

INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons that might guide one's interest toward a subject of study. Certain events and encounters, which, as one conducts research in course of a career, provide opportunities for thematic study; or perhaps there are motivations tied to one's own history, which lead to questions and the search for answers that affect us directly, an intellectual curiosity linked to subjects held dear for sentimental reasons driving us to deepen our own understanding.

My interest in the Italian Americans is deep rooted and has developed over time; its winding course began a long time ago. On a personal level, that interest relates to the histories of migration that have marked my family for generations, within and beyond the national confines, in search of fortunes to be made and life-opportunities to be achieved; it is connected to my own personal migrant story from southern to northern Italy, a south that I've always loved—despite being so young when I left—and which I rediscovered unexpectedly in the ensuing years, in different parts of the world, following traces of an identity which I'd imagined to be so far from my own. It's connected also to expanding my studies on emigration, which started with my graduate thesis that examined the transformations of the Italian families that had emigrated to Argentina.

Subsequently, I was able to spend long periods of time in the United States and to meet the Italians of America. I had encountered them in Italy, even before visiting the United States, through their writing, music, the wonderful films that moved me deeply and sparked my imagination. Then I met them in New York, where I first set foot in December 2001, three months after the mournful events of September 11.

And so my interest and study of them developed and matured over the years, an interest that drove me to search for how these people still felt connected to Italy and to the legacy inherited from their forebears; although we no longer shared a native language, what meaning could I attribute to the familiarity that I recognized in their ways of thinking and speaking?

In March 2012, I began to develop my research project with the patronage of the John D. Calandra Institute of Italian American Studies in New York, under the aegis of Queens College (CUNY). The objective I set for myself was to study the transformations that occurred, across the generations of the Italian Americans, related to their connection with cultural and historic Italian heritage and the representations and interpretations of it within the perspective of the present day.

To accomplish my cognitive goal, I constructed a research project composed of two working phases: the first is based on a qualitative approach and utilizes an in-depth interview as the technique for collecting information; the second phase focused on a quantitative approach, using a standardized questionnaire as a surveying tool. The project started in March 2012 and concluded in October 2013.

I was introduced to numerous Italian Americans in the course of my work. Some of them contributed to the history of a great city—New York City—which is where they live and work, often holding positions of great importance in the Italian American community and American society in general. They were predominantly third-generation immigrants, descended from Italians who had arrived in the United States during the period of large-scale migration. Their contribution profoundly affected the social, economic, political, and cultural achievements and the recognition of Italian Americans living in the United States and abroad; they provided a level of visibility, acquiring power and prestige, which had a major impact on the public at large, and enabled them to attain institutional positions at multiple levels. Their hard work facilitated the creation of bridges that connected to Italy, thus resuming a dialog which had been suspended in time. The fifty-one in-depth interviews provided me with an understanding, through their accounts of personal and family histories and the descriptions of their perception of the Italian American community, of how they depict and interpret their sense of belonging and their sense of identity connected to *italianità*. I also listened to the stories of some Italian emigrants who came to New York in recent years—some already adults and others still children or adolescents—who occupy key positions in the economic, political, cultural, and artistic fields and consider themselves Italian Americans, despite being born in Italy. Their vision is accompanied by those of the previous groups and helps compose the complex framework of how these representatives of the third generation perceive and represent their own sense of Italian Americanism.

Within the first research phase, I also interviewed twenty—mostly professional—young people, including ten Italian Americans. Their testimony shed

light on a double bond with Italian tradition and current culture, each bearing its own nuances of meaning.

The other ten young people interviewed are recent arrivals, having come from Italy after the completion of their university studies, driven by inner strength and fierce determination, comparable to what spurred the first Italian emigrant to leave Italy, bearing the spirit of all those who want to “make it in America.” Within twenty years, many of these young Italians, arriving in New York both culturally and educationally well equipped, acquired professional status and obtained respectable positions and recognitions in various fields. Beyond my interview work, I would occasionally meet other Italians of America who at times, despite possessing an Italian surname or some Italian blood in their family tree, don’t attribute any significance or relevance to those remnants: they lacked any trace of knowledge about an ethnic past that has faded, vanished, perhaps lost or just buried; all that remains for some is a quick flash of a look in the dark eyes of the southern people.

