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The Power of Perception

How the perception of race impacted Irish and Italian immigrants in Boston from 1850–1910

By Genevieve Weidner

In the 1850s, a large population of Irish immigrants came to Boston. In the 1880s, as Boston began to industrialize, the promise of jobs encouraged many more groups of immigrants to move to Boston. The Italians and more Irish came to Boston, but because the Irish had established communities and job connections in the city, it was easier for the Irish immigrants to have better jobs and move into positions of power. Since the Italian immigrants came later than the Irish, the gatekeepers of Boston largely defined that their ethnicity meant. By referencing secondary sources on the topic of race and ethnicity, and by using primary sources from the period on the experience of the Irish and Italian immigrants, this paper explores the difference between race and ethnicity, and how that impacted the experience of different groups as they settled into Boston.

Groups of Irish and Italian immigrants came to the United States in waves throughout the 19th century. Both the Irish and Italian immigrants were similar in their poor economic standing and devote Catholicism. This certainly brewed trouble as both the Irish and Italians immigrated to Boston. To borrow a phrase from historian Marilyn Johnson, since the Revolutionary era, Boston was an “overwhelmingly Protestant city.”¹ While the Irish were discriminated against for being Catholic, they were still able to largely rise out of poverty, move away from the tenements in the North End, and many Irish even became politically powerful. However, the Italian immigrant population lived in poverty in the North End for much longer and struggled to have the same political achievements that the Irish did. What was different about these two groups, that were similar in their religious practices, economic standing, and objective color in their skin, that made the Irish capable of advancing out of poverty while the Italians struggled?

The demand for labor from industrialism explained why many Irish and Italian immigrants came to Boston in the first place. Because they came from poor conditions in their home countries, the Irish and Italian immigrants had to take low-wage, unskilled work. This forced many immigrants to live in tenements in the North End. However, the Irish and Italian experience differed significantly in Boston. For the purposes of this paper, “Irish Americans” will be the group of Irish that immigrated in the 1850s, and “Irish immigrants” will be the latter group of Irish that immigrated from the 1880s 1910s. I will focus specifically on how these two groups were perceived in Boston during the 1880–1910s. “Native Bostonians” and the “gatekeepers” are essentially the group that had been living in Boston since the American Revolution. I will refer to this group as the “native Bostonians,” because that is the language many of the primary sources used when describing this group. My definition of “race” is the color of the immigrant’s skin, and ethnicity will refer to the perception of that race by both the immigrant group and the “native Bostonians.”

The idea of “whiteness” for the Irish and Italian immigrants ultimately determined how both groups would be perceived Boston. Irish immigrants were considered “in between” white and non-white, but the Irish Americans’ status allowed Irish immigrants to advance faster than Italian immigrants. The essential difference was from where the perception comes. Irish immigrants were perceived as “in between” ethnicities by other Irish Americans, because Irish Americans had time to settle into Boston. Since there was an earlier wave of Irish immigrants in the 1850s, the Irish had time to establish themselves and work to have higher paying jobs. Italian immigrants were perceived as “white” by the gatekeepers of Boston. This meant that the power of determination of ethnicity in the context of American standards was extremely important. Even though the whiteness of the Irish was in between, the fact that the Irish Americans had the power to determine what their ethnicity meant and how the Irish would relate to other ethnicities meant they had the opportunity to advance out of poverty. The Italians had little control over their perception of their ethnicity, which explains why the Italians remained in poverty for longer than the Irish immigrants. The “in between” whiteness status of immigrants offers a lens to examine how both immigrant groups integrated into Boston.

