Becoming Italian in the US: Through the Lens of Life Narratives

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Sociologist Francis Ianni suggests that immigrants from Italy and their children lacked an ethnic identity based on their common national ancestry when they came to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. In his view, when they eventually acquired the consciousness of being Italian, such an outcome was "an invention of the new world" (202). Ianni's interpretation of the changes in Italian Americans' ethnicity resulting from their interaction with the adopted society can be easily placed in a broader perspective with implications for other immigrant communities in the US as well. Italian Americans, not unlike other immigrant groups, are subject to two widely-held notions about ethnicity in the US: first, that an individual's attachment to his or her ethnic group undergoes a process of transformation over time, and second, that the social boundaries of an ethnic minority are continuously re-negotiated through real-life encounters.

Furthermore, in the last few decades, the category of ethnicity as a social or a cultural construction has been central not only to sociological research like Ianni's but also to other disciplines (Steinberg; Vecoli; Waters; Conzen et al.). In particular, Werner Sollors contends that ethnic affiliation is less a matter of descent than a question of consent. In his deconstructionist approach, he also shows that the notion of ethnic identity as a state of the mind is expressed in symbols in literary texts (Beyond Ethnicity; The Invention of Ethnicity). Indeed, narratives are a means as apt as so-
cial behavior to reveal the changing meaning of ethnic identity over time. The purpose of this essay is to examine Italian Americans’ autobiographical accounts and narrative sources in order to cast further light on the process that Ianni describes from his sociological standpoint.

The survival of strong regional and local identities was the legacy of Italy’s belated unification in the second half of the nineteenth century (Putnam 18). Such a delay caused the Italians to retain a sense of attachment to their origins that hardly went beyond the borders of their native regions, provinces, or even villages. It also split the population of the peninsula along lines of local origins and fuelled the flames of subnational rivalries among people of disparate geographical extractions. Separate villages often meant separate worlds. As author Maria Laurino points out, even “towns only about forty miles apart. . . had a distinct dialect, nurtured for centuries by separate cultural influences and foreign rule” (102).

Immigrants carried such divisions to the US and usually kept fellow countrymen from different geographical backgrounds at arm’s length. A number of eyewitnesses stress the lack of ethnic homogeneity within what superficial observers regarded as being cohesive Italian settlements in American cities. Consular officer Luigi Villari, for instance, argues that, in turn-of-the-century New York City’s Little Italy, “Some neighborhoods are inhabited exclusively by newcomers from a given region; we can find only Sicilians in a street, only people from Calabria in another street, and immigrants from Abruzzi in a third one. There are even streets where only individuals from a single town live” (216). Marie Di Mario similarly observes that “an Italian seldom refers to himself as an Italian among his compatriots; he identifies himself with a tiny town. . . . differences in dialect, food, and occupation tend to segregate provincial groups. . . . Each group lives its own life, has its own leaders, celebrates its own holidays” (19).

Among other factors, the retention of a disparate range of local Italian dialects prevented newcomers from reaching out to Italians from other regions and helped the survival of the breakdown of each Little Italy into subnational enclaves. Novelist Jerre Mangione, for example, maintains that “my parents made it a strict rule
that we speak nothing but Sicilian while we were at home” (“My Experience” 67). He also remarks that his fellow Sicilians hardly interacted with people who were not of their ancestral island: “Nearly all their business and social life was conducted in their own native language. In a world filled with forestieri whose language and customs were incomprehensible, they depended on one another's company even more than they had in Sicily” (“My Experience” 69).

Italian immigrants’ resorting to dialects and their fragmentation in everyday life along local lines also resulted in a lack of communication that enhanced regional antipathies. The reminiscences of Joseph Napoli, a second-generation Sicilian, offers a case in point of the local rivalries and misconceptions that affected the lives of Italian newcomers in the US. Napoli recalls that his mother, a native of San Biagio in the province of Messina, looked on fellow Sicilians from Palermo with scorn. With even greater vehemence, she despised Italians from other regions:

Her special detestation was reserved for the Neapolitans. . . . She hated them openly. . . . With the index and little finger of her left hand she threw “corni”—horns—at their home or when she saw them in the distance. She crossed the street to avoid walking near the house or near them, thus eluding their malice and their own potent evil eye. She hoped the horns would cause the malefactors to be stricken with indescribable diseases, the unmarried daughters to be impregnated by devils, and the family reduced to beggary. (58-59)

