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ARE HOW RACE IS MADE IN AMERICA  
ITALIANS  
WHITE?

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## "NO COLOR BARRIER"

## Italians, Race, and Power in the United States

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Looking back on their and their ancestors' early immigrant experiences in America, many Italian Americans, especially since the 1970s, have prided themselves on making it in America by working hard and shunning government assistance. Examining interviews of Chicago's Italian Americans conducted in the early 1980s, I came across these views over and over again. Leonard Giuliano stated: "With determination and perseverance . . . the Italian was able to . . . pull himself up by his own bootstraps. . . . His greatest desire, of course, was for his children and his family to have a better life than he had left in Italy, but he did not expect this for nothing. He had to work." Constance Muzzacavallo agreed: "I think we've updated ourselves. I'll give the Italian 100 percent credit for that. You didn't have the government helping you." Joseph Loguidice added: "The immigrants in those days didn't have . . . the things today . . . or the help that they have today. Today is a cake walk. Everybody gets help. They didn't have no aid . . . like you have today. . . . Those people were too proud."<sup>1</sup>

These views—coming to life most forcefully during the post-1960s "backlash" years—address far more than simply the value of hard work and the proper role of the federal government; they are also deeply about race. As one Al Riccardi told an interviewer in the early 1990s, "My people had a rough time, too. But nobody gave us something, so why do we owe them [African Americans] something? Let them pull their share like the rest of us had to do."<sup>2</sup>

This essay was written, in part, as a response to Giuliano, Muzzacavallo, Loguidice, Riccardi, and the countless others who share their views. Focusing on the early years of migration and settlement—approximately 1890–1918—I am interested in Italian immigrants' hardships, hard work, and perseverance, but also in something too often overlooked in romantic retrospectives on the European "immigrant experience"—white power and privilege. Most broadly, this essay examines where Italians were located within America's developing racial order and what consequences this had on their everyday lives and opportunities. This essay is written as an invitation to other scholars to further explore Italians' (and other immigrants') encounters with race in the United States. If it demonstrates anything, it is that we still have much to learn about these critical issues.

Beginning in earnest with the onset of mass migration from Italy (particularly southern Italy) in the late nineteenth century and continuing well into the twentieth century, racial discrimination and prejudice aimed at Italians, southern Italians, Latins, Mediterraneans, and "new" immigrants were fierce, powerful, and pervasive. And some of this anti-Italian sentiment and behavior questioned Italians' whiteness on occasion. In the end, however, Italians' many perceived racial inadequacies aside, they were still largely accepted as whites by the widest variety of people and institutions—the U.S. census, race science, newspapers, unions, employers, neighbors, real estate agents, settlement houses, politicians, political parties, and countless federal and state laws regarding naturalization, segregation, voting rights, and "miscegenation." This widespread acceptance was reflected most concretely in Italians' ability to immigrate to the United States and become citizens, work certain jobs, live in certain neighborhoods, join certain unions, marry certain partners, patronize certain movie theaters, restaurants, saloons, hospitals, summer camps, parks, beaches, and settlement houses. In so many of these situations, one color line existed separating "whites" from the "colored races"—groups such as "Negroes," "Orientals," and "Mexicans." And from the moment they arrived in the United States—and forever after—Italians were consistently and unambiguously placed on the side of the former. If Italians were racially undesirable in the eyes of many Americans, they were white just the same.

They were so securely white, in fact, that Italians themselves rarely had to aggressively assert the point. Indeed, according to my work on Chicago, not until World War II did many Italians identify openly and mobilize politically as white. After the early years of migration and settlement, when Italy remained merely an abstraction to many newcomers, their strongest alle-

giance was to the Italian race, not the white one. In the end, however, how Italians chose to identify proved to be of little consequence when it came to the "wages of whiteness." As it turned out, Italians did not need to be openly and assertively white to benefit from the considerable rewards and resources of whiteness. For a good part of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, Italians were white on arrival, not so much because of the way they viewed themselves but because of the way others viewed and treated them. For this reason, and because of space constraints, I will not focus on Italians' race/color self-identification here.

