

## Review Essay:

### Paesani and Puertorriquenos in Philadelphia

By Stefano Luconi. *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia.*

(Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001. Pp. x, 264, Notes, Bibliography, Index.)

By Carmen Teresa Whalen. *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economics.*

(Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001. Pp. xiii, 309, Photographs, Notes, Bibliography, Index.)

Stefano Luconi's *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia*, and Carmen Teresa Whalen's *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economics* have similar goals but different methods and conclusions. Both use the complex mix of native homeland and new local circumstances in Philadelphia to explain the ethnic experience and how it accounts for the present-day status of the respective ethnic groups. Each would also agree with recent scholarship in viewing assimilation and acculturation as fluid processes dependent upon a wide range of local, national and international conditions and events. The ethnic community has limited control in shaping its own social, economic and political destiny. However, there are also major differences in the two works. Luconi takes a macro approach by relating Philadelphia's Italian-Americans to broad concepts and events in American history. On the other hand, Whalen takes more of a micro perspective in ascertaining how individuals and demographic patterns shaped the new environment. She then connects these findings with broader concepts and events. Perhaps most important, the authors come to different conclusions on the very nature of each group's American experience. Luconi accounts for the factors that brought about Italian-American socio-economic and political mobility transforming the group from distinctively ethnic to the category of White Ethnic Americans. Conversely, Whalen explains the conditions

that have caused Puerto Ricans to retain their ethnic identity but at the same time have limited socio-economic mobility and assimilation.

Stefano Luconi, an Adjunct Professor of North American History at the University of Florence, Italy, focuses on the transformation of ethnic identity in America. He does not claim to write a history of Italian-Americans in Philadelphia or analyze the demographic and socio-economic patterns. However, he discusses these factors as they pertain to his central theme—how Philadelphia's Italian-Americans "constructed and renegotiated their ethnic identity between the late nineteenth century and the mid-1900s." (p. 2) He often focuses on how politics "played a key role in the formation and redefinition of the self-perceptions of minorities in U.S. society." (p. 2)

*From Paesani to White Ethnics* begins with an in-depth introduction on the historiography of American, and more specifically Italian-American, ethnic studies. While this might be superfluous for some, it does serve as a solid background for scholars and, perhaps more importantly, students not actively involved in ethnic studies. In his historiographic overview, Luconi states that while traditional scholarship saw the coming together of a "white ethnics" culture as a post-World War II phenomenon, recent works have focused on "the whole course of American history." (p. 6) Luconi analyzes the varying historical perspectives on Italian-Americans and other white ethnic groups and their role between the Protestant establishment and African Americans, Hispanic and Asian groups. Despite differing interpretations, the combination of cultural interests and the political forces needed to achieve these interests brings about a broadening of ethnic identities. Consequently, Italian-Americans lessen their ethnic ties in favor of the greater goals of all white ethnics. Philadelphia is the logical locale for such a study in that it offers a microcosm of Italian-American settlement in the United States.

Luconi begins his study with an analysis of how the regional cultures of the homeland coalesced into Italian-American culture. While traditional scholarship has often taken a bottom up approach in the creation of ethnic identity, Luconi believes it was the Italian social elites, *prominenti*, who were responsible for the realization of a common national origin by utilizing causes from the homeland. The *prominenti's* efforts would be reinforced by the unity with the homeland in World War I and became even greater during the 1920s because of discrimination leveled against Italian-Americans; conflict with other ethnic groups; and common political and religious goals. Contrary to the thesis that the Depression dampened ethnic identity, Luconi offers examples of how

Philadelphia's Italian-American culture continued to flourish. Most striking was the support for Mussolini's Fascist regime which fostered Italian pride. Luconi asserts that not even the Italian belligerence during World War II lessened Italian identity. Fears of reprisals against them and concern for the homeland after surrender fortified ethnic cohesion.

According to Luconi, the watershed for the reduction of ethnic identity and the development of a white ethnic consciousness was the perceived political and social threat of African Americans and Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia. The culmination of this was the election of Frank Rizzo as Philadelphia's mayor in 1971. This "demonstrated that ethnic cooperation was more productive than competition for providing effective solutions to such problems as crime and urban violence." Despite a perception of a continuing Italian-American culture in Philadelphia, Luconi asserts that this is more image than reality. The vast majority of those of Italian heritage are part of the white ethnic culture.