Throughout the in-depth interviews—which will be the focus of a separate and forthcoming analytical work—I was able to collect the most significant themes pertaining to the perception and representations of identity of Italian heritage, on the individual and on the collective level. Using these points of reference and based on these assumptions, I then constructed the research design, which brought me to the realization of the second quantitative phase, in the form of the survey taken by 277 young Italian Americans. The following pages contain the results and analyses through the interpretation and critical reflections that emerge from processing that data. Today we are faced with the valuation and rediscovery of ethnicity, with numerous ethnic and racial minorities reaffirming a connection with the “culture of the past.”

The Italian Americans may also stake their claim, which makes it very important to understand the significance that the youth attribute to that cultural heritage.

Does a connection still exist with this cultural baggage, and if yes, what kind? In the future, will this connection weaken and ultimately disappear, or will it be preserved by future generations? How does one transmit such a cultural legacy? Are the new generations interested in safeguarding it? What are the points of concern for this future? What are the strategies for promoting the preservation and revival of a dynamic perspective of this legacy?

Trying to understand self-representation as it relates to the cultural inheritance of young Italian Americans, its intersection with their sense of personal

identity, and how these young people imagine they are perceived by other Americans are all of strategic importance for the future of the Italian American community.

The main reason for studying young Italian Americans rests in the importance of envisioning the future of the Italian American culture; to do so we must understand the position of those who would pass on this cultural heritage to the next generation.

Speaking more generally, recalling Pasqualini (2012), to study the youth primarily implies an analysis of the sociocultural changes of which the youth are a driving force.

Regarding the past, there are traces of both continuity and disruption in the passage of generations, and the objective of study is to find possible models for describing the more significant changes and fluctuations that occur.

The research thus aims to delineate and comprehend—via sociological reading—the actions, representations, and orientations of a group of young people who live in the greater New York area, as related to their descent from Italian ancestry.

By studying the value systems, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as lifestyle and life practices, we will seek to understand how these elements potentially intersect with ethnic identity, by breaking up and analyzing the various components thereof.

The data interpretation aims to highlight the behaviors and demeanors as new, renewed, or in absolute continuity with regard to the preceding generations. The three most important cognitive questions connected to the motivations for studying young Italian Americans correspond to three types of needs:

- heuristic: namely, to understand who are the “new” Italian Americans;
- predictive: that is, to understand what changes within the Italian American youth denote anticipation and expression;
- strategic/practical: in the sense of analyzing the process that can facilitate the transmission of Italian heritage to future generations.

The perspective chosen for this consists of a vision of the group “from the inside.” It’s composed, indeed, of young people who self-identify as Italian Americans. Therefore, the study seeks to understand how these individuals define themselves in reference to the Italian legacy, specifically analyzing how the youths: (1) represent themselves; (2) view the Italian American community as

a whole; (3) perceive the Italian American community to be viewed “from the outside,” namely, by other Americans.

The volume consists of two parts. The first part examines the results of the survey respondents, young Italian Americans living in the greater New York area, while the second part presents further analytical deepening based on the research data, which includes some constructed identity profiles of the youth in relation to Italian heritage. This part describes, analyzes, and interprets the results of the survey.

The description of the theoretical structure, methodological path, and the sample construction constitute the objective of the first chapter.

The second chapter concerns the reference values of the youths; beginning with the general framework of the research, the analysis delves into greater depth on the family, through the profile of the mothers and fathers with references to the process of primary socialization for the interviewed young people.

The third chapter discusses ethnic identification. The argumentation begins with a description of the ethnicity of the respondents and of their partners and delves into the deepening of the knowledge of the historical memory linked to their ancestors' immigration to America.

A thorough analysis of the sense of belonging for those who define themselves as Italian Americans was effected by establishing a series of justifications that could support this self-representation. This led to the individuation of two dimensions that characterize such an identification: one of these, the “gaze” toward Italy—knowing the language, an attachment to family origins, feeling connected to an international network of people who share Italian values and culture—and, for the second dimension: the privileging, instead, of belonging above all to America, and more specifically to the Italian American culture and community.

Within the study there was a focus on the comprehension of the level of understanding of the Italian American community, the degree of importance the interviewees placed on ethnic background, and the motivating factors underpinning their choices. It thus becomes necessary to understand which members of the family—in the process of the transmitting ethnic identity—had drawn the interviewees toward Italian culture.

The emotional-affective aspect of identity becomes a significant area of inquiry, as potentially opposing sentiments converge within this space, including the pride or the shame of being/feeling Italian American, which can also lead to real identity crises, characterized by instances of malaise and distress.

