

Cultural Philanthropy, A Private Affair

Anthony Julian Tamburri (March 17, 2008)



Education is the only way we can change people's minds. A concerted conversation (i.e., coming together) on cultural philanthropy among/by Italian Americans is, I would submit, something necessary to bring to the table.

In his ground-breaking essay, "Breaking the Silence: Strategic Imperatives for Italian American Culture," Robert Viscusi championed an articulation of history that includes a collective purpose. While much progress has been made on numerous issues, many Italian American associations seem to work in a vacuum, moving forward alone on issues whereas, within groups working in unison, the community at large would benefit, thus encountering greater success in bringing forth a variety of



projects that would contribute to an Italian/American agenda.

What is – or, what should be – that rallying point around which the greater Italian/ American community might find some sense of commonality? Indeed, both African Americans and Jewish Americans have their one issue, as tragic as it may be, that coheres the group. I have in mind, of course, slavery and its dreadful sister of outright discrimination that has resulted from it, for the former; two millennia of diasporic existence and the more recent horrific holocaust, for the latter. What then can we identify as that cohesive force for Italian Americans? Can we look to something as immigration, that timespan 1880 to 1924, those forty-four years that have now become an historical marker for contemporary Italian Americans? There may indeed be specific tragedies that come to mind: the 1891 New Orleans lynching, for which we hold the dubious distinction of having been victims of the largest group lynching. One might even underscore historical discrimination, dating back to the nineteenth century and culminating, to date, in something like *The Sopranos*.

Though valid points of discussion, these last two examples do not constitute, in an encompassing manner, that one issue that can unite the Italian/American community in the same way in which other groups cohere. We might thus ponder what is that all-encompassing issue that unites, for instance, Hispanic Americans. In addition to a strong sense of belonging they may have with regard to their culture(s), it may very well be the migratory experience, a sense of not belonging to the host country, that coheres Hispanics.

Surely, I do not want to be naïve in thinking that Hispanics from any and all Latin countries have an equal sense of allegiance to the “old country.” Nor do I want to imply that all Hispanics have an automatic sense of belonging to that group comprised of Hispanics/Latinos, as categorized in the United States. Nevertheless, we would not err in perceiving a certain sense of commonality that has its origins in the migratory experience insofar as they perceive themselves as outsiders, and, as such, hold on to their culture of origins. This combination of difference and cultural specificity – based in part on the migratory experience – surely figures as a cohering agent.

A similar formula might prove valid for Italian Americans. Immigration can figure as that cohesive agent, however tenuous. A strong sense of commonality is that necessary ingredient for the community to progress, for the study of all things Italian/American to become part and parcel of the dominant culture, as it is for other United States hyphenated groups.

All of this is dependent on an Italian/American commitment (*impegno*) to the appreciation of our culture. This entails an active participation in cultural activities of all sorts; it requires that Italian/American groups make a concerted effort to go beyond those one or two activities they have identified as their own, and make attempts to expand their agenda to include a new, more encompassing form of cultural integration.

All of this, as we shall see, is dependent on a combination of cultural awareness and appreciation: namely a new sense of the Italian/American self that ultimately leads to an appropriation of one’s cultural legacy.

A concerted conversation (i.e., coming together) on cultural philanthropy among/by Italian Americans is, I would submit, something necessary to bring to the table. The concept has yet to be discussed beyond those few occasions among a small number of individuals. We need only turn to (1) names on libraries, colleges of arts and humanities, and privately endowed professorships, (2) the lack of a free-standing museum, and (3) graduate programs in Italian Americana for us to realize how far behind we are in cultural appreciation.



Education is the only way we can change people's minds. Italian Americans must step up to the plate and support grand projects such as an Italian/American museum, endowed professorships and centers, and other entities and/or institutions dedicated to imparting knowledge of our history and culture. This ultimately brings us to the dire need of private, cultural philanthropy; there is a lack of Italian/American names on (1) college and university libraries, (2) colleges of arts and humanities, and (3) endowed professorships, just to name a few areas.

Less than a dozen names comes to mind when discussing private, cultural philanthropy vis-à-vis Italian and Italian/American studies: Baroness Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò's donation in perpetuity for the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò at New York University; the Joseph and Elda Coccia Institute for the Italian Experience in America (Montclair State); the Charles and Joan Alberto Italian Studies Institute (Seton Hall); the Joseph M. and Geraldine C. La Motta Chair in Italian Studies (Seton Hall); the Valente Family Italian Studies Library (Seton Hall), a collection of Italian books second to none; the George L. Graziadio Center for Italian Studies and its George L. Graziadio Chair of Italian Studies at California State University Long Beach; the Amelia V. Gallucci-Cirio chair at Fitchburg State College; the Esposito Visiting Faculty Fellowship at UMass Dartmouth; the Dr. Neil Euliano Chair in Italian Studies at the University of Central Florida; and, *dulcis in fundo*, the Westchester Italian Cultural Center.

While the above tends more toward Italian than Italian/American Studies, the majority of these programs does include Italian Americana as a field of intellectual inquiry. But these are just the beginning. Italian/American Studies has progressed magnificently over the past thirty years at the college level. There are numerous programs or parts thereof at both the undergraduate and graduate levels nationwide. Indeed, for this to filter down to the public school system (where it is most needed in order to create future thinkers in this regard), access to Italian/American Studies for more graduate students needs greater facilitation. This, simply, will not happen through public funding alone. There needs to be a significant articulation between the academic world and those of Italian America who can readily underwrite any and all of the above-mentioned entities, centers, and institutes. This includes graduate fellowships so that those in history, sociology, literature, cinema, and the like can dedicate themselves fulltime to earning their degrees, and not be distracted by having to work parttime.

Because many of us have had to follow this second path, it does not mean our children and grandchildren should do the same. Anzi!

It is a great challenge that lies ahead, but it is surely a feasible accomplishment: The ten above-mentioned centers and professorships are proof positive. We thus need to talk, talk, and talk in order to do, do, and do...

Alla riscossa!

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