

## **INTERNAL MIGRATIONS IN ITALY IN THE 1920s REVISITING THE SOURCES**

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### **1. Introduction**

The history of internal migrations in Italy has been addressed by various scholars. These contributions, taken together, offer a fairly precise picture of the migratory movements that have affected the country, including in the fascist period. Among the most important is a work by Anna Treves (1976), which indicated pre-war migratory flows and how these grew into the flows that characterized the country during the post-war economic boom. Although not specifically dedicated to the fascist period, a volume by Stefano Gallo (2012) also deserves to be mentioned. Gallo showed the importance of temporary migration in the fascist years. There are many other contributions, often with reference to specific territories. These works usually focus either only on outgoing migratory flows or only on incoming flows. Ercole Sori studied migration within and outside the country using statistical sources showing the migrations from the Italian countryside to urban-industrial areas, the importance of wage differentials, and the relationship between migration and economic development (Sori, 1975). During the 1980s historians focused on the experiences of the internal migrations organized by the fascist regime (Gaspari, 1985; Franzina and Parisella, 1986; Protasi, 2016); internal colonizations were subsequently considered in the framework of fascist demographic policies (Ipsen, 1997; Protasi and Sonnino, 2003). The movements from high-mobility regions as Veneto and Friuli have been studied through fascist resources and municipal immigration records (Scarzanella, 1977; Ermacora, 2012); these research works based on local records show the relevance of spontaneous movements and the need to find alternative paths to emigration abroad during the interwar period. Municipal records, letters, diaries, and oral testimonies reveal mobility patterns and seasonal rural migrations that often are not detected in official records. Recently studies have stressed the importance of the fascist institutions devoted to migration during the 1920s (Gallo, 2015a; Gallo, 2015b), the negative impact of fascist policies, and the international labour market on Italian emigration in the interwar period. Fascist policies – the so-called “Battle for Grain” (1925), currency revaluation (“Quota 90” lira-pound, 1926) and the expatriation restrictions to promote internal colonization

(1927) – led to an economic slowdown and a rise in unemployment both in rural and in urban areas. In particular, Southern Italy was badly hit both by the Quota Act (1921; 1924), which significantly reduced immigration towards the United States (1920: 349.042; 1921-1929: 36.000 average per year) and by policies which favoured rural internal immigration from Northern regions to Agro Romano and Pontino (Lazio Region). Unable to expatriate, southern people ceased to be as mobile as they had been (Gallo, 2018; D’Amico and Patti, 2018). The 1929 world economic crisis also played out in Italy: according to official records, from 1930 to 1933 unemployment rose from 0.5 to 1.2 million, meanwhile Italian emigration dropped from 259,876 to 60,736 (Alberti 2015). Italian emigrants repatriated from the United States and emigration was reduced to a minimum. In order to mitigate unemployment, the fascist authorities promoted large-scale public works, re-opened borders for a short time, invaded Ethiopia (1936) and organized migration towards the Third Reich and Libya (1938-1939) (Mantelli 1993; Bermani 1998; Fincardi 2002). Meantime, internal migrations spread. In many of these works there are also attempts to quantify the phenomenon: the numbers and the demographic characteristics of internal migrants. However, each of them essentially uses a single source and often only partially uses the information contained therein. In this article, we propose a different approach, one in which all the information relating to the main stock and flow sources published by the Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT) is systematically exploited. In the article we offer an overview of internal migrations in Italy with reference to the 1920s. The aim, one already addressed extensively in the literature, is to gauge migration between different regions of the country.

## **2. Internal migrations in fascist Italy: Some quantitative evidence**

With migration, perhaps more than with other forms of demographic behavior, a comparison between the absolute numbers of the flows, with rates, may prove useful. In migration studies there has been more work on the absolute numbers of migrants or of acts of migrations. However, it is also important, especially from a comparative point of view, to see the impact of these flows on the population.

Number of migrations and migration rates are summarized in Figure 1, where they are represented from 1911 to 1981. This is done to evaluate the characteristics of internal migration in the period considered in this article, compared to other time periods. The accuracy of the data is undermined by the problem of non-cancellation in the population registers by municipal employees; this involves the lack of agreement between the number of immigrants and emigrants. In order to overcome this problem, we take registrations as a point of reference; though they can, at least

partially, overestimate the phenomenon. With the same data we then calculated the migration rate. Figure 1 highlights the interval from 1921 to 1931.

