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"Bread denied by the Nation"

The Italians Abroad Exhibitions between the 19th and 20th centuries

Anna Pellegrino

Great universal exhibitions are, as has been noted, one of the places where hierarchies amongst the great European nations are constructed and developed, on the basis of not only economic and industrial, but also social and cultural progress, putting the less developed nations and the colonies in subordinate positions. It is in the course of these events that in Italy, at the end of the 19th century, the first, experimental "Italians abroad exhibitions" were established. These were very committed political and cultural events, which involved a series of diverse actors: governments, public and private institutions, both at home and among emigrants abroad, which then converged in exhibition pavilions ensuring maximum visibility amongst the greater public. These exhibitions had a dual objective: in the first place to underline the presence and dissemination of Italian identity and culture abroad through the phenomenon of migration; secondly to reinforce a feeling of Italianness in the motherland.

The phenomenon coincides almost exactly with the culmination of the wave of migration that Italy experienced at the turn of the 20th century, reaching its peak in 1906, the year of the Milan Exhibition.

There had been manifestations previously: the Columbus Exhibition in Genoa in 1892, when the Exhibition of Discovery filled an entire section (this was an Italian-American Exposition dedicated to the achievements of Italians who followed in the footsteps of the great navigator); and the Turin Exposition in 1898 when a group of young economists (amongst who were Geisser, Jannaccone, Sella, Cabiati, Prato, Bachi, and Graziadei) had set up a small exhibition, accompanied by a conference on "Italians Abroad. Emigration – Commerce – Colonies", the convenor of which was Luigi Einaudi. They were attempts, although still embryonic, which looked ahead to the type of cultural operations that were to be put into effect later. In fact, in 1898 an impressive volume "destined to be epoch-making" had been published by the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Buenos Aires, in which the success of Italian emigration to Argentina was celebrated, with an intense interaction between "inside Italy" and "outside Italy"[1]. The volume was organised according to a scheme, which not only examined the phenomenon in its economic details, but also envisaged collaboration among Italian communities abroad,

[1] Camera italiana di commercio ed arti, *Gli italiani nella Repubblica Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Compania Sud-Americana de Billetes de Banco, 1898).

represented by the Chambers of Commerce and particularly by Societies of Mutual Assistance (institutions fundamental for social cohesion and the maintenance of national identity, little studied up till now)[2].

This model, which thus envisaged not only exhibitions of catalogue publications, of data and statistics, but also the life histories, and direct documentation, also photographic, of the life of Italians abroad, would be taken up and elaborated in the exposition of 1906, when it would be even more permeated by a powerful liberal, labourist and progressive ideological connotation, and thus become a prototype for all subsequent exhibitions on the same theme.

The Sempione Exhibition

Between April and November 1906 the first Italian International Exhibition was held in Milan, organised officially to celebrate the inauguration of the Simplon Tunnel completed some months previously, in February 1905. Among the numerous pavilions designed and constructed for the event there was also an "Exposition of Italians Abroad".

The concept of Italianness was central to the exhibition and revolved entirely around praising the contribution of Italians not only to development and progress in industry, but also in the sciences, in culture and in the arts.

In this paper I will focus on three points: firstly on the meaning of an exhibition of Italians abroad, that is, the economic and political context into which this type of cultural operation was introduced; secondly, on the ways in which the exhibitions and their communications were constructed: or rather on the genesis and character of the exhibition message – the way in which the organisers put across the message through the documentation produced by the public and private institutions of the countries involved; finally, the perception and reception of the exhibition on the part of the public. To analyse the reception on the part of the public we have taken into consideration the way in which some spectators, who we can consider representative of the lower but also more extensive echelons of the public at the time, received this message; that is, we analysed the writings of workers invited to the expo, who, at the end of their trip, had to produce a report on their visit, outlining the aspects that interested them most.

[2] Emilio Franzina, "La tentazione del Museo: piccola storia di mostre ed esposizioni sull'emigrazione italiana negli ultimi cent'anni (1892-2002)", *Archivio Storico dell'emigrazione italiana*, 1(2005): 167-168. See also Patrizia Audenino, "La Mostra degli italiani all'estero: prove di nazionalismo", in *Milano e l'Esposizione internazionale del 1906. La rappresentazione della modernità*, eds. Patrizia Audenino et al. (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2008).

