

Between Black and White. The First Columbus Day of the Obama Era

Ottorino Cappelli (October 04, 2009)



Musings on the symbolic coincidence of the first "Italian month" under an African American President—and what we could make of it

Since Barack Obama was elected to office in November last year, many things have happened in America "for the first time under an African-American president." On January 15, the 80th anniversary of Martin Luther King's birth was celebrated just days before the first negro president was sworn in. A few months later, Americans celebrated Independence Day for the first time under a non-white president. The symbolism of these and other events did not escape notice.

Nor should the fact that October 2009 is the first "Italian Heritage and Culture Month" of the Obama era. And, of course, on October 12 we shall celebrate the first Columbus Day of this era of racial and ethnic change in America. To my mind, there is some food for thought here. For those at least who believe that in order to reconstruct Italian/American identity we need to engage in a new, progressive discourse on race and ethnicity in this country and, by extension, in Italy and around the



world.

At first, this may sound as wishful thinking. Both the racial and the progressive components of the Obama phenomenon did not seem to resonate well with many Italian Americans. To the extent that there is an Italian/American vote (and many doubt that such an entity exists) it did not go overwhelmingly for Obama in 2008. To take just one well-known example, New York City's most Italian borough – Staten Island – was also the sole of five boroughs in the city to give the majority to McCain. We at i-Italy are certainly not going to deny this. Our contributors (we call them 'Bloggers') have been discussing at length the issue of the Italian/American attitude towards the first African American candidate to the presidency (see for instance Maria Laurino's "[Obama Mamma](#) [2]" and Jerry Krase's "[Obama ends in a Vowel](#) [3]" and "[Obamania or Obamaphobia: Italians in a Post-Bush America](#) [4].") Coming to the more general issue of interracial relations, we have never faltered before the task of exposing anti-blacks sentiments and even violence when these emerged among members of the Italian/American community (see for instance Joe Skee's "[The Vergognosi of Staten Island](#) [5].") And we have been writing extensively on racism, ethnic intolerance and xenophobia in Italy as well (see our special online issue entitled "[Criss-crossing Migrations](#) [6].")

But there is one theme that should be brought up with more clarity in this first October of the Obama era, and it is that of the Italians' "blackness" (or negritudine). Many Italians both in this country and in Italy, were not born white; they became white, but they were born, i.e. perceived, as black—or quasi-black: an ethnic and sociological hybrid.

After Italy achieved unity as a nation (by way of the Northern kingdom, based in Turin, conquering militarily the Southern Kingdom of Naples, or "of the two Sicilies,") ministerial envoys sent to inspect the new land found that its inhabitants were "worse than Africans": "[Altro che Italia! Questa è Africa](#) [7]: i beduini a riscontro di questi caffoni, sono fior di virtù civile" (Italy? This is Africa! Compared to these caffoni, the bedouins are an example of civic virtue,) wrote one of them, Farini, in a report to then Prime Minister Cavour. And still hundred years thereafter, Southern Italian peasants migrating to Northern industrial areas such as Turin and Milan, found it difficult to rent an apartment, as signs reading "We do not rent to Southerners" hung outside many buildings.

Little wonder thus, that a similar, if even bitter fate awaited them in the U.S. in the very same decades. We all know that in Louisiana, at the end of the 19th century, several Italian immigrants were "lynched like niggers"—and we shall only urge the reader to watch Gianfranco Norelli's wonderful documentary [Pane Amaro](#) [8] to learn more (it is now available in English as "Bitter Bread," thanks to a grant from NIAF). Nor did the likening of Italians and blacks belong only to the most racist areas of the American South. In the "Race" column of their entry papers at Ellis Island, many Italian immigrants were listed as "Southern Italians"—an indication that these people were viewed "as a different race entirely," writes Stephen Puleo in [The Boston Italians](#) [9]. And the possibility that (especially Southern) Italians may have been considered "part Africans" by many in the US has been discussed by several historians and social scientists (google-books offers a quick way to read excerpts from Thomas A. Guglielmo's [White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago](#) [10], and Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno's [Are Italians white?: How race is made in America](#) [11].)

