Emigration from Italy has been thoroughly analysed in particular with reference to the large contribution that Italians made to the mass migrations from and within Europe between 1815 and 1939 (Baines, 1995; Hatton and Williamson, 1998; Bade, 2003). The country experienced a second wave of mass emigration after the Second World War, which has only recently caught scholarly attention (Colucci, 2008; De Clementi, 2010; Bonifazi, 2013). In addition, even though Italy has almost constantly had a positive net migration since 1974, thus becoming a country of immigration, there have always been relatively significant numbers of people leaving, up to the so-called *nuove mobilità* (‘new mobility’) of the 2000–10s (Bonifazi and Heins, 2009; Tintori, forthcoming).

Official statistics tell us that roughly 28,500,000 citizens left Italy between 1869 and 2005, with an arithmetic mean of 211,000 people per year. The periods with the highest intensity of mobility out of the country were 1869–1931, with more than 18,500,000 expatriates, and 1946–74, with over 7,500,000 people leaving. The peak of emigration took place in 1913, when more than 872,500 Italians left. Even though we lack reliable data on return migrations, it is estimated that backflows from European countries reached almost 80 per cent of the total, while roughly 50 per cent of those who left for the Americas or Australia went back (Foerster, 1919: 23–43; Gould, 1980: 86; Baines, 1995: 35–8; Cerase, 2001: 115–16).

The latest official data show that, in 2012, 67,998 citizens moved their residency abroad, the highest figure in the last ten years, with a 35.8 per cent increase on the previous year. The majority of the expatriates came from the northern regions and went to European countries, with Germany, Switzerland and the UK as their main destinations. The average age was around 33 and there was a slight prevalence of males (54.6 per cent) over females (ISTAT, 2014). These trends and features are confirmed by the most recent data of the AIRE (Registry of Italian citizens residing abroad), with the number of Italian citizens officially residing abroad up from 4,341,156 at the end of 2012 to 4,482,115 at the end of 2013.

It is important to underline that these statistics should be taken with a grain of salt: they are essentially useful for indicating a trend and the numbers of non-temporary emigrants. In fact,
not all Italian citizens who emigrate register with their consulates. According to the law, Italians moving overseas should register with the AIRE at consulates if they intend to stay abroad for at least one year. Since failure to comply with the law is not punished, most people typically register only when they are in need of a service from the consulate. Thus, ISTAT and AIRE data certainly underestimate the actual number of current expatriates from the country, especially because they do not detect temporary and circular migrants. On the other hand, though, the AIRE registry is not an accurate tool for counting Italians who have left the country, since it contains sizeable numbers of people who were born outside Italy and obtained citizenship by descent. According to the latest available data, between 1998 and 2010 at least 1,003,403 individuals got Italian citizenship by descent at Italian consulates abroad and were automatically added to the AIRE registry. Of total new Italian/EU passports, 73.3 per cent were released in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay alone (Tintori, 2009, 2012a).

Determinants, processes and patterns of Italian emigration are complex. The same complexity applies to the causes behind Italy’s ‘continuing history of emigration’ (Tintori, 2013). Push-and-pull models, based on a cost-benefit analysis applied to wage differentials and core–periphery segmented labour markets, offer insufficient explanations. Demographic pressure, social upheavals, differences in the process of industrialisation between Italy and the destination countries, the development of an increasingly interdependent international labour market, the perpetuation of migration chains, and personal reasons have all contributed to determining emigration from Italy.

In this chapter, we aim to investigate how the Italian state discursively framed expatriation at various points in time and how these institutional perceptions were translated into policies; to what extent the conventional narrative that describes past emigration as mainly formed by labourers, often unskilled, and the more recent one as a ‘brain drain’ is empirically grounded; to what extent the international dimension, in terms of participation in the development of an international economy, played a role in defining Italy’s emigration policies.

A brief digression on the so-called ‘Great Emigration’ of the 1860s–1930s will set the proper background for our analysis. Not only will it provide a historical perspective, but more importantly, it will offer the opportunity to look at the larger picture and point out continuities and breaks throughout the whole history of the unified Italian state.

