

## **Review Article**

### ***Ethnic Identity, Then and Now***

Jerome Krase

(Brooklyn College, City University of New York)

[JKrase@brooklyn.cuny.edu](mailto:JKrase@brooklyn.cuny.edu)

I was pleased to be asked to write a foreword for my good friend and colleague Rosemary Serra's *Sense of Origins: A Study of New York's Young Italian Americans* (2020). Re-reading her text has led me to reflect on my own personal and academic experience with the Italian American Experience. I have long-followed her impressive trail of well-informed and well-researched studies of Americans of Italian descent. I have also been not a little jealous of her closer attention to a subject to which she is also 'well-connected'. Like her, my own interest and involvement in Americans of various generations of Italian descent has grown over a very long time. However, as opposed to her natural and deeply-felt personal Italian roots, my own half-Italian (rather Sicilian) roots are quite shallow. For 'White Ethnics' like me, Richard Alba's admonition that Italian Americans were well into *The Twilight of Ethnicity* (1985) is more apropos.

My distinguished old friend Rudolph Vecoli, (1927-2008) was a major force in Italian American studies beginning, but not ending, with his pioneer study of the *Contadini in Chicago* (1964). In this classic work, he passionately criticized Oscar Handlin, the premier scholar of turn of Twentieth Century American immigration, for his book *The Uprooted* that essentially condemned the imported culture of Italian immigrants to not only assimilation and acculturation but oblivion as well. Vecoli would have thought of Dr Serra as one of the tens of millions of 'rooted' (racinated) Americans. On the other hand, I would clearly fit the bill of fellow Brooklyn-born Handlin's *Uprooted* (deracinated), being thoroughly assimilated. Here I should note that Vecoli did not end with his complaint against Handlin in 1964, and three decades later published a racially, as well as culturally, provocative essay 'Are Italian Americans Just White Folks?' (1995).

Serra was aware, if not a bit stimulated, by my pioneering studies of Italian American students at Brooklyn College (1975, 1978, 1986). These studies came about because of my commitment, not to my co-ethnics, as I did not yet see them in that light, but because, like other minorities in the CUNY system, their culture was not understood and therefore their educational needs were neglected. Had she conducted the research at that time (1975), I am sure their needs would have been better met than was the response to my limited study, which, not coincidentally, led to the eventual establishment of the John. D. Calandra Italian American Institute, which immensely facilitated her later, much more expansive work.

The major finding of my work was the Italian American students of all immigrant generations did not 'feel at home' at Brooklyn College. I am pleased, and honoured, that she included some my discussions of Italian Americana in this book.

‘Krase (2003), with the intention of defining Italian Americans in today's society, maintains that although they are well integrated into the American social structure, they are still distinct. He adds that “despite the concrete disunity of Italian Americans, they are united by images shared in people's minds about who they are” (ibid, 14). These representations of Italian Americans can be contradictory because, despite the stereotypes, the individuals are very different from each other. In fact, as with other large groups of ethnic Americans, “Italian Americans do not comprise a monolithic and cohesive group, but they are instead members of the most disparate communities” (ibid). Thus it is possible to arrive at the paradox that “in many cases, Italian Americans have more in common with non-Italian Americans than they do with others in their own group” (ibid). (Serra 117)

Serra was also far bettered prepared for her extremely detailed study that includes a variety of qualitative as well as quantitative methods. This challenging, multi-method approach is required in order to see the multifaceted phenomenon of adjustment, as immigrants of all origins have struggled to ‘make it’ in America; or simply to be tolerated, or to fit into it. Hers was a two-phased project beginning with 51 in- depth interviews from which she developed a detailed questionnaire to administer to a sample of 277 Young Italian Americans. Most impressive for me, as an urban ethnographer, were her in-depth interviews. Such deep probing is the only way to get at the core of the heart of ethnic identity. I suggest that the details of the questionnaire construction provided in the text should be used as a guide for others; especially for conducting comparative research within and between ethnic groups, albeit with much larger sample sizes. which is sorely needed in the field of Ethnic Studies of all kinds. A further enhancement of Serra’s study would be the inclusion of direct ethnographic observation, such as participant observation, of the social behaviour of some of the young Italian Americans in her study. Direct observations of family, peer group, and neighbourhood life, as well as religious and associational life would complement, and I believe support, her detailed analysis of data from other collection methods.

