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The Italians of Port Pirie

Dissertation
Presented for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the
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at the
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J.F. Brosley,
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This study is concerned with Italian settlement in the industrial city of Port Pirie, South Australia. The problem to explain the kind and degree of assimilation among migrants of Italian descent was bound up with the further problem of group integration, since the Italians who appeared least assimilated formed themselves into a cohesive racial group, and the most assimilated Italians resisted group integration. Because of this variation in grouping the study of the assimilation of Italians in Port Pirie became one of the effect of group integration on assimilation into the host society - that is, that portion of the adopted country where the migrants chose to settle.

The degree of assimilation was not amenable to quantitative measurement, but was gauged comparatively by the knowledge that the migrants had of the host society, their readiness to accept its norms, and the willingness of the host society to accept them on a similar footing in the society. The problem of assimilation was complicated because the adopted country and the host society were not themselves uniform, and it is dubious whether there was any one set of values about which all Australians were agreed. Thus the type of explanation of assimilation which depended on the replacement of an Australian ethos, described by listing typical Australian behaviour traits and expectations as criteria by an Italian ethos was too facile, and the study of such a transformation would have meant that equal attention should be given to Australian and Italian folkways. Such a study would have demanded more time and resources than I had at my disposal.

Uniformity could be more easily achieved by the migrant group than the host society, and so long as it remained small in size it could
retain a fair degree of homogeneity, which made the study a less imposing one to begin with. But, since the more coherent Italian group composed of Molettiere fishermen and their families was virtually a closed community, and the fishermen were not given to making abstractive or verbalising their motives for action, there were many initial difficulties. The study became to depend on patient and participant observation of group behaviour in a variety of settings. This gave an interactional bias to the study which, however, was not a shortcoming since interaction was implied in group analysis.

Group membership and interaction were both selective processes. People belonged to groups for the same reason that they made friends - they wanted to express themselves freely and economically on a variety of subjects, and to have their wants recognized by others. Successful interaction tended to draw people together because there were always other people outside, with whom it was difficult to interact and become intimate. "Temperamental and experiential differences put restraining barriers on interaction. Also, before people could communicate with one another they must at first agree about the meanings of the symbols they used. Some of the symbols might attain special emotional overtones in that they were adopted at a critical stage in the development of the individual. The interactional approach to assimilation raised at the outset the problems - Why do groups arise, and why do some groups persist? - and indicated that the answers to the problems would have to be sought in the values upheld by the groups.

The first problem was met in relation to the formation of an Italian community in Port Pirie in Chapters Two and Three. The answer to the second was sought in an account of family solidarity
and the socialization of the individual in a family setting in Chapter Four. The discussion of values themselves was left to Chapter Seven. The question of changes in value and value orientation led directly to the problem of assimilation, which was considered as a part of social change in the final chapter. Material more directly concerning change within the most solidary of institutions in the Molfettese community—that of the family—were considered immediately after the discussion of the family, and in Chapter Five.

The influence of size and common experience were crucial to group formation and integration. They explain why illiterate Southern Italians coming from Sicily and Naples did not affiliate themselves with Italian groups in Port Pirie. There does not seem to have been sufficient number of them to have formed a group of their own at any time, and their experiences seem to have been too remote from those of the North Italians or the Molfettese to allow them to interact freely with them. This is borne out by the fact that the two literate Sicilians who attached themselves to particular North Italian friends left the group when the North Italians married. When the Molfettese group expanded rapidly in size after the Second World War the community tended to split into sub-groups, and this splitting in turn undermined group control. Where the community no longer provided a source of security against the more remote out-group, interaction within the community itself became restrained and group values were not reinforced.

Group solidarity was achieved at the expense of the out-group or host society, but where the out-group seemed to a sufficient number of deviants, to offer fuller economical and social rewards without personal restraints, group disintegration would soon be under way. If this was
met with acceptance on the part of the host society that assimilation would be accelerated. Knowledge of the out-group was obtained chiefly through the steady indoctrination of schools and newspapers, by radio and through films. The process of assimilation in this respect became one of the extension of knowledge and experience, and of accepting for consideration alternative modes of response. It was characterized by an extensity of interaction at the expense of an intensity of interaction. Extensity of interaction lessened racial prejudice as such, and opened the way for assimilation. For, two freely communicating individuals will tend to know, and not to know, many of the same things, and through sharing the same opinions will reinforce one another's opinions and come to regard other opinions and values as incorrect and pernicious. Thus group life has a cumulative aspect, and group values become clearer when the life of the group is intense and self-contained.