Carmen Teresa Whalen, a member of the Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies faculty at Rutgers University, centers her research and thesis around the community, family and employment roles of Puerto Rican men and women in the homeland communities of San Lorenzo and Salinas, and in the Philadelphia area. She questions the origins of the "culture of poverty" and "underclass" concepts that are "still embedded in the mainstream literature on Puerto Ricans." (p. 8) She views the ethnic group's eventual socio-economic status as a product of "structural factors, unequal relations between countries and within national borders, and to the gender dimensions of economic development, labor migration and economic incorporation." (p. 8) Whalen also believes that scholarship challenging the culture of poverty perspective has not been grounded in historical research methodology. Her work incorporates the broad scope of global and national economic conditions with local factors in Puerto Rico and Philadelphia in order to present a composite of Puerto Rican socio-economic status and ethnic identity.

The monograph first details how the decline of Puerto Rico's post-World War II agricultural and home labor forced many rural dwellers to migrate to cities on the island. In viewing eventual migrants to the States as having both rural and urban experiences, Whalen challenges Clarence Senior's thesis that migration to the States came in separate waves of rural and urban residents in which the urbanites became the "permanent migrants." (p. 48) The weak Puerto Rican economy and

farm labor programs in the States prompted large numbers of rural men to migrate. Some saw the farm labor programs as seasonal labor while others used them as a means of permanent settlement. The eventual decision to settle in an urban area such as Philadelphia was prompted by greater economic opportunities and a lesser degree of racial bias. The urban manufacturing jobs also began to attract an increasing number of women. By 1970, ninety-six percent of the Puerto Ricans in Pennsylvania lived in the metropolitan Philadelphia area.

Once in Philadelphia, Puerto Rican migrants found "a plethora of limited opportunities" with an abundance of work in primarily low paying, secondary market positions. (p. 136) They were faced with the recurrent dualism of American immigration history—they were needed to fill the low-paying jobs that residents of the States eschewed, but were not welcome to become Americans. The irony was that Puerto Ricans are Americans, a fact not known by many residents of the States. Philadelphia's postwar loss of manufacturing jobs and eventual growth of the service economy decreased the need for unskilled laborers. Unlike other ethnic groups of the past, the post-World War II migrants did not enjoy a sustained period of economic growth that allowed them to gain socio-economic mobility. As the last hired first fired victims of this economic restructuring, the stigma of underclass and culture of poverty was placed upon Puerto Ricans.

Both *From Paesani to White Ethnics* and *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia* stand on their own as excellent studies on the ethnic experience in America. They clearly demonstrate that the assimilation processes and socio-economic mobility are contingent upon factors that go beyond any ethnic characteristics. Both emphasize the fact that ethnic communities do not evolve in a vacuum, but are affected by a multitude of regional, national and global economic and political factors. If readers want a detailed account of demographic patterns and individual experience, the Whalen work would be the choice. She gives an exacting account through statistics and oral histories. Luconi is more interested in focusing on the assimilation process and does not offer the degree of specific details. Nonetheless, he is faithful to his stated purpose and is quite convincing in his arguments. While both authors clearly demonstrate the impact of global, national and local economics and politics, there could have been more focus upon cultural factors. The diffusion of Italian-American and Hispanic cultures into the mainstream of American society impacted upon members of each ethnic group. Luconi and Whalen do not address how American born children of the

migrants brought new dimensions to the ethnic culture. This is particularly apparent when Italian-Americans from Philadelphia became connected to the youth culture and popular music and media during the 1950s and 1960s. Similar analogies can be drawn to Hispanics in more recent times.

While each book is highly recommended on individual merits, there is an advantage in reading them concurrently. In this way readers can see how circumstances of history shaped ethnic cultures in different ways. While this may make the field of ethnic studies more complex, Stefano Luconi and Carmen Teresa Whalen clearly broaden our perspectives on America's ethnic heritage.

Paul J. Zbiek, *King's College*

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**Rejoinder to Rebuttal by Phoebe Lloyd (winter, 2002 issue) on the *Peale Family Papers* Project:**

In her response to our letter, Phoebe Lloyd fails to answer our central question: what evidence does she have to support her serious charge (one she has been making for years) that the Peale Family Papers has omitted or distorted documents which we have published in the Collected Papers microfiche edition and in the Selected Papers letterpress volumes.

Further response to Dr. Lloyd is unnecessary but we will suggest it is time for her to stop her piecemeal attacks and produce her own scholarly volume on the Peale Family.

Sidney Hart, Editor, *Peale Family Papers*

David C. Ward, Deputy Editor, *Peale Family Papers*