MIGRANT ECOLOGIES IN THE PRESS: CHICAGO ITALIANS AND *THE TRIBUNE*

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ABSTRACT

During the age of mass migration (1850-1940) more than 4 million Italians reached the United States. The experience of Italians in United States cities has been largely explored during the twentieth century and produced a vast amount of academic literature. However, the study of migrants' adjustment practices connected to nature is a quite recent concern, also for Environmental History. Migrants' visions of nature influenced their practices and attitudes toward the environment, helping them to be resilient and adjust to different urban contexts and manage the sense of displacement provoked by their encounter with a U.S. metropolis at the turn of the twentieth century.

Italians of Chicago, for instance, in their quest for a partial self-sufficiency brought into the urban space non-urban practices—like the raising of animals, the farming of many vacant lots in the city, and the collection of different kinds of materials from the urban landscape—which challenged the modernity project that was deeply embedded in the functionalist city enterprise. Their way of inhabiting the city was a performative activity, which generated hybrid spaces. In many cases though, these practices were perceived by U.S. authorities and public opinion as a sign of backwardness and an obstacle to modernity: this complicated immigrants' aim for self-sufficiency and generated conflicts over the uses of urban space.

One of the challenges that emerge from the study of migration phenomena through the lens of environmental history is the lack of sources: where can scholars find the environment in migration studies' sources? With this article we address such an apparent epistemological blank spot by analyzing one specific kind of written source: we aim to explore the Italian experience in Chicago through the articles of the newspaper *The Chicago Tribune*, which we analyze following the socio-ecological dichotomy of proper urban space vs. unruly migrant practices. Known for its nativist, isolationist, and anti-Catholic positions—which targeted the Irish before shifting to Italians—*The Tribune* played the role of an anti-Italian-immigrant press organ from the 1870s until the first decade of the twentieth century.[1] In an era when white Anglo-Saxon primacy within society, racism, and discriminatory discourses on immigrants' ethnic qualities were commonly accepted as scientific, *The Tribune* reportage of Italians' poor conditions and livelihoods concurred in re-enforcing such a narrative.[2] With this article, we want to show that through the

[1] On the history of *The Tribune* and its political positions, see Kinsley (1946).
[2] To deepen the relationship between science, ideas of "race," and immigration, and their influence on the work of the Dillingham Commission, see Benton-Cohen (2018).

often biased and deformed lens of the WASP middle-class press, it is possible to reconstruct Italians' and other immigrant's urban practices, as well as to show how so-called modernization processes were contested and resisted by various marginal urbanites.

TRANSHUMANT URBAN STRATEGIES: MOBILITY AND IMMIGRANTS IN MODERNIZING URBAN AMERICA

"A transhumant or metaphoric city insinuated itself into the clear text of the planned and readable city" (de Certeau 1980, 142). With his enlightening and prophetic style, Michel de Certeau offers a key to understanding the power of mobility within the urban context. According to the French historian, the urban space should be understood as an ensemble of different patterns and practices, which become visible when those iterant and itinerant trajectories cross each other. In de Certeau's view, street-level practices of everyday life characterize the cityscape as the environment where the multiple ways of inhabiting that "produce the city" occur.[3] Such a view opposes the top-down perspective that long informed—as it still does—urban planners regards and activities towards urban spaces. From the ground level, seemingly ephemeral livelihoods such as scavenging, recycling waste, raising and herding domestic animals around the city, and farming liminal green lots become a way of valuing the city space as a whole. Therefore, assuming that living (in) the city is an act of mobility-informed dwelling and livelihood practices, we argue that by moving between the urban and the rural, subsistence and wage, commons and private property, migrants' urban strategies were similar to the inherently itinerant pastoral practice of transhumance[4] which continuously challenged state borders and the enclosing of private space. We analyze those transhumant urban strategies through a highly significant case: Chicago.

[3] "History begins on the ground level, with some steps" de Certeau (1980, 147). With these words de Certeau states the inherent bottom-up approach of geo-history, at once a methodological posture and a scholarly practice. Much like environmental history, the French historian was theorizing a scholarly historical practice that united geographical or spatial approach to a diachronically based analysis of events de Certeau.

[4] Transhumance is a millennial practice that was—and still is—performed all around the Mediterranean area, consisting in the movement of shepherds, cattle, sheep, and other herding animals following seasonal pasturelands. The same practice, with different names, can be found all around the globe. Braudel spent a significant part of his work on those practices, which he defined as "continual migrations" Braudel (1949, 85-103) in his account of Mediterranean geo-history.

