

## **"Out of the Melting Pot" - The Southern-Italian American Renaissance...i-Italy.org - To Help or Not!**

Tom Verso (August 24, 2011)



During the great post-1950s American urban emigration, children and grandchildren of pre-WW I European immigrants abandoned their 'urban villages' for the culturally amorphous and homogenous suburban 'MELTING POTS'. Southern-Italian Americans, following this suburban melting pot trend lost

much of their 'old world' southern-Italian culture. However, there is evidence of a contemporary nascent Southern-Italian American Renaissance. Southern-Italian Americans seem to be rejuvenating their historic 'south-of-Rome' culture. The i-Italy.org publication's functionality and physical location makes it uniquely capable of facilitating this Renaissance. Sadly, instead of rising to the intellectual and ideological challenge of leading the southern-Italian American people back to their glorious historical and cultural roots, it has settled into a chatty pop-culture publication (food, music, shoes, personalities, Berlusconi gossip, northern Italian clichés...). It has defined itself as a virtual magazine on the Internet's virtual newsstand in the tradition of paper publications one picks up in train stations to read during the morning commute, and then discards.

## **The Melting Pot**

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, many American cities experienced an influx of European immigrants and African migrants from the American South. Each national group clustered together in their own "national urban village"; neighborhoods where they perpetuated their cultures - e.g. "Little Italy". Such cities were heterogeneous aggregations of foreign national neighborhoods (German, Italian, Irish, African...).

For example, in Rochester, NY up through the 1950s there were very distinct foreign national neighborhoods: German, Polish, Italian, Hispanic and African. The people living in those neighborhoods were predominately of the respective nationality; street names, churches, stores, eateries, music and languages spoken and read (newspapers) all manifested the culture of the neighborhood's foreign national identity. Of course, this pattern of foreign national "urban villages" was reproduced in many cities in the U.S.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the great migration from the cities to the suburbs ensued. The suburbs were the "melting pots". It was in the suburbs that the various nationalities physically integrated with one another; e.g. Italians were no longer clustered on the same streets with other Italians, they lived on a street with people of German, Irish, etc. origins.

When the people of a foreign national/cultural group live in close proximity to each other, their interaction reinforces and perpetuates their culture.

When people of a foreign national/cultural group separate and integrate with other groups, a new homogeneous melting pot culture is developed and adopted.

These propositions can be tested, by considering the physical and cultural status of African, Hispanic and Native Americans.

These groups have not migrated in mass to the suburbs. Africans and Hispanics stayed in their urban neighborhoods throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Similarly, Native Americans largely stayed on 'reservations' and in rural communities. Accordingly African, Hispanic and Native American cultures did not become 'blended' with other cultures. They maintained their uniquely definitive characteristics.

As with the former European urban villages, today Hispanic and African neighborhoods overtly manifest the respective cultures of the people (language, churches, shops, music, food...). For example the Spanish language is still very much alive; similarly, the very unique, distinctive and definitive African American idiom is heard on the streets of their neighborhoods and in the lyrics of their music.

Indeed, **African American Ivy League scholars** such as Cornel West and Michael Dyson (masters of the "King's English") easily slip onto the **vernacular of the "Hood"** when speaking.

Similarly, Native American culture thrives on reservations and other predominate 'Indian' communities, which are separated from the mass suburban 'melting pot' American culture.

**In sum**, national groups that remained physically together retained and perpetuated their national culture. Those that integrated with other cultures largely lost their culture. However, Italian Americans are demonstrating that a lost culture can be found and revived.

## Nascent Southern-Italian American Renaissance

There is a large body of evidence that Americans of southern-Italian descent, after decades of being separated from each other in homogenous suburbs and losing their cultural heritage, are finding ways to reunite (both physically and virtually) and reviving their historic cultural roots.

## Physically Reuniting

### Local evidence from Rochester, NY

In Rochester, NY there are sixteen Italian American organizations. Some are small clubs like the 'Valguarnera Society' that meets informally from time to time. There are also three very large organizations whose sizes are indicated by the significant structures they built, pictured below:





Saint Padre Pio Chapel



Italian American Sport's Center

National Evidence from Census Data



According to the 2007 Census Department “American Community Survey”, Italian Americans represent approximately 6% of the national population. This compares with German Americans 17%, English 9% and Irish 12%.

Further, the “Yahoo Italian American Directory” listed at the time 18 organizations. Whereas the “Yahoo German American Directory” listed 4 organizations and there were no English Directory listings.

