

## *The Origins of an Italian Neighbourhood in Buenos Aires in the Mid XIX Century\**

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Research on Italian mass migration to Argentina has gained momentum in the last few years. By proposing new questions and new methodologies, recent contributions have broadened the historiographic field and opened the way for a revision of older explanations. However, the period preceding mass migration has not received similar attention. But early migration could have a strong conditioning effect on the patterns of adjustment of later immigrants in the host society. Research linking earlier migration with later mass movements is precisely what is missing in the Argentine case.

As R. Harney has pointed out for North America,<sup>1</sup> most traditional approaches on Italian emigration to Argentina have generally contrasted a more selective, professionally qualified and literate earlier migration with a later, mostly rural, unqualified and illiterate emigration. This contrast is generally explained by reference to the regional origin of the migrants (North-South). However, these differences derive largely from the different sources used by historians of the first period. Whereas historians of migrations at the end of the century have

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<sup>1</sup> R. HARNEY, *Dalla frontiera alle Little Italies*, Rome, Bonacci, 1984, pp. 42-45.

relied on sources of a quantitative or institutional nature, research on earlier migration has relied almost entirely on sources of political and/or diplomatic origin, which give a very strongly biased image of that period. All studies of early Italian migration to the River Plate, from the pioneer book by Cuneo to those more recent by Candido, Scarzanella, or Nascimbene,<sup>2</sup> are based almost exclusively on reports by the Sardinian consuls in Buenos Aires or on sources from political exiles in the River Plate.

This paper will re-examine the earlier Italian migration to Buenos Aires (1830-1870) primarily — though not exclusively — on the basis of quantitative sources and from a social and economic perspective. By analyzing the valuable and so far unexplored Buenos Aires census of 1855 and also the 1869 National Census, as well as membership records of the first Italian mutual aid society in Argentina and the census materials and conscription rolls of a commune in the former Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia, I shall outline a somewhat more complex image of the life of pioneer Italian migration in the Buenos Aires district of La Boca. This is of course a provisional sketch, which forms part of wider research in progress and is based on the analysis of a single case. Our conclusions cannot, therefore, be generalized to the earlier migration movement as a whole without further verification.

<sup>2</sup> N. CUNEO, *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana in Argentina (1810-1870)*, Milan, Garzanti, 1940; M. NASCIMBENE, *Historia de los italianos en la Argentina (1835-1920)*, Buenos Aires, CEMLA, 1986 (who in this respect follows Cuneo faithfully); S. CANDIDO, *L'emigrazione politica e di elite nelle Americhe (1810-1860)*, in F. ASSANTE (ed.), *Il movimento migratorio italiano dall'Unità nazionale ai giorni nostri*, Geneva, Droz, 1978, I, pp. 113-150; Idem, *La emigración política italiana a la América Latina (1820-1870)*, en "Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas", Cologne-Vienna, XII, 1976, pp. 217-238; E. SCARZANELLA, *Italiani d'Argentina*, Venice, Marsilio, 1983.

## Early Italian emigration to Buenos Aires

By 1855 Buenos Aires was undergoing rapid transformation. The process had already started in the later years of the long Rosas government, and accelerated after his fall, when external conflicts came to an end and the international economic conjuncture improved, two factors of key importance for the prosperity of a town that had depended for centuries on import and export trade. The former capital of the State of Buenos Aires, seceded from the Argentine Confederation in the years 1852-1862, and was quite modest in size. The census of October 1855 counted 91,395 inhabitants in Buenos Aires. But even at this early date, the city presented a singular feature: foreigners accounted for 36% of the total population and probably, a little over half the active population. This strong foreign presence, which would be reinforced in the subsequent decades, is a distinctive characteristic of the River Plate city (and of the neighboring Montevideo) among Latin American cities. Although in all the censuses effected until World War I the Italians were by and large the first numeric group among foreigners.<sup>3</sup> With 11% of the total population and 31% of foreigners, they were followed at considerable distance by the French (7% of the total population) and the Spaniards (6% of the total population).

The demographic features, occupation and territorial distribution of the Italians registered in the census contain some interesting facts. In consideration of the early phase and in comparison with other initial Italian migration flows, the Buenos Aires group already showed some stability. Despite the mythical image that the Italians were a colony formed almost entirely of men without family, of political exiles or navy deserters, there was a considerable number of Italian families in Buenos Aires in 1855. This is apparent from the relatively low male/female ratio: there were 271.6 Italian men to 100 women of that nationality

<sup>3</sup> G. BOURDE, *Urbanisation et immigration en Amérique Latine: Buenos Aires*, Paris, Aubier, 1974, pp. 190-191.

although, as we shall later see, the percentage oscillated considerably from one Buenos Aires district to another. The 10,279 Italians numbered in the census covered the most varied occupations and professions. Although they were clearly predominant among skilled and semi-skilled workers (mainly artisans and sailors), Italians were also found in trade and professions, especially as small shopkeepers. However, despite such diversification Italians were almost absent in the higher strata of Buenos Aires society: they were not found among big importers/exporters and landowners.

The territorial distribution of the Italians in the city was also unusual. Contrary to what we know about early-stage settlement in some cities along the USA East Coast,<sup>4</sup> Italians were evenly dispersed among all Buenos Aires quarters as early as 1855. As shown on Table 1, Italians were found in every Buenos Aires district, and each of the most populous districts (Montserrat, San Miguel and Barracas al Norte, in this order) contained only a little over 10% of the Italian population. The ratio of Italians to the total inhabitants per district was not at all uniform however. Italians formed 28.5% of the population in Barracas al Norte (the district where La Boca was included by 1855), but only 6.9% in Concepción, an overwhelmingly *criollo* district.

The marked territorial and occupational dispersion of Italians in Buenos Aires reflects the numerical importance of the group, but also the relative success of those pioneers in adjusting to their host society. This relative success was, in turn, a consequence of the existence of "empty" zones both in the economic tissue and in the urban space in Buenos Aires. Italians could take advantage of their early arrival (in the sequence of different

<sup>4</sup> Cf., e.g., the cases analysed by G. POZZETTA, *The Mulberry District of New York City: The Years before World War One* and R. JULIANI, *The Italian Community of Philadelphia*, both in R. HARNEY and J.V. SCARFACI (eds.), *Little Italies in North America*, Toronto, The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981, pp. 7-40 and 85-104.

