



Towards an Italian American Curriculum - Lampedusa's "The Leopard" is a Pedagogical Gold Mine

Tom Verso (May 27, 2009)



With only 9% of Italian Americans over 18 in college and 70% have an education level of less than a bachelor's degree, the time is long overdue to consider curriculum changes to inspire and support Italian American students at all levels of education

At Italian American scholarly shows,



Outside Cassandra forebodes:

"Where did Italian American students go?"

The literati think the pizzels a bit brittle,

And laugh at Chicken Little.

Italian Americans and college education

According to U.S. Census data, in the year 2004 there were 12.1 million Americans of Italian descent 18 years of age or older, and 1.1 million Italian Americans were enrolled in college at any level. Given that high school graduation age is generally about 18, we can say 9% ($1.1 / 12.1 * 100$) of Italian Americans 18 years or older were in college in 2004. Also, 70% had an education level of less than a bachelor's degree (see Calandra website for this census data: <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/calandra/research/pdf/pressrelcensus.pdf>)

Call me Chicken Little if you will, but I think those numbers imply a crisis in Italian American culture. I don't understand why Italian American literati are not having conferences and mobilizing a movement to deal with this 'crisis'. They seem preoccupied with any number of social issues except the education of our children. For example, consider the number of articles that have appeared in ilitaly.org on the issues of Catholic sexuality, Italy's crime and Italy's politics. Then compare those numbers with the number of articles dealing with the education of Italian Americans.

Education and employment

If nothing else, the low numbers of college educated implies that in the coming years and decades, our presents in the professions (medicine, law, education, etc) will be negligible. Further, given that the professions represent the highest paying jobs, it seems reasonable to expect that our standard of living will decrease. The only work available to us will be low paying jobs not requiring higher education. This much, we can be certain.

Education and culture

What is not known, and perhaps more importantly ("money isn't everything"), is how the lack of higher education will affect Italian American culture. Historically, ours is an impoverished illiterate peasant culture where history and values were passed on from one generation to the next by family



instruction and community experience. Formal education was not a necessary condition for cultural preservation. However, in a technological mass media society, a major, if not the major, cultural input comes from mass media (TV, movies, ipods, etc.). Accordingly, without higher education, which opens cultural alternatives to mass media and teaches critical thinking skills necessary to critique mass media, the culturalization of our people will essentially be left largely to non- (indeed anti-) Italian American mass media producers.

Further, the correlates of higher education are such that few of our people will know Ciardi's poetry, or Paglia's philosophy, or Sanmartino's "Veiled Christ", or Scotto's operatics, or..., etc. The culture of Italian Americana will likely be a very shallow mass media culture; in no way approaching the magnificence's of the mother country.

Essentially, the problem is two fold with possibly one solution. First, Italian Americans are not learning their history and culture. Second, they are not motivated to go to college. The solution, it seems to me, is to develop and implement an Italian American curriculum. Such a curriculum, by definition, will teach students their history and culture. Also, it MAY (hopefully) instill a pride in their culture and love of letters that will motivate them to study and go on to college and graduate school. How can we affect an Italian American curriculum?

Curriculums and Lessons

A curriculum consists of a set of individual lessons. The curriculum for world history, for example, consists of a set of individual lessons about specific events and societies (e.g. lesson(s) on the French Revolution, lesson(s) on the Reformation, etc). Similarly, literature curriculums are a set of lessons about the literature of various periods and societies (e.g. lesson(s) on Elizabethan literature, lesson(s) on American Romantics(s), etc).

Accordingly, it would not be unreasonable to expect that SOME lessons be inserted into those curriculums about Italian history (e.g. Risorgimento), Italian American history (e.g. urban village life), and literature (e.g. Verga, di Donato).

Also, in most high school history and literature curriculums there are requirements for independent studies. In history courses students pick a topic for a research paper. Similarly, in literature courses students pick books to read and report on. Again, it is reasonable to expect that Italian American students would have the option, indeed be encouraged, to select independent study topics from Italian and Italian American history and literature.