The two series are very similar. The differences, however, allow us to stress three aspects: 1) considered in absolute terms, the graph gives the maximum of internal migrants in Italy in the early 1960s; 2) migration during the fascist period and, in particular, from the mid-1920s onwards, reached very high levels, comparable or even higher than those recorded in the economic boom; and 3) the first half of the 1920s was the period of fastest growth in internal migration. Therefore, the 1920s represent a highly dynamic phase for internal migration.

**Figure 1** – Internal migration and migration rates. Italy 1911-1981.



Sources: registrations and numerator of the migration rate in *Sviluppo della popolazione*, 1965. Denominator of the migration rate Human Mortality Database. University of California, Berkeley (USA), and Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (Germany). Available at [www.mortality.org](http://www.mortality.org) or [www.humanmortality.de](http://www.humanmortality.de) (data downloaded on 14/6/2021)

### 3. The sources: data and problems

In this article we use both stock sources, namely the population censuses of 1921 and 1931 (ISTAT, 1925-1928; ISTAT, 1933-1936), and flow sources, Population Registry Office data. As regards the two censuses, information is available on the present population with region of birth<sup>1</sup>. Populations are divided by gender and into large age groups. This information was also collected in other censuses before and after these, but not in that of 1936. As regards Italy between the wars, the two surveys span this period convincingly. A further reason why, at the moment, we have limited the analysis to this period is due to the fact that the data, at least at the national level, are perfectly comparable. Borders do not change between the two surveys, while the same cannot be said of the other censuses. The use of censuses for internal migration estimates leads to distortions, as: 1) they report only a summary of migration flows fixed at a given moment of time; and 2) they do not consider the influence of mortality. The analysis, therefore, focuses on migrants and not on migration. The differences are greater the greater the time distance between the two surveys. This depends on “both the number and the moves of migrants who died in the interim are likely to be excluded” (United Nations, 1970, p. 2). In the case of the resident population: “this number is, however, a gross understatement of both the amount of migration that has occurred during the lifetime of the living population and of the number of persons who have migrated” (United Nations, 1970, p. 2).

To these general limits we must add those that depend on the specific sources used here (Corsini, 1967). Probably the most serious is that the measurements refer to the present population. In fact, in comparisons between censuses carried out on the resident population, it is possible to speak of permanent migrants. But this is not the case if the reference population is the present one. In particular, in our case, there are conscripts and their uneven distribution across Italian territory. The Italian Army was mainly based out of the north and, in particular, in those areas annexed after the World War I. These were certainly border areas and needed military units. But there were other considerations. Soldiers were particularly numerous in the provinces of Bolzano and in those of Venezia Giulia, where there were very large groups of German, Slovenian and Croatian speakers. Numerous soldiers from other provinces represented part of the Italianization of these territories (Pupo, 2014). A second problem, connected to the survey of the present population and not to the resident one, is that the two censuses were conducted on different dates: on 1 December of 1921; and on 21 April of 1931. Thirdly, in the ten years between the two surveys there were some changes in the administrative boundaries of the regions. The most

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the censuses also report the resident population, but in this case the region of birth is not specified.

important relate to the municipalities of the current province of Rieti, established in 1927. These were detached from Umbria and joined to Lazio in 1923. In 1927 some municipalities in the province of Caserta (Campania) were also added to Lazio. These changes were, however, modest. They only marginally affect our calculations.

Unlike stock data, with which we study migrants, flow data allows us to study migration. The data used here come from two different sources, both of which refer to changes in residence. The first are the files of the Movimento della Popolazione (1925-1932), the second is a collection published in the journal *Annali di statistica* (Sviluppo della popolazione, 1965)<sup>2</sup>. For both, the total number of registrations and cancellations is reported at the regional level, but without any indication of origin or destination. Although the basic data are the same, the two sources have very different types of information. In the first, which stops in 1928, yearly registrations and cancellations coincide perfectly. Therefore, the balance at national level is always equal to zero. This is evidently the result of data processing. In the second source, the series covers the entire time frame considered, though the data of Venezia Tridentina and Venezia Giulia annexed to the Kingdom after World War I are missing for some years. In this source, registrations and cancellations do not coincide. Therefore, they seem to reproduce the data of municipal origin as they were collected by the statistical institute: there was no processing. The precise data of the first source seem, at first glance, more attractive. But those of the second are more consistent with what we know about the Population Registry sources and their problems.

