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‘Si deve amare la mamma anche se povera’ The Dante Alighieri Society, Italian emigration and the safeguarding of *italianità*, 1870-1925

Tamara van Kessel

Ironic as it might sound, an Italian emigrant on the deck of a ship heading for the United States of America around 1910 could well find him- or herself learning how to read and write Italian, possibly for the first time. This opportunity was offered by the Dante Alighieri Society, which since its creation in 1889 had been promoting the Italian language and culture at home and abroad. The Dante’s initial focus had been on the Italians in the *terre irredente*, the bordering areas ruled by the Habsburg Empire that had not been incorporated into the new Italian state. Keeping strong the ‘Italianness’ of the inhabitants in those areas was essential to maintain Italy’s territorial claim. Gradually the Dante Society extended its activities to include the care of Italian emigrants abroad and the prevention of ‘snazionalizzazione’ or the ‘denationalisation’ of the Italian diaspora. Among members of the Dante there was considerable concern about the illiteracy of many Italian emigrants and the fact that often they only spoke their local dialect. Hence the Neapolitan local committee of the Dante in 1902 launched the idea of creating libraries with Italian educational books - grammar books, dictionaries, guidebooks, history and geography manuals and other such material - to be installed on ships bringing emigrants to the United States. At the annual congress of the Dante Society held in 1903, it was suggested that primary school teachers who were traveling could be asked to teach Italian writing and reading on board in exchange for a discount on their travel expenses.¹

Here we see that emigration and the shaping of national identity were intertwined processes. The concern among the Dante Society members was that these emigrants spoke only their local dialect and had in many ways not yet been turned into Italian citizens. Why was the loss of Italian national identity perceived as problematic? Through the analysis of two documents produced for Italian emigrants, some general motives underlying this concern will be explained and some recurring themes in the debate presented. This will be done against the background of the major developments in Italy’s emigration policy.

Italian emigration: desirable or not?

If in July 1871 the proclamation of Rome as capital of Italy appeared to be the coronation of the Risorgimento endeavour, the existence of large Italian communities

¹ P. Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale ed emigrazione nella Società Dante Alighieri*, Roma, Bonacci Editore, 1995, pp. 86-87, 110 and 122-123.

just beyond the Italian borders continued to remind patriots that there was still more to be achieved. These severed Italian communities were living in the so-called *terre irredente* under Austro-Hungarian imperial rule: mainly the Julian March, Trentino, Dalmatia and Fiume. It was to make sure that these could one day be made part of the nation that eighteen years later the Dante Alighieri Society was created. Through schools, lectures and libraries the Dante aimed to keep the Italian language and culture alive in those areas. However, while efforts were made to maintain cultural ties with the *terre irredente*, there was a rapidly growing part of the Italian population that was leaving the newly formed nation-state, seeking a means of living elsewhere in Europe or even as far away as North and South America. These co-nationals were leaving the country even before they had been changed from 'peasants into Italians'.² In 1876 a total of 100,000 Italians emigrated, by 1895 the number had grown to 293,000 and it continued to do so exponentially to reach 872,000 in 1913.³ Altogether, between 1880 and 1915, thirteen million Italians emigrated to other countries in Europe, North-Africa, and North and South America.⁴

Across the political spectrum, the attitudes to emigration in Italian society were mixed. Not all Italians going abroad for work left for good. Hence this phenomenon was not far removed from the seasonal migration that had been taking place for centuries between different Italian regions, with workers coming back to their home region after their manpower was no longer needed. It is therefore not surprising that many liberal politicians saw (e)migration of a part of Italy's population to other countries as a natural regulatory measure and one which the government need not feel responsible for. Among Catholics, however, there was the fear that those leaving might be corrupted by the Protestant faith, whilst landowners in the South were concerned about wage prices rising if too great a part of the labour force left the country. Socialists saw in this wave of emigration a desertion from the cause of building a fairer society in Italy itself. Imperialists, who relished in Italy's first colonial ventures beginning to take shape in Eritrea, were in favour of encouraging these wandering Italians to seek their future in the colonies rather than emigrate to other countries. Under the first centrist coalition government led by the left-wing politician Depretis, Italy's foreign minister Pasquale Mancini – in office from 1881 to 1885 – launched a more active colonial policy based on the premise that emigration flows made this necessary.

