

---

# The Long Journey of Italian Statistics on International Migration

Corrado Bonifazi

---

## Abstract

The last 150 years of Italian history include all the main steps of the evolution of a national migration system. In fact, for almost a century Italy had been one of the most important countries of emigration in the world, while nowadays it has become one of the favorite destinations of international migration flows. The paper is an attempt to describe the main changes in Italian statistics on international migration, highlighting the relations between these changes and changes in migration policies and migration trends.

---

## 1 Introduction

The history of the first 150 years since unification saw Italy go through all the main steps that a national migration system can meet during its evolution. Just think that, for almost 100 years, Italy has been amongst the main countries of emigration in the world, though now it has become one of the main destinations for international migration. From the beginning of the new State, the importance of migration has led to an attempt by official statistics to measure its intensity. Since then, Italian statistics on international migration have experienced profound changes in sources, definitions, and methods of data collection. These changes are closely intertwined, on the one hand, to the evolution and dynamics of migration flows and, on the other, to political choices in the migration field. In fact, it is well known that in every country statistical information on the phenomenon tends to focus on specific categories of migrants subject to political interest and, therefore, to move its attention according to the changes in needs and demands of national

---

C. Bonifazi (✉)

Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies (IRPPS-CNR), Roma, Italy  
e-mail: [c.bonifazi@irpps.cnr.it](mailto:c.bonifazi@irpps.cnr.it)

policy (Kritz 1987). We will try to describe this process, aiming to grasp some of its most important aspects and taking into consideration the four main periods in which we can divide the history of Italian migration: the period of mass emigration from 1861 to the First World War; the inter-war period; the period of European labor migration (1946–1975); the period of mass immigration.

---

## 2 Italian Migration Statistics During the Mass Emigration Period

The birth and development of Italian migratory statistics should be included within an international context in which, already before 1861, the problem of collecting comparable information about such a social dynamic, which was growing in importance on the world stage, had already been raised. In fact, as early as 1853, the first International Statistical Congress in Brussels, in its conclusions, identified some guidelines for collecting comparable data for the measurement of international migration, particularly the trans-oceanic types (CGS 1853). The central point of the proposal envisaged the creation of municipal registers of the emigrants in order to gather information on those who moved to another country and alongside such registers, in order to measure the incoming traffic, registers of immigrants. Gathering information at ports of departure and arrival on emigrants and immigrants was recommended as a control strategy. Therefore, since then, two key instruments that are still essential in the measurement of migration were identified: the population registers and statistics on departures and arrivals.

In the early post-unification years, migration certainly was not a priority in a country that was yet to be built and neither was for the newly formed Office of General Statistics that belonged to the Ministry for Agriculture, Industry and Commerce (MAIC). In the first census of 1861 there was, however, information collected on international mobility. In particular, the birthplace was considered to distinguish people born within the kingdom from those born in foreign countries. In addition, information was collected on seasonal migrations, distinguishing between those that occurred within unified Italy and those that moved abroad.

The prevailing models of mobility were still the traditional ones related to agricultural activities in the Po Valley and the Roman countryside or to transhumance. The extent of emigration to other countries was small. Even if some migratory flows had already begun before unification and in some local areas international migration had already become an important element in the economic family strategy. Overall, however, Italy was still far from reaching those continental and extra-continental migration flows that will characterize the latter part of the century. Just consider that in neighboring France, the census of 1861 showed 76,000 Italians, next to 85,000 Germans and 204,000 Belgians, or that the US Census of 1860 counted less than 12,000 Italians when the Irish were already 1.6 million, the Germans nearly 1.3, and the British almost 600,000.

