

The Immigration Conundrum in Italy and Spain

Laws and policies in Italy and Spain reveal ambivalence about immigration.

by Kitty Calavita

Both Spain and Italy have significant undocumented immigration populations. In this article, Kitty Calavita explains the origins of increased migration to Italy and Spain, beginning in the 1980s, the role of immigrants in the economy, the anti-immigrant backlash, and immigration law and policy today.

Spain and Italy have long been countries of emigration, sending millions of working men, women, and children to every corner of the globe since the late 1800s. In the decades after World War II, Spaniards and Italians found labor opportunities closer to home, shuttling back and forth to north and central Europe where they supplied the backbone of the industrial labor force for the post-war economic boom. This migrant stream began to reverse itself in the early 1980s, as many former emigrants returned home, and these southern European countries attracted large numbers of immigrants from beyond their borders.

Italy experienced its own “economic miracle” in the post-WWII decades, drawing large numbers of rural people from its less developed southern regions to its northern industrial centers. By the mid-1970s the gap between Italy and its northern European neighbors had narrowed. The increased employment opportunities and higher wage levels associated with this transformation attracted immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, much as in earlier years Italians had migrated north to better jobs. By 2006, approximately 4 million foreigners resided in Italy, with an estimated 300,000 being undocumented. The vast majority of these immigrants come from outside the European Union. While Africa is the largest source region, immigrants also come from eastern and central Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

Spain also experienced massive internal migrations in the midtwentieth century, when the industrial areas in and around Barcelona and Madrid, and in the Basque region, attracted the landless populations of the rural south. But the high level of external immigration beginning in the mid-1980s was new. The number of legal foreign residents in Spain went from fewer than 250,000 in 1985 to over 3 million by 2006. With just 11 percent of the population of the European Union, Spain now receives an estimated 22 percent of its immigrants.

“Spain and Italy passed their first immigration laws in 1985 and 1986, respectively.”

Kitty Calavita (kccalavi@uci.edu) is Professor of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine. She is author of Immigrants at the Margins: Law, Race, and Exclusion in Southern Europe (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

The single most important country of origin is Morocco, but Spain is also host to a substantial Latin American population, not surprisingly given its linguistic and colonial-cultural ties to the region. A slightly larger share of Spain's immigrant population is undocumented than is the case in Italy.

Spain's economy has been shaped by a unique set of historical circumstances, most notably the Francoist regime. Since Franco's death in 1975, the Spanish economy has grown by spurts and starts, undergoing unprecedented levels of expansion between 1986 and 1990, when over two million new jobs were created, more than in any other European country. While still lagging behind Italy in terms of real wages and standard of living, Spain too has gone far in narrowing the gap with the rest of the European Union. As in Italy, Spain's social protections have expanded rapidly and its welfare state is now almost comparable to that of other western European democracies.

Immigrants in the Economy

One out of every four new hires in Italy is an immigrant. They are clustered in several sectors, the primary ones being manufacturing, construction, agriculture, domestic service, and other services, with their distribution across these sectors varying by region, gender, and nationality. More immigrants work in manufacturing in Italy than anywhere else in Europe, where they tend to be more highly concentrated in services. Wages and working conditions for immigrants vary between the north and the south of the country, even within the same categories of work. What remains constant is that they are generally worse than for local workers. Whole Chinese immigrant families working in the garment industry in southern Italy often earn the equivalent of \$250 a month for 8–10 hour days.

Immigrant women in Italy are heavily concentrated in domestic service, especially elder care and child care. The need for immigrant caregivers is particularly acute in southern Europe where the welfare state is less developed than in some areas of northern Europe where state-sponsored child care and provisions for the elderly are the norm, and the demand is further accentuated by the rapidly aging population. The large metropolitan areas of Rome and Milan account for roughly half of all immigrant domestics (three out of four domestic workers in these two cities are immigrants).