Table 1  
ITALIAN NATIVES IN CENSUS DISTRICTS  
IN BUENOS AIRES (1855) (percentages)

Districts ( <i>Jurisdicció de Paz</i> )	Distribution of Italians among districts (%)	Italians as % of total population of each district
Barracas al Norte	10.7	28.7
Monserrat	12.5	9.3
San Miguel	11.1	13.0
Catedral al Norte	9.6	12.6
Catedral al Sur	8.3	8.1
San Nicolás	7.7	12.2
Concepción	6.6	6.9
La Piedad	7.5	12.0
Socorro	6.4	11.0
Balvanera	6.1	10.4
San Telmo	9.3	18.4
Pilar	2.4	7.2
No data	1.8	—
(N)	100 (10.279)	— (10.094)
Average	8.3	11.2

Source: *Registro Estadístico de Buenos Aires*.

groups of migrants) and place themselves in positions not exclusively marginal in the Buenos Aires society.

Their social status, however, did not lack ambiguity. This is evident from the uneven occupational structure shown in the censuses, as well as in the opinions of contemporaries concerning the prestige and wealth of the group. Although a few Italians had reached a social position which enabled them to establish strong links (even by marriage) with some of the most prominent families of the Buenos Aires *élite*.<sup>5</sup> It is nonetheless true that when diverting their eyes from those few lucky businessmen to the bulk of Italians living in Buenos Aires, the views of promin-

<sup>5</sup> T. HALPERIN DONGHI, *La integración de los inmigrantes italianos en Argentina. Un comentario*, in F. DEVOTO and G.F. ROSOLI (eds.), *La inmigración italiana en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Biblos, 1985, p. 90.

ent members of the local elites were unfavourable. Miguel Cané, for example — while commenting on the Italian situation in a Buenos Aires paper — described popular classes in Liguria as “wilder than the wild inhabitants of the Pampas”.<sup>6</sup> It is unnecessary to recall here that the Italian colony in Buenos Aires consisted mainly of these popular classes. The limited social success achieved by Italians is also apparent when we consider their position not in itself or relative to Italians in other parts of the world but in relation to other Europeans living in Buenos Aires. Thus, M.G. and E.T. Mulhall<sup>7</sup> place Italians last among the Europeans — preceding only Latin Americans (Bolivians and Chileans) — in an imaginary social hierarchy of foreigners in Buenos Aires in their guide to Buenos Aires in the late 1860s.

These contradictory images of Italians in Buenos Aires were destined to survive and in time establish a dualistic vision of the Italians, with a small number of high-level professionals, successful businessmen and political exiles contrasting with a much greater number of manual and low non-manual workers. The Argentine *élite* thus drew a distinction between “foreigner” and “immigrant” that would be later on consecrated juridically in the immigration and colonization law.<sup>8</sup> But many historians of the early immigration have also concentrated on the first of these groups, leaving the second one in the darkness.

The Italians living in Buenos Aires in 1855 came from all over Italy. Unfortunately, although the census includes that crucial question on the town of origin, the information was not always written down by the officers in charge of filling in the census bills; thus it is not possible to determine precisely the rela-

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by N. Cuneo, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

<sup>7</sup> M. G. and E. T. MULHALL, *Handbook of the River Plate*, Buenos Aires, The Standard, 1869, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> The 1876 Immigration and Colonisation Law defined an immigrant in ways that associated relative poverty with the condition of foreigner, thus article 12 states; “Repútase inmigrante para los efectos de esta ley, a todo extranjero (who)... llegase a la república para establecerse en ella, en buques a vapor o vela, pagando pasaje de segunda o tercera clase, o teniendo el viaje pagado por cuenta de la Nación...”

tive weight of the different Italian regions. A complementary source is the membership registers of the first mutual aid society, *Unione e Benevolenza* that was formed a few years later (1858-1862). A sample of the total 2634 members<sup>9</sup> reveals a high percentage of immigrants from Liguria (63%), followed at a distance by those from Lombardy (16%) (mainly from the Como area), Piedmont (8%), Sicily (2,5%), etc. These are only very approximate figures, since, as we have pointed out,<sup>10</sup> migrants from Northern Italy were generally overrepresented and Southerners under-represented in Italian mutual aid societies, as compared to the total number of Italians from every region in Argentina.

We have been speaking of Italians in Argentina, although Italy did not yet exist as a political entity. However, Argentine census officers considered the natives of all preunity states as Italians. This may have reflected the ideas of the Argentine élite influenced by the patriotic ideals of *Risorgimento* and the national self-awareness of the Italians themselves. Yet other Argentine as well as Italian sources suggest that such consciousness was more contradictory and was probably limited to certain social strata. Most migrant workers gave their origin as the *paese* or region, certainly never to a pre-existing national State. The consul from the most prominent among those States — the Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia — bitterly resented the utter indifference shown by most Ligurians towards his investiture.<sup>11</sup> The question of an Italian identity is certainly more complex. The Italian nation was a vivid ideal at least among intellectuals, republican exiles and a considerable part of the middle-class non-manual sectors living in the River Plate. The creation of in-

<sup>9</sup> A systematic random sample of 20% of members (527) was taken. Regarding the characteristics of the membership register and its representativeness see also the Appendix.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> E. PICOLET D'HERMILLON, *Rapporti del* 3 July 1836, 30 January 1838 and 25 September 1839 in Archivio di Stato di Torino (AST), Consolati Nazionali, Buenos Aires (1835-1861), mazzo I.

stitutions such as *Unione e Benevolenza*, which brought together people of Italian culture and language from different regions (including Italian Switzerland), or institutions such as the Committee for the building of the Italian Hospital established in 1853, reflect the political ambitions of those groups. But it is doubtful whether the Italian *élite* in Buenos Aires would have been able in the 1850s to impose on emigrated workers its own myths and symbols articulating an ethnic-national identity. More than a decade was still necessary for the joint efforts of the new Italian State and the emigrated *élite* (through a network of ethnic institutions) to breed an Italian national identity among emigrants in Argentina. An identity that would, on the other hand, be always coloured by regionalism, *campanilism* and family loyalties.

