

Michael Parenti and Camille Paglia: The Ivy League vs. Southern-Italian American Culture

Tom Verso (September 03, 2011)



Michael Parenti and Camille Paglia are Yale PhDs respectively in the fields of political science and literature. They are also renowned writers and speakers. Yet, neither has obtained the crown jewel of academia - 'Ivy League Professor' - or professorships at any other major American university. Why is



that – I wondered? Is it just unique personality traits that alienate them from academia’s crème de la crème? Or, are they representative of a general relationship between ‘Ivy’ and southern-Italian American scholars and culture? Without getting all whiny about bias and prejudices for which both, I’m sure, would reject – self confident and independent ego rocks that they are; social scientifically one may consider objectively the manifestations of southern-Italian American culture in Parenti and Paglia’s scholarly and personal style that alienates them and helps us understand how southern-Italian American culture is differentiated within the “melting pot”.

Preface

It is easy to think of Parenti and Paglia as ‘eccentric’ scholars who, while achieving success outside of academia, have been largely shunned by academicians because of personality traits that alienate them from academia.

Michael Parenti said: “I was kicked out of some of the best universities in America. I was considered a wild man by colleagues.” And, “Wild” or some such synonym is routinely used to describe Paglia. Joseph E. Taylor III, University of Washington Department of History wrote: “Paglia seems to be the academic equivalent of a bomb thrower.” More generally, legendary Yale scholar Howard Blum said: “Camille will never be politically correct they [academicians] will blackball her everywhere.”

Throughout history there have been intelligent individuals who ‘just did not fit-in’. Diogenes, for example, relentlessly mocked the academicians in Plato’s Academy. When they posited a definition of ‘Man’ as a “featherless bipod”, he threw a “plucked chicken” over the Academy’s wall. When they talked about “searching for Truth”, he walked around with a lantern held high telling people he was “searching for Truth”.

Paglia’s commentary on Oxford University Rhodes Scholar Naomi Wolf and Parenti’s on M.I.T. Professor Emeritus Noam Chomski are just two examples that bring Diogenes to mind.

Parenti and Paglia could easily be placed in that historic class of eccentric intellectuals that ‘just did not fit in’. For some time, I was quite content to go along with this crowd mentality of dismissing them as eccentric scholars who ‘just did not fit in’ – until I noticed something very unique in their presentations...they made me laugh!

Loving and Hating Humanities and Social Sciences

From high school through graduate school I **loved** the humanities and social sciences. From high school through graduate school I **hated** the humanities and social science courses. I found teachers/professors incredibly dull and boring. I would sit in classes, ostensibly devoted to subjects I loved, doodling, looking at the clock, praying to St. Anthony to liberate me from the monotony, and remembering why Hesse’s “Magister Ludi –The Glass Bead Game” was my favorite novel.

It was not just my teachers. Professors from the world’s greatest universities are regularly on C-Span programs like “Book TV”, “Booknotes”, “American History TV”, etc. and they are equally boring. Indeed, many of my teachers were former, and proud to have been, students of the C-Span literati. Obviously, my teachers were successful students: credentialed, working and boring.

Quite the opposite, from time to time, I would see Parenti or Paglia on TV or hear them on the radio and invariably they caused me to bust out laughing – not a smile or ‘hee-hee’ – I’m talk’n full blown ‘belly laughs’.

Significantly, it was not as though they were trying to be comics. They were not less serious than the C-Span gang – indeed, they were much more serious. It was not their intention, they did not go out of their way, to make people laugh – humor flows naturally from their personalities (their culture?). On the contrary, they were high-minded scholars with a passion for their subject matter and the social injustices associated with their subjects. And yet, periodically through out their presentations they would make me laugh.



More generally, I never became bored with their presentations even though I was not particularly interested in their scholarly specialties and interests. There is, for example, no subject I am further from than Paglia's history, culture and politics of sex (especially gay and bi); also, what I respectfully judge to be Parenti's oversimplified philosophy of history (rich folk exploiting poor folk).

Nevertheless, I found myself intrigued and totally engrossed with their presentations: their 'tip of the tongue' mastery of an enormous body of facts, the force and validity of their logic, the ethical and moral dimensions of the analysis, and the (Oh My!) incredible ("Mad-man", "Bomb-throwing") screaming passion pouring forth - passion born of love for scholarship, and ethical commitments implied by scholarly studies.

