Lampedusa As An Opportunity for Europe

Marcello Saija (April 21, 2016)

In Italy we must change our thinking about immigration and see it as an opportunity and not as a burden. For this vision to work, we need to begin social planning along the lines of the American model during the Great Migration—to create many carefully organized and operated Ellis Islands along the contested southern shores of Europe.

I agree with much of what Jerry Krase has written in response to my article in the previous issue of i-ItalyNY. However I believe that in describing the differences between Ellis Island and the experience at Lampedusa it is simplistic for Krase to sum up my position as implying, merely, that “there (Ellis Island [2]) was better than here (Lampedusa).” In fact, the difference was and is enormous. I don’t need to describe again what’s happening on Lampedusa.

I wrote that story for all to see. Moreover, I don't think it's necessary now to discuss the attitudes of America (both in its institutions and across society) toward Latinos and Muslims.

If Krase sees a resurgence of racism and xenophobia in the U.S. today, he is probably right—but that's not the issue. My point of comparison was between what happened on Ellis Island during the Great Migration and what happens today on Lampedusa. And here I think lies the greatest difference in our positions. On this point I believe that Krase's judgment is short-sighted and a bit reductive.

Not just immigrants, but manpower

It is perfectly true that during the period of the Great Migration, roughly between 1870 and 1920, the United States sought not just immigrants but manpower. And in that sense it succeeded by welcoming millions of workers. This pragmatic mindset is exactly the same one that created Ellis Island and its mechanisms of reception. The history of immigration through Ellis Island was defined by a project of social engineering. When Ellis Island began to operate at full capacity in 1892, distinctive ethnic enclaves—Little Italies as well other ethnic neighborhoods—were already established in Manhattan and Brooklyn in New York City, in Chicago, Boston, Hartford, Providence, San Francisco, Paterson, and in many other places.

During that period, the federal government was vigorously trying to combat the padrone system and diminish the power of its bosses by heavily promoting the creation and growth of immigrant mutual aid societies. Of course, that plan never got as far as to directly offer immigrant workers 3,000 jobs in the silk mills of New Jersey or 150 in the watch-making factories of Connecticut, for example. But the government knew very well that these silk mills and watchmakers and many other companies throughout the United States had already begun to avoid the padrone bosses by recruiting workers through mutual aid societies.

Defeating the padrone system

The padrone system typically created workers who were unhappy and unproductive by exploiting them heavily. Bosses would keep enough of every paycheck that the immigrant worker was unable to buy the prepaid ticket that would help someone else back home come to the United States. So it was that a very specific piece of federal legislation caused a dramatic growth between 1892 and 1924 of the number of mutual aid societies across the country. These societies soon became the main vehicle of Americanization, welcoming migrants freed from bosses, teaching them English, and finding them jobs.

The Mutual Aid Society [3] of Salina Island [4]on Mulberry Street in lower Manhattan was responsible for the naturalization of some 2,000 of its members between its founding in 1898 and 1923. Of course, the federal government did not engineer this process entirely on its own or by itself, but rather by encouraging other institutions. And this governmental role was an integral feature of the Ellis Island model.

The Ellis Island model

Search the massive Ellis Island immigrant arrival database (www.ellisisland.org [5]) and look (as I did for all Sicilian immigrants from 1892 to 1924) at the addresses of American contacts given by arriving immigrants: these addresses are almost always those of the banks that issued them their prepaid tickets. You will also find the name of the guarantor marked in the same box. In the early years of Ellis Island, guarantors were likely to be labor bosses, but were gradually replaced by a relative or an officer of a mutual aid society. After 1900, the contact address is often listed as that of the societies themselves, many of which, like that of the Contessa Entellina society in Brooklyn, contained a loan desk. This is the immigrant experience in the United States of the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Ten, hundred, thousand Ellis Islands!

Compare this experience to what is happening today in Europe and then ask if there is or is not any

difference. One might argue that “the US needed to search for an immigrant workforce, while Europe today does not.” And it’s true. But are we completely sure there are enough farm workers in Europe to meet the demand? Are we confident that the labor market for all European economic sectors is in fact saturated? I really don’t think so. And we can only change our thinking about the value of immigration when we see it as an opportunity and not as a burden or, worse, as a dangerous nuisance. For this vision of migration as a benefit to work, we would need to begin social planning along the lines of the American model during the Great Migration—to create many carefully organized and operated Ellis Islands along the contested southern shores of Europe.

My personal opinion is that people have the right to settle anywhere they want to, even though I realize this might be an impractical goal. In the end, I’d honestly be happy if what happens today to migrants in the Mediterranean was even a little bit like that which happened to migrants in America 100 or more years ago.

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Links
[1] http://test.casaitalianayu.org/files/lampedusaellisisland1461287420jpg
[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellis_Island
[3] https://www.tenement.org/encyclopedia/lands.htm
[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salina,_Sicily
[5] http://www.ellisisland.org
[6] https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marcello_Saija