To summarize it is evident that the idea of a community which included all Italians in Buenos Aires in the 1850s is hardly sustainable. The establishment of the leadership of a small group of Italians over the rest of the Italians living in Buenos Aires was at an easy stage, and it would not be inadequate to describe this stage as proto-communitary. If this is correct, we must lower our field of observation to examine other social networks on the life of the Italians in Buenos Aires. A microhistorical study of the Ligurian emigrants in La Boca might throw a clearer light on the socio-economic processes involved in the early Italian migration than a study of global inadequately aggregated data would permit.

### A case study: Ligurians in La Boca

La Boca was less than 2 km away from downtown Plaza de la Victoria (today Plaza de Mayo), in the southeast of Buenos Aires, where a small tributary (Riachuelo) joins the River Plate. Though references can be found to some naval activities (shipping and probably smuggling) from the late XVIII century, set-

tled occupations date from the 1820s.<sup>12</sup> The area remained marginal within the city and was — yesterday as today — a place chosen by immigrants — first from Europe, later from neighboring countries — to settle down, mainly because of low land and rental prices. La Boca was an important centre for small shipping, since the Riachuelo was the only coastal site near the city for anchoring and repairing shallow draft ships. As a result La Boca became a centre for commercial and artisan activities linked to river navigation from the time of Rosas. At the same time, la Boca presented some disadvantages: it was subject to recurrent floods, which influenced the value of properties, and was reputed still very unhealthy in the second half of the XIX century on account of effluent from the Riachuelo, where all meat-curing factories along the river poured their waste.<sup>13</sup>

In 1855, La Boca was still isolated from the western quarters of the district as well as from the downtown area. An area of barren ground cut La Boca off from the former, and part of the road to San Telmo — the *Camino Nuevo* — became impracticable during rainy times. Over 10 years were still to pass before the road was elevated and a railway built to permit regular communication between the city's main Plaza and the quarter. But in 1855, the date of the census on which our analysis is based, not only was La Boca isolated — the first regular coach to run in periods when roads were practicable started only in 1856 — but the neighbourhood also lacked the institutions common to other city quarters: there was in it no city council delegation, no post office, no church — churchgoers had to walk a long way to San Telmo — nor any other formal, voluntary association known to us.<sup>14</sup> The few existing streets — if we dare call them

<sup>12</sup> A. BUCICH, *La Boca del Riachuelo en la Historia*, Buenos Aires, Asociación Amigos de la Escuela Museo de Bellas de la Boca, 1971; Idem, *El barrio de la Boca*, Buenos Aires, Cuadernos de la Municipalidad, 1970.

<sup>13</sup> A. ISABELLE, *Voyage à Buenos Aires et à Porto Alegre*, Le Havre, Impr. J. Mor-kent, 1835; X. MARMIER, *Lettres sur l'Amérique*, Paris, Bertrand Ed., 1850; *Los saladeros, el riachuelo y la fiebre amarilla*, Buenos Aires, Imp. del Porvenir, 1871.

<sup>14</sup> El Avisador, *Guía General de Comercio y de forasteros*, published by W. Sil-

so — had no official name, the State was present only in the figure of the Port Captain.<sup>15</sup> Shops and *pulperias* were the only places in the quarter offering its 1500 inhabitants an opportunity for social life.

In 1855 La Boca was one of the two population centres within the Barracas al Norte district. Whereas the other one, the higher land on the West side, was inhabited by long-standing native residents and some more recent groups of Irish and French Basques, the majority of Italians in the district were concentrated in La Boca. Italians — at least those still living there when the census took place — arrived at La Boca in the early 1830s (others perhaps earlier). If the proportion of Italians to the total inhabitants was higher in Barracas al Norte than in any other district, the percentage was even higher in La Boca: 42,5% of the inhabitants of the quarter (53% including Argentine children still living with both of their Italian parents). High as this percentage may seem, it is lower than one would expect, were one to judge by the opinions of contemporary observers — especially the Italians — who believed the early population of La Boca consisted almost exclusively of Italians.<sup>16</sup> The discrepancy between the image given by so many authors and the actual census figures must be attributed to the weight Italians had in the quarter beyond strictly quantitative considerations. Through a process we know very little about, and which was certainly not free from conflicts,<sup>17</sup> Italians were able to exert

veyra, Buenos Aires, Imp. El Nacional, 1862; *The River Plate Hand-Book, Guide, Directory and Almanac for 1863*, Buenos Aires, The Editors of The Standard, 1863; J. E. BELZA, *En la Boca del Riachuelo*, Buenos Aires, Libreria Don Bosco, 1958.

<sup>15</sup> A. BUCICH, *Origen y evolución de la nomenclatura boquense*, Buenos Aires, Archivo y Seminario de Historia de la Boca del Riachuelo, 1968; A. TAULLARD *Los planos más antiguos de Buenos Aires (1580-1880)*, Buenos Aires, Peuser 1940.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., C. BELLOC, *Rapporto sul commercio sardo colla Confederazione Argentina e la Banda Orientale (Sud America)*, 10 February 1851, in AST, Consolati Nazionali, Buenos Aires (1835-1851), mazzo I.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. outrage inflicted by a local group to a "povero suddito sardo" in La Boca, M. Cerruti to Lorenzo Torres (draft), 11 august 1853, in Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASMAE), Segreteria di Stato de A. E., Regno Sardegna,

control over the economic and social life of La Boca, and so to mould the peculiar physiognomy of the neighbourhood that impressed visitors so vividly. This explains why in a city where fifty years later (1904) Italians were still as many as 24% of the total population, were found in all districts and amounted in many of them to over 30% of the population,<sup>18</sup> la Boca was seen by contemporaries as the major Italian neighbourhood in Buenos Aires. La Boca was the Little Italy or, more precisely, the Little Liguria of the River Plate, in whose streets, by the end of the XIX century, Argentinians, Italians and other foreigners communicated basically in Genoese dialect.<sup>19</sup> The use of this dialect was the pinnacle of a process towards successful leadership by the Ligurians that had begun around the mid XIX century.

