

Goodbye, Columbus: The Future Usefulness of Italian-American Historical Awareness

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To begin a dialogue, Italian Americans can change the name of Columbus Day to Italian-American Day and also can support the establishment of Indigenous Peoples Day

Michele Mansolino, my maternal grandmother's father, died young from pneumonia. Seven years later, dire straits forced his widow, Amalia, to enroll their not-quite-eight-year-old son, Antonio, in a charity school for fatherless boys. The January 1916 application for his admission has survived. It documents the impressions of the person who conducted and reported on the intake interview about



Amalia, Antonio, and my grandmother, Assunta, then 11 or 12 years old.

The interviewer recorded that Amalia "seems a little better type than most ignorant Italians." Antonio's second-grade teacher at Wilson School, Miss Trollis, noted that "Antonio is very quiet, can hardly be induced to talk loud enough to be understood. He is so small and babyish that [I] cannot believe he is eight....He seems in a stupor and cannot be made to wake up and take an interest." Susie [Assunta] "is a strong healthy girl, a good worker and gets along satisfactorily though she is a little slow." The file also includes contradictory testimony from the District Superintendent for the Society for Organizing Charity, Miss Helen V. White, who supported the application. Noting the society's six years of intervention for Michele Mansolino's survivors, Miss White remembered Amalia's desperation: "Mrs. Mansolino was very devoted to the children and would not hear of placing them in an institution....The children have been bright in school and had good records....[Tony's teacher] considers him perfectly normal. We hope that there may be no trouble about having the child admitted in February."

In February 1933, my paternal grandmother, Jennie, applied to the same charity school for fatherless boys for the admission of her youngest child, Salvatore, later my father. Her husband, 42-year-old John Spaltro, had died eight months earlier of pneumonia.

The interviewer noted that "immediately upon entering this home one is conscious of the fact that these Italian people are decidedly Americanized and considerably above the average....[Jennie] speaks entirely without an accent and gives evidence of both intelligence and refinement." Salvatore's second-grade teacher at Cassidy School, Miss Harper, asserted that "Salvatore is very likeable and well behaved but rather slow and can only make a passing grade with hard work and a little assistance. He also lacks initiative and is rather dreamy and shy."

The gentleman who combed the institution's archives for these files apologized to me for the bigoted tone of some of the comments. Keeping in mind that southern Italians (like the Irish) were seen as a "racially inferior" group, one has to wonder about the suppositions about members of the Mansolino family, as well as my very bright father, as all being "ignorant" and "slow." The apparent contrast between the characterizations of Amalia as "a little better type than most ignorant Italians" and of Jennie as "intelligent and refined" turned on the facts that Jennie had been Americanized to the point that her accent was gone. Being "considerably above the average" seemed mostly to mean being less Italian.

These institutional records undeniably testify to unquestioned contempt for Italians as a "racially inferior" group. I have long believed that this racism, expressed for decades toward Italian and Irish people, among other immigrants to the United States, expressed tremendous anxiety generated by the question "what is an 'American'?" American identity gradually became unmoored from the requirement to possess northern European ancestry, but only gradually, and, in the interim, the pressure created by the immigration of many distinctive nationalities created an intense emphasis on assimilation, on the surrender of a different ethnic identity and the acquisition of an assumed homogenous identity as an unhyphenated American.

The American-born children of Italian immigrants felt this emphasis very keenly—to an extent rarely appreciated by their parents or their own children and grandchildren. They often buried their conflict about being both Italian and American by exhibiting both a fierce patriotism and a defensive ethnic pride that simultaneously revealed and masked their insecurity.

Some in later generations uncovered the truth that their parents wanted to forget, about the racism they had endured and then denied. Sometimes they unexpectedly blurted out the truth. My own mother became distraught when reading these institutional records about her late husband and



her uncle. My aunt by marriage confessed that she had felt pride about her Italian ancestry only after visiting Italy in middle age; before then, "I had no idea that there was anything to feel proud about."

It is time for these secrets and lies, this amnesia and denial, to give way to a historically informed Italian-American identity. This demands a recognition that past racism did not necessarily target skin color but included fantastic negativity about different national origins and ethnic identities. In a phrase, Italian Americans must remember that they "became white" in the United States only after a tortured process of acceptance based on shame.

An historically informed Italian-American identity honors the dead because it insists on remembrance and respect for what they actually experienced, even if they themselves preferred to forget or deny it.

An historically informed Italian-American identity honors the living because it recognizes the similar issues faced by today's racial and ethnic minorities. This is especially important in a country in which "white people," Italians and Irish among them, will in a few decades become just another minority. Honesty about the Italian-American experience could create the necessary conditions for leadership that could reach out to today's racial and ethnic minorities to create authentic dialogue and mutual understanding.

If, by mid-century, all American ethnic and racial minorities simply jostle one another in the struggle for opportunities and privileges, the failed politics of our present will worsen the future. Such balkanization is not inevitable, if historically informed Italian Americans resolve to base dialogue with today's racial and ethnic minorities on respect for cultural differences and awareness of past and present mistreatment.

To begin this dialogue, Italian Americans can change the name of Columbus Day to Italian-American Day and also can support the establishment of Indigenous Peoples Day. This humane and sensitive gesture would recognize the hideous impact that Columbus's deeds as a colonizer had on the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere. While it would preserve the celebration of Italian-American heritage, it would also respect the heritage of other groups and display the warmth of heart, generosity, and humanity long associated with Italians of either hemisphere.

Opening the Pandora's box of Italian-American history, whether through genealogy or through historical study, could engender the hope that we can finally relinquish 19th century and 20th century racism in a better and more humane 21st century. Why shouldn't Italian Americans discover this brave new world?

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