Fig. 1. *The Italians Abroad Exhibitions Pavillion in Milan 1906*. Cartolina ufficiale dell'esposizione 1906.

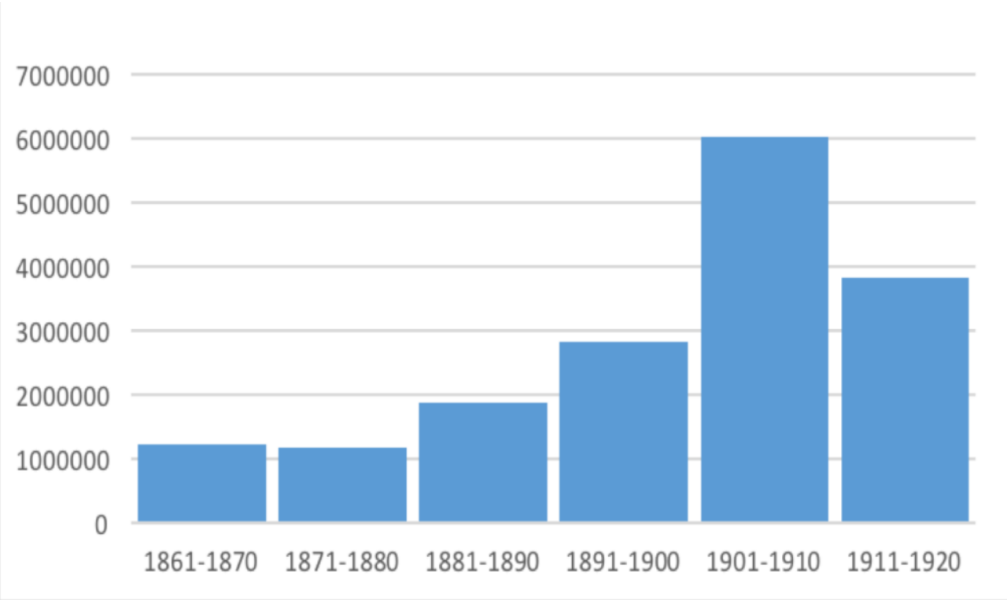
The economic and political context

At the time, more so than today, the 1906 exhibition was a response not only to a demand of a simply cultural character, in the sense of displaying knowledge and documentation. There was also a very strong correspondence with a phenomenon crucial both on account of its economic aspects, but also aspects of culture and identity, namely massive Italian emigration.

The 1906 Exhibition was in fact particularly important because it took place at a crucial moment during the phenomenon of Italian migration. In the second half of the 19th century the number of emigrants was confirmed to be around 100 000 persons annually, considered inconsequential to the Italian economy. From the beginning of the twentieth century the number of emigrants increased dramatically and unexpectedly to reach an average of 310 000 (of which 162 000 went overseas) in the four years 1896-1900, reaching its peak in the three years 1905-1907 with 739 000 emigrants (458 000 overseas)[3].

Chart 1. *Departures of Italian emigrants during the first 50 years after national unification*

[3] Data from the databases of Istat archive, Tavola 2.9 - Espatriati e rimpatriati per destinazione e provenienza europea o extraeuropea - Anni 1869-2014, in http://seriestoriche.istat.it/



It was a phenomenon of crucial importance for the Italian economy and society of the time (at that time the total population was just over 30 million) and it was evidently associated with the choices in economic policy that the liberal ruling class had made after Unification.

Italy, unlike Germany, but also in a more marked manner than France and England, had made an absolutely liberalist choice, which initially caused a crisis in certain industrial and manufacturing sectors, but which in the first decade of the 20th century was producing substantial industrial development. The sense of this exhibition is contained within this liberalist choice.

