

# “No Mafia Here”: Crime, Race, and the Narrative of San Francisco’s Italian American “Model Colony”

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## Introduction

Crime, particularly organized crime, has been one of the major stigmas applied to Southern Italian immigrants in the United States. Their frequent involvement in illegal activities and violent felonies branded their social image and was a key argument used by those who claimed the need for immigration restrictions.<sup>1</sup> The high rate of arrest for “major offenses” among Italian Americans during mass immigration and the interwar years, even though possibly exacerbated by discrimination in the justice system, is a “fact” that contemporary observers and recent scholars have registered (Jenks and Lauck 1912, 54–57; Moehling and Piehl 2009, 758–759). This article does not aim to offer a new interpretation for either Italian immigrants’ heavy crime rate or the origin of the Sicilian American Mafia, whose sociohistorical explanations have been examined by academia in recent years (Lane 1989, 70–74; Lupo 2008). Rather, this article joins other current research that has investigated how Italian American criminal behavior came to be understood in the erudite as well as popular culture of the Progressive Era, not as a matter of social conditions or environment but as something related to their racial background. To use Thomas Guglielmo’s (2003, 85) expression, Southern Italian “criminalization and racialization worked in tandem.” The arrival in the United States of Italians and of other “new immigrants” from eastern and southern Europe between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with the rising of eugenics and social Darwinism. Pseudoscientific theories professing the inequality of human races and their classification in an indefinite spectrum of subdivisions spread outside universities into the wider society (Jacobson 1998, 39–90; Spickard 2007, 264–268). In the most noteworthy of the then-proposed racial schemes—William Ripley’s (1899) and Madison Grant’s (1916) tripartition of the European races into Nordics, Alpines, and Mediterraneans—Northern Italians fell into the second group, southerners into the third. According to its advocates, this distinction applied not only to phenotypical (especially craniometrical) features but also to psychic ones: For example, Alpines were reputed to be patient and peaceful while Mediterraneans were impulsive and excitable.<sup>2</sup> It was not surprising then

that Southern Italian criminal involvement was seen as inherited in their race temperament. As several scholars have noted, such speculations were not an all-American product. Transnational flows of the theories of Cesare Lombroso's school of anthropology influenced both U.S. academia and politics in distinguishing Italian northerners and southerners and in ascribing a proclivity toward crime to the latter (Deschamps 2000; D'Agostino 2002). American public opinion reflected the same ethnocentric discourses developed after Italy's unification in 1861. In the new Kingdom of Italy, the debate over the emerging "Southern question" never came to be dominated by an explicit racial discourse; nonetheless, images portraying the Mezzogiorno as the land of the "other," the "barbarian" untouched by "modern civilization," circulated in the press of Northern Italian cities, particularly in relation to "brigandage" (Teti 1993; Petraccone 2000, 54–65). The characterization of Southern Italian immigrants as "brigands," "savage," and "uncivilized" was frequent in the American press when reporting crimes (Serra 2009, 81; Iorizzo and Mondello 1980, 189).

The reactions of Italian American communities to this process of racialized criminalization of its members in the American press have varied. Sometimes, the Italian American community fragmented into a variety of subgroups blaming each other as being the cause of the problem: Northerners accused southerners, some Italian Americans distanced themselves from Sicilian Americans, and middle-class older Italian immigrants asked for restrictions against poor new Italian ones (Iorizzo and Mondello 1980, 53; Guglielmo 2003, 90; Serra 2009, 92). For the most part, however, Italian Americans coalesced defending the whole ethnic group without distinction of any kind. According to some scholars, the demonization of Italian Americans for crime and racial undesirability actually helped forge a common identity overcoming both class and regional differences (Luconi 2001, 47–49; Guglielmo 2003, 90). By promoting Italian pride, the ethnic press played a great role in this regard, reasserting "Italian worthiness as a civilized race" (Vellon 2014, 15).

The case under scrutiny here does not seem to fit this overall interpretation regarding Italian American responses to external attacks. By focusing on San Francisco's Italian American community, this article will illustrate its distinct reaction to criminalization and racial scapegoating. Two aspects justify such a "case study" analysis. First, one striking feature of San Francisco's Italian American population was its large central-northern stock, composed mainly of Tuscan, Ligurian, Lombard, and Piedmontese immigrants. Unlike those in East Coast and midwestern metropolises, these regional groups remained the majority of local Italian Americans

even after the increasing numbers of arrivals in the city of southerners, mostly Sicilians and Calabrians, from the late nineteenth century onward (Cinel 1982, 21). The second aspect considers the fact that, according to historians (Fichera 2011, 122–126; Mullen 2005, 88), the crime rate among San Francisco's Italian Americans for the period ranging from 1890 to 1940, while higher than that of non-Italian American "whites," was far below the average of their co-nationals residing in major U.S. cities. Sebastian Fichera (2011, 125–126) has pointed out that this was because of a powerful "community-building" process developed among local Italian Americans under the shared leadership of the Salesian priests and the *prominenti* whose entrepreneurial skills and philanthropy helped reduce poverty and criminality within the population.

