

## **Italicity: Who, What, Where, When and How's Italian**

Jerry Krase (November 27, 2008)



Piero Bassetti's expansive notion of Italicity not only raises great expectations but also many important questions that must be addressed before its potential can be realized.

In "Italici" Piero Bassetti" asks, and answers rhetorically: "Who are the Italici? Yes, they are also Italians, of course. Better still; post-Italians. of Italian extraction, but also Italian-speaking nations and regions: Italian Switzerland, Dalmatia, Istria, San Marino, Malta. And then there are those men and women who, though they do not have a single drop of Italian blood in them, share the same values and style of life, the unmistakable models of that Italian way of life that the expansion of the Italian economy has, over the past few years spread around the world. The young and not so young



who have chosen that particular style amongst the many put on offer by the wares of international industry. And let us not forget the managers and entrepreneurs who base their professional activities on the products and initiatives linked to Italy of to products of an Italian flavor. So the figures and numbers change. Or rather explode. One can count on about two hundred million people spread over five continents." Bassetti is a very intelligent man. I know because some of his most brilliant ideas about Italians parallel my own musings, and complaints, about Italian-Americans.

As to Who's Italian/American? the number of Italian Americans depends on how they are identified. A century ago they were simply Americans born in Italy. At that time, nationality and race were virtually synonymous. Later they were Americans born in Italy or who had at least one parent born in Italy. Then in 1990 they became Americans who identified themselves as such. Using self definitions in both the 1990 and 2000 Census over 16,000,000 people in the United States identified themselves as Italian American. In combination with other demographic indicators some estimate the population at closer to twenty million souls. Other than by self-identification, how do we ascertain membership in an ethnic group? As other American-ethnic groups, Italian Americans are collections of people who share a varying number of socially relevant demographic attributes such as: national origins, cultural values, practices, language uses, and religion. In many cases they have more in common with non-Italian Americans than with each other. "Culturally Italian" people have migrated to the US from places other than Italy. As the number of Italian immigrants and the foreign born Italians have been decreasing the definition of Italian American has been expanding. Another way of defining a group is by a shared common culture.

Decades ago, a Giovanni Agnelli Foundation study identified Italian cultural values as: "the importance attached to intermediate groups: the family, the neighborhood, and the community." Germane to the quality of domestic life was "the importance of the home, the dinner table, and holidays." Relating to interpersonal supportiveness Italians exhibit "religious faith understood as love of neighbor, and as for actions in this world they show "a feeling for group and village ties, hospitality, and the importance of personal relationships." Italians also have "a realistic view of life as indicated by anti-dogmatic skepticism, political realism and higher education choices made pragmatically." Most of these qualities are shared by Is and IAs but unfortunately also share the absence of another important quality; inclusiveness (*inclusivita*).

Some personal examples of being included and not included in the fold might be helpful in this regard. I have noticed over the decades that many, if not most, Italians don't hold Italian Americans of any generation too highly in their esteem. For example, Italian scholars often seemed disappointed when I tell them "I'm Italian-American" instead of the co-ethnic embrace I expect. Strange, because I don't get the same response from my Slavic counterparts. Maybe that's because there are fewer Slavic wannabees. Most people, not only Italians and Italo-Americans, find it hard to believe that I'm even part-Italian. I occasionally paint, and like "real" Italians, I don't like criticism of my work so I don't tell people that some of the artwork hanging on my walls was created by me. That is until they make a positive comment about it. Some years ago a colleague (*collega*) from the Brooklyn College Sociology Department was admiring one of my paintings so I said took credit for it. At first he seemed puzzled. Then he smiled and said: "Aha ... now I remember, your mother was Italian." He didn't realize they were studies of French Impressionists (see below) After that, he wanted to know everything I knew about the mafia. Sometimes, being included is not all it's cracked up to be.





On the other hand, I recently and gratefully received an invitation (in inglese) from the Italian Consulate General in New York to attend a free public concert billed as “an introduction to the U.S. of the music of Fabrizio De Andrè as interpreted by Mauro Pagani.” I thought it was a good opportunity to bring my non-Italian-speaking but all-Italian American wife to an Italian event that she could understand. I should have known better. By the time we got to the Italian Cultural Institute on Park Avenue from one of the “Outer Boroughs,” where most Italians and Italo-Americans live, it was packed (as usual/come solito). Luckily, an Italian-speaking all Italo-American friend who is a “regular” at the Institute, and his all-Italian American non-Italian speaking wife were holding seats for us. We uncomfortably settled in and when the program started late (also come solito) the first speaker welcomed the (mostly all-Italian, Italian-speaking) crowd in English making us feel “at home.” However, not long after those English words of welcome, he unabashedly (imperturbatamente) asked, if the crowd preferred Italian. The not quite unanimous response was a chorus of “Italiano!” Hardly an invitation to inclusiveness.