In particular, Liberal milieux, which had had and continued to have substantial influence on public opinion and government choices, looked favourably on the migratory 'valve' as a 'physiological' element sustaining the equilibrium of the labour market in the international economy. For these reasons, the entire concept of the Exhibition of 1906 was aimed at representing Italian emigration abroad as a highly positive factor on the economic level. On the one hand, it underlined the fact that individually many emigrants had been able to improve their own social conditions to an extraordinary degree; on the other, the fact that the emigrants' success also reverberated in economic relations between Italy and the countries of destination. Emigrants in fact tended to import Italian products and disseminate their consumption abroad, also favouring increased commerce from abroad with Italy. These exhibitions thus constituted

a "test of nationalism",[4] but not only that. They were also intended to justify the economic policies of the liberal governments in the eyes of public opinion[5].

It was not an easy undertaking since emigration was also a phenomenon of poverty, of misery, and of difficulty in adaptation to the countries of destination.

The polemics of emigration were extremely fierce inside the country. Already distinguishing himself in Liberal circles was the young Luigi Einaudi, author of fundamental essays on the subject but also leader of an intense and continuing journalistic campaign. In those circles, the need was felt to divulge to the greater public the positive aspects of the migratory phenomenon. For this reason, I will focus my attention on the content and tone of the Exhibition in an attempt to highlight the dysfunctions and evident contradictions between the representations of labour, of the successes and the results of emigrants abroad and the real conditions of Italian emigration.

The Construction and Communication of the Message of the 1906 Exhibition

The 1906 exhibition was not a simple show, but the endpoint of a vast cultural operation, which involved the main communities of Italians abroad on a continual basis. A series of publications and preparatory initiatives had been produced, which mobilised not only the Organising Committee of the Milan exhibition, but especially an extremely wide range of committees, organisations, and associations in the various countries which had welcomed Italian emigration, thus a massive involvement of communities and institutions abroad.

[4] See Audenino, "La Mostra degli italiani", 111-124.

[5] On the Italian liberal economists in their relations with the public opinion of the time, see now *Economia e opinione pubblica nell'Italia liberale. Gli economisti e la stampa quotidiana. Gli economisti*, Vol. 1., eds. Massimo M. Augello et al. (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2016).

Fig. 2. Cover, *L'Italia al Perù, rassegna della vita e dell'opera italiana nel Perù*, Lima, 1906.

Fig. 3. Cover, *Gli Italiani nella repubblica argentina*, Buenos Aires, *1906.*

Fig. 4. Cover, *Gl'Italiani in Isvizzera, compilata per cura del giornale La Nazione italiana (Vevey, Tip. del giornale, 1906).*

This network of interlocutors representing the voice of Italian communities, still almost entirely first generation, with very strong links with the culture of the motherland, had collected materials and testimonies, and had produced a series of initiatives: photographic exhibitions,

conferences, and especially printed works, which then constituted and constitute today most of the documentation.

Among the most significant were the volumes about Peru, Argentina, and a series of monographs on Switzerland[6]. The data and statistics were illustrated graphically, but the most striking was the photographic documentation.

This was mostly organised along the lines of industrial photographic documentation which was popular at that time also in Italy, so with frontal and axial views that highlighted how imposing factories and constructions – the products of Italian emigrant labour – were; also shown were perspectival series of products, containers, vats, or cellar casks[7].

Fig. 5. *Italian businessman in his vineyard called "Gambellara"*, in Stabilimento viti-vinicolo di Domenico Tomba in Belgrano di Mendoza, Repubblica Argentina (Album fotografico), 1906.

[6] Comitato di Lima per la Mostra degli italiani all'estero nell'esposizione di Milano del 1906, *L'Italia al Perù, rassegna della vita e dell'opera italiana nel Perù* (Lima: Litografia e tipografia Fabbri, 1905-1906); Comitato della Camera italiana di commercio ed arti Buenos Aires, *Gli Italiani nella repubblica argentina* (Compania general de Fosforos, 1906); *Gl'Italiani in Isvizzera, compilata per cura del giornale La Nazione italiana* (Vevey, Tip. del giornale, 1906).

[7] See on the subject Cesare Colombo ed., *La fabbrica di immagini. L'industria italiana nelle fotografie d'autore*, (Firenze: Alinari, 1988); Giorgio Bigatti and Carlo Vinti, *Comunicare l'impresa. Cultura e strategie dell'immagine nell'industria italiana (1945-1970)*, Sesto (San Giovanni: Fondazione ISEC, 2010).

