



"An Italian/American State of Mind" - A Comment

Tom Verso (November 07, 2007)



Here at i-Italy, Anthony Tamburi has a fascinating article posted: "An Italian/American State of Mind." I hope many will read it. I am posting this comment with a mind towards promoting discussion about his very important ideas.



The idea of promoting and supporting Italian American writers has been discussed for some time on various forums. It is an important idea and a necessary condition for the perpetuation and development of our culture, and I'm happy that i-Italy is promoting it. However, what is not discussed, at all so far as I can determine or very little at best, is the necessary precondition for a robust Italian American literature - i.e. a high level of Italian American humanities literacy.

What few statistics I can find on Italian American education levels suggest that there are relatively few (compared to population as whole and other ethnic groups) college graduates, and far fewer still at the graduate level. Further, those who go on to college and graduate school tend to be in the vocational professionals such a medicine, law, engineering, business, etc. Very few pursue the liberal arts literary professions.

My anecdotal sociology, in the Rochester NY area which has a large Italian American population, suggest that five generations later the immigrant peasant mentality of learning a trade or getting good paying factory job is still the norm. For example, on a break down of standardized test by area school districts I noticed that districts with large numbers of Italian Americans were in the middle to low end of the distribution. I asked an Italian American principal in one of those districts why Italian American students where not performing better. She knew exactly what I was talking about. She said that often when she approached an Italian American parent about a student who was doing C work and was capable of doing much better the responses was something like: "That's alright, as long as he is not failing and stays out of trouble. We don't want to put a lot of pressure on him. He is a happy boy and he loves working on cars. He has a part-time job in a garage and he wants to be a mechanic. That's a good trade and they make good money." I find this scenario is representative of the educational attitude of a great many Italian Americans in my area.

To appreciate the implications of this scenario, consider the response of a typical Jewish parent when their child does C work. Teachers in districts with large numbers of Jewish students say that the pressure to get A averages is relentless. Of course, this parent attitude translates into high numbers of Jewish writers, professors, book buyers, etc.

In sum, it seems to me that Italian American academics should be promoting comprehensive sociological studies about the "Italian American State of Mind" about education generally and literary education in particularly. We need to update the great sociological works like "Street Corner Society" before we can develop hypotheses about how to increase the numbers of our children who go to college and into the humanities professions.

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