The first decade of unification represented an important moment in the evolution and transformation of Italian migration, with the gradual emergence of new patterns of mobility, the enlargement of emigration area, and the growth of migration

flows. Emigration thus began to take on an increasingly important role in the life of the country. On a political level, such an increased importance resulted in a debate that was most vigorous. On the one side there were those who feared the consequences of this phenomenon and wanted it to be controlled to avoid loss of human resources for the country and on the other, those who considered it an inevitable result of the economic and social transformations that were taking place (Marucco 2001). The comparison also moved quickly onto a question of numbers. The first census of Italians abroad was completed in 1871. The survey proved itself largely inadequate to provide an accurate understanding of the phenomenon and led to estimate between 432,000 and 478,000 units “the approximate number of Italian residents or visiting in other countries on the night of December 31, 1871” (SGRI 1874, II). In 1871 the results of a semi-official survey by Leone Carpi were also published. Carpi had some collaboration from the Ministry of the Interior and the Foreign Office. In 1872 the Statistical Council urged for the establishment of an emigration statistics (MAIC 1872) which, after various studies, was launched in 1876. The measurement of the phenomenon was seen as an essential tool to assess the causes and effects and to “put an end to the ‘controversy over the figures’ around which, until then, proponents and opponents of the Exodus had clashed” (Marucco 1996, p. 155). The debate within the Statistical Council concerned, first of all, the very basic position on migration. Proponents of migration were well represented by Luigi Bodio, Secretary of the Board since 1872 and subsequently Director of the Directorate of Statistics, who considered migration a fact of life and a right that must be recognized to all. Opponents were represented by Giovanni Florenzano, author of an emigration statistics for the Province of Naples published in 1874. He, in contrast, saw the migration outflow as a serious detriment to the agricultural economy of the country.

This diversity of positions was also on a more strictly technical level. The line taken by Bodio, which then prevailed, was to point to official statistics, “conducted according to scientific methods and carried out with proper tools, quite willing to limit its aspirations rather than to venture into uncertain terrain” (Marucco 2001, p. 64). Florenzano feared that such a situation would hide the real intensity of the phenomenon, which would result in preventing or delaying government intervention to discourage emigration. Furthermore the first results of the new survey counted about 108,000 units as the outflow in 1876, while the estimates by Carpi counted nearly 152,000 units in 1873 (Bodio 1877). Apart from the political factors, we find in such a diversity of positions the main conceptual node that still characterizes the debate on migration statistics, with the confrontation between the needs and limitations of official statistics on the one hand, and knowledge needs, on the other. In this sense the position of Bodio, careful in identifying as objectively as possible measurement criteria, contains the fundamental character of a modern statistical survey which must be based on reliable data and whose limits of coverage and reliability are particularly clear.

However, the definition of the criteria of a survey, that through successive changes and adjustments accompanied the entire history of Italian emigration, was anything but linear. On 2 March 1874, the Board of Statistics and the Advisory

Commission on pension funds and work, in a joint meeting, identified a number of requirements for the statistics on emigration (MAIC-DS 1880). It is a long list of needs, many of which proved to be impossible to achieve. In fact, the initial path of the source is characterized by a gradual adjustment of its ambitious knowledge goals to the feasible statistical tools. Ultimately the source, up until the changes made in the early twentieth century, considered migrants as emigrating people in poor economic conditions and based the collection of data on clearances granted by the municipalities for the issuing of passports, supplemented by other information. The most apparent limit of the survey, very clear from the beginning to the Directorate of Statistics, was the obvious discrepancy between the number of clearances and passports granted and actually used. This was also at a time when the possession of such a document was not essential to expatriation.

However, beyond this and other limits of the survey, it must be considered that the characteristics of Italian emigration from the start of the phenomenon and the deficiencies of the administrative system made it difficult to use other methods of data collection. In the Italian case, in fact, emigration was initially mainly directed to other European countries, thus making it less meaningful to a system based on boarding lists. This was unlike the situation in other countries where the bulk of the phenomenon was for departures toward North and South America or took place within national borders. The choice of creating registers of emigrants, as suggested in the conclusions of the International Statistical Congress of 1853, would then have been impractical given the difficulties to set up an effective system of population registers, whose creation had been expected as early as 1862 (Marucco 1996) but whose practical realization did not take place until 1929.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a considerable growth in the migratory exodus, within an increasingly favorable framework of the phenomenon: for the first time the expatriates in 1887 exceeded 200,000 units and in 1900 reached almost 353,000. On the side of the push factors, the start of the demographic transition, the development of new economic activities, and the crisis of large sections of the traditional economy led to an increase in the need to emigrate. Furthermore emigration soon came to be the most effective and direct way of improving the quality of life for ever larger segments of the population, while the effective action by a range of actors was stronger (especially the shipping companies and migration agents) and created a real economy of migration. Then, the attractive factors were no less intense. In European countries, migrant workers carried out integrative and substitutive jobs in those areas that were deserted by the local workforce, especially in agriculture and in large public works (Bade 2001). On the other side of the Atlantic, countries promoted immigration to promote their development, encouraged by the extraordinary improvement in shipping and the lowering in the cost of crossing (Bade 2001).

