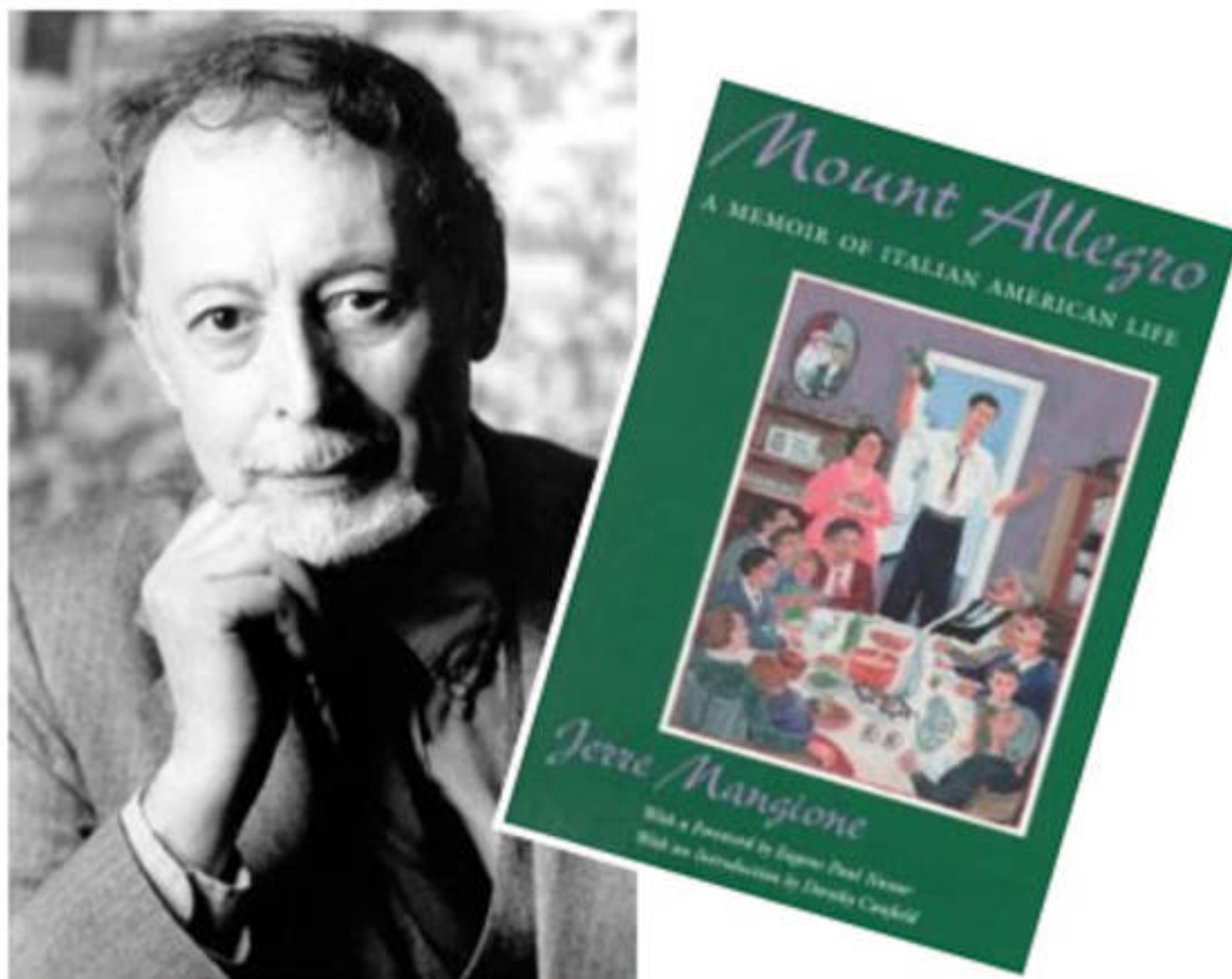


“Mount Allegro” revisited in terms of Gribaudi and Dickie’s historiography

Tom Verso (June 08, 2008)



The first lesson that an historian must learn before 'putting pen to paper' is that “with pen and paper anyone can write anything.” A document cannot be thought of as a 'mirror to society'.

The essence of the "historian's craft" is to describe and explain past social phenomena based on information about the phenomena in documents (e.g. newspapers, government statistics, letters,



literature, etc). The first lesson that an historian must learn before 'putting pen to paper' is that “with pen and paper anyone can write anything.” Accordingly, a document cannot be thought of as a 'mirror to society'. Documents are not necessarily accurate descriptions of persons, places, events, etc.; they may contain errors of: omission, exaggeration, computation, ‘flat-out’ lies, etc. Excellence in the historian’s craft is the ability to identify errors contained in documents and differentiate true statements from false.