The foundation of Italy’s emigration policies: 1861–1945

Soon after the unification of the country in 1861, emigration became a major social and economic issue the state had to cope with, simply because of its sheer scale. At first, the liberal ruling classes addressed the question with administrative provisions. All these acts dealt with mass migration essentially as a matter of public order and were aimed at avoiding the state’s finances incurring the costs of repatriations (Sori, 1979: 255–9; Ostuni, 2001: 309–11). Prime Minister Francesco Crispi, who saw mass migration as a safety valve to ease the pressure of unemployment and social tensions, promoted the first organic law on emigration in 1888 (no. 5866, 30 January). The legal protection of emigrants was kept at a minimal level. Yet, the 1888 Act marked the beginning of an increasing interventionism by the state in emigration.

In an age of mounting nationalism, a more proactive attitude developed with the evolution of a strategic plan that not only viewed emigration positively as a safety valve, but most of all aimed at transforming Italian emigrants abroad into a tool for Italy’s export and colonial expansion (Tintori, 2006; Choate, 2008). As a consequence, even though Italian emigration had been characterised as being mainly ‘circular’ and ‘temporary’, the state directed its efforts towards that strategic goal and concentrated its actions on the ‘settlers’, especially in those countries that
were deemed crucial for Italy’s interests in the international economy, such as the United States and, to a lesser degree, Argentina and Brazil.

More consistently, Act no. 23 of 31 January 1901 – the Emigration Law – set up the Commissariato generale dell’emigrazione (Cge) [General Emigration Agency], a branch of the ministry of Foreign affairs, and an Emigration Fund, to finance several programmes of assistance for emigrants and strengthen their chances of success. The 1901 law marked what was described as the ‘golden period’ of Italian emigration legislation (Cometti, 1958: 822) and inaugurated a tradition of commitment in assisting Italian emigrants, provided they were compatible with the international interests of the country. The Cge was established as a central institutional body with the sole purpose of regulating and managing emigration from Italy. Among its tasks, it would ideally rationalise the outflows and improve the emigrants’ human capital, through targeted training programmes.

The aim was to ‘outsourcing’ as much as possible the social and moral protection of emigrants, through the Emigration Fund’s subsidising of mutual aid, and religious and migrant associations. Most of the bureaucratic resources were to be dedicated to the strategic plan of establishing ‘free colonies’ of Italians.

When the fascist movement seized power in 1922, at first the rationales behind emigration policies remained substantially identical. For example, Mussolini replaced the Istituto Nazionale per la Colonizzazione e le Imprese dei Lavori all’estero (INCILE), founded in 1920, with the Istituto di Credito per il Lavoro Italiano all’estero (ICLE or Credit Institute for Italian Labour Abroad). But its functions remained to provide financial support for ‘colonization projects abroad’ (Cannistraro and Rosoli, 1979: 681–92). It was rather the adoption of increasingly restrictive measures towards international immigration by the main destination countries during the 1920s and throughout the 1930s, which practically ended the era of free mass migration, that prompted a change in the regime’s emigration policies. Initially, the regime tried to negotiate a higher quota for Italians, especially with the US, and extended the policy of ‘selective emigration’ already started by the Liberal governments, that is training programmes for prospective emigrants specifically tailor-made to match the needs of the destination country’s labour market. When it became clear that restrictionism in the Americas was due to economic as much as ideological reasons, in 1927 Mussolini suspended all governmental subsidies to private associations, dismantled the Cge and replaced it with the Direzione Generale degli Italiani all’estero (Dgie or General Bureau of Italians Abroad, still a branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In parallel, he announced a new demographic policy whose goal was to increase Italy’s population, by means of both higher birth rates and return migration. The new regime of international migration put an end to temporary and circular mobility and accelerated the process of settlement for those who were abroad. In this light, the regime’s emigration policies consistently carried on what had been started by the Liberal state. It just turned the ‘free colonies’ into ‘fascist colonies’.

Already at this early stage, especially if we place our analysis in comparative perspective with other countries producing emigrants (Dufloix et al., 2010; Collyer, 2013), the Italian state displayed a great deal of proactive commitment towards the expatriates, in terms of both resources and governmental agencies.

