

**Caprotti F (2008) Internal colonization, hegemony and coercion:  
investigating migration to southern Lazio, Italy, in the 1930s**

***Geoforum* 39(2): 942-957**

**Published – final version**

**Abstract**

This paper investigates the Italian fascist regime's use of internal colonization as part of a wider ruralization policy aimed at promoting population growth, curbing rural-urban migration, staunching emigration, and halting the spread of industrial urbanization. By focusing on the case study of the Pontine Marshes, the paper demonstrates how, through targeted selection procedures aimed at displacing defined social and political undesirables, migrants were chosen and effectively coerced into migrating to the "fascist" landscape of the marshes. The area, reclaimed and developed in the 1930s, was celebrated as a sign of the regime's engineering and social success. The paper utilizes Antonio Gramsci's thought on hegemony, and argues that the overt use of coercion hints at the fact that fascism, although ideologically totalitarian and hegemonic, was contested. Although statisticians, demographers and state bureaucrats were organized and institutionalized in the construction of hegemony based on consent, fascism based itself more in coercion than in passive consent in the case of internal colonization.

**Keywords:** Italy, fascism, demography, migration, population, historical geography

# Internal Colonization, Hegemony and Coercion: Investigating Migration to Southern Lazio, Italy, in the 1930s

## 1. Introduction

Statistics were a dirty business in the 1930s. Cold calculation, presumed objectivity and mathematical precision went hand-in-hand not only with Fordist production and industrial development, but also with the totalitarian ideologies – fascist, national socialist, communist – of the machine age. Furthermore, in the first few decades of the twentieth century, statistics and statisticians were becoming increasingly institutionalised instruments of government. As the role of the state widened and, in totalitarian societies, became ideologically fused with society itself, state control of population – a realm previously left to the mysterious workings of biology – entered the scene. This paper explores an example of the consequences of the fusion of statistics and demography in Italy. Mussolini's regime (1922-43) became focused in the 1920s on perceived population decline: Italian demographers and sociologists related this to emigration and rural-urban migration (Dalla Zuanna, 2004; Ipsen, 1996; Atkinson, 1998; Taueber, 1949; Treves, 1976). Internal migration was significant at the time: in 1921-31, the number of people resident in communes other than those they were born in increased from 24% to nearly 30%. By 1931, around 25% of the population lived in a different *region* than that which they were born in, a situation which Lorenzo Del Panta (1996, 211) has defined as the age of "long-range migration" in Italy. Population growth had also been less rapid in the 1910s (in 1911-21 Italian population increased at the rate of 0.45% per annum, as opposed to 0.63% p.a. in 1901-11), but this situation was not replicated from the advent of fascism onwards (in 1921-31, there was a 0.87% p.a. rate of increase; in 1931-36 the

rate was 0.83% p.a.) (Del Panta, 1996, 134). Nonetheless, the “problem of population” became one of tantamount importance to the regime, which started to tackle it through a raft of policies, loosely defined as a ruralization policy, aimed at curbing rural-urban migration and radically altering existing urban environments (Atkinson, 1998; Treves 1976). These policies were elaborated by Italian demographers and sociologists in an atmosphere of increasing professionalization and state control of statistics and cognate sciences (Livi-Bacci, 1977, 276-83; Ipsen, 1996). The foundation of the Italian national institute of statistics (initially the Kingdom of Italy’s Central Institute of Statistics, now known as ISTAT), from which most of the statistical data utilised in this paper is drawn, is an example of this. The institution of a government commissariat for demography is another example, as is the institutionalization of geographical knowledge through the military (Atkinson, 2003). By the 1930s, these institutions were to play a central part in the regime’s ruralization policy and in the strategic initiatives derived from it.

The Pontine Marshes, in the southern part of the Lazio region in central Italy, were the ruralization policy’s lynchpins. They were a large, almost uninhabited and insalubrious area of malarial marshland at the gates of the Eternal City. In 1930, the mosquito and the buffalo reigned supreme in a vast area of muddy pools, stagnant water, and high humidity, which had stymied any attempts at settlement (Caprotti, 2006). The regime’s planning institutions saw this area as a political opportunity to build a showcase project aimed at highlighting the regime’s modernity (Ben-Ghiat, 2001) and technological prowess. Its justification was to be twofold: stifling emigration, and constructing a planned rural-urban environment which could be the local engine for a “population revolution”. New Towns and small villages were planned on the blank map of the marshes, and land reclamation work was started with a vengeance. In 1932, the first New Town – Littoria (now known as Latina) – was inaugurated. All that were needed now

were people to live in the towns, in the villages, and on the farmsteads, to work the fields clawed back from nature's grasp. The marshes needed "colonists", and the regime called upon its functionaries – planning institutions, and local and federal secretariats – to procure them. The concept of "internal colonisation" entered the regime's vocabulary. The impetus towards internal migration and colonisation aimed to raise birth rates through the relocation of limited sectors of the population to more "healthy", often rural areas (Ipsen, 1996). Colonists mostly originated from northern regions, for the stated reason that internal migration would ease population pressure on densely populated industrial areas. This paper explores the demographic workings behind the Pontine Marshes project, and is based on archival documents from the Central State Archive in Rome (*Archivio Centrale dello Stato*, henceforth ACS), and on 1931-1938 census data from the Kingdom of Italy's Central Institute of Statistics (*Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia*, henceforth ISTAT). Statistical data is also drawn from the Presidency of the Council of Ministers' Commissariat on Migration and Internal Colonization's (*Commissariato per le Migrazioni e la Colonizzazione*, henceforth CMC) yearly reports on internal and colonial migration in 1930-1938.

The next section argues for an understanding of coerced migration and internal colonization in fascist Italy in light of Antonio Gramsci's ideas on the construction of hegemony in the modern state. Hegemony is considered here as built through the twin dialectical strategies of coercion and consent. The former strategy played a major role in the construction of hegemony as part of Italy's colonization of the Pontine Marshes: coercion was key to the engineering of a living project based on internal migration. The third section of the paper sets the demographic scene in which coercive internal migration policies were to play their part in populating the marshes. This is followed, in the fourth section, by analysis of how colonists were coerced into migrating from

northern provinces, often not for demographic reasons but because they were deemed to be socially, or, in certain cases, politically undesirable. The simplest response to the need for colonists might in fact have been to encourage migration from neighbouring areas or from southern Italy, from which large numbers of internal migrants traditionally originated. However, the regime engaged in a programme which encouraged and, at times, effectively forced farmers and peasants from northern regions to migrate to the marshes. The fifth section builds on this analysis by analysing colonists' origins, trying to construct a picture of the complex migratory flow from northern Italy to the Pontine Marshes. The final section provides a brief discussion on the success, or otherwise, of the Pontine Marshes colonization project in relation to the regime's stated aims.

## **2. Hegemony, demography and coercion**

Mussolini's Ascension Day speech, delivered in May 1927, was the symbolic cornerstone for a subsequent fascist demographic policy. The speech focused on the "problem" of a decline in national fertility (Ipsen, 1996, 66). The contradictions within fascist demographic policy and its focus on the rural in binary opposition to the urban were present from the start. As Ipsen (1996, 66) has noted, in his 1927 speech Mussolini:

“[C]riticized as suicidal previous Liberal indifference to the problem, given that demographic strength constituted the basis of a nation's political, economic, and moral strength. He equated declining fertility with moral decadence and cited statistics that demonstrated Italy's decline. Mussolini blamed two basic causes for this decline: industrial urbanism, as borne out by the low fertility of Italy's most industrial cities (Turin, Milan, Genoa); and small property holdings, which gave rise to the fear that having several children would lead to the eventual division of an already small holding. This was a surprising statement as it contrasts dramatically with much subsequent demographic policy, in particular the programs for internal and African colonization which were intended precisely to create small property holders” (Ipsen, 1996, 66).

Ipsen's point here seems to be somewhat confusing on the point of small holdings. The regime aimed to stymie holdings which were so small as to be a cause of migration to cities. At the same time, it saw land reclamation and colonization projects as opportunities to relieve demographic pressure, in a controlled way, directed at *rural* environments. As a 1930 study by the Confederation of Fascist Agricultural Syndicates (1930, in Treves, 1976, 123) shows, the subdivision of small holdings into even smaller lots was a concern as it was seen to constitute one of the causes for rural-urban migration. Young generations were at risk, in authorities' eyes, of being pushed off the land. Therefore, fascism's African colonization projects and internal colonization drives, such as the one in the Pontine Marshes, were aimed at creating small holdings, not in overpopulated areas (Treves, 1976, 124) but in reclaimed and "colonized" zones where expansion was theoretically possible, even desirable. Therefore, rather than a focus on small holdings, what seems contradictory about fascism's ruralization and demographic policy is its New Towns construction programme, which went against the grain of the regime's anti-urban focus, even though it was covered by a thin veneer of propaganda describing New Towns as interconnected nodes in a rural-urban system (Caprotti, 2007).