As mentioned above, this article does not aim to discuss the reason for the high Italian immigrant crime rate; neither does it go into why the rate for San Francisco's Italian American community was lower than the national average, especially given that local contemporary observers, as we will see, did not notice such exceptionality. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that to understand why there were different rates of delinquency between San Francisco's, Chicago's, and New York's Little Italies, one should consider differences in environmental factors. Even though the Italian American experience in California should not be idealized, Italian Americans there not only found more economic prospects than in the East Coast or midwestern crowded cities but also encountered a less systemic form of racism, given the presence of a large number of Chinese immigrants attracting the most virulent discrimination.<sup>3</sup> If, conversely, such disproportions in crime rates are explained by the allegedly exceptional character of San Francisco's Italian American community, one risks the error of embracing, rather than deconstructing, the narrative of the "Model Colony" endorsed by the local Italian American elite. The model was constructed to prevent their own predominantly Northern Italian group from being tarred by the social stigma, such as that of the Mafia, that hung over Southern Italian enclaves in other major U.S. cities. In this article the concept of "narrative" is used to describe the Model Colony as a cultural construction forged by Italian elites by analyzing a variety of articles and publications. To deconstruct the Model Colony requires a closer examination of the rhetorical structure of these texts in order to extrapolate their historical meaning and origin. San Francisco's Italian American "exceptionalism" needs to be historicized and seen within the context of the early twentieth century, when the Italian American population of the city boomed together with social problems, crime included. The starting point will be a dramatic homicide event involving some of

Little Italy's Sicilians in 1905. It will be used as a lens through which to highlight the rising anti-Italian American prejudice in the San Francisco press that the Italian American *prominenti* challenged through their own narrative. To use Rudolph Vecoli's (1998, 19) expression, the Model Colony became a "force actively constructing social reality" in the sense that it influenced the local American audience's perception of the "exceptionality" of San Francisco's Italian American community, notwithstanding the many analogies connecting the East Coast and West Coast Italian American' experiences.

### The Vilardo Case

Late on the night of April 5, 1905, a human torso, "headless, armless and legless," as described by the *San Francisco Examiner*, was found in the doorway of a house in San Francisco's Little Italy, North Beach ("Headless, Armless, Legless" 1905, 1). The murder's unquestionable brutality facilitated the quick transformation of the event into a sensational news item, occupying the front pages for several months. While awaiting identification of the victim's remains, the press made three hypotheses: The crime was the act of a maniac, the work of the Mafia, or it was related to women and honor; for example, the "revenge of a family whose daughter had been betrayed," proposed the *San Francisco Chronicle*. ("Mutilated Body" 1905, 1). The Mafia hypothesis was immediately seen as the most likely. As reported by the *San Francisco Call*: "Mafia is the rumor on every tongue. Mafia is the conviction of the police" ("Marks on Victim's Skull" 1905, 11). The prevalence of the Mafia hypothesis was due to two facts. First, Dr. Bacigalupi, the Italian autopsy physician who first examined the remains, did not exclude the involvement of a "dread society," the crime being evidently premeditated. According to the *Examiner*, Bacigalupi's statement was: "From the fact that spaghetti was found in the stomach, and the fact that the skin is dark, I am of the opinion that the deceased is an Italian, possibly a Sicilian or Calabrian, because of a well authenticated practice among the criminal classes of these people to use hatchets" ("Victim May Have Been a Sicilian" 1905, 4). The second reason supporting the Mafia hypothesis was the belief that San Francisco's fishermen were involved. Detectives noted that the blanket in which the torso had been found was tied with a cord whose size and texture resembled that used by fishermen. San Francisco Bay Area fishermen were mainly Italian Americans, along with a smaller percentage of Greeks and Portuguese.<sup>4</sup> For San Francisco public opinion, these men represented the quintessence of the Latin or southern European race ("Fishermen of San Francisco" 1896, 1):

The San Francisco fisherman is a distinctive character among the industrial class. He is also as distinctive socially as well as by race. He belongs to the swarthy-skinned, black-eyed and mellow-tongued Latins. He hails either from the northern shores of the Mediterranean sea or from the Atlantic coast adjacent to the Pillars of Hercules.

In the Anglo-Saxon mind, the southern European race was associated with not only certain swarthy phenotypical traits but also with temperamental qualities, such as its "hot-blooded" attitude: "The inhabitants of Southern countries, such as Greece, Spain and Italy . . . are hot-blooded, quick tempered. It is a direct result of the climate in which they live," wrote a journalist ("The Stigma of the Stiletto" 1911, 10). The representation of fishermen in California's magazines and journals vividly reflected the "clash of romance and race" to use Joseph Cosco's (2003) expression in American perceptions of Italian Americans. Fishermen, their hot-bloodedness included, were seen as a picturesque remnant of an idealized past, as shown by local writer Roland Whittle's (1903, 366) description of a gathering in a humble Italian restaurant in North Beach:

The fishermen represent the whole seaboard of Italy, for they come from Venice, from Genoa, from Sicily where the winds still whisper the story of the classic times, and the tides appear to move to the music of Virgilian hexameters. They bring with them their local prejudices and their fierce feuds, and though for the most part quiet and peaceful enough, the hot blood flares out at times, and the rich oath of the Southern sailor is sometimes answered with a sharp knife thrust.

