



Sicilian Emigration and the Dynamics of Globalization

John Alcorn (November 28, 2008)



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The great migrations of Sicilians, since the unification of Italy, were intimately connected with the dynamics of globalization. My paper concentrates on the mass migration of Sicilians to America from the late 1890s to the early 1920s.

If we define globalization as the international integration of markets, then the golden age of globalization was roughly contemporaneous with Liberal Italy. The advent of railroads and steamships (technological innovations) made it possible to transport bulk goods and labor swiftly and cheaply across continents and oceans. Global markets in goods, capital, and labor developed on the



basis of the transportation revolution.

The mass migration of Sicilians to America made more prosperous both Italy and the United States, but deepened divisions within each country.

In Italy, the emigration of Sicilians exacerbated the contrast between Sicily and northern Italy. My paper identifies a broad variety of mechanisms. For example, the great migration of Sicilians to America indirectly helped to finance industrialization in northern Italy, thereby widening the economic gap between north and south. This momentous mechanism was a chain with three links: 1) A remarkably high rate of savings by Sicilians in America. 2) Massive remittances to banks in Sicily. 3) Financial intermediation (conversion of remittances into capital) to investors in Piedmont, Lombardy, and Liguria.

In the United States, the massive immigration of Sicilians induced a backlash by a coalition of two major groups with separate motivations: a) Nativists motivated by cultural bias. b) Trade unions motivated by economic self-interest. My paper identifies a variety of specific mechanisms that shaped motivations and coalitions in America towards Sicilians. This backlash culminated in a policy against immigration (The Great Restriction), marking the end of the golden age of globalization in America.

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

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