For millions of people, New York was the entry point to urban America, but often Italian immigrant patterns did not end in the Five Boroughs of NYC. Italians immigrants were mostly leaving behind their peasant lives and they were looking for urban environments and livelihoods. Chicago could very well rival the Big Apple as an urban future in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Chicago was in fact the second preferred destination for Italians in America, as it was for most other immigrant groups.[5] As the Gateway City to the American West (Cronon 1991), Chicago exerted a potent attraction on newcomers, luring and ordering nature, goods, and laborers. We decided to focus on migrant subjects for they constitute inherently unruly figures within the modernity project. Plus, migrants were key constituents of Chicago's metabolism as a part of its circulation and extractivist processes. We opted for Italians as an ethnic group because of their high numbers and the interest that their unruly activities raised among journalists, social reformers, and politicians in the U.S. (Serra 2009; Vellon 2014; Guglielmo 2010). We argue that Italian immigrants epitomize the undisciplined figure of the immigrant within the U.S. urban environment. In a world where identity, nationality, class, and race were to be fixed and shaped by the joint action of capitalism and nationalism, immigrants were a living crack in this heteronormative apparatus. Italian immigrants' unruly livelihoods help us see how the construction of modern urban environments—in North America and elsewhere—was often contested from a variety of groups which were systematically and deliberately excluded and marginalized by this very social, economic, and environmental transformation.

WRITING AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF MIGRATIONS: WHAT TO LOOK FOR?

Environmental history deals with the relationship between humans and the environments they inhabit: a relationship that produces temporal and social shifts as

[5] In the decade from 1900 to 1920, when emigration from Italy knew a massive growth, the Italian population in Chicago increased from 16,008 to 59,215, and this number represented one fifth of the Italian population in the United States in 1910. The total number of Italians in the United States was 2,045,877. Nelli (1983, 62); See Daniels (1990, 189).

well as ecological and environmental transformations. Environments and human societies in fact influence and—to use Lefebvre's words—co-produce each other continually (Lefebvre 1974). But what does it mean to look at the environment from an historical perspective? For environmental historians it is often a matter of summoning different disciplines and analyzing anew the sources we already possess in order to unveil the *environmental* in them. From a new observation, then, new questions—and answers—arise. In order to see that, environmental historians interrogate historical sources differently and we come up with new historical questions about the environment, and new ecological questions about history. As French historian Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud wrote, those questions might be the following ones:

> How did people, at different moments in time, perceive what we call today our environment? When neither the word nor the concept existed, what did people enjoy or dislike among the elements that surrounded them; whether built or natural, in a given time and given circumstances? What did they regard as an amenity, and what a nuisance? What struck them, if at all, as unfair, and did they complain? (2001, 20)

Following this methodological insight, we looked at the history of the Italians in the United States trying to imagine the encounter of many Italian peasants with the vastness of the American urban environment. What did the view of Chicago's skyline mean to those Italian peasants? How did these migrants see the urban space? Which experiences and vernacular knowledge did they mobilize to adapt to their new urban environment? Which sources do we need as historians to write their history? And what do we ask the pages of a newspaper to add new knowledge—as practitioners of environmental history of migration—about migrants' experience?

Environmental history of migration (EHM) looks at the transnational, vernacular, and bodily knowledges and practices that moved along with migrants to their new home. As migrants moved, so did their environments and their ecological understanding. Seeds, food, herding, scavenging, and picking wild herbs; those were all practices which originated in the practical and centuries-long relationship between Italian migrants and their rural environments back in Europe. In fact, most of those migrants came from rural areas (Vecoli 1964, 1983), and once in Chicago, New York, and

other American cities, they behaved accordingly to their own ecological understanding. Often relegated to the poorest neighborhoods and the lowest social classes, Italians mobilized their ecological knowledge in order to make a living out of what they could access in U.S cities: wastelands, dumpsites, seemingly abandoned lots of land, and lawns, as well as by raising domestic animals. What upper- and middle-class White Anglo-Saxon Protestant dwellers considered proper behavior for an urban citizen did not match Italian immigrants' needs. Italian saw and inhabited the environment of the Windy City differently from their fellow citizens in central Chicago. In this brief contribution, we want to retrace their vision and their understanding of the environment of Chicago. By looking at Italian practices as described by *The Chicago Tribune* we want to show how a different reading of the same narrative can lead to a very different understanding of Italian immigrant unruliness in American cities (Fisher 2015, McCammack, 2018).

With this essay, we mainly focus on one source: *The Chicago Tribune*, the most read newspaper in all of the Midwest.[6] We deliberately choose to focus on the *Tribune* since our aim is to write an essay that shows the methodology of Environmental History of Migrations: as Environmental historians, we don't want to write a comprehensive history of the Italians in Chicago, but we want to put up a few bricks for a bridge between disciplines, which migration historians could also cross, in order to start reading and interrogating sources with a different point of view. In addition to the *Tribune*'s reportage, we analyze some Italian reformers' and travelers' accounts of the same streets and immigrant groups in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Chicago, as well as a few Italian-American novels and other journalistic and scholarly accounts of other contemporary cities in the U.S. and in Italy.

