

Thinking about American Italian Identity - R. D. Lang and Gabriella Gribaudi's Theory of "The Other"

Tom Verso (June 20, 2008)



"What you write on paper is American. What's in your veins is Italian."

After graduating high school I worked as a mason apprentice for immigrant Italian masons. One day an Anglo American on our crew (wondering if I was "off the boat") asked what my nationality was. Almost perplexed by the question, I said "American!", in a tone that implied "of course, why would you ask?" At which point one of the "off the boat" Italians started to laugh and said: "What you write on paper is American. What's in your veins is Italian."

I had no idea what he was talking about, and given that 'profound fatigue' is a 'rite of passage' into



the ranks of Italian masons, I was too tired to explicate the poet-mason's metaphor. It was lunchtime, and my only interest was eating the delicious lunch my mother prepared for me: soppressata, pecorino, olives, focaccia, and cuchidahti.

More recently, I periodically meet with former high school friends. We are all full-blooded Italians (i.e. four grandparents "off the boat") who are proud of and live our Italian heritage. At a recent meeting, one of the fellows brought a 1956 yearbook from the high school we attended. As it made its way around the table the overwhelming fascination that became the subject of conversation was how many Italians went to our school. The question that arose in my mind: Why, 50+ years later, were we surprised to see "so many Italians" in the high school we attended? What's more interesting, the high school was a neighborhood school (i.e. before busing) and the neighborhood was a quintessential "Little Italy Urban Village" where the original pre-WW I immigrants (e.g. our grandparents) were still very much present. Yet, while going to our Italian neighborhood high school, we were not conscious of the student population's preponderant Italian composition.

The significance of these two anecdotes is that the grandchildren of pre-WW I Italian immigrants growing up in a post WW II "Little Italy", had not developed an Italian consciousness. We were not aware of our Italianness while living in an Italian environment. The question then is; when did we become conscious of being Italian and why?

There is a social-psychological theory that may explain this phenomena of latent and belated Italian identity and may have significant implications for the future of American Italianity.

The Existential Psychologist R.D Lang posited: "All 'identities' require an Other: some other in and through a relationship with whom self-identity is actualized." ("Self and Others" 1999 p. 66 emp.+).

Similarly, Gabriella Gribaudo (University of Naples Professor of History and Sociology) writes: "An identity is the product of a comparison. Whenever one imagines an 'Other', one starts with categories and images which reflect the culture of the society in which one was born and lives..." ("Images of the South" in "Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction" David Forgacs, Robert Lumley; Oxford University Press, 1996. p 72 emp+)

In short, my friends and I did not develop an Italian identity until we left our "Little Italy village" and encountered the Other (i.e. non-Italians). Once we encounter the Other, we began to "reflect [upon] the culture of the society in which [we were] born and lived."

For example, my first memory of an Italian identity encounter with a non-Italian Other came when I was 16 and got my drivers license. Some friends and I drove across town to a teen hangout in a non-Italian neighborhood. In the course of conversations, one of the Other boys mentioned our high school football team that dominated the city league for years. We gloated. He laughed and said his high school could hardly field a team and when it does, they never win. However, he went on to note that his school won more scholarships than any other school in the city. Our football 'tough guy' response, essentially: "So what! Who cares!"

Then came the Italian identity encounter. He went on to say; first, that we had such a good football team because we were (succinctly paraphrasing) an "Italian School" and second, his school led the city in college scholarships because it was (succinctly paraphrasing) a "Jewish School." My fiends and I had virtually no previous encounter with Jewish culture; there were no Jewish students in our high school and no Jewish owned stores or synagogues in our neighborhood. Further, we never thought our football prowess had anything to do with our Italian grandparents.



Moreover, we did not understand the social-psychological significance of what had transpired. An Italian identity had been foisted upon us by a non-Italian Other. We were forced to think about our ethnicity. However, it was an ephemeral identity moment, and soon we were back in our 'village' telling the guys on the corner about the girls across town.

The last year of high school was punctuated by such periodic forays out of the village into the non-Italian Other world. Each encounter with the Other brought a glimmer of Italian identity. However, it was not until we left high school and entered the Other's world in earnest that we became fully aware of our Italianness. For many Italian American boys in the 1950's and 60's, the first totally comprehensive enveloping encounter with the Other came in the military. Those were the days of the draft and the draft meant the Army.

The Army constituted a profound Italian identity consciousness-raising encounter with the Other. Beginning with Food! Within hours of getting to an Army base a meal is served. Needless to say there was a profound difference between the food Italian Americans were accustomed to and what was served in the Army. This difference made us conscious that food in our homes was Italian. Prior to the Army, we did not think of our home cooking as Italian. It was just the food that we ate. Only when we encountered the Other's food did we, in Gribaudo's words, "... [engage] categories and images which reflect the culture of the society in which [we were] born and lived..." In short, we began to think about what Italian food was and, in turn, what it meant to be Italian.

Further, the encounter with the Army Other was not limited to an individual self-awareness of Italianness. Experiences with the Other were the basis for a community of Italians from all over the country. For example, all the Italians, no matter where they were from, laughed at the putty like spaghetti with "tomato soup poured over it", and the southerners who eat it vigorously wondering why the [Aye]Italians didn't like it. Soon we found that no matter what city or part of the country we came from, we shared a common culture. Not just food. We spoke a common idiom punctuated with Italian words and phrase. We knew the same jokes about priest and nuns. We played the same card games. We had tempers that would flash for the same reasons. In short, we found out that we were Italians we were different from the Other.

After the service we went to work with the Other and lived in the same suburbs with the Other. Many Italians became the Other. That is to say, they lost their Italian culture and "melted", as it were, into the "pot" - soft sliced bread purchased at supermarkets replaced crusty Italian loaves from bakeries.

However, in my community, I see significant evidence of nostalgia that is bringing my generation back together celebrating their Italianness. From small weekly breakfast club meetings to large semimonthly lunches that draw 'hundreds', there is a magnitude of Italian esprit that I have never seen before. I write monthly articles for an Italian American newsletter. Whenever I write about one of the old "Little Italy" neighborhoods, I get phone calls and e-mails from people telling me how much they enjoyed the article and how they wish they could go back to those days.

In short, after about fifty years of living and working in the Other's world, we have an Italian identity that we never had when we lived isolated in our Italian 'villages'.

However, the fascinating question remains about the Americans of Italian descent who are the great-grandchildren (about age 30-40) and the great-great-grandchildren (about age 20-30) of the pre-WW I immigrants. They have no living memory of the immigrants or "Little Italy". They were born and raised in the Other's world. Indeed, raised in the Other's family. As a result of mixed marriages, "what's in their veins" is not all Italian. A child with only one Italian parent will be inculcated in part



with non-Italian cultural.

The generation of pre-WWI immigrant's grandchildren is passing. In 20 years, there will be no more gatherings such as I described above. When we project the future, what do we see? Will there be an Italian American culture? What will it look like? Are we witnessing the twilight of Italian American culture born in the beginning of the 20th century and ending in the beginning of 21st? Is Italian American culture a Phoenix that will rise again from the ashes of the previous generations? Interesting!

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