Two conceptual tools are critical to my analysis. First is the simple point that we take the structure of race seriously. Race is still too often talked about as simply an idea, an attitude, a consciousness, an identity, or an ideology. It is, to be sure, all of these things—but also much more. It is also rooted in various political, economic, social, and cultural institutions, and thus very much about power and resources (or lack thereof). Particularly helpful on this point is sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who argues that we use "racialized social system" as an analytical tool. In all such systems, he argues,

The placement of people in racial categories involves some form of hierarchy that produces definite social relations between the races. The race placed in the superior position tends to receive greater economic remuneration and access to better occupations and/or prospects in the labor market, occupies a primary position in the political system, is granted higher social estimation . . . often has a license to draw physical (segregation) as well as social (racial etiquette) boundaries between itself and other races, and receives what Du Bois calls a "psychological wage." The totality of these racialized social relations and practices constitutes [a racialized social system].<sup>3</sup>

Such a system existed throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States. Whether one was white, black, red, yellow, or brown—and to some extent Anglo-Saxon, Alpine, South Italian, or North Italian—powerfully influenced (along with other systems of difference, such as class and gender) where one lived and worked, the kind of person one married, and the kinds of life chances one had. Thus, race was not (and is not) completely about ideas, ideologies, and identity. It is also about location in a social system and its consequences.

To fully understand these consequences, one more conceptual tool is critical: the distinction between race and color. Several years back, when I began research on Italians and race, I envisioned a "wop to white" story, an

Italian version of Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*. I quickly realized, however, that this approach had serious shortcomings. For one, Italians did not need to become white; they always were, in numerous, critical ways. For another, race was more than black and white. Though Italians' status as whites was relatively secure, they still suffered, as noted above, from extensive racial discrimination and prejudice as Italians, South Italians, Latins, and so on.

Nor was this simply "ethnic" discrimination. To be sure, few scholars agree on how best to conceptually differentiate between "race" and "ethnicity." Some have argued that whereas race is based primarily on physical characteristics subjectively chosen, ethnicity is based on cultural ones (e.g., language, religion, etc.). Others have maintained that "membership in an ethnic group is usually voluntary; membership in a racial group is not." Still others have argued that "while 'ethnic' social relations are not necessarily hierarchical, exploitative and conflictual, 'race relations' almost always are." None of these distinctions, though all are valid in certain ways, is very helpful for our purposes. None of them, that is, helps us to better understand Italians' social experiences and their particular social location in the United States. After all, a group like the "South Italian race" was purported to have particular "cultural" and "physical" characteristics; included both voluntary and involuntary members; and was created in Italy and used extensively in the United States to explicitly rank and exploit certain human beings.

How, then, to navigate between Italians' relatively secure whiteness and their highly problematical racial status, without resorting to unhelpful conceptual distinctions between race and ethnicity? The answer, I contend, is race and color. I argue that between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries there were primarily two ways of categorizing human beings based on supposedly inborn physical, mental, moral, emotional, and cultural traits. The first is color (or what might be called "color race," since this is what many Americans think of as race today): the black race, brown race, red race, white race, and yellow race. Color, as I use it, is a social category and not a physical description. "White" Italians, for instance, could be darker than "black" Americans. Second is race, which could mean many things: large groups like Nordics and Mediterraneans; medium-sized ones like the Celts and Hebrews; or smaller ones like the North and South Italians.

This race/color distinction was, of course, never absolute during this time period, and it certainly changed over time. But some people and institutions were very clear on the distinction. The federal government's naturalization applications throughout this time period, for instance, asked applicants to provide their race and color. For Italians, the only acceptable answers

were North or South Italian for the former and white for the latter. Most important, for all of its discursive messiness, the race/color distinction was crystal clear throughout the United States when it came to resources and rewards. In other words, while Italians suffered for their supposed racial undesirability as Italians, South Italians, and so forth, they still benefited in countless ways from their privileged color status as whites.

Italians are a particularly good group on which to test this argument, because they faced such severe racial discrimination and prejudice in the United States, which all started prior to migration in Italy. In the late nineteenth century, an influential group of positivist anthropologists, including Cesare Lombroso, Giuseppe Sergi, and Alfredo Niceforo, emerged on the scene with scientific "proof" that southern Italians were racially distinct from and hopelessly inferior to their northern compatriots. Sergi, for instance, using skull measurements to trace the various origins and desirability of the Italian people, argued that while northern Italians descended from superior Aryan stock, southerners were primarily of inferior African blood. Similarly, Niceforo argued in his widely read study, *L'Italia barbara contemporanea*, that two Italies existed, whose fundamental racial differences made unification impossible. After all, "One of the two Italies, the northern one, shows a civilization greatly diffused, more fresh, and more modern. The Italy of the South [however] shows a moral and social structure reminiscent of primitive and even quasibarbarian times, a civilization quite inferior."<sup>5</sup>