[6] The *Chicago Daily Tribune* was founded in 1847. In its early decades, accomplished through the presence of the editor Joseph Medill, the Tribune supported the Republican Party. Later, in the first decades of the twentieth century, Robert McCormick—Medill's grandson—took control of the *Tribune*, making it the most read newspaper in Chicago in 1925, with a daily circulation of circa 650,000 copies. In this latter era the *Tribune* dealt in depth with issues of social and political reform, publishing investigations and editorials about political corruption. See Kinsley (1946).

In analyzing a few of the hundreds of *Tribune*'s articles concerning Italian improperness in Chicago, we follow the socio-ecological dichotomy of proper urban space vs. unruly migrant practices. We focus on the timespan between 1880 and 1924, the peak of the mass migration period.[7] The same decades correspond to a historical transformation in American cities which Chicago led, together with New York (Cronon 1991; Steinberg 2002, 2014). In fact, in those years, Chicago underwent a series of modernization processes—sanitary and infrastructural changes—that changed the cityscape and subverted the ecological relationship that had previously characterized American cities and their urban environment until the mid-nineteenth century. Not by chance, the first skyscrapers to appear in the United States were built in Chicago. Dirty roads, the lack of sewage systems, the free roaming of wild and domestic animals: those quite common features of urban life began to be consciously fought by municipal governments as well as by urban boosters and developers. But to free the city from its nonhuman inhabitants was not a matter of propriety to the vast mass of urban poor who relied on pigs, goats, and free access to waste and the urban green to sustain themselves (McNeur 2014; Fisher 2015).

In such a context, the resilient practices that European migrants performed were often perceived as non-modern. Often ethnically secluded in marginal areas, where the lack of public services and job opportunities exposed them to major setbacks to their American dream, Italians used their lay ecological knowledge to sustain themselves and supplement their meager incomes. As other immigrant groups did, Italians mobilized their rural background to transform their environments, producing hybrid urban-rural livelihoods. Italians' precarious and unruly livelihoods often clashed with the idea of a clean and ordered city that social reformers and urban planners were enforcing at the

[7] Concerning the Italian mass migration, Italian migration historiography generally focuses on the timespan between 1870—when the kingdom started to officially register emigrants—and 1924, when the Quota Act blocked mass immigration to the U.S., the period known as the *Grande Migrazione*. Recently historians placed the migratory flows from Europe to North America into the wider context of a unitary and global migratory flow of people, labor, and capital that occurred between the nineteenth and twentieth century. In the case of Chicago, the number of Italians swiftly rose from 552 in 1870 to 5,685 in 1890, then reached 59,215 by 1920, when they became the fourth largest immigrant group in the city behind Poles, Germans, and Russians. See Guglielmo (2004, 14); Bevilacqua et alt. (2001); McKeown (2004).

time.[8] Adjustment practices like raising animals in the streets or in tenement cellars, as well as scavenging and cultivating vacant lots to provide food for their families, were labelled by American authorities as undesired remains of a rural past which had no space in their idea of a modern city. Hence, urban reforms like street cleaning, or the implementation of *zoning* laws—the tool through which a municipality began regulating the uses of its land—often put obstacles in the way of activities like scavenging or animal agriculture (Brinkley, Vitiello, 2014).[9]

It is exactly in these interstices of the ephemeral history of Chicago that we can find precious sources and write an environmental history of migration. Descriptions are peopled with strange words and characters, at least for a modern urban context: a narrative where "Italian" and "immigrant" are often coupled with "goat," "chicken," and "cow." In this story, right next to skyscrapers or beltways, we see "farms," "gardens," "truck farmers," and "market gardening," while abandoned lots and liminal urban wastelands are reclaimed as commons to produce vegetables. It is a landscape populated by scavengers and peddlers, where "waste," "garbage," "junk," and "refuse" are transformed into valuable resources. It is all already there, in the *Tribune*'s articles, but instead of buying into journalists' criticism, we analyze Italians' unruliness through the lens of their ecological understanding of the urban environment. This method allowed us to extrapolate the *environmental content* in the *Tribune*'s articles and helped us to build an alternative narrative "from below."

