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# From Subjects to Actors: Italians and Jews and the Fight against Immigration Restriction in the United States

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*This article explores how Louise Tilly's examination of nonstate actors, collective action, and transnationalism remains relevant to scholars today. More specifically, I address how her scholarship has influenced the conceptualization of my first book project, which investigates how Italian and Jewish immigration reform advocates in the United States mobilized against restrictive immigration laws within a transnational framework. Tilly's work has helped me complicate the story of immigration restriction in the United States by looking at how grassroots ethnic organizations took advantage of their members' ability to naturalize to challenge the legitimacy of draconian immigration laws that marked them as undesirable. In addition to the influence that her scholarly agenda still has on the field, this article contends that Louise Tilly's commitment to interdisciplinarity and collaboration with other scholars is a model to emulate and represents another major aspect of her legacy.*

I have never personally met Louise Tilly, but having worked closely with one of her students, Donna R. Gabaccia, I have had the opportunity to read her work and to benefit from the ethic of generosity and mentorship that she instilled in her students.<sup>1</sup> Before coming to the United States for my PhD, my interest in the powerless and the marginalized had naturally led me to gravitate toward Tilly's scholarship. As I worked on my undergraduate thesis, Tilly's *Politics and Class in Milan* provided a powerful model of the type of historian I wanted to become (Tilly 1992). Perhaps influenced by my family's own multigeneration and transatlantic migrant experience, I immediately identified with her call to focus on collective action and nonstate actors within a transnational framework.

At a time when scholars still struggle to engage in comparative, interdisciplinary, and multilingual research, Louise Tilly's scholarship provides us with valuable lessons in how to do all three. As Tilly and Gurin remind us in their 1992 introduction to *Women, Politics, and Change*, it is easy to fall back into specific disciplinary boundaries. And, yet, Louise Tilly's scholarship stands as a powerful reminder of

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1. Like Louise Tilly, Donna Gabaccia has generously shared her expertise with and mentored students at other universities. I know that I am better scholar and intellectual because she accepted to be on my dissertation committee. This tribute to Louise Tilly is for me also a tribute to Donna Gabaccia, my mentor.

what bringing together different disciplines, sources, and geographical locations can produce. In her work, Tilly bridged history and sociology to explore the impact of major systemic social changes on the daily lives of nonstate actors, used primary sources in different languages to capture the full range of the human experience, and always paid attention to temporal and spatial connections within different historical settings.

Weaving together political, social, policy, and transnational history, my current project, *From Unwanted to Restricted*, examines how Italian and Jewish immigration reform advocates in the United States mobilized against restrictive immigration laws from 1882 to 1965 within a transnational framework. As they tested the limits of citizenship and citizen activism, Eastern European Jews and Italians had to strike a balance between resisting restriction and presenting themselves as full-fledged Americans. Moreover, from the very beginning, both groups' transnational identities forced them to situate their strategies in the context of their relationship with their home countries and with Jewish and Italian immigrants around the world. Telling this story is particularly important because many Americans believe that immigrants from a century ago, unlike the immigrants who are fighting to change American immigration laws today, incarnated the "up from the bootstraps" ethos. By exploring the full complexity of the evolution of the relationship of immigrant communities with American immigration policy, *From Unwanted to Restricted* challenges Americans to think more deeply about themselves and the nation's past.

As I grappled with the connections and differences between the two groups' mobilization, the implications of their different approaches to immigration restriction, and the ramifications of their battles against the national origins quota system, Tilly's writings on nonstate actors, collective action, and transnationalism were crucial in guiding me through my analysis of a multifaceted and multipronged story. Along the way, I strove to write a story that explored, in Louise Tilly's words, "connections between structure and action, individuals and processes, the past and the present, and settings distant in space" (Tilly 1994: 1).<sup>2</sup>

## Nonstate Actors

At the heart of Louise Tilly's work resides her commitment to demonstrate that nonstate actors, like state actors, have played a crucial role in the cross-cultivation of social, political, and economic changes in history. Focusing on the lives of nonstate actors over the last two centuries, Tilly identified industrialization and the rise of a relatively centralized, strong state apparatus as two of the major forces that shaped collective action around the globe. Whether in monographs like *Politics and Class in Milan*, in coauthored books like *Women, Work, and Family*, or in the preface of

2. In her tenure as president of the Social Science History Association, Gabaccia similarly encouraged conference participants to explore and analyze the connections between time and space. See Donna R. Gabaccia 2010.

edited collections like *The Rebellious Century*, Tilly analyzed riots, protests, strikes, or rebellions as cogent, if not always successful, manifestations of nonstate actors' efforts to defend or advance their specific interests in the face of industrialization and the centralization of the state.

