

Italian Americans Between Guidos and Columbus. An Interview with Nancy Carnevale

Ottorino Cappelli (January 20, 2010)



There is nothing new in certain segments of the community trying to impose their views of what it means to be Italian American on others. This controversy reminds me of recent tensions around the celebration of Columbus Day. On the one hand, identifying with the discoverer of their adopted land was an ideal strategy to gain full inclusion into mainstream America. But on the other hand, in today's era of multiculturalism with a rhetoric that celebrates cultural diversity, the "discovery" of America by Columbus is equated with the beginnings of the demise of native peoples and their cultures. And there are already many Italian Americans who do not celebrate Columbus Day because of what Columbus has come to represent. It seems to me that this desire to squelch any consideration of the so-called "Guido culture" is a similar attempt by some to impose a uniform identity on a diverse group.

I would like first to ask your opinion, as an Italian American and an academic, about this discussion born out of the MTV show "Jersey Shore"—the existence of a "Guido youth culture" and the legitimacy of intellectual investigation of this phenomenon.

As an Italian American, I can attest that the "Guido culture"—a Northeastern, urban, working-class/lower middle class youth style — does exist although the degree to which it coincides with the representations of that culture in the media is a separate question. As an academic, I am always in favor of open discussion and examination of the issues, whatever they may be. To avoid doing so in this case is to perpetuate the myth that there is a right way and a wrong way to be Italian American when of course there are many ways; we are a diverse group in terms of generation, lifestyle, politics, etc. I do understand why some Italian Americans feel defamed by certain characterizations of Italians in the media. The stereotype of Italian Americans as unsophisticated and lacking in intelligence goes way back. In the early years of Italian migration, children who fell asleep in school



because they had to stay up late nights helping their mothers finish garments or make artificial flowers so that their families could survive were labeled intellectually inferior. American schools steered them into “steamer classes” for slow learners. Other factors went into this characterization of Italian Americans as unintelligent, but that label stuck and it has been damaging. But to try and suppress exploration of a segment within your ethnic group because it doesn’t conform to your self-image and the public face you want your ethnic group to present, I can’t condone that.

This is not the first time that the "prominenti" try to shape the public image of the Italian-American community in ways that do not entirely reflect the views of people of different classes, generations, etc. Would you give us some examples?

These conflicting understandings of ethnic identity between different segments of the Italian American community that we are seeing now remind me of recent tensions around the celebration of Columbus Day. Columbus Day became a federal holiday in 1934, but some Italian Americans had long been advocating for that and with good reason. For years, Italian Americans were a marginalized group. Identifying with the discoverer of their adopted land was an ideal strategy to gain full inclusion into mainstream America. But in today’s era of multiculturalism with a rhetoric that celebrates cultural diversity, the “discovery” of America by Columbus is equated with the beginnings of the demise of native peoples and their cultures. Although Columbus was not unique in his attitudes or actions, he has come to embody the destruction left in the wake of Western expansion. It is hard to see how Italian American children growing up today who are taught this more critical historical view will be able to express their ethnicity through Columbus day festivities. There are already many Italian Americans who do not celebrate Columbus Day because of what Columbus has come to represent. I understand why many in the Italian American community have trouble hearing alternative opinions on Columbus Day. Traditions are important to Italian Americans and many remember a time when they felt excluded. Columbus day has been an important public expression of ethnic pride for many years. But like all ethnic traditions, it is an invented one; another one can take its place, one that would not impose a particular vision of italianità on the community. It seems to me that this desire to squelch any consideration of the so-called “Guido culture” is a similar attempt by some to impose a uniform identity on a diverse group .

In your current book "A New Language, A New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945" you dug into this subject by focusing specifically on the language maintenance efforts...

In New York City beginning in the 1920s, leading members of the Italian American community including educators like Leonard Covello, began advocating to have Italian included as an offering in the junior highs and high schools. Covello and others felt that teaching Italian to the children of Italian immigrants would help raise their self-esteem, which suffered in this era of blatant prejudice against Italian Americans. Essentially, their aim was to create a pan-Italian American identity which was in reality a fiction since few of these children would have heard standard Italian spoken in their homes and their parents most likely identified with their regions of origin or their paese, not with the Italian nation itself. Rather than help Italian American kids take pride in their local, peasant origins, including their dialects, Italian American leaders sought to impose their own views of what it meant to be Italian, ie, to speak standard Italian rather than dialect, to revere Italian high culture, etc. While not all of the prominenti disparaged local identities (Covello was respectful of them), many other leading figures did. So there is nothing new in certain segments of the community trying to impose their views of what it means to be Italian American on others, nor is this phenomenon limited to Italian Americans.

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