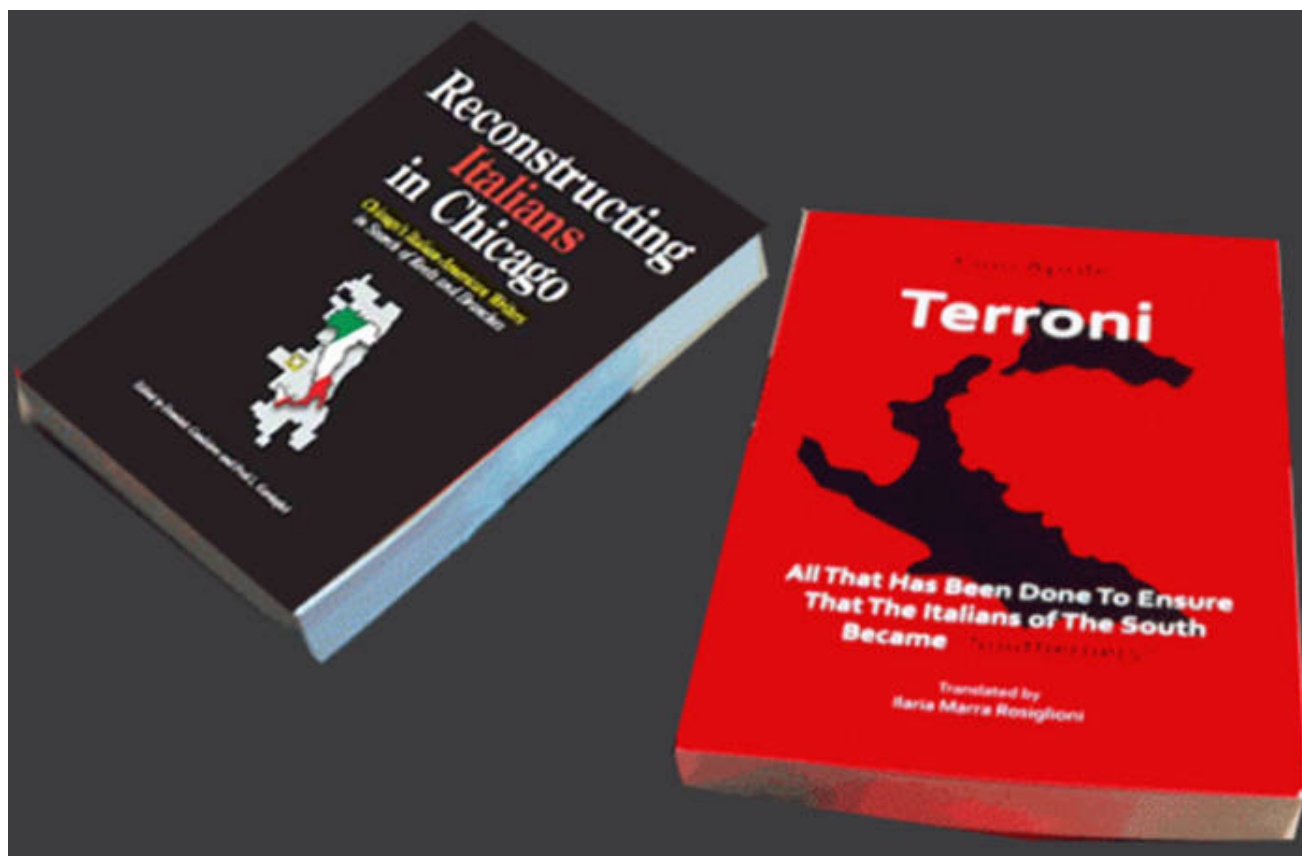


## Pino Aprile's "Terroni"- A Review

Tom Verso (November 06, 2011)



The simultaneous publication of "Reconstructing Italians in Chicago" (Italian Cultural Center, 2011), and the English translation of "Terroni" (Bordighera Press, 2011) is a delicious juxtaposition of the "same'o same'o" nostalgic reminiscences with hopefully a 'new historiography of the Italian American people' - a history of our people and culture south of Rome. "Roots" is in-fact NOT about the "roots" of Italian Americans, for our roots are in Italy - south of Rome. Accordingly, "Terroni" is the real history of the "roots" of the Italian American people. Would that our amazingly creative, talented and dedicated Italian American literati read it and finally stop trying to document the minutia of every family dinner, festival and street dance in our 100+ year history; instead ask themselves what is the meaning of the word "Italian" in the phrase "Italian-American"? "Terroni" goes a long way towards answering that question. Mass Media give the Italian American youth "Jersey Shore", and the Italian American literati give them "Nonna's Kitchen". No one gives our youth the "reality" of the profound history and culture they are heir's too, or the mighty Terroni from which they are descended - no one until Ilaria Marra Rosiglioni and the ILICA foundation brought us the translation of Pino Aprile's "Terroni". Let the New Historiography of the Italian American people



and culture begin now – with the breathtaking story told in this great book “Terroni”!

In Rochester, NY there is a sizable Gaeta population. Up through the 1950s, while the original circa 1900 immigrants were present, the Gaeta Society was very robust. Today, the aging children and graying grandchildren of the original immigrants keep the nostalgic remnants of that society alive. For purposes of an Italian American local history article, I interviewed some of the current members. As with all southern Italian groups, I was told about the local foods, saints, festivals and other traditions of Gaeta.