The argument presented here is that overt coercion of the kind employed by fascist institutions to move families to the Pontine Marshes is evidence, in Gramscian terms (Simon, 1982; Urbinati, 1998), of a social group (here identified with the fascist regime) aiming at, but not fully achieving hegemony, and therefore falling back on coercion as a way to bolster consent. Hegemony is understood not as a conscious top-down strategy, but, in Gramsci's terms, as a political, social, cultural and economic moment which transcends the state. Hegemony can be seen as the institution of a set of power relations, mediated through institutions, intellectuals and technocrats, and acting in a particular coercion/consent dialectic. In Gramsci's thought on the state as "hegemony armoured

by coercion” (Gramsci, 1971, 263), the twin strategies of dominance and command (over real or potential opposing groups in political society) and direction (over allies) are utilized to maintain power. Therefore, the political sphere contains the power-based relationship between coercion and consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation. Gramsci’s understanding of the state encompasses these two faces of the same coin (Sassoon, 1987, 111-3; Crehan, 2002; Medici, 2000). John Hall (1994) has echoed this point by questioning the binary distinction between coercion and consent, and the assumption that states seeking consent are weak, and that coercion, often conflated with brute power and forced action, signifies strength. Rather, Hall argues, consent can be harnessed to great effect by authoritarian states, and this may in fact enable such states to institute a more effective system of coercion, based on consent. This is reflected in the large contemporary debate on the construction of consent in fascist Italy, especially in the 1930s, which cannot be adequately summarized here (De Felice, 1995; Falasca-Zamponi, 2000; Ben-Ghiat, 2001; Eatwell, 1996, Gentile, 1994, Thompson, 1991). As a result fascism should be seen not in hegemonic or even exceptionalist terms but, as Gramsci argued, as a historical continuity with social and economic conditions already pre-existent in Italy before the coming to power of Mussolini’s regime in 1922 (Landy, 1986; Montanari, 2002, p. 138).

Following on from Gramsci’s ideas, this paper understands the struggle to impose hegemony, and fascism itself, as a deeply modern phenomenon. Hegemony, as Sassoon (1987, 113) notes, is a Gramscian concept which is firmly rooted in the *modern* state which Gramsci sought to understand (Crehan, 2002). Gramsci related the rise of the modern state to the development of modern society: “The modern State substitutes for the mechanical bloc of social groups their subordination to the active hegemony of the directive and dominant group” (Gramsci, 1971, in Sassoon, 1987, 113). The modern state

develops as a collection of groups which have economic interests in common, and which establish cooperative economic and legislative and political networks. However, Gramsci argued that the truly political phase in the development of the modern state occurs when economic, corporative interests are taken further as a dominant social group seeks the political, intellectual and moral unity which allows it to dominate subordinate groups, directing them and generating hegemony (Sassoon, 1987, 117-8). This struggle is not waged in the purely economic sphere, but in the political and cultural one too. The state, in this framework, then becomes something more than the instrument of a class. It is a “class State in that it creates conditions under which a certain class can develop fully, but it acts in the name of universal interests within a field of constantly changing equilibria between the dominant class and subaltern groups” (Ibid, 119).

What can be said, then, in Gramscian terms, about the regime’s demographic policy and the rise of allied sciences (chiefly, statistics) and institutions (such as ISTAT) (Ipsen, 1996; Patriarca, 1996) in the first few decades of the twentieth century in Italy? Demographers and statisticians, land reclamation experts and internal colonization planners, fall broadly within the Gramscian category termed “organic intellectuals”, i.e. those who culturally and socially impose hegemony on behalf of a dominant social group with which they are connected, as well as acting in establishing coercion through the legal system, especially when consent weakens: “By ‘intellectuals’ must be understood [...] the entire social stratum which exercises an organisational function in the wide sense – whether in the field of production, or in that of culture, or in that of political administration” (Gramsci, 1971, 97). Thus, from the most distinguished diplomat to the local school teacher, intellectuals are identified by Gramsci as one category playing particular roles in the establishment of hegemony (Sassoon, 1987, 137-140).



In the case of the fascist regime's demographers and statisticians, Ipsen (1996) has charted the rise of statistics, demography and similar rationalizing, technocratic state apparatuses in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy, and has investigated the way in which statistical institutes, the production of professional statisticians, and the relations between political direction and technical knowledge were coupled in the pursuit of an ideological goal. Utilizing Gramsci's theorization of organic intellectuals as those who are produced in order to support the rule of a particular social group over the rest of society, it can be argued that the regime's statisticians and demographers, and its functionaries working in institutions such as the *Opera Nazionale Combattenti* (ONC) veterans and land reclamation institution, organically participated in mediating the regime's hegemony. As Mussolini (in Romano, 1984, 200) stated in a speech given to fascist university students in 1923, "The fascist government needs a ruling class [...] I cannot create functionaries for the State administration from nothing: the universities must gradually produce them for me"<sup>1</sup>. The brute politics of coercion were not therefore the only focus of power politics in fascist Italy; the opposite side of the same coin saw the production of state employees, experts and a bureaucracy which, through "the exploitation of the cultural factor, of cultural activity, of a cultural front which is as necessary as economics and politics" (Gramsci, 1975, 111), was crucial in the formation of a hegemonic ruling group.

Gramsci clearly connected the fascist regime's anti-urban stance with Italy's new focus on demography. In an article published in the *Popolo d'Italia* newspaper on 22 December 1928, Mussolini claimed that "the exodus from urban centres must be facilitated with every means available, even if it is necessary to employ coercive means [...] [T]he depopulation of the countryside must be stopped, even if it becomes necessary to use coercive means" (Mussolini, 1928, in Treves, 1976, 72). Six years after Mussolini's

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Italian sources are the author's, as are any errors.

speech, Gramsci's analysis of the transition to Fordism in Italy and Europe, and its connection to demography, suggested that:

“In Italy there have been the beginnings of a Fordist fanfare: exaltation of big cities, overall planning for the Milan conurbation, etc.; the affirmation that capitalism is only at its beginnings and that it is necessary to prepare for it grandiose patterns of development [...]. But afterwards came a conversion to ruralism, the disparagement of the cities typical of the Enlightenment, exaltation of the artisan and of idyllic patriarchalism, reference to craft rights and a struggle against industrial liberty” (Gramsci, 1934, in Forgacs 2000, 286).

The following examines the links between the materiality of Italian migration and the regime's institution of hegemony through its policy of internal colonization.

### **3. Internal colonisation: the Pontine Marshes**

In setting the demographic scene, it is useful to look at migratory trends on a national scale before relating these to the fascist regime's attempts to action internal colonization through coerced migration. Of the 44 million people who left the Old World for the New between 1850 and the first decades of the 1900s, nearly one in four (11.1 million) were Italian (Moretti, 1999, p. 640). Italians accounted for the highest level of migration to the Americas after Great Britain and Ireland, which saw 18 million of their citizens leave between 1846 and 1932 (Ibid). Migration from Italy was especially rapid in the first few decades of the twentieth century: from 1901 to 1913, 8.1 million Italians emigrated, an average of 1.9 percent of the population per annum (Ibid, p. 641). Return migration must also be taken into account, however: between 1905 and 1915, for example, 2 million Italian migrants returned to Italy from the United States alone (Cinel, 1991, pp. 2-3). Even though Italians had some of the lowest levels of return migration in Europe (in percentage terms), the numbers involved are significant.