Fig. 6. Still section and moving presses, in Stabilimento viti-vinicolo di Domenico Tomba in Belgrano di Mendoza, Repubblica Argentina (Album fotografico), 1906.

The photographic documentation of the protagonists of this epic migration testified to the upward social mobility of successful emigrant entrepreneurs.

In this context, to the traditional single portraits, were added the classic collections of photographic medallions, often the work of mutual assistance societies, which presented the faces of "notable" personages of Italian emigrants in various countries; or photographs of ceremonies and festivities in which these same notables were captured, sometimes on the occasion of the visit of an important person from the motherland.

Fig. 7. Società Italiana di Mutuo Soccorso Anziana, in *Gl'Italiani in Isvizzera, compilata per cura del giornale La Nazione italiana* (Vevey, Tip. del giornale, 1906).

Artistic production was also celebrated as an attestation of Italianness; to tell the truth in a rather debatable manner, given that the "artistic-historical" section of the exhibition did not display works by contemporary artists who had emigrated, but basically a catalogue of the works of Italian artists in other countries, especially in Europe, from the 15th century onwards [8].

Inside the exhibitions these materials were displayed with a logic that conjoined the values of work with those of the nation; at the beginning, in fact, a triptych by the painter Alciati, dedicated to Industry, Agriculture and Art, followed by a reproduction of the monument to Dante in Trento "the advance guard of Italianness against brazen invasive Germanism", noted the periodical "The Illustrated Exposition of Milan in 1906"[9].

Fig. 8. *Nel Padiglione degli italiani all'estero. La Mostra della Dante Alighieri di Buenos Aires* in *Milano e l'esposizione Internazionale del Sempione 1906,* n. 18, 270.

[8] "Catalogo descrittivo della mostra storico-artistica" *Esposizione internazionale di Milano 1906*. *Mostra gli italiani all'estero*, (Milano: Tip. La Prealpina, 1907).

[9] "Il Padiglione degli italiani all'estero", *L'Esposizione Illustrata di Milano del 1906*, Giornale ufficiale del comitato esecutivo giugno 1906, 18, 138.

In an important place were also the Catholic missionaries in various parts of the world, adopted with a certain nonchalance as vehicles of Italianness aside from religion.
A somewhat pronounced attention was still given to the work of Valdesian and Protestant missions, obviously considerably less weighted than that of the Catholics[10]. On the more secular side of this activity of disseminating Italian culture connected with humanitarian aid, considerable space was dedicated to the Italian Societies of Mutual Assistance abroad, and to some individual enterprises such as the Italian Hospital in London. Finally, noteworthy too was the section dedicated to the Italian press abroad, with more than 500 titles counted, but also the section on schools. Interest in the language and culture was intense.
It is evident that the message conveyed tended to value the migration phenomenon as an expression of Italianness, but at the same time, and perhaps more emphatically, it tended to use it to reinforce a feeling of Italianness inside the country.

> ..there is much to be proud of in the effort and ingenuity with which legions of our brothers hold high our traditions abroad[11].

Or

> …we see here that the Italian abroad is no longer synonymous with the shoe-shiner, guitar strummer, tramp and drunkard, but is now the hard working and ingenious worker, the skilled craftsman [...] at the centre of community life and of productive labour[12].

Public Perception

Sources for the study of the effective reception of the message of the exhibition are scarce, however indirect testimony may come from comments at the time, on the one hand from the press and intellectuals who wrote about the event, and on the other more directly from the visitors to the exhibition themselves.
It has been observed that the exhibition did not find much favour with the public. Einaudi wrote in 1906, in the columns of the pro-government newspaper "Corriere della sera", that the Exhibition was not "appreciated to the extent that it deserved" by the public. Undoubtedly Einaudi was referring to the general public visiting the Exposition, and complained of the fact

[10] Gaetano Conte, *Le missioni protestanti ed i nostri emigrati, Esposizione di Milano 1906, Mostra gli italiani all'estero* (Venezia: Tip. Istituto Industriale, 1906).
[11] A.M. Annoni, "Gli Italiani all'estero", *L'Esposizione Illustrata di Milano del 1906,* 11, aprile 1906, 82.
[12] "Il Padiglione degli italiani all'estero", *L'Esposizione illustrata di Milano del 1906,* 22, luglio 1906, 170.

that spectators did not appreciate to best effect the importance of a representation perfectly consistent with its liberal political and cultural setting, preferring the more captivating and spectacular pavilions.