Although I found all eight chapters to be rich in scholarly content, I was most impressed with Chapter 12, ‘Profiles of Young Italian Americans’. In Chapter 12 Serra related her subjects’ connection to Italian and Italian American culture by their level of knowledge to their level of emotion and attachment. The resulting Table 12.1 ‘Characteristics of the Four Groups of Young Italian Americans’ (p.281) mimicked Robert K. Merton’s ‘Paradigm of Anomie’. The compilation resulted in four self-explanatory groups: Contemporaries (19.3%), Integrated (25.5%), Disinherited (19.3%) and Traditionals (35.9%). Each of the groups is provided with a detailed sketch and is statistically enhanced with extensive tabular data, as is true of all her other discussions. As to this vast improvement on my pioneering studies of young Italian Americans, my simple paradigm of connection to Italy, from most to least assimilated, was based simply on how they identified themselves as ‘Italian’, ‘Italian-American’, ‘American Italian’ and ‘American’. I was also interested in who played the most important roles in connecting them with Italian culture and found that Mothers and Grandmothers were most

important. Serra's more sophisticated analysis found some agreement in that Young Italian Americans ranked the influence of: Grandmothers (75.1 %), Other Relatives (73.6%), Self. (69%), Father (65.7%), Mother (62.5%), Grandfather (62.1%), Everyone (48%) and No One (1.1%).

I am compelled to quote from Serra's 'Concluding Reflections', as to how young Italian Americans might best connect to their origins. After passing reference to the efforts of public institutions to promote a sense of ethnic identity for other Americans, she reported that her subjects did not expect similar treatment and offers the following solution:

'The young people must be able to find support and engage in meetings where bidirectional exchanges with previous generations occur. These young people, in their transition to adulthood, are looking for identifications with meaningful 'others'; the elder generations should not remove themselves and shirk this passage but instead help the younger ones find reasons to feel connected to this inheritance, yet also provide a space to exchange ideas, involving the youth and making them responsible for finding their own "way" of interpreting and loving this culture through knowledge and their own personal contribution.' (329)

As a visual sociologist, I also have a special interest in her various intensive treatments of the image and stereotype of the members of the Italian American community as they have a reciprocal relation to both still and moving images as well as their portrayal in literature. Serra's book, and particularly her analysis in Chapter 5 'The Image of Italian Americans', clearly demonstrates that there is no easy 'one image fits all' for her, and may I now say 'my' community. For ethnographers of Italian Americans as well as others included in the subjects of race and ethnicity in the United States, this exceptional work provides a solid platform from which to do much-needed comparative research within and between ethnic groups and cohorts. Her Notes and Bibliography are also impressive.

As what I hope will be many other readers of *A Sense of Origins*, I look forward to the many future scholarly fruits of her labour. I especially await to learn of the prospects for Italian American culture in the decades to come. I should note at this point that Alba's use of the term 'Twilight' (1985) to symbolize a pessimistic view of the sunset of even a hybrid Italian American culture might be a mistake as twilight also refers to sunrise. In sum, I recommend this book, which was originally published in 2017 as *Il Senso delle Origini: Indagini sui giovani italoamericani di New York* (Milano: Franco Angeli), to all those wishing an in-depth study of not only a particular hyphenated American ethnic group, but an excellent multi-methodology that should be applied to other groups. I also repeat the suggestion of ethnographic follow-up studies of young Italian Americans and other groups.

## References

Alba, R. 1985. *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

- Handlin, O. 1951. *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*. Boston Mass.: Little Brown & Co.; First Edition.
- Krase, J. and Fuccillo, V. 1975. Italian Americans and College Life: A Survey of Student Experiences at Brooklyn College. Reprinted in N. L. Ziehler (ed.), *Italian-American Students in New York City, 1975-2000: A Research Anthology*. New York: John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, 2011.
- Krase, J. 1978. Italian American Female College Students: A New Generation Connected to the Old. Reprinted in N. L. Ziehler (ed.), *Italian-American Students in New York City, 1975-2000: A Research Anthology*. New York: John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, 2011.
- Krase, J. 1986. Educational Attainment and Educational Values of Italian American Generations. Reprinted in N. L. Ziehler (ed.), *Italian-American Students in New York City, 1975-2000: A Research Anthology*. New York: John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, 2011.
- Serra, R. 2020. *Sense of Origins: A Study of New York's Young Italian Americans*, (Translated by Scott R. Kapuscinski). New York: SUNY Press.
- Vecoli, R. 1964. *Contadini in Chicago: A critique of the uprooted*. Mississippi Valley Historical Association.
- Vecoli, R. 1995. Are Italian Americans Just White Folks? *Italian Americana*, 13 (2): 149-161.