To answer the question of what sort of citizens the country was exporting, we should break the analysis down according to specific destinations and years. Skilled workers and even elite emigrants were represented throughout the whole period (Foerster, 1919; Sori, 1979; Incisa di Camerana, 2003). But unskilled male labourers were by far the largest group. This fact, though, must be placed in the proper historical context. First of all, that was the profile of the European, not only the Italian, mobile workforce at the time. Second, according to Italian census data, 77 per cent of the population was illiterate in 1861 and still more than 35 per cent in 1921.
Third, and most importantly, this supply of manual labour ‘caused by the declining numbers of workers employed in agriculture and the collapse of rural industry’ (Hanagan, 1977: 29) was met, on the demand side, by the expanding system of manufacturing under new mechanised methods of production that were characterising the international economy.

**The resumption of mass emigration: 1945–73**

At the end of the Second World War the economic and social situation was particularly critical. The scenario that confronted contemporary observers was that of a country scarred by conflict: its infrastructure destroyed, its avenues of communication barely usable and its industrial apparatus badly damaged. It was a scenario that was inevitably reflected in the everyday life of the people: the difficulty in procuring adequate food supplies, the unhealthy and precarious living situations, and the hygienic and sanitary conditions that were growing notably worse. In order to understand the characteristics of the resumption of emigration in the aftermath of the Second World War one must inevitably start here.

The choice to emigrate was initially an inevitable response to unemployment and to the dashed hopes for the reconstruction following liberation (Pugliese and Rebecciani, 2003; Colucci, 2008; Rinauro, 2009). The most tangible consequence of the negative economic circumstances in the immediate post-war period was precisely the presence of widespread unemployment throughout all of the country’s productive sectors, a situation that was destined to worsen in the two-year period between 1945 and 1946 while at the same time social and political tensions increased. In 1946 the offices of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy registered the presence of 2,098,257 unemployed persons, especially in the construction and agriculture sectors (*Ministero per la Costituente*, 1946). From the return of veterans to assistance for war victims, from layoffs to social assistance, the causes and consequences of unemployment constituted the heart of political confrontations and debate among social forces. Once again, one of the most immediate solutions to confronting the relationship between the economic crisis and unemployment was emigration.

After the Second World War, however, that solution was shown to be much less practicable than it had been in the past. Those governments interested in Italian manpower (among which figured many continental European ones taken up with reconstruction) had every intention of rigidly controlling their respective national labour markets, while other states which in the past had accepted Italian immigrants in large numbers had already erected barriers between the two world wars. With laws impeding the long-term residency of foreigners, provisions limiting family reunions and instruments controlling the labour market that considered foreigners’ presence as transitory and rotational only, the direction the immigration policies of many European countries assumed (like Switzerland, Belgium and Germany) was of a restrictive type. In countries like France and Great Britain as well – in which the ruling classes’ prevalent orientation was favourable toward an increase in immigration – this was notably contingent on and related to the strictest demands of the national labour markets.

One important change of these immediate post-war years, however, was the behaviour of the Italian government, which more than ever insisted on supporting the continuation of emigration at all costs, signing cooperation accords with interested countries and explicitly encouraging emigration among the unemployed. From the government point of view, the objective was twofold: on the one hand, to relieve pressure on the Italian labour market and, on the other, to attempt to ease the social tensions that could easily have erupted with such a large number of unemployed.
Another significant change was the presence of women workers – primarily recruited by Switzerland and Great Britain – who moved on their own, that is, without family members – a migratory phenomenon that had been much less common in previous decades. A less new, but extremely significant, characteristic was the existence of widespread clandestine emigration – above all to France – due precisely to the rigidity of the rules and the policies of certain states and certain companies that encouraged illegal recruitment (Rinauro, 2009).