The main groups considered in this study were the Family and the Community, and some reference was made to recently formed sub-groups. The community was residually split into major areas, so that the effect of propinquity could be studied in relation to assimilation. The Italian living in the less-concentrated area were not invariably more assimilated than those living in the more concentrated area. Children, however, in the predominantly Australian neighbourhood picked up English more quickly than the dialect spoken by their parents, and presumably they acquired many Australian culture traits at the same time.

The institution of visiting kept up communications within the two communities, and if a family lived away from the main residential groups it was obliged to make periodical calls upon relatives within the community. Although relatives often sought to live next to each other, the converse proposition that related neighbours were invariably
on good terms did not apply. Each family had an autonomy of its own, theoretically vested in the father, or leader of the house, and outside interference in family affairs would lead to quarrels and estrangement. The community was not structured to accept a leader, and attempts to alter the community structure in this direction were resisted.

The community was held together through intra-marriage and "other-family" reference. The intense concern with other families led to rivalry and fission where some families became more prosperous than others, and temporary co-operation in the early periods of settlement gave way to competition. The rivalry was expressed through the display of Australian goods, showing that the owner had been successful in the new environment. The material adoption of Australian objects thus preceded the cultural adoption. Competition itself encouraged further innovations and the adoption of more Australian folkways than did co-operation. Where the possession of goods rather than the faithful observance of group standards brought increased prestige and respect, a change in value-orientation occurred in the minority group, which was of vital importance to assimilation. Through his increased desire for Australian goods the Italian was placing himself on a competitive plane with Australians, who were also in a position to note his success and to accord him due recognition. His seeking of the recognition of Australians made him more aware of group pressures in the host society, which he did not previously recognize as applying to him. His success in the new environment together with the disintegration of his group was leading to his acceptance of Australian ways, although it was accompanied in some individuals, and in North Italians, with a certain amount of marginal self-consciousness which impeded assimilation.
Chapter One sets out the problems, and makes preliminary definitions. Chapter Two sets the background for the study, both in Italy and Port Pirie, and pursues the theme of motives for migration, and compatibility of the new environment with the old. The previous experience and education of the migrant in the country of origin were part-determinants of the adjustment and assimilation in the adopted country. The most conservative migrants were the least educated, and the women whose duty to their own family and the relatives of their lineage tied them to the home.

Assimilation was retarded with the establishment of the Molfetta community and the importation of large numbers of Molfetta women from Italy. It was retarded while the Molfettae found employment within their own group, and apart from the host society. The economic apartness of the Molfettae community is described in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four describes how family solidarity is achieved through the socialization process. Religious and educational influences outside the home were not first encouraged by the Molfettae family, and had less weight than might have been supposed. The Family was an omnipresent group; its roles and norms were clearly defined; respect, love, hospitality, thrift, and industry were enjoined upon members, and common consultation over family decisions was an important feature.

The break down of the Family as an omnipresent institution was achieved when governmental and commercial agencies took over many of the non-essential functions of the family. The encroachments of the Government had been resisted before the war; most resistance was disappearing, by 1953.

Interest in Family affairs was kept alive by visiting,
family discussions, continuity of relatives, the display of portraits and group photographs. These partly make up the social life within the community, which is described in Chapter Six.

Chapter Six gives more stress to conditions as they existed in 1953 whereas Chapters Two and Three make reference to the evolution of traditional institutions. Since it analyses sub-groups as they existed at one point of time, it may give a false emphasis to the importance of some of these institutions in the long run. Sub-group formation was accompanied by an increased value of education, freedom, independence and leisure. Chapter Seven analyses traditional Molfetta values, and changes in value. Concessions made to young men were extended in a modified form to girls. The prestige of the mother was rising where the authority of the father could recall the past, and cause strain if the authoritarianism of the father was no longer necessary for group survival.

Chapter Eight attempts to show the interconnectedness of the standard of living and the knowledge of the migrant on his acceptance of an Australian way of life, and the acceptance of the Australian of him. Through the analysis a certain resistance to change was noted, so that the migrant tended to adopt as far as they were able behaviour patterns with which they were familiar in their country of origin. Once one pattern is formed it tends to affect through cultural inertia the adoption of other cultural patterns. The adjustments of migrants and host society are cumulative, so that if adjustments are not made the host society will be conceived as inhospitable, and this inhospitality will discourage further adjustments. The balance between low acceptance of the migrants and the host society was upset by the other balance—upsetting disturbances of a major world war.
In general, the North Italians are, except for their self-consciousness and some inhospitality in the host society, well on the way to complete assimilation. The Molfettesi are still relatively unassimilated, though as fishermen they have been given a place in the host society; and the cessation of the fishing industry would be noted with some regret by the host society. Before the war they were almost entirely cut off from the host society. Since the war new groupings, institutions, and values have been introduced which, although they do not invariably make for assimilation, tend to undermine the solidarity of Italian groups and remove some of the barriers to assimilation.

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