Ligurians were in fact 94% of all 652 Italians registered in La Boca in the 1855 census (see Table 2). Almost all of them came from the Ligurian coast and were part of a wider movement affecting Liguria at least since the early XIX century. Ligurians had emigrated in regular numbers from much earlier dates, to neighbouring France and the West Mediterranean in the first place, and later on to various destinations in South America and, in very small numbers, also to some North American cities, mostly in the East Coast.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes these places were reached after reemigration from the originally chosen destination. La Boca seems to have been a centre for such secondary movements. Migrants came there after several years in Brazil or Uruguay, others changed to new destinations such as San Francisco (California).<sup>21</sup> In the initial stage, Ligurians were pushed to emi-

Serie Prima, Buenos Aires (1857-1861), b. 252. Any the representative of isolated conflicts cannot be easily established.

<sup>18</sup> S. BAILY, *Patrones de residencia de los italianos en Buenos Aires y Nueva York; 1880-1914*, in "Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos," I, 1 Diciembre 1985, pp. 11-21.

<sup>19</sup> A. BUCICH, *La Boca del Riachuelo...*, p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> R. HARNEY and J. V. SCARPACI, *op. cit.*, passim.

<sup>21</sup> D. CINEL, *From Italy to San Francisco, The immigrant experience*, Stanford, University Press, 1982.

Table 2  
REGIONAL ORIGIN AND SELECTED COMMUNES  
OF ITALIANS IN LA BOCA (1855)

Commune/Region	N	%
Genoa	143	25.6
Varazze	129	23.1
Recco	76	13.6
Sestri L.	25	4.5
Others	154	27.5
<b>Total Liguria</b>	<b>527</b>	<b>94.3</b>
Sicily	12	2.1
Piedmont	12	2.1
Lombardy	8	1.5
<b>Total Italy</b>	<b>559</b>	<b>100</b>
No data/unidentified	93	—

Source: Census forms, Census of 1855 (Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires).

grate by a decaying small, home-based industry, by a progressive weakening of smaller coastal trading centres (closely linked to primary activity) and — in particular for those going to La Boca — by the crisis of commercial sail-navigation and the related, small naval industry.<sup>22</sup> Just as with any other pioneer migration, the maritime location of the places of emigration and the information network available through traditional sailors connections favoured the process.<sup>23</sup> Except for Genoa, where probably natives from the city and the province were mixed indiscriminately most Ligurians living in La Boca in 1855 came from two small coastal towns facing similar structural difficulties: Varazze and Recco. Varazze (ca. 8.000 people in 1858) lay

<sup>22</sup> M. G. MARENCO, *L'emigrazione Ligure nell'economia della Nazione*, San Pier d'Arena, Don Bosco, ch. V; G. DORIA, *Investimenti e sviluppo economico a Genova alla vigilia della prima guerra mondiale* Milan, Giuffrè, 1969, I, (*Le premesse*: 1815-1882).

<sup>23</sup> For pioneer European immigration to Australia C. Price underlines the great importance of migrants from coastal cities. Price linked this to their easier access to information about other places. See C. PRICE, *Southern Europeans in Australia*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 123.

35 km West of Genoa, Recco (ca. 5.000 inhabitants in 1858), 23 km eastwards.

The number of natives of each individual Ligurian village in La Boca bore no relation with the total number of natives of the same villages in all Buenos Aires and, more significantly the proportion was in some cases inverse. The evidence comes from two examples in the membership registers of *Unione e Benevolenza* (1858-1862). Among the members of this institution, 92% of all natives of Varazze lived in La Boca, but only 3% of the natives of Chiavari — another town traditionally linked to the naval industry and undergoing a similar crisis. This can easily be explained through migration mechanisms and their influence in the process of adjustment to the local society. It is not so easy to explain, however, why migrants from Varazze showed such a high concentration in their patterns of settlement and, conversely, why those from Chiavari were so widely dispersed in the central districts of the city at such an early date.<sup>24</sup>

An analysis of the occupations of the Italians in La Boca reveals greater homogeneity (see table 3) and a greater concentration in medium-low and low social strata than for all other Italians in Buenos Aires. 75% of Italians in Barracas al Norte (including La Boca) were illiterate, compared to only 43% of Italians in the Catedral al Sur district. We shall not find, therefore, those Italians in a position to hobnob with the Buenos Aires *élite*: those big traders and reputed professionals so often referred to by qualitative sources. Only two low-level professionals (a teacher and an apothecary) and a mass of small shopkeepers, shipmasters and shipbuilders were registered in La Boca; they would provide the future Italian leadership to the quarter. But at this early date there is no sign of the political and economical leadership which would later recruit its members either among the emigré bourgeoisie or from the one emerging in the new

<sup>24</sup> Explanations can be found mainly in the differences in migration mechanisms between the two cases. However, occupational variation as well as relative date of settlement of each group in Buenos Aires should also be considered.

Table 3  
 OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORIES AND SELECTED OCCUPATIONS  
 OF ITALIAN MALES OVER 14 YEARS (La Boca, 1855)

Category	N.	%	Selected occupations	N.
Unskilled	29			
Skilled and Semi-skilled	257		sailors	49
			shipwrights	43
			carpenters (unspecified)	42
			shoemakers	28
			calkers	24
			sawers	15
Total manual	286	78.3		
Low nonmanual and unspecified nonmanual	62		salesmans ( <i>dependiente, corredor</i> )	14
			barkkeepers, shopkeepers, grocers ( <i>almacenero, pulpero, bolichero</i> )	20
			shipmasters	17
Middle nonmanual	9		shipbuilder	8
Low professional	2			
Total non manual	73	20.0		
Others	6	1.7		
Total	365	100		
No data	14	—		

Source: *Ibid.*, table 2.

land. La Boca being a quarter based upon navigation, most commercial activities and professions were related to fluvial trade and to an emergent naval industry (shipwrights, caulkers, sailors), to house building (mostly in wood, since there were practically no brick houses in La Boca), and retail trade.