Historian Marilyn Johnson described how the Irish immigrated to Boston because there was severe starvation and disease, as well as land shortages and natural disasters in *The New Bostonians: How Immigrants*

1 Marilyn S. Johnson, *The New Bostonians: How Immigrants Have Transformed the Metro Area since the 1960s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 34.
<https://doi.org/10.7275/4bx5-5j49>

*Have Transformed the Metro Area since the 1960s.*² Family connections motivated Irish to migrate after the first waves of immigration in the 1850s, but the major motivation was economic advancement.³ Johnson described how the Irish occupied the North End of Boston in the 1850s, because the wages forced the Irish immigrants to live in these overcrowded and disease-ridden tenements.⁴ What this research demonstrates is the labor motivation for immigrants to live in Boston, and how the immigrants were forced to live in poor and crowded conditions as they settled into the culture of Boston. The poverty of Irish and Italian immigrants left them no option but to accept low-wage jobs in Boston, which defined them into the lower class at the beginning of the 1880s.

Johnson described how the Irish immigrants had time to settle into Boston, and how second generations of immigrants settled into “the zone of emergence.”⁵ These were the surrounding neighborhoods, which offered better housing and jobs. In the book *Massachusetts: A Concise History*, Richard Brown and Jack Tager described how even though Yankees discriminated against the Irish, the time that the Irish had to settle into Boston (in addition to fighting for the Union in the Civil War) allowed some Irish to work towards the middle class, and get involved in politics.⁶ The foundational labor of the first generation of immigrants allowed the second generation of the Irish to migrate to South Boston by the 1890s and 1900s.⁷ Johnson discussed the ethnic politics as well, with an emphasis on Irish dominance of politics. Because the Irish were one of the first groups of immigrants to Boston, they had more time to assimilate into the city.⁸ Second and third generations of Irish immigrants got elected because of the growing Irish voting community.⁹ What this research suggests is time was necessary for the Irish immigrants to settle into Boston. The demand for low-wage labor may have trapped Irish immigrants into poverty when they arrived in Boston, but as time progressed, both groups were able to slowly grow out of poverty.

In “Making New Immigrants ‘In between’: Irish Hosts and White Panethnicity, 1890 to 1930,” David Roediger and James Barrett argued that Irish immigrants were not considered fully white from 1880 – 1930. They wrote, “immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were “in between people” — neither fully white nor nonwhite—in certain U.S. places and times, Irish Americans contributed as much to sustaining and structuring such in between-ness before the 1930s as they did toward resolving it.”¹⁰ Roediger and Barrett explained the divide between the “Irish Americans”, or the first group of Irish immigrants from the 1850s, and the “Irish Immigrants”, which was the second wave of immigrants in the 1880s - 1900s into major American cities such as New York, Chicago, and Boston.¹¹ The first wave of Irish immigrants had time to settle into these cities, so there was a significant divide between the class status of Irish Americans and Irish immigrants. Roediger and

2 Johnson 14.

3 Johnson 20.

4 Johnson, 21.

5 Johnson, 24.

6 Richard Brown and Jack Tager. *Massachusetts: A Concise History* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 217.

7 Johnson, 25.

8 Johnson, 42.

9 Johnson, 43.

10 David Roediger and James Barrett, “Making New Immigrants ‘In between’: Irish Hosts and White Panethnicity, 1890 to 1930,” in *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States*. Eds. Nancy Foner, George M. Fredrickson (Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 161.

11 Roediger and Barrett, 168.

Barrett wrote, “To Irish American elites, newcomers presented a threat to group respectability. Especially if poor, drunken, or religiously emotive, the newcomer needed education and reform.”¹² This divide not only put Irish Americans in a position to “teach”¹³ the new immigrants what their ethnicity meant in relations to other races, but it also put the Irish ethnicity in a place where they could be politically powerful in many cities such as Boston.¹⁴

Roediger and Barrett offered several examples of Irish Americans teaching the new immigrants about racism and the expectations of their ethnicity, but this was mostly evident in the immigrant’s labor. Irish immigrants worked in unskilled jobs, but “by 1900 only one-seventh of the second-generation Irish male population worked in unskilled jobs, and for Irish-born males the figure was one-quarter.”¹⁵ Since Irish Americans had more time to live in American cities and “spread through the job structure”, they were in a “strong position to lead labor organizations, which sometimes came to contain many new immigrants.”¹⁶ The powerful position of the Irish Americans in labor unions specifically allowed the Irish Americans to “teach the color line”¹⁷, meaning they could favor Irish immigrants for jobs.¹⁸ The establishment of Irish Americans in many cities in the United States gave Irish immigrants an advantage over other immigrants.¹⁹