The migration issue entered the Italian political debate with even greater force. Though, for the first law on the matter, we must wait until 1888, after a lively parliamentary debate and characterized by an evident conflict of interests between the agrarian South and the shipping Companies (Ostuni 2001). The law that would definitively regulate the great outflow would see the light of day only

in 1901, and was essentially a measure of compromise between the needs for protection and promotion of emigration. The law would foresee the creation of the General Commissariat for Migration (CGE), whose director was Luigi Bodio, and contained the first official definition of the emigrant, at least as far as ocean flows were concerned. With the arrival of the twentieth century, out-migration grew tumultuously: in 1901, 533,000 expatriated and in subsequent years such a phenomena reached levels that would never be reached again, with a maximum of almost 873,000 expatriates in 1913. The focus had now passed to the promotion of emigration, also thanks to the CGE. The macroeconomic effects of migration, through remittances, had meanwhile reached a remarkable size, ensuring that the major economic changes of the Giolitti period come to be in a situation of significant trade deficit coverage (Sori 1979).

Even from the statistical point of view the new century brought important changes. From 1904, the collection of data on expatriates was based on the records of passports held by the District Offices of the Ministry of Interior, which represented a definite improvement (CGE 1926). There remained, however, wide margins of difference between those statistics and the intensity of the phenomenon (CGE 1926). The issue of a passport, in fact, did not necessarily imply migration. Transfers without a passport grew due to the number of states that did not require such a document. Hence, it was not always possible to determine with accuracy the country of destination and, given the 3 years of duration of a passports' validity, more movements abroad were possible for the same person. The CGE too began its own independent survey of ocean flows in 1902, based on the boarding lists and the data was collected on both outward and return movements. The latter formed the basis for statistics on returnees, which would fill a significant gap in a country where return migration and circular mobility have always held a great importance in ocean flows. The major limits of the CGE survey are related to the exclusion of those who traveled in a different class from third class, for those who departed from foreign ports, and those who worked on ships during the journey (CGE 1926).

The arrival of the First World War marked the end of the first globalization and of a time when international migration had been an essential element in the functioning and development of the world economy. After the war, as we shall see in the next section, all the coordinates of the issue radically changed and a new era for Italian and international migration was born.

---

### 3 The Inter-War Period

With the conclusion of the conflict, the movements of people were subjected to increasingly stringent controls and restrictions by the states of destination, while the global economy had difficulty in recovering pre-war growth rates and, in 1929, would enter one of its deepest crises. The transoceanic flows were reduced greatly and, in particular, Italian emigration suffered, being subjected to particularly stringent constraints in the United States which, before the conflict, had become the main destination. Also migration flows between European countries met with

a sharp decline as a result of poor post-war economic conditions and political restrictions. Only France continued to have a policy of attracting flows, at least until the effects of the crisis in the early 1930s would bring about a significant reduction in migration (Bade 2001).

Restrictive immigration policies, economic problems, and economic crisis brought about a total re-articulation of migration processes and prevented the restart of the mechanism of labor transfer that had characterized the entire first globalization. Italian politicians pointed to a resumption in emigration, which seemed to take place immediately after the war with over 600,000 expatriates in 1920. In the following years, though the values decreased, they remained at high levels (between 141,000 and 390,000 units up to 1931), but they did not reach the size recorded before the war. Fascism pursued, initially, the same policy followed by liberal governments of promoting emigration. It was the “speech of the Ascension” of 26th May 1927 that initiated a change in direction (Nobile 1974). The regime introduced increasingly stringent regulations that added an internal obstacle to the external ones already posed by the immigration countries and by the difficult economic conditions (Nobile 1974). The overall result was a further sharp reduction in expatriates that, since 1932, went down to below 100,000 units annually.