In May 1888 Italy's first emigration act was passed. Francesco Crispi, who was then both Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, proposed this legislative act not only as a measure to regulate the number of emigrants but also to offer them more protection against the risks involved, such as being duped by fraudulent travel agencies. Crispi's policy marked a turn towards considering the emigration of Italians as a new form of colonization across the world and as an asset for the Italian state.⁵ Plans for the conquest of more African territory that could then be populated and exploited by emigrants were resolutely abandoned after the dramatic defeat of the Italian army at Adwa in February 1896. All attention now went to South America as a

² With this expression I am deliberately referring to Eugen Weber's classic study on processes of national identity-building, *Peasants into Frenchman. The Modernization of Rural France 1870-1914*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1976.

³ R.J.B. Bosworth, *Italy and the Wider World 1860-1960*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, pp. 118-121.

⁴ M.I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation. The Making of Italy Abroad*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 1.

⁵ D. Cinel, *The National Integration of Italian Return Migration 1870-1929*, Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid and Cape Town, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 85-86; Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, cit., p. 29 and p. 32.

promising destination for the emigrants.⁶ By the beginning of the twentieth century, emigration was recognized as a major resource for the country, in the form of money transfers from abroad and savings brought back by return migration. The Italians abroad were regarded as outposts of one large nation that stretched beyond the geographical borders, which further encouraged thinking in terms of an almost 'spiritual' concept of *italianità*. However, renewed imperial ambitions, incited by the Italian Nationalist Association of Enrico Corradini, reintroduced the link with colonialism. Obtaining Tripolitania and Cyrenaica after the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912) was part of the quest for a Greater Italy to be populated by Italian emigrants.

In 1901 a new law on emigration for the first time put emphasis on government protection of emigrants rather than on curtailing the phenomenon or combatting the cases of fraud that often took place. A Commissariat for Emigration was created in Rome to centralize all emigration measures and whereas emigration issues had so far fallen under the Ministry of Interior, they were now handed over to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Independent emigration agencies were banned. Government inspectors were to ensure that emigrants could travel safely, were not duped by fraudulent travel and financial services, and were properly supported upon arrival. Another law made it possible for emigrants to transfer money to Italy through a reliable channel: the Banco di Napoli. Remarkably, all speakers of the Italian language – including those coming from the Austro-Hungarian territories – were officially considered Italians abroad and as such could make use of Italy's consular services.⁷ Despite the linguistic approach to nationality the territorial claims remained no less present.

The Dante Alighieri Society began to provide assistance for emigrants during the period in which Pasquale Villari was its president, between 1896 and 1901. Villari had been Minister of Public Education (February 1891 - May 1892) and thereafter continued to be member of the Italian Senate (since November 1884). He was also Professor of History at the University of Pisa, making him the prototype of the active Dante member of those days: quite often men with a background as civil servant either involved in education or political administration. Villari's concern for emigration was intrinsically connected to the *questione meridionale*, which he saw as an essential part of Italy's social question. The originally Neapolitan scholar in 1872 published 'La scuola e la questione sociale in Italia' in the review *Nuova Antologia*. Here Villari put forward the question how Italian identity was to be formed while two such divided Italies existed. In his *Lettere meridionali* (1875) he denounced the economic and social deprivation in which the Southern part of Italy was trapped. The government's failure to control the area had left the once feudally controlled people in the hands of the mafia, the camorra and the brigands. This, according to Villari, had prevented the emergence of a middle class and of industrial entrepreneurship. The state was therefore to bring moral reform and to help civilize this part of Italy. Hence Villari turned this issue into a topic of public debate, a process that we see reflected in the activities for emigrants that the Dante started to develop.

One of the initiatives of the Dante Alighieri Society was the so-called 'Decalogue of the Emigrants'.⁸ This was a document intended to provide the Italian emigrant with a number of moral tenets, structured in a format that would have been familiar to most Italians: that of the Ten Commandments. The 'Decalogue' was an initiative of the Dante Committee in Varese and was reprinted in the Dante Society's internal

⁶ Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, cit., p. 53.

⁷ Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, cit., p. 65.

⁸ 'Il Decalogo degli Emigranti', in: *Pagine della Dante* 3 (1925), pp. 55-56.

newsletter in 1925. While Villari presided over the Dante, emigration was still approached as a negative matter, a symptom of economic and social grievances. Together with the general changes in emigration policy, in the following decades a more triumphant tone was set in matters regarding emigration. The nationalist imperialist rhetoric about Italy's expansion through emigration would also influence the Dante.