As in Italy, the proportion of immigrants in the Spanish workforce has increased every year for the last two decades. The number registered with the social security administration doubled in just two years from 2000–2002, with non-European immigrants comprising four out of every ten new workers covered in the social security system. And they are even more heavily represented in the underground economy, where it is estimated that immigrants account for at least 15 percent of the workforce.

More important than their mere numbers, they fill critical niches in the Spanish economy—usually those that



Chinese employees work in a Prato textile firm in the Macrolotto area of Italy. Prato is the biggest textile district in Europe, counting 1700 textile and clothing industries. Italy is home to 25,000 Chinese contractors.

While immigrants are an increasingly central part of Italy's economy, they continue to be concentrated in the "underground," or illegal economy. It has been estimated that Italian employers save at least \$13 billion a year on taxes and social security payments by using immigrant workers in irregular employment, a figure that would increase substantially if their lower wage rates were also considered.

have been vacated by local workers. Based on Interior Ministry data, they are concentrated in agriculture, construction, domestic service, and the tourism industry, with a far smaller fraction in manufacturing than in Italy. As in Italy, immigrants in Spain provide not just a supplemental workforce, but a particular kind of workforce, i.e. one that will do the jobs, and under condi-

tions, that most Spanish workers no longer accept.

And as in Italy, the location of immigrants in different sectors varies across regions. In the south, more than 90 percent of immigrants—mostly from North Africa—work in labor-intensive, hothouse agriculture, while in the northeastern city of Barcelona they are distributed across construction, tourism, and a range of services, and in Madrid they are more likely to be found in domestic service. In every sector, immigrants occupy the most precarious niches and are usually compensated at lower rates than comparable local workers.

Immigration Law and Policy

Spain and Italy passed their first immigration laws in 1985 and 1986, respectively, and have enacted amendments and regulatory changes almost every year since then. Despite what seems like constant tinkering, some consistent themes characterize these laws. Most notably, they are based on the principle that the increasing influx of immigrants from the Third World must be controlled, or at least managed. These Mediterranean countries became the southern gate to Europe just as it was dismantling

its internal borders, and pressure mounted to control the numbers who slipped in.

Consistent with the view of immigrants as temporary workers, Italian and Spanish immigration laws contain few provisions for permanent legal residency or naturalization. Citizenship is based primarily on *jus sanguinis*, translated from Latin as “right of blood,” which means that children born to immigrants within these countries do not automatically become citizens. Indeed, those born to illegal immigrants are themselves considered illegal.

Most permits to reside legally in these countries are temporary and depend on having a work permit, which must be renewed on a regular basis. Recent laws make it possible for those who can string together multiple years of temporary permits to apply for permanent legal status. However, it is extremely difficult to meet the stringent standards required to achieve this status, and relatively few have been successful. Among the most daunting of the obstacles is the requirement to work without interruption in the formal economy, thereby excluding the majority of immigrants who do at least some stints in these countries’ underground economies. Legalization programs are implemented every few years, with applications sometimes reaching several hundred thousand. Those who are legalized, however, are generally extended only temporary legality and have to demonstrate continued formal employment and navigate a maze of government bureaucracies to renew their permits.

While these laws and policies make it difficult to establish permanent legal status, at the same time government policies stress the importance of immigrant integration. The term “integration” is used in these countries to refer to social and cultural inclusion and tolerance for diversity, and is con-

For Further Reading

Andall, Jacqueline. “Cape Verdean Women on the Move: ‘Immigration Shopping’ in Italy and Europe,” *Modern Italy*, 4:2 (1999): 241–257.

Anthias, Floya, and Gabriella Lazaridis, eds. *Gender and Migration in Southern Europe: Women on the Move*. New York: Berg, 2000.

