

Language as a Strategic Imperative

Ottorino Cappelli (October 23, 2014)



Interview with Professor Robert Viscusi. "“Italian American culture without the Italian language loses its connection with the rhetorical, political, and philosophical traditions of Italian culture.”"

In a seminal article that appeared in 1990, entitled “Breaking the Silence”, you noted that Italians in America had been deprived of their own language and thus, reduced to silence, had failed to develop their own discursive power. Accordingly, you indicated three “strategic imperatives” for the Italian American community, the first being that of re-igniting their language. The historical context of your appeal was the aftermath of the Bensonhurst ethnic disorders involving Italian Americans and African Americans.



Could you briefly recall that moment and the reasons of your appeal about the political-cultural need of an Italian American bilingualism?

“At the end of August 1989, U.S. news media filled up with stories about the murder of Ysuf Hawkins, showing protest marches at the site of the crime in Bensonhurst and featuring the loud, crude, and angry responses of people who lived in the neighborhood, many or most of them Italian Americans. The news media did not interview any public intellectual with an Italian name. Why was this? I wondered. How had Italian Americans been reduced to violence and dumbshow as their only means of public expression? I offered as a theory that Italian Americans had lost the ability to speak seriously in public about or problems (to engage in what I called authoritative discourse) when they gave up the ability to speak, read, and write Italian. This had severed any living connection with Italian American history, any living connection with other peoples of Italian descent, whether in Italy or in any other parts of the world”.

Language was the first of your “strategic imperatives”, the other two being narrative and dialectics. To gain capacity of authoritative speech the Italian American community needed to be both bilingual and bicultural. What is the relationship between language and culture? Why can't an Italian American culture just “speak English”?

“Italian American culture without the Italian language loses its connection with the rhetorical, political, and philosophical traditions of Italian culture. The lack of living connection with Italian discourse goes further than any other single factor to explain the apparent inability of Italian America to represent itself adequately in the market of cultural exchange that constitutes the public sphere in the United States. If what calls itself Italian is restricted to food, music, fashion, film, and gangsterism, then the representation of things Italian and Italian American will find it hard to rise into the sphere of authoritative discourse – that is, either to articulate effectively what it has meant, does mean, and can mean to be an Italian in the world, or else to represent persuasively the thoughts and purposes of Italians in the United States. When Italian Americans “just speak English” they silently submit their histories and their collective interests to the hegemonic order of Anglo-American culture, which has a place for Italian Americans as such among the silent and the marginalized. This of course does not mean that Italian Americans have made no social or political progress in the United States, but it does mean that often this progress has of necessity implied the sacrifice of any articulated understanding of their own specific histories, either as Italians or as Italian Americans”.

In 1990 your appeal quickly became a manifesto for political-cultural action, a call to arms. What has been accomplished in the 18 years that have followed since? What, in your opinion, remains to be accomplished? And, in particular, is language still a “strategic imperative” for the Italian American “nation”?

“What has been accomplished? Italian Americans have continued to open new discursive spaces – the Italian American Writers Association and Malia, a Collective of Italian American Women are two leading examples. Many colleges and universities now teach courses in Italian American literature, film, and other forms of cultural expression. The Journals VIA and Italian Americana have continued to provide for the discussion of historical and cultural issues.

The central question of my essay – how to develop Italian American discursive authority by opening full access for Italian Americans to the study of Italian language and culture – has begun, but only begun, to be addressed. More students are studying Italian in secondary schools and colleges. This is good, but it scarcely begins to address the catastrophe of linguisticide that took place during the Second World War. How can this be done?

1. Encourage the study of Italian in American schools and universities. The AP Exam in Italian, recently instituted, is a powerful stimulus to the institution of curricula in Italian in the United States. It needs to be supported at every level, from local civic associations to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.



2. Encourage Italian Americans and other Americans to study Italian in Italy. There is no better way, almost no other way, to develop the substantial bilingual American/Italian community that can advance the work of cultural recovery that is basic to the development of Italian American discursive authority.

3. The work of cultural recovery must go forward both in English and in Italian. The study of Italian American and Italian cultural, economic, and political history are basic to the Italian American wish to have direct access to the sources of their discursive authority. The project, now under way, to translate Francesco Durante's monumental anthology *Italoamericana: Storia e letteratura degli italiani negli Stati Uniti 1880-1943*, is a major step forward in expanding Italian America's knowledge of its own history.

Robert Viscusi is one of the foremost critics of Italian American literature and culture, and the president of the Italian American Writers Association. He is is Professor of English at Brooklyn College, CUNY, and Director of the Ethyl Wolfe Institute for the Humanities.

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