In *The Boston Italians: A Story of Pride, Perseverance, and Paesani from the Years of the Great Immigration to the Present Day*, Stephen Puleo described Italian immigration into the North End of Boston. Between 1880 and 1920, 14 and 15 million people left Italy and immigrated to the United States. Poverty, natural disasters, overpopulation, and disease had an impact on Southern Italy’s economy, which motivated immigration to the United States.²⁰ By 1910, the North End’s population approached 30,000 people, and about 28,000 were Italians. By 1920, 16% of Boston’s population was Italian, (out of about 670,000)²¹ and 97% of the North End was Italian.²²

Stephen Puleo discussed Italian immigrants’ integration into Boston. Puleo stated that by 1915, many Italian anarchists were rooted in the North End, and their sentiments were based in claims that government and capitalism were the causes of poverty and being destitute.²³ In Boston, immigrants that lived permanently in the city would live in the same blocks and areas as their region from Italy, so this was called “chain migration.”²⁴ It made Italian immigrant’s transition to America easier, but it also isolated the immigrants from the rest of Boston’s culture.²⁵ There were multiple incidents of anarchist violence in Boston, such as the North Square

12 Roediger and Barrett, 169.

13 Roediger and Barrett, 174.

14 Roediger and Barrett, 177.

15 Roediger and Barrett, 184.

16 Roediger and Barrett, 185.

17 Roediger and Barrett, 187.

18 Roediger and Barrett, 187.

19 Roediger and Barrett, 188.

20 Stephen Puleo, *The Boston Italians: A Story of Pride, Perseverance, and Paesani, from the years of the great immigration to the Present Day* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 49.

21 Puleo, 47.

22 Puleo, 45.

23 Puleo, 108.

24 Puleo, 67.

25 Puleo, 71.

riot and the Salutation Street bombing.²⁶ Italians became further associated with anarchists in 1919 after the Hardwick bombings in 1919.²⁷ In 1920, The Sacco and Vanzetti trial increased the anxiety for Italian anarchists.²⁸ This research suggested that Italians had difficulty integrating into Boston for reasons beyond the poverty associated with industrial labor. While Irish Americans were able to use their established foundation and “in between-ness” to blend in with the culture of Boston, Italians struggled more with this because of outside factors and perceptions of their race.

Thomas Guglielmo explored the topic of whiteness of Italian immigrants in “No Color Barrier: Italians, Race, and Power in the United States.” Guglielmo argued that despite the discrimination that Italian immigrants faced from 1880 – 1910, their “widespread acceptance was reflected most concretely in Italians’ ability to immigrate to the United States and become citizens, work certain jobs, live in certain neighborhoods, join certain unions ...”²⁹ In contrast to Roediger and Barrett, Guglielmo stated that Italians were considered white by others, so the determination of their ethnicity was not within their power as they arrived to major cities in the United States such as New York, Chicago, and Boston.³⁰ Guglielmo distinguished race from color; he claimed that color is a social category, and while many people in the 1880s – 1910s did not distinguish race and color consciously, these are two categories for which people identified immigrants.³¹ For example, Guglielmo stated that “southern Italians never occupied the lowest of social positions in the United States”, because “the United States had both racial and color hierarchies, and if Italians were denigrated and exploited in the former, they were greatly privileged in the latter.”³²

