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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on how people use legal bordering processes enforced through citizenship laws to their advantage and argues that citizenship provisions may function as immigration regulation, according to the way people use them. Building on an ethnographic fieldwork carried out with binational Brazilians, Chileans and Argentinians of Italian descent, it shows how they use the Italian passport they can inherit from their ancestors through the right of blood to migrate to Europe as citizens. It observes that young South American Italians engage in new forms of migration which seem to counter the current restrictive European immigration policies and that they contribute to the recent resumption of Italian migration in the EU. This article shows that Italy's entangled histories of citizenship, emigration and colonization explain why the descendants of Italian emigrants are so privileged by Italian legislation in terms of citizenship and mobility. It also argues that Italian provisions on ancestral citizenship acquisition contribute to a stratified migration regime based on ancestry, race and class, linking Latin America, Italy and Europe while tackling the paradoxes that South American Italians face upon "return" to Italy.

**Keywords**

Ancestral citizenship

Return migration

Strategic citizenship

Italian citizenship

Europe

Latin America

## **Bloodline gateways: Italian ancestral citizenship as a resource to bypass European migration policies**

Manuel is a forty-one-year-old Argentinian engineer, the great-grandson of an emigrant who left the Italian region of Trentino in 1925. Manuel moved to Trento, the region's capital, from Buenos Aires in 2022, intending to stay just a few months. This was the time he considered necessary to obtain the Italian citizenship he was entitled to by the right of blood. He brought all the required documents from Argentina, where he hadn't been able to complete the process of obtaining Italian citizenship due to the massive demand that the Italian Embassy was facing. Acquiring Italian citizenship was his way of "being prepared" seeing that Argentina was falling into economic difficulties again after the great economic crisis of 2001. After obtaining Italian citizenship, Manuel, who works remotely for the USA, decided to stay and live in Italy, as he considers it a more stable country than Argentina.

“Argentina is 100% complications. Argentina does not give you the opportunity to thrive, Argentina is constantly inviting you to leave. Day to day life is very difficult, because you don't know what is going to happen tomorrow, or in a month or six months. It is impossible to foresee anything, the risks of investing in Argentina are so great that you give up” says Manuel.

Like Manuel, thousands of people of Italian origin move each year to Italy from South American countries where Italian immigration has been substantial, as Italians citizens, thanks to the right of blood, *jus sanguinis*. Recent research indicates that between 1998 and 2012, Italy granted citizenship to 1 million Italian emigrants' descendants born abroad (Mantha-Hollands and Dzankic 2022; Tintori 2009). To acquire Italian citizenship, one has to demonstrate that one has an Italian grandparent who left Italy after the Unification (1861): there are no generation limits or residence conditions. After obtaining an Italian citizenship, many migrate to Italy, while others move directly to other European countries, such as Germany, France, the Netherlands or Spain, thanks to the European citizenship attached to their new passport. Still, this tranche of privileged migration to the European Union remains almost invisible in research and public debate, which tend to focus mostly on European restrictive migration policies.

Building on an ethnographic fieldwork with binational Brazilians, Chileans and Argentinians of Italian descent, this paper argues that citizenship provisions may operate as a substitute for migration governance. Citizenship laws determine who is a member of a State, and thus has access to the rights that State may grant, and who is not, and thus remains a foreigner with limited access to those rights. On its part, migration regulation determines who can enter a specific country and with what (limited) rights. Nonetheless, even if the primary goal of citizenship laws is to define the borders of the national community and not to regulate mobility, the ways people use them may convert them into provisions that regulate migration, allowing aspiring migrants to enter a specific country as citizens or to circulate freely. This paper will show how Italian provisions on ancestral citizenship acquisition contribute to a stratified regime of mobility between Latin America, Italy and the EU.

The second idea this paper defends is that the ways South American citizens of Italian ancestry use the Italian citizenship laws contribute to the resumption of young Italians' migration in the EU, a phenomenon which has been observed since the beginning of 2000 but which, until now,

has been mostly attributed to the changing social and economic situation in Italy (Lafleur and Stanek 2017; Dubucs, Pfirsch, and Schmoll 2016).

This paper begins by situating its contribution in relation to literature on ancestral citizenship, strategic citizenship and return migration (1). In a second section, it focuses more specifically on Italian citizenship laws and their racial premises (2). The third section presents some background to the fieldwork, explaining the context and method of the research, and shows how the mobility in which young Argentinians, Brazilians and Chileans of Italian ancestry engage is far from being a simple “return migration” (3). The final section examines how the ways in which the descendants of Italian emigrants use citizenship laws to move within the European Union outline a differential mobility regime based on ancestry, race and class that links Latin America, Italy and Europe (4).

