

Places of association and differentiation: The Italian immigration in southern Brazil

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Abstract

Caxias do Sul was formed between 1876 and 1914 by Italian immigrants who early developed cultural values favorable to association, but under a specific dynamics: a differentiation between immigrants/descendants (Italians) and Brazilians. The research reveals this contradiction. The research realizes historiographic review of associative patterns in three places: chapel societies in rural areas, mutual aid societies and cooperatives. The theoretical framework used is the social capital. These three sites provide evidence that immigrants were using strategies of the original communities to resolve collective challenges. The notion of "italianità" was a cultural construction that produced mutual trust in an environment of limited information. However, the construction of places based on an exclusionary notion obstructed the integration of the different (Brazilians and other immigrants), especially those without commercial or government positions.

Introduction

In this article³ we developed an approximation of cultural values of Italian immigrants who colonized the current city of Caxias do Sul, located in the northwest region of Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state in Brazil. The aim of this research is to confirm if practices and values of these immigrants helped building collective solutions to the challenges of migratory process and establishment of the city also under of which patterns these solutions were built.

For this reason, our research was restricted to the first years in Caxias do Sul, the end of 1870s to 1914. The theoretical framework used it the concept of social capital. The research raises evidences that the immigrants brought experiences and favorable practices to the development of social capital from their original communities (communities in the north of Italy). We studies three places were collective

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collaboration was especially stronger: chapel societies in rural areas, mutual aid societies and cooperatives.

Theory of Social Capital

The concept of social capital was explored by a diversified group of researchers. Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes how the mutual recognition that individuals apply on contingent interactions can create nets that ensure these individuals the access to goods and social obligations. Coleman (1988) uses the concept of social capital to study how individuals generate collective action. For the author, social capital rises on people's interaction; it is a resource of social relationships that encourages cooperation in mutual objectives within a certain organization. . Putman (2009, p.101), on the other hand, suggests that certain cultural values may encourage the rise of social capital in the entire community, in an indistinct way between organizations focused on conflicting purposes

The individuals in these environments are advised to pursue their interests in a compatible way to the general welfare even when having divergent interests. On his research in the north of Italy, Putman notices the existence of cultural values historically developed in the form of "an ethic of civic participation, social responsibility and mutual assistance among equals" (2009, p. 146). The proliferation of these values would have facilitated the political and economical development of this region until nowadays. The idea that medieval civic traditions may have travelled this long way, although received severe criticism (Tarrow, 1993; Muir, 1999).

It seems appropriate, for the objectives of our article, not to put aside the dynamics of power. This means, the social capital may serve to patrons with partial interests, not always through a cultural pattern of culture favorable to the unrestricted dissemination in the society. As accentuated by Woolccok and Narayan (2000, p. 229), the social capital may present negative gains when it is used to keep resources in a specific group and prevent the success of others. Putnam (2000, p. 22) shows the differences between inclusive social capital (bridging) and exclusive (bonding). The first is related to smooth bonds of reciprocity between people of different social divisions, the second to rigid links that reinsure exclusive identities and homogeneous groups.

Italian Immigration in Caxias do Sul

Iotti (2010, p. 234) emphasizes immigration in the period of greatest flow, between 1874 and 1914, responded to the state project of socioeconomic modernization with the setup of colonial centers of small properties. The historiography accentuates predominance of northerners among the Italians who immigrated to the region of Caxias do Sul. Trento (1989, p. 80) indicates the following ratio: Veneto, 54%; Lombardia, 33%; Trentino-Alto Adige, 7%; Friuli-Venezia Júlia, 4,5%, e 1,5% among other regions. Alvim (2000, p. 386) clarifies relevant aspects about the immigration of (Veneto) whose destination in America was mainly Brazil: at least until 1885, most of them were sharecroppers, small owners and tenants. The main reason for emigration of this group would be the lack of family properties. In fact, the possession of land seems to be an important element on the immigrants' lives.

Giron (2007, p. 44-45) presents lesson from immigrants that show the importance of the land, such as: "There we were servants and here we are commanders". In the same direction, Bergamaschi (2007, p. 29) stresses the importance of the land to the immigrants, a guarantee of independency unknown in Italy. . The conditions to the land access changed over the immigration period but in general, the immigrants received lots of land appointed by the government, material to start cultivating and precarious household (or resources to build it) through financing. The lots of land were usually distributed by the administration of the colony along the lines and beams previously marked. As Nascimento (2009) emphasizes, the establishment in Caxias and other colonies of the region was a project designed and executed mainly by the state.