By the 1930s, Italy had long sent migrants abroad, to North and South America and the rest of Europe (Livi-Bacci, 1992, 1977). In neoclassical models of migration (Todaro, 1969; Hatton and Williamson, 1994; Rodgers, 1970), pull factors lure migrants to a certain area whilst push factors contribute to their decision to move away from their place or country of residence. The cause of these flows, in the case of Italy, has traditionally been ascribed to push and pull factors, such as unemployment in Italy, wage differentials, perceived better living conditions, and agricultural work opportunities in the United States or South America. Moretti (1999), however, has argued for a more sophisticated understanding of Italian migration during and before this period, challenging traditional neoclassical models by utilizing the concept of path-dependence and endogenous migration to describe a “snowball” effect whereby migration accelerates due to previous migrants’ destination choices influencing the choice of destination for successive waves of migrants, irrespective even of diminishing economic incentives to migration. The fascist regime found itself at the perceived sharp end of the stick: the migration snowball was lumbering onwards and no amount of radical economic policies seemed to stifle the outflow of labourers. While some contemporary analyses described Italy as a country in the grip of Malthusian imbalances between population and resources (Anonymous, 1943), the regime viewed emigration in terms of a loss of national vitality and future productivity in a country destined for imperial status (Taeuber, 1949; Atkinson, 2003). Rural agricultural areas, associated with fertility, health and population increase (Ipsen, 1996), were seen as positive counterparts to the deleterious effects which migration and urban industrial population densities visited on national demographic growth rates. The Pontine Marshes thus became a working, living metaphor for the regime’s modernizing drive (Berman, 1999; Swyngedouw, 1999), aimed at the restoration

of traditional pre-industrial values in a “pristine” natural area where nature could be debelled and a fascist rural-urban utopia constructed in its place (Caprotti, 2007, 2005a).

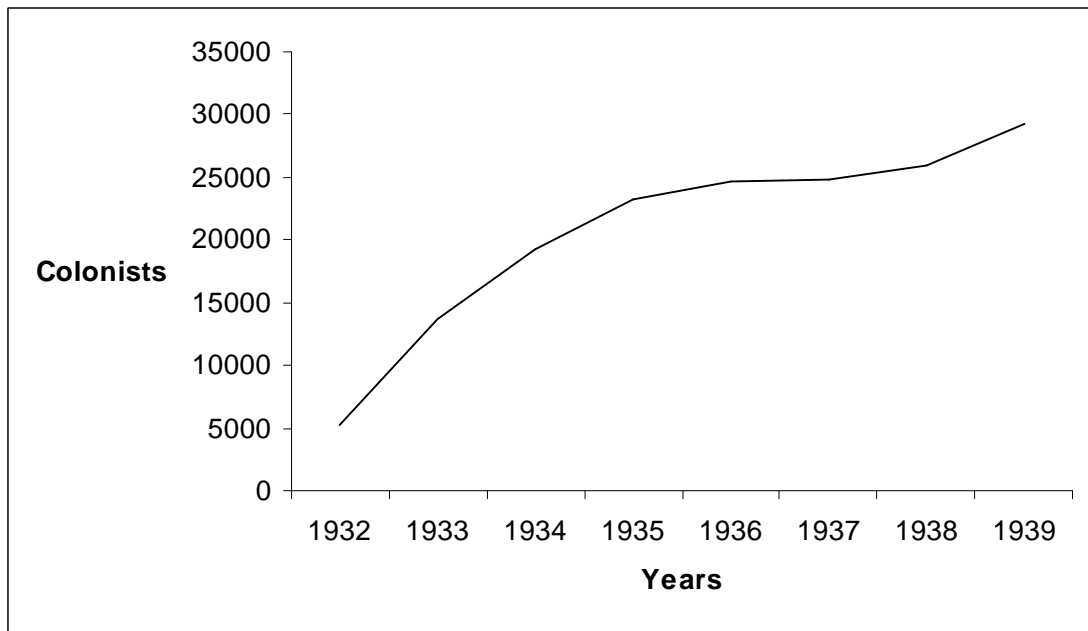
The Pontine Marshes were not densely inhabited before the fascist regime initiated land reclamation in the area in 1932. Alessandrini (1935) estimated that the resident population in 1924 was of 1,800. This rose to a maximum of 3,375 in 1930, before the main influx of workers and colonists. However, such figures can be misleading in a region inhabited by seasonal mobile herders. Alessandrini noted that population in the marshes followed seasonal patterns, featuring low population numbers in July and August and the highest influx in the winter months. For example, July 1924 saw a population of 1,800 in the Pontine Marshes, rising to 4,700 in December the same year (Alessandrini, 1935, p. 226). Most studies focusing on the Pontine Marshes and their development during the fascist period (Parisella, 1986b; Ghirardo, 1989) seem to suggest that average annual population levels below 5,000 were the norm in the 1920s.

The marshes’ demography underwent abrupt change when the land reclamation project started to gain momentum in the 1930s. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, land reclamation workers in their thousands moved into the area, albeit temporarily, to transform the landscape. Secondly, the newly reclaimed marshes, New Towns and outlying planned villages (*borghi*) were populated with colonist families migrating from other regions in Italy. As a result of these internal migratory trends, the population of the Pontine Marshes rose at a steady pace (Schmidt, 1937). Figure 1, for example, shows the change in resident population levels in the marshes from 1932, the year the central New Town of Littoria was built, to 1939, when the land reclamation and urbanization project was declared complete. The charted increase is from 5,000 resident “colonists” in 1932,

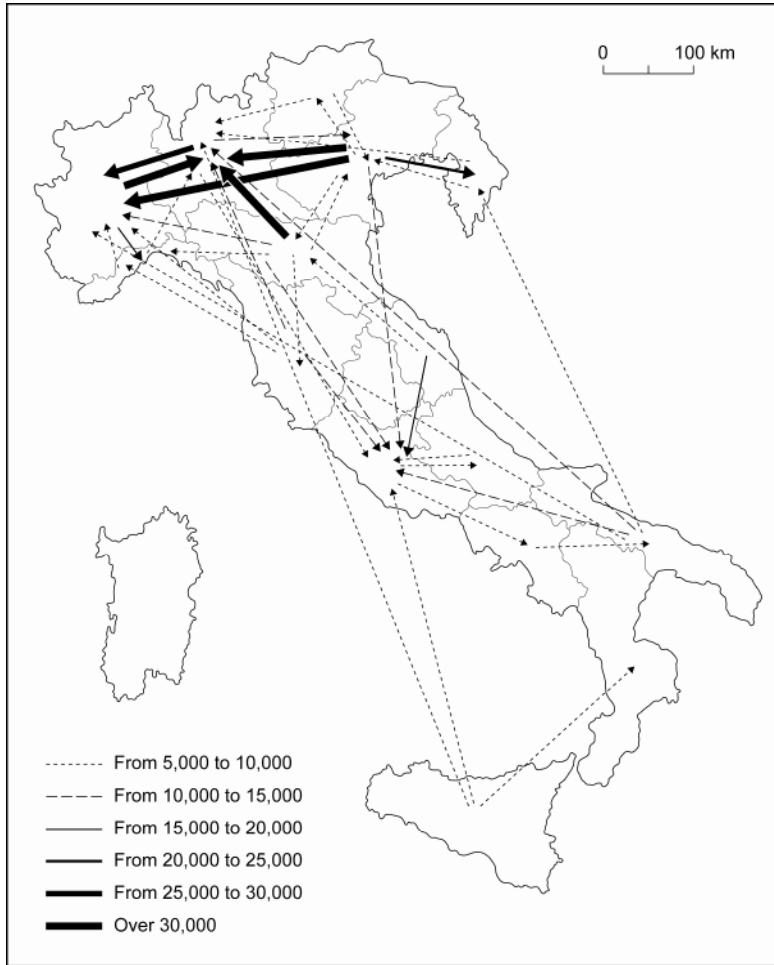
rising to just under 30,000 in 1939<sup>2</sup>. “Colonists” were officially classified as the male workers or heads of families who settled to work the farmsteads provided by the government. Colonists’ settlement paths were focused on New Towns and “new” agricultural areas around these planned urban centres. The towns had been constructed in a short space of time: Littoria was inaugurated in 1932, followed by Sabaudia (1934), Pontinia (1935), Aprilia (1938) and Pomezia (1939). Figure 2 showcases the effect which the colonization of the Pontine Marshes had on internal migratory patterns over three decades. Figure 2a outlines internal migratory flows in Italy in the 1920s; their obvious destinations are Northern regions, with Lombardy being the largest attractor. In central Italy, Lazio also received some migration, although this was small compared to the hundreds of thousands moving northward. This situation changed in the 1930s, with the beginning of the Pontine Marshes project. Figure 2b showcases the changed migratory flows during the decade, with the main focus by far being the Lazio region. Migration to the North is also somewhat stifled. Most migration into Lazio, as shown by the figure, originated from the Veneto, Emilia Romagna and Marche areas, targeted by the regime’s internal colonization institutions as sources of potential migrants. However, as figure 2 shows, the 1930s, and the Pontine Marshes project, were a disruptor in terms of longer-term, long-range migratory patterns; by the 1950s, and with the end of the Pontine Marshes project as a focus on national investment, publicity, and coerced migration, Lazio had returned to a secondary position in terms of national migratory flows.