The fishermen's connection to the murder was reinforced on April 7, when two North Beach boys, while playing at Fishermen's Wharf, discovered a sack with the missing remains of the murdered person. The press described the findings in telling detail: "The head was that of a young man. Italian to the eye in every feature. It was dark skinned, thatched with coarse black hair. A closely clipped dark mustache covered the short upper lip. The eyes, which were very dark, were partly open" ("Head and Limbs Found" 1905, 1). On April 8 the enigma was solved. A Sicilian immigrant from Cefalù identified the remains: The murdered man was his brother, Biaggio Vilardo ("Mafia's Victim Biaggio Vilardo" 1905, 1). Vilardo had arrived in San Francisco less than a year previously. Neither his brother nor Biaggio were fishermen; they were both laborers, one on the railroad, the other in a gas company. However, the fishermen-Mafia connection remained the favorite line of investigation. On the basis of vague information, detectives established that Vilardo's murder was linked to another North Beach

murder that had occurred a couple of months before in which fishermen, apparently, were also implicated ("Drunken Brawl Ends in Death" 1905, 3). San Francisco newspapers started claiming that the Mafia, or the racketeering organization the Black Hand, had arrived in their "fair city" with its "cutthroats" and "murderers" whose "savage vendettas" and "blood-thirsty plotting" smacked of the "dark ages." The *Call* expended huge amounts of ink in describing North Beach as being totally at the mercy of the Mafia's "inhuman power": "Hundreds of Latins knew the dead man. But they dared not even whisper his name. . . . The knife of a blood relation might be lifted against them if they offended the power behind the Black Hand." According to the *Call* the killer might have been hidden in "any house in the Latin quarter." ("Are Sure It Is Work of Mafia" 1905, 1). In the mounting media uproar the leading suspect became a Sicilian woman. The day after the identification of Vilardo, the police had attributed the murder to Vilardo's landlord, Pietro Torturici (some publications spell the name "Tortorici"), a twenty-six-year-old Sicilian can-maker. Despite the \$500 reward offered for his capture, Torturici was never found by the police ("Murder—\$500 Reward" 1905, 1). Instead, Torturici's wife, Rosa, a young lady in her early twenties, was soon arrested on suspicion of being an accomplice. The police were sure Rosa had used her "comeliness" to lure Vilardo and attract him into the apartment where the murder had been perpetrated. The press stressed Rosa's beauty by publishing portraits of her, associating her physical traits with an image of "diabolic attractiveness" ("Close on Trial of the Murderer" 1905, 17; "Believe Woman Is in Plot" 1905, 25). The description in the *Call* was, as usual, the most sensational ("Shred of Flash on Apron" 1905, 25–27):

In face and feature she is a true daughter of Sicily, the land of the Mafia. Her wealth of hair is black, and her eyes are brown as berries. At times there is a flush in them that shows the daughter of a race that does not blanch at the sight of human blood. She would be regarded a beauty among men of the character of Vilardo . . . while the Sicilians live in a Modern American city, they are in heart and soul still Sicilians. This Torturici woman is one of that colony and knows how the women of the quarter would feel toward her if she told what she is believed to know. So she is silent or "does not understand." Her expression reads, "I will not tell."

The police tried to make Rosa confess using every means available, including psychological torture. For example, detectives violently forced a screaming and reluctant Rosa to visit the morgue in order to see her reaction in front of Vilardo's mutilated body. They were convinced that according to an "old Sicilian superstition" this tactic would have broken Rosa. However,



as reported by the *Call*, detectives "learned nothing: The woman is the daughter of a race that can keep secrets" ("Rosa Torturici Is Overcome by Horror" 1905, 1). The behavior of the police and the press's anti-Italian attitude quickly raised protests among the Italian American community. The local Italian newspaper *L'Italia* took the lead, its editor Ettore Patrizi also being a well-known community leader. The newspaper denied that the Mafia existed among Italian Americans and supported the theory of the "crime of passion" ("Le ultime fasi" 1905). *L'Italia* denounced the press's promoting of the Mafia "legend" as "ridiculous" and "dishonest," adding that it was deeply offensive to the Italian colony, especially to the southerners and the fishermen: "San Francisco's Italians—Tuscans, Neapolitans, Genoese and Sicilians—were all industrious people," claimed *L'Italia* ("Mafia e Mano Nera" 1905). The Italian newspaper staunchly defended Rosa Torturici against the unfair treatment she was suffering ("In favore di Rosa Torturici" 1905). Several Italian Americans sent letters to the newspapers protesting about the image of Italian immigrants appearing in the media and about Rosa's treatment at the hands of the police department ("No Mafia Here" 1905, 8; "A Son of Sunny Italy" 1905, 8; "Written Protest Comes" 1905, 2; "Says Treatment of Mrs. Torturici" 1905, 4). However, these protests initially produced no results. As stated pithily by the *Call*: "The Italian people, the better class who voice their opinions through the Italian medium, the newspaper, *La Italia*, oppose the theory of the existence of secret organizations among their race. But the Sicilians are only kin to the Italians. The fact remains that there is a Mafia" ("Crime Planned in a Little Hut" 1905, 1). This distinction made by the *Call* between Italian Americans and Sicilian Americans is crucial. It started to feature in the newspapers immediately after the discovery of the dead body; neither was it entirely a product of the American press. The *Chronicle* ("Police Close on Trial" 1905, 16), for example, reported that the residents of Little Italy

repudiated [the idea] that there is such a thing as organized crime among the Italians. Among the Sicilians they admit that there are feuds or vendettas, but they say Sicilians are not Italians. They assert that Sicilians are a mixture of Moorish and Spanish blood, and [that] among the lower classes there is such a thing as vendetta.

