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## CONSTRUCTING COLLECTIVE MEMORY THROUGH A DOCUMENTARY. THE CASE OF “THE ITALIAN AMERICANS” (PBS, 2015)

### ABSTRACT

The present paper is a case study of the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) series: “The Italian Americans” (2015). It is argued that the series’ authors have aimed to deconstruct the anti-Italian stereotype, widespread in the United States. In exchange, they have proposed a new, positive image of the Italian community in America promoting the accomplishments of its prominent members. The entire PBS project, “The American Experience”, reflects an evolution of U.S. identity patterns from the homogeneous “melting pot” toward the diverse “salad bowl”, and hence – from monologue to polylogue.

KEYWORDS: Italian American, identity, collective memory, documentary, TV series

### 1. *SELECTIVE DISCOURSES:* DOCUMENTARIES BETWEEN MEMORY AND HISTORY

Although in the eyes of many they might seem akin to each other, in fact the concepts of memory and history differ noticeably, as pointed out by a number of scholars (Assmann 2005; Traba 2015). Memory, derived from the Greek term *μνήμη*, can be considered one’s own monologue concerning the past. Its etymology places it not far away from the idea of a relic of, a concern for or a thought about one’s own direct experience, a personal recollection, a subjective vision of events one has lived through. In contrast, the meaning of history, with its Greek origin (*ἱστορία*), as used by Herodotus, the founding father of the discipline, is built upon the concept of research and investigation, a critical study of the past through a variety of available sources. Therefore history proper, as an academic discipline, must necessarily entail multiperspectivity or a dialogue between several opposing visions, which might well be defined as “polylogue”. It is through history education that, psychologically, we all undertake, or at least we should undertake, in our relation to the past, a long march from “monologue to polylogue”, or “from (subjective) memory to (objective) history”.

And yet history education does not always equal historical objectivity achieved through multiperspectivity. Instead, it tends to bow to contemporary political and social contexts, thus enabling communities and nations today to re-write their (hi)stories, treating the past as a reservoir of facts to arbitrarily choose from, so as to alter or solidify specific aspects of their imagined selves, according to the necessities of the moment. That is how collective memory, at times also defined as *cultural* or *social* memory, is fabricated, often having little in common with either complex historical truths, as proclaimed by academic historians, or diverse individual memories (Erlil & Nünning 2008: 5–6). This may happen spontaneously, in response to genuine social processes and needs, yet whenever it comes as a result of an organised and purposeful campaign, often launched by an authority, such a re-elaboration of collective visions of the past will most likely be considered as an example of “politics of memory” (Huysen 2003) or – less frequently – “politics of history” (Heisler 2009).

The expansion of the television and movie industry has made it a powerful tool in this respect. Entire generations have now drawn their ideas of the past, often appallingly erroneous, from either globally or locally made epic film productions, overshadowing the findings of professional historians, thus gradually deprived of their cultural prominence. An ambition to bridge the gap between the realms of academia and entertainment, in order to jointly wield even more cultural influence, has paved the way for a new genre to come to the fore: that of a history documentary. As one author puts it,

documentary films have been important to forming ideas of the US nation, both as an imagined space and as a real place. [...] Films, with the discourses that surround them and the institutions that support them, are central means through which the idea of the national is articulated and culturally determined. [...] Film reflects and refracts national consciousness – it can help create a sense of national belonging through the national narratives and myths it (re)produces. Like national affiliations themselves, films and filmic discourses are selective: they can mobilize, promote and also suppress key ideas and myths of the nation (Geiger 2011: 2–3).

The aim of the present paper is therefore to offer a case study of a documentary whose authors made an attempt to re-create and possibly produce a collective memory, not of the whole American nation, but of an important ethnic community within the United States.

“The Italian Americans” is a documentary series produced by the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), first aired on February 17 and 24, 2015. It was written and produced by John Maggio, an experienced and highly acclaimed film director and contributor to the PBS flagship series: “Frontline” and “American Experience”. The narrator is Stanley Tucci, the famous actor and Emmy Award winner. The series consists of four episodes, each lasting almost 60 minutes, whose respective titles are 1) “La Famiglia (1880–1910)”, 2) “Becoming Americans (1914–1930)”,

3) “Loyal Americans (1930–1945)”, 4) “The American Dream (1945 to present day)”. These are accompanied by an official companion book, authored by Maria Laurino, a New York journalist and speechwriter. Both the film and the book feature contributions offered by some popular Italian American researchers and writers, like Donna Gabaccia, Gay Talese or Fred Gardaphe (Maggio 2015). One can thus claim the series is a voice of the Italian American community opinion leaders and its academic elite.