Such ideas were by no means restricted to the academy; a great deal of Italian mass culture and many public officials absorbed and disseminated them as well. For instance, Italy's leading illustrated magazine of the time, *Illustrazione italiana*, repeatedly and "patronizingly celebrate[d] the South's anomalous position between Italy and the Orient, between the world of civilized progress and the spheres of either rusticity or barbarism." As one of the magazine's reporters noted after a trip through Sicily in 1893, "In the fields where I interviewed many peasants I found only types with the most unmistakable African origin. My how much strange intelligence is in those muddled brains." Similarly, Filippo Turati, a Socialist Party leader at the turn of the twentieth century, no doubt spoke for many of his compatriots when he referred to the "Southern Question" as a battle between "an incipient civilization and that putrid barbarity."<sup>6</sup>

Just at this moment—at the height of the scientific and popular racialist assault on the Mezzogiorno (southern Italy) and its people—the origins of Italian immigration to the United States shifted dramatically from the North to the South. As hundreds of thousands of these much-maligned *meridionali*

(southern Italians) arrived in America each year, a wide variety of American institutions and individuals, alarmed by this massive influx, made great use of Italian positivist race arguments. In 1899, the U.S. Bureau of Immigration, for instance, began recording the racial backgrounds of immigrants and distinguishing between "Keltic" northern Italians and "Iberic" southern Italians. In 1911, the U.S. Immigration Commission, throughout its highly influential forty-two-volume report, made a similar distinction. Citing the works of Niceforo and Sergi, it argued that northern and southern Italians "differ from each other materially in language, physique, and character, as well as in geographical distribution." While the former was "cool, deliberate, patient, practical, as well as capable of great progress in the political and social organization of modern civilization," the latter was "excitable, impulsive, highly imaginative, impracticable," and had "little adaptability to highly organized society."<sup>7</sup>

Social scientists like Edward Ross, also citing the work of Italian positivists, made a similar set of arguments. In popular magazine articles and books, Ross warned that while northern Italians were well-fitted for citizenship, their southern counterparts certainly were not because of their horrifying "propensity for personal violence," "inaptness" for teamwork, strong dose of African blood, and "lack of mental ability." Deeply anxious about many of these characteristics, in 1914 the popular magazine *World's Work* urged the federal government to pass an exclusion law "aimed specifically at the southern Italians, similar to our immigration laws against Asiatics," since southern Italians "are a direct menace to our Government because they are not fit to take part in it."<sup>8</sup>

A wide range of local institutions shared these anti-*meridionali* racialist ideas. Newspapers from New York to Florida, and Chicago to Louisiana, regularly lambasted southern Italians as being "injurious," "undesirable," and of the "lowest order."<sup>9</sup> Typical for the time was the *Chicago Tribune*, which in 1910 sent anthropologist George A. Dorsey to the Mezzogiorno to study immigrants in their homeland. Traveling from one small hill town to the next and writing daily columns on his impressions, Dorsey offered, in the end, the most damning view of southern Italians. These people, he claimed, were unmanly and primitive barbarians who had clear "Negroid" ancestry, who shared much more in common with the East than the West, and who were "poor in health, stature, strength, initiative, education, and money." "They are," concluded Dorsey after five months, "of questionable value from a mental, moral, or physical standpoint."<sup>10</sup> And throughout the United States many local governments, local politicians, labor unions, and employers could not help but agree with Dorsey and the *Tribune*.<sup>11</sup>

These ideas had a popular appeal as well, which was reflected in Italians' rocky relations with their neighbors in a wide range of communities nationwide. In northern cities like New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, Rochester, New Haven, Buffalo, and Philadelphia, various immigrant groups vigorously resisted the influx of Italians (particularly those from the South of Italy). In Rochester, one character in Jerre Mangione's *Monte Allegro* recalled that neighborhood animosity was so intense against Italians that "the storekeepers would not sell them food and the landlords would not rent them homes."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, on Chicago's Near North Side, bloody battles involving sticks, guns, knives, and blackjacks occurred regularly between Swedes and Sicilians. The former also held homeowner meetings to devise more genteel ways of ridding the neighborhood of the dreaded "dark people." The problem, in the words of one local Swedish pastor, was that Sicilians "do not keep their places clean; they tear up the cedar blocks of the sidewalk; and they also bring the district into disrepute in many other ways." Meanwhile, children engaged in similar battles on the playgrounds and streets of the neighborhood as Swedish girls kept Sicilian girls off the swings and out of the sandboxes at Seward Park by exclaiming: "Get out! Dagoes! Dagoes! You can't play here!" And Irish and Swedish boys regularly engaged in street battles with their Sicilian counterparts. On one occasion an Italian youngster led a charge of his compatriots against their neighborhood aggressors on horseback.<sup>13</sup>