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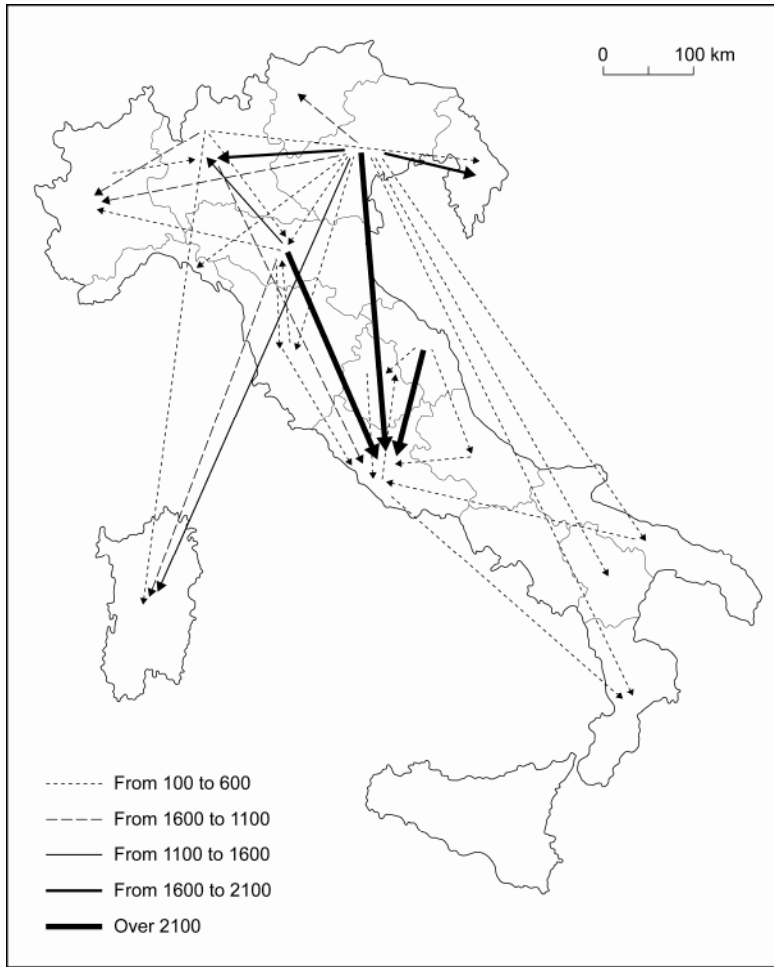
<sup>2</sup> This population data is also corroborated (until 1937) by Ghirardo (1989, p. 48).



**Figure 1: Number of “colonists” in the Pontine Marshes, 1932-1939** (Compiled by author from data in Mazzocchi Alemanni 1938, in Parisella 1986b: table 8: 216)

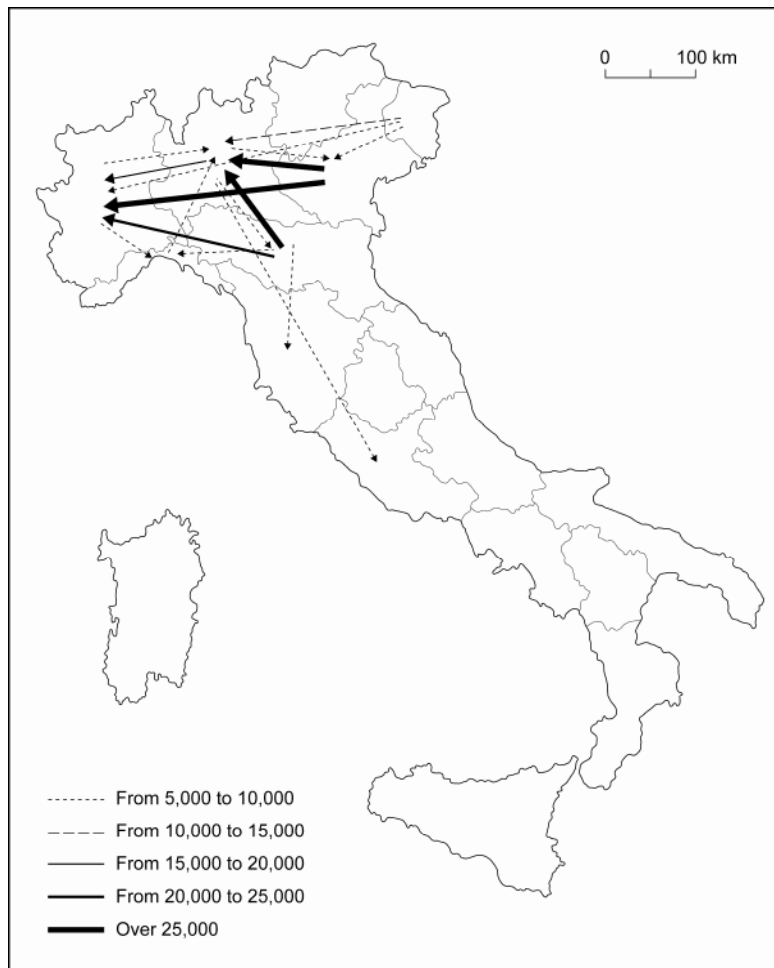


**Figure 2a:** Internal migratory flows in Italy in the 1920s (adapted from Treves 1976: map 3: 192).



**Figure 2b:** Internal migratory flows in Italy in the 1930s (adapted from Treves 1976: map 4: 193).





**Figure 2c:** Internal migratory flows in Italy in the 1950s (adapted from Treves 1976: map 3: 196).

The demographic aspects of the Pontine Marshes colonization strategy aimed to tackle not only internal rural-urban migration, but aimed to try and stem the flow of emigration abroad by offering incentives to return migrants. The regime's leadership believed that agricultural and urban opportunities in the reclaimed Pontine Marshes could not only stop internal migrants from targeting large industrial cities, but also attract Italians who had migrated abroad. Mussolini attempted to lure emigrants back to the Italian countryside, with the promise of land and housing in the New Towns built by the regime. For example, he expressly wished for housing in the New Town of Pomezia to be reserved for emigrants wishing to move back to Italy from France. In a telegram to

the president of the organization mandated with land reclamation and urbanization in the marshes, Mussolini ordered the organization to “Reserve all of Pomezia’s colonies for our peasant fellow countrymen returning from France” (Mussolini to di Crollalanza, 27 December 1938). The request was readily agreed to within twenty-four hours (Di Crollalanza to Mussolini, 28 December 1938).

Return migration to Italy cannot be accurately assessed in terms of passive consent, but it may have strengthened the formation of a perceived sense of consent. By 1940, nineteen families from France and twenty-six from Yugoslavia had settled in Pomezia (Di Crollalanza to Mussolini, 12 March 1940). Emigrants were also lured back from other parts of Eastern Europe, from as far away as Romania. Perotto (1990), for example, recounts the story of a travelled village, all the inhabitants of which had migrated from the northern region of Trentino, in northern Italy, to Bosnia, founding the village of Mahovljani, near Banja Luka. They had followed the encouragements of Francis-Joseph, Emperor of Austro-Hungary, who attempted to create a “Catholic barrier” in the areas of Europe from which the Ottomans had been expelled. Mahovljani remained largely Italian in character, and in 1928 the foreign ministers of Italy and Yugoslavia agreed to provide colonists with the choice to retain either a Yugoslav or an Italian passport. Most elected to confirm their Italian citizenship, and were directed to the Pontine Marshes over the next few years (though a few were sent in the same role to Abyssinia). In total, 98 farmsteads (or *poderi*) were assigned to colonists from Trentino, who had emigrated to Yugoslavia but had then been encouraged to move back into Italy, to the Pontine Marshes (Perotto, 1990, p. 131).

The total number of emigrants enticed back to Italy in the 1930s is risible when compared with the large flow to the Americas and Europe. However, it highlights the

regime's concern with perceived declines in birth rates on the one hand, and its positing of a causal link between "unhealthy" urban areas (the focus of internal rural-urban migration) and decreasing fertility and increase rates on the other. Italian demographers and urban sociologists, responsible for elaborating demographic targets and analyses, and for proposing policy solutions, unwittingly generated policies steeped in the ideals of modernity as a result of their particular positionalities and knowledges – ideological, political, but more importantly statistical and scientific (Horn, 1994; Ipsen, 1996) – which, in turn, influenced the local transformation of the Pontine Marshes through and by internal migrants, or "colonists".