The importance of economic activities directly or indirectly connected with river navigation and trade clearly reflects the preponderance Ligurians had reached in those particular sectors of economic activity. The process through which, in the second quarter of the XIX century Ligurians took over control of small river navigation and the activities related with it is unfortunately not well known. It has recently been suggested<sup>25</sup> that the dis-

<sup>25</sup> Prof. Chiaramonte has highlighted the distortion of the figures given by Italian diplomats with respect to Ligurians in river navigation by comparing them with more

placement of natives might have not been as absolute as contemporaries had imagined; yet the process itself was not void of meaningful features. It is possible that a greater technical ability added to the advantage of being a foreigner at a time when Argentine shores were permanently subject to civil wars may explain the success the Ligurians achieved so quickly. Anyway, in this period the Genoese controlled an important part of the internal naval trade and even a small part of the international one since they gained some predominance in supplying Buenos Aires and other towns in the River Plate with commodities.<sup>26</sup> In a similar way Ligurians seem to have also displaced other groups in the construction and repair of small boats. Thus small colonies of Ligurian artisans, sailors and traders, linked to one another by family or commercial bonds, settled not only in La Boca and Montevideo, but also in small towns along the inland rivers: San Nicolás, Paraná, Goya, Corrientes, Paysandú, etc.<sup>27</sup>

The 1855 census also provides basic demographic information on the Italians living in La Boca areas. Sex ratios in particular differed widely from general data for all Buenos Aires. Whereas there were 271.6 Italian men to every 100 women in 1855, in La Boca the ratio was reduced to 189.7: 100. This ratio was moreover, very low when compared to those for Ligurian emigration,<sup>28</sup> for later Italian emigration taken as a whole (365.0

plausible calculations based on the nationality of the masters of river boats entering Parana between 1843-53. Anyway there was a conspicuous Italian presence: about one third of the 300 cases considered. J. C. CHIARAMONTE, *Notas sobre la presencia italiana en el Rio de la Plata en la primera mitad del siglo XIX*, paper present before the Conference; "Argentina e Italia: a la búsqueda de las comunes raíces Buenos Aires", september 1986.

<sup>26</sup> W. PARISH, *Buenos Aires y las Provincias del Rio de la Plata (con notas y apuntes de J. Maeso)*, Buenos Aires, Hachette, 1958, p. 519.

<sup>27</sup> A 1852 report listed 88 subjects of the Kingdom of Sardinia (74 men and 14 women in the city of Corrientes, 95% of them Genoese. Most of them (37) were shopkeepers (*comerciantes*); others were shipmasters (9), shipbuilders (5 carpenters and shipwrights (5). RAFAEL GALLINO, *Razón de los súbditos sardos residentes en la ciudad de Corrientes*, 5 december 1852, in ASMAE, Segreteria di Stato degli A.E., Regno Sardegna, Serie Prima, Buenos Aires (1857-1861), b. 252.

<sup>28</sup> G. FELLONI, *op. cit.*, ch. IV.

for the period 1876-1930) and with the yearly figures — with some exceptions towards the end of the period and during the war —<sup>29</sup> for Italian mass migration into Argentina during 1880-1930, (except for the years 1890-1894 when the ratio was 264 men to every 100 women<sup>30</sup>). But these indexes are too aggregated and we would need to be able to compare more restricted areas in order to draw firm conclusions. However, this ratio again points to the early presence of a strong family migration stream, contrary to the conventional image of Buenos Aires and to what we know about the early days of North American Little Italies.<sup>31</sup>

Other data provide us with more direct confirmation of the high proportion of families. If we compare the number of Italian immigrants over 16 years old living with their family (368) to those living separated from it (152), we find that 71% belonged to the first group.<sup>32</sup> The percentage was obviously higher among women than among men, but, even among the latter, the predominance of adults living with their family is notable (Table 4). Finally, it is interesting to point out that in cases (154) where the census permits us to establish the moment when marriage between Italians or between an Italian and a non-Italian took place, 73% of such marriages had taken place before emigrating to Argentina and only 27% after arrival. 60% of those 73% Italian couples had probably come together from Italy, while the remaining 40% emigrated at different dates and married couples re-united after some time in Buenos Aires. This proportion of married couples who emigrated is also apparent in their choice

<sup>29</sup> G. F. ROSOLI (ed.), *Un secolo di emigrazione italiana 1876-1976*, Roma, CSER, 1978, Appendix.

<sup>30</sup> M. C. CACOPARDO and J. L. MORENO, *Características regionales, demográficas y ocupacionales de la inmigración italiana a la Argentina (1880-1930)*, in F. DEVOTO and G. F. ROSOLI (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 70-74.

<sup>31</sup> R. HARNEY, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> To define the family structure in a household, the criteria used by P. Laslett has been adopted. See P. LASLETT, *La famille et le ménage*, in "Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations" XXVII, n. 4-5, 1972, pp. 847-872.

Table 4  
FAMILY SITUATION OF ITALIANS OVER 16 YEARS  
(La Boca, 1855)

	Males	Females	Total
Living with their family	208 (58.5%)	160 (97.5%)	368 (71%)
Living without t. family	148 (41.5%)	4 (2.5%)	152 (29%)
Total	356 (100%)	164 (100%)	520 (100%)
N.d.	5 —	1 —	6 —

Source: *Ibid.*, Table 2.

of a spouse: 77% of married Italians living in la Boca were married to someone from the same *paese*.

When we compare the social and demographic features of the Italians in la Boca with the Italians in Buenos Aires as a whole, some clear differences can be detected. These differences, however, rather than offering contradictory visions of the early emigration, reveal their essential features. Italian emigration in La Boca was socially and regionally more homogeneous, and showed greater stability (in connexion with the greater number of families) and greater internal social cohesiveness along *paese* lines that will be analyzed later. In this respect, the image of Italians in the La Boca quarter that emerges from our sources is different from that model of spontaneous, impersonal and inorganic emigration that has been deducted from qualitative sources and has had so much influence upon the historians' interpretation of the earlier period. The features we have found in early Italian migration to La Boca correspond, on the contrary, to patterns of settlement as well as demographic and occupational patterns which are typical for chain migration.

The concept of "chain migration" proposed over 20 years ago by Australian demographers and anthropologists such as C. Price and J. and L. MacDonald was part of a broader attempt to pull research on migration out of the alley it had been driven into by global approaches and the debate on pull/push factors.