Literati and Methods of Curriculum Changes

Such reasonable expectations for curriculum changes will remain just that (expectations), unless Italian American literati, community leaders and politicians aggressively promote such curriculum modifications. But, the impetus must come from the literati.

At the college level, the *literati* have the power to affect change through their professional organizations, and in the case of Italian American notables (e.g. emeritus professors) through their personal prestige.

In the public schools, governments largely dictate school curriculums. Accordingly, Italian American politicians are the basis of change. However, politicians are not teachers and scholars. They are dependent upon the *literati* to guide them about the content of recommended curriculum changes.

For example, on January 31, 2008 Anthony Portantino introduced in the California State Assembly the "The Italian American Education Bill" which states: "This bill, encourages schools to include in their instruction the role and contribution of Italian Americans and require the State Board of Education to include the role and contribution of Italian Americans in the curriculum frameworks in the social sciences... (Coauthors: Assembly Members Galgiani and Plescia, Senator Perata)"

This is the type of political action that is needed to bring about curriculum changes in public schools. However, the curriculum recommendations must go beyond simple list of and biographical notes about "Rich and Famous" Italians and Italian Americans. The lessons in the history and literature curriculums must be substantive in-depth studies of the history and culture of our people. Italian American teachers and scholars must provide politicians with the substance for recommended curriculum changes.

Illustration of Italian American curriculum change

Giuseppe di Lampedusa's novel "The Leopard" is a pedagogical gold mine of Italian history and culture instructional material for high school through graduate school.

At the high school level, "The Leopard" lends itself to teaching basic concepts of literature. It is written in a very readable idiom and the plot is basically linear and not difficult to follow. The novel is an excellent vehicle for teaching all the concepts required of most high school literature curriculums: theme, plot, figurative language, protagonist, narrator, point of view, etc.

At the same time, by reading "The Leopard", students will get exposed to one of the most important events in world history and the most important event in modern Italian and Italian American history – the *Risorgimento*! They will be presented with the 19th century feudal class character of Sicily, the politics of northern vs. southern Italy, and the culture (e.g. the religion, dinners, Balls, etc.). In short, after reading the novel, Italian American students will know something about the characters, events and culture that brought their families to America and formed the basis of Italian American culture.

While the novel lends itself to high school education, it has enough depth for teaching undergraduate and graduate literature. The novel can be used to teach the concepts of subplots and time shifts, delve more deeply into the figurative language, the psychology of the characters,



the great debates between the various schools of literary criticism (e.g. neo-realism, neo-avantgarde, etc.) used to critique novel, the Nietzschean philosophic paradox "everything must change so Sicily can remain the same", etc.

Of course, the proverbial 'icing on the cake': Luchino Visconti made "The Leopard" into an incredible movie, which won the coveted Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. The scenes of 19th Century Sicily, the dynamics between the aristocrat, merchant and peasant, the costuming, food, etc. all lend themselves to instructing Italian American students about their heritage.

The sum, the study of "The Leopard" meets all instructional goals and objectives from high school to graduate school. At the same time it will help Italian American students answer the question: "What does it mean to be Italian?"

Conclusion

Needless to say, "The Leopard" is only one such book that can be introduced into the literature and history curriculums at all levels of education. Each would at minimum teach Italian American students their history. Hopefully, such lessons would motivate students to study the Italian language and pursue higher education.

All of these types of Italian consciousness raising lessons can be implemented without any major revolutionary changes in the goals, objectives and curriculums of any school district or college history and literature departments. The curriculums like Sicily, as the Leopard observes, "can change and remain the same".

However, no changes can happen unless Italian American literati develop curriculum recommendations and lobby politicians, community leaders and department heads to implement the changes. Italian American literati must decide: Is it Cassandra or Chicken Little admonishing outside their convention halls, and how will they respond? They have a heavy responsibility – indeed!

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