### **1. Ancestral citizenship, return migration and their unsettled links**

Ancestral citizenship is associated with provisions of *jus sanguinis*, that is, to laws based on the transmission of nationality within families from one generation to another. Historically, the expansion of ancestral citizenship provisions has been explained by the will of emigration states to maintain ties with their diasporas, or by the will of States that emerged from prior empires to reclaim parts of their population that had been living outside their borders due to changing national frontiers or to persecution (Moritz 2015).

Although the European Union has been the focus of many comparative studies on citizenship legislation (Sredanovic and Stadlmair 2018; Bauböck 2019; Isin and Saward 2013), ancestral citizenship provisions in the EU have been relatively understudied. Most works have been carried out from a top-down perspective focused on policy implementation and concentrate more on Central and Eastern European states than on other regions of Europe (Knott 2022; Subašić 2022). Laws favoring co-ethnics have been considered by some scholars as provisions selecting immigration to kin countries (Joppke 2005; Pogonyi 2022; Dumbrava 2015). Other research shows that, as they grant the passport of a European state, these provisions also have the effect of selecting immigration to the EU (Blanchard 2020). Less extensive literature tackles the motivations for acquiring ancestral citizenship and shows that individuals often dissociate the rights attached to citizenship from the feeling of belonging to a national community and that ancestral citizenship may be used in a flexible, strategic way (Ong 1999; Harpaz and Mateos 2019). Nonetheless, instrumental use is not only correlated with ancestral citizenship, but has also been observed in relation to naturalization in immigration countries (Finotelli, La Barbera, and Echeverría 2018), to citizenship acquisition through “birth tourism” (Balta and Altan-Olcay 2015) as well as to citizenship by investment (Džankić 2019). Moreover, the debate on the instrumental uses of citizenship has expanded to include studies on states’ attitudes towards nationality provisions, which have shown that they can also be utilitarian (Aguilar Jr 1999). This has been observed particularly in relation to provisions such as dual citizenship or external citizenship. For example, it has been noted that *jus sanguinis* policies enforced by emigration countries, like Italy, have often been strengthened against the determination of immigration countries, like Argentina, to make citizens out of new immigrants through the right of the soil (*jus soli*), engendering a scramble for the same migratory populations (Cook-Martín 2013; Cañas Bottos and Plasil 2023).

The literature shows that people may use their ancestral citizenship to benefit from favorable conditions to migrate to a more economically attractive country (Harpaz 2019), to access welfare benefits (Tintori 2011) or to circulate freely, especially when it comes to citizenships of the EU member states. The importance of the Europeanization of citizenship (Kostakopoulou 2001) is all the more visible after Brexit, as recent studies show how Britons try to recover the citizenship of a EU member state their ancestors might have held (Godin and Sigona 2022; Sredanovic 2022). Instrumental considerations for acquiring an additional citizenship are grounded in what has been called the global mobility divide (Mau et al. 2015), that is, the differential access to mobility rights that each citizenship can confer on individuals. Some citizenships are thus more desirable than others (Lamarche 2019). In this perspective people's ancestral origins can become a sort of "ethnic" (Durand and Massey 2010), "juridical" (Gonzalez Bernaldo and Jedlicki 2012) or "legal" capital (Kaşlı 2016).