The fact that land reclamation went hand in hand with increased and, I will argue, subtly coerced migration into the area, indicates that the regime's planning authorities viewed land reclamation not as a purely engineering enterprise. The Pontine Marshes were not simply areas to which modern hydroengineering technology was applied. Rather, the land reclamation project was viewed by the regime's bureaucrats, engineers, agronomists and planners, in social as well as technical terms (Serpieri, 1930, 1948). The marshland became a landscape in which technology and the quasi-utopian agency of fascist persuasion went hand-in-hand. The regime's creation of an ordered, transformed hydraulic and biological landscape (Caprotti, 2005a) in the marshes was the base layer on which the regime's planning institutions constructed urban, rural and agricultural realities embodied in the colonists who, willingly or not, came to populate this vast socio-technological experiment. I now turn to examine the manner in which colonists were selected and, often, coerced into migrating to the marshes by the regime.

#### 4. Coercion: selecting colonists

The following examines the selection of colonists slated to migrate to the Pontine Marshes. This is interpreted as an example of a blend of coercion and consent. However, I argue that coercion was used more often and more visibly than what is allowed for in a truly hegemonic state. Therefore, the colonist selection process, with its institution of coerced migration to the marshes, may be interpreted as a symptom of a state which aimed to be hegemonic, and represented itself as such, but which did not achieve this in reality (Caprotti, 2005b). This argument is made in order to explore the workings of a fascist hegemonic project, rather than to claim that Italian fascism was not truly hegemonic.

Internal migration to the Pontine Marshes for the purpose of internal colonization was a highly controlled and linear process, at least on paper. The main government bodies charged with responsibility for organizing and controlling migration for internal colonization purposes were the CMC, and the ONC (Parisella, 1986a, p. 18). The two agencies were to work in tandem. As Orsolini Cencelli, director of the ONC and the first mayor (or *podestà*) of Littoria, stated, the CMC's role was to identify and supply colonists (Orsolini Cencelli to Undersecretary of State of the Council of Ministers, 22 March 1935). The ONC had jurisdiction over land reclamation and urbanization in the Pontine Marshes: its role in colonizing the marshes was to provide housing and facilities for colonists upon their arrival. It effectively became responsible for colonists' daily existence. This meant that the institution's authority extended into colonists' working lives, education and leisure time. Studies indicate that colonists viewed the ONC and its employees as authoritarian administrators who were not on the colonists' side, highlighting a contrast between the ONC's stated role and experienced reality in the

marshes (Gaspari, 1986). The ONC was seen as an imposing institution, whilst local Fascist National Party (*Partito Nazionale Fascista*, or PNF) representatives were seen as acting positively in the tutelage of colonists' interests. Gaspari (1986) describes the resulting conflict between the PNF and the ONC as a “personal contrast” in colonists' minds, between Mussolini (identified with PNF representatives), who in his speeches exalted colonists in the Pontine Marshes, and the ONC employees, who were seen as “bad administrators of [Mussolini's] will” (Gaspari, 1986, p. 229).

The colonist selection process is fascinating in its own right. It highlights fascism's use of coerced internal migration as a tool for engineering the social makeup of the reclaimed marshes. Potential colonists were supposed to migrate voluntarily: the regime's colonization strategy was aimed at the decongestion of traditional urban centres to occur as a result of *voluntary* internal migration to the Pontine Marshes (Jacobelli and Fasolino, 2003; Ipsen, 1996). In practice, however, the internal colonization programme – from administrative structure to effects on the ground – was in many cases also a campaign aimed at displacing those who opposed the regime. These were mainly Northern local networks and urban or agricultural areas in which individuals were historically and culturally enmeshed in webs of kinship and lived experience and from where they could present threats to the regime. In support of this, Jacobelli and Fasolino (2003) state that the families who emigrated came mainly from regions with a statistically higher number of people accused or convicted of antifascist activities on a national scale: Lombardy, the Tre Venezie area (north-east Italy) and Emilia Romagna (the region centred on the city of Bologna).

Local agricultural selection syndicates in the source regions were mandated with the selection of appropriate colonists. The stated aim of local selection syndicates was to

select individuals with agricultural experience who could benefit the Pontine Marshes project (Jacobelli and Fasolino, 2003). Archival research does not support this claim. Families do seem to have been chosen at the local level from lists selected by the Provincial Unions of Agricultural Syndicates (*Unioni Provinciali dei Sindacati dell'Agricoltura*) (Orsolini Cencelli to Undersecretary of State of the Council of Ministers, 22 March 1935). However, local federal secretariats often made the final call (Ghirardo and Forster, 1985). They often selected those whose professions (typographers, cobblers, fishermen) were not the most suited for agricultural development work, but who could have been seen by local secretariats as politically or socially undesirable or potentially threatening to local fascist power (Jacobelli and Fasolino, 2003). In his study of migration from north-east Italy to New Towns in the Pontine Marshes, Parisella (1986a, p. 18) also notes that migration from Veneto to the Pontine Marshes was “highly controlled”, from selection procedures to departure and arrival points. While selection criteria were certainly not fully implemented, coercion was not a simple matter of selection at source, as will be illustrated below.

In their extensive study, Ghirardo and Forster (1985, p. 639) argue that it was not a coincidence that colonists came from those northern regions which featured the highest number of people prosecuted and sentenced for antifascist activities. They state that the federal secretariats charged with the selection of future colonists chose, for the most part, political suspects or “social undesirables”: those individuals (such as potential migrants or the unemployed) who, although not tainted by anti-fascist political leanings or activities, were nonetheless seen as undesirable within fascist society. This may be so, and this paper analyses the colonisation of the marshes and New Towns by subversives as an attempt by fascism to prove that even the most calloused antifascists could be transformed into good fascist citizens through inclusion in a national project far removed

from central urban areas. Physiologist Nicola Pende (1933, 241, in Ipsen, 1996, 115) described the regime's internal colonies, such as the Pontine Marshes, as loci from which would spring "a race of Italians selected and tested for productivity and fertility". However, archival research has given cause for reflection as to how to define "undesirables". In particular, documentary sources seem to posit a distinction between economic (i.e. the unemployed) and social undesirables (although I remain aware that this distinction may to all intents and purposes prove a false one). One point that must be noted is that in one fell swoop, Ghirardo and Forster (1985) and others (Jacobelli and Fasolino, 2003) include political suspects and "social undesirables" in the same category as preferential groups for selection. It is more arduous to ascertain whether social undesirables were coerced into migration: the documents and lists consulted in archives do not specify this. It is however possible (although at the present time it remains unconfirmed by primary sources) that federal secretariats, as well as local actors, were inclined to choose social undesirables (based on local knowledge and presuppositions) so as to "purge" their jurisdictions from problematic elements. Such actions would remain unexplained on paper because of their non-relatedness to the centralised, national organization of internal migration. As such they constitute a difficult but interesting niche for additional research.

Having said this, archival sources *do* suggest that migration was mainly utilised in order to relocate "undesirable" unemployed labourers to the Marshes:

"Which are the colonial families which have been sent to the chosen provinces? [...] Through the colonization of the Pontine Marshes we have obtained a marvellous purification of original provinces by sending into the Pontine Marshes not those elements who are most prepared from a technical agrarian point of view, but only those who weighed down, often because of incapacity, on the balance of

provincial unemployment.” (Orsolini Cencelli to Undersecretary of State of the Council of Ministers, 22 March 1935)

It can be seen that the “undesirable” unemployed elements who became colonists were treated with scorn, as “weights” on a balance of social usefulness. Unemployment was conceptualised as a symptom of “incapacity”, or uselessness. As Ipsen (1996, 113) states, “Agro Pontino colonists tended to be chosen from among those deemed least desirable by the sending provinces”. The regime thus functionalised the Pontine Marshes as a safety valve for specific elements in society. A life in the marshes could be the beginning of a new “education” for such people. The document quoted above states that efforts to reclaim the Pontine Marshes were coupled with efforts to re-educate “negative elements”, namely colonists. These “elements” were to be educated in a rural way of life devoted to agricultural production and biological reproduction for the state, supported by selected traditional rural values. However, it has to be noted that the opinions of government ministers on the matter do not seem to have been unitary. Luigi Razza, the minister of public works, reacted negatively to the document from which the above quote is taken. Referring to Cencelli’s depiction of colonists as inept at working the land, Razza fumed in a letter to Mussolini: “What has been reported to Your Eminence by the honourable Cencelli regarding the composition of the families which migrated to the Pontine Marshes is absolutely inexact” (Razza to Mussolini, 18 March 1935).