It was and it is an attempt to regard immigrants not as inert masses drawn by the fluctuations of capitalism, but as active subjects able to plan their own survival and adjustment strategies in contexts of macro-structural change. These strategies were limited no doubt by those of other social actors, but the concept of the chain stresses the role played in the migration process — even within certain limits — by the family and other social groups. Challenging more traditional interpretations centred either in the individual dimension of migration or in the determination of migrants by social forces or economic interests, the chain concept emphasized that solidarity and cooperation among migrants provides the central explanation of migration mechanisms and patterns of adjustment of immigrants to the host society. Though the concept has been subject to many debates not directly concerning the specific topic of this paper,<sup>33</sup> chain migration can be defined as that mechanism through which future migrants get to know the existing opportunities, are provided with transportation and obtain their initial lodging and employment through primary social relations with emigrants preceding them.<sup>34</sup> Thus the concept of a chain is derived, somewhat unilaterally, from the contrast between personal relations and impersonal, spontaneous mechanisms, stressing the role played by friends, neighbours and relatives in the network of exchanges established between a *paese* of origin and a place of destination. This network of relations will have decisive influence on the decision to emigrate, the choice of destination

<sup>33</sup> C. PRICE, *op. cit.*, J. S. and L. MACDONALD, *Chain Migration, Ethnic Neighborhood Formation and Social Networks*, in "The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly XLII, 1, January 1964, pp. 82-96; R. HARNEY, *op. cit.*, ch. II; F. STURINO, *Inside the chain: a case study in Southern Italian Migration to North America (1880-1930)*, Ph. D. Tesis, Department of Educational Theory, University of Toronto, 1981; V. Y. McLAUGHLIN, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants of Buffalo, 1880-1930*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977; J. ZUCCHI, *Precursors of the "New Emigration": Italian Street Musicians 1815-1930*, paper presented to the meeting "A Century of European Migrations, 1830-1930: Comparative Perspectives," Minneapolis, November 1986.

<sup>34</sup> J. S. and L. MACDONALD, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

and, by strongly conditioning the patterns of settlement and employment of the newly arrived, also the initial adjustment to the host society.

Following the pioneering essay by S. Baily,<sup>35</sup> several papers on chain migration in Argentina have been published recently. Unfortunately they all concentrate on the period of mass migration. Generally speaking — and this point has not been emphasized sufficiently — chain migration is just one among several migration mechanisms operating in the Argentine case, and it is hard to establish at the present stage the extent of this particular mechanism.<sup>36</sup> It is very likely, however, that, contrary to many general models used for analyzing other experiences, we may find that, as we discover more about the early stages of migration, a broader, more autonomous role of the chain mechanism results. Everything suggests that in the early migration period, personal chain movements were not subject to the competition of either public policy fostering migration, private colonization programmes or “migration trade” mechanisms. At a time when migration agents and *padroni* were not yet active nor had steamship lines developed greater interest in the subject, the social network of primary relations could lead and control the process independently. Nevertheless, how ever widespread that chain mechanism might be for early Italian migration to Buenos Aires, it was far from being exclusive, as can be inferred from the previously described patterns of settlement and employment of migrants from Chiavari, which were very different from those resulting of chain migration.

Early Italian migration to La Boca indicates the presence of several migration networks that were established simultaneously between the Ligurian coast and the new settlement in Buenos Aires. We know nothing, however, about the previous informa-

<sup>35</sup> S. BAILY, *Chain migration of Italians to Argentina: case studies of the Agnonesi and the Sirolesi*, in “Studi Emigrazione,” XIX, n. 65, march 1982, pp. 73-90.

<sup>36</sup> F. DEVOTO, *Las cadenas migratorias italianas: algunas reflexiones a la luz del caso argentino*, “Studi Emigrazione,” XXIV, n. 87, autumn 1987, pp. 355-373.

tion network that must have been established between both places to set the migration chain in motion. An important role might have been played by Ligurian sailors — whether deserters or not — serving on the Buenos Aires-Genoa route which was in full expansion after 1820 as Sardinian traders took over part of the Spanish trade to the River Plate after the Independence wars.

A more detailed analysis of one of the existing chain migrations in La Boca may help establish the various features of the migration mechanism. The chain migration operating between Varazze and La Boca was one of the oldest and the most active. The 129 Italians from Varazze living in La Boca in 1855 had reached the country during the preceding 23 years and showed strong residential and occupational concentration. As already indicated, over 90% of the inhabitants of that *paese*, who were at the same time members of *Unione e Benevolenza*, lived in La Boca and almost all of them settled in a narrow cluster in the central portion of the *Calle de la Ribera* (today Pedro de Mendoza street), between housing units 61-104. They were occupationally concentrated (85%) in activities related to navigation: shipwrights (47% of male adults), caulkers (11%), shipmasters (8%), shipbuilders (8%) and sailors (8%). This was a stable migration consisting basically of families that had come to Buenos Aires either together or separately.

Buenos Aires was not the only destination for the many chains established at early dates by the Varazze inhabitants. As far as we know, since the late XVIII century they had emigrated, to different points in the West Mediterranean. A list — probably incomplete — of people from the *paese* residing abroad dating from 1808<sup>37</sup> counted as many as 94 emigrants. Almost half of them were peasants; three quarters of them had gone to the Iberian Peninsula, mainly Gibraltar (42%) and Cadiz (20%). Unfortunately the City Council Archives in

<sup>37</sup> Archivio Comunale di Varazze (ACV), XIII, b. 407, f. 3.

Varazze do not contain emigration records for the first half of the XIX century, so we have had to use instead the levy rolls made out yearly by every commune and listing all young men in the commune reaching 18 years of age.<sup>38</sup> Those lists included the name of those absent at the time of preparing the roll, the reasons for their absence and the place where they were at that time. Though these rolls are of little use for quantitative research inasmuch as they concern only young men aged 18 or under, they are more helpful and reliable — because of the homogeneity of the source — to detect and ponder the directions of migratory flow. Two clearly distinct emigration periods can be recognized in Varazze in the first half of the XIX century, differing in places of destination and partly also in social structure. During the first period, 1809-1828, over 80% of emigrants continued to go to Gibraltar; most of them were fishermen, a smaller number sailors and peasants. In the following 20 years (1829-1848), coinciding with the development of the movement towards the River Plate, the flow towards the Iberian Peninsula faded out and, destinations in the Americas drew the majority of emigrants (60%). North Africa (Algolia and Oran) followed at a considerable distance (21%). Changes in destination coincided with variations in occupation of the migrants: these were again mostly peasants (44%), but this time — for the first time — they were accompanied by a conspicuous number of urban artisans from naval industries (28%).<sup>39</sup> When disaggregating occupations by destination, it becomes apparent that whereas the River Plate attracted almost all the artisans driven out by the crisis of the Ligurian shipping industry, other places in the Americas and the Mediterranean absorbed the rural emigrants. Groups of migrants of peasant origin from Varazze can be found in Peru, Brazil and Venezuela especially from the late 1840s and the early 1850s. But from the mid-1850s the relatively

<sup>38</sup> ACV, VIII, b. 312-316. For an analysis of their characteristics, cf. Appendix.