For the study of migration and, in particular, for the study of internal migration, we can make the two different types of sources act simultaneously in order to exploit the strengths and to limit the weaknesses of each. In particular, as regards the census data, we evaluate the direction of flows and their distance. As regards the flow data, we evaluate their consistency. The use of sources that report information that should be, at least in principle, consistent with each other, allows for some further reflections.

#### 4. Methods and consistency checks

In terms of the sources, no particular explanations are necessary for the flow data: the information there, with all the limits previously noted, gives us the absolute extent of migration on an annual basis. As for the stock sources, however, matters are more complex. The method we use to estimate migrant numbers is discussed in

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<sup>2</sup> These data are also published on the ISTAT website in the section *Serie storiche*: <http://seriestoriche.istat.it/>. Last access 14/12/2020.

the United Nations *Manual VI* (1970)<sup>3</sup>. In particular we use the more simplified version of the method illustrated in that book, that is the one that does not take into account mortality between the two surveys<sup>4</sup>.

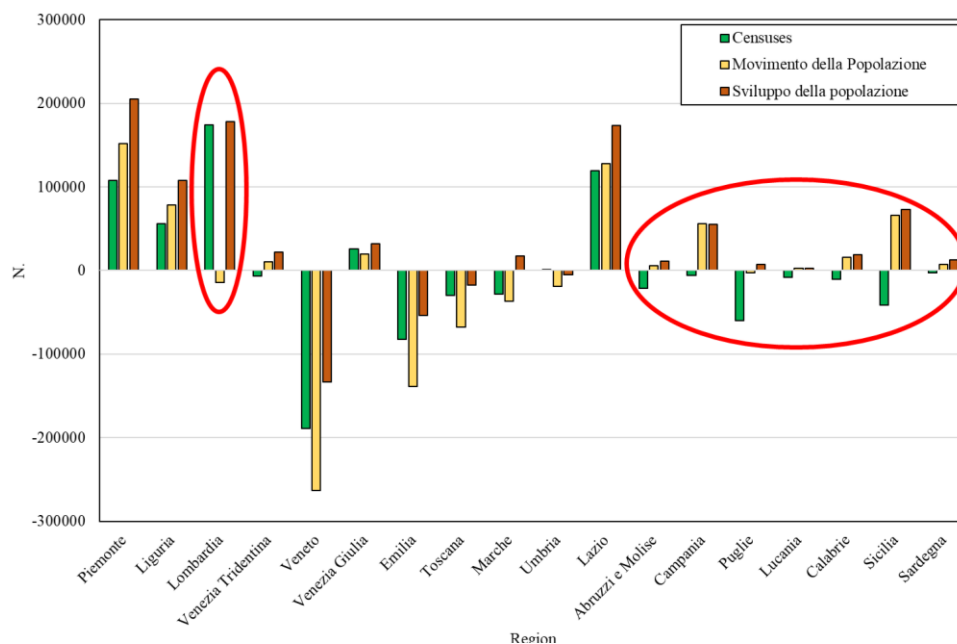
To highlight how census information was exploited, we divide the estimation procedures into three stages. Each of these gives us a supplement of information compared to an analysis of the data referring to a single region. In the first we consider the complete matrix of the present population in the different regions both 1921 and 1931, on the basis of the region of birth. This allows us to establish, referring to the census date, not only where the people who lived in a single region came from, but also where the people who left it went. In the second we compare the data of the different regions and thus propose the matrix of migratory exchanges between these territories. In this way we can see, for the two dates, the outcome of the transfers to and from all Italian regions. In the third we build the matrix of the differences between the two matrices obtained in the second phase and thus propose any migratory exchanges between all regions in the interval between the two censuses. The results of this last phase can be compared with the migration balances calculated from the flow sources<sup>5</sup>. The results of these comparisons are summarized in Figure 2. Before moving on to comment on the graph, it is necessary to point out that the outcomes at the national level of the migration balance are equal to zero for the censuses and the data of “Movimento della popolazione”. For those taken from the “Annali”, meanwhile, there is a deficit of cancellations of over 700,000 units.

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<sup>3</sup> We, therefore, follow the same arguments advanced by Anna Treves. But we develop them in a systematic way.