Recently, two historians of southern-Italian society have written about the need to critique documents in terms of how prior “images” and “stereotypes” of the South affect writers’ descriptions of southern Italy. For example, Gabriella Gribaudo, in her essay “Images of the South”, wrote: “The Southern question continues to be discussed as... pre-existing stereotypes... [and] ..images...(see: “Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction” by David Forgacs, Robert Lumley p 72-74; emp.+)

Similarly, John Dickie in his book “Darkest Italy - The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900”), wrote: “...representations of the South from the centers of political and cultural power in Liberal Italy were informed by a repertoire of stock images...[and] stereotypes ...[e.g.] illiteracy, superstition, corruption, brigandages, dirt, disease, idleness, ‘mafiosita’...” (emp. +, p 1)

Translating the terms “images” and “stereotypes” into epistemological concepts, I understand them to mean ‘a priori assumptions’. That is, prior to any empirical observations of the object in question, the observer assumes certain characteristics (images, stereotypes) are inherent in the object and ignores evidence to the contrary. Accordingly, what Gribaudo and Dickie are saying, is that much writing about southern-Italy post 1860 are not completely objective observations; rather, manifestations of the writer’s unquestioned, presumed to be true, a priori assumptions (images and stereotypes) even when evidence to the contrary is available.

For example, Dickie writes about documents created by travelers:

“The perceptions of the traveler in strange territory, it need hardly be said, are never wholly spontaneous or immaculate. Travel is a culturally saturated experience, structured through powerful precedents...” (p7)

The purpose of this note is to consider the document “Mount Allegro”, a book written by the American traveler Jerre Mangione, in the context of Gribaudo and Dickie’s historiographic principles. The book is essentially in two parts: First and primarily, a reminiscence of Mangione’s childhood family and neighborhood. Second, his trip to Sicily “...to look at the earth of my ancestors and meet [the relatives my Rochester family] left behind.” (p239)

When reading this book (document) it is especially important to keep foremost in mind Dickie’s characterization of a traveler:

“The perceptions of the traveler in strange territory are never wholly spontaneous or immaculate. Travel is a culturally saturated experience”.

Thus, it should not be assumed Mr. Mangione’s report is an accurate representation of reality (‘mirror of society’). This is not to say or imply that Mr. Mangione was consciously deceptive and misleading. Rather, as Gribaudo and Dickie note, a reader has to take into consideration “pre-existing paradigms, images and stereotypes” affecting the writer’s point of view. Reading “Mount Allegro”, one should especially be on guard about such affects, for there is not even agreement about whether the book is fiction or factual autobiography.



“Mount Allegro was first published as a work of fiction, over Mangione's protest. Despite this initial confusion, Mount Allegro survived to acquire the appropriate subtitle: A Memoir of Italian American Life.” (“Italian Signs, American Streets” p79) Also, in 1960, highly esteemed and prolific Rochester City Historian Blake McKelvey referred to “Jerre Mangione’s reminiscent novel, Mount Allegro”.

For purposes of this discussion, it is important to note that while Mangione claims that he is describing his family and neighborhood in Rochester, NY, there is absolutely nothing that is factually denoted and therefore verifiable. All the names of people are admittedly fictitious. Further, all the streets, factories, churches, schools, etc. that the writer refers to are nameless. It is impossible to verify anything that the writer says about his family, neighborhood or city.

On a personal note, I was born, raised and have lived in Rochester my whole life. If I had not read interviews with Mangione in Rochester newspapers, I would not know that the book was about Rochester or what neighborhood Mangione lived in. This is especially significant because as it turns out, I knew the so called “Mount Allegro” neighborhood well, and from time to time visited people a short walk away from the Mangione house. Again, this is not to say Mangione was untruthful. On the contrary, there is no way to know if he is truthful or not. The reader can believe or not believe. But, the reader cannot know.

When reading the section of the book dealing with his Sicilian trip, Mangione’s “pre-existing paradigms, images and stereotypes” and his travel being a “culturally saturated experience, structured through powerful precedents” are blatant and unequivocally stated. He is a passionate anti-Fascist who wrote for the American Communist publication “The New Masses.” This is not to say or imply that he was a Communist. Rather, associating himself with writers such as, the renowned Communist editor of “The New Masses”, Whittaker Chambers is indicative of how passionately anti-Fascist Mangione was at the time of his 1936 Sicilian trip, when in his words: “there was Fascism all over Italy. In my years of becoming an American I had come to understand the evil of Fascism and hate it with all my soul.”

Also, the reader should wonder about the son of an immigrant who graduated from Syracuse University during the Great Depression. Such an education would have put him in a very small and elite group of educated Americans in general and an unheard of level of education for children of Italian immigrants at the time of the Depression. Nevertheless, given this excellent education, he shows an incredible lack of knowledge of the history and historic conditions of Sicily.

Mr. Mangione manifests his anti-Fascist and unhistorical presuppositions of Sicily by stating or implying that observed negative aspects of Sicily are caused by the Fascist while ignoring long pre-Fascist history of those same problems. This results in significant misrepresentations of the historic reality of Sicily.

For example, he writes:

“I had come to Sicily expecting to see green meadow softly undulating hills, and long stretches of vegetation.... Within an hour after I took the train from Palermo to Girgenti I was plunged into a Wagnerian maze of naked solid-rock mountains...the Gates of Hades, indeed.”