Despite the community's strong defense—via *L'Italia*—of Italian Americans as whole, southerners included, at a street level the Vilardo murder, and the police round-ups that followed, had raised the Italian American residents' anger against Sicilians. The *Chronicle* informed readers that the police, which was in search of murder suspect Torturici, had told Italian Americans that "they cannot draw a distinction as to province or city, they

cannot draw a line between Sicilian and Italian.” Detectives searched for Torturici among the vegetable farms near the city. However, as the *Chronicle* reported: “Nearly every farm is in the hands of the Genoese, who are said to abhor the vendetta of the Sicilians; they say that they themselves would kill Torturici if he sought refuge among them” (“Police Close on Trial” 1905, 16).

### Pioneers and New Immigrants

As noted by Peter D’Agostino (2002, 339), “identities such as Sicilian or Calabrian were already racialized in Italian (and European) culture before migrants arrived in the Americas.” It is not surprising therefore that North Beach Italian Americans, in an attempt to disassociate themselves from such a horrible crime, tried to distinguish themselves from Sicilians, embodying as they did typical racial stereotypes of “southern” savagery and backwardness that had become popular across the United States. During the decade of the Vilardo murder, San Francisco’s Italian American community was undergoing major changes, transforming itself from a relatively small colony of approximately 7,000 mainly Northern Italian immigrants into a large community of more than 17,000 immigrants more balanced between north and south as a result of mass migration from Italy (U.S. Department of Commerce 1913, 825). The arrival of new immigrants, such as the Vilardo brothers, was a cause of concern for older Italian American residents. In the years 1903, 1904, and 1905 *L’Italia* hosted a public debate among California’s Italian Americans, receiving letters in support or in condemnation of the flow of newcomers (Giovinco 1993, 20–24). Many readers complained about the influx, especially those defined by the Italian American daily as the “pioneers,” “the colony’s most influential part,” that is, Italians who had arrived in the United States before mass migration and had already formed a significant middle and upper class (“Il nepotismo nella colonia” 1903). Druggist and Italian Chamber of Commerce President Giuseppe Calegaris claimed that there were not enough job opportunities for all the Italian immigrants in California (“La risposta di G. Calegaris,” 1903). The same point of view was expressed by Milanese banker John Fugazi, who remarked upon the low quality of new Italian immigrants: “I nostri poveri emigrati capitali con loro non ne portano, anzi arrivano qui ignari degli usi e costumi del paese, digiuni della lingua inglese e per la maggior parte analfabeti” (our poor emigrants bring with them no capital, actually they arrive unaware of American mores and customs, as well as of the English language, and for the most part illiterate, cited in Rossi 1904, 123). (The preceding and all other translations are by the author.) Journalist



and Italian Chamber of Commerce Secretary Carlo Dondero foresaw an increase in "racial prejudice" directed against Italian Americans: "Si proclama che gli italiani non sono benvenuti, desiderati. Una volta lo erano discretamente, in California; ora, sventuratamente, non più, son soltanto tollerati" (It is said that Italians are not well regarded, desired. In California, they used to be rather well welcomed here and there. But not anymore. Now, unfortunately, they are only tolerated), he commented ("Stolte accuse ai nostri connazionali" 1903). An Italian American doctor stated: "Dobbiamo ammettere—sebbene nel far ciò ci si stringa il cuore—che esiste un pregiudizio di razza riguardo agl'italiani. A che cosa questo pregiudizio è dovuto e come abbatterlo? Io posso attribuirlo soltanto a una causa: e cioè alle proporzioni dell'immigrazione italiana in questo paese negli ultimi anni." (We must admit, even if it tears our heart to do so, that a prejudice against the Italian race does exist. What is the cause for such prejudice and how to combat it? I can identify one cause only: and that is the great numbers of Italian immigrants in this country in recent years, "Un giovane italo-americano" 1903).

But who were these "pioneers"? In California, a relatively new and sparsely populous state, Northern Italians who had arrived in the early decades of its development encountered many opportunities. In spite of the failures the majority of them faced in the gold fields in the 1850s, a minority persisted and even flourished in California's harsh environment, finding a means of self-improvement through commerce, agriculture, and fishing. A survey I conducted for another study reveals that, in 1900, 13 percent of San Francisco's older Italian American residents, i.e., those who had arrived in the United States before the 1880s, held, according to the Census, jobs with a middle- or upperclass social status: commissioner merchants, import businessmen, professionals, bankers, and real estate investors.<sup>5</sup> This elite of the Italian American pioneers was quite well integrated within local political life. Notables of the Italian colony were members of the Republican Party. Some second-generation pioneers already held positions on the board of supervisors and the board of education.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to the pioneers' attitude, *L'Italia* strongly defended Italian newcomers. Editor Patrizi wrote ("Due righe di commento" 1903):

L'infimo emigrante d'oggi è spesso migliore, sotto ogni rapporto, di tanti famosi pionieri che vennero qui zotici, ignoranti, spilorci, e che, malgrado le migliaia di dollari accumulati, non hanno migliorato affatto moralmente e intellettualmente.

Even the lowest type of the emigrant of today is often better, in every aspect, than many of the famous pioneers who came here [to California]

boorish, ignorant, penny-pinchers, and who, despite all the dollars accumulated, did not improve either morally nor intellectually.