I was shocked with Parenti's hand waving, body shaking, yelling speech about the gross class-character misrepresentations of Julius Caesar's assassination by historians from ancient times down to the present day Chairs of Wisdom; the same, listening to Paglia on Madonna. Parenti and Paglia **are both "cut from the same cloth."**

Unmitigated Passion and meticulous Scholarship - that's what defines these **two great southern-Italian American thinkers**.

They put humanity back into the humanities.

They put society back into social science.

They reminded me why I was attracted to the humanities and social sciences.

Accordingly, the more I read and listened to Paglia and Parenti, the more I wondered why they were persona non grata in the American university system?

University Teaching Qualifications

Universities, like all social institutions, select their membership, not solely on objective quantitative criteria (degrees, publications, references, grants, etc.). For any social institution to function effectively (to thrive and survive) all the members must function as a unit - a team, so to speak. All the members must be committed and contribute to the material and ideological mission, the goals and objectives of the institution; all must play the roles pre-defined 'by' and 'for' the institution - just as every player on a team has a pre-defined role.

If one is not prepared to act out the role assigned to them, then they cannot be part of the institution (cannot be on the team). Indeed, in the application process, the applicant is obliged to convince the institution's representative that s/he is best suited for the pre-defined role and will commit unequivocally to that role - that's how you get a job in any institution!

Thus, no matter how qualified an individual may be for a particular 'job' within an institution (education, finance, manufacturing, merchandising, on-line magazine...) s/he will not get the job, if there is reason to believe that the person will not contribute to the institution's mission or hinder the mission. Indeed, persons of lesser qualifications will get jobs by virtue of the fact that they are judged to be a "better fit" or "team players".

Accordingly, it would be easy to pass Paglia and Parenti off as PhDs who couldn't get a job in a renowned university because of their unique eccentric personality traits; unable to 'fit in' with the faculty 'team' and not able or willing to work with the 'team' to achieve the mission of the university.

But, I wondered if there was something more to their alienation than unique (don't fit in) personality traits; because, in fact their personality traits were not unique.

Paglia and Parenti are "born, breed and raised", 100% by nature and nurture ("down right brag'n), southern-Italian Americans. They embody the history and culture of Italians south of Rome and west of Ellis Island.



The Social Scientific Question:

Is the alienation of these **two brilliant southern-Italian American scholars** from academia’s “hallowed halls” just the result of unique **random** personality traits? Is their alienation just that – THEIR alienation? Or, are they representative of southern-Italian American culture – is their alienation in fact individual manifestations of a general cultural gap between southern-Italian Americans and elite academia?

How may these questions be approached social scientifically?

Comparative Social Science Method

In the natural sciences the Experimental Method is the principle means of research. In the social sciences, in as much as experimentation is not possible, the Comparative Method has proved to be an effective research tool. Essentially, by **comparing characteristics of similar social entities** (states, religions, nationalities...), researchers come to a better understanding of each entity. For example:

In 1975 UNESCO embarked on a study of third world infant mortality. In Chili they found that infant mortality rates for children under the age of 1 year was 61 per 1,000. This fact in itself is interesting, but does not contribute to understanding the variables that affect infant mortality in Chili or the third world's generally.

However, when Chili’s 61 per 1,000 infant mortality rate was compared with Cuba’s 27 per 1,000, UNESCO researchers were able to locate specific differences in the health care and political systems of the two countries affecting infant mortality, and generalize to other third world countries.

Similarly, one may use the comparative method to study cultural groups. For example, by comparing sub-cultural groups of the general American ‘melting pot’ culture, such as southern-Italian Americans with African Americans, we may expect to gain knowledge of the respective relations each has with the American political, economic and cultural institutions.

For example, by comparing the number of African American Ivy League professorships with southern-Italian American, we should get a better understanding of each group’s Ivy League institutional relations.

Southern-Italian Americans vs. African Americans in the Ivy League

Comparative Demographic Statistics

Consider the table below:

“Graduate or Professional Degrees”

Group

Population 25

years and older

Graduate

or professional degree
African American

22,166,023



1,307,795

Italian American

11,138,614

1,347,772

Source: Census Department - American Community Survey 2006-08

The table clearly shows there is no statistically significant difference between the numbers of African Americans and Italian Americans holding graduate or professional degrees.

Now consider further the next table showing the number of African American faculty positions for the year 2005 at each Ivy League university.