What were the concrete results of this post-war trend? We can distinguish them as follows: first, mass emigration resumed but to a lesser degree than the Italian governments would have wanted. Between 1945 and 1957, 3,157,269 persons left Italy, 1,745,089 of them to European countries. In the same period, however, 1,216,203 persons were repatriated, 904,835 of whom came from Europe (Prencipe and Nicosia, 2010). Already in 1949 a Ministry of Foreign affairs report (Direzione generale emigrazione, 1949) pointed out that it would have been impossible to allow more than two or three hundred thousand people to leave per year as the demand from destination countries was not so high; ministers in charge in 1945 still forecast and hoped for, however, at least one million emigrants per year. Second, the European states and the new non-European states interested in Italian labour (Australia, Canada and later Venezuela, countries that prior to 1945 had absorbed little Italian manpower) above all sought qualified personnel and opened recruitment offices in Italy themselves. Only a fraction of the unemployed eligible for expatriation managed to pass the selection process and therefore mainly qualified workers or those who could guarantee previous experience were selected.

Third, emigration became a terrain of extreme political conflict. The departure of qualified workers, who should have had a primary role in the reconstruction of Italy, became the object of heated debate and animated discussions.

Controversy also arose from the living and working conditions that Italians encountered abroad. Having been encouraged to leave, once abroad they frequently found themselves in situations that glaringly violated the accords signed with Italian governments. Yet no one – if one excludes the trade unions and religious organisations and only very rarely the consular structures – attempted to improve those conditions. The mining disaster of Marcinelle in 1956 (137 Italian dead) opened the eyes of the entire country to this reality, but in the preceding ten years 520 Italians had died in Belgian mines.

In spite of the improvement in Italy’s economic conditions in the early 1950s, emigration continued to represent a structural voice for the Italian economy. Money sent back by migrants, for example, amounted to 397.5 million US dollars; in 1970 it surpassed the symbolic number of a billion US dollars to reach 1004.6 million US dollars. Considering the effect of remittances on familial finances, from the immediate post-war period onwards they were an important factor in providing a support to income. In 1949, for example, Italian miners in France on average sent 9,476 lire a month back to their families. In the same period the salary of a specialised worker at FIAT was around 30,000 lire; therefore, the sum that a family of a miner working abroad received was equivalent to about a third of the salary of a specialised worker.

In the period of reconstruction emigration once more began to be a customary presence for the working classes of the country who moved primarily to Europe and who, over time, even managed to take advantage of the process of European integration. Beginning with the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the European Common Market in fact envisaged the free movement of workers among its member countries.

In the course of the 1960s, the Italian migratory context was modified. Already at the end of the 1950s the ‘economic miracle’ had contributed to directing the flows not only abroad, but, increasingly, to the industrialised areas of the central-north, in particular to Piedmont, Lombardy and Liguria. In the 1960s the number of people leaving Italy declined, even though
Emigration remained significant: 383,908 citizens emigrated in 1960, 151,854 in 1970. A new geography of mobility was taking over: many returnees did not, in fact, go back to their places of origin, but to the major cities of central Italy (Fofi, 1964).

European countries remained the preferred destination of Italian emigrants throughout the whole period. The country that statistically recorded the most arrivals of Italians was the Federal Republic of Germany. The takeoff of mass Italian emigration to Germany dates to the period from 1959 to 1960 when the annual number of emigrations rose from 28,394 to 100,544.

It is important to underline that Italians shared their migratory experience with a growing number of communities, not only from southern Europe, but from the rest of the world as well. In Germany in 1964 Italians made up 31 per cent of all foreigners, in 1966 30.3 per cent, in 1968 28.3 per cent and in 1973 16.7 per cent. In the 1960s – after the 1955 migration accord with Italy – Germany in fact signed similar agreements with Spain and Greece (1960), Turkey (1961), Morocco (1963), Portugal (1964), Tunisia (1965) and Yugoslavia (1968) (Collinson, 1993). Outside Europe the most significant data relates to the decline in departures for South America. The countries that showed a persistence of Italian emigration were in fact Canada, the United States and Australia; only Venezuela in the early part of the 1960s was anywhere close. Throughout the 1960s Italy even enjoyed a positive migratory balance with Argentina, the symbolic country of Italian migration par excellence; only in the years 1967 and 1969 were departures for Argentina lower than returns from Argentina.