By the time this 'Decalogue' was compiled, Mussolini had become head of government. Initially the National Fascist Party had largely taken over the glorified representation of Italy's diaspora. But a change of policy in the countries receiving Italian and other emigrants gave Mussolini a new factor to deal with. In 1917 the United States of America had introduced a Literacy Act, in 1921 a Quota Act and 1924 a National Origins Act, all measures intended to limit the number of immigrants that could come, including those coming from Italy. Emigrants soon faced similar restrictions in Canada, Brazil and Australia.⁹ This somewhat hostile development as well as the desire to keep Italian citizens under closer control of the National Fascist Party led to a shift in Mussolini's emigration policy towards curtailing emigration and stimulating a population growth that was meant to strengthen Italy's own Empire only. In 1925, the year in which the 'Decalogue for the Emigrant' was printed in the Dante newsletter, this shift was only just taking shape.

The Decalogue of the Emigrants

1. Ricorda sempre che di patrie ve n'è una sola. E la tua è l'Italia, la più bella di tutte le terre. E la tua regione varesina è fra le terre più belle d'Italia. Nessun altro paese deve da te essere amato come l'Italia e come la tua regione.
2. Non imprecare alla tua Patria se hai dovuto lasciarla in cerca del lavoro che essa non poteva darti. Si deve amare la mamma anche se povera.

The first article of the 'Decalogue' reminded the emigrant to remain true to his country as well as to his region, with a love that would surpass that for any other country or region. If we take into consideration the objections to *campanilismo* present among many who called for a greater allegiance to the nation, it is remarkable that here region and nation are in fact presented as two mutually reinforcing sources of identification. It may have been a certain realism that made the Dante of Varese aware that love for the nation would have to go through the love for the region. In the second article a personification of the Italian nation tackles the spite emigrants might feel against their Fatherland because it had failed to provide them with subsistence. A mother was to be loved even if she was poor, and so too the Italian emigrant was to continue cherishing his nation.¹⁰

3. Ricorda e celebra le Feste Nazionali del tuo Paese. Lo straniero ti stimerà di più se vedrà che tu onori apertamente la tua Patria e le sue Istituzioni.
4. Rispetta il Console e gli altri rappresentanti del tuo Paese. Offendendoli, offendi la Patria. Aiutala e facilita il loro compito nel limite delle tue forze.

How to manifest this respect for the nation was made clear in the third article, urging emigrants to remember and rejoice in the Italian national celebrations. Rather than alienate the emigrant from the new surroundings, it was argued in Article 3 that the host country's citizen would show appreciation for the fact that the Italian

⁹ Bosworth, *Italy and the Wider World*, cit., p. 123.

¹⁰ Here we are reminded of the fact that the Italian term for Fatherland can contain the dual image of the mother and the father: *la madrepatria*.

emigrants were honouring their own Fatherland and the institutions. In Article 4 the emigrant was also encouraged to respect the Italian consuls and other official representatives, cooperating with them as much as possible. This was presented as being synonymous with respect for one's own country. The fact that this article was thought necessary suggests that in reality such deference towards Italian official representatives was not commonplace, be it because the emigrant had never counted on assistance from the state or because among some emigrant communities Mussolini's government and the National Fascist Party were viewed with distrust or even hatred.

5. Rimani sempre cittadino italiano. Se per forza maggiore tu dovessi farti straniero, conserva nel cuore l'amore della tua Patria d'origine. Non esimerli dal servizio militare. Osserva e rispetta in qualunque tempo e luogo la Religione, gli usi e i costumi, le credenze e le abitudini della Patria, senza però offendere quelli del Paese che ti ospita.

It is likely that as host countries began to introduce ever more restrictions to emigration, a greater understanding was shown for the emigrant who chose to renounce his Italian citizenship and take on the citizenship of the country that he had emigrated to. It is therefore not surprising that Article 5 takes into account the possibility that the emigrant might take on a foreign citizenship. This was declared acceptable, as long as the emigrant would keep in his heart his love for Italy. As if this love was naturally expressed in the willingness to defend the country, the article continues by stating that the emigrant must not evade his military service. There was no reason to hide that one of the Italian state's prime interests in maintaining the bond with its distant citizens was the need for recruits in case of war. Just as in Article 3 the national celebrations are pointed out as expressions of patriotic love, Article 5 closes with the call to uphold – always and wherever – the religion, the traditions, the beliefs and the customs of the Fatherland, providing that these would not offend the host country. Here for the first time religion is mentioned. By now the Dante Alighieri Society, while having anti-clerical roots and still maintaining strong ties with the Freemasons, had pragmatically accepted Christianity as a component of Italian national identity.

