

# Welfare comunitario

*Politiche locali, sviluppo e mutamento sociale*

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# Welfare comunitario

*Politiche locali, sviluppo e mutamento sociale*

*Welfare comunitario* vuole essere un “luogo” di confronto sul tema del rapporto tra la società, con le sue diverse sfaccettature, e l’attore sociale, con le sue realizzazioni plastiche e anche con quelle non tangibili. La collana si offre come momento di autoascolto sul mutamento sociale *tout-court* e propone spunti di riflessione attraverso la connessione tra la ricerca sociologica e le sue ricadute empiriche, mediante attività di ricerca applicata. Le proposte di pubblicazione saranno sottoposte a un sistema (*blind*) di *peer review*.

Photo credit: Letizia Airos.

ANTHONY JULIAN TAMBURRI

**A POLITICS  
OF [SELF-]OMISSION**  
THE ITALIAN/AMERICAN CHALLENGE  
IN A POST-GEORGE FLOYD AGE





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O natura, o natura,  
Perché non rendi poi  
Quel che prometti allor? perché di tanto  
Inganni i figli tuoi?

*A Silvia*, G. LEOPARDI  
19–20 April 1828



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- *The Semiotics of Labeling: “Italian” to “American”, “Non-white” to “White”, and Other Privileges of Choosing* first appeared in *Circolazione di persone e di idee: Integrazione ed esclusione tra Europa e Americhe*. Sabrina Vellucci and Susanna Nanni, eds. Bordighera Press, 2019. It appears here slightly expanded.
- *The Columbus Controversy and the Politics of Omission* first appeared in «La Voce di New York», December, 17, 2017.
- *Indro Montanelli: Reverence Misdirected?* also first appeared in «La Voce di New York», June, 24, 2020.
- *Why Promoters of Italian/American Culture Need to Know More: The Italian/American Experience in Religion*

first appeared in the «Journal of Religion and Society», 24, 2022. It appears here notably expanded.

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Of course, any fallacies, perceived or real, are mine.

## INTRODUCTION WHY NOW

The idea for this book was born out of discussions that originated after the murder of George Floyd. Until then, the 2017 brouhaha in New York City surrounding the Christopher Columbus statue seemed to have faded a bit from collective memory. At that time, in 2017, then Speaker of New York City’s City Council Melissa Mark-Viverito had called for the reconsideration of the Columbus statue’s value, and if it should not be included among the so-called “hate statues”. Yes, people subsequently continued to discuss Columbus, but not to the degree and with the heated passion we have since witnessed post-George Floyd’s murder.

While some of the chapters herein pre-date the Floyd murder and the subsequent discussions and protests, I believe that they nonetheless prove relevant in any discussion on the “Columbus Affair”, as I have called it, and all that it pertains<sup>(1)</sup>. How we see ourselves (chapter 1), how we

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(1) For more on Columbus, see TAMBURRI (2021).

might characterize the behavior of others (chapter 2 and 3), and how we have constructed mis-guided, alternative narratives (chapters 4 and 5) constitute a rainbow of issues that call for remedies in order for Italian Americans to move forward in a more constructive manner, are all part and parcel to any discussion — Columbus or more general — on Italians in America. Nothing should be left on the cutting-room floor.

In his ground-breaking essay, *Breaking the Silence: Strategic Imperatives for Italian American Culture*, Robert Viscusi championed an articulation of history that includes a collective purpose. While much progress has been made on numerous issues, many Italian/American associations seem to continue to work in a vacuum, moving forward alone on issues; whereas were more groups to work in unison, the Italian/American population at large would benefit, thus encountering greater success in bringing forth a variety of projects that would contribute to an Italian/American agenda.

What is — or what should be — that rallying point around which Italian Americans might find some sense of commonality? Indeed, both African Americans and Jewish Americans have, respectively, their one issue, as tragic as it may be, that coheres the group. I have in mind, of course, slavery and its dreadful sister of outright discrimination that has resulted from it, for the former; two millennia of *diasporic* existence and the horrific twentieth-century holocaust, for the latter.