That kind of bigotry was not confined to Southern Italians. Northerners shared such prejudicial views, too. Rosa Cavalleri, an immigrant from the Lombard village of Bugiarno, who arrived in Chicago in the early twentieth century, discloses an attitude that differs from Napoli’s mother only in the targets of her contempt: “The people from Toscana they’re not good like the people from Lombardia. But they’re not bad like the people from Sicilia. . . . The people from Piemonte are a little more bad than the people from Lombardia, but they come next. Lombardia is the last in the world to do wrong things” (Ets 209). In her opinion, Sicilians were not even Italians (Ets 232).
Literary works add further insights. In John Fante's partially autobiographical *1933 Was a Bad Year*, Bettina, Dominic Molise's paternal grandmother from Abruzzi, and his mother from Potenza reveal an attitude that places them in the same camp as Napoli's mother and Rosa Cavalleri: "In Grandma Bettina's opinion, the Potenzese... were the most ridiculous people in the world... To the Abruzzese, the people of Potenza were some kind of a national joke, as if they lived in tilted houses and were all dwarf... Mama clicked her tongue patiently, for the Potenzese look down on the Abruzzese, too" (19). Likewise, in *Mount Allegro*, Italian immigrants from outside Sicily perceive Sicilians as a bunch of criminals, which prompts author Jerre Mangione's father to remark: "It is bad enough for an Italian to commit a murder, but it is far worse when a Sicilian does" (5). Still, he, too, is prejudiced against newcomers from Carrapipi. As Mangione puts it, "In the event the murderer turns out to be Sicilian, my father would solemnly announce that the criminal undoubtedly came from Carrapipi, a small town in Sicily which—according to my relatives—produced nothing but a population of thieves, blackmailers and murderers" (5). Other Sicilians usually accused the newcomers from Carrapipi of being unable to "speak the Sicilian dialect properly" (6). His relatives' bias against the people from this Sicilian town was so strong that Mangione ended up imaging Carrapipi "to be an island cut off from civilization and inhabited wholly by desperate characters whose chief ambition was to get to Rochester and prey on the natives there" (6).

Mangione's retrospective irony fails to conceal that the US establishment frequently denigrated all Italian immigrants regardless of their different geographical extractions in their native country. The WASP mainstream also ascribed the criminal behavior that supposedly characterized Sicilians in general or the people from Carrapipi in particular to all Italians (*Mount Allegro* 7, 14). Indeed, Anglo-Saxons as well as other immigrant minorities were usually unable to realize Italian newcomers' subnational differences. As Di Mario points out, "homogeneous as this population may appear to outsiders, any self-respecting Italian would explosively denounce the artless lumping together of representatives of eighteen regions, which, with their independent historical background, are further
carved into about four times as many provinces and about one hundred times as many comuni" (19).

Notwithstanding immigrants' local sense of pride, ethnic discrimination bothered Italian newcomers. As latecomers to the United States among the nationality groups of European origin, Italians fell easy prey to ethnic intolerance and bigotry. Writing his diary in 1904, Camillo Cianfarra was confident that the second generation would eventually win accommodation within US society. Yet he also acknowledged that turn-of-the-twentieth-century Italian newcomers were victims of harassment: they were called "dagos," a disparaging term for Italian, they were accused of being dirty, and they were charged with resorting to the knife in case of personal controversies (99-100).

Geraldine Ferraro, the 1984 Democratic vice presidential candidate, is an example of a second-generation Italian who eventually made it as Cianfarra had forecast. Still, looking back on her mother's immigration experience in the early twentieth century, Ferraro, too, emphasizes the anti-Italian bias in the US:

Italian immigrants, especially from the south, were considered inherently lower class by other Americans, and they were a common target of abuse. In New York, where the Irish were more established and controlled the Catholic Church and the political machinery, discrimination against Italian Americans was codified—expressed both formally and informally. (28)