*L'Italia's* favorable attitude toward immigration matched its defense of Italian Americans in the Vilardo case. Patrizi himself was not a pioneer. He had arrived in San Francisco in 1894 to work at the Italian pavilion in the local Midwinter Fair (Troiani 1991). He had graduated in Milan as an engineer but also had journalistic skills due to his political commitment at the university there on behalf of socialist and republican groups. On his arrival in San Francisco, he was welcomed by many pioneers, and they offered him the editorship of *L'Italia*. Patrizi, for his part, respected and admired them: The year of his arrival, he wrote a sonnet celebrating the colony's prominent Italian Americans ("Saluto alla colonia" 1894). To some extent, he did share the prejudice of the older residents against Italian newcomers, southerners especially, as is evident from the description in *L'Italia* of Cesare Lombroso as "l'illustre scienziato che tutte le nazioni civili invidiano all'Italia" (the illustrious scientist who makes Italy the envy of all nations) when the Italian anthropologist visited San Francisco ("Cesare Lombroso verrà a San Francisco" 1904). However, despite the short time spent in the United States, Patrizi had quickly developed a radical nationalist consciousness in reaction to the deep anti-Italian American prejudice of the wider American society, as he later recalled in some articles (Maurizi 2007, 17–18). He indeed became an untiring promulgator of "Italianness" and a booster of the Italian quality of "grandeur." His position as both Italian American editor and ethnic leader depended on the growth of the Italian American population and on the construction of a common Italian American identity among immigrants from the peninsula.

Not all the pioneers were hostile toward new Italian immigrants. Patrizi, in his fight in favor of Italian immigration, was backed by two of the most influential of the pioneers, Andrea Sbarboro and Marco Fontana, who shared with him a role of ethnic leadership and also saw in newcomers a source of cheap labor for their entrepreneurial activities ("La nostra inchiesta sulla emigrazione" 1903; "A proposito della nostra inchiesta" 1903). Sbarboro and Fontana were Ligurians and established entrepreneurs. Although the two were involved in each other's business concerns, Sbarboro was mainly in charge of the Italian-Swiss Colony, one of California's largest wineries, while Fontana was in the fruit-canning business as superintendent general of the California Fruit Cannery Association. In 1899, they together founded the Italian American Bank, to attract investments and the deposits of Italian immigrants to support their businesses. The two men were also well-known public figures in the

city of San Francisco. Fontana was appointed supervisor by Mayor James D. Phelan in 1900; Sbarboro, in the same period, was elected president of the Manufacturers and Producers' Association and of the California Promotion Committee (Sbarboro 1996–1997; Press Reference Library, 281). At the turn of the century, banking was growing within the Italian American community. Headed by Amadeo Giannini, a son of pioneers, in 1904 some Italian American bankers, real estate investors, merchants, entrepreneurs, and professionals joined together to found the Bank of Italy, whose policy was to make the Italian colony's expanding population and economic life the basis for its own profitable financial activities (Salvetti 1989; Giovinco 1968).

Despite the benefits a section of older residents received from the growth of the Italian American community, many were still hostile toward newcomers. They feared any increase in social problems, such as crime, which might damage the "Italian name" in the city. *La Voce del Popolo* expressed such anxieties after a murder in Little Italy by lamenting that "brigands" had arrived in the colony ("Briganti nella colonia" 1890):

La Colonia Italiana di San Francisco ha goduto sin qui fama di essere il miglior nucleo d'Italiani all'Estero, e poichè, Dio mercè, la grande, l'immensa maggioranza de' suoi componenti è costituita ancora di onesti lavoratori . . . questa maggioranza è fermamente decisa a volere mantenuto questo buon nome della nostra colonia e denuncia alla esecrazione de' connazionali e additerà alle autorità locali quei miserabili, quegli esseri vilissimi che vogliono poltrire e ingrassare nel vizio gettando nel fango il nome italiano.

Until now the fame of the Italian colony of San Francisco has been that of being the best element among Italians abroad and, thank God, since the great, the vast, majority of its members is still composed of honest workers . . . this majority is firmly determined to maintain the colony's good name and will denounce to their co-nationals and public authorities those miserable and cowardly men who want to loaf around and get fat in vice and thus flinging the Italian name in the mud.

The pioneers' worries were not unfounded. In fact, between 1900 and 1910, the crime rate among Italian Americans in San Francisco doubled as a consequence of the rapid increase of the Italian American population. The number of Italian American inmates at San Quentin State Prison increased from 1.6 to 2.5 percent, while at Folsom State Prison they increased from 1.8 to 3.6 percent.<sup>7</sup> However, the pioneers' hostility was not motivated only by statistics but also by prejudice. Among Italian newcomers there

were indeed southerners. After 1900, tensions rose between the Italian American elite and La Meridionale, a Southern Italian benevolent society. In 1903 the president of La Meridionale protested to the Italian consul because the Italian Comitato di Soccorso, a society financed by wealthy local Italians, proposed the imposition of a specific charge to his organization since Italian Americans applying for assistance were increasingly southerners. The president of La Meridionale also protested not having been invited to a community public event (“Comitato di soccorso per gli emigranti” 1903; “Lettera aperta” 1903). Despite his overall attempt to reduce tensions among Italian Americans, Patrizi sometimes gave way to more retrograde impulses, remarking on the “otherness” of southerners. In 1904, the San Francisco Board of Education discovered that some sons of Italian immigrants were exploited as peddlers by their parents, and it launched a campaign to take them off the street (“Padrone Plan Is Uncovered” 1904, 4). *L'Italia* branded the episode as a “dishonor” to the community, explicitly blaming the Sicilians (“Contro certi genitori italiani” 1904). However, since the children working as peddlers were not Sicilians, but rather Calabrians, La Meridionale protested against the Italian daily’s generic anti-southern attitude (“Una riunione della Meridionale” 1904).

