



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT Dominick Carielli, Ph.D.

I would like to take this opportunity to share some of my thoughts on Italian Americans as a people. Although I am not a sociologist or anthropologist, nor am I a scholar of Italian American studies, I am trained as a psychologist in the field of multiculturalism, and I have done a fair amount of reading on the subject matter.

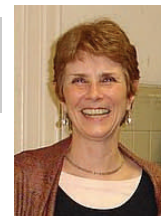
When Italians first came to this country, they were classified as non-White. If one looks at historical records, there were separate wages for White, Colored, and Italian laborers, with Italians at the bottom of the pay scale (see Dr. Richard Gambino's book, *Blood of My Blood*). At CUNY, Italian Americans are an affirmative action category, and have been so for the past 32 years (see the Kibbee Memorandum of 1976). However, given CUNY's laissez faire attitude regarding affirmative action for Italian Americans, one is likely to be unaware of their status.

All of this brings us to some poignant questions. Have Italian Americans arrived – have they truly made it in America? Are they a minority group or a part of the mainstream? Although Italian Americans have made some educational and other advances, they continue to be an underclass. They are not seen as a true minority, and are on the fringes of the mainstream; existing in some twilight zone.

Italian Americans have faced great discrimination in this country, and continue to deal with discrimination, stereotyping, and bigotry. Although statistics have shown that only a very minute percentage of Italian Americans have any ties to organized crime, newspapers and TV news frequently use the word Mafia, and highlight those in organized crime who have Italian surnames. Movies, television programs, and video games stereotype Italian Americans, and often portray them as gangsters.

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CHAIRPERSON'S MESSAGE Geraldine DeLuca, Ph.D.



WHY MINOR (OR EVENTUALLY MAJOR) IN ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

What can you do with a major or minor in Italian American Studies?

- Gain a knowledge of Italian American literature, culture, history, art, music, film, commerce, and politics.
- Understand the connection between Italian and Italian American cultures.
- Learn Italian: una lingua bellissima!
- Go into banking, finance, teaching, writing, or the hospitality industry.
- Travel to Italy to do business.
- Combine Italian American Studies with one of the social sciences (e.g., anthropology, psychology, or sociology).
- Attend law school; focus on international law.
- Acquire a better understanding of yourself and your culture.

What could be more lovely than a life tied to Italian culture? Italy is one of the beautiful places of the earth. Something happens to you when you land in Rome, Florence, Puglia, Reggio di Calabria, or Palermo. The culture seeps into your soul. You relax, you find yourself surrounded by art. You settle down to a glass of wine and a good meal. You are changed! Become an expert in this most exquisite country that has been conquered and liberated so

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One television program that has garnered great attention is, of course, *The Sopranos*. There are arguments about whether or not *The Sopranos* was one of the best written shows to ever hit the airwaves, or the biggest piece of tripe imaginable. I will not debate that issue. My concern is not with the quality of the writing, but rather with what such a show does to the image of Italian Americans.

My concern is threefold. First, it is pervasive. *The Sopranos* was on HBO, it continues to live on DVD, and I wouldn't be surprised to one day see a *Sopranos* movie. There are web sites on *The Sopranos*, and I am sure there are some video/computer games about the *Sopranos*. There is even a sandwich called the Ba Da Bing at the local Fairway in Redhook. We have had signs in New York that have proclaimed, "Leaving Brooklyn, Fuhgeddaboutit." Second, there is no counterbalancing programming that portrays Italian Americans in a positive light. I have enjoyed watching many hours of programming on PBS about the experiences of various ethnic groups in America. Italian Americans, however, get short shrift. Ken Burns, where are you? Third, for many people living in America shows like the *Sopranos*, Mafia movies, and sensationalized accounts of Italian Americans in organized crime (portrayed by the news media) are their sole source of information about Italian Americans.

If you think that I am overly sensitive and that Italian Americans have come a long way, I can give you a recent example of how easy it is to insult Italian Americans with impunity. Dr. Fred Gardaphe, who was recently hired as a Distinguished Professor of English and Italian American Studies, was welcomed in a Queens College electronic publication with the following: "Apparently, CUNY made Fred Gardaphe an offer he couldn't refuse." Not only is this phrase insulting, it is hackneyed. I don't think that they would dare do this to other ethnic groups. I should point out that the editor of the publication is, to my knowledge, of Italian decent.

