

Mind The Gap

Renata Conte (November 14, 2008)



An eye-opening meeting with Piero Bassetti

A few nights ago I decided to attend the round table discussion at Casa Zerilli-Marimò, centering on Piero Bassetti's notion of "italicita". The idea of a new virtual meeting place where 250 million people of italic origin could transcend formal boundaries and interact. A general invitation had gone out to all bloggers and really any members of the i-italy community. I want so badly to find my place; to "g-localize" myself, and this seemed a step in the right direction. I rearranged my schedule and off I went with a sense of excitement, and in my mind alot to say.

I arrived in a room filled with excited people. They all seemed to know one another. They all were extremely animated, flitting from Italian to English and back again. I followed some conversations, and yes they all knew each other for the most part. This was the club I so longed to be a part of. This was my way of getting from “Mezza Via” to Tutta Via”. I listened intently to the learned and very entertaining panel. The idea of this “Italicity” was grand. These people were so intelligent and so caring and passionate about their work. I have never felt that way about the practice of Pharmacy and that made me listen more intently. I almost felt like I belonged there.

My reality set in when the Consul General of Italy in NY, Francesco Maria Talò took his turn speaking. This is a charismatic man who one cannot help but listen to and for the most part agree with, that was the problem for me, he made sense. He began to describe the 3 different populations that are encompassed by “Italicity” and the free and open community of Piero Bassetti.

The first group, as he explained, numbered in the tens of millions. They are the grandchildren, great-grandchildren and beyond of Italian immigrants. Most do not speak Italian nor have ever even been to Italy. And now I add that they do not fight for pro-italian causes, they do not care about defending the image of the Italian-American/Australian/South American etc , they do not get “involved”. They do however retain some type of connection with ancestors long gone, usually through cuisine, or an Italian flag sticker on their car.

The second group, numbering maybe in the hundreds of thousands was my father's. He visited, fell in love, and stayed in NY in the 1960's. He still read the Italian newspaper, followed Italian politics and calcio, and spoke Italian 50-75% of the time. But in my opinion this group is not exactly the internet generation. Most, (my father was an exception) are totally involved in their regional organizations. They keep a tight circle of friends, usually involving the common denominator of the geographical area of Italy in which they were born and raised in.

The third and smallest group was the new virtual “Little Italy” inhabitants. These were young professionals from Italy living in and working in NY (or somewhere else abroad). They connected via their i-phones and truthfully always feel more comfortable when they are around each other. They are an unknown entity to most Italian Americans of the first group.

Unfortunately, out of these 3 groups that Francesco Maria Talò had described and that I have elaborated on, I could not find my place. It made me pat myself on the back while thinking about the name I had coined to describe myself and status; me; sempre “Mezza Via”. How incredibly left out I felt, and how my mind went in all different directions trying to figure out how to belong to Italicity. It seemed I was always fighting to show the 3rd group that I was definitely NOT part of that 1st group.

Physical distance can now be overcome, globalization has intensified common worldly concerns, cosmopolitanism creates that internal unity, but the main obstacle and divider in any issue of networking, global community, italicita' is LANGUAGE. The people I spent Wednesday evening with are a relatively small group of people without this problem. They are all fluent in at least 2 languages, and could have been just as comfortable conducting the evening in Italian as they were in English. How could they empathize with the angst I feel when someone asks me if I speak Italian... I do but please do not speak too fast or use any idiomatic expressions, why don't I just admit it and say “no, not really”.

I suppose over time all ethnicity, origin, and commonality become homogenized, diluted, and assimilated into a common “American” culture if you will. One cannot deny that there is strength in numbers and that assimilated 1st group has the numbers on its side. So for me and my Mezza Via people, wherever they are, we will stand by our causes, keep pushing Italian Language instruction in



schools, keep contributing to the digital project, keep opening our children's eyes to the wonder and privilege that is Italianita'. And keep trying to find our comfort zone within this Piazza di tutte Piazze.

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