Ancestral citizenship acquisition is often linked by the literature to return migration (Markowitz and Stefansson 2004; Tsuda 2009). Surprisingly, while immigration to the EU is the object of a tremendous amount of scholarship, "return migration", which refers to the return of emigrants and emigrants' descendants to Europe, is poorly studied. The literature stresses that it is difficult to define the real numbers of return migration due to the scarcity of data, as the statistics do not capture this phenomenon because returnees hold the status of national citizens (King 1986; Sanfilippo 2005; Rallu 2007). Nonetheless, by cross-checking various administrative and archival sources, historians have estimated that return migration to Europe has always been a mass phenomenon (Wyman 1993). Return migration to Europe is not limited to the emigrants of the great emigration of the 19th and 20th centuries though: it is an ongoing process which grows or decreases over time following the political and socio-economic disparities between emigrants' descendants' ancestral and birth countries. For instance, it increased in Ireland in the 1990s, at the time of the rapid economic growth known as that of the Celtic tiger (Ní Laoire 2007); it expanded in Italy and Spain in the 1970s and 2000s following dramatic economic and political upheavals in Argentina (Blanchard and Sirna 2017; Tintori 2011; Vilar Ramírez 2003); it grew in Croatia in the 1990s as a consequence of the Yugoslavian war (Čapo Zmegač 2007). Some research has been carried out on return migration in Central and Eastern Europe following the fall of the socialist block (Brubaker 1998; Münz and Ohliger 2003; Fox 2007), but studies are scarce on return migration in Western and Southern Europe. The category of return migration itself needs further clarification when it comes to different generations' experience. The literature refers to second and subsequent generations' moving to their ancestors' homeland as ancestral return migration (Bovenkerk 1974), ethnic return migration (Brubaker 1998; Tsuda 2010), diasporic return (Olsson and King 2008), or counter-diasporic migration (King and Christou 2010). A refinement of the return migration concept is very much needed (Long and Oxfeld 2004), and the big question that remains unanswered is whether we can consider as "return" the migration of emigrants' descendants to an ancestral country where they have never been before.

## **2. The Italian citizenship law and the white roots of *Italianità***

Italian citizenship law is considered as the most inclusive in Europe towards emigrants' descendants living abroad (Tsuda 2009). While the literature unanimously stresses that massive emigration in the 19th and 20th centuries played a crucial role in shaping it, some recent works

show that colonialism also had a significant influence on the way the representations of Italian citizenship were constructed (Deplano 2017; Hawthorne 2022; Pesarini and Tintori 2020). After unification (1861), defining Italian citizenship became a pressing matter in the newly formed Italian state. It was necessary to handle both the internal regional diversity (Zincone and Basili 2010) and the spatial dispersion of Italians that were leaving Italy for emigrating and for participating in Italian “demographic colonialism” (1869-1943). Between 1861 and 2019, some 31 million Italians left Italy, with a peak between 1900 and 1930. While millions emigrated to the Americas and Europe, some tens of thousands went to Italian colonies in Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia and Libya. Angelica Pesarini and Guido Tintori show how, from the outset, Italian citizenship, conceived as the legal recognition of a collective national identity – *italianità* – was based on a solid link between blood and race (Pesarini and Tintori 2020). The Italian Civil Code of 1865 adopted *jus sanguinis* as the principle for transmitting citizenship, which could be passed down exclusively through male lineage. In the colonies, the civil code for Eritrea, 1909, provided that, in the case of unknown parents, a child could acquire Italian citizenship only if his or her physiognomy showed the presence of “Italian blood”. In 1940, granting citizenship to children born to an Italian man and an African woman was prohibited. Although racial laws were abolished in 1952, the Italian state continued to not grant citizenship rights to the children and grandchildren of Italians born in Africa (Deplano 2017). Their applications for citizenship were processed according to the previous colonial legislation: the degree of whiteness and an assumed level of civilization were fundamental to determine if they could be Italian or not.

While the law made it difficult to confer Italian citizenship on the children of Italian colonists in Africa, it made it very easy for emigrants’ children to acquire it. Strengthening *jus sanguinis* was one of the main objectives of the first Italian citizenship law reform, in 1912. According to this reform, Italian citizenship could only be lost by formally renouncing it. Its aim was to secure ties with the Italian diaspora in the Americas (Choate 2008). This was crucial for the political class of the time in order not to “lose” the masses of Italians who were leaving for South America and who, by virtue of the right of the soil and of forced naturalization operations (as in Brazil in 1891), acquired the nationality of the state of residence. For the Italian state, this was a question of sovereignty, but also an economic issue, as 6 million emigrants and their descendants at the time were a major source of income and development for Italy, through remittances, as well as a lever for international economic and political influence (Tintori 2013). Italian parliamentary debates and public opinion in the early 20th century often equated Italian colonialism in Africa with emigration to Latin America. They used the term “colonies” to refer to Italian settlements in Latin American countries where emigration was considerable, such as Argentina and Brazil (Choate 2008). So much so that scholars speak of Italian “colonialism of emigration” (Tintori 2006). The assumption, though, was that, contrary to what happened in Africa, in Latin America Italians would intermarry or marry with people of other European origins, which assured that their offspring were white.

