

## Per un “Verso” o per l’altro, non è un caso “Piccolo” da scartare\*

Anthony Julian Tamburri (August 31, 2009)



We need Italian language classes in our public schools, as well as courses in Italian/American history and culture. Both are necessary for our culture to thrive into the future.

I have pondered and pondered the speech I was born to, lost now, mother gone, the whole neighborhood bull-dozed, and no one to say it on the TV, that words are dreams.

—Felix Stefanile, “The Americanization of the Immigrant”

In two recent “Op Eds” on i-Italy, two gentlemen seem to have come to loggerheads over a sort of argument of what should come first, the chicken or the egg: namely, Italian/American courses at the



college level or the Advanced Placement Program in Italian. Tom Verso states in his “Fighting the ‘Better Fight’” that “Italophile lamenting about AP Italian continues. But, for Philo-Italian Americana, the ‘Better Fight’ would be over the non-existence of Italian American history and culture in our public schools, colleges and universities.” Arthur Piccolo, in turn, references what he sees as the “bane of the Italian American community our often argumentative non-supportive attitudes among Italian Americans organizationally and individually. [...] I see the self-inflicted naïveté (not to be taken personally Mr. Verso) that is the very worst characterization that defines Italian Americans. Oblivious to strategy.” (“It’s All About Strategy Mr. Verso”).

Well, both are necessary for our culture to thrive into the future. We need the language classes because they open doors for us to better understand the culture of our ancestors’ country of origin, as well as the current geo-political conditions of that same country, not to mention access to a greater general knowledge of Europe. The AP, in turn, allows our students the same advantage as those who study the so-called canonical languages that both the dominant culture, and hence also the College Board, have supported for fifty-plus years (French, German, and Spanish); they get college credit for work done in high school! We also need the Italian/American courses because they allow us, Italian Americans, to understand better our culture; these courses also allow the non Italian Americans to access basic notions and facts of Italian Americana and, we hope, better understand who we are so we no longer hear those still accepted ethnic references that those who make them may find “cute” but what we, instead, find offensive: “Here come the Don!” “Hey, Bada-bing, che see deech!” For I am loath to believe that one could joke around today – Nor should one be able to do so! – with expressions such as “Here come the Kingfisher!” and not get an earful, at the very least, for a racially insensitive comment.

Both, however, have also fallen victim to what we might call the socio-cultural malaise of the Italian American. And this is where both Piccolo and Verso are correct. Verso’s lamenting the lack of initiative on the part of Italian Americans to fight what he sees as the “better” fight underscores the community’s seemingly disregard for the courses and, one might infer, disregard for the culture; for if one does not fight the fight, someone can only assume that one is not interested. Piccolo, rightly so, underscores the Italian/American community’s naïve approach to the struggle in social issues. The community simply does not seem to have the “consapevolezza” (read, awareness and “saper fare”) of how to engage in such a struggle. We seem to overact in some cases, calling a “spoon a spade” while ignoring the more significant issues of infiltrating the system. Or, we seem to ignore the more insidious and yet, on the surface, seemingly insignificant causes that, in the end, are the ones that we need to defend and uphold. We are, for sure, “oblivious to strategy,” as Mr. Piccolo states; and it is also true that even those who do come to the defense of Italian/American causes, many seem to do so only “nominally,” as Mr. Verso states.

This, indeed, is one of our problems. We engage in the socio-political and cultural struggles almost as an afterthought. Or, as we have seen in the past, we lack that self-critical capacity to come to the fore when in fact one of our own sins, so to speak. And I dare not raise the ugly incidents of Howard Beach and Bensonhurst, ignored as they were by the then self-appointed leaders of the Italian/American community. Let’s go back less than two years ago: Where were the clamorous protests over the Clinton ad that emulated the Sopranos during the 2006-08 Democratic campaign? Where were the equally clamorous protests about that occasional silly-minded Italian/American elected official (e.g., Salvatore Laquinto) who used Godfather imagery for his re-election campaigns? Instead, we demand that actors not accept jobs (i.e., not eat), but we do nothing to support those playwrights and screenwriters who can write the more acceptable plays and films many want to see. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the publication of Mario Puzo’s Godfather novel. How many Italian Americans know that this year also marks the 20th anniversary of the film True Love (dir. Nancy Savoca)? How many Italian Americans have even seen the movie? It deals with local, working-class issues, much of which is seen through a gendered lens. Do we not want to revisit our working-class origins, having moved to the suburbs in those glorious houses that, pray tell, resemble those we saw in that HBO series? Or, are we simply afraid to let the female voices out of the kitchen?



Finally, for now, we always seem to resort to a distinction—and not always a constructive one—within our community as opposed to seeking out unity within and therefore distinguishing our community from the greater dominant-cultural thinking power brokers. That said, I was sorry to read the distinction in Verso’s Op Ed between Italophile and Philo-Italian. It harks back to an awkward and uninformed conversation of a few years ago when some tried to distinguish between “activists” and “academics.” It is, first and foremost, an incongruent dichotomy (pardon the risk of tautology). For should not an admirer of things Italian (read, “Italophile”) stand side by side someone who is pro-Italian (read, “Philo-Italian)? More significant, it lays a foundation for separatism from within as opposed to unity vis-à-vis the dominant culture, which lies outside our community. This type of internal discord does not exist within other ethnic (read also, racial) communities. The so-called activists of those communities do not distinguish themselves from the so-called academics. Indeed, they each cross over, so to speak, and join forces when a situation inimical to the survival of their culture rears its ugly head. Some of our Italian Americans, instead, denigrate and dismiss each other—a metaphorical elbowing under the basket—in order to be first and, one can only assume, bask in the glory!

Adjectives such as the “first,” “only,” “largest” when used to place itself ahead of other organizations does very little to advance unity though a great deal to stimulate separatism. In similar fashion, first-person singular pronouns shouted from the rooftops by self-recognized heroes and other acts of conceit add to the dissonance and quarrelsome cacophony within our community. We basically need to remove the vainglory and supplant it with selflessness. Otherwise, we shall all lose in the end: no Italian/American courses, no Advanced Placement Program in Italian, and, in final analysis, no one to promote our Italian/American culture.

\*One way or another, it is not a small thing to cast aside!

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