ITALIAN SCAVENGER AND URBAN HYGIENE

Hygiene and waste mismanagement, as well as urban and social propriety, have long been tied together in late nineteenth century journalistic accounts. Migrants, minorities, and new urban dwellers' mischief were often protagonists of such reportage

[8] On the changes to the urban environment, especially in the United States, at the turn of the twentieth century, see: McNeur (2014), Melosi (2000), Tarr (1975).
[9] The city of Chicago formed a zoning commission in 1919 and implemented its first zoning law in 1923. In the mind of Chicago Mayor William Thompson, zoning was important to "preserve property values and . . . for the city industrial growth," Lewis (2013, 92).

in Chicago as in other major American cities (Melosi 1982; Zimring 2005). In 1882 the *Tribune* began paying attention to the hygiene problems that the growing city was facing with the lack of public cleaning services.[10] Notably, in the summer of 1882, the area of Chicago, and especially the Italian neighborhoods, were hit by a cholera epidemic.[11] Two years later, with the epidemic gone, hygiene had not improved, and a *Tribune* reporter venturing to the north side of Fourteenth Street, between Indiana and Michigan Avenue, could still smell "sickening refuse that pollute the air beyond the endurance of man of the ordinary mold."[12] Without the city government's will to spend more money on a public garbage disposal system, scavenging was the easiest possible bottom-up solution developed by local inhabitants to manage their own neighborhoods' properly.[13] Surprisingly, or maybe not, the solution that the *Tribune* suggested was not to pay for a public waste disposal system, but to teach the inhabitants of the Twelfth Ward "to burn their own garbage."[14] In that way, those uncivilized urbanites could contribute to the cleaning-up of the city prior to the World's Fair that was to happen in Chicago in the next months.[15] What the *Tribune*'s journalist considered as a sign of Italian immigrant's backwardness could instead be understood as a bottom-up strategy to cope with the lack of public interest in waste management. But such a view did not pertain solely to American citizenship. Class biases and racist considerations all concurred in marginalizing the poor. Significantly, also Italian middle- and upper-class dwellers and travelers shared similar accounts of immigrant neighborhoods in the U.S at the time.

In 1892, the Italian playwright Giuseppe Giacosa visited Chicago. During these days, he strolled through the city and wrote a memoir—later published as "Impressioni

[10] "Health Situation and Deaths," Chicago Tribune, March 28, 1882, 8.
[11] Ibid.
[12] "The Italian Quarter," Chicago Tribune, July 24, 1884, 5.
[13] "The Garbage Must be Consumed," Chicago Tribune, July 19, 1892, 4.
[14] Ibid.
[15] "There should be no shrinking or half-heartedness about this . . . Half-way measure will not do. It has been decided that the city must be put in presentable condition for the World's Fair . . . We ought not to have five hundred streets in the city heaped with trash, we must get rid of that garbage at the soonest." "The Garbage must be Consumed," Chicago Tribune, July 19, 1892, 4.

d'America"—about the Italian neighborhoods of Chicago. Among those memories, Giacosa focused on the figures of old women who he saw scavenging all day for useful scrap materials and leftover food. Those female scavengers were searching a triangular plot of land next to the railroad, on the pathway that Giacosa took every day from his hotel to the city center:

> . . . lo spettacolo della nostra miseria, va cercato un po' da per tutto e più nell'esercizio di certe infime industrie che solamente i nostri connazionali patiscono di esercitare. La più comune, consiste nel ribruscolare fra il lezzume ammassato presso i grandi depositi di cereali, le concerie, gli scali d'imbarco e le stazioni ferroviarie. È industria di vecchie donne delle nostre provincie meridionali andate in America col marito e coi figliuoli. Questi attendono all'arte loro od ai negozi; esse passano, piova o nevichi, l'intera giornata fra le spazzature per riportarne la sera, a farla grassa, il valore di pochi centesimi. (Giacosa, 1899, 117)[16]

The "spectacle offered by Italian misery" described by the composer did not differ much from what Italian journalist Matilde Serao described in her reportage on Naples in the same years (Serao, 1906). The point is that European and American cities were facing an epochal transformation, one where industrialization, urban growth and renewal, and increasing global trade all joined with a massive proletarization of millions of people. What Wines (1985) defined as the re-cycling mentality worked both in urban America as it did in Europe, but it was swiftly eradicated by new capitalist ways of valuing the environment. What wage-workers and middle-class citizens saw as valueless waste was still valuable to Italian immigrants. While many Italian men of Chicago spent their days in seasonal or part-time occupations in railroad jobs and construction (Gugliemo 2000,

[16] "The spectacle of our misery must be sought everywhere, and more in the scope of certain low-grade industries our compatriots suffer from practicing. The most common one is rummaging in those masses of garbage next to big grain warehouses, tanneries, loading areas, and railway stations. It is an industry mostly practiced by old women from southern [Italian] areas, who migrated to American with their husbands and children. These wait in their shops while the women spent—even in the rain or snow—the whole day in the garbage just to pick up—at best—few cents in value." Translated into English by the authors.