HADES INDEED!!! He seems totally unaware that the train from Palermo to Girgenti went straight through the former sulfur-mining regions of Sicily that left the land blighted. Indeed, he more than likely went through the town of Campofanco were 25 years earlier Booker T. Washington saw and described in great detail the hideous mining conditions that the de facto enslaved children of Sicily



were subjected to in HADES. Further, Mangione's family came from Girgenti. Didn't anyone tell him that this was the port where the sulfur mined by those slave children in HADES was loaded on to ships?

He wrote that before going to Sicily he "read books ... historians ... Pindar, Aeschylus, Archimedes and Empedocles." If he had read something more contemporary he would have learned that these child slave mines were own and operated by the "ANGLO-Sicilian Sulphur Mining Company which was exempted from taxation and legal dues, and The Bank of Sicily was obligated to make advances to them for up to four-fifths of the value of sulfur in warehouses." All of this long before anyone heard of Mussolini and the Fascist. (see: Britannica 1911 vol. 25 p 22)

Further, Mangione gives no indication that he knows anything about the agricultural regions of Sicily. For example, just 35 miles west of Girgenti, is the town of Sambuca di Sicilia where Donna R. Gabaccia did her study of 19th century western Sicilian agrotowns. She describes the "Physical Setting" of such agrotowns as "surrounded by corona oasis of greenery." ("From Sicily to Elizabeth Street" 1984 p13)

Another a-historical presentation is his rightful condemnation of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. However, he leaves the impression that this is a manifestation of Fascism per se; when in fact Italy under a Liberal government invaded Ethiopia in 1895 and suffered a major military defeat in 1896 at the Battle of Adowa, where Italian dead and missing numbered 7,000 and the Africans many thousands more.

In short, Mangione does not seem to understand that Mussolini and the Fascist he hates so much may be in Hell. But, they may not be alone. The pre-Fascist Liberal politicians may be there also atoning for the sins they committed against the people and children of Sicily and Africa in their effort to enrich their corporate patrons. As Jesse Jackson so eloquently observed about the American political system, "It makes no difference whether you are riding a donkey or an elephant, if they are both going in the same direction."

One final example of Mangione seeing only what his presuppositions allow him to see is his mocking tone of Fascist's attempt to get Italy's trains to run on time. Even though he lived a few blocks from the New York Central Railroad and could hear the freight trains from his house, he does not appreciate the role that efficient train systems played in the development of the American industrial system. He does not seem to understand that Italy could not become a modern industrial power without an efficient train system. And, again, he shows no understanding that long before Fascist came to power, the Liberal governments of Italy poured enormous resources into the train system. For example, the Italian Parliament in 1884 passed a railroad bill called the "Convenzioni" in an effort to increase railroad construction and efficiency. Again, in 1905 the Parliament acted with the creation of Ferrovie dello Stato (State Railroads).

In sum, Mangione's book is probably best read as a good novel. But, as a description of Sicilians in Rochester and the culture of Sicily it is seriously wanting. I could never understand why it is held in such high esteem by the Italian American literati. But, let's face it, how many Italian Americans have become Ivy League professors? In the American University system, if it's Ivy it must be good. Nay more - Great!

Addendum notes

1. None of the above should be construed as criticizing Mangione's rightfully justified hatred of Fascism. The evils of Fascism are a matter of historic record. There is no debate about that. When the book was first published in 1942, thousands of American born sons of Italian immigrants were



fighting Fascist in North Africa and Italy; many from Rochester and a few from my family. The value of their sacrifice is never in doubt and always appreciated.

Nevertheless, if the historian is going to accurately get at the factual reality of a society, then s/he is obligated to differentiate ideological value judgments and presuppositions from factual propositions. It does not matter if the document was created in 1942 A.D. America, or 1942 B.C. Egypt. The same historiographic concepts, methods and techniques are applied to the analysis of the document in an effort to know the society in question.

Objective history demonstrates that Fascism, unlike “Athena”, did not “leap from the head of Zeus a complete form.” Rather it evolved and metamorphosed from prior social, political and economic preconditions. If the evils of Fascism are to be avoided in the future, then those preconditions must be understood and acted upon. Only objective historical studies can inform and alert society about those preconditions. If the pre-Fascist Italian governments had not been sanguine about eating the children of Sicily or introducing colonial ideology into the social milieu, perhaps the people of Sicily would not have been so susceptible to Mussolini’s rhetoric.

Students of history seeking to know and understand the reality of Sicilian history must be able to differentiate ideological rhetoric from factual reality. Further, it is this writer’s opinion that the strongest ideological debates are based on facts. The factual shortcomings of Fascism were legion. The best way to discredit it or any malicious ideology is with facts, not more ideology.

2. Forty years and five editions after the first publication, Mangione added a “Finale” chapter that clearly identifies his childhood neighborhood long after the immigrants had passed away, their children moved away, houses and streets bulldozed away, and city officials going out of their way to heap accolades on the Ivy League professor son of the city, and placing a historic marker in the neighborhood no more distinguished than other city neighborhoods just because a book was written about it. There are no historic markers honoring the people in the truly homogeneous “Little Italy” neighborhoods consisting of the city’s largest ethnic population up to the 1950s. Also, he wrote the “Finale” while in Sweet Briar, Virginia – so not Rochester!

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