Indeed, especially the Irish were most confrontational toward Italian immigrants. Mangione, for example, recalls that the Irish forced Italians to sit in segregated sections in movie theaters and that Irish gangs assaulted Italian students on their way to school in some neighborhoods in Philadelphia (Mangione and Morreale 153). Ethnic prejudice affected individuals from Italian backgrounds especially in the workplace. As Rose Vigilante recalls about working conditions at a laundry in Morristown, New Jersey, in the 1910s, "The Irish girls worked upstairs on the street level, ironing rich people's fancy clothes. We Italian girls worked in the basement, doing the flat work, folding pillow cases, handkerchiefs, and sheets" (Costanzo 82). Actually, almost all working-class Italian immigrants' memoirs include references to job discrimination.
Pasquale Spagnuolo, for instance, remembers that for his father, who had landed in New York in 1913 and found a job on the waterfront, “working conditions on the docks were terrible. The Irish foreman forced the workers to give him 25 cents a week under the table, or else be out of work” (15).

However, the common experience of facing discrimination on the part of other groups because of their national origin eventually caused Italian immigrants to close ranks and to develop a sense of ethnic identity based on their Italianness in the interwar years. As Max Ascoli, an anti-Fascist exile who came to the US in 1931, observes, “they were unified into a ‘national’ block by the other Americans with whom they came to live and who called all of them Italians—or rather ‘Wops,’” another derogatory term newcomers from Italy were usually referred to (46).

The emergence of nationalistic sentiments also helped the acquisition of a self-perception that was rooted in Italians’ attachment to their mother country. In view of the ethnic bigotry that they had to face upon arrival in the US, these immigrants considered for decades their Italian origins to be a stigma from which they had to distance themselves if they wanted to get assimilated into their host society. Yet the outbreak of World War I and especially the intervention of the US on the side of Italy against the Austro-Hungarian and German empires changed the reception of the Italian immigrants in the eyes of the US public opinion. While Italy and the US were allies in the conflict, the national background of the Italian newcomers became acceptable and was no longer a kind of social original sin. As a result, Italians felt free to claim their Italianness and to give voice to their nationalism (Pallovicini passim).

Fascism further galvanized the national consciousness of the Italian immigrants and their offspring after Benito Mussolini’s rise to power in 1922. The dictator’s aggressive foreign policy, which had supposedly turned Italy into a great power, pleased many Italian immigrants and their children. Most of them rejoiced over the alleged achievements of Mussolini’s regime out of a sense of ethnic redress after suffering from ethnic discrimination in the US for their being supposedly an inferior people. After Italy had apparently become a mighty country, they were glad to identify them-
selves with their fatherland. Even prominent anti-Fascists in the US acknowledged the role of fascism in cementing the Italian identity and the nationalistic feelings of the members of the Little Italys nationwide. In his recollections as an exile, for instance, Gaetano Salvemini maintains that

[The immigrants] arrived in America illiterate, barefoot, and carrying a knapsack. . . . They were treated with contempt by everybody because they were Italians. And now even the Americans told them that Mussolini had turned Italy into a mighty country, that there was no unemployment, that there was a bathroom in every apartment, that trains arrived on time, and that Italy inspired awe worldwide.” (110)

Likewise, author Constantine Panunzio offers a psychosocial interpretation for Italian Americans’ allegiance to Mussolini. In a piece for the influential *Yale Review*, he explains that:

The Fascist doctrine. . . gave them strength, endowed them with a sense of ethnic dignity and pride by proclaiming the greatness of the Italian people and of the contribution they made to culture. . . . many Italian Americans, being human and needing a prop to sustain them in a world where many people with whom they had to deal regarded them as inferior, looked on fascism as their savior. They turned to it simply as a means of recovering their sense of human importance.

(774-75)

By enhancing Italian Americans’ attachment to their ancestral country, the Duce also contributed to strengthen their sense of Italianness.

Italian Americans’ support for the Fascist regime came to a climax after Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in October 1935 and proclaimed the establishment of an Italian empire in eastern Africa in May 1936. In those months, most Italian immigrants and their offspring contributed money and gold in order to finance the Duce’s colonial venture. They also successfully lobbied Congress to prevent the United States from passing economic sanctions that could endanger Mussolini’s conquest of Ethiopia (Luconi, *La “diplo-mazia parallela”* 85-111). As Albert Peter Russo writes about the
response to fascism among members of Providence's Little Italy in his historical autobiography:

In Italy, Benito Mussolini strutted about basking in the glory of conquests over hapless North African Nations. Strains of the song, “Fac-ciata [sic] Nera,” bolstered the country’s ego, spreading overseas. Thousands of transplanted Italians rejoiced over the lyrics. Vestiges of pride in the land of their birth lingered with them. . . . There were those on Leo Avenue who thought *Il Duce* was the best thing that had happened to Italy since the introduction of the tomato plant. A small number of dissenters regarded him as a pompous despot. They kept it to themselves. (132)

The latter were really very few. Paul Pisicano, a New Yorker of Sicilian descent, remembers that, to most Italian Americans, “Mussolini was a hero, a superhero” (Terkel 138). Paul D. Pope similarly recalls that his grandfather, the owner of the New York City-based Italian-language daily *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* and an authoritative supporter of Italy’s aggression on Ethiopia, “saw Mussolini as the man who had given Italy a new international prestige.” Even Italian American anti-Fascists pointed to the *Duce’s* merits because Mussolini’s imperialistic achievements let members of the Little Italys take pride in their ethnic descent. One of them, for instance, contended that the *Duce* “enabled four million Italians in America to hold up their heads, and this is something. If you had been branded as undesirable by a quota law you would understand how much that means” (Ware 63).

Remarkably, not even World War II managed to cause the demise of Italians', recently acquired ethnic identity based on their common national ancestry. After Italy declared war on the US in December 1941, the immigrants and their children did disavow their previously prevailing Fascist allegiance. In an exhilarating passage of his *An Ethnic at Large*, Mangione recalls a Philadelphia “judge, a father figure in the Italian-American community, outdoing the others in histrionic gestures, [who] actually ripped open his shirt and beat his hirsute breast with clenched fists as he declared his undying love for the United States and democracy. . . . no one dared remind the judge that only a few years before he had accepted a Fascist decoration from Mussolini in person” (305).
Nonetheless the repudiation of Mussolini’s regime did not involve severing Italians’ ties to their ancestral country. Rather, the newcomers and their offspring continued to cherish their Italian roots, especially because they retained relatives and friends in their native land. Notwithstanding their patriotic support for the military efforts of Washington as well as their loyal stand against fascism and Nazism, the war between the US and Italy was anathema to most Italians. Pietro Riccobaldi, an activist of the Democratic Party in New York City, remembers how hard it was for him to campaign for the party of President Franklin D. Roosevelt among Italian Americans after the outbreak of the conflict between Rome and Washington:

To these people the war was not against fascism and nazism, against Mussolini and Hitler, but against Italy, their real motherland. Campaigning for the Democratic Party was not easy... as soon as they heard Roosevelt’s name they got angry and threw me out of their houses. “Shame on you,” they said. “You go around to tell us to vote for that damned cripple who sent our sons to kill our people.” (125)

Such feelings were so widespread that World War II witnessed a significant drop in the vote for Roosevelt out of resentment for the president’s policy toward Italy not only in New York City’s Little Italy but also in almost all the Italian American communities throughout the nation (Luconi, “La partecipazione politica” 496-97).

Many Italian American narratives provide additional evidence of how World War II failed to undermine the identification of most immigrants and their children with their ancestral land. The reaction of journalist Gay Talese’s father to the news that the Allies had razed the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino, a sanctuary located between Rome and Naples, epitomizes the bonds of affection that still linked Italian Americans to the country of their origin. Talese writes that as soon as his father learnt of the bombing raid, he immediately proceeded to destroy two dozen replicas of American fighter planes that were his son’s pride (627-29). Joe Vergara’s account of his youth, Love and Pasta, offers another example of Italian Americans’ attachment to their parents’ land. The
son of Italian immigrants, Vergara is torn by conflicts when he joins the US army during World War II. In spite of his loyalty to the US, he muses:

I wondered how I would react if I was sent to Italy. Could I treat Italians as enemies—men just like Il Lungo, The Gink, Compa' Francesco? Would I be able to pull the trigger if I saw one of Pop’s compa’s through the gun sight? When the time came, I told myself, I would do what I had to. But, all the same, I wondered. (170)

Italian Americans were aware that, as Maria De Paoli Friedlander remembers, their “native land had joined the wrong side” in World War II (81). Yet ethnic identity was so strong even as late as the early 1940s that they would rather not fight against people whom they still considered to be fellow countrymen. Sergio Campailla recalls that, to the ordinary Italian American, waging war against Italy was like “waging war against himself” (61).