While Italian Americans have had to deal with bigotry and institutional racism, they are also adept at shooting themselves in the foot. Italian Americans tend to be tough-skinned, to let things roll off their backs, and to make lemonade out of lemons. These qualities helped our ancestors

survive tough times in the old country, and helped immigrants with their struggles in the new country. However, these characteristics have also allowed us to be victims of insults and discrimination, and have kept us from advancing. Values from peasants in Italy, who came to America in the early part of the 20th century, were passed along to the succeeding generations. Many of these values had little utility for the new generations, and worked to the detriment of Italian Americans.

Italian Americans tend to be very pragmatic. Although they are pursuing higher education as never before, they will never be an intellectually elite group. They are wary of institutions, and tend not to be philanthropic. They rely on the support of family, rather than seek help outside of the family. Italian Americans are often suspicious of one another, can't seem to agree with one another, and are not united. Infighting and lack of unity have done more to keep Italian Americans from advancing than anything else. As I have said before, Italian Americans are tough-skinned, and don't know when they are being insulted. More to the point, they can't agree as to whether or not they're being insulted. This is why they used to show the premiere of *The Sopranos* at the College of Staten Island, and recently had a student on the radio who wanted to call himself "Vinnie the Guinea," yet they don't offer a B.A. in Italian language.

We need to be a little more sensitive, less forgiving, and a little bit angrier. We can't wait for others to give us what we deserve, we need to demand it. Many of you may disagree with what I've said. Good; I'd love to hear from you (at least I'll know that you're out there). With the dearth of research on Italian Americans, however, it's difficult to provide much empirical evidence for any point of view.

Italian Americans in academia are either chained to their desks (they feel they have to work harder than other groups to prove their worth), are trying to keep a low profile (trying hard not to seem too Italian), or feel that they've already done their bit for the cause. With Italian Americans on campus, it can be hard to get a good checker game going. Come out, come out wherever you are!

WHY MINOR (OR EVENTUALLY MAJOR) IN ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

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many times, this land with ties to the north and the south, to Europe and Africa. Understand the ties that bind Italians and Americans. In a global economy, make a connection to one of the great places of the earth. Then, when you come back to the United States, understand the forces that shaped Italian Americans. Appreciate and share the contributions of Italians and Italian Americans in a deep and lasting way!

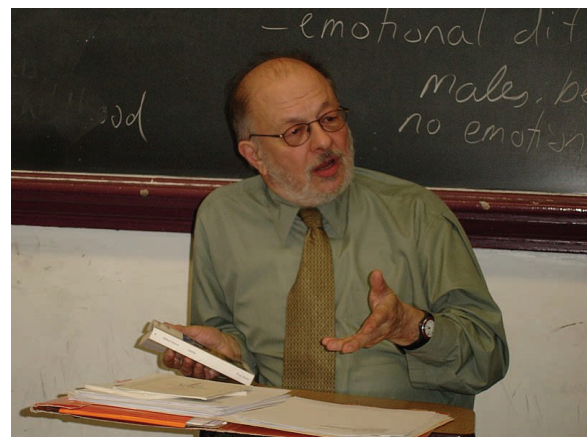
Visit our new web site at:

<http://dephome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/iacenter>

CAMPUS EVENTS



Pictured above: Dean Anthony J. Tamburri (Calandra Institute, Queens College) talked to students about Italian /American relations.



Pictured above and below: Prof. Robert Viscusi and Rosette Capotorto read a selection of their poems.



*A fond farewell to
Professor Geraldine DeLuca,
who will be on leave for the
Fall 2008 semester.*

CALL FOR EVENTS

If anyone is interested in sponsoring an event for Italian Heritage and Culture Month (October), or at any time during the year, please contact the Director at the Center for Italian American Studies.

SPECIAL THANKS

To Nancy Strein for all of her help in getting our web site up and running.

To Therese Marrocco for her help throughout the year, and for never missing a committee meeting.

To Geri DeLuca for being a great Chairperson.

RESEARCH & COMMITTEE INTERESTS

If you are interested in conducting research on the Italian American population or would like to serve on the Presidential Advisory Committee on Italian American Affairs, please contact the Director at the Center for Italian American Studies.

SOTTO VOCE

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Center for
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