

The Characteristics of Sicilian Emigration in America

Marcello Sajia (November 28, 2008)



Sicilian emigrants brought with them different cultures: communities coming from internal zones had strong feudal costumes, while communities coming from the eastern part of island shared a culture of solidarity...

The emigration is only in part explained by the famous pushing model created by the old historical analysis; in large part we have to explain it as an attraction exerted by an unknown destiny, which was in any case, better than the condition in which emigrants were living. For these reasons, in the first gallery of exhibition you'll see on the coming left the internal structural causes of emigration and on the coming right the external cultural ones, explained through the ship companies' activities and emigration agent's propaganda.

In the second gallery there is not a particular interpretative line. We tried to describe what was happening from the moment the emigrant was deciding to leave until the moment he effectively left. So you can see the usurer's activities or the role of Italian American banks and labor bosses, you can see the ritual of leaving, the bags and bauli, the Sicilian horsing cars, the trenino, the shares and concerns of the last formalities in Palermo and Messina ports, and until the living ships. In the third gallery we represented the impact of emigrants with America after Ellis Island passage. So the first experience for emigrants runs in the Little Italies of American towns: New York, Chicago, Rochester and so on. Of course was not possible to describe every place where Sicilians get, but the ones we chose are, I think, the more representative. After that, it was important for us to make another choice in order to represent the life of Sicily's derived communities in United States. Among the different ways: families scene, works and jobs, marriages and others events well-known in every representation of Sicilian Americans, we suppose that best and unusual way was to present the collection of photos and documents (belonging to the network of Sicilian museums of Emigration) on the old Sicilian association in the US, the ones well known as Mutual aid societies, or Benefit Mutual Aid societies.

This choice permits us an important historical consideration: Not every Sicilian community founded them. This behavior is very widespread in the communities coming from the costs of the island, from the small islands around the Sicily, and especially from the eastern part. Is not, instead, for the people coming from internal zone and the large estate property zones. the few we found are really an exception with specific reasons. Why this difference ? Which causes can explain this ? Maybe, another element can help us in understanding this. If we look at the official statistics of emigration from Sicily, we can realize that the large estate zone are the places where the emigration phenomenon started and just these zones support an hemorrhagic mass of leaving people since the early 80' of XIX century.

This happens because the internal zones of large estate properties, still in the late XIX century, had feudal costumes: the property is in the hands of persons (old Sicilian aristocracy) and the mafia maintains a big power in defending the aristocracy privileges. In these zone the daily land workers were selected every morning, before rising sun, on the church's square, by the Mafiosi rented aristocracy lands (today will work you, you and you, the others at home).

In this society the workers did not have hope in the future and when the season of emigration starts, left soon. They brought with them the social culture of their poor zones: They had not mutual aid societies in Sicily and not enough culture of solidarity in order to create them in the NEW WORD. Absolutely different is the culture of solidarity of Sicilian people coming from the eastern part of island, from islands and from all that zones where was prevalent the small property estate. Here the peasants, little owners, and daily land workers, were saving the hope to enlarge their small properties or became owners, in these communities run the mutual aid societies since the early '60 of XIX (Kingdom of Italy foundation) and when started the emigration season they didn't leave soon. It started to happen after the turn of century because of the diffusion of American Dream. And when they left brought with them their culture of solidarity founding soon the mutual aid societies. I think that this relevant difference can contribute to explain why in many cases some Sicilians communities had better fortune in order to integrate their members in the New word societies, and some others, instead, had much more trouble in this process.

* This text is the abstract of the paper presented by prof. Marcello Saija to the conference "Memories of the Future" (Palermo, 28-29 November 2008)



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