Relations were often no friendlier in other parts of the country. Most dramatically, lynchings were none too rare an occurrence for Italians throughout the South, West, and Midwest at this time. Certainly the most infamous and shocking of these took place in New Orleans in 1891 when an angry mob, bent on avenging the murder of Police Chief David Hennessy, lynched eleven Sicilian suspects in one night. Other lynchings took place in locations as diverse as Denver, Tampa, Tallulah, Mississippi, and southern Illinois. Indeed, as late as 1915, an armed posse in Johnston, Illinois, a mining town some one hundred miles east of St. Louis, lynched Sicilian Joseph Strando for his alleged murder of a prominent town resident.<sup>14</sup>

Taken together, many Italians, particularly those from the Mezzogiorno, encountered powerful, pervasive, and often racialized discrimination and prejudice upon arrival in the United States. Thus, if *meridionali* emigrated from Italy in part to escape a racialized social system that relegated them to the bottom tier, they entered another social system in the United States fairly close to the bottom again. But the social systems of turn-of-the-century Italy and the United States were very different. Most important, in contrast to the

Old World, southern Italians never occupied the lowest of social positions in the United States. This was because the United States had both racial and color hierarchies, and if Italians were denigrated and exploited in the former, they were greatly privileged in the latter. That is, for all of the racial prejudice and discrimination that Italians faced in these early years, they were still generally accepted as white and reaped the many rewards that came with this status.

To be sure, this statement needs serious qualification, for certainly at no other time in Italian American history was the color status of *meridionali* more hotly contested. We have already seen that prominent social scientists publicly ruminated on southern Italians' "Negroid" roots, and that lynching—a punishment often reserved for African Americans—occurred with some frequency against Italians in these years. Color questions came in other forms. In 1911, the U.S. House Committee on Immigration openly debated and seriously questioned whether one should regard "the south Italian as a full-blooded Caucasian"; many representatives did not seem to think so. From the docks of New York to railroads in the West, some native-born American workers carefully drew distinctions between themselves—"white men"—and "new immigrant" foreigners like Italians.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, in the South, where color questioning may have been most severe, one Mississippi Delta town attempted to bar Italians from white schools, and Louisiana state legislators in 1898 fought to disenfranchise Italians, along with African Americans, at the state constitutional convention. As one local newspaper at the time wrote, "When we speak of white man's government, they [Italians] are as black as the blackest Negro in existence." In the sugarcane fields of Louisiana, one Sicilian American recalled, "The boss used to call us niggers" and "told us that we weren't white men."<sup>16</sup>

This important evidence notwithstanding, we should not exaggerate the precariousness of Italians' color status. Color questioning never led to any sustained or systematic positioning of Italians as nonwhite.<sup>17</sup> That is, if U.S. congressmen openly debated whether southern Italians were full-blooded Caucasians, they never went so far as to deny *meridionali* naturalization rights based on their doubts; if magazines like *World's Work* called for the exclusion of southern Italian immigration, Congress never enacted such measures; and if some Louisianans tried to disenfranchise Italians, their efforts, in direct contrast to those regarding African Americans, failed miserably.

Italians' whiteness, however, was most visible in communities all across the country. In Chicago, for example, when famous African American boxing champion Jack Johnson attempted to marry a "white" woman in 1912, a

rowdy and menacing crowd of a thousand "whites" protested on the Near North Side by hanging Johnson in effigy. Italians, by contrast, could marry "white" women without anywhere near this level of resistance.<sup>18</sup> Regarding housing, battles took place to prevent Italian infiltration in places like the Near North Side and the Grand Avenue area. These efforts, however, were never as violent as those in areas just west of the Black Belt, where bombings, rioting, and gang attacks against African Americans occurred regularly as the Great Migration got under way during World War I. As a result, while the few wealthy Italians could move to any Chicago neighborhood that they could afford, African Americans (and many Asians) were forced to live in the most blighted of Chicago's neighborhoods, regardless of their wealth or education.<sup>19</sup>