<sup>39</sup> These percentages are only informative, since profession and emigration date are unknown in many cases.

successful insertion of people from Varazze in the River Plate countries turned the latter into the principal destination for future migrants of the commune. Information on the overall composition of legal emigration from Varazze is available from 1854. 70% of a total of 1214 emigrants for the decade 1854-1863 made their way to the River Plate. These migrants were still mainly peasants (39%), sailors (29%) and fishermen (10%), while urban artisans were again very scarce.<sup>40</sup>

How can the considerable variations in the migratory flows out of Varazze during the period under study be explained? Unfortunately we know too little about the way local and regional labour markets operated at those early stages to be able to give positive answers. It seems necessary however to distinguish — at least during the first half of the XIX century — urban and maritime from rural emigration. Each of these flows had its own rhythms and can be explained in terms that are partly independent from one another. Rural emigration can be more clearly related to structural difficulties, which in turn may explain why it maintained relatively high levels throughout the period. Rapid population growth (Varazze rose from 4932 inhabitants in 1806 to 8451 in 1848<sup>41</sup>), the extreme fragmentation of property and the lack of technological capacity resulting in low yields, meant that rural emigration from Varazze was pushed abroad by the same forces that affected the whole Ligurian emigration. Urban emigration was linked in almost every case to maritime activities (shipping, fisheries, sailing) and was more sensitive to sudden oscillations caused by local conditions. There were some cases of irreversible — though not linear — decay in some of these those sectors, such as shipbuilding during the XIX century. The substitution of timber by iron in shipbuilding was the main cause of the decline of Varazze shipyards in the XIX century,

<sup>40</sup> G. ALBEZZANO, *L'economia e la popolazione di Varazze nel secolo XIX*, Tesi di Laurea, Facoltà di Economia e Commercio, University of Genoa, Genoa, 1976-77, tables 14-15-16.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85-88.

although there had been an expansion of this industry in the first three decades of the XIX century, when both the number of shipyards and of men employed increased. The first crisis came in the 1830s, and the shipyards decreased from 24 to 13 between 1831-1836, just when alternative possibilities were developing in the River Plate. In the late 1840s the tonnage built<sup>42</sup> indicates a certain recovery, and the emigration of naval artisans fell again to minimum levels (under 1% in 1854-63). But although after the Unification the crisis in the naval industry became irreversible, the expansion of other urban industries in the 1870s seems to have absorbed an important part of these workers.

The exchange of information between the different emigration chains in such a small community must have influenced both urban and rural flows, which initially were directed towards different external markets, and caused them to converge on a common destination. This can be clearly seen in the River Plate: peasants who in the first half of the XIX century emigrated to other destinations, after the mid — 1850s began to move towards the River Plate — some of them even to La Boca — where they took up work in the naval industry or local activities related to navigation.<sup>43</sup> The Varazze case shows the extent to which local factors can distort migratory flows and thus frustrate our attempts to understand their patterns simply on the basis of macrostructural explanations based on very generalized data. It also shows that a local migration stream can operate simultaneously towards different destinations. The case of

<sup>42</sup> G. FAZIO, *Varazze e il suo distretto*, Genoa, Tip. della Gioventù, 1867, p. 96. About urban industry in Varazze, see also: G. PETRACCO SICARDI and A. REGAZZONI, *Un'officina del ferro a Varazze*, in L. COVERI and D. MORENO (eds.), *Studi di etnografia e dialettologia ligure in Memoria di Hugo Plontoux*, SAGEP ed., s.a., pp. 141-148; G. ALBEZZANO, *Innovazione e arretratezza delle industrie varazzine nel secolo XIX*, in "Liguria," a. 54, n. 8-9, september 1987, pp. 25-28; B. T. DELFINO, *Varagine, Varazze*, Sabatelli ed., 1983.

<sup>43</sup> This process can be at least partially followed by comparing professions indicated in the Italian Census of 1848 and 1857 for Varazze and in the 1855 Buenos Aires Census and 1869 National Census for La Boca.

Varazze reveals the existence of alternative flows alongside a prevailing mainstream; and it is the existence of options such as these that enables us to think of chain migrations as strategies that were developed with a certain degree of autonomy (at least in the earlier stages) by the emigrants themselves.

The importance of family-based strategies is best seen by studying individual cases. The history of the oldest family group that emigrated to La Boca from Varazze (among those present in the 1855 census) is in a way typical.<sup>44</sup> Bartolo Vallarino had emigrated to Buenos Aires in 1832 together with his elder son, then 10 years old and later a shipwright like his father. Father and son must have done rather well, since two years later the female members of the family — Bartolo's wife and daughter — joined them. Three years later (1837) a nephew and a niece — Lorenzo and Giacinta Vallarino, children of Bartolo's brother Giuseppe — reached La Boca. Lorenzo, the elder, was only 14 at the time of his arrival and became, like his uncle, a shipwright. We can trace the Vallarinos in 1839 to a small town in the Paraná riverside, San Nicolás de los Arroyos, where a son was born to the couple. In 1841 they were back in La Boca, where four other children were eventually born to them. Another brother of Bartolo's, Lorenzo, arrived at La Boca in 1850. Lorenzo lived with Bartolo and set up a greengrocer shop. Finally, two further sons of Giuseppe — Vincenzo, a storekeeper, and Antonio, also shipwright — arrived in 1852. Several second generation Vallarinos were to marry natives of Varazze in La Boca. Significantly, Bartolo's father was married to a Baglietto, and a daughter and a niece living in La Boca also married two young Varazze men bearing that name, although we cannot be certain of any kinship between them. One of those married

<sup>44</sup> This little family history has been reconstructed on the basis of the following sources: Archivo General de la Nación (A.G.N.) (Buenos Aires, Argentina), Census of 1855, (*Cédulas Censales*, Barracas al Norte); ACV, XII, b. 383 (*Registro della popolazione locale secondo lo stato del 31/XII/1857*); Archivio Parrocchia San Ambrogio (Varazze), Atti di Nascita (1811-1837); AGN (Buenos Aires). Censo Nacional de 1869, *Cédulas Censales*, Buenos Aires, sección 20 (La Boca).

couples — his daughter Maddalena and Domenico Baglietto, also a carpenter — lived (at least between 1857-59) in Asuncion del Paraguay, where two children were born to them.