In the United States in particular, the intersection between these two forces produced the rise of pressure politics and consciousness-raising groups. Following Tilly's example, I focused in my own research on the key organizations that mobilized the Italian and Jewish communities to reform restrictive immigration laws for more than 40 years. Both groups soon recognized that, in addition to grassroots strategies, they needed to create influential advocacy organizations to lobby for immigration reform and work with the very people who sought to restrict them. To this end, their organizations focused almost exclusively on immigration matters, relied on sophisticated lobbying techniques, and worked with well-chosen allies. In time, these strategies paid off. When the United States' position in the world changed at the end of World War II, these organizations became influential players in the new geopolitical order. These organizations' transnational networks became a powerful asset to achieve American Cold War objectives. At a time when the country remained opposed to reform of its immigration policy, these Italian and Jewish organizations used their new role and Cold War rhetoric to urge for immigration reform throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Yet, not all nonstate actors are alike. As we continue to explore the role that nonstate actors have played throughout history, it becomes necessary to qualify some of our assumptions. In the case of my project, it is important to keep in mind that at the turn of the nineteenth century the opportunity to engage in the political process was not readily available to everyone. For example, most Asian immigrants remained excluded from this nation's shores until the middle of the twentieth century, and most of those who did manage to enter were denied the right to naturalize. Although restricted, Italian and Jewish immigrants, by contrast, could enter the country and held the legal right to naturalize. As the prospects of restriction increased, they understood that, if well organized, they could exert influence on the political process to fight for a less discriminatory immigration policy. Even though what they accomplished did not always coincide with their goals, naturalization represented a crucial gateway to political agency.

## Collective Action

Louise Tilly's work on collective action offered me another invaluable lens through which to interpret Italian and Jewish immigration reform advocates' mobilization against restriction. In the conclusion she wrote for the edited collection *Class, Conflict and Collective Action*, Tilly noted that the study of collective action, as opposed to the study of class conflict, provided richer opportunities for scholarly inquiry because it was a more inclusive category of analysis (Tilly and Tilly 1981). In her later *Women, Politics, and Change*, coedited with Patricia Gurin, Tilly further elaborated on her notion of collective action and embraced resource mobilization theorists' definition

of collective action as “coordinated action on behalf of shared interests” or as “action in which sets of people commit pooled resources, including their own efforts, to common ends” (Tilly and Gurin 1992: 6). These definitions became particularly useful to sort through the different strategies Italians and Jews used to coordinate their opposition to restriction. Amid the cacophony of efforts that both communities employed to call for immigration reform, focusing on collective action as defined by Tilly helped me identify on which groups and strategies to concentrate.

As Louise Tilly demonstrated in her work, at the heart of collective action often rest organizations that mobilize participants for specific events and activities, recruit new members, formulate strategies, rally support from potential allies, and sustain action even in the face of failure (Tilly and Gurin 1992). Italian and Jewish immigration reform advocates began to succeed in their efforts to challenge and influence American immigration legislation only when they created national organizations that had the resources and the manpower to lobby politicians, mobilize members of their communities, and build nationwide coalitions. Inspired by Louise Tilly’s call for the study of the intersection of economic, political, and social structures with collectivities, I also discovered that, contrary to what some migration scholars have argued thus far, Italians and Jews also collaborated with non-European immigrant groups and did indeed advocate for a more inclusive immigration policy, especially in the 1950s and 1960s.

Despite their accomplishments, Italian and Jewish immigration reform advocates’ actions, as well as those of other contemporary advocates, often had ambivalent long-term consequences for American immigration policy. Italian and Jewish Americans were the first to admit that the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act hardly represented the pinnacle of American liberal immigration policy. Yet, remembering the many defeats they had suffered since 1924, both groups pragmatically chose to compromise to accomplish at least the most important of their demands, the repeal of the national-origins quota system. Their victory came at a high price, however, as they saw some of their major immigration reform goals entirely subverted. In this context, Louise Tilly’s emphasis on the importance of historical contingency became particularly helpful. Her scholarship clearly demonstrates that in order to understand identity formation, scholars must pay systematic attention to how changing economic structures, political opportunity, organization, and mobilization shape collective action in local, national, and international arenas. As she reminds scholars in an article on structure and action in the making of Milan’s working class published in this journal in 1995, the strategies in which collective actors engage and the outcomes reached at a specific point in time “close off alternatives or facilitate outcomes at a later time” (1995: 244). As she demonstrated in her 1992 *Politics and Class in Milan, 1881–1901*, while Milanese workers successfully took advantage of political shifts and economic changes in the region to fight for workers’ rights and enter the local, regional, and national political arenas, their inability to create strong coalitions limited their impact on the political sphere and affected the process of class formation of future Milanese workers. In the case of Italian and Jewish immigration reform advocates, while their actions to oppose discriminatory immigration laws opened opportunities for

subsequent groups pushing for reform, their pragmatic decision to accept restriction as necessary to fight for reform demonstrated the limits of immigrant mobilization.

