



Making Italians All Over Again

Robert Viscusi (October 02, 2007)



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When the Risorgimento finally succeeded in joining the many parts of Italy into a single nation, Massimo D'Azeglio remarked, "We have made Italy, now we must make Italians."

... People concerned about the new country knew what he meant. Subjects of the new kingdom often could not understand one another's way of speaking. They ate different foods, wore different clothes. They feared each other's differences. The new Queen, going from Turin to Naples for the first time, was surprised to find that Neapolitans were people, as she said to her husband, "just like us."

During their history as subjects of a single king and, later, as citizens of a single republic, Italians have often exhibited a degree of doubt about who really counted as one of them.

We know of many efforts to overcome this doubt. The national language has been a political project since the 1870s. In the 1890s, the prime minister Francesco Crispi conducted a doomed program of "wars and empire" as a way of getting the inhabitants of Italy's intensely local localities to see themselves as members of a collective enterprise. In the 1920s and 30s, Fascism conducted many energetic campaigns in almost every avenue of daily social reproduction in its effort to mould Italians into a single political culture.

This was uphill work. After the 50s, television made it easy. Today, even in the poorest and most remote villages, local languages and customs have long since begun to acquire the paradoxical luster belonging to spectacles produced for the delight of tourists. For several decades now, young people have been learning the national language and its prefabricated culture from many sources: children's programs, evening newscasts, annual song competitions at San Remo.

Now, however, even national Italian culture is beginning to seem provincial and outmoded. The European Union, new patterns of migration, and the Internet are rocking Italy's world. Many forces have suddenly conspired to propose the question again: who is an Italian now?

i-Italy is a site where anyone may present an answer to this question. Who will want to? There are



people who think of themselves as Italians in Perth, Bogota, Vancouver, Irkutsk, Queens. What music do they like? What languages do they speak? What will their videos show us? What do they want to tell us? Is it a time to make Italians all over again?

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