In the workplace, Italians faced discrimination from both unions and employers. However, they always enjoyed far more employment options and opportunities than did the "colored races."<sup>20</sup> Finally, Italians were refused admission to a movie theater or restaurant on occasion. But such instances were rare indeed, and certainly paled in comparison to what many African Americans and some Asians had to endure: systematic exclusion from or segregation in countless Chicago restaurants, theaters, hotels, bars, prisons, hospitals, settlement houses, orphanages, schools, and cemeteries.<sup>21</sup> Thus, even in this early period when the "colored races" remained a small fraction of the city's population, a distinct and pervasive color line separated them from "whites." And for all their alleged racial inadequacies, Italians were placed firmly among the latter.<sup>22</sup>

A very similar story applies to Baltimore. Here, according to historian Gordon Shufelt, from the earliest days of Italian immigration, the "white citizens of Baltimore . . . invited Italian immigrants to join the white community." As in Chicago, this color position made all the difference in the world. In 1904, when a massive fire swept through the city, destroying almost everything in its path, the city distributed relief and relief jobs strictly according to color criteria—"whites" (Italians among them) got jobs and relief, "blacks" did not. Similarly, in the following decade, when local Democratic politicians repeatedly tried to pass anti-African American disfranchisement legislation and segregation housing ordinances, they never intentionally targeted Italians and instead welcomed them into the white fold as key constituents. By the early 1900s, one local politician for Italians campaigned openly as the "white man's ward leader," and began speeches with the boast: "There's no man in the state who hates the darky more than I do."<sup>23</sup>

Out West, Italians suffered from indignities on account of their race. They faced some workplace and neighborhood discrimination in cities like

San Francisco, and severe violence throughout the West. Italians were lynched in Gunnison, Colorado, in 1890 and in Denver three years later. This mistreatment extended to explicit color questioning on occasion. One Italian from rural Washington recalled: "Many of the natives were kind and generous; but others spared no effort to let us know that we were intruders and undesirables." In fact, one classmate called him "a goddamn wop" and insisted that he did not "belong to the white race." Similarly, in Arizona, some copper companies categorized their workers into three main groups—whites, Mexicans, and Italians/Spaniards.<sup>24</sup>

As in other parts of the country, however, this color questioning seems to have been sporadic at best (probably more sporadic in the West, where far fewer Italian immigrants settled and where, of these, fewer came from the Mezzogiorno) and rarely institutionalized. Indeed, as scholars like Tomás Almaguer and Yvette Huginnie have shown, whiteness mattered monumentally in the West, and all people of European descent belonged to this most privileged color category. In a region of "white man's towns"—where pervasive color lines prevented many African Americans, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans from owning land, marrying anyone they chose, serving on juries, joining particular unions, claiming land to mine, swimming in the local pool, or attending the best schools—Italians were white and, as usual, benefited greatly from this arrangement.<sup>25</sup>

But what about the Deep South, where Italians' whiteness may have been most seriously challenged? Though far more research needs to be done, it appears that Italians' whiteness was more evident on a daily basis here than perhaps anywhere else. After all, the Deep South had, by the turn of the twentieth century, the most visible colorized social system in the form of disfranchisement, antimiscegenation laws, and Jim Crow segregation. And while evidence certainly exists that Southerners ("black" and "white") and some of their organizations occasionally categorized Italians as nonwhite, I have found no evidence that Italians were ever subjected in any systematic way to Jim Crow segregation or disfranchisement, or legally barred from marrying "white" men and women.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, it was Italians' very whiteness that largely explains their arrival in the South in the first place. Many southern planters recruited Italians explicitly as "white" laborers who, in direct contrast to African Americans and Asians, could address their two major turn-of-the-century concerns: the "colored problem" and the declining pool of cheap labor. As historian J. Vincenza Scarpaci has pointed out, "The growing interest of the planters for Italians paralleled the post-war concern for an increased white population."