Clearly, this is **evidence of much more robust Italian American cultural activity and physical unity** than the much larger German and English American populations.

Also, the “Yahoo Irish American Directory” listing of 15 organizations is close to the 18 Italian American. However, the Irish American population is almost twice the size of the Italian American; thus, **further evidence** that Italian American cultural activity and physical unity is significantly greater as a percentage of population than the Irish American.

While southern-Italian Americans are still physically separated one from the other in homogenous suburbs, the above quantitative evidence indicates that individual southern-Italian American communities are motivated and finding ways of coming back together and rejuvenating their culture at the local level.

However, more exciting is the **potential** the **Internet** holds for national and international **reintegration** of southern-Italians **across the country** and indeed, **the Ocean**.

The Internet and Virtual Unification

Reconnecting Southern-Italian Americans across local communities and the Ocean

When sociologist **Richard Alba** postulated the **decline of ethnicity**, he was reacting to and writing from the perspective of the **suburban melting pot**. However, he **underestimated** the resilience of and **rejuvenating potential** of southern-Italian American culture, and he was not aware of the **incredible unifying potential of Internet technology**.

For example, I know fifth generation southern-Italian Americans (i.e. great-great grandchildren of pre-WWI immigrants) in Rochester, NY who, by using the Internet to locate and Goggle Translator to communicate, have reestablished relations with relatives (ancestors) in Calabrian towns.

#### i-Italy.org and the Southern Italian American Renaissance

**i-Italy.org** has unique internet functionality that can greatly facilitate the virtual unification of southern-Italian Americans and their **nascent southern-Italian American renaissance**. Also, the physical location of its offices and workspace further lends itself to supporting this renaissance

However, to my mind, **i-Italy.org is not rising to the intellectual and ideological challenge of being a formative renaissance publication**. To date i-Italy has ignored its extraordinary potentiality and I dare say 'responsibility' to bring this southern-Italian American renaissance to fruition.

#### Functionality

The functionality of the i-Italy publication is incredibly complex and dynamic relative to other Internet sites. **"The Drudge Report"**, for example, one of the most popular news and culture sites on the Internet, is a cartoon compared to the vivacious and complex multilinking capability of i-Italy.

In terms of the complexity (numbers of articles, links to other magazine sections, world and national news, bloggers...) and the artistry of presentations, i-Italy approaches the world class **"Huffington Report"**. Indeed, there are aspects of i-Italy that exceed Huffington in terms of quality and organization.

#### Location

i-Italy is physically located in an Italian American Studies Institute which is part of a major university in American's largest southern-Italian American city, and has a university Dean on its editorial board. This gives it access to human and physical resources for both academic research and field research in the metro area.

i-Italy, due to its physical location, is **uniquely positioned** to explore all aspects of southern-Italian Americana, communicate with southern-Italian Americans, and affect southern-Italian American culture.

### i-Italy's Wasted Opportunities for Southern-Italian American **Community Building** and **Renaissance Facilitating**

Following are a few **wasted** i-Italy community building and renaissance facilitating **capabilities**:

#### Comments Section

When i-Italy first began to publish, it had a very dynamic comment section.

If a reader posted a comment below an article, the article's author automatically received an e-mail notification of the comment posting. The author could then respond to the commenter. The commenter in turn was automatically notified of the author's response. This feature promoted a virtual personal relationship between the author and the commenter.

Further, if there were more than one commenter, all parties (author and all other commenters) were notified. This feature promoted a virtual community relationship

For example, through my blog's comment's, in the past, I became acquainted with many other southern-Italian Americans. Some liked and agreed with what I wrote, some disagreed, some insulted me and others asked for my advice. In short, I had a full range of personal interactions with southern-Italian Americans from all over the US, and southern-Italians in ITALY who read the articles (how's that for breaking out of the melting pot and reconnecting with 'my primordial culture').

Sadly, this robust community building capability of comment auto-notification has been abandoned

by i-Italy. Now if a fellow southern-Italain (in the US or Italy) posts a comment to one of my articles, I have no way of knowing unless I daily physically check. If I write a reply, they have no way of knowing unless they physically check back to the comments section.

For example, recently, I went back into an article I wrote last year looking for a reference, and I found that a very cogent comment had been posted last year. I had no idea it was there and I would so very much liked to have interacted with the writer about his thoughts.

In short, the potential for a **virtual personal relationship** between two southern-Italians was lost, in turn also lost is the opportunity for a multi-person **virtual community relationship**.