In the context of labor in these major American cities, Guglielmo argued that Italians faced much discrimination from unions and employers. However, in contrast to races that were undeniably “colored” such as African Americans, Italian immigrants had “far more employment options and opportunities.”³³ Even though many Americans regarded Italians as white, the distinction between the whiteness, exemplified in sentiments such as “White Foreigners Should Not Have Privileges over White Natives”³⁴, led to discrimination against Italian immigrants in labor opportunities. Guglielmo argued that Italians were undeniably white because racial scientists “placed Italians firmly in the white category”³⁵ and the history of Rome and the Renaissance “supported the classification of Italians as white.”³⁶ The ambiguity of U.S. census for categorizing the Italians contributed to the Italians being accepted as white, because the census would alternate between asking for incoming immigrants’ “color” or “race”, so the two terms became associated together.³⁷ This was why even though there was a distinction between race and color; people associated the two factors as one. The perception

26 Puleo, 110.

27 Puleo, 108.

28 Puleo, 112.

29 Thomas Guglielmo, “‘No Color Barrier’ Italians, Race, and Power in the United States” in *Are Italians White?* ed. Jennifer Guglielmo (New York: Routledge, 2003), 30.

30 Guglielmo, 31.

31 Guglielmo, 32.

32 Guglielmo, 36.

33 Guglielmo, 37.

34 Guglielmo, 39.

35 Guglielmo, 40.

36 Guglielmo, 40.

37 Guglielmo, 41.

of whiteness gave Italians an advantage over races that were clearly “nonwhite”, but the discrimination they faced was rooted in ideas against their status and class when they first immigrated in the 1880s.³⁸

Roediger and Barrett’s analysis contrasted with Guglielmo is a powerful lens with which to understand the Irish and Italian experience in Boston. Both groups of historians emphasized the power of perception. Roediger and Barrett stated that the Irish immigrants had an advantage because the Irish Americans could “teach” them about their place in a city, so they therefore had the power to determine what their race meant. Guglielmo claimed that the Italians were considered as a white race because of the color of their skin, but that did not mean they had the power of perception of their ethnicity. By focusing on the power of perception, the following primary sources demonstrate that the immigrants’ experience in Boston depended on how the “native Bostonians” perceived and accepted them. Race was a way to categorize this perception, and being “white” did not necessarily give immigrants the power to advance and assimilate into Boston.

In 1900, the *Boston Globe* published an article entitled “Irish in America. Their Character as Developed by Her Institutions” by John F. Cronan.³⁹ This source was an account of a speech that Hon. John F. Cronan gave to a crowd of 3,000 people in Boston. Cronan claimed that the Irish are resilient people, coming from famine and a tyrannous government.⁴⁰ He made the argument that the Irish were able to “assimilate” into American culture because of the strength of American institutions, such as the law and American authorities. He claimed American institutions “enabled [the Irish] as a class to be reconciled to their position, and to so readily assimilate and conform to the American idea of government.”⁴¹ Therefore the Irish immigrant “had no occasion to apologize for being here.”⁴² Any dissent from the Irish probably came from a misunderstanding between the immigrants and Bostonians, because the Irish recognize that American institutions were founded on principles of justice. Cronan claimed that because of this, “there is ... no longer a pretext for prejudice.”⁴³ He also claimed that their “respect for authority” resulted in their assimilation. Because the descendants of Irish immigrants were present in America, especially in Boston where this speech was given, Cronan claimed that the Irish were important “in both state and nation” and they are “benefitted prosperity and progress.”

The context of this source was not entirely clear, beyond how it was a political speech intended for a large crowd. The sentiments that Cronan expressed could have been to claim anti-immigrant riots in Boston, or it could have been a sincere expression. Regardless of the intent, the speech reflected important ideas about how Irish immigrants managed to settle into Boston. The term “assimilate” is ambiguous and suggests finality in being accepted into Boston, which was not the case for every immigrant family in this period. However, because the Irish had time to settle into “American institutions”, Cronan expressed they had a right to be here. Since Cronan focused on the Irish in this speech, and no other groups of immigrants, there was clearly a sentiment that the new groups of Irish immigrants in the 1880s – 1910s had more of a right to be in Boston than other groups. This source also suggested that acceptance of an immigrant group was due to time, because the

38 Guglielmo, 43.

39 John F. Cronan. “Irish in America.: Their Character as Developed by Her Institutions,” *Boston Daily Globe*, March 19, 1900, 1.