The Chapel's Society

Azevedo (1975, p. 179) points out the structure of the community in the countryside was established by the chapel, where the neighborhood got together at the cult, the commerce and fairs, parties and school. The religion and Italian nationality (*italianitá*) formed the collective common sense of aggregation bond within families. Giron (2007) reveals the chapel would be a place where the community meets while the church is for the rites. He points out "religion is, in this way, a kind of associativism"

(ibidem, 49). For the author, collective work has a greater ascendancy than religiosity as a connection between individuals inside the chapel.

Azevedo (1975) reports the Chapel's Society was organized by the priest, supported by the community and *reeves* designated to care for the goods of the chapel and look after the customs. This structure is very similar to the *populus*, which administrates the church properties in the Northern villages of Italy (Putnam, 2009, p. 137). In the colony of Caxias the priest becomes "the most powerful element of order, morality and stability for the settlers" (Azevedo, 1975, p. 184) including representing the settlers before the administration. On the other hand, in practice these functions are fulfilled "by the priest with the believers, in a fairly democratic atmosphere of combinations and agreements which offers to the believers a margin of participation in some decisions, like the settings of the fees and taxes to cover the expanses with transportation, sermons" (Azevedo, 1975, p. 193).

Mutualism also organizes itself in the chapel, as one of the statutes: "in case of misfortune, everyone will help the partner's family in the plantation, cleaning the land, harvest, rebuilding the destroyed house and at the supply of what is essential to the devastated family or unable to work"

From what Azevedo reports, even at the Chapel's society and facing the priest's authority developed horizontal relations of power. Far away from favoring the isolation of the families, these communities provided conditions to the climb of mutualism. According to the author "the conscious of community reveals itself in the solidarity of certain moments and in a certain pride of belonging to it". (ibidem, p. 185). Furthermore, reports the frequency of arguments and fights between neighbors to decide minor affairs related to constructions and activities in Chapel Society. It is not hard to identify this behavior consistent to intense civic engagement capable of bringing love and hate, as Puntman describes as the origin of civic community.

Societies of Mutual Aid

Azevedo (1975) stresses with the religions associations also raised in Caxias and region, associations of mutual aid. It was established in Caxias, in 1887, a *Societá Italiana di Mutuo Soccorso Principe di Napoli*, nowadays called *Sociedade Caxiense de Mútu Socorro* (Caxiense Society of Mutual Aid). The aim of Principe di Napoli on its

foundation was to provide assistance to members unable to work due to illness. Beside this primary objective, as it was usual in these associations, the *Principe di Napoli* focused on the cohesion of immigrants and encouragement of ethnical values, “keep the spirit of Italian identity alive”, according to the statute (Azevedo, 1975, p. 223). Azevedo accentuates the statute of Principe di Napoli forbidden the entry of non-members to its facilities and the admission was allowed only to Italians and descendents. Therefore, it was more rigid than other associations which established a contribution to non-Italians.

On his notes, Azevedo (1994, *passim*) indicates the existence of several of such associations in Caxias and region, some of them related to locations, others to professional activities. Luchese (2008, p.82) informs that in Principe de Napoli’s main office, operated a school since 1904, also with evening classes for adults. The author points out the fundamental role of the mutual aid societies in the maintenance of educational establishments in the villages of the region, due to the lack of these services and absence of public schools. Organized by associations and supported by the community or through monthly fees, these schools received material support by the Italian government, taught Italian dialect (some of them Portuguese also) and propagated knowledge and values relating to Italy.

Beside mutual aid and cultural values, Principe di Napoli had political functions and more moderate ones. Machado e Herédia (2001) revealed that the association was considered the most influent political power in Caxias do Sul in 1901, after the Intendancy and the City Council. Mazo e Ampessam (2005, p. 64) highlight the association was one of the supporters of bocce game. It was said that the idea of forming a mutual aid society happened exactly during a bocce game (Câmara, 2007). On this society’s facilities the first movie theatre of Caxias was installed, in the beginning of 20th Century (Pozenato e Giron, 2007, p. 102).

In the case of Caxias, the element that creates mutual trust in mutual aid societies – at least initially- is given by a subjective measure, the ethical identification or sense of Italian identity. We can think that the associativism pattern cultivated in the North of Italy came to the immigrants as a strategic to overcome the challenges presented. However, the struggle to create bounds in a little structured public environment and with a flow of people about whom little information is shared

generated the fixed idea of Italian identity as the support of interpersonal confidence. This arrangement interrupts the development of bonds of trust for the whole community.