### The Narrative of the Model Colony

For the Northern Italian middle and upperclasses, crimes such as Vilardo’s murder posed a risk that their own ethnic community would be tarred by those stereotypes under which East Coast and midwestern Italian Americans were already suffering. An essay in the *Overland Monthly* of October 1905 outlines the spread among San Francisco’s public opinion of the stereotype of Italian Americans as *mafiosi* in the wake of the Vilardo case. Author Charlton L. Edholm (1905, 291) explained the “race mystery” of the inhabitants of the city’s Little Italy:

[T]ake, for instance, that swarthy, well set up young man, with lips that show full and red under his mustache . . . he looks confidently, carelessly, at the world with his smiling eyes . . . and tell me, if you please, whether he is bound for the Re’ d’Italia Saloon to indulge in a quiet game of dominos and red wine, or whether the Black Hand has pointed out to him a victim whom he is to slay this night, whom he is to dismember with abominable awkwardness and blood-spilling.

The Italian community’s public image became more and more associated with other social problems besides crime deriving from its growth, such

as poverty and low standards of living. The board of health frequently characterized the Latin Quarter as being "filthy" and representing an "evil almost as gross as that of Chinatown" (San Francisco Board of Supervisors 1898, 196). The Latin Quarter was frequently subject to purges because of the spread of infectious diseases. In 1900 the *Chronicle* reported: "To-day the Health gang will descend with the force of inspectors upon the Latin Quarter. The Italian and Mexican residents of the city have been placed in the same unclean category as the Chinese" ("Little Italy Comes Next" 1900, 5). In 1911, the San Francisco Housing Association (1911, 20–22) found that the Latin Quarter was the city's most crowded district and stated that it was as congested as the worst tenement neighborhoods of Boston or New York. The use of the term *Latin Quarter*, both by local American institutions and the press, reflected the perception of Italian Americans as a racial element distinct from other of the city's European populations. Since Mexican immigrants also lived in the Latin Quarter, this area became in the eyes of Anglo public opinion not only an Italian district but a Mexican-Italian one (Spadoni 1904, 12). Italian Americans and Mexican Americans were compared in terms of alien and disreputable behaviors: "The Mexicans in this district are poorer than the Italians, but not so addicted to tenement habit," wrote a social reformer ("The Poor among Us" 1895, 1). Italian Americans, as well as other southern European immigrants, were frequently denigrated through association with Mexicans whose racial status, as highlighted by Tomàs Almaguer (1994, 45–46) was ambiguous in nineteenth-century California because they could not claim a "pure" European ancestry. In 1893, for example, the *Chronicle* described the San Francisco heterogeneous population thus ("Here All Races Meet" 1893, 1).

There is no doubt about the cosmopolitan character of San Francisco. . . .  
There are the Chinese, whom, like the poor, we have always with us . . .  
and then there are those whom the heedless small boys and some of his  
elders who ought to know better lump together under the comprehensive  
term "Dagoes"—Italian, Spaniard, Mexican, Portuguese, Chileno.

However, as Ilaria Serra (2009, 38–41) has noted, the San Francisco press's anti-Italian American attitude never reached East Coast levels. This was mainly for two reasons evident in the reactions to the Vilardo case. The first has to do with the presence in San Francisco of a large Asian population, mostly Chinese and Japanese, attracting the worst of discriminations. After the murder of Vilardo, the Methodist newspaper the *Christian Advocate* attacked the *Chronicle*, stating that the daily was too indulgent toward Italians ("Japanese Immigrants" 1905, 6):

If the one such horrible crime had been committed among the Japanese as was recently committed in the Italian quarter of San Francisco, the "San Francisco Chronicle" would have gone into a succession of anti-Japanese spasms hitherto unknown, but this awful Mafia spirit, that chops human beings into mincemeat, is passed by unrebuked, all because it "assimilates" so nicely with American ideals. Sixty thousand Italian laborers living on garlic and sour wine, densely ignorant, swarm into California, and only because they can vote not a word is said against them.

Certainly, the *Christian Advocate's* critique was exaggerated to the point of bigotry. Italian Americans had been targeted for weeks, also by the *Chronicle*. Nonetheless, the Methodist newspaper latched on to a crucial aspect: the power of Italian Americans deriving from their legal status as "whites." The second reason for the San Francisco press's softer attitude toward Italian Americans has to do with the influence of the Northern Italian elite in local society. At the end of 1905, the *Call*, which had been the most virulent anti-Italian American daily during the Vilardo case, published an article apologizing for the treatment reserved for local Italian Americans ("Our Italian Colony" 1905, 8). It praised Italian Americans for their part in California's rural development and business enterprises and remarked on their integration into the city's public life. The *Call's* excuses, however, were directed only to a *part* of the Italian colony. It stressed that San Francisco's Italian colony should not be judged on the basis of a "minority of criminal individuals" because "perhaps a majority of them [Italians]" were "Piedmontese, the people of the Valley of the Po, the countrymen and compatriots of Cavour, the statesman who created 'modern Italy.'" Furthermore, the article concluded by drawing a distinction between local Italians and their co-nationals living elsewhere: "We desire to say for them [Italians] that no such charge can lie against them as is made in other of our large cities," where Southern Italians prevailed, we may add. By distinguishing between California's Italian Americans and "other" Italian Americans, the *Call* echoed a long-standing piece of propaganda by the local Italian American elite. Since the Gold Rush, prominent Italian Americans had promulgated the idea that the Italian immigration experience in California was exceptional in terms of success and prosperity. Businessman, journalist, and Sardinian Consul Secretary Federico Biesta in 1856 asserted that the "Italian population" was one of the "best, most active and hard-working in California" and that "whether in San Francisco or the interior, the Italians thrive[d] and prosper[d]" (cited in Rolle 1999, 255). In 1868, *La Voce del Popolo* described California's Italian Americans as "courageous, industrious, and enterprising" while it denigrated New



