Italian Passages. Thoughts from the 40th AIHA Annual Conference

George De Stefano (November 11, 2007)

The recent AHIA 40th Annual Conference eschew the language of nostalgia and “filiopietistic triumphalism” in favor of critical engagement with the complexities and heterogeneity of the Italian American past and present.

The air in Denver, Colorado may be thin and dry. But there was more than enough intellectual oxygen at this year’s AIHA conference to offset the climatic challenges of “the mile-high city.”

Academics and independent scholars from across the United States, and from Canada and Italy, attended the Denver conference, the 40th that AIHA has held since its founding in 1966. The conference’s panels and roundtables explored the far-ranging experiences of Italians in America, their diverse histories and cultural expressions.

There were sessions about immigrant communities in Appalachia, upstate New York, the Midwest, Colorado and the Western frontier. Others focused on the work of authors Mario Puzo, Don De Lillo, Tina De Rosa, and John Fante, “de-constructing” the Italian American family, the movement of Italian American rappers known as “hip-wop,” the politics of Columbus Day, gay Italian Americans and their families, the constructed “authenticity” of celebrity chef Mario Batali’s cucina italiana, and the legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti.

There also were poetry and fiction readings, performance pieces, and documentary films. The two documentaries I viewed deserve wide exposure: Circe Accursi Strum’s and Randolph Lewis’ “Texas Tavola,” a fascinating account of St. Joseph Day celebrations among Sicilian-Americans in Bryan, Texas, and Anthony Fragola’s “Un Bellissimo Ricordo,” a moving profile of the late Felicia Impastato, mother of the murdered Sicilian anti-Mafia activist Peppino Impastato.

The scholarly and artistic work on display at Denver not only flouted the reductive stereotypes of Italian Americans all too common in American society; it also demonstrated the vitality and intellectual rigor of Italian American studies. The Little Italies established in the new world by immigrants may have either disappeared or continue to exist only as tourist destinations. But the disappearance of these geographically-based communities and their traditions hardly means the demise of Italian America. As scholarship presented in Denver made evident, Italian American identity not only has survived but continues to evolve, sometimes in unpredictable and surprising ways.

Paola Sensi-Isolani, professor of Anthropology and Sociology at St. Mary's College of California, offered a perspective on the conference’s theme, “Making and Thinking History,” that resonated powerfully with me. In her keynote address, she spoke of her “attempt to look at the underside of the past and the present, to question glossed-over representations of the immigrant experience, to ask for more than filiopietistic triumphalism, to remember those Italian immigrants who dared to speak out against the powerful, those who were anticlerical, the women, the union activists, the anarchists and radicals, the priests and nuns in isolated parishes, and just the simple forgotten Italian immigrants…In short, to look at both the people who claim history as their own and the people for whom history, for economic, political, or ideological reasons, is often suppressed or omitted from conventional studies.”

Sensi-Isolani’s approach – questioning, iconoclastic, and radical – offers a potent antidote to nostalgia and sentimentality about the past. It recognizes the complexities of history that celebratory narratives of ethnic experience often conceal or deny. It encourages critical inquiry and skepticism about received wisdom, and particularly about monolithic and exclusionary conceptions of Italian American history and identity.

Her words struck a chord in me not only because they made eminent sense but also because they reflected, and validated, my own perspective and my work in the field of Italian Americana.

Being openly gay, left-wing and atheist, I have often felt at odds not only with the “prominenti” who claim to represent Italian Americans but also with prevailing conceptions of people of Italian origins as politically conservative, family-oriented (and “amorally” familial), and Roman Catholic. Ethnic boosterism, and the notion that I owed allegiance to members of my tribe simply because we were of the same ethnicity, always turned me off.

Sensi-Isolani’s evocation of rebels and nonconformists, of those whose lives have been forgotten or hidden from history, is consistent with my sense of italianità – and my own history as the grandson of

immigrant radicals. When I was an angry and impatient young left-winger, my mother would exclaim, “You sound just like my father,” with a mix of pride and apprehension – pride because she honored his radicalism, apprehension because he suffered for his politics, including being fired from jobs due to his labor agitation, and she didn’t want that to happen to me.

My Sicilian grandfather was one of “those Italian immigrants who dared to speak out against the powerful,” but I know his life and struggles only in fragments, in memories of conversations we had when I was very young – I can recall him heatedly denouncing the Vietnam war and its capitalist profiteers -- and from my parents’ recollections dealt out piecemeal, while we were a tavola. He used to have Italian-language radical newspapers and other publications, but at some point they all were lost.

I know I will not be able to reconstruct my grandfather’s life from the fragments I have inherited. I feel a sense of loss and frustration over these lacunae in a history both familial and collective. But my contribution to the Denver conference was a paper about another Italian American radical whose life can be documented, as he, formerly a prominent public figure, is still alive and eager to share his remembrances.

Frank Barbaro is to me emblematic of a milieu that the late Philip Cannistraro called “the lost world of Italian American radicalism.” Born in Brooklyn to southern Italian immigrant parents, Barbaro, now 80, was a leftist longshoreman on the gangster-ridden New York docks during the 1950s, organized tenants and lead rent strikes, got elected to the New York State Assembly as an anti-war candidate while the Vietnam conflict raged (his 26-year tenure included chairmanship of the Assembly’s Labor committee), and served six years as a New York State Supreme Court justice.

As a legislator Barbaro represented Bensonhurst, Brooklyn while it was still a predominantly Italian American enclave not exactly known as a hotbed of radicalism. Yet the district’s voters repeatedly returned him to office, his militant and unapologetic leftism notwithstanding. Socialist, pro-choice, pro-gay rights and anti-death penalty, Barbaro succeeded in electoral politics because he delivered needed services for his mainly working class constituents while also building coalitions among the various constituencies for progressive social change.

Frank Barbaro, an “ethnic” politician who never pandered to ethnocentrism, has shown that an elected official can serve – and maintain – his base while pursuing an expansive agenda. His progressive populism, however, is not sui generis; rather, it is rooted in an Italian American radical history whose exemplary figures include Congressman Vito Marcantonio, labor organizer Peter Panto, Fiorello La Guardia, and many others, both those whom history remembers and those whose stories, like my own grandfather’s, have been obscured or forgotten.

As AIHA’s Denver conference demonstrated, the association is a “big tent” that accommodates scholars from diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and viewpoints. If AIHA is, as past president Anthony Tamburri has claimed, “the only organic voice for/of Italian America,” it is because its members eschew the language of nostalgia and “filiopietistic triumphalism” in favor of critical engagement with the complexities and heterogeneity of the Italian American past and present.

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