What does this story of this single family reconstructed on the basis of census and parochial data in Varazze and Buenos Aires reveal? In the first place, that there were strong kinship links among emigrants from Varazze. Unfortunately these inter-relations are not always apparent, because the census criteria were based on family groups living in the same housing unit. For example, all the Vallarinos living in La Boca in 1855 were in 3 dwellings that were relatively distant from one another, but had a close family relationship to one another and all of them but two had the same occupation. Secondly, we see that the Varazze migration chains operated on a broad social space along the Paraná-River Plate axis, where members of the chain circulated temporarily. In the third place, except for temporary changes, the group residing in La Boca experienced great stability. Bartolo Vallarino and his wife, as well as most of their children and in-laws still lived in La Boca when the 1869 National Census was effected. Like Ligurian families, including more prosperous ones like the Amigos or the Cicheros, they chose to stay in the quarter in spite of the evident disadvantages. This might be a result of their economic activity but there was also a strong attachment to the new living space reconstructed by migrants and to the network of family or *paesani* social relationships that developed in it. This might explain the longevity of the La Boca community as well other Italian ethnic enclaves.

Finally, these observations suggest in which chain migration operated and about the origin of ethnic neighbourhoods. On the first question, it is clear that the Argentine case differs considerably from the model elaborated by MacDonald (and adopted later by other scholars) for the American case. The Australian scholars proposed three stages in chain migration: first a *padroni* emigration; then generally a series migration of workers without their wives assisting other migrants to do the same; finally a

migration centred in extended family, when eventually migrants bring their wives and children. The stages proposed by Mac Donald are based in the study of Southern Italian emigration to the United States but do not correspond to the Argentine case. On the contrary, chain migration seems to have developed more fully its possibilities in the initial stage, and we cannot find traces of any *padrone system* in Argentina in the earlier period. The available information on *padroni* seems to indicate that they appeared after the family-based emigration and not before it, either considering early Italian migration to La Boca or emigration from Northern Italy in the 1880s. The few examples known to us are perhaps not representative enough to make reliable comparisons, but they do call our attention to the universality of the model.

On the second question — the origin of ethnic neighbourhoods it is clear that the features of early settlement were decisive in explaining the future evolution of settlement. The astonishing and long lasting cohesiveness of the Ligurian ethnic group in La Boca in the second half of the XIXth century and first decades of the XXth and its capacity to become culturally and economically hegemonic in the quarter's life can be explained by features that were established at an early stage. In the first place, the relatively greater number of Italians in the population of the quarter; in the second place, the geographical isolation of the quarter in the early stages, which permitted an autonomous Genoese culture to develop in La Boca; in the third place, the relatively weak and late influence of the state's bureaucratic structures in the quarter's social life. It is nevertheless only the combination of all these circumstances together with the nature of the chain migration mechanism in the earlier period that can explain the initiation of an ethnic neighbourhood. As was suggested forty-five years ago,<sup>45</sup> chain migration

<sup>45</sup> C. TILLY and H. BROWN, *On Uprooting, Kinship and the Auspices of Migration*, "International Journal of Comparative Sociology," 8, 1967, pp. 139-164.

tends to delay the assimilation of migrants in the host society. Thus the strong initial cohesiveness of the Ligurian migrant group which derived from a chain migration movement reinforced by the exceptional social, economic and geographic peculiarities of La Boca, made the persistence of a small Italian neighbourhood possible in Buenos Aires at the turn of the century.

## APPENDIX

### Notes on sources

The Buenos Aires census carried out in October 1855 repeated a census made in the previous year which in the opinion of the local authorities did not prove satisfactory enough. The new edition did not overcome all difficulties, however. The major problems related to the different criteria used by census officers regarding some of the questions. For instance, not all of them wrote down the town of origin of foreigners, but some stated only the nationality. Although there were also some problems regarding general information which was only partially published, the census offers advantages when compared with later ones. It is the only one to consider the crucial question of the town of origin and to ask, furthermore, about the number of years of residence of foreigners in the country (which is useful for reconstructing migration phases) and about kinship between people living within each housing unit.

The gaps in this census concerning place of origin of Italians, as well as the many errors in the spelling of names and places in Italy, can be partially made up for using the *Registro de Socios of Unione e Benevolenza*, founded in 1858. From the list of Italian members between 1858 and 1862 (total: 2634), a systematic random sample (taking the first case at random) of 20% was taken. Although approximately every fourth Italian living in Buenos Aires at that time was a member of the institution, the use of registers of associations in Argentina is not without problems. In most registers Northern Italians as well as non-manual and qualified manual occupations are over-represented.

Cf. S. BAILY, *La sociedades de ayuda mutua y el desarrollo de una comunidad italiana en Buenos Aires, 1858-1918*, in "Desarrollo Economico", v. 21, n. 84, pp. 485-514; F. DEVOTO, *Las sociedades italianas de ayuda mutua en Buenos Aires y Santa Fe. Ideas y problemas*, in "Studi Emigrazione", a. XXI, n. 75, pp. 320-341.

The "liste di leva" were effected by communes every year to register all young men who reached 18 years of age in that year. Unfortunately in some cases, due to the age at which the individual had emigrated — or because the authorities lacked the relevant information —, the occupation and, or the place where the absentee was at that momento are missing.

We have used lists for the period 1817-1856, which included men born between 1799 and 1838. From a total 3578 names, 418 were abroad. We know the place of residence of 358 of these and the occupation of 299.

(Translated into English by Alicia Bernasconi)