As one southern newspaper joyfully announced in 1906, "The influx of the Italians between 1890–1900 made Louisiana a white state."<sup>27</sup>

To be sure, many Southerners, even planters among them, came to deeply regret recruiting Italians and other southern and eastern Europeans. Indeed, during the first few decades of the twentieth century growing anti-immigrant fervor swept through the region. Still, anti-Italian feelings and actions—while intense for a time—seldom lasted long. Having completed an extensive survey of southern towns in the early 1900s, the U.S. Immigration Commission found that in many locations Italians had "fought their way inch by inch through unreasoning hostility and prejudice to almost unqualified respect, or even admiration." Equally prevalent, reported the commission, was that if in some cases parents held fast to their anti-Italian prejudice, similar feelings were breaking down among the "American" children with whom Italians played and mingled freely in "white" schools.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, even at their height, anti-Italian feelings had their limits. Even the most virulent attacks on Italians often took their whiteness for granted. During Louisiana's debates about disfranchisement in 1898, for instance, New Orleans's main paper, the *Daily Picayune*, suggested under the headline "White Foreigners Should Not Have Privileges over White Natives"—that Italians might be too ignorant and illiterate to be trusted with the ballot. In 1906, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* asked: "Does the South want white labor to piece out or to compete with its Negro labor? . . . What class of settlers are they bringing here? Are they of that character that they would help maintain a white man's Dixie; or are they so ignorant or careless as to become in effect allies of those *across* the color line? We want immigration to a certain extent, but we do not want 'just anybody'" (emphasis added). One journal article from 1903, titled "Italian Immigration into the South," put it best by asking: "Is the immigrant of today the kind of white man whom the South stands ready to welcome?" That Italians were white was assumed; that they were desirable was another question entirely.<sup>29</sup>

This point becomes even clearer, perhaps, when we compare Italians' experiences with those of another marginalized immigrant group in the South—the Chinese. As James Loewen has shown convincingly in his book *The Mississippi Chinese*, the Chinese were initially grouped along with African Americans and systematically excluded from white schools, organizations, and social institutions. By the 1930s and 1940s, when their reputations and status improved considerably, the Chinese were, generally speaking, still not accepted as white. Instead, many towns in the South developed triply



segregated school systems. Nothing in Italians' experiences in the Deep South ever approached this sort of treatment.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, whether in the North, South, or West; whether by the government, newspapers, employers, social scientists, or neighbors; Italians faced their share of racial discrimination and prejudice. During these early years of migration and settlement, however, their whiteness was rarely challenged in any sustained or systematic way. Italians were white on arrival in America, then, regardless of where they happened to arrive.

Why was this the case? Given the widespread doubts about (chiefly) southern Italian *racial* fitness and desirability, why was their *color* status as whites not more seriously contested? First, scientists, for as long as they had attempted to construct racial/color taxonomies, placed Italians firmly within the white category. The weight of scientific opinion in the United States supported some variation of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's classification scheme from the late eighteenth century, which divided humankind into "five principal varieties": the American ("red"), Caucasian ("white"), Ethiopian ("black"), Malay ("brown"), and Mongolian ("yellow"). As the U.S. Immigration Commission's *Dictionary of Races and Peoples* noted in 1911, "in preparing this dictionary . . . the author deemed it reasonable to follow the classification employed by Blumenbach. . . . The use of this classification as the basis for this present work is perhaps entirely justified by the general prevailing custom in the United States [to follow Blumenbach], but there is equal justification in the fact that recent writers, such as Keane and the American authority Brinton, have returned to practically the earlier [Blumenbach] classifications." Significantly, Blumenbach placed Italians (both southern and northern) within the Caucasian "variety." To question Italian whiteness, then, required one to challenge widely accepted theories in race science as well.<sup>31</sup>

Second, the history of the Italian peninsula—particularly that of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance—also supported the classification of Italians as white. As Eliot Lord argued in the early twentieth century, "The far-reaching ancestry of the natives of South and Central Italy runs back to the dawn of the earliest Greek civilization in the peninsula and to the Etruscan, driving bronze chariots and glittering in artful gold when the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, and all the wild men of Northern Europe were muffling their nakedness in the skins of wild beasts." As a result, asked Lord in conclusion: "Upon what examination worthy of the name has the Southern Latin stock, as exhibited in Italy, been stamped as 'undesirable'? Is it undesirable to perpetuate the blood, the memorials and traditions of the

greatest empire of antiquity, which spread the light of its civilization from the Mediterranean to the North Sea and the Baltic?"<sup>32</sup> Given these points, anti-immigrant racialists had to exercise caution in their color-questioning of Italians, for if Italians were not white, a good deal of Western civilization might not have been either.