6. Uno dei vanti degli Italiani è la sobrietà. Mantienti sano e forte, bevendo poco vino, poca birra e mai liquori. L'alcool è una veleno che uccide, lentamente ma sicuramente. Il maggior numero degli ospiti delle prigioni e dei manicomi è dato dai bevitori.

7. Non privare la tua Patria dei suoi cittadini col lasciare che i tuoi figli diventino stranieri. Educa i tuoi figlioli ed i tuoi nipoti nell'amore all'Italia. Appena puoi, mandali a studiare o a imparare il mestiere in Italia. E prima che abbiano compiuto i 18 anni fa in modo che essi possano vivere qualche tempo in Italia, affinché siano in grado di comprendere cosa sia la Patria dei loro padre.

8. Se hai lasciato in Patria la sposa, i genitori ed i figli, pensa continuamente a loro ed adempi al tuo dovere di mantenerli e di aiutarli in tutti i modi. E tieni sempre una condotta seria ed onesta, ricordando che la buona condotta tua all'estero vorrà dire la pace e la tranquillità assicurate per la tua famiglia in Italia.

Abiding to the traditional Italian customs was part of maintaining Italian prestige abroad. Article 6 seems to further elucidate this. To defend what is said to be the Italians' reputation for sobriety, the emigrant is told to remain strong and healthy, drink only small portions of beer or wine, and no liquor at all. Alcohol is classified as poison and it is threateningly claimed that most people in prisons and madhouses are drinkers. Proper behaviour had to be transmitted to the next generation as well. According to Article 7, the children of emigrants have to be raised with love for Italy, so as to be sure that they too feel they belong to Italy. Children and grandchildren

were to be sent to Italy to study or to learn a trade, and for them to be able to understand what the Fatherland of their fathers was it was best if they could spend some time in Italy before the age of eighteen. Because of the reference to studying and professional training, and since it mentions only the fathers, this article must apply to the male children. Presumably their bond with Italy was considered more important because of their potential role as soldiers, although we know that there was concern about Italian women in American factories conforming to local ways too quickly.¹¹ The moral reputation as representatives of Italy was underlying Article 8 as well. If the emigrant had left wife, parents and children behind in Italy, he was to keep to his duty to provide for them and to help them. By behaving seriously and honestly abroad, the emigrant was securing the peace and tranquillity of his family in Italy. What is left unsaid is that helping the family back home also meant sending money, which was in Italy's interest.

9. In ogni occasione e di fronte a chiunque, non rinnegare mai la tua Patria. Rammenta che nei secoli lontani, quando l'Europa ed il mondo erano ancora in preda alle barbarie, gli Italiani dettavano già quelle leggi che oggi ancora sono dovunque applicate. Rammenta che Roma, capitale d'Italia, è la sede della religione di Cristo. Sii sempre orgoglioso della tua Patria.

Never was an emigrant to deny his Fatherland, as Article 9 stated. The emigrant was to bear in mind that in distant centuries, when Europe and the world were still in a barbaric state, the Italians compiled the laws that until this day were applied. Once again Christendom is brought to the fore as an essential element of Italian identity, for the emigrant had to realize that Rome, the capital city, was the seat of the religion of Christ. These combined legacies made it imperative to always be proud of the Fatherland.

10. Tutte le volte che puoi, procura di comperare e di far comperare, di consumare e di far consumare, generi e merci prodotti e lavorati in Italia. In tal modo tu aiuti i tuoi compagni lavoratori che risiedono in Italia e concorri a formare la ricchezza del tuo Paese. Cerca di leggere e di far leggere scritti in italiano e con il cuore italiano. Se non ne hai, scrivi al Comitato della Dante Alighieri di Varese che te li spedirà gratuitamente.

Whereas Article 9 emphasized the intellectual and spiritual legacy, the tenth and final article returned to the material aspects of national identity. At all times, the emigrant was to buy and consume or make others buy and consume products that had been made and processed in Italy. This was presented as an act of solidarity towards the fellow workers in Italy and a contribution to Italy's wealth. But as was to be expected from the Dante, the final request was to read and let people read in Italian and 'with an Italian heart'. The Dante committee of Varese was prepared to send reading material for free if needed.