The literature shows how, after fascism, when explicitly mentioning race was no longer acceptable, racism and racial nationalism were incorporated within the apparently race-neutral apparatus of Italian citizenship (Hawthorne 2022; Pesarini and Tintori 2020). According to some scholars, the “unspeakability” of race in postwar Italy has brought Catholicism to become a substitute for whiteness (Portelli 2005).

The second and last citizenship law reform, in 1992, “maximized” the principle of *jus sanguinis* by extending the conditions under which the (white) descendants of an Italian can acquire Italian citizenship and finally allowed dual citizenship. The links between Italy and its diaspora were further strengthened in 2001, when Italians living abroad were granted the right to vote. An examination of the parliamentary debates reveals that the last reform of Italian citizenship law was not aimed at encouraging return migration. Oddly enough, the legislators did not think that reinforcing the permanent character of Italian nationality, while allowing the possession of dual citizenship, would trigger new immigration: this was a quite unexpected outcome (Pastore 2004).

The most recent figures of the Registry of Italians Living Abroad (AIRE), show that as of December 2022, 5.933.418 Italians lived abroad (out of a population of less than 54 million Italians living in Italy). This means that more than 1 Italian in 10 lives abroad. The majority of them reside in Argentina (921.544 persons), followed by Germany (822.243), Switzerland (639.251) and Brazil (558.233). To these figures one must add all of the Italians who did not register with the AIRE (which is not compulsory) and all of the Italian emigrants’ descendants who could apply for Italian citizenship based on ancestry. According to rough estimates, people of Italian origin residing outside national borders would number around 60 million: more than the national population (Pastore 2004; Gabaccia 2000). The category “Italians living abroad” also includes smaller groups who do not have a direct ancestor that held Italian citizenship, but who are assimilated to the Italian diaspora because their ancestors came from territories that became part of Italy during the 20th Century (Sredanovic 2017). A specific law (no. 379 of December 14, 2000), in force between 2000 and 2010, ascribed Italian nationality to persons born in Italian territories that were formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and became Italian at the end of World War I (1919) and to their descendants.

In line with the representations of whiteness and Catholicism implicitly embedded in the concept of *italianità*, Italian nationality law is very restrictive towards immigrants and immigrants’ children. It does not recognize the acquisition of citizenship by *jus soli*: immigrants’ children who were born and raised in Italy can apply for Italian citizenship only at the age of eighteen and only provided they can prove continuous residence in Italy from their birth. Citizenship acquisition by residence is also hindered. Moreover, Italian policies on immigration are mostly characterized by restrictions on legal entry. In spite of figures showing a considerable growth of immigration in the last forty years (Colombo and Dalla Zuanna 2019; Sciortino 2012), the Italian legal system struggles to consider Italy as a country of immigration, while it continues to represent it as an emigration country and to privilege emigrants’ descendants over immigrants’ children (Decimo 2015). Estimates from the Italian census suggest that between six hundred and nine hundred thousand children of immigrants are denied citizenship by the Italian law (Hawthorne 2022). The theories of racial differentiation that developed at the time of Italian colonialism seem to be applied again to migrants arriving today in Italy from Africa and Asia, as well as to their children (Harris 2008; Mezzadra 2012; Triulzi 2006).

### 3. Insight from fieldwork in Trentino: is this “return migration”?

From 2019 to 2023 I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Trentino, an Alpine region in North-Eastern Italy. The fieldwork was based on semi-structured interviews I conducted with three

types of actors: local authorities of the Autonomous Province of Trento and of the Chilean honorary consulate (4 interviews); representatives of civil society associations (3 interviews); 25 “returnees” from South-American countries (10 from Argentina, 9 from Chile, 6 from Brazil), 11 of whom were women and 14 men<sup>1</sup>.

Like all the Alpine regions, Trentino has been an area of great family emigration, especially between 1870 and 1970. Much of this emigration headed towards Latin America: Argentina, Chile and Brazil (Grosselli 2000). The president of the local association supporting Trentino emigrants estimates that today there are around one million people of Trentino origin scattered around the world: twice the local population.

From 1986 until 2018, Trentino had an attractive return migration program that offered financial support to emigrants and their descendants who wished to “return”. As it was open to anyone who could prove direct descentance from a Trentine emigrant, it fostered a considerable flow of “return”, even of people with few ties to Trentino. Today this program is no longer in force, but the Autonomous Province of Trento provides scholarships to emigrants’ descendants who wish to study at the University of Trento and financial support to high skilled workers of Trentino descent who wish to “return” and settle in Trentino. Manuel benefited from this second scheme. Current “return” policies are aimed not at attracting any emigrant descendant, but just high skilled migrants. In Italy, return programs are implemented on a regional basis and, today, Trentino’s is one of the most appealing. This program makes immigration to Trentino simpler than to other regions, as Vitor’s case shows. Vitor is a thirty-year-old Brazilian student who arrived in Trentino in 2019. On his mother's side, the grandfather of his grandmother left Trentino around 1875 for the South of Brazil: Vitor is the fifth-generation descendant of a Trentino emigrant.