What then can we identify as that cohesive force for Italian Americans? Can we look to something like immigration, that timespan from 1880 to 1924, those forty-four years that have now become an historical marker for



contemporary Italian Americans? There may indeed also be specific tragedies that come to mind: the 1891 New Orleans lynching, for which we hold the dubious distinction of having been victims of the largest single “white” lynching<sup>(2)</sup>. One might even underscore historical discrimination, dating back to the nineteenth century and culminating, to date, in something like *Everyone Loves Raymond* or *The Sopranos*.

Though valid points of discussion, these last two examples do not constitute, in an encompassing manner, that one issue that can unite the Italian/American population in the same way in which other groups cohere. We might thus ponder what is that all encompassing issue that unites, for instance, Latinx. In addition to a strong sense of belonging they may have with regard to their culture(s), it may very well be the migratory experience — a sense of not belonging to the host country — that coheres Latinx. Surely, I do not want to be naïve in thinking that Latinx from any and all Latin/American countries have an equal sense of allegiance to the “old country”. Nor do I want to imply that all Latinx have an automatic sense of belonging to that group comprised of Latinx, as categorized in the United States. Nevertheless, we would not err in perceiving a certain sense of commonality that has its origins in the migratory experience insofar as they perceive themselves as outsiders, and, as such, hold on to their culture of origins. This combination of difference and cultural specificity — based in part on the migratory experience — surely figures as a cohering agent.

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(2) After one hundred twenty-eight years, the City of New Orleans issued a formal apology. For details, see Ryan Prior. Indeed, we had to wait for an African/American female mayor for someone in office who could truly empathize with this historical tragedy. On the New Orleans lynching, see Daniela G. Jäger; on the general history of lynchings of Italians in the United States, see Patrizia Salvetti.

An analogous formula might prove thus valid for Italian Americans. Immigration and its more than century-long history may very well figure as part of that cohesive agent, however tenuous. A strong sense of commonality is a necessary ingredient for the population to cohere and thus to progress for the study of all things Italian/American to become part and parcel of the *mainstream*, as it is for other United States hyphenated groups. To be sure, one added challenge is that there is greater distance between us Italian Americans and our migratory history, and therefore we need to make that extra effort to bridge that knowledge gap and, in the end, also correct some of the narratives we often hear, one being the question of “legal” *vs.* “illegal” historical Italian immigration. Hence, in addition to such thinking in a one-way and chronologically based mind-set, we might, in the end, consider the more complex legacy of said history. In so doing, we enter the realm of diasporic studies, the consideration of the dispersal of Italians beyond Italy’s border, in our case the United States, and how such a legacy has created new, contemporary articulations of the Italian-descendent populations throughout the United States as well as other parts of world<sup>(3)</sup>.

All of this is dependent on an Italian/American commitment (*impegno*) to the appreciation of our culture. This entails an active participation in cultural activities of all sorts; it requires that Italian/American groups make a concerted effort to go beyond those one or two activities they have identified as their own and make attempts to expand their agenda to include a new, more encompassing form of

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(3) The idea of speaking in terms of diaspora and not just immigration and its legacy was born out of a conversation with Stephen Cerulli, in which he insisted that we need to adhere to something not just historical but, indeed, current as well. See my essay (TAMBURRI 2022).

cultural integration. All of this is dependent on a combination of cultural awareness and appreciation: namely, a new sense of the Italian/American self that ultimately leads to an appropriation of and identification with one's cultural legacy.

A concerted *conversation* (“cum veterē”: i.e., coming together) on cultural philanthropy among Italian Americans is, I would submit, something necessary to bring to the table. The concept has yet to be discussed beyond those few occasions among a small number of individuals. We need only turn to (1) names on libraries, colleges of arts and humanities, and privately endowed professorships, (2) the lack of a free-standing *national* museum, and (3) graduate programs in Italian Americana, for us to realize how far behind we are in cultural appreciation.

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