The typology of the outflows from Italy remained particularly tied to the migratory policies of the host countries. Switzerland undertook a redefinition of its immigration laws, which found a direct application in the new accord signed with Italy in 1964. In any event, working conditions remained rather precarious: in 1965 the Mattmark Dam disaster occurred when half a million metric cubes of ice fell on workers building the dam. This resulted in 83 deaths, 57 of which were Italian. The catastrophe is still remembered by the Italian community today. In Switzerland from the mid-1960s onwards the campaign against the so-called ‘forestation’ of the country – initially culminating in 1969 with the Schwarzenbach proposal – or, in other words, the progressive reduction of the country’s foreign population, took place. That proposal, however, was struck down by a 1970 referendum in which a 55.5 per cent majority voted ‘no’ (Niederberger, 2004; Ricciardi, 2013).

Up until 1967 the majority of Italians who arrived in Canada in the post-war period had entered the country through the channel of ‘sponsorship’ which, having been introduced in 1948, was, however, abolished in 1967. The mechanism forecast that one Italian could legally enter Canada if a relative was already a resident and open to guaranteeing and covering the costs of the initial period of settlement. Among the foreign communities present in Canada, Italians were the major beneficiaries of this provision, which up until 1967 allowed many of a low professional level to immigrate. The mechanism of sponsorship had in fact not envisaged any type of professional standard and the new arrivals, in terms of their work-related assimilation, had the possibility of becoming clerks in sectors connected to ethnic businesses or in other fields where specific competences were not required. As we have stated, the practice of sponsoring ended in 1967: for entry by new immigrants the Canadian authorities – instead of sponsorship – established criteria based on professional qualifications (Akbari, 1999). Thus the final phase of emigration to Canada – which ended in the middle of the 1970s – was characterized by the arrival of specialised workers who were already assimilated into the Italian labour market or into that of other countries accepting emigration (such as the United States). In the United States, the abolition in 1965 of national entry quotas for the years following had a bearing on the increase of Italian emigration to the country, which remained in any case at a fairly low level (Maffioletti, 2004).
Over the course of the 1960s, the actions of the Italian government were centred mainly on social and moral assistance to emigrants, amending and supplementing what was ratified in the bilateral agreements signed since the end of the war. For example, Law 1115 of 27 July 1962 gave Italian workers affected by silicosis in Belgium a series of indemnities and Law 302 of 10 March 1968 guaranteed medical assistance to Italian workers in Switzerland, including their families, and to cross-border workers (Zanetti Polzi, 2007).

The 1960s represent a decade of profound transformations in the evolution of Italian communities abroad. In this respect, the pathways of the associations to which Italian emigrants belonged represent a meaningful lens. In fact, new social and cultural organisations aligned themselves with traditional mutual aid groups. Sponsorship, trade unions, Catholic and lay groups, and political parties without a doubt still represented important points of reference, but together with them grew the importance of associations organised along regional or provincial lines which founded their membership on geographical origin. As we shall explain in the next section, this tendency was notably reinforced in the 1970s, as a consequence of the devolution of power to the Regioni. Commercial ties, import-export channels, and initiatives connected to tourism multiplied between the zones of departure and the zones of arrival: it was the emergence of the transformation of the emigrant communities into business communities (Guidotti, 2002; Devoto, 2007).

From the turn of the twentieth century onwards, associations filled in for the state. As we have already mentioned, Italian governments did their best to promote ‘emigration’, but when Italians had started living abroad as ‘immigrants’, they were often ignored by Italian government institutions.

From working class to elite emigration? 1974–2010s

Just like the Great Depression following the stock market crash of 1929, the 1973 oil crisis had a great impact on international migrations, with a restructuring of the global division of labour and states’ regulations on the mobility of migrant workers. The age of assisted migration and bilateral agreements on the expatriation of Italian workers was over. As we have already mentioned, this was a turning point for Italy, whose net migration rate has been quite constantly positive from 1974 to the present day. Initially, this inverted trend was also due to the high proportion of Italian returnees, but from the 1980s inflows of foreign workers became its main cause (Pugliese, 1996). Between 1974 and 2011, emigration of Italian citizens from the country waned, with an arithmetic mean of 58,700 people per year for the whole period and 41,680 for the years 2000–11. Not even quite high unemployment rates, constantly at between 9.1 and 12 per cent from 1982 to 2001, contributed to emigration resuming in numbers comparable with the immediate and more distant past.