“In Brazil I was involved in politics; I was doing my Masters in political research in a foundation linked to the ruling party. Then the President was impeached. I was at the center of the turmoil and it kind of wore me out, so I decided to leave Brazil... I had spent six months in Chile during my three years of studies, so I thought that I would go there. I found a job that I liked in Chile, it granted me better professional conditions than those I could find in Brazil and I decided to move there right away, in July 2016. When I was in Chile in 2016, I obtained my Italian citizenship, because I didn’t have it yet.... Actually, it was a process we started as a family in 2003, and in 2016 we finally got the citizenship. I got my passport when I was in Chile and I immediately wanted to move to Italy, because I had the option. I first tried to look for jobs in Italy, but it was difficult to get one because I was a foreigner anyway. So, I tried the scholarship for the descendants of Trentino emigrants. There was a Master’s program at the University of Trento that seemed in line with what I was already doing professionally. I applied for the fellowship and that is how I got here.”

The scholarship from the Province of Trento gave Vitor the opportunity to have a stable situation and to settle in Italy, where he wouldn’t otherwise have been able to find a job, as he was considered a foreigner despite his newly acquired Italian passport. Vitor is Italian thanks to his ancestry, but his ancestors left Trentino before it was annexed to Italy, so they emigrated

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; to ensure anonymity, names in the article are pseudonyms.

as subjects of the Austro-Hungarian empire and not as Italians. As a border region between Italy and Austria, Trentino was a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the historical Tyrol) until 1919. Vitor, as many others “new Italians” by ancestry, acquired an Italian passport thanks to Law 379 of 2000, aimed at descendants of emigrants coming from the old Austro-Hungarian territories. The process of genealogical reconstruction necessary to apply for Italian citizenship is both long and expensive – all the more so for emigrants with older ties to Italy, for whom it is more difficult to prove ancestry. It also requires applicants to possess a certain cultural capital, in order to be aware of the existence of specific provisions, but also to set in motion the quest for the documents of ancestors. Some people are able to do it on their own and embark on a very time-consuming process that can take years to complete. Others turn to legal intermediaries: agencies and individuals who specialize in genealogical reconstructions, translations and the filing of applications, and who charge several thousand euros for this service (between 1000 and 3500 euros, according to the people I interviewed) – a sum that the majority of the Brazilian population cannot afford. Some candidates to Italian citizenship thus gather with other family members and go through the process collectively in order to share the costs. This practice is not specific to old emigrations such as the Brazilian one; it is followed also in Argentina, where emigration is more recent and genealogical reconstructions are less difficult. In Vitor’s case, his uncle initiated the process of citizenship acquisition as soon as the law came into force, in 2000, because he learned about it from the trentine club he used to attend in his hometown in Southern Brazil. In 2006 when Vitor, a teenager at the time, told his mother he wanted to acquire Italian citizenship to reconnect with the country of his ancestors, they were able to benefit from the documents his uncle had collected and shared the costs of the procedure. Vitor’s mother applied for Italian citizenship for herself and her two other children as well. While Vitor wanted to explore new life opportunities, his mother thought that an Italian passport could be an asset should economic difficulties arise in the following years. Benefitting from a return program can make a real difference for new migrants. Indeed, to the costs linked to citizenship acquisition, one must add those of the flight to Italy, of the documents to be obtained there (such as the national identity card) and of accommodation on site. From 2001, when scholarships for the descendants of emigrants started to be awarded, dozens of young Latin Americans moved to Trentino to attend university without having to pay tuition, while receiving free board on the campus as well as a little financial contribution. Veronica, the twenty-six-year-old Chilean granddaughter of an Italian emigrant, took advantage of this program too. Through it, she obtained the financial support that helped her move to Trentino and go through the first months when she was settling there. She then made her life different from what she had initially expected and is now the owner of a shoe shop in Trento.

