What Makes a Citizen?

George De Stefano (May 11, 2009)

Italians are leaving Italy, poor immigrants are trying to get in, and descendants of Italian immigrants are applying for Italian citizenship.

What does it mean to be a citizen? Is citizenship something one simply has or something one does?

I've been thinking about these questions quite a bit in recent weeks, and especially since the recent conference, "Land of Our Return: Diasporic Encounters with Italy," held at the Calandra Italian American Institute here in New York. One of the conference's best-attended sessions was about Italian Americans obtaining Italian citizenship. The presenters, an Italian American woman and her (non-Italian) husband, an attorney, had obtained cittadinanza, and they declared that other Italian

Americans should – no, must – do the same.

I was unconvinced. It seemed to me the main reasons given for pursuing Italian citizenship were sentimental (a connection to the ancestral homeland) or self-aggrandizing (being able to travel and do business in Italy and elsewhere in the European Union). To me, neither seemed worth the trouble of dealing with Italy's byzantine and sclerotic bureaucracy.

But it was Annie Lanzillotto's impassioned remarks at the end of the conference session that went to the heart of the matter. What does it mean to be a citizen, of Italy, or of the United States or any other nation, she asked. What is the point of citizenship? Annie urged us to think of "citizen" not as a noun but as a verb – how do you be a citizen, of Italy or the United States?

As a writer and performance artist, Annie Lanzillotto asks the pertinent, if sometimes disconcerting questions. I felt she did us all a favor at the Calandra conference by challenging us to think about why we might want to obtain Italian citizenship. What would we do with it?

In the West, our concept of citizenship originated with the ancient Greeks, who identified it with the essence of being human. Aristotle observed that only gods and animals took no part in the affairs of the polis, the city-state.

If you were a member of the polis, the public and private spheres were not separate realms. The obligations of citizenship were inextricable from the everyday life of individuals living in the polis. For the Greeks, citizenship was founded on citizens' obligations to the community, not on a concept of inalienable rights. This worked because the city-states were small, organic communities whose members felt that their destinies were linked to that of the polis.

Citizenship, active and engaged, also was for the Greeks an opportunity to demonstrate one's virtue, thereby winning the respect and honor of fellow citizens.

I wonder what the Greeks would make of the desire of growing numbers of Italian Americans to become citizens of the country their forbears left, or rather, fled, if we're being honest about why millions of Italians emigrated. They might say, you're already citizens of another country, where you were born. Don't you have enough to do there?

But these questions certainly aren't deterring Italian Americans. Just Google "Italian citizenship" or "dual Italian citizenship" and you'll find that there are companies and organizations ready to provide all the assistance you'll need to obtain the required documenti and to deal with your local Italian consulate. One company says, "We do all the work for you!" -- an implicit acknowledgment that the process can be a bureaucratic nightmare.

"Italian Citizenship will enable you to live, work, retire, go to school, and travel freely in 27 European Union (EU) countries," the ad continues. (So you don't even have to stay in Italy if you don't want to.) "Don't become overwhelmed by this complex journey…We will prepare everything while you

enjoy reconnecting with your heritage."

It isn't only Italian Americans from the U.S. who are pursuing citizenship. La Repubblica reports that last year more than a million citizenship requests came from descendants of Italian immigrants to South America, mainly Brazilians, Argentines, Venezuelans, and Uruguayans. The article, however, did not cite figures for citizenship applications from U.S.-born "discendenti dei vecchi emigranti."

The move by the discendenti to claim Italian citizenship comes at a time of both emigration from and immigration to Italy. La Repubblica noted that 3,853,614 Italians are living and working abroad, mainly educated younger people, under thirty-five years of age, who have found better jobs and a higher standard of living outside Italy.

At nearly 4 million, those who make up i cervelli in fuga (the brain-drain) are almost equivalent in number to the documented immigrants currently in Italy.

But there are now many more undocumented immigrants – extracomunitari, clandestini, irregolari are some of the more benign terms used to identify them. These new arrivals, many of whom should qualify as refugees, are fleeing extreme poverty and starvation, political persecution, and war. But many in Italy don't want them, and the current ignoble government is pandering to, and feeding, their xenophobia and racism.

Under new policy championed by the Lega Nord, Italy will send back undocumented immigrants before they can land and be processed in Italy's centri di accoglienza. (These so-called "acceptance" centers often have functioned more as detention facilities.) Repubblica noted that 500 immigrants, including newborns, had been sent back to Libya in the first five days of May. Libyan authorities are known to be brutal to many returned immigrants, especially those who left for political reasons. Gangs of young Libyan men have attacked immigrants to Libya from sub-Saharan African countries.

The Lega Nord, led by Umberto Bossi and whose Roberto Maroni is Italy's Interior Minister, is ecstatic. Not only has Premier Silvio Berlusconi wholeheartedly endorsed the leghista send 'em back policy; he aligned himself ideologically with the Lega when he recently declared that Italy will not become a multiethnic country.

Italy's bishops objected, noting that a multiethnic Italy already exists and is a good thing. The Italian Left, which is good at expressing moral indignation if not much else, condemned the new immigration policy and Berlusconi's support of it.

But moral indignation, though insufficient, is necessary, and Alessandro Dal Lago, an editorialist with the left-wing daily Il Manifesto, has expressed it well. He noted that "when someone starving, sick or needy knocks at our door, it should arouse a primordial imperative to give aid." But by sending boatloads of those whom Frantz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth" back to Libya, the Italian government has decided to renounce "any minimal humane consideration."

The policy, Dal Lago noted, “has established that citizenship…is the indispensable requisite for someone to be treated like a human being.” So in the Italy of Berlusconi, Bossi and Maroni, citizenship has become the dividing line between “us” and “them.”

“Among the migrants sent back without even setting foot on our sacred soil there are people fleeing war, massacres, and hunger,” Dal Lago observed. “By impeding them from requesting asylum and returning them to their ports of departure, Italy condemns them to detention, to oppression, and, as has been documented for years, to death.”

Native-born Italians are leaving Italy and staying abroad. Desperate people from impoverished lands are coming into Italy, or are trying to. And now Italian Americans increasingly are claiming Italian citizenship. I have considered becoming one of them. It’d be nice to vote in Italian elections and travel freely throughout the EU. I would be lying if I said I felt no personal connection, no cultural affinity, to la madrepatria. (I’d hardly be writing for I-Italy if that were the case.) But is that enough? I admit, I’m not sure.

But I am certain that, given the ugly turn Italy has taken, particularly since Berlusconi’s return to power in alliance with the Lega Nord, I’m in no hurry. For now, one passport will do.

Links
[1] http://test.casaitalianayu.org/files/9155immigrants21242084405jpg