This is not to say that Italians or Southern Italians ever endured anything like the hardship of slavery and segregation, either in America or in Italy. Indeed, as far as the U.S. is concerned, Italians did become white in less than a century after their arrival. So much so that a not-so-black African American in the 1950s could escape segregation in Virginia by... pretending to be a not-so-white Italian! This story is told in a fabulous 1995 book by Gregory Howard Williams I came across only recently (my fault): [Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black](#) [12]. Here is how Williams, a Law professor and Civil Rights advocate who has been The City College of New York's eleventh president, recounts his experience as a boy, when he had his first doubts about his father's (and his own) ethnic-racial background:

"I didn't understand Dad. I knew I wasn't colored, and neither was he. My skin was white. All of us are white, I said to myself. But for the first time, I had to admit that Dad didn't exactly look white. His deeply tanned skin puzzled me as I sat there trying to classify my own father. Goose bumps covered my arms as I realized that whatever he was, I was. I took a deep breath. I couldn't make any



mistakes. I looked closer. His heavy lips and dark brown eyes didn't make him colored, I concluded. His black, wavy hair was different from Negroes' hair, but it was different from most white folks' hair, too. He was darker than most whites, but Mom said he was Italian. That was why my baby brother had such dark skin and curly hair. Mom told us to be proud of our Italian heritage! That's it, I decided. He was Italian. I leaned back against the seat, satisfied."

And here is Williams' reaction when he finally learned the truth:

"I never heard anything crazier in my life! How could Dad tell us such a mean lie? I glanced across the aisle where he sat grim-faced and erect, staring straight ahead. I saw my father as I never had seen him before. The veil dropped from his face and features. Before my eyes he was transformed from a swarthy Italian to his true self—a high-yellow mulatto. My father was a Nigro! We were colored! After ten years in Virginia on the white side of the color line, I knew what that meant."

Italians thus, are no blacks. And Italian Americans are not African Americans. But this truism notwithstanding, the historical experience of these two minorities (in a global world we're all minorities) does have some common roots, a fil-rouge that can bind them together in bonds of cultural solidarity and political understanding. And rediscovering those roots could contribute to cure the racist disease both in Italy and in America. As Patrick Gallo once wrote ([see his *Ethnic Alienation. The Italian Americans*](#) [13]) "What is needed is an alliance of blacks and whites, white-collar and blue-collar workers, based on mutual need and interdependence and hence an alliance of political participation." The last thing that is needed, I would add, is one of those glorious celebrations of ethnic pride and achievement that pit one group against the other—each nourishing the dream of being accepted into the American mainstream and thus, metaphorically, of "becoming white."

To go back to our original question: how can we use the symbolic coincidence of "the first Italian month under an African American president" to foster a white-(Italian)-black cultural alliance? I am not going to propose a strategic plan for action here—i-Italy has more adroit contributors than me at this, including Bob Viscusi and Anthony Tamburri, to name just two.

However, as a "part-African" who was born in Southern Italy in a post-war, anti-fascist era, I have noticed one event that is going to take place during this Italian/American month and that suggests one of many ways we could proceed along this path. On October 6, the Italian Consulate General in Philadelphia and the African American Museum of that same city are co-organizing the presentation of award-winning film documentary "[Inside Buffalo](#) [14]" by Fred Kuwornu, an Italian filmmaker of African heritage (his father is from Ghana) who was born and raised in Italy. The film tells the story of the 92nd Buffalo Division, the all-African-American segregated combat unit that fought with outstanding heroism in Italy during the Second World War.

The "Buffalo Soldiers" fought two wars at the same time, one to liberate Italy from Fascism and Nazism, the other against racial discrimination in their own country and army. Upon returning to the US, the survivors of the Buffalo Division found that their contributions had gone unnoticed at home and some of them started a long process to obtain recognition of their unit's heroism. Director Kuwornu reconstructs this important piece of African American history and of Civil Rights history, and fills it with an underlining political message that unites Africans, Americans, and Italians beyond all possible racial and ethnic barriers. A courtesy appearance by president Barack Obama is also featured in the film.

To be sure, "Inside Buffalo" has already been screened under the auspices of the [Italian Cultural Institute in Washington](#) [15] and elsewhere in the US. But by choosing to co-sponsor its presentation at the African American Museum in October, the Italian Consul General of Philadelphia Mr Luigi Scotto has generated a powerful symbolism, suggesting an original, progressive, non-hagiographic way to celebrate the first "Italian month" in Obama era's America.

May this initiative be one of many in the future. After all we are going to have three, and potentially seven more Columbus Days in the Obama era...



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