In reality it was difficult to escape from the phantasmagoric logic of the Exposition and Einaudi himself could not help remarking on the pavilion of the Colony of Eritrea inside the exhibition, which he described in a dream-like fashion:

> ... many would believe they were dreaming on seeing all the goodness of God that the colony produces and could produce in greater quantities [...] Those who at the Turin Exposition in 1898 were sceptical about the pieces of quartz displayed in a glass bell should now think again when seeing the full size models and the cross section of the workings of the gold-bearing quartz mines of Medrizien and Simmagallé[13].

The journalist Innocenzo Cappa, came out against the section as being among the "antithetical protagonists" of the exhibition as well as "something imposed by the will of government", even if he himself in the end declared a fascination for the colonial dream:

> Alas! There is a goldmine that winks at me and I too dream again of the ancient Africa of Imperial Rome, looking at Eritrea [14].

[13] Luigi Einaudi, "La mostra degli italiani all'estero", *Corriere della sera*, 255, 18 settembre (1906), 4.
[14] Innocenzo Cappa, "Vagabondo nelle sale degli Italiani all'estero", *Milano e l'esposizione Internazionale del Sempione 1906*, 32, 486.

Fig. 9 Mostra degli italiani all'estero. Colonia Eritrea (fot. Varischi, Artico e c., Milano), in *Milano e l'esposizione Internazionale del Sempione 1906,* n. 17, 243.

Einaudi's judgement was undoubtedly conditioned only in small part by the fascination of the moment, and he was responding rather to a clearly defined political orientation. Italian colonial adventures, which stirred feelings of identity and "national" affirmation, had in the eyes of the liberal economist an extremely problematic significance; they was supported by political forces such as nationalists and Catholics, as well as the right wing and the protectionist component of the Liberal party; even a part of the socialist workers movement, although without having a jingoistic orientation as in England, who looked with sympathy on an African colonisation that could absorb some of the surplus workforce of the motherland.

In the face of this powerful front of political parties and public opinion, which saw its expectations satisfied a few years later with the conquest of Libya, liberals like Einaudi instead saw especially in emigration and the Italian communities abroad the physiological solution to the problem of overpopulation at home.

But in reality, even if they constituted very different solutions to the problem of overpopulation at home, the colonial solution and that of emigration could well have both been appreciated in public communication and the principal media of the time, as well as in the spaces of the

Exhibition itself. For example, in the case of the illustrated exposition of Milan 1906 Sonzogno dealt with it well in advance in two editorials in February and March 1906, defining the Pavilion as one of the highlights of the exposition[15]; and later, during the exhibition, as a place "which the visitor leaves unwillingly, then on returning, enamoured, the Italian lingers, always finding new reasons for patriotic gratification and pride [16].

At the same time, his direct competitor in Milan at the time, Treves attributed great importance to the event in his *Milano e l'Esposizione Internazionale del Sempione 1906* dedicating images, full page photographs and articles to the exhibition:

> One of the most arresting attractions in the Piazza D'Armi Exposition is the *Italians Abroad Pavilion,* where the surprising evidence of the activities of our co-nationals in distant foreign lands can be admired [17].

Particular mention was made of Italians in Argentina, Catholic missionaries and the works that "our valiant sons accomplished in distant Egypt, honouring their country" [18].

Naturally Treves's newspaper also gave prominence to the Eritrean display especially on account of intense recent interest in ethnography[19].

Apart from these semi official judgements, I try to make a comparison with the reception on the part of the public, looking at the perception of the Simplon exhibition by the workers sent to the expositions to perfect their professional expertise.

These workers were required to produce a report, after their trip, often very extensive and in-depth, on the aspects of their visit that captured their interest: unusual and very interesting documentation, as writings and commentary from the lower classes are rarely available sources, for the time.