From the statistical point of view, the collection of data on international migration experienced several changes and improvements despite the great difficulties the official statistics encountered until the creation of Istat in 1926. In 1914 changes in the definition of migrant were introduced to take into account the new definition of the law aiming at the legal protection of migrants of 1913. The source, therefore, regarded those who went abroad to perform manual work, to operate small businesses, or to reach family members who had already emigrated for work reasons. From 1928 onwards these groups were joined by the intellectual workers. From 1915 the summary models compiled by the prefectures were replaced by individual records processed directly by the DGS.

Since 1921 the survey of returnees was also extended to countries in Europe and the Mediterranean. But the most significant change, also introduced in 1921, for the statistics of the phenomenon, was the use of collecting coupons included in the passports and withdrawn when boarding, disembarking, or crossing the border. The information thus collected was supplemented for flows to and from non-European countries by the lists of names of those on board. This innovation allowed for the overcoming of some of the shortcomings of the survey described above. Critical areas that remained were related to illegal migration, the multiple departures throughout the year, the use of passports granted for reasons other than emigration, and the ineffectiveness of border controls. According to CGE (1926) these problems concerned mainly the flows to European countries. The introduction of these new methods coincided with the passage of the responsibility of surveying to the CGE. With the removal of the CGE, in April 1927, the office responsible for surveying passed to the Directorate-General for Italians Abroad and, since November 1929, to the ISTAT.

## 4 The European Labor Migration Period

The end of World War II marked the opening of a new phase in the European migration scenario. In fact, after the end of the first post-conflict emergency most of the Western European countries experienced three decades of extraordinary economic growth and in which immigration played a major role. As for Italy, the end of hostility and the fall of fascism marked a return to a policy of active encouragement of emigration. The country aimed to resume the same role it had had during the first globalization and the right to emigrate was present in the Constitution of the Republic, as if to confirm a clean break with the Fascist policy of autarkic closure. The political orientation in favor of emigration resulted in two different levels of intervention in a situation characterized by a strong commitment by the entire governmental structure and the public apparatus to achieve the objective of maximizing the output fluxes (Bonifazi 2005). On the one hand, Italy aimed at concluding bilateral agreements with countries willing to accommodate incoming flows; on the other, it sought to promote the Italian interest of encouraging emigration internationally, particularly concentrating the efforts within the international organizations that saw the light in those years.

The output volume grew rapidly, returning in 1947 to 254,000 units. Until near the end of the 1970s, the number of expatriates, even reflecting changes dependant on the phases of European labor markets, kept the numbers up to between 200,000 and 387,000 units. In the first part of this period, Italian workers formed the bulk of European migration for work purposes. This resurgence in migration coincided with a period of extraordinary growth in the Italian economy and especially the final transformation in the industrial sense of the production structure of the country. The result was that, for the first time since unification, interregional internal migration came to be seen as a real alternative to emigration towards foreign countries (Sonnino 1995). In fact, between 1955 and 1965, the South and the North East lost 1.7 million inhabitants in the interchange of internal migration, while at the same time the total loss of the whole country to foreign countries was just under 1.5 million.

Since 1955 data of population registers is also available on cancellations and registrations to and from other countries, which represented a new source for the measurement of international migration. In reality, however, the source of reference remained the survey of expatriates and returnees for the whole period considered. In this source the definition of emigrant was further enlarged in 1943 to include those who went abroad to pursue a profession, art or craft, or just under the dependency of others to follow or to join family members expatriated for such reasons and finally for those who for whatever reason wished to establish residence outside national boundaries. The coupon system was abandoned in 1955 and replaced, for the flows to European countries, by verifications made by the Italian municipality of residence (or former habitual residence) of the migrants. Since 1969 these criteria were extended to the movement towards non-European countries where, since 1955, the boarding lists and the reports of expatriates registered via airplane were used.

With these changes, which led to the creation of files of immigrants and emigrants bound for foreign countries and held by municipalities (Bonarini 1976), ISTAT tried to adapt the survey to the great changes that had characterized the global migration scene in the meantime, especially in the European context. In fact, many of the assumptions and requirements on which the survey was based were actually exceeded. In particular, the birth of the European Community had liberalized much of the movement and migrating could be done without leaving the necessary track for the proper functioning of the statistical survey. The result was a progressive loss of information capacity from a source that had accompanied a century of Italian history and would be completely abandoned in the 1980s.