A major point of Bassetti’s transnational glocal theory is how one can be included among the Italic with even the slightest connection to Italy and Italianita. However, trying to make a point about being “only” half-Italian-American is not easy when whole ones surround you. Either “they” don’t get it, or they don’t care to. At the panel presentation of Bassetti’s book at The Zerilli Marimo Italian House at NYU (La Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimo NYU) I stood up in the audience and tried to make a point about the paradoxical nature of identities; that having one identity doesn’t exclude, even what appears to be contradictory and mutually exclusive others. I tried, come solito, to make the point by self-reference. People who know that my mother’s family came from Sicily say that I am “half-Italian.” My response is to point at my waist and say: “Sono meta-siciliano, qua e giu” (I am half Sicilian, from here down). The lack of response to my comment made me think that everyone thought I made a crude remark. What I meant was that a person can’t be half anything. Even with complex combinations we are whole things, just like Italians and Italy. The What?, Where?, When?



and How? of Italianita has always been in question. I had suggested more than a decade ago that its meaning was contested by the “dark-skinned” beauty of Denny Mendez (Miss Italy 1996). She was a naturalized Italian citizen from the Dominican Republic where her mother had married an Italian. Two contest judges had been suspended for (incorrectly) saying, that a black woman could not represent Italian beauty. Despite some forms of cultural myopia, Italians do have an eye for beauty and one-third of the million Italians who voted in the pageant gave their nod to Mendez. At the time, Prime Minister Romano Prodi commented on the results by saying “Italy is changing.” If he was an historian rather than an economist he would have noted that half a millennium ago a quasi-Italian Cristobal Colon (Cristoforo Colombo) discovered Santo Domingo (on the island of Hispaniola) and may have left some of his DNA behind. His brother Bartolomé Colón (Bartolomeo Colombo) founded the settlement and Santo Domingo was also the hometown of Don Diego Colón, Christopher’s son who was the viceroy of the colony. Maybe Ms Mendez’ Italy roots come from her mother’s and not her father’s side.

If we think about how the rest of the world contributed to making Italy Italian and not just how Italy contributed to the rest of the world, we might realize that a lot of “Italian” things aren’t really all that Italian. For example, the most iconic of Italian foods pasta (pasta), tomatoes (pomodori), and for northerners - polenta (polenta) have foreign origins. If Italians are what they eat, then most are indigenous Americans and Asians. If we add the cultural and genetic exchanges from Imperially German and culturally Greek Romans to the lavishly “Oriental” Venetians, as well as the light and dark contributions of the Normans and the Saracens, not to mention the unanticipated 20th century consequences of 19th century Italian adventures in Africa, one could suggest that maybe Italy never was (really isn’t) Italian at all. In that case Italicity isn’t local, global or glocal, it’s cosmic (cosmico). With this understanding Silvio Berlusconi and even Umberto Bossi might solve the foreigner problem in Italy by re-defining the immigrant invaders and the “G2s” (Seconde Generazioni) as the return of long lost tribes of italici.

As Piero Bassetti well understands, Italians may want (or perhaps “need”) to stretch the limits of Italicity but closer to home, they have real problems with dealing with their neighbors. Italy is divided, north south, dark, light, rich, poor, g1, g2, g3, etcetera, etcetera... Maybe first they (we) should learn to get along at home before spreading out into the global village. As I have argued, even though Italian Americans are well integrated in America, they are still distinct. And despite their disunity, they are united by positive and negative stereotypes about who they are. The fact that representations of Italian Americans are contradictory is expected because Italian America, is extremely diverse and increasingly so. Italy is also changing rapidly and struggling to reach consensus on who is, and is not, Italian. Italy has always been diverse, even if unrecognized as multicultural with its newest mixture. Italians and Italian Americans must reach out to everyone who can be tied to Italy while simultaneously opening themselves to others who share their basic values. As both become more diverse, old outmoded and narrowly circumscribed notions of Italianita must also change. If not Italian Americans, Italians and even the mighty Italici, like the dinosaurs, will become extinct.



## **Links**

[1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/5394dscn24171227756842jpg>