Industrial Cooperatives

An important example of associativism in industry is the woolen mill in Galópolis. In 1981, a group of weaving workers emigrated from Schio, in Veneto, after the repression of the strike movement declared as a response to the reduction of 20% in wages of *Lanificio Rossi* (Fasolo, 1984; Herédia, 2000). From this group, five families went to the current district of Galópolis in Caxias do Sul and they have settled in agriculture. A few years later they associated with the older residents to obtain a creek and an inactive Italian weaving, in 1898 they founded a small company of woolen mill in cooperative rate.

Twenty-eight partners participated in the undertaking. Within the problems faced by the cooperative was the lack of transportation, which in 1897 had already motivated requests to the authorities. Facing difficulties, in 1908 the cooperative was sold to Hércules Gallo. Even after the company was sold, remained the import of strategies from Italy with the implement of a worker village and other paternalistic policies, reproducing *the Lanificio Rossi*. Although anecdotal, it is worth mentioning the murder of factory manager in 1933, under the pretext that only employed Italians.

Another relevant example of cooperativism is associated to Viticulture. Antunes (apud Dias, p. 2007, p. 87) mentions the activity of Dr. Stefano Paternó to assist the organizations of small producers. As reported, Dr. Paterno arrived in 1912 and promoted a “cooperative avalanche [...] which could gather almost the unanimity of industrialists establishing cooperatives in almost all of the municipalities wineries”. Antunes even reports, the cooperative initiatives of this period failed within a short time. The cooperativism in the viticulture sector suffered with the context of market and opposition of intermediaries. (Cenni, 2003; Dias, 2007), it was successfully retaken in 1929.

The cooperatives, heirs of mutualism associations, were a great civic feature of northern Italy (Putman, 2009, p. 105). . The case of Galópolis is an impressive example

of the immigrants' capability of acting together. . In addition to this example, Paternós' initiatives to induce associativism would not have had such a fast approval if they were not a familiar idea on public environment.

Conclusion

In this article we presented examples where associative values were used by Italian immigrants in Caxias do Sul to confront their mutual challenges. The practices in the societies of the chapel, in the associations of mutual aid and in the cooperatives, resemble the import of the strategies of these immigrants' original communities. However, the subjective element of mutual trust is connected with the idea of belonging of the immigrants and decedents to a distinctive category of individuals. Giron (2007, p. 45-47) highlights that the descendents distinguished the inside ones (settlers and immigrants) and the outside ones (the natives, *brasilians*). We suggest, in this article, this differentiation producing identity- the *italianitá*- compose the subjective cultural element of associative components in Caxias do Sul, identified mainly on the Chapel's society and mutual aid societies.

Azevedo (1994, p. 147) states that the culture of the region of Italian colonization "is very defensive, very closed, with the evident care to mark and protect the boundaries which separate them from other cultures". The author observes even though the region established, since the beginning, commercial and bureaucratic relations with surrounding areas, cultural changes were slow. The contact with people from other places usually happened because of sporadic relations with dealers and with the administration of the colony. The opening happened as the state became more present with the expansion of public educational system and the installation of the headquarters of the army, as well as due to the industrialization process.

From the cultural pattern that emerged in the growth of Caxias do Sul, we can state that the exclusive notion of Italian identity incorporated in the places where associativism developed, indicates the conditions of production and usage of social capital in this historical experience. It is the possibility of social capital to assist a part of the society without being extensive to other social sectors. More research would be

necessary to identify the impact of exclusive social capital (bonding) or to what extent these associative bonds were rigid or flexible.

It is pointed out that an *italianità* was not an obstacle to opportunities for economical development. As emphasized by Nascimento (2009, p.145) with the state's support the immigrants were able to quickly build a whole network of individual business between trade and services. However, the exclusion of places where social and public life happened and mutualism systems of economical protection may have imposed a high price to people outside the *italianità* especially to more vulnerable ones (those without state or commercial association).

Other articles, in addition to this reinforce the need for further study on associative practices in the context of social capital formation and immigrant's integration, specially related to mutual aid societies (Teixeira, 2009). Expanding the knowledge about historical patterns of associativism may offer important elements to understand the mechanisms that produce and keep social capital, the process of migration and the construction and meaning of new places by collective collaboration.

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