

economic and social circumstances have on their behavior and on the family structure? In the shaping of attitudes, behavior and relationships, what was the role of music and ethnic traditions? What functions did these traditions have in Italian American families and communities? Are there any noticeable demographic or generational differences in the extent to which “popular” (or “folk”) traditions and culture have been retained by Italian Americans?

Assuming a successful resolution of the questions raised, will studies of Italian Americans based on new methodologies and a “feminist” frame of reference provide new insights for similar studies of other cultures? Can valid conclusions be obtained from studies of individual ethnic groups apart from their social and cultural contexts? Will the results of such studies lend credence to a specifically “feminist” viewpoint? Or will these studies, instead, confirm the need for a “humanist” approach that recognizes gender-based differences in attitude and behavior as functions of the human condition and social dynamics and formulate its methodology, observations and conclusions accordingly?

— Gloria Eive

## Critique

The results of the 1980 United States census indicate that about twelve million persons were reported as being partly or solely of Italian ancestry. One in twenty people in the United States or 5.4 percent of the total U.S. population claims Italian descent, representing the sixth largest group in the United States.

Given their significant representation in the population, Italian Americans are a legitimate area of investigation. It is, in addition, a particularly challenging arena for feminist scholars because of the traditional role of women in a culture profoundly influenced by the metaphor of the Madonna. As a result, Italian society has been described as a mother-centered but a male-dominated culture. That male dominance has, unfortunately, sometimes been shaped by values characterized by the following proverb:

Like a good weapon she should be cared for properly,  
Like a hat she should be kept straight,  
Like a mule she should be given plenty of work and occasional beatings,  
Above all, she should be kept in her place as a subordinate.

To some degree the polarization of Italian male and female roles was exacerbated by the experience of immigration. The consequent social reorientation caused males to express outwardly even more dominance in an effort to compensate for the growing insecurity in this unfamiliar environment where their traditional values were continually assaulted.

Despite patriarchal imprecations against the abandonment of *la via vecchia*, however, children and grandchildren were inexorably drawn to the emblems and values of their adopted culture. The resulting acculturation is evident in the fact that by 1980 eighty percent of women reporting partial Italian ancestry had married outside the ethnic group. An earlier 1964 study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center noted a significant distancing by third generation Italian American women, fifty-eight percent of whom had married outside the traditional confines of the Roman Catholic Church. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Italian American woman's demographic profile today is not congruent with the image of "woman as the heart of the family." In 1980 Italian American women had approximately 2.5 children, slightly below the national average, and they reported a divorce rate of 4.8 percent, more than double the two percent noted in 1974, and only .5 percent below the national average of 5.3 percent. The same census report revealed that while only one-third of the first generation Italians were high school graduates, fully sixty percent of the second generation had graduated from high school, lending support to the 1975 findings of the National Opinion Research Center, which in tabulating family incomes of ethnic groups, ranked Italians third from the top.

These few indicators cited suggest the tendency of Italian Americans to enter the mainstream, and, in the process, dilute many of their cultural traditions. This has given rise to a variety of responses alluded to by Micaela Di Leonardo in *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class and Gender among California Italian-Americans* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). She contends that "Italian-American women have embraced, modified and rejected" the traditional mother-centered role. In Di Leonardo's estimation, economic context rather than inherited ethnic family culture has "influenced the structure and functioning of the Italian-American household."

If, in examining the traditional image of the Italian American woman, Ruggiero intends to focus on the females among the 831,922 Italian foreign-born persons in the United States in 1980, the research model is complicated by variables of age, class, and regional difference. For example, the G.I. war brides and their successors have been, on the whole, better educated, more frequently nurtured in urban centers, and generally reflective of contemporary Italian cosmopolitan tastes—all

factors contributing to a far greater degree of acculturation than their earlier counterparts, who often emigrated from the agricultural villages of southern Italy in the decades preceding America's imposition of strict immigration quotas in 1924. These two groups represent extremes within the complex spectrum of immigrant experience. Yet both have manifested a sufficient degree of acculturation as to render relatively evanescent the traditional mother-centered image posited by Ruggiero.

The researcher's task is further complicated by the fact that the values and adaptive behavior of immigrant Italians have been reflective of their socio-economic class. Their adaptation was also affected by the prevailing conditions in their receiving environment. Even greater was the influence of their villages and regions of origin. It is extremely important, therefore, to concentrate on the immigrant's place of origin, since it was not until Mussolini's ascendance in the 1920s that the concept of the Italian nation gained widespread acceptance.

The complex and dynamic issues of immigration, particularly the status of the sexes within an intergenerational context, are made even more difficult by the frame of reference of traditional investigators who by continuing to ask the same questions elicit the same skewed answers. In light of this, it is not the feminist researchers who are guilty of bias, as the author observes, but rather the traditional researchers whose conceptual frameworks are biased. As a result, these conventional histories, according to Deconstructionist critic Jacques Derrida, are no more than petitions sent forward by the culture, containing implicitly approved code words and using canons of research and interpretation approved by the power structure. Such history, the Deconstructionists contend, rests firmly though falsely upon the concepts and perspectives approved by a male authority. Feminist historians and social scientists are indeed needed to revise the categories of questions and revamp the framework of study. Thus, Ruggiero's analysis is appropriate.

The obvious need for feminist enquiry into the field of Italian American women's studies has accelerated the pace of research on both sides of the Atlantic, a trend which should be welcomed by the author. Eleven percent of the respondents to a 1983 survey by the American Italian Historical Association reported on research in women's studies ranging from the changing role of the Italian American woman to the psycho-social conflicts experienced by Italian Americans. There were as well several studies comparing Italian American women with women of other ethnic groups. Additional research projects have focused on food exchange as gifts and on food preparation as woman's work. Charles Zappia of the University of California, Berkeley, is investigating Italian American women workers in the International Ladies Garment Workers

Union. While in Italy, Giovanna Clavi has researched Italian American factory women. L. Cetti has documented the life and work of Italian American women in New York City and M. Tirabassi has examined the Americanization of Italian women and children.

The one universal rendered by these examinations is that immigrant history is complex and changing. Consequently, the stereotypical image of the Italian American woman needs to be fine tuned and refined through a series of microhistorical studies more clearly focused on the issues of class, kinship, region of emigration, and generation. Finally, if as the data suggest, the Italian American woman is evolving from *paisana* to professional and suburbanite, her constraints and opportunities may be those shared by her American sisters, and the misconceptions against which the author urges vigilance may be methodological considerations deprived of a test population to sample.

— Gloria Ricci Lothrop