---

## 5 The Mass Immigration of the Second Globalization

The oil crises of the early 1970s marked the end of the golden period of European Labour Migration. In the Italian case, it determined the prevalence of returns on the departures and the closure of a migration cycle that had opened before the unification of the country. The first flow of foreign immigrants that started towards the end of the decade faced a substantial shortage in legislation and an equally substantial information gap (Bonifazi 2007). The available statistics were limited to census data on foreign residents and some information on residence permits granted by the Ministry of the Interior, while the population registers data, which noted the in and out movements of foreigners, gave a total value and did not distinguish the foreign residents from the Italians. The radical change in the dynamics of migration posed the need to redirect a statistical system which captured outflows, then beginning to decline, yet that was unable to give an account of the incoming movements. On these grounds, in the early 1980s, the scientific community began to play an important role in stimulating, encouraging, and proposing solutions that would enable the national statistical system to provide information on a phenomenon still in its early phase (Natale 1983).

Meanwhile, the political interest in the phenomenon grew. In 1986 the first law on immigration was passed and the debate became more and more lively. As had happened a century before the migration, even in this case, the debate between supporters and opponents found the size of the phenomenon as the first natural terrain for confrontation. A war of figures began, supplied by the little and controversial data available. The census of 1991 sought to improve the quality of data collected on the phenomenon. A new survey on foreigners registered in the municipal registry saw the light and a satisfactory form was given to the statistics on the permits to stay, eliminating the problem of duplication and missed cancellations. Furthermore information on foreigners was included in many current surveys.

Meanwhile, foreign immigration was consolidating its position within Italian society, becoming a structural element of the reality of the country. The foreign residents moved from 211,000 units in 1981 to 356,000 in 1991. Due to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the consequent end of the socialist regimes, foreign immigration in Italy marked the beginning of a growth phase that, over the years,



became tumultuous: in 2001 foreign residents surveyed were 1.3 million and 10 years later they would be 4.5 million recorded in the municipal registers.

In the 1990s immigration gained weight in the Italian political debate. Overall, however, the focus of politics towards statistical information on the phenomenon has been limited and sporadic. The impression is that in recent years, the national statistical system acted in a substantially independent manner in trying to improve and expand its ability to collect data on the size and characteristics of the phenomenon.

In recent years, the final settlement of the surveys on permits to stay and aliens entered into the population register took place. These offered a good base for information on the phenomenon and the census of 2001 gave the foreign presence the attention it deserves. More recently, the availability of the data on foreigners collected in the labor force survey and the distribution by sex and age of the foreign population residing in municipalities have recovered part of the delay we had when compared to other EU countries. Much remains to be done, particularly in terms of timeliness, because the knowledge demand is increasing and is becoming more pressing over time due to the growth in the scale of the phenomenon.

---

## 6 Conclusions

The 150-year period since the unification of Italy has seen extraordinary changes in migration statistics. These changes are related to the evolution of the phenomenon and of political needs. From this last point of view, it should be emphasized that the statistical knowledge of migration is an integral and decisive element of the decision-making process (Kritz 1987). This function, which reflects a modern understanding of the relationship between decision making and statistical information, was realized by the Italian statistical system in different ways during the long period of time considered. Certainly, statistics on emigration have been an element of reference in political discussions during the Liberal Italy, also thanks to the actions of an important figure, such as Luigi Bodio. A more instrumental relationship developed during fascism, when a clear contradiction between the undoubted improvements in the statistical system and on specific surveys, and an interest in pursuing decidedly authoritarian regime objectives in the field of migration, opened.