The workers were struck by the positive message and successes of their co-nationals abroad, but a series of critical observations also emerged. As is evident from this worker's testimony:

> "A doubt went through my mind that under the veil of a patriotic and philanthropic enterprise was hidden dishonest exploitation of our brothers even in those lands far from their homeland"[20].

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[15] "Gli italiani all'estero*", L'esposizione illustrata di Milano*, 8 and 10, febbraio 1906 and marzo 1906.
[16] "Il Padiglione degli Italiani all'estero" in *L'Esposizione Illustrata di Milano del 1906,* 22, 1906, 170.
[17] *"*Gl'Italiani dell'Argentina all'Esposizione"*, Milano e l'Esposizione Internazionale del Sempione 1906*, 270.
[18] "Mostra degli Italiani all'estero. Le grandi costruzioni italiane in Egitto", *ibid*. 483.
[19] See in particular the article of Eduardo Ximenes "La Mostra Eritrea", 17, 242-243.
[20] ASCFi, Cerimonie, Festeggiamenti, Esposizioni, Esposizione di Milano 1906, Relazioni degli operai inviati, cart. 3, n. 5050, "Relazione dell'operaio Gino Calvetti".

Openly critical comments were not lacking. Some workers drew attention to the fact that:

> we still have to see leaving every year, half-starved, thousands of young people, in the prime of their strength, going far away, perhaps never to return, supplying the work of their brains or their muscles in exchange for the bread their nation denies them[21].

An awareness of the critical aspects of emigration were often accompanied by a strong fascination in relation to the message of Italianness that emerged from the exhibition. In some this message was filtered through references to their trade, to professional skills; for example, commenting on photographs concerning Bosnia, one worker wrote:

> the Italians resident there built Italian type houses and for this we can be proud that the style of our Nation has not been forgotten by our brothers who were forced to forsake their home soil to find work[22].

Often the appreciation took on explicitly patriotic tones, as in, for example, the comment of Raffaello Massetani, who does not hesitate to express his own "lively sense of gratification":

> Our country has strongly affirmed the vigour of a young people and its faith in renewed nationhood, since in all the major centres of commercial life abroad it holds a respectable place even compared with the grandeur of other powers. The current exhibition of Italians abroad is proof of the achievements and above all of great portent for our co-national emigrants[23].

It is also necessary to note the numerous positive references to the activity of disseminating the Italian language and culture undertaken "with constant progress" by the Dante Alighieri Society, defined as "profoundly humanitarian work".
Finally, there was no lack of appreciation for missionary activity, which resulted in considerations that demonstrate how widespread among workers was a culture not only impregnated with "national" and patriotic values, but also with concepts inspired by a vision sometimes with racist overtones, when they examined the work of Italian missionaries:

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[21] *Ibid*.
[22] ASCFi, cit., "Relazione dell'operaio Arturo Berni".
[23] ASCFi, cit., "Relazione dell'operaio Raffaello Massetani".

> Great and sacrosanct is the work of the missionary fathers! How much effort, how many sacrifices. The way is not always easy but most often rough and treacherous. They are barbarian people, superstitious, who see in every foreigner an enemy, a usurper[24].

What seems to get lost in their passage through the testimony of workers, or at least lose significance, are the life stories, the stand out, obvious success of individual entrepreneurs. There are not many references to the cases of individual entrepreneurial success that we saw highlighted in the preceding paragraph, as characteristic of the message of the exhibition.
Generally, though, the message is more ambivalent. The workers are sensitive and they identify with their emigrant colleagues who have been successful, also appreciating the message of 'Italianness' that emerges out of the Exhibition. In some cases, when Italian colonies are talked of, there are suggestions that recall English jingoism. In any case, the workers always show great interest and involvement.
Nevertheless, the exhibition had a great impact on the more popular elements of the public. From the writings of the workers there is almost always reference to the "Pavilion of Italians Abroad", but also to a participation, an involvement and a "sentiment" that at times brought "tears to the eyes". The workers were anything but indifferent to the call to a shared 'Italianness' that emerged from the exhibition; however, they perceived it in a somewhat more complex and controversial manner than the way it was presented by the ruling classes who had organised that great enterprise of national propaganda.

[24] ASCFi, cit., "Relazione dell'operaio Ugo Orlandini".