York's for being a "legion" of "organ grinders," residing together with their monkeys in the shallows of local Little Italy ("Corrispondenza" 1868, 1). In 1888, the almanac of the same newspaper asserted that California's Italian Americans were "one of the most important foreign colonies of Italy" and remarked on their possessing an "immense capital" ("Pacific Coast Italians" 1888, 6). In 1903, wine entrepreneur Pietro Rossi, attending the international agricultural conference in Rome, presented California's Italian Americans as "one of the best in the United States both from a socio-economic perspective, and a moral one" ("Un discorso di P.C. Rossi" 1903). The Italian American elite usually freed its own community of those stigmas ascribed to Italian Americans nationwide. According to an Italian American druggist, California's Italian Americans were exempt from the transient migration that so alarmed American public opinion. He stated to the *Chronicle*: "In some parts of the East the Italians work eight months in the year and spend the four coldest months in Italy, but here in California the Italians come to stay. The climate is more congenial, and so, too, are the occupations" ("They Come to Stay" 1893, 38). Actually, there were transient Italian migrants also on the Pacific Coast (Sensi Isolani 1990); however, this fact was downplayed by relying on what Simone Cinotto (2012, 37) has called the "cultural construct" of California as the "Italy of America," i.e., the nineteenth-century popular literary representation of California as being environmentally strikingly similar to the Mediterranean region. The *prominenti* used such a popular image to persuade American public opinion that California's Italian immigration was more stable than that of the East Coast. To quote a "prominent Italian" interviewed by the *Chronicle*: "Like no other part of America, California reminds us of our former Mediterranean home. That's why when we come here, we come to stay" ("Important Role in Up Building" 1920, 82). Italian American notables in self-celebrating publications always remarked that California's Italian Americans were "respected and honored" and enjoyed a "better reputation" than their New York co-nationals (Frangini 1917, 28-29; Baroni, Brogelli, and Tuoni 1928). Sometimes even Italian consuls participated in distinguishing between West Coast and East Coast Italians: "San Francisco has the best of the Italian population that has migrated," Vittore Siciliani told the Examiner in 1923, "those with less money, less education and less ambition probably stopped when they reached the eastern coast" (Willson, Hodel, and Hodel 1951, 24).

Ettore Patrizi contributed significantly to the shaping of this propaganda over the "exceptionalism" of California's Italian Americans by turning it into a systematic discourse, which we may call "the narrative of the Model Colony." On the occasion of the 1911 Turin International

exposition, he prepared a monograph about Italian Americans in California for the pavilion dedicated to Italian colonies abroad. The beginning is emblematic (Patrizi 1911, 1):

The Italian who goes to North America for the first time with the intention of finding work and fortune . . . has hardly arrived in New York and spoken with some of his countrymen [before] . . . he is shocked to hear very few happy and pleasant things about that colony. . . . But hardly does he make it known to his informers that he plans to go to California [when] he hears without fail “You’re going to California? What an excellent colony you will find in San Francisco! Yes, that is truly the Model [Italian] Colony.”

Without such a polarity, the Model Colony would have been inconceivable. Crime was a crucial feature of the narrative. Patrizi (1911, 1) remarked that California’s Italian Americans

rarely participate in those crimes involving knives, guns and bombs, in which regard there are unfortunately many dreadful examples in some of our communities in the East Coast, especially in New York; here continuous crimes among our co-nationals—crimes of every kind and sometimes monstrous—are terrorizing the local population and are creating hostility towards the Italian community.

Patrizi depicted California’s Italian Americans as being free from all of those stigmas applied to Italian Americans nationwide, such as residential segregation. He stated in the monograph that San Francisco’s Italian Americans did not live in “special overcrowded districts, as in most major U.S. cities, called . . . ‘Little Italy,’ or ‘Dago Town’ . . . the hated and vulgar word used to identify Italians. . . . No: Italians in San Francisco are spread all over the City, their points of concentration being various” (Patrizi 1911, 18).

The task here is not so much to unmask the falsity or fabrication of the Model Colony, the pretentious nature of which is clear; rather, it is to highlight its historicity, its being grounded in both class and racialized regional tensions within San Francisco’s Italian American population in the early twentieth century. As noted already by other scholars, the image of the Model Colony implied Northern Italians’ feeling of superiority to southern newcomers residing in California or on the East Coast (Cinel 1982, 19; Cinotto 2012, 195). Ettore Patrizi, in the monograph quoted above, paid tribute to his Northern Italian elite circle by remarking that Americans distinguished between “our immigrants from the North and from the South” because the former were “more educated” and “able to

assimilate," while the latter had a tendency to live "too much below the American working class standard of living" (Patrizi 1911, 20). Nonetheless, it should not be overlooked that the Model Colony narrative actually downplayed the northerners vs. southerners dichotomy by turning it into a more implicit and vague distinction between East Coast and West Coast Italians. His aim being the creation of a national Italian American community, Patrizi had indeed no interest in fueling racialized regional contrapositions among Italian Americans. This is why he explicitly included southerners in the myth of the exceptional immigration experience of California's Italian Americans (Patrizi 1911, 2):

But—some could ask—who are they and where do they come from, these Italians of California with such noble virtues that they differentiate themselves from their brothers of other localities? Are they a special class, a selected stock of the motherland? . . . No: They are Italians like any others; they come from the North and from the South of our beautiful Peninsula.