40 Cronan, “Irish in America.”

41 Cronan, “Irish in America.”

42 Cronan, “Irish in America.”

43 Cronan, “Irish in America.”

Irish had more time to get used to the “American institutions.”

When focusing on labor practices, the Irish had more advancement and career opportunities because of when they immigrated. In 1840, a family of Irish immigrants came to Middletown Connecticut.⁴⁴ William Doogue was 12 years old at the time. He received an apprenticeship in Hartford for a nursery and greenhouse company, “before the time of the overstretched specializing that so largely characterize[d] private business methods in all lines.”⁴⁵ After a long contract of employment at this Hartford Company, Doogue moved to Boston and became the superintendent of public grounds for the city of Boston. He held this position for 28 years, until the day of his death in 1906.⁴⁶ This article stated that “No native born citizen of this country ever had deeper love or profounder respect for the institutions of free popular government than William Doogue.” However, he was proudly Irish and was affiliated with social and patriotic Irish societies in Boston.⁴⁷

Doogue was an example of an Irish immigrant who came to the Boston area before the Civil War, and had the opportunity to build a successful career. Doogue was a proud member of Irish nationalist societies, and still maintained success in his career in Boston. This demonstrated that the first wave of immigration into Boston in the 1850s provided the Irish with more opportunities. Even though this evidence is anecdotal, it showed that an Irish person who immigrated in the 1850s could still identify as Irish and could obtain career success. Doogue was ambiguously Irish, and was ambiguously American, because he appeared to identify as both. This article exemplified how an Irish person could be between races and still succeed in the job market while having the ability to define their ethnicity to an extent.

In an article entitled “1,000,000 immigrants in a year: Can the Country assimilate them?” in the *Boston Globe*, an interview was conducted with Frank Sargent, the commissioner general of immigration. The interview revealed the difference between the immigrants in the 1850s versus the immigrants in the 1880s-1910s, and explained why the immigrants wanted to live in cities. Sargent stated, “[The recent immigrants] are not like the immigrants of the first three quarters of our century, who came with the ambition to be farm owners ... such foreigners changed and were transformed into Americans ... These immigrants came from northern Europe.”⁴⁸ The article stated that the reason for the increase of immigration was due to “the era of prosperity which this country is now having and the great demand for labor arising therefrom.”⁴⁹ The Italian immigrants specifically came to the United States “to get easier jobs and better wages”, and the cities offered the best opportunities for jobs in factories.⁵⁰

This source discussed the difference between Irish and Italian immigrants based on when they arrived in cities like Boston. Sargent specifically compares the first group of Irish immigrants in the 1850s to the second wave of immigrants in the 1880s. From this perspective, the first group of Irish wanted to become honest farmers, while the second group of Italians wanted to benefit from the increasing wealth of industrialism. This article suggested “native Bostonian’s” perceived the Irish as immigrants that wanted to farm and work their

44 “Doogue passes away,” *Boston Daily Globe*, Nov 3, 1906, 1.

45 The author meant the industrial factory and division of labor system that predominated this time period.

46 “Doogue passes away.”

47 “Doogue passes away.”

48 Frank Carpenter, “1,000,000 immigrants in a year, Can the Country Assimilate Them?” *Boston Daily Globe*, Dec 2, 1906, 1.

49 Carpenter, “1,000,000 immigrants in a year.”

50 Carpenter, “1,000,000 immigrants in a year.”

way up the economic ladder, while the Italians were looking to exploit the developments of industrialism. This article was a professional interview, so Sargent did not discuss specific stereotypes or perceptions of Irish or Italian immigrants. However, he undeniably described a definite difference about how Irish and Italian immigrants were perceived.