Helen Barolini similarly re-appropriated her ethnic identity after dissociating herself from anything Italian whether Mussolini or doing shopping “in grocery stores that smelled of strong cheese and salamis” (“A Circular Journey” 111). Yet, as in the case of Tina (who sticks to the family tradition of planting rosemary but finds nothing she can relate to in her great-grandmother’s birthplace) in the semi-autobiographical bildungsroman Umbertina, Barolini’s quest for Italianness has eventually led her to a notion of symbolic ethnicity à la Gans. As Barolini acknowledges, commenting on the desires of other present-day Italian American women like herself in their real lives: “We wanted the look of tweed and tartan and not the embroideries of our grandmothers’ Italian bed linens; we wanted a Cape Cod cottage for our dream house, not some stuccoed villino with arches and tomatoes in the backyard” (“Introduction” 20). According to Barolini, even her mother “found her way back to her heritage . . . starting in her kitchen” (Festa 52). This reference to food as a means of identity building further corroborates Gans’s theory about the symbolic characterization of Italian Americans’ self-perception.

Like the longing for assimilation of Marguerite’s father, who replies to his daughter’s question about their ethnic identity in Umbertina by saying, “We’re Americans” (150), Gilbert’s and De
Torgovnick’s intermarriages reveal Italian Americans’ growing integration with the US mainstream in key decisions in life. In particular, Torgovnick discloses how the acquisition of whiteness made many Italian Americans in the Bensonhurst district of New York City, including her own father, insensitive to the 1989 killing of a young African American within their neighborhood (3-18). Moreover, to Torgovnick, Crossing Ocean Parkway, the street dividing working-class Italian American Bensonhurst where she was born from the middle-class Jewish American neighborhood into which she married, is not merely an effort to move up but also what Werner Sollors would call a “passing for white” (Neither Black 247) that is strictly related to her longing for upward social mobility.

In conclusion, Italian Americans’ autobiographical and narrative sources contain a number of insights that reveal the transformation of the contents of ethnicity for the people of Italian descent in the US during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Italian immigrants and their children were latecomers to the acquisition of a single ethnic identity based on their common national extraction. They developed it in the interwar years from preexisting subnational senses of attachment that had characterized their experience upon arrival in America but that were unable to survive the confrontation with widespread anti-Italian bigotry and discrimination in US society. When they eventually came to think of themselves as Italians, this new ethnic consciousness was hard to eradicate and succeeded in outliving the outbreak of the military conflict between Italy and the US during World War II.

While ethnic defensiveness was key to the forging of an Italian identity among immigrants of Italian birth and their children, informal and negotiated participation in the discourses of whiteness has helped empower the subsequent generations and has let their members overcome most of the challenges their parents and grandparents previously faced (Alba). As Paul Pisicano recalls, antagonism with Blacks was key to Italian Americans’ accommodation within US society:

There were riots in Harlem in ’45. I remember standing on a corner, a guy would throw the door open and say, “Come on down.” They were
goin’ to Harlem to get in the riot. They’d say, “Let’s beat up some niggers.” It was wonderful. It was new. The Italo-Americans stopped being Italo and started becoming Americans. We joined the group. Now we’re like you guys, right? (Terkel 141-42)

As such, the experience of Italian Americans resembles that of other immigrant groups of European descent such as the Irish and the Jews (Ignatiev; Brodkin), who have similarly come to develop a symbolic sense of ethnicity that is generally confined to leisure time activities such as eating ethnic food or traveling to one’s ancestral country (Gans), and to share the benefit of their whiteness (Lipsitz).

Ethnicity has remained a central theme in contemporary Italian American narratives. However, as time has separated younger generations from the immigrant experience of their parents and grandparents, the focus has shifted from the elaboration of an Italian identity out of pre-existing subnational self-images to the rediscovery of Italianness after its obliteration or rejection under the pressure of ethnic bigotry and intolerance. After adopting her Irish husband’s last name in order to “rub out my foreignness” and to be “lifted up and away from my own Italian self,” poet Maria Mazziotti Gillan “took back” her own Italian ancestry. So did Sandra Montola Gilbert and Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, who had previously thought of their Jewish spouses’ surnames as viable protection against the stereotypes underlying their own national descent.

Works Cited


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