“I came to Trentino with a scholarship from the Province of Trento to attend Trento University in 2003. I wanted to study child psychology, which I didn’t do in the end because my husband came to join me. Actually, we were just dating at the time. He was Chilean, so he didn’t have a visa and all that, but I had Italian citizenship thanks to my mother, so we got married. At that point, I gave up my studies and started working. I decided to come because I didn’t want to burden my mother with university in Chile, because it’s so expensive there. A year after I came, I had my mother and my sister come and live with me”.

Having Italian citizenship allowed Veronica to switch smoothly from the administrative status of student to that of worker. Combined with the stable economic situation she was able to create thanks to the “return” program, it also allowed her to have her family join her and to provide her future husband with an Italian passport through marriage. Veronica’s case shows that the use of ancestral Italian citizenship creates new migratory chains, with young generations of descendants of emigrants often acting as bridgeheads.

From the standpoint of Latin America, the professional and circulation opportunities provided by an Italian passport are very attractive and combine with the financial support offered by the scholarships granted by the Province of Trento. The grandson of a couple of emigrants who left Trentino in 1952, Cesare is a twenty-eight-year-old Chilean from La Serena. At the time I met him, he was studying for a second degree at the University of Trento. His story echoes Veronica’s and Vitor’s and is remarkable for the relationship between his use of the Italian citizenship law and his (lack of) links with Italy.

“One day my aunt told me that the Province of Trento was offering scholarships to the descendants of emigrants, and I decided to take advantage of the opportunity. The truth is that I was thinking about the future and I said to myself, gosh, I could have an Italian passport that would allow me to enter the European Union without any problem, maybe I could go to university there. Because with this passport I can be in Europe without a residence permit and I can have many other benefits and I said to myself, I have to take advantage of it. So, I started to do some research... because I didn’t know much about my family in Trento.... I had no contact with Trentino or with Italy: no one in my family spoke Italian. I had to study it before coming. In my family we knew that we could have Italian citizenship, that we could have *descent by blood*, that it is easier, because if you’ve got your grandfather’s birth certificate you go to the embassy, you fill out the form, you pay the amount of money they ask for and they give you an Italian passport”.

In Cesare’s words, an Italian passport paves the way to free mobility and broader working opportunities within the EU; it’s an asset. And in fact, after graduating from the University of Trento he worked in Spain and then in Ireland.

It is well known in South American countries where Italian emigrants have settled, that Italian citizenship is a straightforward path to a valuable passport and freedom of movement. An Italian passport is “easier” to get, as Cesare puts it, compared to the passports of other European countries from which one’s ancestors may come. Yet, candidates must be cognizant of the specific laws they can benefit from and must have the economic resources necessary to go through the process of citizenship acquisition, which makes it accessible mostly to people from the middle and upper classes. “Return” programs put in place by the Province of Trento certainly facilitate migration to Italy because of the financial advantages they confer to their recipients. These programs, though, are aimed specifically at high skilled workers or at university students, which makes them class specific programs as well. Indeed, as the interview excerpts show, the Italian emigrants’ descendants that participated in this research are fully embedded in “middle class” educational and professional trajectories.

#### **4. A differential mobility regime based on ancestry, race and class**

Examining the way in which the descendants of Italian emigrants from various Latin American countries use their Italian passport suggests that citizenship laws can function as migration governance. Many Chileans, Argentinians and Brazilians of Italian descent, especially young people, take advantage of Italian citizenship regulations and return programs to engage in migration towards Italy and Europe. This can take the form of a long-term migration to a specific location (as in the case of Vitor and Veronica), or a temporary migration that is not tied to a specific place and can result in circulation within the EU (as in the case of Cesare). Others go directly from South America to other European countries. This is Giovanni's case. Giovanni is an Argentinian of Italian descent who entered the EU as Italian in order to attend University in the UK (before Brexit). After completing his PhD, Giovanni worked in the Netherlands and is now a university professor in Sweden. Giovanni's path is not an exception, as Latin American students and academics with an Italian passport are many in European universities outside Italy. Young South Americans with Italian passports participate in the current resurgence of mobility among young Italians within the European Union. Thus, Italian nationality laws, through the ways in which they are used, contribute to the expansion of the current Italian migratory system, both in its geographical and historical dimensions. Indeed, the South American continent appears as a potential reservoir of Italian emigrants, outlining a much broader and more complex picture of contemporary Italian migration. In this picture, connections are made both between Italy and the other countries of the Schengen area and between Latin American countries where Italian immigration has been massive and the European Union. The professional and educational mobility of the Latin American Italians within the EU is similar to the current mobility of young Italians born in Italy. In fact, the opportunities offered by European citizenship are attractive not only to young South Americans with Italian passports, but also to young Italians born in Italy, who since the 2000s have been intensively emigrating to Northern European countries. So much so that the literature speaks of a resurgence of Italian emigration in Europe (Gjergji 2015; Lafleur and Stanek 2017; Finotelli, La Barbera, and Echeverría 2018). Compared to historical Italian emigration, this new migration is composed by a higher share of young working graduates and students, the "Eurostars" (Favell 2008). Though, new Italian migrants also include "other Eurostars" (Varriale 2023): young individuals that come from class groups with lower levels of cultural capital (Franceschelli 2022; Tintori and Romei 2017), even if with relative economic security. They are also more racially diverse than historical emigrants, as they include black Italians. In spite of differences in class origin, race and cultural capital, the reasons that drive young Italians to emigrate are quite homogeneous and are often rooted in the quest for self-realization and social promotion, rather than in the lack of work per se (Dubucs, Pfirsch, and Schmoll 2016). Yet, the experiences they make of migration are shaped by inequalities of class and race (Varriale 2023).

