



To Educate Italian American Children...or NOT??

Tom Verso (April 27, 2009)



Italian Americans are generally not highly educated, and they are especially lacking in education about their history and culture. Can there be Culture without Education?



Americans of Italian descent are not highly educated people. This fact is well documented by the "2004 U.S. Census Bureau - American Community Survey" statistics posted on the City University of New York - Calandra Institute web site.

In 2004, out of a total population of 10.5 million Americans, who identified themselves as of Italian origin and were 25 years of age or older, 69% have an education equivalence of less than a bachelor's degree. Only 20% had attained a bachelor's degree and 11% had education beyond a bachelor's.

Further, projecting the future: only 1.1 million Italian Americans of any age in 2004 were enrolled in college or graduate school. Thus, we cannot expect Italian Americans to have a significant impact on American society in any areas that presuppose an education beyond high school. Absolutely not as teachers!

In as much as a Masters degree is necessary to teach in public schools and a PhD in colleges and universities, the question arises as to who is going to teach Italian American children? Certainly, not Italian American teachers! With only 11% having a degree higher than bachelors, at best 11% of Italian Americans can teach in public schools. Eliminating those with degrees in law, medicine, engineering, etc., far less than 11% are available for teaching at any level.

Further, the absence of Italian American teachers is correlated with the dearth of Italian cultural curriculum being taught. For example, in the New York State Secondary Social Studies Global Studies curriculum, one is hard pressed to find anything about Italy other than the three traditional touchstones (Rome, Renaissance and Mussolini). Needless to say, other European countries are covered in depth (England, France, Germany, Russia, etc.). Similarly, Asian and African countries figure prominently in the curriculum. Further, there is virtually nothing about Italians in America except a mention in the immigration unit.

A similarly absence of Italian culture can be seen in the English literature curriculum:

Of approximately 150 listed books recommended for reading in English Literature grades 9-12, there is only one book by an author with an Italian name; Lawrence Ferlinghetti (pardon my cynicism- but he never knew his Italian father, his mother was of Sephardic French /Portuguese heritage; he was raised in France till he was five years old; French as his first language and he earned a doctoral degree at the Sorbonne in Paris - hardly your typical Italian). In short, virtually the whole recommend reading list for New York secondary English literature students is devoid of Italianita.

A similar void in Italian America cultural education can be seen at the Community College in Monroe County New York; a county in which 140,000 (20% of population) is classified as Italian descendent in the 2000 Census.

Consistent with national education statistics, 58% of the Italian American residents over the age of 25 attain a high school diploma or higher, but less than a bachelor's degree. Education 'higher than



high school' but 'less than bachelors' implies that a significant percentage of Monroe County Italian American students attend the Community College.

The cultural education of students of Italian descent at Monroe Community College is nonexistent. The following is taken from the college's on line course descriptions.

History courses (not including various American):

- (Three) African American
- Jewish/Holocaust
- Asian
- (Two) Russian
- China & Japan
- East Asia
- Women's

Literature courses (ethnic):

- Holocaust - (one dedicated course and a significant part of another survey course)
- (Two) British
- Black
- Minorities (Native American, Latino, Asia, African American)
- Shakespeare
- Drama (no Italian dramatist listed)
- Poetry: (no Italian poets listed)

In short, there are no Italian or Italian American history or literature courses offered at a community college in a county with 140,000 Americans of Italian descent (20% of population).

The final affront to Italian American students comes in the form of a culinary course offered by Monroe Community College. This is a vocational training course meant to prepare students to work in restaurant kitchens. A French chef uses a French culinary text to teach French culinary concepts and techniques.



The book and the teacher present gross misrepresentations of food history. For example, they say: "Marie Careme (1884-1833) wrote the first really systematic account of cooking principles, recipes, and menu making." There is no mention of "Opera On Right Pleasure and Good Health" written by Bartolomeo Scappi circa 1500 and is called by food historian Bill Buford, "Europe's first international cookbook best-seller (still on sale, even in paperback)". Nor is there any mention of the numerous other Italian cookbooks written long before Marie was born. Nor is there any mention of the fact that the fountainhead of French cooking was in the kitchens of the Italian chefs Catherine de Medici brought with her to France when she married the French king.

In Monroe County, there are approximately 20,000 French-Americans and virtually no French restaurants. There are 140,000 Italian Americans and literally thousands of Italian eateries of all types: pizzerias, family 'trattorias', national chain Italian restaurants, and high-end 'restorantes'. Yet, Italian American student's only option at the county community college is a French cooking course. "Go figure!"

In sum, there can be no culture if there is no education about the culture. There can be no Italian American culture if there is no education about the Italian American culture. One thing for sure: Italian American cultural education is not happening in public schools.

It seems to me that Italian American literati, community leaders and politicians have two education issues to address:

- 1 How do we explain the low level of education attainment of the Italian American people and what can be done to improve the education of our children.
2. Are we content to let the public school system send Italian American culture into oblivion.

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