Calavita, Kitty. *Immigrants at the Margins: Law, Race, and Exclusion in Southern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Cornelius, Wayne A., Philip L. Martin, and James F. Hollifield, eds. *Controlling Immigration: A Global Perspective*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Zolberg, Aristide. “Wanted But Not Welcome: Alien Labor in Western Development.” In *Population in an Interacting World*, ed. William Alonso, 261–297. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987.

trusted to segregation, exclusion, and rejection. Integration policies include language courses and socialization classes, as well as tolerance campaigns that encourage local populations to accept immigrants’ cultural differences.

Since passing its first immigration law in 1986, Italy has formally endorsed the notion of equal social rights for legal immigrants. Both the original 1986 law and the Martelli Law in 1990 made reference to equal access to housing, public education, social assistance, and the national health care system. The Turco-Napolitano Law of 1998 is widely recognized as the blueprint for immigrant integration in Italy today,

despite a few retrenchments made by the conservative Berlusconi Administration in 2002.

Spain has followed a remarkably similar path. The Preamble to its 1985 law spoke of “facilitat[ing] the integration of aliens into Spanish society.” By 1991, as both legal and illegal immigration increased, so too did the emphasis on integration. Resolutions, administrative decrees, and speeches before Parliament regularly warned of the need to ensure the social integration of immigrants.

A liberal law passed in 2000 over the opposition of the conservative Aznar Administration, giving immigrants equal rights to Spaniards in access to public education, health care, housing, and social security protections, and making these rights contingent on being registered in the local municipality as a de facto resident, rather than on formal immigration status.

Anti-Immigrant Backlashes

It is often said that Italians and Spaniards are more tolerant of immigrants than are their western European neighbors. Their relatively low levels of xenophobia are consistently affirmed in surveys. In one study of attitudes towards immigrants, Italians and Spaniards had lower anti-immigrant attitudes than citizens of any of the other participating European countries.

However, the low xenophobia levels are relative. Absolute levels are fairly high, with almost one-third of Spaniards and Italians saying they “strongly agree” or “very strongly agree” with statements characterizing immigrants as threatening, harmful, or dangerous. Anti-immigrant riots periodically expose the intensity of these perceptions. While the political parties that exploit xenophobia have not attained the levels of popular support

evident in some other western European countries, nonetheless, immigrant advocates and those urging tolerance express concern.

The anti-immigrant backlash has many roots and comes in myriad forms. Most immigrants work in low-wage jobs that Italians and Spaniards have rejected. Not only does this mean that they are by definition economically distinct from the local population, but the

“The anti-immigrant backlash has many roots and comes in myriad forms.”

low-wage nature of these jobs amplifies that distinction and traps them in poverty. The concentration of poverty within the immigrant population operates as a stigma, a sign of difference, and—for some—a mark of inferiority. Cultural and religious differences often compound this perception of difference and fuel the fire of intolerance.

“Wanted But Not Welcome”

The legal system arguably exacerbates this perception of difference. Despite well-intentioned programs to integrate immigrants, laws that inhibit the full incorporation of immigrants into Spanish and Italian society by limiting their ability to put down permanent roots, ensure their continued marginality. Policy-makers thus face a kind of catch-22, with immigrant workers confined to temporary and contingent permits to do work that locals mostly shun, but with this fact contributing to backlash against the impoverished immigrant population.

In the United States and western Europe, there is substantial ambivalence towards immigration, with immigrant workers filling niches in the economy but often experiencing social exclusion. Laws and policies in Spain and Italy mirror this ambivalence, on the one hand, limiting immigrant incorporation and on the other, exhorting immigrants to integrate. As the populations of these southern European countries age and birth rates plummet, these societies are increasingly dependent on immigration. How they cope with the catch-22 surrounding the immigrant influx will have major consequences for the nature of these societies in the twenty-first century and beyond.

FOR DISCUSSION

- In what industries or sectors are immigrants employed in Italy and in Spain?
- How does the “underground” economy in Italy benefit employers?
- What themes or trends emerge in immigration laws in Spain and Italy?
- How do these countries deal with integration issues?
- What does the author mean by the phrase “Wanted But Not Welcome” to characterize the place of immigrants in Spain and Italy?