The narrative of the Model Colony had a significant impact in the San Francisco press. In 1913 both the *Call* and the *Chronicle* reviewed Patrizi's monograph stressing the editor's definition of local Italian Americans as "the model of the Italian colonies in the United States" ("Italians' Share in State Growth" 1913, 5; "Italian Progress Told in New Book" 1913, 53). In 1914, a journalist of the *Chronicle* wrote: "The Italians of San Francisco have formed a model colony within a city, a model city within the city, and have become a part, a great part, of the official, business and financial life of the great western metropolis" ("Italian Colony" 1914, 22). Some years later, another reporter of the same newspaper repeated one of the leitmotifs underlying the Model Colony narrative: "If one were to look for the Italian quarter in San Francisco in the sense in which one looks for Chinatown or an Old World Ghetto, one would be disappointed . . . [they] have mingled with their American-born comrades and are scattered throughout the city" ("Many of California's Best Citizens" 1921, A56). More generally, local public opinion often echoed the propaganda of Northern Italian elites about the distinction between California Italian Americans and East Coast Italians: "In the East the retail vending of fruits was an ignoble calling," noted a West Coast writer (Jones 1927, 155), "but in California it took on a romantic aspect . . . the trade gave rise to not grimy hucksters or the pallid warehousemen of London's Soho, but a group of curiously intelligent and enterprising merchants like Sbarboro, the banker Fugazi, F.N. Belgrano and the scholarly Marco Fontana." The narrative of the Model Colony, therefore, preserved the image of local Italian Americans despite those social problems emerging within the immigrant group in the early

twentieth century with its rapid expansion; on the other hand, it also reinforced the stigmatization of East Coast Southern Italians. A San Francisco tourist guide stated (Dunn 1912, 47–48):

There is no Mafia here, the *Mano Nera* has never shown the menace of its imprints. Perhaps because these sons of Italy are of a different type from the peanut seller, banana huckster, street laborer, “Ginny” of Castle Garden Entrance.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

As Fred Gardaphé (2010) has noted, Italian Americans became “visible” more through the stereotypical images the media branded them with rather than through the efforts they showed to endorse their own heritage and culture. This article has illustrated how San Francisco’s Italian American elite dealt with the problem of the “quality” of its own ethnic group’s visibility. On one hand, the narrative of the Model Colony forged by Italian American notables represented a successful attempt to control and determine Americans’ perception; negative stereotypical images were challenged through the diffusion of a counterstereotypical image of local Italian Americans, based on the assumption of their own “exceptional” character. On the other hand, the cultural construction of the Model Colony, by reproducing distinctions among Italian Americans, ended up corroborating anti-Italian prejudices; it exempted San Francisco’s Italian Americans from those stigmas, such as crime, ascribed to Italian Americans nationwide by limiting them to the East Coast Italian American communities. The polarity between San Francisco’s Italian Americans and New York’s Italian Americans informing the narrative masked the polarity between Northern and Southern Italians. With their propaganda concerning San Francisco’s Italian American exceptionalism, Italian American notables pandered to the feelings of Northern Italian residents of superiority while avoiding fueling racialized regional distinctions within the wider Italian community. However, in the eyes of San Francisco public opinion, the distinctive element favoring the acceptance of local Italian Americans remained the fact that they were mostly northerners, this corroborating the implicit antisouthern content of the Model Colony narrative.

## Notes

1. For a general overview, see Lupo (2002) and Iorizzo (2000).
2. There were differences between Ripley and Grant's studies. As Gossett (1997, 355) wrote: "Ripley had argued that each of the three European races had mental and temperamental traits peculiar to it, but it urged caution in the description of these inward characteristics. Grant, however, assigned all traits dogmatically."
3. Among historians, two major lines of interpretation have arisen as to the Italian American experience in California. The first one is Rolle's (1968) description of California as a sort of "Italy in America," a place providing Italian Americans with job opportunities suited for their skills and with a less structured society, factors apparently favoring a higher degree of both social and economic success than that achieved by Italian Americans on the East Coast. Rolle's early idyllic interpretation, however, was later revised by other scholars who furnished a "more balanced view" by bringing into light also darker aspects of California's Italian American experience, such as poverty, discrimination, and exploitation (Sensi Isolani and Martinelli 1993). A synthesis of the debate on the Italian American experience in California is offered by Canepa (1994).
4. On Italian fishermen, see Gumina (1978, 79). The Chinese also were engaged in fishing. However, their immigration restricted since 1882, their presence in the fishing industry steadily declined.
5. The survey will appear in its entire version in my Ph.D. dissertation. Using the 1900 Census, I collected data on occupations of more than 500 heads of households of San Francisco's Italians who had arrived in the United States before the year 1880.
6. Columbus Bank's founder Francesco Arata was a Republican ("Death of a Leader" 1901, 7) as well as bankers Joseph Cuneo and Egisto Palmieri ("Italian American Republican Club" 1896, 14). See also "Death of Giosuè Rottanzi" (1899, 10) and "Alfred Roncovieri" (1915, 127).
7. Percentages are from California State, Board of Prison Directors (1900, 63, 120; 1910, 67, 182).
8. "Ginny" is derived from the epithet "guinea."

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