

Giuseppe Prezzolini and the Changing Face of Italian America

James Periconi (November 27, 2007)



Giuseppe Prezzolini was an important Italian intellectual in the first half of the 20th century. As director of Columbia's Casa Italiana and as a journalist, he had much opportunity to meet Italian Americans of various types. His trenchant but painful observations are gathered in his book *I Trapiantati* (The Transplanted) (1962), the main point of which is that Italians in America, though



economically successful, paid an enormous price - they're "mutilated" in their original language, and thus mutilated in spirit; they've lost contact with those from whom they sprang, without being comfortable with or centered among Americans. Prezzolini's mistake was that he assumed that things would not change, that assimilation would not advance beyond his point of observation in early-mid 20th century, that Italian Americans would always remain in some sense on the periphery of American life. He was wrong (for the most part).

Giuseppe Prezzolini is hardly ever read any more, yet he presents a good exemplar of a mid-20th century Italian intellectual's view of Italian Americans, for better and (mostly) for worse.

Director of the Casa Italiana at Columbia University for some years, Prezzolini leaves a rich history in Italian letters both in Italy and in the U.S., founder of an important Italian periodical, *La Voce*, among other accomplishments. The fairly lengthy entry on him in the excellent *Italian American Experience: an Encyclopedia* edited by Salvatore J. LaGumina, et al. (New York 2000) - a book that anyone serious about understanding Italian American history should get a copy of - gives a good survey, yet oddly fails to note even the publication of (much less discuss) his most important work for Italian Americans. Never translated, unfortunately, but much cited except in the sketch just noted, is his *I Trapiantati* [*The Transplanted*], published in Milan in 1962, containing writings of his from the 1950's and earlier.

In it he discusses Italians he has access to as a journalist, as well as due to being the Casa's Director - their politicians, their organizations, their writers, their "prickliness" or touchiness as a people. Though brilliant in places in assessing our position, his overall thesis is a rather depressing one: that taken as a whole, the migration of Italians to the U.S. has been a massive failure, because - as he says in answering his own question in an Epilogue ("Why are Italian Americans so Touchy? ["permalosi"]") - they sense themselves neither wholly Italian nor wholly American, and as a result, they are too sensitive to what others think of them. It may seem like a simplistic analysis - of course, it's more nuanced than that - yet there is much truth to the observation.

He notes, even in his 1950s and earlier writings, that Italian became a great success economically in the U.S., but they paid a terrible price: they're "mutilata nel linguaggio," mutilated in their speech, and, thus, he continues, mutilated in their spirits. They've lost contact with the people from whom they sprang, without being entirely centered among those who have received them. They've adapted to American culture, without mixing in or becoming fused in that culture. They don't represent the joining of two cultures so much as a confusion of the cultures, a blunting of two cultures estranged from each other. They are not the sum of two wholes, but the residue of two subtractions.

It sounds terribly harsh, and it's easy to reject his view as that of an Italian intellectual who loved to look down on his Americanized former countryman, but it's more complicated than that. Prezzolini does not speak without some sympathy: chillingly, almost, he opines that the Italian American is worthy of admiration if he does not, from the ravages of his spirit caused by the experience of immigration, the uprooting, the loss of language, become either deranged or criminal. And I think he means that sympathetically.

Nevertheless, his "failure" thesis too thoroughly pervades his discussion of Italian American writers and other professionals. Even what we might have regarded as successes by the 1950s and early 1960s - the not insignificant number of American medical doctors of Italian descent - he notes with some hauteur that they do not much do sophisticated research in medicine, but are mere workaday practitioners.

While this and similar judgments had the ring of truth in the 1950's or 1960's, Prezzolini seems to have been sure that this would never change; he fails to recognize that it might just take some more time before Italian American doctors would be anything more "interesting" than workaday practitioners (and query whether there's anything wrong with that anyway), and in general, whether Italian Americans could be in effect reach the summits of their professions. Two of the most prominent researchers in the origin and cure of perhaps the worst scourge of late 20th century America were Italian American - Robert Gallo, M.D., co-founder of the AIDS virus, and director of the Institute of Human Virology (IHV) at the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute



in Baltimore, and Anthony Fauci, M.D., the long-time director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, one of the National Institutes of Health. And there are others.

But my story here is actually about the new, new Italian American medical doctor – not merely a brilliant researcher, like Gallo or Fauci – and my exemplar is “Vin Ferrara,” as he’s called in a front-page New York Times story recently. My discovery of Ferrara was the result of one of my favorite activities – to find and compare two Italian Americans who achieve some prominence in a single issue of the New York Times. On October 27, 2007, Doctor Vincent Ferrara was featured on the front page of that newspaper. A former quarterback on Harvard’s football team – that alone is significant, as Prezzolini’s Italian Americans did not often go to Harvard – Ferrara is responsible for developing and marketing what a doctor treating concussions resulting from football injuries, the cause of serious brain injuries among American football players, called the “greatest advance in [football] helmet design in 30 years.” But wait, there’s more – besides being a medical doctor, he holds an MBA from Columbia, where he also obtained his medical degree. Call this a blend of medical, engineering, and entrepreneurial inventiveness Italian or American, but it is surely a reflection of the genius of both cultures, the histories of both countries – precisely the opposite of what Prezzolini saw as the utter failure of Italian American culture to fuse the best of the two cultures.

Most of all, I get a kick out of proving (to myself) the late Prezzolini short-sighted for not thinking our situation in this country might improve, given another generation. Besides all the highly credentialed, high level research medical doctors and other scientists among Italian Americans now, we have the business people. Not the deli or fruit stand owners or other small businessmen that Prezzolini appeared to know, the small businessmen of, say, Lapolla’s *The Grand Gennaro* (1935) and other works, but people who’ve gotten to the summit of American business. In his 1960’s *Italian America*, there were no Italian American CEOs – none whatsoever – that I ever heard of, then for a while there was Lee Iacocca at Chrysler, and him alone.

But now the country is almost lousy with them, from Sam Palmisano at IBM, to Pat Russo at Lucent, to Robert Nardelli, who recently stepped down (with a \$210 million severance package) as Chairman and CEO of Home Depot, to Ken Langone, co-founder of Blockbuster Video, to former New York Stock Exchange Chairman Robert Grasso, whose \$140 million or so annual salary caused some consternation at the State Attorney General’s Office a few years ago, and many, many others. Like the situation with medical doctors, we’re no longer second-class citizens in business.

The other featured Italian American in that same issue of the Times would have been all too familiar to Prezzolini, namely, a Rhode Island politician, long-time State Senator Louis De Luca, who has both debased political life and resurrected the “buffoon” image that we all hope would somehow have disappeared. Senator DeLuca confessed some months before to intervening in a domestic squabble that his grown granddaughter was having, by using old world strong-arm methods, namely, by getting an allegedly “connected” trash hauler to literally knock some sense into this granddaughter’s husband. Besides confession to a misdemeanor, DeLuca stepped down from his post as Senate Republican minority leader. We cringed to read this story, and it’s one that Prezzolini, who wrote of both corrupt Italian American politicians and the role of the Mafia, would have recognized all too clearly.

So, we could tell Prezzolini, were he alive, about Dr. Vincent Ferrara (and Anthony Fauci, et al.), parade the Italian American CEOs in front of him, and tell him how “everything has changed in slightly more than one generation.”

But sadly, he’d be able to point to Lou DeLuca to say that nothing had changed. Both of us – or neither of us – would be correct.

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