



Towards an American Terroni “Education Manifesto” - i-Italy’s role (if any)

Tom Verso (March 11, 2012)



So Pretty / So Witty / Not Phony / But Soooo Not Terroni Spare me Manzoni - Yo / Don't yah know / American Terroni want / a South of Rome show



A few years ago, I enrolled in a vocational culinary arts cooking course at the local community college. Ignoring me, I judge the average age of the twenty-two students in the class to be about twenty (i.e. a distribution of late teens and early twenties, with me an ‘outlier’) I immediately noticed that fifteen names on the class list were Italian. This did not surprise me. There are approximately two-hundred thousand Americans of Italian descent in the greater Rochester, NY area. As with Italian Americans nationally, they are mostly in ‘blue-collar’ working-class families whose children, following that socio-economic tradition, seek vocational education in the community college, trade schools and various blue-collar job training programs (I/A national census data: 70% less than bachelors degree).

As I came to know the Italian American students, I found that these fifth generation (great great grandchildren of Ellis Island generation) Italian American students had an intense sense of being Italian (indeed proud of it). However, they did not seem to know what it meant to be Italian. Like their parents they were raised in heterogeneous suburbs (third generation, grandchildren of immigrants born in the 1940’s and early 50’s, was the last urban “Little Italy” generation). While my classmates knew they were Italian, in the absence of knowledge about what it meant to be Italian, at best all they could do was mimicked media images of Italian Americans – Ergo Guido.

Wondering about their education and what contribution it made, if any, to knowledge about Italian history and culture, I did some document research into census data and school curriculums (high school through graduate studies) – all of this with a mind towards understanding southern-Italian American youth’s sense of Italianita. Much of this “back of an envelope” type of research has been reported and discussed over the years on this blog – see a few such articles in the 'related articles' links on this page. But, the short report is as follows.

Dearth of Italian History/Cultural Curriculum

New York State Secondary Curriculums

Social Studies-Global Studies

One is hard pressed to find anything about Italy other than the three traditional touchstones (Rome, Renaissance and Mussolini). There is virtually nothing about Italians in America except a mention in the general immigration unit.

Needless to say, other European countries are covered in depth (England, France, Germany, Russia, etc.). Similarly, Asian and African countries figure prominently in the curriculum.

English Course Readings

Approximately 150 listed books are recommended for reading in state English courses. Literally the whole recommended reading list for New York secondary English literature students is **devoid of Italianita**.

For literature in grades 9-12, there is only one book by an author with an Italian name; Lawrence Ferlinghetti (pardon my cynicism- but he never knew his Italian father, his mother was of Sephardic French /Portuguese heritage; he was raised in France till he was five years old; French was his first language and he earned a doctoral degree at the Sorbonne in Paris – hardly your typical Italian American).

Community College in Monroe County New York

The historical/cultural education available to 200,000 Italian Americans at Monroe Community College is **nonexistent**. The following is taken from the college’s on line catalogue course descriptions.

History

- 3 African American
- Jewish/Holocaust
- Asian
- 2 Russian



- China & Japan
- East Asia
- Women’s

Literature

- Holocaust (1 dedicated also significant part of a survey)
- 2 British
- Black
- Minorities (Native American, Latino, Asia, African American)
- Shakespeare
- Drama (no Italian dramatist listed)
- Poetry: (no Italian poets listed)

There are no Italian or Italian American history or literature courses offered at a community college in a county with 200,000 Americans of Italian descent (20% of the population).

In sum, there can be no culture, if there is no education about the culture. There can be no Italian American culture, if there is no education about the Italian American culture. One thing is for sure: Italian American cultural education is not happening in public schools and colleges. Similarly universities, which this blog has documented in detail many times, that define “Italian Studies” as de facto Renaissance Studies which has nothing what-so-ever to do with the history and culture of near 17 million Americans of southern-Italian descent (again, see evidence in 'related articles' links on this page).

Thoughts about an American Terroni Education Manifesto

It seems to me that Italian American literati, community leaders and politicians have two education issues to address:

1. How do we explain the relatively low education attainment level of the Italian American people generally (i.e. 70% less than Bachelors degree), and what can be done to increase the level of education attainment.
2. Are we content to let the public schools, colleges and universities send **southern** - Italian American culture into oblivion.

In short, what this blog and a suggested education manifesto are about - “a picture is worth a thousand words”:





The promotion of American Terroni Patria Meridionale (Southern-Italian American Homeland) education should not be construed as a chauvinistic regional nationalism as in Italy's South (e.g. Alleanza Siciliana) vs. Italy's North (e.g. Lega Nord). I know virtually nothing about Italy today except; as the Depression era pundit Will Rogers would say: "All I know is what I read in the newspapers."