The fourth chapter continues to seek insight into the identification with Italian heritage, including an investigation of its significance for today's Italian American youth on the ways that influence the perception of reality in everyday interactions, the values, and symbolic references. The significance of this area was such that the interviewees were asked to express their own definitions, interpretations, and experiences connected to that significance in great detail.

The next two chapters connect the image of the Italian Americans with that of the Italians and Italy.

Specifically, the fifth chapter considers the image of the Italian Americans, studying it from various angles, at the individual and collective level, in exacting detail. The indication, according to the interviewees, of distinctive traits and characteristics that typify this image has led to a meaningful portrayal within contemporary society.

For comparative purposes, it appeared relevant to establish an image of the "typical" Italian and Italian American; furthermore, in searching for similarities and differences in the perception of the image of Italian Americans with respect to Italians as well as other Americans, there was also study of characteristics related to work, family, cooking, television preferences, etc. with the goal of finding parallelisms and divergences of perception among the three groups.

Once the image of the Italian American as an individual subject was analyzed, the scope was expanded to the collective image and, specifically, to the group structure of the Italian Americans; in this perspective, the group's composition, organization, and integration were examined.

The sixth chapter covers the images of Italy and the Italians. There were multiple facets studied: from the level of knowledge of Italian culture to the opinions held by the youth regarding Italian society and Italians, along with the emotional aspects, as they connect to life experiences within Italian society, moving toward an understanding of the profounder dimensions, which constitute the foundational aspects contributing to this image.

A significant part of the study is dedicated to the direct, personal relationship with Italy and the Italians. This appears to be a very relevant aspect, as an indicator of the vitality of the connections with the land of origin and the places one's parents came from; the relationship is shown through the contact maintained with relatives, friends, and acquaintances, by means of the visits made over the course of time. Personal knowledge of Italy also connects to other aspects that affect one's identification; for example, there is a linguistic facet, tied

to one's familiarity with the Italian language and the dialects, which is positively affected by direct contact.

The seventh chapter reflects on the stereotypes and prejudices surrounding the Italian American image, envisioned by the interviewees as it exists today. It does so from historical premises that go back to an earlier time, to the history of the Italians in the mother nation, particularly those from the South in the time before the great migrations to the Americas. Notably, the reflection is focused on the image of the Italian Americans as presented by the media, with specific references to the Guido subculture.

The eighth chapter studies some of the youth's attitudes and behaviors in multiple spheres of action; it examines their relationship with religion, politics, food, mass media, and territorial attachments to significant places.

A considerable part of the reflection is dedicated to the role of associations. The objective was to understand the frequency and methods of participation in Italian American associations and organizations, and in results showing a lack thereof, what caused the young people to distance themselves. Close attention was paid to the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction regarding the activities promoted by the associations, argued by the motivations that would lead to one opinion or the other. The promotional aspect wasn't overlooked; there was a concerted effort to determine which kinds of activities should be promoted by the associations to facilitate and encourage youth participation.

The ninth chapter discusses the future prospects of Italian American culture. Here it seemed interesting to compare the position of the scholars in Italian American studies with those of the young people interviewed. The proactive dimension was also under consideration here, expressed through the youth proposals and suggestions for keeping Italian American culture alive.

The first part of the volume concludes with the examination of two interpretive categories considered meaningful in the construction of some explicative models of identification with an Italian cultural legacy: on one hand, level of understanding of Italian and Italian American culture and on the other, the attachment, connection, and effective bond with them.

The second part of the volume is further subdivided into two sections. The first contains the analysis of the data cross-referenced with the generations of immigration for the young people interviewed. Relating the various significant aspects of the study—namely, structural data, socialization and values-systems, ethnic self-identification, the Italian and the Italian American image, stereotypes,

affiliations and belonging, and the future—with the generations of immigrations it became possible to create several interpretive models that could be used to delineate the physiognomy and the characteristics of every generation.

The second section of the second part contains the description, analysis, and interpretation of four identity profiles, representing four models of how the youth relate to Italian heritage. As with the generations of immigration, these identity profiles are also positioned in relation to structural data, socialization, value-systems, ethnic self-identification, the image of the Italians and the Italian Americans, stereotypes, affiliations, belonging, and the future. What emerges is a descriptive and interpretive framework of the presented typology, which sheds light on what today appears to be the ways, the forms, and the tendencies related to how Italian heritage is perceived, experienced, and represented by the Italian American youth.