<sup>4</sup> With the available data relating to the resident population, estimating the probability of survival is very complex. This is due to the fact that during the period the country's migratory balance was still strongly negative. There is also the issue that for the 1921 census the figure for some regions was strongly overestimated. On the estimation methods, please refer to Manual VI.

<sup>5</sup> Missing data in the flow sources were integrated with some estimates.

**Figure 2** – Internal migration balance in different sources. Italy 1921-31.

Sources: see text.

The figure highlights coherence and inconsistency issues between the sources. As to coherence, the most important point derives from having a magnitude not too dissimilar to most of the balances. The most notable dissimilarities, on the other hand, are given by: 1) a very marked difference in the balance concerning Lombardy where the situation recorded in the series of the “Movimento” is very different from the other two sources; and 2) the differences of sign between the census and sources of flow in the southern regions, according to which, in the first the balance is negative, while in the second it is positive. These results, at least on the basis of what is universally supported in the literature, seem to give greater reliability to the stock data rather than to the flow data. However, we believe that these discrepancies need to be examined more carefully, because these come very close to the problem we want to explore. In particular, as regards the flow data, the results taken from the “Annali di statistica”, which as we have seen do not lead to a national balance equal to zero, should be corrected by increasing the number of cancellations and, therefore, by reducing the regional balances. The problem of the data on the migratory balance (i.e. those with national balance equal to zero) is precisely this. Trying to reproduce

the calculation methods that led to a migration balance equal to zero, we have obtained results that almost perfectly overlap those observed in the figure<sup>6</sup>.

The problem, therefore, is to find a more correct criterion for aligning the results of the flow sources with those of the stock sources. On a provisional basis, we can assume that the data on cancellations in the southern regions are much worse than in the northern regions, and that the revision of the data should go in this direction: this is unless, of course, we decide that the south attracted emigrants from central and northern Italy.

## 5. Migrants and the range of migration

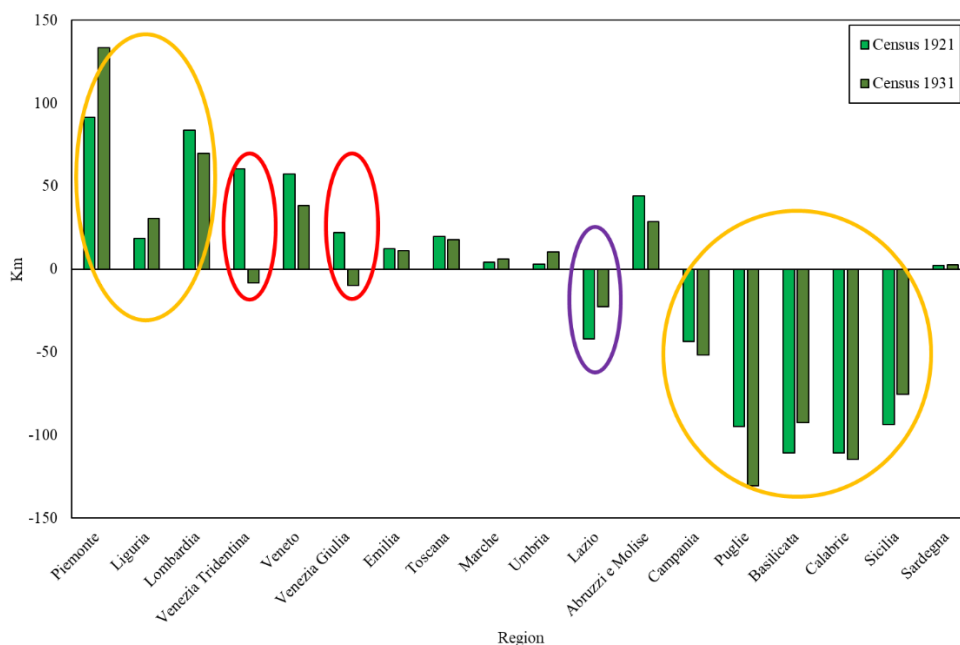
An alternative way to follow the evolution of internal migratory flows is that of calculating migratory distances. In this regard, we have built a matrix of the distances between the different regions by measuring from regional capital to regional capital. For each individual present in a region we multiplied the distance from the capital of the region of birth and that of the region of arrival and then divided the result by the total number of migrants. We made the calculations both at the national level and at the regional level distinguishing outgoing and incoming distances. At the national level, of course, they coincide and are equal to 293 km for 1921 and 303 km for 1931. In the decade, therefore, the average distance covered by migrants has grown by about ten km. An increase of this magnitude may seem small, but, in the relevant ten years, growth was much greater, because in the figure of 1931 numerous acts of migration prior to 1921, and therefore already present in the previous census, are incorporated. The national figure is already significant in and of itself, because, in this case, migratory distance can be an indicator of deeper changes. In fact, it marks the fall off of movements between neighbouring regions and the increase of migration to more distant regions.