## Feature Articles

On the morning of 8/4/11, the Front Page of i-Italy had 1 video and 7 articles devoted to FOOD, and three of the five "Active" blogs where blogs totally devoted solely to FOOD. While that morning was an extreme (indeed, shortly after one Food article was dropped and SHOE article was substituted), this extreme was not unrepresentative of the Front Page.

The predominance of FOOD on the Front Page is not unique. I would note that the Life and People section shows a similar pattern of food articles, and they always primer on the Front Page.

While we hear much about the stereotype of Italian Americans in crime, I would also note a second stereotype is that we define ourselves with and by food.

It is a widely accepted principle of social psychology that **others** define a group as much as the group defines itself. The extent to which **others** think of southern-Italian Americana as 'just a food culture' must not be allowed to affect our **self-identity**.

And, to the extent that **others** think of us as intellectually 'light' and unscholarly, our publications must not only prove them wrong; but also instill and reinforce an intellectual identity in our culture.



The Front Page of all our publications should scream our intellectuality to others **and ourselves**.

### Specials Section as scholarly archives

The Special Sections has fallen into disuse and its great potential to archive scholarly articles more like professional journal articles that would not fit well on the Front Page of a Magazine.

For example, i-Italy could have a “History and Social Science – Special Section”. Articles going into that section would be noted and briefly summarized on the front page and those interested could link to it. Such a section would become a place where academic writers could get relatively short articles published quickly rather than going through the rigmarole of “Academic Journals” which gather dust on library shelves.

In time the Special Sections would be a place where researchers and especially students writing term papers could go not only for ideas and data, but using an interactive comment section they could dialogue with the author and one another.

For example, i-Italy has published 10 demographic articles under the category heading “Italian Americans by the Numbers.” Each article in that category provided data and discussion about a particular southern-Italian American demographic characteristic (Education, Employment, Income...).

If those articles were archived in a Special Section – Italian American Demographics, researchers, students and other interested parties could easily locate them to obtain the data and interact with the author. Other demographic researchers would be encouraged to place similar articles in the section. In time, i-Italy would become the place for definitive and authoritative demographic information and discussion about the quantitative characteristics of our population and implications the numbers have for our culture.

The 'Village Square' in Italy and the 'Street Corner' in Little Italy were very much a part of the southern-Italian and southern-Italian American culture. They were the places where we congregated to 'talk', 'argue', 'complain',... whatever. When we moved to the suburbs we had no convenient physical place to congregate. i-Italy has the functionality to provide a virtual 'village square' and 'street corner' for us to meet and 'talk' again.

Nothing 'too fancy'! It would be a location in the publication meant for spontaneous comments on somewhat ephemeral topics - topics that would come-and-go like news cycles. There should be almost real-time give and take between the participants.

#### Affecting Public School Curriculum - southern-Italian education

i-Italy, physically located as it is within and close proximity to major universities and colleges which have **teacher training and certification programs**, is in a position to reach and influence future teachers about southern-Italian American history and culture. Bringing them to the realization that there is a history of Italian people "South of Rome and West of Ellis Island"; i.e. Italian history and culture is more than Roman Empire, Renaissance and Mussolini which is about all that public and college history and literature curriculums consist of currently.

#### Conclusion

The post-Little Italy southern-Italian Americans have been wandering in the homogenous cultural melting pot wilderness since they left "Little Italy" during the post 1950s suburban migration. After decades of exile from their cultural homeland, southern-Italian Americans are now finding their way back home through local community organizations and the Internet.

However, like Ulysses upon return home after his wanderings, before they can reaffirm their mighty 3,000-year history and culture (the very essence of Italy - Po Valley pretensions aside), they must deal with the pretenders to and usurpers of their historic and cultural throne:

- Mainstream media
- Philo-Renaissance literati
- Northern Italian (Gramsci-esque) hegemonic tourist /product marketing industry.

As demonstrated above, there is a significant body of evidence indicating that descendants of pre-WW I southern-Italian immigrants are reviving their history and culture - a Southern-Italian American Renaissance.

**i-Italy.org** has unique and extraordinary capabilities to facilitate that renaissance if the people who



own, publish, edit and write for the publication are of a mind to do so.

Will they take part in this renaissance milieu?

Or, will they settle for being a **slick** 'train-station' publication?

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#### **Links**

[1] <http://iitaly.org/files/17877litt-ity-sub21313239724png>