It can be seen that, whilst colonists might have been chosen to a certain extent because of their political preferences, the Pontine Marshes were by no means an “internal prison” in which the regime solely aimed to reform those it thought of as lying outside fascism. The regime aimed to do something more sinister: transform colonists, whether politically undesirable or not, into fascist worker-ants, contributing locally to the large-scale success of the Pontine Marshes project as required by overarching government institutions,



agencies and bureaucracies, and therefore contributing to the broader fascist project of ruralization, helping to present an image of a successful regime at home and abroad. For example, early 1930s migration from the Veneto region occurred at a problematic time for employment: the year in which Littoria was constructed was also a time of industrial strife in Veneto (Franzina, 1986, pp. 34-5); historically, and preceding the Pontine Marshes project, Lazio was one of the main non-northern targets of internal migration from Veneto in 1921-31, as seen by Figure 2a. However, Franzina also states that colonists were chosen preferentially from Veneto because they were stereotyped as rural “ideal types”: expert in agriculture, hard-working, religious. Emilia-Romagna, on the other hand, was stereotyped as the region of origin of colonists imbued with patriotism. Colonists can be seen as having been selected according not only to political and social characteristics but also according to general regional stereotypes which may have been used to create an image of a national project in which Italians from different regions participated shoulder to shoulder. Interactions between local actors (syndicates and secretariats) and their beliefs about those slated for colonization, and national stereotypes created tensions between the institutional negative characterization of colonists, and their positive representation in fascist accounts – in the press, newsreels and the like (Caprotti, 2005a) – which presented colonists as participants in a successful fascist meta-project.

Fascism has been described and analyzed as a political system which aimed for the construction of hegemony (Caprotti, 2005b). Antonio Gramsci related hegemony to a series of historically-rooted, yet dynamic structures in society which effectively constitute a subtly forced mainstream of thought, while precluding political, social or cultural alternatives (Gramsci, 1964; Simon, 1982). In a hegemonic state, coercion through force (of which violence is only one aspect) is one strategy which can help to maintain power – yet Gramsci believed that this was the strategy used less often in a hegemonic political

system. Rather, hegemony was a power strategy maintained through passive consent and subordination (Urbinati, 1998), backed up when needed by the power of coercion. The fascist regime attempted to achieve hegemony, and the 1930s have in fact been described as the “age of consent” (De Felice, 1995). However, on the ground the instruments of hegemony – institutions such as the federal secretariats, local syndicates and passport issuing authorities – had to revert to overt coercion in order to initiate a flux of migrants to the marshes. Thus, migrants can be understood as migrating out of coercion (when their passport applications were dismissed, for example, or when they were selected as “undesirables”) backed up by consent. The following section considers colonists’ geographical origins, cost implications of internal migration to the marshes, and post-settlements changes in birth rates in an attempt to understand the geographical selection of colonists at a wider scale, and assess the colonization programme’s results in terms of the regime’s demographic strategy and obsession with population demographic statistics.

## **5. Colonising wilderness: population and migration**

The first wave of colonists who arrived in the Pontine Marshes in the early 1930s originated from specific areas, for reasons which will be explored below. This section outlines colonists’ geographical provenance, focusing on the Veneto region. This is a fascinating window into the social construction of the marshes through the coerced import of population into the area. Secondly, the settlement destination of colonists from Veneto will be examined. Lastly, the financial costs involved in coerced migration will be assessed, taking the family as the scale of analysis. This is key to understanding the material and financial aspects involved in the regime’s attempt to construct a quasi-utopian social landscape in the marshes.

Colonists' geographical origins can mostly be found in northern Italy; migration generally concerned whole families. Men sometimes migrated shortly before the rest of the family. However, in most cases the family seems to have migrated as a whole, as noted in the archival documents and census data on which this analysis is based. A range of estimates exist as to the number of families and individuals who took part in internal migrations for internal colonization (Treves 1976, n.13, p.109), which put the number of families at 8,000 to 12,000, and the number of individuals migrating at 80,000 to 100,000. CMC data indicates that between 1930 and 1938 (the latter year being the last year for which data from the CMC is available), 9,879 families, comprising 80,731 individuals, took part in internal migrations aimed at internal colonization throughout Italy (Ibid).

Colonists originated mainly from the "Tre Venezie" area in northeast Italy, as well as from the regions of Lombardia and Emilia Romagna (Ghirardo and Forster, 1985, p. 639). On a wider scale, national yearly census data indicates that Lazio – the region in which the Pontine Marshes were located – became the focal point for the internal migratory flux from the rest of Italy. As can be seen from figure 3, yearly migration into Lazio was rarely below the level of 30,000 internal migrants per annum in the 1930s, with a maximum of over 55,000 migrants per annum in 1932 and 1933, at the start of the land reclamation and urbanization drive in the marshes. Data in Treves's statistical appendices (1976, 184-189) can be utilized to compare the magnitude of interregional migration into Lazio in 1921-31 (in the first decade of fascism, when legislation checking internal migration was only promulgated at the end of the decade), with 1933-38 CMC data showing the number of migrants migrating to Lazio as a result of interregional migration with the sole aim of internal colonization. The 1921-31 migration data shows an influx of nearly 100,000 migrants into the region for the specified period. Data from 1933-38 on migrants taking part exclusively in internal colonization show that over the five years

between 1933 and 1938, slightly over 21,000 individuals migrated to Lazio from other regions for the purpose of colonization. The assumption is that since the Pontine Marshes were the largest internal colonization project in Italy, and the main such enterprise in Lazio, most of the 21,000 migrants were destined for the Marshes. The data reported by Treves, furthermore, focus on interregional migration, and as such does not include migrants to the Pontine Marshes from within Lazio itself.

Veneto was the main region of provenance for colonists. This is not surprising. Migration to Lazio from Veneto was already significant in the 1920s, before the Pontine Marshes project, because of landholder and textile sector crises in Veneto (Parisella, 1986a). Most of these initial migrants settled in Rome, with a few choosing the Roman Ager (or *Agro Romano*), just north of the Pontine Marshes. However, after 1932, migration became controlled, and directed towards the ONC's *poderi* in the marshes. Over 1,763 families from Veneto (totalling around 18,000 people) settled in the marshes, especially in the areas around the New Towns of Littoria and Sabaudia. Littoria's environs received 1,164 families from the region, with 86.9% of the families remaining within the boundaries of the commune. Sabaudia received 440 families from Veneto, with 64.5% settling in the commune. Figure 4 highlights the main provinces in Veneto from which migrants from Veneto to the Pontine Marshes originated.

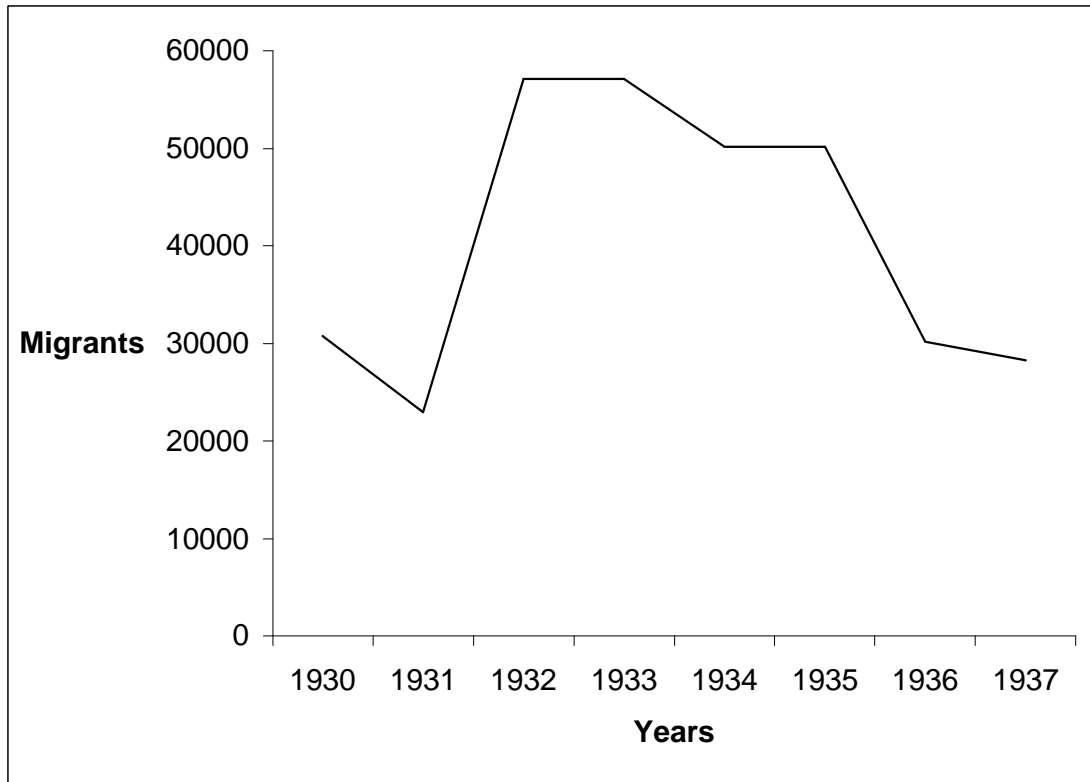


Figure 3: Migration into Lazio, 1930-1937 (Compiled by author from ISTAT data)