Yet, it is exactly during these decades that emigration gained great visibility in the national narrative and momentum in the public discourse. The strategic salience of Italian emigrants for the country was already noted at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1900, Luigi Einaudi, future president of the Italian republic (1948–55), published the short essay Un principe mercante: studio sulla espansione coloniale italiana, celebrating the entrepreneurial skills of Enrico Dell’Acqua and the Italian expatriates in South America. Two Congresses of Italians Abroad were held in Rome in 1908 and 1911 on the initiative of Italian institutions. But substantial steps towards the pursuit of business strategies and the formal inclusion of extraterritorial citizens in the political life of the nation were taken just when mass emigrations ended.

As we mentioned in the previous section, in 1970, with the devolution of power to the Regioni, the regional administrations took over most of the social and economic responsibility
for emigrants. Basically all twenty Italian regions established an Emigration Department and developed specific programmes dedicated to these communities abroad, ranging from social subsidies to vocational training and co-development projects. Regions have since increasingly invested human resources, together with Italian and European taxpayers’ money, to create permanent business opportunities and networks, import-export channels, return programmes for prospective investors and potential employees for local companies, often relying on the collaboration of regionally based private associations.

These efforts have often been intended to replace immigrants who arrive in Italy from all over the world with ‘co-ethnic’ ones, i.e. the descendants of former expatriates. Programmes providing financial incentives for the ‘return’ of ethnic descendants have been run at least since the early 1990s by both conservative and progressive local administrations. The Veneto region’s ‘Project Return’ has invested several million euros since 2001 to help Argentine and Brazilian descendants of Italian emigrants to work for local industries. The programme has not been able so far to achieve any of the planned targets. Both the Liguria and Piedmont regions have traditionally allocated funds to support the return, especially from Argentina, of descendants of emigrants. Trentino Alto-Adige and Friuli Venezia Giulia have implemented a combination of co-development and return programmes in Latin America (Tintori, 2009: 50–60). As recently as 30 December 2010, Umbria approved a measure (Law 238), based on the Regional Law 37 of 1997 and funded by the European Social Fund, that grants tax incentives to ‘return employees/workers’ who are hired or start business activities in Italy. The programme is tellingly called ‘Brain Back Umbria’.7

The Italian state has, on the one hand, bureaucratically conflated expatriates and emigrant stock, the latter being mainly ‘ethnic’ descendants, while on the other, it has created a narrative where those loosely termed ‘Italians abroad’ are transformed into an asset. Both the Ministry of Foreign affairs and the Ministry of Labour have recently developed several action plans, often coordinated with local administrations, to support the creation of new transnational businesses. Italia internazionale – Sei Regioni per cinque Continenti, active since 2000, the Osservatorio sul lavoro e la formazione degli italiani all’estero (formerly known as ITENETS), the agency Italia Lavoro SpA and its project Occupazione e sviluppo della comunità degli italiani all’estero (ITES) are all endeavours to turn the Italian diaspora into an integrated global labour and trade market (Tintori, 2013: 140–1).