I have no special interest in Italy today's North vs. South issues. However, I have a very special passionate interest in my history, which is the history of virtually all Americans of Italian descent. And that history is the history of Italy south of Rome.

I don't think historic southern Italian culture is better than northern - but I know it's different. That is a FACT! An unmitigated, unequivocal, indubitable FACT of History! And, it is also a FACT that virtually all Italian Americans (i.e. vast majority) are descended from immigrants who came from the South of Rome.

What I am talking about, what Pino Aprile is talking about in his book Terroni, what the Magna Grece blog and other Meridionale blogs link to it are talking about is OUR History and OUR Historical Culture.

OUR being understood as Americans of southern-Italian descent - i.e. American Terroni! And, History understood as both post and pre-Ellis Island history of southern-Italian Americans. Pre-Ellis Island history understood as the history of Italy south of Rome - i.e. our Patria Meridionale. It is that history - our history that has been lost and with it our culture.

Pino Aprile, in the first four pages of his mind boggling book "Terroni", begins twenty-three paragraphs with the phrase "I did not know" or words to that affect. This is a well-educated professional southern Italian who became overwhelmed by how little he knew about his Patria Meridionale. Growing up south of Rome, there was no oral traditions or school textbooks to inform him about the incredible history of the post-Risorgimento period.

Like Aprile, my classmates at Monroe Community College have come of age in the **complete absence of any information about their history and culture** except what they can glean from mass media (mis-)representations.

Tragically, American Terroni **history cannot be found** or systematically **made available to** American Terroni **children and young people** anywhere in the whole American education system from primary school to graduate school.

I'm outraged that Polentoni "Italian Studies" professors, following the dehumanizing nineteenth century Piedmontese tradition, define "Italy" as "north of the Garigliano". "Italian" in the phrase "Italian Studies" does not denote the whole of Italy - rather approximately two and a half centuries of Arno River Valley history.

I'm disappointed in "Italian-American Studies" professors who **can't see**, let alone **research and teach**, the magnificent and exciting history of southern-Italian Americans before Ellis Island.

I'm exasperated with the **neglect and indifference** Italian American literati and professional classes have shown towards the education of the working class southern-Italian American **children and youth**.

I'm saddened that i-Italy, one of the most dynamic and robust publications on the WEB, defines itself as the English language voice of Italy's bourgeoisie instead of the Italian American working class.

Sadly, publications like i-Italy (the voice of Italy) and H-ITAM (the voice of Chicago) do not see, at least part of, their mission to systematically and aggressively promote the teaching and research of southern-Italian American history and culture (pre and post Ellis Island!).

The much loved darling professor of Italian American Studies, receiver of voluminous accolades and holder of the coveted title Professor Emeritus of the State University of New York - has he used his prestige as a scholar and TEACHER to organize Italian Americans and petition the Board of Regents to get southern-Italian history and culture in the public education curriculum and the curriculums of the community colleges where so many of our children go post-high school?

Did the eight year Italian American governor, his Italian American activist wife and his now son the governor, who love to show up at Italian starched table cloth / cow's milk cheese functions, petition the Board of Regents for the same?

Ooh the hew and cry about the need for Italian language courses which specialize in northern Italian history and culture experiences as the medium to teach the language and promote northern Italy's tourism; yet not a word - NOT A SINGLE WORD! - about complete absence of the history and culture of the people south of Rome in the public education system.

Our children have no teachers! All they have are philo-Renaissance art and literature professors and



Little Italy nostalgics; both of which care nothing about public and college education; except in so far as education policy impacts on jobs and personal special interest. Care being measured by action!
The question for i-Italy:

Is this publication interested in teaching and promoting the teaching of the history and culture of the southern-Italian American people; or is the purpose of the publication to disseminate news about Italy Today - to whom?

What is your target reading market?

Consider, for example the incredible (unparalleled) **blanked coverage** given to **Mario Monti** - the former officer and advisor to those great defenders of blue-collar/working-class benefits and rights (pardon my cynicism) Goldman Sachs, Trilateral Commission and Bilderberg Group. On just one day (2/12/12) of many, the front page included the following on **Monti**: 1 video; 5 English language Magazine articles; 3 Italian language Magazine articles; 10 General News articles!

Take a random sample of southern-Italian Americans (which necessarily will include 70% blue-collar/working class) and asked them what they think about Mario Monti, and then ask the same question in the halls of university Italian Studies Departments such as NYU. I predict that there will be a significant difference between the responses of the two populations. For which population do you write?

Aye now, there’s the question - eh? The proverbial “heart of the matter!”

In conclusion, regarding an American Terroni Education Manifesto

For me: “That’s all she wrote.”

You?

Source URL: <http://test.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/op-eds/article/towards-american-terrioni-education-manifesto-i-italys-role-if-any>

Links

[1] <http://test.iitaly.org/files/20229xapicture1331125313png>