## Transnationalism

In keeping with Louise Tilly's scholarship, my exploration of immigration reform advocates' mobilization would be incomplete if it remained confined to national borders and failed to take into consideration how Italian and Jewish immigration reform advocates handled the impact of restrictive American immigration laws abroad. Tilly's search for systematic variation across time and space remains an extraordinary example of how to compare similar historical experiences within a transnational framework.

Her analysis of the interplay of textile industrialization and the familial social relations of workers in India, England, and France in her presidential address at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1994 represents a concise but powerful example of how to compare similar historical experiences within a transnational framework (Tilly 1994). As the Industrial Revolution and the development of commercial capitalism expanded across the globe, textile workers in all three countries, she contended, had similar responses to the attendant process of proletarianization. Having lost their battle against industrialization, they set out to build strong connections among themselves at the local level and cement more interdependent relationships within their families. Tilly's AHA address cogently highlighted the strong connections that existed among case studies that historians might have at best considered as parallel experiences distantly linked by an international market. Following her example, my project employs a transnational perspective to move beyond the domestic/foreign policy division so common in immigration policy histories.

Italian and Jewish immigration reform activists' unique relationships with their homeland and their diasporas around the world profoundly shaped how they mobilized against restrictive American immigration laws. Jewish immigrants' statelessness forced them to acquire American citizenship immediately, build global networks with other Jewish communities, and rely exclusively on their own resources to organize against restriction. Their activism in the name of world Jewry and their visibility in the fight against restriction often attracted accusations of Jewish conspiracy and disloyalty, especially during times of heightened anti-Semitism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Conversely, Italian immigrants' strong ties with their ancestral home and the Italian government's efforts to sustain those ties, especially after Mussolini's ascent to power, hindered their effectiveness in their opposition to immigration restriction. The Italian government's diasporic policy toward its migrants in the United States to advance its economic and foreign policy interests in the country increased Americans' suspicions of Italians and impaired Italian Americans' ability to mobilize effectively against restrictive immigration laws until the end of World War II. Italians' strong connections

with Italy often generated accusations of disloyalty and unassimilability. For both groups, then, their connections with the world outside the United States represented a liability, but they also provided them with powerful arguments to push for reform, especially during the Cold War.

To capture this varied set of voices, I again followed Tilly's example and conducted in-depth research in a wide range of primary sources in English, French, and Italian at archives in the United States and in Italy that have rarely or never been used in immigration histories. Together these rich primary source materials advance my transnational narrative, weaving together the perspectives of migrants and international organizations as well as of government officials—American and Italian. They help me to illuminate the competing understandings of policy and migration that were in play in the domestic and international realms and demonstrate how these ideas shaped groups' mobilization strategies and individuals' fates, as well as the contours of US policies.

## Conclusion

Louise Tilly's work on collective action, transnationalism, and nonstate actors has profoundly shaped how I have come to conceptualize and understand Italians' and Jews' history of mobilization against immigration restriction. These three analytical concepts have helped me complicate the story of immigration restriction in the United States. My research contributes to migration studies by advancing the recent scholarly focus on the restricted to include Southern and Eastern Europeans. While scholars have explored the consequences of Asian exclusion and the forced repatriation of Mexican immigrants, we still know very little about how a restrictive immigration system affected European immigrants in the United States and abroad. My book also broadens this focus on specific restricted or excluded groups by comparing how different ethnic groups found distinct ways to carve out a niche within the American political sphere to advance their cause. Finally, my work contributes to recent efforts to analyze the "practice" of citizenship among recent immigrants. While a few scholars have analyzed the emergence of immigrant rights from the nineteenth century to World War I and have explored how immigrants and their advocates have become more effective after 1965, my project frames their practice within a transnational context over most of the twentieth century.

As I conclude my reflections on Louise Tilly's intergenerational contributions to the field of migration studies, I find that her work can inspire us in yet another way. Although migration studies should by definition be interdisciplinary, Tilly's urgent call to move beyond disciplinary boundaries remains relevant today. As we continue to strive toward that goal, the work she did with other authors, including Joan Scott, Leslie Page Moch, Patricia Gurin, and Charles Tilly, among others, might represent a possible answer. One of the major challenges of doing comparative work, especially within an international or transnational context, rests with the difficulty of accumulating data, expertise, and knowledge of significant scale. Working with

scholars from different fields, as Louise Tilly did, opens infinite opportunities to engage in a truly interdisciplinary research agenda. At a time when our field is yet again in transition, her efforts to uncover the story of the intersection of ordinary people, state structures, and larger international forces across time and space can still push us in new directions.

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