This perspective provides a possible explanation of why Italy has consistently favoured a self-perception as a country of emigration, despite official figures showing the opposite. It also accounts for the rationales behind the Italian state’s intense activities of symbolic and political incorporation of the Italian diaspora during these decades: three more Congresses of Italians Abroad were organized in 1975, 1988 and 2000 (CNE, 1975; CNE, 1990–1) and a Congress of Parliamentarians of Italian Origin in 2000; the Museo nazionale dell’emigrazione italiana (National Museum of Italian Emigration) was inaugurated in Rome in 2009; non-parliamentary forms of institutional representation of the Italians abroad, such as the Comitato consultivo degli italiani all’estero (Ccie) in 1967, the Committees of Italians Abroad (Comites) in 1985 and the General Council of Italians Abroad (CGIE) in 1989, paved the way for the Acts of 2000 and 2001 which granted voting rights and special representation to citizens abroad (Colucci, 2002; Tintori, 2012b). All of this contributed to the notion that the Italian diaspora is mainly formed by individuals with high human and social capital, or ‘brains’, instead of ‘workers’. This was perfectly epitomized by the initiative of Mario Monti’s government in 2012, when the Ministries of the Interior and Education cooperated in setting up an online ‘platform’, called Innovitalia, whose goal is to ‘maximise the impact of human capital’ of Italian ‘brains’ abroad and ‘promote research and business opportunities’ in partnership with the motherland.8
To what extent, though, is this true? If we look at the composition of the emigrant population in the whole period, despite all the government rhetoric, those who were unemployed at the moment of leaving between 1974 and 1990 ranged from a minimum of 23.6 per cent to a maximum of 45.8 per cent of the total. In addition, if we focus on the years 2000–13, when both Italian institutions and media reports have particularly stressed the presence of graduates among the new emigrants, the data show that the percentage of those with not even secondary school qualifications (diploma) is constantly over 60 per cent. The percentage of graduates in the emigrant population above 25 years of age has increased from 11.9 per cent in 2002 to 27.6 in 2012. Thus, even though there is a clear growing trend of graduates leaving the country, the sheer numbers tell that ‘brains’ are still by far a minority in the emigrant population. In addition, the increase in graduates among the emigrants mirrors a similar trend in the population at home. Even in comparative terms, then, Italy does not export more graduates than, say, Germany, France or the UK. The problem is instead twofold: Italy is not able to participate in ‘brain circulations’ or ‘exchanges’, in that the country does not attract a number of educated foreigners equal to that of educated Italians leaving. The main cause is that the recruitment system for high-ranking jobs is scarcely transparent and meritocratic (Becker et al., 2004; Beltrame, 2007; Economist, 2011). Lastly, Italian graduates choose the United Kingdom as their first destination, where they find employment mainly in the financial sectors and academia. The UK comes only third, though, after Germany and Switzerland when we consider the whole emigrant population. Without downplaying the importance of the academic and financial sectors in the latter countries, the main demand from Germany and Switzerland’s labour markets is for workers for their manufacturing and industrial sectors. Once again, it seems that the Italian ruling classes are disregarding the actual composition of the emigrant population.

Conclusion

In this review of emigration and the Italian state, we have tried to offer a synthetic representation of the main continuities and changes, features and rationales of Italy’s emigration policies and emigrant population. Determinants and patterns of Italian emigration are tremendously complex and should be addressed at deeply disaggregated levels. Yet we can extend to the whole period what Faini and Venturini (2005) showed in their analysis of the determinants of Italian emigration between 1876 and 1913. Interactions among demographic transitions, income differentials, labour market conditions, better transportation links, perpetuation of migration chains, and transformations in the production system and in society, all played a role according to specific cases and different points in time and contributed to generate outflows from the country. But labour demand in destination countries and the effect of income growth in Italy, which spreads better levels of education and living conditions, and therefore higher expectations about employment and social status especially among young adults, have been more critical in prompting people to migrate.

To that we should add the responsibility of the state or rather its political leadership. There is in fact a recurrent pattern in the Italian governing classes’ attitude towards emigration over time: concentrating the main resources and efforts on the strategic assets that the presence of Italian citizens abroad might secure, while reducing to a minimum any commitments in the social and moral sphere as well as addressing the economic and structural causes behind this continuing history of emigration. As pointed out by Fenoaltea (2011: Ch. 4) in his reinterpretation of Italy’s economic history from the Unification to the Great War, the economic strategies of the Liberal state, based on protectionism and centred on productive sectors that were not labour-intensive, caused the Italian diaspora and stunted development.
Emigration is a fundamental feature of contemporary Italy that observers ought take into account to better understand the social, economic and political developments of the country.

Notes
1 Michele Colucci wrote the section ‘The resumption of mass emigration 1945–73’; Guido Tintori wrote all the other sections.
2 An important exception is Cometti (1958).

References