18), Italian women roamed the streets in search for food or valuable—to them, not to proper Americans—items as they used to do back at home.[17]

> Cartaccie, ritagli di cuoio, cenci, chiodi, bullette, pezzi di lamiera, fili di ferro, quanto è ultimo vilissimo rifiuto della grossa vita industre e meccanica, tutto raccolgono ed insaccano… Non le nutrisce anche il mondezzaio? Io ne vidi addentare gustosamente certi avanzi di patate succherine raccattati fra la spazzatura. Dio sa, quelle patate da quanti giorni erano cotte e come inacidite! Sedani, carote, cavoli vizzi e raggrinziti, mele fradicie, quanto le più povere cucine diedero per disperazione al corbello dello spazzaturaio, è loro pasto quotidiano. (Giacosa 1899, 117-118)[18]

Giacosa's notes about his time in Chicago and New York City are full of similar descriptions, which tellingly depicted the ambivalent tension of transforming urban environments during the transition to modernity.[19] But while Giacosa focused specifically on Italians, also the Irish, Germans, Greeks, Bohemians, Jews, and the fast-growing African-American community of the so-called Black Belt engaged in similar practices, or used to, in Chicago as in other cities.[20]

Through practices like scavenging, those immigrant urbanites contributed to the functioning of Chicago's urban metabolism, exploring and experiencing it via the rational and original application of those livelihood skills previously used in their homeland. Together with wealth and jobs, the Windy City produced waste and wasted lives too. Given their subordinate position within the urban socio-ecological context of the growing city, those unruly citizens mobilized their lay knowledge, developing an original hybrid livelihood in a foreign environment. Moreover, through their practical relationships with liminal and wasted nature, those immigrants recognized and

[17] Among various authors, Nuto Revelli gathered many testimonies of Northern Italian women's scavenging and inventiveness in gathering herbs and other valuable products in the Alpine region. See Revelli 1977.
[18] "Paper waste, leather scraps, rags, nails, tacks, plate slices, iron wire: they pick up all the vile remnants of industrial and manufacturing life. Aren't they fed even by the street cleaner? I saw them eating those scraps of sugary potatoes taken from the garbage. God only knows when these potatoes were cooked and became sour. Celeries, carrots, wrinkled cabbages, rotten apples, all that the poorest kitchens put into the street cleaner's basket becomes their daily meal." Translated into English by the authors.
[19] For deeper treatment of this aspect of Giacosa's writing, see Guarnieri (2006, 31-64).
[20] See Valisena, Armiero, Mazzoli (forthcoming).

benefited from the residual value inherent in discarded objects. Such a valorization by poor migrants helped the city manage the unprecedented waste-ecology that modern urbanization was developing. However, those unruly behaviors ended up supporting the exclusion and the racialization of migrants by wealthier citizens throughout all American cities and in Europe (Valisena, Armiero, Mazzoli, forthcoming). Narratives and "reportage from the slums" soon became typical in Chicago's Italian areas.

The establishment of a publicly managed waste-disposal service which in Chicago started in 1849 (Colten 1994, 128) threatened the very basis of such unruly hybrid livelihoods. As *The Tribune* reported, local scavengers set up a long-lasting protest against a modern waste facility built right in the heart of an Italian neighborhood. Apart from the unpleasant smell coming from the facility, the population could not embrace the "marvelous effectiveness" of the system's technology, which allowed for the conversion of garbage into fertilizers. As *The Tribune* journalist L. J. Kadish wrote, to his astonishment "the local scavengers found it more profitable to use the garbage for street filling and to feed the swine."[21] At stake, of course, was not modernity or technological progress, but the privatization of the commons and the loss of control over a means of survival.

FARMES AND GATHERERS IN THE URBAN WILD

Italians arrived in the Windy City at the time of its stormy industrial development in the 1870s. At that time, according to the U.S. Census of 1870, there were 552 Italians in Chicago and they settled mostly in the First, 27th, and 42nd wards. As noted by sociologist Giovanni Schiavo in his study on Americanization of Italians in Chicago in 1928, these areas were previously inhabited by Germans, Scandinavians, Poles, and the Irish. Those wards "had been for generations the seat of rampant vice, and of the worst types of political corruption." In late-nineteenth-century Chicago, the 42th ward was known as "Little Hell," and the First ward—mostly inhabited by Italians from the

[21] "How to deal with garbage," Chicago Tribune, July 3, 1892, 19.