"African American" Ivy League Faculty - 2005

Ivy League University	Total faculty	# African American Faculty	% African American Faculty
Brown University	628	25	4.0
Columbia University	3,313	213	6.4
Cornell University	1,511	51	3.4
Dartmouth College	512	21	



	4.1
Harvard University	
	2,959
	93
Princeton University	3.1
	830
	25
University of Pennsylvania	3.0
	2,475
	78
Yale University	3.2
	2,603
	82
	3.2
	Total
14,831	
588	
4.0%	

Source:

“Black Faculty at the Nation's Highest-Ranked Colleges and Universities”

The Journal of Black Education 2005

In short, as of 2005 Ivy League universities employed 588 Black faculty members; 4% of the total Ivy League faculty (note: Columbia at over 6%).

Italian American Ivy League Faculty

Big Problem!

Whereas African Americans meticulously document comprehensive education statistics on the number of their scholars obtaining Ivy League positions, I am unable to locate any such body of statistics about southern-Italian Americans.

Using Google search (the research tool for social scientist without grants, graduate assistants or



university library privileges), I could not locate any Italian American organization or social scientific research papers that documents Ivy League Italian American faculty numbers.

The sole reference I found came from a quote of the esteemed Dr. Kenneth Ciogoli in a 1999 article "Our Self-Selecting Elite" by the renowned writer and political commentary Patrick J. Buchanan:

"Kenneth Ciogoli, president of the National Italian American Foundation wrote Italian Americans are less than 1 percent of the Ivy League faculties."

Conclusions

1. There is no significant difference between the number of African Americans and Italian Americans holding "graduate/professional degrees".

Therefore,

if : the statistic of less than 1% Italian American Ivy League faculty is accurate,

then: African American Ivy League faculty, at 4%, is 300 times greater than Italian Americans - i.e.

$\{(4-1)/1\} * 100 = 300\%$

Again:

0 % difference - number of graduate/professional degrees holders

300% difference - Ivy League faculty positions

2. African Americans systematically collect a large body of diverse statistics describing their relation to the Ivy League including year over year changes in the number of African Americans on Ivy faculties.

This concerted effort at collecting statistics is indicative of the value that they place on having a presence in the Ivy League. The statistics are measures of how successful they are in achieving their goal of a significant presence in Ivy faculty.

3. if: there is not a similar systematic collection of Ivy faculty statistics by southern-Italian Americans,

then: the absence of such a statistics collection MAY be indicative of southern-Italian American indifference to the Ivy League faculty positions.

This is to say, as a culture, southern-Italian Americans do NOT value the Ivy League, do NOT aspire to the Ivy League and therefore, have no reason to keep faculty number statistics.

In short, the prima facia evidence indicates:

The Ivy League does not reject southern-Italian Americans.

Southern-Italian Americans reject the Ivy League!

4. Camille Paglia and Michael Parenti

Coming 'full circle' to the original question posited above:

Is the alienation of Parenti and Paglia from elite universities such as the Ivy League the result of their unique alienating scholarly and personality traits (i.e. not team players); or are their scholarly and personality traits the manifestations of the southern-Italian American cultural indifference towards and rejection of the Ivy League?

if: it is the case, as the above (#1-3) suggests, that southern-Italian Americans:

reject the Ivy League, do NOT value the Ivy League and do NOT aspire to the Ivy League

then: cultural indifference cannot be ruled out as an explanation of why Paglia and Parenti never became Ivy professors.

As the products of southern-Italian American cultural nature and nurturing, Parenti and Paglia developed a value system anathema to Ivy League university goals, objectives and missions.

In short, they just did not care, or have aspirations, to teach in the Ivy League. Their personalities



having nothing to do with their absence from the Ivy League; rather, their cultural values rendered them indifferent to or in conflict with the Ivy League.

Finally

If the **study of southern-Italian American culture** is to be **social scientific and empirical**, then the study must “begin with observations”. In this case, we began with the observation of Parenti and Paglia’s academic standing as a start to gaining knowledge of the southern-Italian American culture as a whole.

Of course nothing has been proven. But, the comparative method is pointing to what seems to be a fruitful line of hypothesis formation and further research.

Source URL: <http://test.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/op-eds/article/michael-parenti-and-camille-paglia-ivy-league-vs-southern-italian>

Links

[1] <http://test.iitaly.org/files/17998paglia-parenti-ivy1314634416png>