Why was the Varese committee intent on disseminating this 'Decalogue'? To find an answer, it is worth noting that in the first decades of the twentieth century a large number of stone-workers living in the valley surrounding Varese emigrated to New England, especially Vermont. Emigration was therefore a phenomenon the Varese community was familiar with.¹² An illuminating background to the compilation of the 'Decalogue' is provided by a document written by the lawyer Giulio Moroni in

¹¹ M. Tirabassi, *Ripensare la patria grande. Gli scritti di Amy Allemande Bernardy sulle migrazioni italiane (1900-1930)*, Isernia, Cosimo Iannone Editore, 2005, p. 36.

¹² C. Brusa & R. Ghiringhelli (eds.), *Emigrazione e territorio: tra bisogno e ideale*, Varese, Edizioni Lativa, 1995.

1923.¹³ Giulio Moroni also happened to be the President of the Dante committee in Varese. The document in question is a plea presented to Mussolini by the representatives of political and syndicate institutions and associations of Varese. They advocate the creation of a new province with Varese as capital should an administrative reorganization of Lombardy be considered. If this is impossible, they ask for Varese at least to be maintained as *sottoprefettura* and to be aggregated to the province of Milan. Historical, political, economic and geographical motives are summed up to demonstrate what importance Varese has already acquired and to justify the request for it to be made the centre of a separate province. One argument points towards the strategic significance of Varese given the necessity to remain vigilant in the areas near to the political border of the Kingdom. Beyond the area of Varese lies what is described as an opening in the Alps, a dangerous portal whose keys are not in hands of the Italian government: this is a reference to Trentino. In another bordering territory, Canton Ticino, lives a majority of patriotic and faithful Italians, yet close to them is the 'rodent remorse of the foreign dominator' ('il tarlo roditore della dominatrice straniera'), meaning the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and among them the presence of plotting renegades. This makes it vital for the Italian state to have a strong foothold in the Varese area. Another argument is the large temporary migration from the Varese area, estimated at two thousand workers a year. These migrants are regarded as susceptible to propaganda, to discouragement and anger. The supporters of the request for Varese to become a province argue that it is vital to keep these returning migrants under close government control, which is why they plead for more administrative recognition. The document also mentions that those same migrants provide tens of millions of foreign currency, which has enabled local industry and work in the area around Varese to develop.

Among the representatives of Varese requesting the area's recognition as a province was the local branch of the National Fascist Party, which suggests that Moroni had no objections to cooperating with the regime. Consequently, we can see this document as evidence supporting what has been concluded about the 'Decalogue' elsewhere; namely, that it is an example of how the Dante members' nationalist ideals fitted congenially in the new Fascist propaganda, embracing the universal significance now attributed to *italianità*.¹⁴ If instead we set aside the question of convergence between between the ideals of the Dante committee and of the National Fascist Party, the document can reveal other issues that are echoed in the 'Decalogue of the Emigrants' two years later. We here have an example of how irredentism, a major driving force for the Dante, was accompanied by concern for (temporary) migration. We know that many of the migrants from this area headed for the United States. As the plea points out, there were considerable financial benefits to be gained from maintaining ties with the emigrating population, making it understandable why Moroni together with the Dante committee of Varese was so keen to offer guidance to Italians abroad.

Lineage, language, sentiment and commerce

In May 1913, well before the rise of Fascism in Italy, a document that was very similar to the 'Decalogue for the Emigrants' was published in a leading Italian newspaper in Argentina. This text was called the 'New Ten Commandments of Italian

¹³ G. Moroni, 'Il memoriale inviato a Mussolini per la costituzione di Varese in provincia', in: M. Botti and M. Lodi, *Giovanni Bagaini. Giornalista a Varese*, Varese, Edizioni Lativa, 1987, pp. 120-130.

¹⁴ Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale*, cit., pp. 236-237.

Emigrants'.¹⁵ How does it compare with the later 'Decalogue'? Does the comparison give reasons to believe that the document from 1925 contains typically 'Fascist' characteristics? The commandments are listed as follows:

1. There is only one Fatherland, and your Fatherland is Italy. You shall love no other country as much as Italy.
2. You shall never name your Fatherland without reverence. Exalt the glories of your Italy, which is one of the most ancient and noble nations in the world.
3. Remember the national holidays, wherever you might be. On these occasions, at least, forget your political party and religious faith; remember only that you are Italian.
4. Honour the official representative [consul] of your Fatherland, and respect him as a symbol of the faraway Fatherland, even if sometimes he displeases you.
5. You shall not kill a citizen of the Fatherland by erasing in yourself the Italian consciousness, feeling, and citizenship. You shall not disguise your name and surname with a barbaric transcription.
6. You shall not attack out of envy the authority and prestige of your compatriots who hold honorary appointments.
7. You shall not steal citizens from your fatherland, letting your children squander their *italianità* to become absorbed by the people among whom they have emigrated.
8. Be proud to declare yourself always, everywhere, and on every occasion, Italian in origin and in sentiment, and be not servile, be not despised by those who host you.
9. You shall always buy and sell, consume and distribute goods and merchandise from your Fatherland.
10. You shall marry only an Italian woman. Only with this and by this woman shall you be able to preserve in your children the blood, language, and feelings of your fathers and of your Italy.¹⁶

To begin with, this version remains closer to the original biblical Ten Commandments, even though it does not follow the same order. Some elements of these 'New Ten Commandments' - the imperative not to change name, not to envy compatriots or to marry only Italian women - cannot be found in the 'Decalogue'. However, by and large the portent of the instructions does not change. The love of the Fatherland comes first, although in the text of 1913 it is explicitly said that this should stand above party allegiance or religion. The compilers of the text in 1925 saw no need for this distinction.

In both texts emphasis is put on the exclusive consumption of Italian products, which remains a strikingly 'earthly' imperative amidst the other more 'spiritual' ones. By placing the Italian commercial interests in the final Commandment and expanding on it, the 'Decalogue' gave this aspect additional weight. This was no coincidence but part of a recognizable strategy. Indeed, in several forms of cultural promotion abroad that were developing in the early twentieth century, an underlying commercial interest can be easily found.¹⁷ An analysis of these admonitory documents raises another issue too. It shows how Christian models, such as the Ten Commandments, served to build Italian national identity despite the still existing antagonism between the Italian state and the Roman Catholic Church. Clearly even the originally anti-clerical Masonic Dante Alighieri Society while creating a secular faith in the Italian nation had to recognize the instrumental use this religious

¹⁵ 'New Ten Commandments of Italian Emigrants', in: *La Patria degli italiani* (May 1913). See: A. Filipuzzi (ed.), *Il dibattito sull'emigrazione*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1976, pp. 397-398; Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, cit., 73.

¹⁶ Translation by Choate in: idem, *Emigrant Nation*, cit., 73.

¹⁷ T.M.C. van Kessel, *Cultural Promotion and Imperialism. The Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council Contesting the Mediterranean in the 1930s*, PhD dissertation University of Amsterdam, 2011, pp. 17-59.

heritage.¹⁸ Altogether, these documents illustrate how studying Italian emigration policies in the nineteenth and twentieth can enrich our view of Italy's nation-building process.

Key words: cultural nationalism, cultural promotion, irredentism, emigration, Dante Alighieri Society

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RIASSUNTO

‘Si deve amare la mamma anche se povera’

La Società Dante Alighieri, l’emigrazione italiana e la protezione dell’italianità all’estero, 1870-1925

L’attività della Società Dante Alighieri per la tutela degli emigrati italiani agli inizi del Novecento dimostra quanto erano intrecciati la costruzione dell’identità nazionale ed il desiderio di mantenere i legami con gli italiani all’estero. Benché nell’Italia unita ci fossero state diverse opinioni sul fenomeno dell’emigrazione di massa, il governo cominciò a vedere questi concittadini sparsi per il mondo non come segno di povertà, ma come un veicolo per comprovare all’estero le doti attribuite al proprio paese. In un simile spirito nazionalista, la Dante si occupò di fare dell’emigrato un degno rappresentante della cultura e società italiane. Un esempio di come cercarono di guidare l’emigrato è ‘Il Decalogo degli Emigranti’: un documento divulgato tramite il bollettino della Dante nel 1925. Si direbbe che le raccomandazioni di questo ‘Decalogo’ si inseriscono armoniosamente nella propaganda fascista di quell’epoca. Un documento simile del 1913 fa vedere invece come già allora era invocata una forte lealtà alla nazione. Ciò che colpisce nelle due fonti è che l’italiano all’estero veniva incoraggiato a consumare prodotti esclusivamente italiani. Questo motivo economico era parte integrante di molta della politica culturale internazionale di quel periodo. Infine, la forma scelta - quella del decalogo - è emblematica per il modo in cui si dovette ricorrere ai modelli religiosi per consolidare l’identità italiana laica.

¹⁸ Choate, ‘For Religion and for the Fatherland’, in: idem, *Emigrant Nation*, cit., pp. 129-146.