southern regions of Calabria and Basilicata—was the old red-light district. Here, in 1892, the living conditions were "filthy and rotten tenements" where refuse and manure "accumulate undisturbed" and "tuberculosis prevail[s]." As Schiavo remarked, from those grime-dominated descriptions "we may form in our mind a vague picture of the wretched conditions with which the Italians were confronted when they settled in Chicago" (Schiavo 1928, 30-34). The state of the First ward did not improve in the following two decades. A 1915 survey depicted tenements' narrow backyards full of "decaying garbage, thrown there for want of any better place, rubbish of every description, filth from the stables and yard closets fill the so-called yard, which serves as well for the home of various animals and as the playground for many little children" (Walker 1916, 296-7). Unlike the Lithuanians described by Sinclair (1906), most of the Italians did not work for the meat-packing industry. Furthermore, Italians in Chicago did not comply with the narrative of the one and only Little Italy, or the idea of the uniform—and spatially segregated—community. As Dominic Candeloro argued, "Italians were occupying all the three directions of the Loop, clustering in the River Wards" (2003, 15), close to the working sites they were employed on. Italians settled between Halsted Street and the river,[22] but they were also found around Taylor Street and the area of the present-day University of Chicago, where more than 25,000 Italians lived in the heyday of immigration. Approximately, around the mid-1920s, some 75,000 Italians were living in the Windy City (Candeloro 2003, 16). The idea of the existence of only one Little Italy is a construction elaborated after the Second World War, when the last great wave of Italian immigrants arrived (Gabaccia 2007, 25-41; Rainhorn 2007, 45-56). Those women and men often discovered their *Italianity* only after they had migrated. Those Italians knew only one *paese*,[23] the small hamlets and towns where they

[22] The area where Hull House was—and still is—located. See Jane Addams (1920, 17). On a citywide level, Thomas Guglielmo individuates up to seventeen Italian neighborhoods in the early twentieth century Chicago. The most populated was the Near West Side area, where by 1910 twenty-five thousand Italians lived (2000, 17-19).

[23] In Italian, the word *paese* tellingly refers both to "home country," as well as to a small town or a rural hamlet. Those very limited worlds and cognate world-visions informed—and to many extents, it still does—the horizon and the sense of belonging of most Italians on the two sides of the Atlantic. As various Italian migration scholars have stated, Italian emigrants in the years of the great Italian migration often began to think of themselves as Italian

grew up. They spoke their own dialects, befriended, lived, and worked with their kin or *paesani*, and to the newly arrived immigrants, the Italians already living on this other side of the Atlantic seemed as foreign as were Chicagoans (Luconi, Barone 2010). The *Italianity* we refer to must be understood in very local terms: in the choice of a place to live, Italian migrants reproduced their homeland within the gridded urban space of American metropolises: both sources and historiography confirm that these Little Italies were also fragmented spaces. Italians abroad adhered to a sort of *campanilismo*, that basically meant "loyalty only to that area over which one could hear the bell from the village church" (Fisher, 2015, 53). This led to a precise spatial subdivision within Little Italies: Italians from different provinces lived together, grouped in different streets. Often *campanilismo* affected and fragmented the disposition of Italians even within a single street in a Little Italy: through word of mouth and the so-called chain migration[24] mechanism, the first settlers invited friends and families and re-created their small village of provenance even in a single tenement. As the *Chicago Tribune* rightfully reported, "Italian has a wide meaning."[25]

Nevertheless, those concepts were almost completely unknown to many social reformers and most public officers dealing with immigrants in the early 1900s and later on. As social reformer Mike Davis wrote in the mid-1920s ". . . most people [working with immigrants] seem to imply: Americanism is a dogma; the inferiority of foreign born as datum; uniformity as a social goal; compulsion as a method" (1921, 12). Given that point, it is not surprising that forcing foreigners to behave like proper Americans was perceived as a "natural goal" for police officers, property owners, and whoever lived close enough to the Italian neighborhoods. A contentious place of disagreement was the interpretation of public space and its functioning: Italian immigrants and proper Americans understood urban space in very different ways.

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from the moment they were classified and treated as an unitary ethnic and national group by American or other immigration officers upon their arrival. See Bevilacqua et alt. (2001).

[24] On chain migration mechanism, see J. and L. MacDonald (1968).

[25] "Italian has a wide meaning," Chicago Tribune, June 7, 1910, 8. On regional and local differences between Italians, see also Broers (2003).

