letters we had access to clearly demonstrate, long-lasting ethnic links are in many cases independent of spatial movements, since the latter may follow, in fact, ethnic lines.

Do all these limitations of the different quantitative sources we have pointed out force us to give priority to qualitative information? To begin with, it must be remembered that the latter also raises equally difficult problems. Let us take, for instance, immigrants' letters, which together with some other materials, such as journals, diaries or memoirs, are almost the only source allowing us to recover the point of view of the migrant himself in the case of studies on migratory movements before the First World War. These letters also raise a serious problem as regards representativeness. First, they tend to overrepresent the population strata having a greater degree of literacy and of formal learning. Moreover, in many cases they reach us after having been screened through the political manipulation of other social sectors (v. gr., letters published in newspapers). In other cases, on account of the relationship sender/receiver, the contents of private correspondence tend to highlight the world the receiver is familiar with, that is, the ethnic universe.²¹

gueses en Buenos Aires a mediados del siglo XIX: una aproximación socio-demográfica, "Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos, 4, 12, 1989, 353-382.

²⁰ R. GANDOLFO, *Notas sobre la élite de una comunidad emigrada en cadena: el caso de los agnoneses*, in F. DEVOTO and G. ROSOLI, *La Italia...*, cit., 160-177.

²¹ S. BAILY and F. RAMELLA, *One Family, Two Worlds. An Italian Family's Cor-*

We would like to conclude this review of Italian immigration to Argentina making some suggestions which are not necessarily fully original. Firstly, we wish to stress that the only way to get a more complex and reliable picture of the social interaction processes of Italians in Argentina is to combine different quantitative sources (v. gr., census schedules, marriage records and voluntary associations archives) and to complement them with the qualitative information provided by a number of sources (v. gr., the rich mine of information supplied by newspapers, or the still unexplored but valuable notaries' records). Furthermore, the migrants' experience itself was varied from the very beginning, and the relationship migrants established with the host society can hardly be reducible to a single model. However this approach will not be complete until the process can be observed from the other side of the coin, namely, from the perspective of native inhabitants and the sources informing about them.

Secondly, we wish to emphasize that, even if the evidence collected until now — and before going further along this line, models of analysis should be more thoroughly discussed — clearly favours the idea that in the period of mass migration Argentine society had strongly pluralist traits, this finding was to be expected somehow. During the sixties, several macrosocial myths took for granted that societies were homogeneous (or, inversely, that they were structured according to social classes only). Once these myths have been exploded can there be a study of the past which does not reveal the necessary diversity (and not only ethnic) of modern societies? Moreover, the fact that a society is ethnically plural does not mean that its pluralism must follow the American model. It seems as arbitrary to consider the Argentine case an exception as to declare that the responses of Italians to different host societies were uniformly the same.

As a final word, we should like to point out that our researches will make more speedy progress if we do not overestimate the comparison with the American case and put more emphasis, instead, on the more plausible comparison with other Latin American societies which also were strongly influenced by immigrants in the late XIXth and early XXth centuries.

respondence Across The Atlantic, 1901-1922, New Brunswick, 1988; E. FRANZINA, *Merica! Merica! Emigrazione e Colonizzazione nelle lettere dei contadini veneti in America Latina, 1876-1902*, Milano, 1979; E. CIAFARDO, *Cadenas migratorias e inmigración italiana. Reflexiones a partir de la correspondencia de dos inmigrantes italianos en Argentina, 1921-1938* (mimeo).

²² F. DEVOTO, *Las cadenas migratorias italianas. Algunas reflexiones a la luz del caso argentino*, en "Studi Emigrazione", 87, 1987, 355-372.