The fact that young South Americans of Italian descent immigrate to Italy while young Italians born in Italy leave the country to emigrate in Northern Europe, may seem a paradox. Though, this is only an apparent paradox, as entering Italy may be, for young South Americans with an Italian passport, only the first step in a wider mobility on a European scale (Blanchard 2020). Therefore, it would be inaccurate to define their mobility to Italy as "return" migration, since their primary goal is not to "come back" to a country where they never lived or with which they have few or no ties. Their goal is to benefit from a range of opportunities attached to Italian citizenship and to circulate freely between Latin America and the EU, within the European

Union and possibly beyond, thanks to the value of their passport. The way young emigrants' descendants use the Italian citizenship law to emigrate to Italy and to circulate within the EU contributes to outline a differential mobility regime (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) based on ancestry, race and class. This regime favors "white" South Americans of Italian descent over their peers who are not, and over the children of immigrants born in Italy.

The migration young Brazilians, Chileans and Argentinians of Italian origin engage in resembles that of young Italians born in Italy. Yet, when they settle in Trentino, they often face social exclusion (i.e. exclusion from social circles, difficulties in renting an apartment, difficulties in gaining working partners' trust). They are considered as foreigners, despite the fact that they possess an Italian passport. The decoupling of legal membership and social membership upon "return" is not specific to Trentino and has been widely observed when return migrants settle in their ancestors' places of origin (Brubaker et al. 2006; Fox 2007; Cook-Martín and Viladrich 2009). In Trentino, it is not emigrants' descendants' appearance that marks them out as foreigners, as they are mostly phenotypically close to the local population. It is their accent and their country of birth. In a region like Trentino, where the valley and village of birth define who is an insider and who is not, the children and grandchildren of emigrants are often seen as outsiders. Veronica, as many other emigrants' descendants, felt isolated and suspected by the local population from the moment she arrived in Trentino:

"They are so cold here, it's difficult even to make friends with someone from Trentino, it's hard... all my friends here are from Southern Italy. Here, people are suspicious, the fact that you're a foreigner... even when I bought the shop, at the beginning the suppliers were mistrustful, you know... I'm Italian, I have Italian documents, everything, but the fact that I wasn't born here... there are some prejudices. They looked at me as if to say, 'So, you're the owner?!' It's not easy".

Social exclusion goes hand in hand with uneven economic inclusion. This reflects local "return" policies that seek to attract highly skilled migrants, mostly in specific sectors such as engineering or medical sciences. While some emigrants' descendants are included in prestigious working sectors, like engineering, those who have got university degrees in the humanities and in the social sciences often find themselves working in low-skilled sectors. Therefore, young Italians of Latin American origin face a twofold paradox upon their "return". First, while they are legally considered as Italians thanks to their ancestry, they are not considered as "the same as us" by the local population, because they were born in Latin America. Secondly, in Brazil, Chile and Argentina, they could benefit from a privileged social status thanks to their ancestry: having proved European origins and being white (or whiter than others) is a class marker; it is something that ascribes social privilege, according to the logic of the coloniality of power (Qijano and Ennis 2000). It is a privilege that some emigrants' descendants deliberately seek when applying for Italian citizenship. Yet, they partly lose it upon "return", as in Italy they are assigned to the status of migrants. The racial privilege Italian emigrants' descendants had in Latin America fades when they arrive in Italy, where their ancestry (read race) is no longer a marker of privilege, while their origin (birth country) often becomes a marker of devaluing difference.