According to Clay McShane (1979), by the beginning of the 1900s urban bureaucrats saw streets mainly as arteries for the flow of goods, while for many migrants they were places for social activities and various trades, relational and shared spaces at once. The American demarcation between the public space of the city and citizens' private dwelling areas was something that those Italian immigrants could not grasp properly. The same goes for the separation between working space and the home. As social reformer Jane Addams noted: "He [the average Italian] usually spends all his time outdoors, doing his work on the sidewalks or in the court or in the yard of his dwelling . . . where the goats and the donkeys or other animals share equally, with him and his family" (1920, 118-9). And again: "Because of limited space, fewer women kept small animals, except for a few caged rabbits, chickens or birds" (Gabaccia 1984, 93). As most other social reformers did, Jane Addams (1920, 282) also complained about those migrants, mostly Italians and Greeks, who used the streets of Chicago to sell food and vegetables:

> One of the striking features of our neighborhood twenty years ago, and one to which we never became reconciled, was the presence of huge wooden garbage boxes fastened to the street pavement in which the undisturbed refuse accumulated day by day. The system of garbage collecting was inadequate throughout the city but it became the greatest menace in a ward such as ours, where the normal amount of waste was much increased by the decayed fruit and vegetables discarded by the Italian and Greek fruit peddlers, and by the residuum left over from the piles of filthy rags which were fished out of the city dumps and brought to the homes of the rag pickers for further sorting and washing. (1920, 282)

Jane Addams' grievances about migrants' behavior materialized through her efforts to teach immigrants better ways to interact with the urban environment. The same vision was shared by other American public institutions during the Progressive Era. Such an account might come as a surprise especially since it comes from a social reformer who spent her life to improve Chicago's poors' conditions. Yet most social reformers like Jane Addams maintained the same progress-informed modern vision of Chicago's ruling classes, one which impeded them from seeing how rag-picking and scavenging were but an economically rational response to the impoverishment and the social marginality

that those Italian immigrants withstood. Also, since there was no public waste collecting service in their neighborhoods in Chicago, Italian had to do it themselves. Furthermore, those practices were elaborated by Italians drawing from their own vernacular knowledge. Italians' unruly *savoir-faire* had been constructed and transmitted from generation to generation in the context of rural communities which had to fight against a constant increase of population and limited resources. Especially in the south of Italy, the infamous *latifondo* (Petrusewicz 1996) social and agricultural structure forced poor farmers to constantly deal with few sources of food and income. In such a context, Italians had to develop new strategies to cope with their families' daily needs. In that perspective, urban America's concept of private property was easy to understand, but less so was the concept of public parks and leisure areas.

FROM SLUM ECOLOGIES TO PERI-URBAN FARMING

Scenes such as the one described by Addams were quite common in the Near North Side, the area known as Little Sicily or "Little Hell." The not-so-merry nickname of the area around Goose Island blended in a more-than-human juxtaposition the endless activities of the steel mills—the blast furnaces and the gas works situated in the area—and the activities of the Black Hand.[26] Obviously, nobody from the main Chicago newspaper found problematic the fact that those immigrants were continuously exposed to the toxic miasmas of the industrial area. Evidently, the elites, with their passion for a sanitized and beautified city, could be disgusted by immigrants' urban moral ecologies (Valisena, Armiero, Mazzoli, forthcoming) but they were not equally horrified by the urban capitalistic ecologies of production and profits.

Italians there, although mostly employed in road and building construction, never gave up to their vegetable gardens, building wooden shacks on every plot of land they could find, filling those areas with tomatoes, lentils, and other vegetables, and also with some goats and hens. The open spaces around 67th Street were thus transformed

26 "Little Hell," Chicago Tribune, November 27, 1875, 7.

from grasslands to hybrid spaces for working, socializing, and gardening, areas where goats could be seen roaming around to the dismay of the proper American residents.[27] Those practices served as a means to "remember distant villages, regions, and nations," but differently from what would later happen with the more "Americanized" relation with public parks, those early immigrants developed original ways to produce hybrid cultural/natural spaces, where work and leisure mixed rather than separated (Fisher 2015, 54). In his extensive research on Italian immigrants in Chicago, Dominic Candeloro (1981, 315) has stressed their quest for autonomy. Chicago Heights, a heavily Italian neighborhood in the city, was crowded with chickens, goats, and pigs. Aiming to limit their dependence from the market — and from wage work — Italians used to make canned tomatoes, pasta, and bread while harvesting urban commons, generally invisible to others, items such as chicory mushrooms and burdock stems (Arctium lappa).[28] While Italian immigrants were well known for their scavenging ability to extract value from waste, their skills as urban gathers still deserve more scrutiny. Alessandro Mastrovalerio was a Hull House resident and a journalist working for many years with Italians in Chicago. In one of his writings, he reasoned through the formidable picking instinct of Italians:

> The Italian instinct for picking is notable. In Italy they are used to pick wood from the forest, weeds from the fields, wheat and grain after the mowers fruit from the trees, insects from the bark of the trees and vines, for which they are paid so much per hundred; herbs, beans, pease (sic) and other truck-farm products from the plants; the seeds of weeds from wheat, oats, rye, etc.; herbs from the woods, and many other things which the average American would never think of using in any way. (1895, 134)