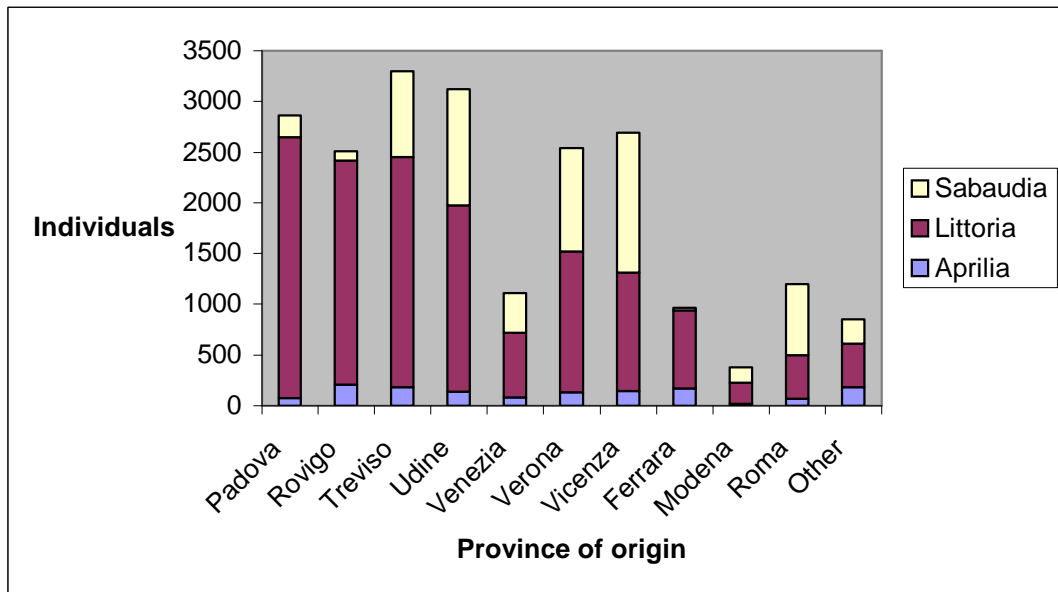
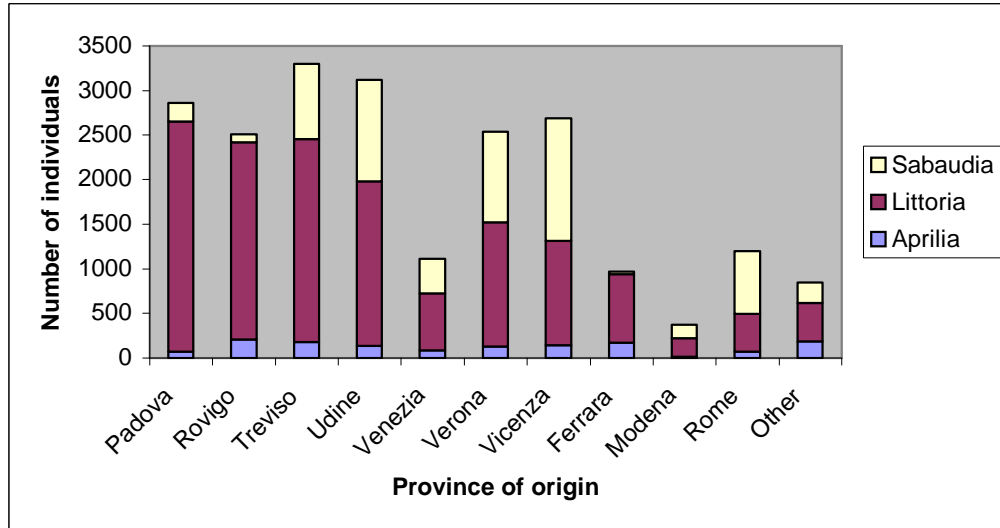


Figure 4: Main migrant flows from Veneto to New Towns in the Pontine Marshes, by province (Compiled by author from data in Parisella, 1986a: 16)

Colonists did not only originate from the Veneto region. As many migrants came from Vicenza as from Rome, according to 1930s census data provided by the Central Institute of Statistics of the Kingdom of Italy (*Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia*), the precursor of ISTAT. Migrants from the capital constituted internal migration *within* Lazio, and therefore did not appear in data on national internal migration *into* Lazio. Census data shows a clear geographical originating pattern, with Rome, Vicenza, Treviso and Udine appearing to be the main originating provinces for colonists (Vicenza and Treviso are in Veneto). At another scale, census data also indicates that colonists from any single area were not dispersed once they had reached the marshes. Their final settlement destinations in the reclamation area, and in New Towns, caused the marshes to be defined by areas of settlement by colonists from one, two or more particular northern provinces. Although this data cannot be fully explored here, it is interesting to note, as shown in figure 5, that it becomes possible to discern that Littoria mainly received settlers from Padova, Rovigo, Udine and Treviso, whilst Sabaudia's colonists largely came from Udine, Vicenza and Rome. The figure, based on data in Collari (1943), shows settlement locations in the three largest New Towns by population (Littoria, Sabaudia and Aprilia), and shows the originating province in Veneto, with the addition of Rome for comparison. The provinces of origin in figure 5 were chosen, for reasons of representational clarity, if they sent more than 150 migrants to at least two New Towns. The figure only includes migrants who settled within New Town authority boundaries (the *comune*). Therefore, colonists who settled in geographical proximity to New Towns, but not within their specified boundaries, are not included in the graph. This is the case, for example, with colonists who settled in San Felice Circeo, or Terracina, near Sabaudia. Furthermore, migrants from provinces in Veneto which did not send a substantial number of migrants to at least two New Towns are represented in the "Other" column.

The figure does not include colonists settling in New Towns but originating from abroad.



**Figure 5: Origins of New Town colonists, by major province of origin in Veneto, with Rome for comparison** (Compiled by author from ISTAT data)

The CMC was clearly focused on northern regions as a source of colonists. A 1935 government document states that:

“The fundamental concept of colonization in the Pontine Marshes has been that of injecting into these lands, previously devoid of any rural population, strong nuclei [of population] from Veneto and Emilia, belonging to those provinces which were characterised by the most demographic density.” (Orsolini Cencelli to Undersecretary of State of the Council of Ministers, 22 March 1935)

Internal migration, aimed at internal colonization, was seen as a tool which could be used to reduce presumed population pressure in certain regions, in order to increase levels of rural population in other areas.

In terms of fascist attempts to encourage population growth in a healthy, fascist environment, it is difficult to assess whether colonists' birth rates in the Pontine Marshes show an improvement over the national average. Livi-Bacci (1977, 280) claims that overall, the long-range effects of fascism's demographic policy were modest at best. Parisella (1986a) argues that colonization was carried out utilizing the family as the basic unit because it was seen as a productive and reproductive force, organized hierarchically around the authority of the (male) head of the family. Rural land in the vicinity of New Towns was organized according to the planned division of land into parcels assigned to individual families. The farmstead, or *podere*, was the resulting blend of rural house (or *casa colonica*, the "colonial house"), stables, yard and fields. On a wider scale, *poderi* were organized according to strict geometrical patterns (Riva, 1983). The farmsteads orbited around the planned *borghi*, which were centered on New Towns. At the hierarchical centre of it all was Littoria, where power from Rome was devolved to New Towns and further down to the local scale. This organization system was to be the vehicle for an increase in population numbers.

