

Representation of Italian and Italian/American Culture and History. "And Now What...?"

Anthony Julian Tamburri (June 06, 2009)



We simply need to do more. Much as we have made overall progress in the diffusion and representation of Italian and Italian/American culture and history in the United States, we need to keep on trucking, as we used to say in the 1960s!



A few months ago Michael Kinsley wrote an offensive article in which he aped what he thought would be a conversation that included a gangster of Italian origins. We can call it silly, supercilious, or anything else we might want to, but what is clear is that the piece was, intentionally or not, downright mean. Kinsley took a stereotype of an ethnic group and publicly squeezed it for all he could.

More recently Italian/American groups from the Mid-West shamed MillerCoors LLC into stop running ads featuring Frank Vincent, of recent The Sopranos fame, advertising Miller Lite in the United States. This is, to be sure, a clear case of ethnic stereotyping, as the ad showed Vincent offering "protection" to store owners, clerks, and bartenders. The president of the Italian American Human Rights Foundation (Chicago), Lou Rago, said the group had threatened a boycott. He then went on to

say that "if you agree [that] you wouldn

't have two black actors doing Amos and Andy, if you agree



... you wouldn't have two Polish actors pretending to be stupid, and if you agree ... you wouldn't have two Hispanics pretending to be gang-bangers, then you agree with us that this is wrong." Indeed, we could not disagree. This is something many of us have stated ad nauseam.

Why then, we continue to ask, do individuals and companies continue to use a most offensive stereotype in a public forum, regardless of the context? The answer is quite simple, as disturbing as it may seem. Kinsley, MillerCoors LLC, Verizon, as well as others, basically feel entitled to do so because the so-called dominant culture thought process in the United States allows, indeed encourages, people to do so. From Kinsley one Italian-American group sought a public apology (Not sure that happened. If it did, it was behind closed doors); others, like the Italian American Human Rights Foundation, succeed in having the spot pulled. This, I would underscore, is admirable to be sure. But it is not the end all. Indeed, it is only the beginning. We need to move forward from these apparent end goals.

We need to be sure that Italian and Italian/American history and culture are part of the USA curriculum at the public school level, K-12. We also need to be sure that professorships in Italian Americana exist on the college level; I have spoken to this issue in this venue on a couple of occasions. The success of such actions lies with us, the Italian/American community. We need to support our own activities in that we attend events, and this means sitting through lectures that, in the end, truly do inform us toward a greater completeness of knowledge of our culture in spite of the fact that we might believe we know it all already. We need to respond with courteous yet firm indignation when—whether it be at a social event or business meeting—someone makes an offensive comment about Italians or Italian Americans in his/her feeble attempt to make a joke. We need to engage in a cultural philanthropy that is second to none!

More significant, it is tantamount that our public officials engage in a greater degree of ethnic discourse, one that clearly surpasses those ethnic boundaries of social events. Namely, it is simply not enough for our elected representatives (congressional, senatorial, state, and municipal) to proclaim their Italian pride at Italian events such as Italy's National Day or the Columbus Day Parade. They need to do so at events and in venues that are NOT Italian and Italian/American. They need to uphold the value of our Italian legacy in these venues precisely because, for instance, (1) what we know today as "modernity" has its origins in the Italian Renaissance; (2) what we know as philanthropy today has its "modern" roots in the Italian Renaissance; (3) what we know today as the United States legal system, it has its roots in an eighteenth-century Italian legal philosopher, Cesare Beccaria; (4) what we know of the art world is that more than sixty-percent of the world's production is Italian in origin; (5) what we know of United States contemporary literature is that some of our best sellers are Baldacci, Ciresi, DeLillo, Scottoline, Trigiani, to name a few. Simply stated, we need to go beyond "pizza" and "nonna"!

All this to say that Italian culture goes well beyond what we sometimes hear described as the three Fs, Food, Fashion, and Fun. Italian culture is all of the above and more. Language, for instance! How is it, some of us marvel, that the College Board can cancel (it is officially "suspended") the Advanced Placement in Italian, a national exam, after only three years, and there is not a peep from the greater, more power-wielding Italian/American community of socio-political leaders in this country? Where is that well-articulated, national sense of outrage and indignation? Where are the Italian/American Waters, Sharptons, Jacksons, Rangels, and others who immediately come to the defense of their culture when it is under attack? Still in the making?

Well, let us indeed ask for the public apology and let us even call for the pulling of the offensive commercials. But once we achieve these goals, let us also make sure that the fertile terrain exists for those scholars, writers, filmmakers, and artists who will need the support to tell the stories that need to be told. Where is, for example, the community support for filmmakers such as Nancy Savoca, John Turturro, and Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno? As a group, do we even go to their films? Where are the fellowships for writers to spend four to six weeks perfecting their craft? Do we even buy, as well as read, their book? Where are the think tanks that look to Italy's legacy in the United States, exploring



also, indeed first and foremost, the history of Italian immigration in this country? Such specific entities exist for other US ethnic groups, indeed funded also from within. Yet, the Italian/American community cannot seem to set up such entities unless they are funded from without. The John D. Calandra Institute is the closest thing to what I am underscoring here. We need more institutes in different parts of the country that can make it possible for the public discourse in the United States to include Italian Americana as part and parcel of the national conversation. As I write, we have yet, definitively, to cross that threshold.

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