Paradoxically, the political role of statistical information on migration appears to have declined in recent years. In particular, when considering foreign immigration, the degree of integration and interaction between politics and information has appeared decidedly modest. A central role that statistical information should have in the decision-making process has not been recognized. Often the task of remedying the lack of clear political decisions of policy and organization of the overall system of data collection has been left to the good will of individuals or individual agencies that deal with the problem (Bonifazi and Strozza 2008). The necessary clarity on an essential element of political debate has frequently been lacking and has often fueled a war of numbers that has certainly not contributed to the serenity of the debate. In the meantime new challenges are entering the agenda of the statistical

system (Bonifazi and Strozza 2008). The stabilization of foreign immigration and the growth of a second generation born or brought up in Italy are posing the need to collect information on naturalized foreigners and on the population of foreign origin. Furthermore integration issues are gaining a central role in the evaluation of the overall impact of immigration on Italian society. Some of these questions have already been addressed by official statistics and all are at the core of scientific debate. The long journey of Italian migration statistics is far from concluded, it has a long future in front of it.

---

## References

- Bade, K.J.: *L'Europa in movimento. Le migrazioni dal settecento ad oggi*. La Terza, Bari (2001)
- Bodio, L.: Intervento alla seduta del 26 marzo 1877. In: Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio – Direzione di Statistica *Ann. di Stat. Serie 1<sup>a</sup>*, vol. 88, pp. 160–169. Tipografia eredi Botta, Roma (1877)
- Bonarini, F.: Analisi della rilevazione del movimento migratorio con l'estero. *Genus* **32**(1–2), 141–177 (1976)
- Bonifazi, C.: Dall'emigrazione assistita alla gestione dell'immigrazione: le politiche migratorie nell'Italia repubblicana dai vecchi ai nuovi scenari del fenomeno. *Pop. e Storia* **1**, 19–44 (2005)
- Bonifazi, C.: *L'immigrazione straniera in Italia*, 2nd edn. Il Mulino, Bologna (2007)
- Bonifazi, C., Strozza, S.: Informazione statistica ed esigenze conoscitive sull'immigrazione straniera: realtà, problemi e prospettive. In: Istat, *La presenza straniera in Italia: l'accertamento e l'analisi*. Atti del Convegno Roma, 15–16 dicembre 2005, pp. 187–212. Istat, Roma (2008)
- Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione: *Annuario statistico della emigrazione italiana dal 1876 al 1925*. Edizioni del CGE, Roma (1926)
- Congrès général de statistique: *Compte rendu des travaux du Congrès général de statistique réuni a Bruxelles les 19–22 septembre 1853*. M. Hayez, Bruxelles (1853)
- Kritz, M.M.: International migration policies: conceptual problems. *Int. Migr. Rev.* **21**(4), 947–964 (1987)
- MAIC – Direzione di Statistica: *Ann. di Stat.. Serie 1<sup>a</sup>*, vol. 6, 1875 Sec. edn. Tipografia eredi Botta, Roma (1880)
- Marucco, D.: *L'amministrazione della statistica nell'Italia unita*. Laterza, Bari (1996)
- Marucco, D.: Le statistiche dell'emigrazione italiana. In: Bevilacqua, P., De Clementi, A., Franzina, E. (A cura di) *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*. Partenze, pp. 61–75. Donzelli, Roma (2001)
- Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio: *Ann. 1872 Parte II – Statistica*. Tipografia Sacchetto, Padova (1872)
- Natale, M.: Fonti e metodi di rilevazione della popolazione straniera in Italia. *Studi Emigrazione* **20**(71), 265–296 (1983)
- Nobile, A.: Politica migratoria e vicende dell'emigrazione durante il fascismo. *Il Ponte* **30**(11–12), 1322–1341 (1974)
- Ostuni, M.R.: Leggi e politiche di governo nell'Italia liberale e fascista. In: Bevilacqua, P., De Clementi, A. e Franzina, E. (a cura di) *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*. Partenze, pp. 309–19. Donzelli, Roma (2001)
- Sonnino, E.: La popolazione italiana dall'espansione al contenimento. In: *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana: vol. 2, Tomo I. La trasformazione dell'Italia sviluppo e squilibri*, pp. 532–585. Einaudi, Torino (1995)
- Sori, E.: *L'emigrazione italiana dall'Unità alla seconda guerra mondiale*. Il Mulino, Bologna (1979)
- Statistica Generale del Regno d'Italia: Censimento degli Italiani all'estero*. Stamperia Reale, Roma (1874)