Did internal colonization succeed in raising birth rates? In percentage terms, population growth in Littoria province, from its institution in 1935 onwards, was indeed higher compared to the much larger (in demographic terms) provinces of Milan and Rome, as would be expected of a new and growing province. Census data shows that the province of Littoria featured the highest provincial population growth by far in percentage terms in Lazio after 1935, three years after the New Town of Littoria was founded. Littoria certainly experienced a rather high birth rate – two hundred infants were born in the new city from its inauguration on 18 October 1932 until early October 1933 (Orsolini Cencelli to Mussolini, 6 October 1933). However, such figures are factually correct, but misleading. Littoria was mainly populated by families selected in part because of their



numerous offspring, and the province itself did not contain, at first, many elderly people or children. It could therefore be assumed that the high population growth rates were due to lower death rates because of the absence of an elderly population and high birth rates because of the marriage of early colonists who were in their adolescence in 1932. Furthermore, New Towns such as Littoria were not “normal” populations by any means in statistical and demographic terms, and thus a high initial birth rate can be expected. It can however be seen that the fascist regime applied a systematic structure to the Pontine Marshes’ demographic and geographical constitution. It aimed to create an area characterised by high birth rates and populated by what it thought were small-scale “developers” from the northern regions, who could farm the land and make it productive. Mindful of the methodological limitations of considering birth rates in abnormal population samples such as New Towns in the Pontine Marshes in the 1930s, figure 6 charts the growth in number of births in New Towns in 1932-40.

	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939	1940
Littoria	0	273	444	691	701	947	1004	1035	1201
Sabaudia	0	45	64	252	178	176	198	196	186
Pontinia	0	0	0	33	121	156	183	213	199
Aprilia	0	0	0	0	38	54	104	102	183
Pomezia	0	0	0	0	0	0	49	62	115
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>508</b>	<b>976</b>	<b>1038</b>	<b>1333</b>	<b>1538</b>	<b>1608</b>	<b>1884</b>

**Figure 6: Number of live births in New Towns in the Pontine Marshes, 1932-1940**  
(Source: compiled by author from ISTAT data)

Transferring colonists into the Pontine Marshes was a costly endeavour. The following briefly examines an example of the financial burden involved in the fascist state’s insistence on internal migration. This is interpreted as an indication of the importance that internal colonization had for the regime. It is also a useful material example of the

way in which a hegemonic project such as the colonization of the marshes has to be rooted in a financial and planning basis which, in its bureaucratic organization, is organizational and deeply modern (Bauman, 1989; Herf, 1984). The creation of apposite material conditions can thus be seen as a necessary precondition for the formation of hegemony.

A cost estimate of internal migration to the marshes, gleaned from archival records, is given below. This is based on financial figures pertaining to internal colonization to the Pontine Marshes from Padova province in November and December 1932. These figures are tentative inasmuch as one province may have been more expensive than another in terms of internal migration costs. The analysis below, however, features Padova, a province from Veneto, the main province of origin for internal migrants. The last two months of 1932 – a key year in internal migration to the marshes – are analysed. This data was selected because a more than satisfactory level of archival data is available for this period. Data from this province was then compared to data from the provinces of Treviso, Verona and Vicenza in order to ascertain whether calculated costs in the province of analysis lay within the norm, broadly defined.

In the last two months of 1932, 168 families were transferred into the Pontine Marshes from Padova province. Normal practice was for costs to be initially met by Padova prefecture, and reimbursed six months or more later by the ONC (Prefect of Padova to Orsolini Cencelli, 8 July 1934; Orsolini Cencelli to Prefect of Padova, 7 August 1934). The cost for transferring the families ranged from just over 500 lire per family, to a maximum of 1,159.75 lire for the most “expensive” family. The total cost for the province was of 38,977 lire per month (Orsolini Cencelli to Provincial Agricultural Labour Employment Office, Padova, 14 July 1933). The costs per family found in

Padova are largely similar to costs per family in other provinces from which colonists originated and which were analysed as a comparison with Padova. These provinces were Treviso (Orsolini Cencelli to Vaccari, 17 July 1934; Vitale to ONC(a), 17 June 1933; Vitale to ONC(b), 17 June 1933), Verona (President of the Council of Ministers to Crollalanza, 14 March 1935) and Vicenza (Crollalanza to Vicenza prefecture, 3 May 1935; Prefect of Vicenza to ONC, 18 May 1935). However, the financial costs of migration were not limited to the initial migratory flux. The cost of transporting family furniture and the like was also significant. For example, the furniture transferral cost for 49 families who were moved from the province of Treviso to Littoria in December 1932 was of 12,478 lire (Report, 31 December 1932).

Specific cost discrepancies arise when focusing on cost data. Certain families' transport costs were significantly higher than the average price range. For example, the transport cost for one particular family from Vicenza was of 7,266 lire, with another two families' transport costing more than 3,000 lire each (Crollalanza to Vicenza prefecture, 3 May 1935). This may be due to the large size of the families, though family numbers were not specified in archival documents (Ibid). The reason for such discrepancies in costs (7,000 lire was enough to transport 12 "normal" families) is not indicated in archival documents, and as such it is hard to gauge the reason for the discrepancy in costs from family to family. Family size and location within the province may have had a part to play. However, what is clear is that migration costs were not centrally allocated, with a fixed, budgeted amount per family. Rather, archival data shows that migration costs were met on an *ad hoc*, family by family basis. This final section has examined the workings of Italy's internal migration strategy to the Pontine Marshes. Although statistical data shows that the Pontine Marshes project can at best be described as demographic tinkering, its inner workings – from colonist selection and stereotyping to the geographically specific

migration strategy – illuminates the complex interplay of institutions and ideas in the making of a hegemonic fascist national project.

Coerced migration can be described as an organized, geographically specific and targeted strategy. It was also a double-edged strategy, aiming to improve fertility rates and stem migratory flows, in line with the regime's demographic and ruralization policies, whilst being a foil for the targeting of social and political undesirables. Coerced internal migration was used as a convenient way of moving agricultural families and, at times, "red" proletarians to areas where they could not organize and pose a threat (Treves 1976, 107). This strategy, carried out through a blend of institutional coercion and individual consent, was celebrated as a victory by the regime. However, after the steam trains had deposited their human loads on station platforms in the marshes, and after the regime's cameras and statisticians had propagandised and totted up birth rates, those left on the platforms were colonists themselves. Required and coerced into making a life out of fields and lands as foreign to them as America would have been to any European migrant, colonists and their families turned to the task of transforming the Pontine Marshes into a lived landscape.

## **6. Conclusion**

Fascist Italy's policy of internal colonization, achieved with a focus on coerced migration to reclaimed areas, is an example of hegemony working through coercion in a totalitarian state. In the same way that Antonio Gramsci considered the modern state as a hegemonic construct whose main function is regulatory, the fascist regime can be seen as a symptom of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy's unease with the rise of Fordism, industrial urban centres, an urban consumer society and a changing mass politics. At the same time, the

struggles and tensions inherent within the acceleration of capitalist development led the regime to take on a regulatory role which was at once bureaucratic and mythical, economic *and* ideological. Gramsci considered that hegemony, exerted over particular classes or social groups within a state, is not purely economic, but cultural, political, social and, therefore, historical. In the coerced colonization of the Pontine Marshes one can see the engineering of a project in which technology and ideology fused with contemporary theories on demography and migration, resulting in the attempted construction of an ideal rural-urban area. This was to be an example of the way in which the fascist state could utilise its organizational functions in order to channel demographic theories, ideology and tensions into concrete policy.

The Pontine Marshes project was a deeply modern enterprise imbued with all the defining characteristics of a modern meta-project: reliance on technology and technical-scientific knowledge, a progress-based conceptualization of the project, the fetishism of technology, and the use of statistics and the “objective” sciences to justify what were in reality social endeavours. The cracks in the scientific, technological and ideological façade constructed by the fascist regime’s institutions to celebrate the project are constituted by the human dimension. Colonists and their families can be seen as the lens through which the regime’s use of coercion in populating the marshes can be identified. At the same time, the transformation of colonists and political-social undesirables into numbers becomes yet another example of the way in which modern, positivist science became an instrument for domination and the justification of social aims. The Pontine Marshes project was embodied in functionaries and colonists. Likewise, scientific discourse which gave rise to concerns with demography, as a result of ideological convictions about the need for a large population uninfluenced by urban industrial capitalism, was embodied in the regime’s statisticians and demographers (Ipsen, 1996). Working towards legitimate

and logical scientific aims, they helped quantify and streamline the process by which undesirables and their families were selected and dispatched onto southbound trains. Less than a decade later, similar trains, working to strict schedules and “justified” by scientific and geographical theories, would deposit millions of other undesirables, on more northern, much less welcoming platforms.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am thankful to staff at the Central State Archive, Rome, and the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), Rome, for assistance in locating research materials and census data. Three anonymous reviewers also provided useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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