There were many articles at this time that discussed the stereotypes of Italian immigrants. The gatekeepers clearly attempted to define the Italian immigrant's place in the culture of Boston, and these definition attempts were rooted in this obvious resentment. For example, an article in the *Boston Globe* entitled "the Italian as an American" stated that "so widespread has been the discussion of the desirability of the Italian immigrant as an American citizen, that the Italian periodicals have taken up the matter and have answered some of the criticisms which have been made of the immigrant from Italy in America."⁵¹ These periodicals had to address "accusations of drunkenness, sloth and uncleanness", and they quoted statistics to try to disprove these rumors. For example, the article reported that the "Italian's home is among the cleanest, and the women the most moral."⁵² An Italian periodical that attempted to clarify the rumors about the Italian immigrants exemplified a few things. First, it demonstrated that the rumors were significant enough that all Italian immigrants were regarded as drunk and violent to the point where it became a significant association of their identity, according to the "native Bostonians." Secondly, it showed the attempt of the Italian community to redefine their ethnicity, and the struggle of their identity within the city of Boston and how others perceived them.

A lot of these stereotypes about Italian immigrants seemed to be rooted in the "native Bostonian's desire to categorize their ethnicity. In an article from 1908 entitled "Hill discusses race problems" recounted Orations exercised at Faneuil Hall, presided over by the Mayor. Arthur D. Hill, a respected Boston attorney, gave a speech that described the tensions between the "native Bostonians" and the immigrants.⁵³ Hill recounted the foundation of the United States, and while many of the founding fathers were immigrants, they "were all more or less alike," which made it easier for "them to understand one another and easy for them to act together."⁵⁴ Hill stated that "the presence of men of so many races certainly adds to the difficulty of effective political action."⁵⁵ He cited the example of the "Immigrant and the Yankee" to get along with one another, because their race and backgrounds "prevented understanding."⁵⁶ He claimed the Italian immigrant had this struggle, and also struggled to understand the other groups of immigrants such as Jews and Syrians.⁵⁷ He claimed that race did not have to define a person, for an Italian man named George A. Scigliano "gave us one of the highest examples of intelligent and successful citizenship."⁵⁸

Even though Hill called for peace and unity in this speech, it demonstrated a fundamental divide between the immigrants and the rest of the "native Bostonians" due to perceptions of the race of the immigrants. This applied in particular to the Italian immigrant according to this article, who struggled to relate to the other immigrants and the "native Bostonians." Hill suggested the reason for discrimination and lack of unity within

51 "The Italian as an American." *Boston Daily Globe*, Oct 17, 1907, 1.

52 "The Italian as an American."

53 "Hill discusses race problems." *Boston Daily Globe*, Jul 5, 1908, 1.

54 "Hill discusses race problems."

55 "Hill discusses race problems."

56 "Hill discusses race problems."

57 "Hill discusses race problems."

58 "Hill discusses race problems."

Boston was due to the race of the immigrants, which prevented them from “assimilating” into Boston. Even if the Italians were considered “white” in color,⁵⁹ their race was obviously different from the “native Bostonians.” As Guglielmo suggested, race and color were soon associated together.⁶⁰ That means the Italians were considered to be a different race completely, regardless of the color of their skin. This demonstrated the perception of the Italian immigrant’s race, which really meant how their ethnicity was defined.

These primary sources reflected the importance of considering and studying generations in immigration history. The more time a group of immigrants remained in a city changed the people’s perspective of them. This can be an optimistic message, because it suggests that a path toward opportunities for immigrants is time. This is not the only factor, because true acceptance of a foreign group takes conscious efforts for inclusion and acceptance. However, the influence of generations for a particular immigrant group has an undeniable impact and should be considered in future historical analyses on the topic of immigration. Especially in a city like Boston, which is heavily steeped in maritime and industrial history combined with a large variety of immigrants, generational establishments of race are important to understand the complexities of the ethnicities within Boston. The difference between race and ethnicity can also be explored further. While I defined race to mean color and ethnicity to mean the perception of race, other scholars should examine the difference and understanding of these terms to learn more about immigration history.

59 Guglielmo 41.

60 Guglielmo 41.

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