The regional detail shows values that are also very different from the national average. Figure 3 shows the migration balances in terms of distance for all regions. They are calculated by subtracting the average distance covered by emigrants from the average distance traveled by all immigrants. The results, therefore, do not depend on the number of people who move. Rather they reflect structural emigration trends.

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<sup>6</sup> We have assumed that the number of cancellations must correspond to the number of registrations by re-proportioning the missing cancellations to the number of registrations for each region.



**Figure 3** – Migration balances in terms of distance.

Sources: see text.

Before commenting on the graph, we want to note that, in a system of displacements defined by geographical borders, the migratory distance depends on the geographical location of individual territories too. If the direction and distance covered by the flows were random, the distances relative to the peripheral regions would be on average greater than those of the central regions. In this case, however, the difference between the average distance of entrances and that of exits would be zero. The outcomes described in the figure are very different. Peripheral regions, such as Sardinia, have a balance value lower than that of central regions such as Lazio and Abruzzi and Molise. Apart from this, however, what is most important here are the signs of the flows and their evolution over time. With regard to the first aspect, there is the almost specular patterning between the North-West and the South. In the regions of the industrial triangle, immigrants come from greater distances than those covered by emigrants from the triangle. The opposite is true for the southern regions. The central regions, on the other hand, have something closer to a balance. In other words, the regions that have a strongly positive migratory balance, or those that attract emigrants, exercise this action over a wider range than other regions. An exception is Lazio, the only one among the regions with a strongly positive balance to release its emigrants at a greater distance: the demographic growth of the region

and, in particular, of Rome was due to immigrants who came from neighbouring regions.

With regard to the historical evolution of flows, we focus here on the particular cases of Venezia Tridentina and Venezia Giulia. Both territories had been annexed to the Kingdom of Italy after World War I. In both cases we pass from a relatively large positive balance to a negative one. Before 1921 the inflows of Italian citizens settled in the recently annexed territories had been intense, particularly among those employed by the public administration. These flows were not balanced out by flows of an equal distance to the Italian regions. In the 1931 census, however, the arrangement of these flows and the intensification of relations between these territories and the rest of the Kingdom become clear.

## 6. Conclusions

The use of stock data and flow data allows us to investigate some aspects of internal migration in Italy in the 1920s. Not all the elements that can be drawn from the sources have been developed here. In particular, we have made a very limited use of census data, which are those that give us the greatest amount of information. Furthermore, these data are consistent with what we already know of the history of internal migrations in Italy. The flow data, on the other hand, seems less consistent with what we know for two reasons: the first is the effect of estimation techniques; and the second of a migratory balance that does not equalize as it should.

Another aspect that previous studies have not directly addressed is the extent of the underestimation of migrants in the census. From this point of view, the divergence between the two sources is striking. According to the calculations on the census data, immigrants and emigrants number fewer than 1.2 million, while in the flow data there are almost eight and a half million acts of migration recorded. 'Migration' is different from 'migrant': we do not know how many migrants there were. Certainly, fewer than 8.5 million, but equally certainly much more numerous than the estimates based on comparing the censuses. However, if the Population Registry Office data are by far the most reliable for defining the extent of flows, this is not necessarily true for direction. It is our belief that only an analysis that integrates the different pieces of information from the two source types can give a proper sense of internal migration in Italy.

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## SUMMARY

### Internal migrations in Italy in the 1920s: revisiting the sources

The history of internal migration in Italy has been addressed by various scholars, whose contributions offer a fairly precise picture of the migratory movements that affected the country, the Fascist period included. In many of these works there are also attempts to quantify the phenomenon: the numbers and the demographic characteristics of internal migrants. However, each of them essentially uses a single source or only partially uses the information contained therein. In this article, we propose a different approach, one in which all the information relating to the main stock and flow sources published by the National Statistical Institute is systematically exploited. In the article we offer an overview of internal migrations in Italy with reference to the 1920s.

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