What is interesting, reflecting back on those interviews, after reading “Terroni”; in all the discussion about cultural (food and music) and history (medieval and ancient), no mention was made of “The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies”, the Bourbon King who made his last stand in Gaeta, and most especially absent was any reference to the incredible dehumanizing atrocities committed in Gaeta by the Piedmontese conquerors.

For example, Aprile writes:

“In order to place the [Gaeta] fortress under siege, [the Piedmontese general] Cialdini ordered: ‘All of the inhabitants residing outside of the fortress which constitutes four fifths of the population, to vacate the city within ten hours [after that] neither people nor objects can be carried out and the people remaining behind will be treated as though they were secret agents for the enemy’...One citizen out of every five was a target for the cannons and the remaining four became propertyless beggars...the Piedmontese shot at least one citizen of Gaeta in the main square every morning” “[Further,] in order to set up their camp, [the Piedmontese] destroyed nearly half of all the cultivated land including age-old gardens. The winter reached Siberian proportions that year and in order to heat themselves, they burned one hundred thousand olive trees. Of the original three hundred oil mills that once stood, not one remained standing. They were dismantled and moved up on Lake Garda near Verona”

“The sea trade came to an abrupt halt: three hundred merchant ships, centuries-old shipyards with two thousand employees, sixty-four fishing boats. It all came to an end...the city never recovered. For centuries, Gaeta was one of the most important cities in the world, a true capital of the sea. It was reduced to a little sea town...”

“After such violence came the emigration...There are more citizens of Gaeta in the state of Massachusetts than here” (p 40-42)

In short, the Gaeta immigrants brought no history of post-Risorgimento Gaeta. They brought recipes, holiday and religious traditions, family anecdotes but no social history of the Piedmontese invasion that give rise to the great southern Italian migration which brought them to Rochester.

This Gaeta experience is a microcosm of the whole southern-Italian American experience. The immigrants from southern-Italy never passed on the history (written or oral) of the post-Risorgimento experience. The diaspora was simply explained in terms of two variables: the pushing variable of poverty and the pulling variable of opportunity. There was poverty in Italy and there was opportunity in America – end of conversation – end of history.

The depths to which this ignorance of the later nineteenth century post-Risorgimento history has penetrated the southern-Italian American culture is measured not only by the complete absence of the oral history in the immigrant tradition, but also in the Italian American scholarly tradition. Italian American scholars never research and write the history of southern-Italian Americans before their arrival at Ellis Island; as evidenced by their professional publications and course curriculums. However, what is the most stunning point brought out in “Terroni” is that the history of the late nineteenth century post-Risorgimento has also been obliterated from the minds of southern Italians living in Italy. That southern-Italian Americans have no pre-Ellis Island history is not so terribly surprising. But, how did it come to pass that the Terroni in their homeland know virtually nothing about their history.

For example, in the first four pages of his book, Aprile begins twenty-three paragraphs with the phrase “I did not know” or words to that affect. This is a well-educated professional southern Italian who became overwhelmed by how little he knew about his Patria Meridionale. Growing up in the South, there was no oral traditions or school textbooks to inform him about the incredible history of the post-Risorgimento period.



More importantly, that history was systematically repressed. For example, consider the story of Alessandro.

"One day the brother of Alessandro's grandfather said, 'Hey boy, I gotta tell ya something. What they have written in the history books are lies. The Piedmontese did not unify Italy, they simply enlarged the Piedmont'.

"Alessandro asked himself why he told me stories that took place so long ago and in such a mysterious tone of voice ('I have told you these things, but don't go around mentioning them, not even to our family') 'It is not true that the Bourbon kings were tyrants. It is not true that the South was riddled with hunger and misery. No one left the South: at least not back then'. And why must we not mention them? 'It is not time, yet. The important thing is that you know how things really are.'

"Alessandro thought he was exaggerating, so he mentioned something to his father. He became very angry: 'Forget Uncle Salvatore. He says a lot of foolish thing.(p34)

It's as though the 'total shock and awe' delivered by the Piedmontese army was so devastating, so punishing, so humiliating that the whole population south of Rome willed themselves to forget. To remember was just too painful. Henceforth, no discussion of Gramsci's "Cultural Hegemony" will be complete without reference to "Terroni". Gramsci posited the concepts; Aprile provides the facts. Alessandro's uncle spoke in hushed tones and did not think the time had come for the truth about the Piedmontese invasions. Pino Aprile thinks the time has come and it is long overdue to bring to light the real history of the South and the implications that history has for the people and economy of the South today; for the South is still suffering the consequences of that invasion (i.e. not unification).

Mr. Aprile has told this story with a truly masterful work of meticulous document history. He has not only mastered the 'Historian's Craft', he also has the 'Touch of a Poet.' The text exudes a unique combination of cold logic and heated passion. Olive groves and highways become extended metaphors for history and political economy. This is a great read!

Thanks to Ilaria Marra Rosiglioni and the Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance foundation for the translation. The Italian American literati almost certainly will continue to write histories of 'nonna's kitchen', but no longer have the excuse they do not know about the historic conditions giving rise to the great diaspora - Rosiglioni has dropped it into their laps!

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