## Conclusions

This paper has analyzed how citizenship provisions can affect migratory processes. By using the Italian citizenship law to enter Italy and circulate within the EU, young Chileans, Brazilians and Argentinians of Italian descent engage in new forms of migration that seem to counter the current restrictive immigration policies enforced both in Italy and in Europe. The contrast between Latin American youths using an Italian passport to migrate to the EU and the EU's restrictive migratory governance may only be apparent though. As Adrian Favell observes, Western nation-states conceptually extract a part of the migrant population from the dynamic flow of immigration that is usually considered as disruptive (Favell 2022). In doing so, they make the latter as visible as it is unwanted, while making the former as invisible and unproblematic as it is wanted. Italian citizenship law and Italian migration policies both participate in a bordering process, through which some people are categorized as citizens (insiders, legal) and other as foreigners (outsiders, illegal). Examining them together gives insight into how “difference” is socially organized and produced. In the Italian case, ancestry (as proxy for race and religion) plays a crucial role in determining which kinds of migrants are allowed into the national body and which kinds are not. Comparing citizenship acquisition via ancestry and citizenship acquisition via birth, it appears that supposedly white and Catholic migrants from South America are preferred as new citizens over supposedly black and Muslim migrants from Africa. Class is another factor shaping migration selection to Italy. Although it is not mentioned in the law, class determines who can engage in the long, expensive and difficult process of citizenship acquisition via ancestry. Acquiring Italian citizenship, in fact, requires a certain degree of economic and cultural capital. Therefore, Italian citizenship law and the uses people make of it contribute to a stratified migration regime based on ancestry, race and class, across Latin America, Italy and Europe. This regime privileges supposedly “white” young Chileans, Argentinians and Brazilians who have Italian ancestry over their peers who do not and over immigrants' children born in Italy.

This paper has shown that young South Americans holding an Italian passport often use it to circulate within the EU in search for educational and professional opportunities, as young Italians born in Italy do. They thus participate in the recent increase in mobility among young Italians within the European Union that has been registered in the last twenty years. The mobility in which they engage, therefore, is more complex than a straightforward “return” migration from Argentina, Brazil and Chile to Italy.

This paper has also shown the paradoxes that Latin American Italians face upon “return”. Ancestry is supposed to determine their proximity to the Italian population. Nevertheless, because of their place of birth and their accent, in Trentino, the local population considers them to be migrants, a status that is typically racialized and rooted in the post-colonial border regime (Mezzadra 2012). Moving to Italy, thus, they partially lose the white privilege they had in their origin country, as they are confronted with social marginalization and stereotypes of “otherness”. However, because they are “white” and of old Trentino origin, they may be seen by the local population as more desirable than “non-white” and Muslim migrants. This is a question for future research, which may help to uncover the interplay of different degrees of “othering” according to “race”, religion and class and not just to citizenship. For now, we can observe that there is a disjunction between the juridical ideas of *Italianità* as enshrined in the

right of blood, on one hand, and social representations of belonging in Trentino, on the other hand, that seem to be linked to an intertwining of “race” and birthplace.

At a macrolevel, a bordering process is also visible in the narrative on return migration used by the Italian local authorities. This paper has shown that, in light of young Brazilians’, Argentinians’ and Chileans’ strategic use of an Italian “dormant” nationality and a flexible European citizenship, it would be inaccurate to qualify as “return migration” their mobility to Italy and to the EU, as the political and legal language does. Rather, the institutional use of the rhetoric of “return migration” against that of “irregular migration” seems to reveal a political will to introduce a difference in value between populations of different origins (read races) seeking to enter the European Union. What Italian policies call “return migration” seems rather to reflect a privileged access to an otherwise unequal international and intra-European mobility regime.

This article argues that in order to understand contemporary migrations in Europe, as well as the differential rights granted to mobile populations, it is crucial to take the past into account. Italy’s entangled histories of citizenship, emigration and colonization shape present migration flows and explain why the descendants of Italian emigrants are so privileged by Italian legislation in terms of citizenship and mobility. Beyond this specific case, the importance of considering the past, especially the colonial past, to understand contemporary migration, has been stressed by critical migration studies (Mayblin and Turner 2021). This paper contributes to this debate by showing that an emigration past is equally crucial to understanding present-day migration processes as well as their governance.

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