Mastrovalerio explained Italians' exceptional eye for recognizing and making use of any kind of resources available around them as a form of cultural heritage, a bodily knowledge derived from a long tradition dating back to modern-time era usages and

[27] See for instance "Empty City Lots," Chicago Tribune, April 15, 1922, 22. See also Candeloro (1981, 28).
[28] Ibid., 316. About the role of mushrooms for Italian immigrants in California and their gathering skills, see Arora (2008).

habits. In one of his novels, the Italian-American writer Toni Ardizzone confirms this idea of the city as an immense urban mine from which Italians could extract precious resources. In a passage from one of his novels, Ardizzone describes the unusual "hunt and gather" skills of *Ziu* Griddu, a Sicilian immigrant trying to survive in Chicago:

> At home, Ziu Griddu had a lot of hungry mouths to feed. Each day before dawn he tied the piece of rope that held up his pants and donned his jacket and put on his cap, then smoothed his drooping black moustache and ventured out with his knife and empty sack, looking for anything that he could bring back that evening to feed his family. No frog or snail, no snake or worm or slug, was too small. (1999, 167-8)

Historian Hasia R. Diner confirms Italians' outstanding ability to scan the (peri-)urban environment, looking for "plants that most Americans disdained as not being food" (2001, 61). Sometimes this foraging occurred in the remaining urban green areas, or, and Diner mentions precisely Chicago, in dumping grounds and vegetable markets, where Italian women collected articles which, although discarded, they could still use.

Pluri-activity and multiple sets of professional skills were a common feature of many Italians, who accordingly to the seasonal needs of the European labor markets would likely turn into masons, lumberjacks, miners, quarrymen, diggers, carpenters, and workers in many other jobs (Corti, Schor 1995; Dadà 1994; Petersen 1993). Such flexibility helped Italians to adapt to different environments, often surviving at the fringe of the "proper" urban space where their skills could be of special value.

Nonetheless, this attitude was not only a coping strategy to deal with extreme poverty. Italian immigrants preserved their connection to the land also when they moved up in the social scale of the city. An article in the *Tribune* dated August 15, 1909 congratulated a group of Italians who "abandoned the slums" to become "town farmers." The anonymous reporter described as a conquest worth mentioning the "normal housing" where Italians were now living in the suburbs of Chicago, almost at the city limits. Those "old-fashioned houses with an upstairs and a downstairs" were drastically different—in a better way—from the crowded tenements which had long hosted Italian families. Those Italians, mainly women, were working their plots growing vegetables for their own consumption. "Now many Italians in Chicago"—concluded the article—

"know that one can live better on the outskirts of the city than in the most congested streets . . . and they move as fast as they can to buy their little cottage."[29]Although still growing vegetables in the backyard, this passage into the suburbs seemed to turn Italian immigrants in the right direction to finally leave the wild costums of the slums and embrace the proper American (sub)urban lifestyle.

CONCLUSIONS

The transformation of Italian immigrants' livelihoods in Chicago corresponded to a shift in their social positioning among the white-ethnic groups in U.S. cities. At the same time, this historical change can be understood as a shift in the relationship between Italian immigrants and the environment of Chicago. However, even if they were moving their farming from the empty lots of Chicago's central areas to the periphery of the city, Italians didn't accept the proper ordering of urban America. Suburban style, to a certain extent, implied nothing but the application of the ideas of a clean and ordered city—which characterized the American urban context of the early twentieth century—to its suburban counterparts. Instead of tenements and skyscrapers placed on a gridded area, in suburbia it was typical to see endless rows of mono-familiar houses, most of which were equipped with a "(must be) perfect lawn." It could seem just a detail, but it is not: the transition from a backyard garden with vegetables to a smooth lawn occurred—due to a mixture of Romanticism and achieved wealth—in early twentieth century America, soon turning into an obsession.[30] The mono-familiar house with the lawn became the symbol of suburbia. In fact, in post-World War Two suburban America, a backyard with vegetables would surely be perceived as an unproper space. As Ted Steinberg wrote, a 1959 *Time* magazine article depicted the suburbs as a place where "crab grass on a lawn can lower a man's status faster than garbage in his foyer" (2006, 50). Whether Italians forsook their tomatoes, eggplants, and lettuce for such plain green lawns—thus being

[29] "Slums deserted for Suburb"; "Italians become Town Farmers," Chicago Tribune, August 15, 1909, 36.
[30] On the rise of the suburbs in the United States see Jackson 1985, Rome 2001.

finally tamed by the fascination of the American Dream—or they kept cultivating gardens in order to reproduce their homeland environments unconcerned about the aesthetics of suburbia, still deserves scrutiny. But that is the beginning of another story.

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