Finally, if various branches of the American state deeply institutionalized the *racial* differences between northern and southern Italians in their immigration statistics, studies, and applications, they just as surely secured the two groups' *color* commonalities. For one, American naturalization laws during this time allowed only "free white male persons" or "aliens of African nativity or persons of African descent" to become U.S. citizens; and American courts repeatedly denied Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants access to American citizenship because of the color stipulation in the law. Italians never once encountered any problems.<sup>33</sup>

Just as important as naturalization laws was the U.S. census. The color/race category and the kinds of answers the census requested changed many times between 1880 and 1920; the census, for instance, alternated frequently between asking for people's "color," "race," and "color or race." At some points it also asked enumerators to distinguish between "whites" and "Mexicans," between "mulattos," "octoroons," "quadroons," and so forth. Throughout all of these variations, however, Italians were always listed as foreign-born or native-born "whites." Because the census represented the federal government's final word on color categories, this classification was no small thing. Indeed, census categorization schemes must have had an immense influence on everyday Americans and their color conceptions. With the largest collection of social data on Americans anywhere, the U.S. census offered invaluable information to countless people—from social scientists and politicians to government bureaucrats and journalists. When using this information, one often unwittingly reproduced the various ways the census organized it—and, in the process, reproduced Italian whiteness.<sup>34</sup>

In the end, Italians' firm hold on whiteness never loosened over time. They were, at different points, criminalized mercilessly, ostracized in various neighborhoods, denied jobs on occasion, and alternately ridiculed and demonized by American popular culture. Yet, through it all, their whiteness remained intact. The rise of immigration restriction in the early 1920s demonstrates this point well. Anti-immigrant racialists—from Madison Grant to Kenneth Roberts, from mass circulation magazines like *Collier's* to mass movements like the Klan—roundly condemned Italians (particularly, though not exclusively, those from the South) for mongrelizing and menacing the

nation. Interestingly, however, they stopped well short of questioning Italians' whiteness. If all racialists agreed that Italians were a hopelessly inferior lot, they also agreed that they were "white" or "Caucasian" just the same. They were, in the fitting words of former Seattle Mayor Ole Hanson, "the White Peril of Europe."<sup>35</sup>

Lothrop Stoddard's popular book, *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920), typified this point. Stoddard, an ardent Nordic supremacist, sounded the alarm against the unrestricted immigration of the Alpine and Mediterranean races, who as "lower human types" "upset standards, sterilize better stocks, increase low types, and compromise national futures more than war, revolutions, or native deterioration." And yet for all this doom and gloom, Stoddard was much more concerned about "colored" immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Central/South America. "If the white immigrants can gravely disorder the national life," declared Stoddard passionately, "it is not too much to say that the colored immigrant would doom it to certain death." The Immigration Act of 1924 made eminently clear the practical implications of this distinction between "whites" and "coloreds": while "new" European immigrants, branded as racial inferiors, were severely reduced in numbers, the Japanese, branded as racial *and* color inferiors, were excluded altogether.<sup>36</sup>

Whiteness continued to deeply shape Italian Americans' lives and opportunities in the interwar and postwar years. The Federal Housing Administration redlined every major city in the country; local institutions distributed GI Bill benefits, ensuring that people of "color" would not receive their fair share; and Congress excluded farmers and domestic workers—the vast majority of whom were African Americans and Latinos—from receiving Social Security and labor union protections.<sup>37</sup> If whiteness, as historian Matthew Jacobson aptly put it, "opened the Golden Door" for so many European immigrants, it also kept it wide open for years to come.<sup>38</sup>

Many Italian Americans (among other people), as noted, have had a hard time appreciating this point. Often contrasting themselves explicitly with African Americans, they have spoken (and continue to speak) proudly of the ways in which they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps by working hard and shunning government assistance. And, of course, these narratives have some truth to them. Many Italian Americans did work hard and their success in the United States is, in part, a testament to this fact. However, the idea that they, unlike groups such as African Americans, did it all by themselves without government assistance could not be more inaccurate. Indeed, the opposite was often the case. Italian Americans' whiteness—conferred more powerfully by the federal government than by any other institution—was their

single most powerful asset in the "New World"; it gave them countless advantages over "nonwhites" in housing, jobs, schools, politics, and virtually every other meaningful area of life. Without appreciating this fact, one has no hope of fully understanding Italian American history.