## 2. *NONE GUILTY!*: THE ITALIAN AMERICAN STEREOTYPE DECONSTRUCTED

The series authors’ crucial presumption is conspicuous from the very beginning. They believe so overwhelming has been the power of the negative stereotype of Italian Americans in mainstream U.S. society that it is this widespread prejudice they first need to face and deconstruct: “There’s truth in any stereotype, but if that’s overblown and that’s all what you are seeing, it becomes untrue. [...] No other immigrant story has been more mythologized than that of Italian Americans” (Maggio III 2015, 1:15–1:27). Bitterly aware as they are of an inferior status assigned to early Italian immigrants (Guglielmo & Salerno 2003), the authors attempt to turn the tables by adopting an utterly new perspective: instead of the traditional approach of a severe White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) judge, disgusted with Italian American sins and vices, they invite viewers to embrace that of an empathetic observer, willing to understand, and not condemn, the Italian immigrant. This is achieved through the usage of three techniques: contextualisation, inversion and re-dimensioning.

In order for viewers to exorcise the stereotypical image of a notoriously uncultured and violent ethnic group, they are offered insights into the harsh realities of Italian life back in the mother country. In particular, the so-called “Southern question”, or the deep divide, in spite of the country’s formal unification in 1861, between Italy’s triumphant, prosperous and liberal Northern regions and her backward, poverty-stricken and provincial South, is discussed at length. Pro-Southern interpretation of the contrasts is unequivocally implied when the narrator declares: “The Northern government did nothing for Southern Italian peasants” (Maggio I 2015, 7:53–7:56). Thus, the blame is put on post-unification Italian government, though still labelled as “Northern”, and South Italians are portrayed as the helpless victims, brought to abject misery (flour made of plaster from the walls) by imposing excessive taxation (“if they knew more about you, they could tax you even more”) and thus forced to migrate to the United States, embarking on “horrible voyages”, as lowest class passengers who “didn’t see the ocean” throughout the Atlantic crossing. This allows the narrator to conclude that it was “hardship

[that] has brought Italian Americans together” since in the world as they knew it only families could be trusted while “anybody in the authority was an enemy” (Maggio I 2015, 8:50–8:57). The historical context is thus introduced in order to both justify stereotypical Italian American clan mentality with their previous trauma and inspire contemporary viewers’ compassion in the face of their suffering.

When claiming another technique for deconstructing the anti-Italian stereotype is inversion, what I have in mind is that much of the guilt for racial prejudice is attributed to America’s own problems, and not the Italian immigrants. The filmmakers stress how deeply segregated U.S. society had anyway been even before it experienced the first mass-scale wave of Italian newcomers. Roughly two decades after the American Civil War, dark-skinned immigrants from the South of Italy, Sicily in particular, replaced black slaves on sugar cane plantations, while the city of New Orleans, once known as ground zero for black slave trade, was then called “Piccolo Palermo” (Maggio I 2015, 10:45–10:58). It is thus implied that Italian immigrants, alongside their jobs and living spaces, also inherit the inferior social status of African Americans, being denied the quality of white people, instead considered “Dagoes” (from the Spanish name “Diego”). When mentioning the infamous episode of New Orleans lynching of 1891, it is stressed that among those eleven Italians massacred for allegedly having murdered the local police chief (“The dagoes got me!”, he famously whispered before dying) “none [was] guilty!” (Maggio I 2015, 12:55–14:58). If one adds to all this that it was a widespread conviction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that “the very air of America somehow weakened the Italian family” (Maggio I 2015, 4:35–4:41), the inversion is accomplished: it was not the Italians who threatened American life according to the orthodox WASP narrative, but it was America that corrupted and persecuted Italians because of her deeply embedded racism and immorality.

Finally, re-dimensioning the Italian American experience also seems a useful technique in challenging the prejudice. Claiming that the power of myth has overshadowed the real story, the authors decide to shift the balance between the different elements of Italian history in the United States. Consequently, even though they are well aware that in the United States Italianness is promptly and primarily associated with the Mafia, they choose to devote little attention to the phenomenon of Italian organized crime within the three first episodes. Instead, again in an attempt to inspire compassion, attention is focused on the “grim details” of the Italian “urban village” life in “chaotic New York City”, “separated from society”, with homesick “men used like animals” desperate to bring over Sicilian sea salt for their mozzarellas, as well as their children and wives, “the white widows” whose husbands had abandoned them in search of a better life as “birds of passage” (Maggio I 2015, 18:35–20:10). The Mafia will re-emerge as a key theme only in Episode 4, and yet in a very different light. The unquestionable power of the linkage between Italianness and the gangsters will be attributed to the unprecedented success of Mario Puzo’s novel – and subsequently the movie based upon it – “The Godfather”.

Thus, with their skillful application of contextualisation, inversion and re-dimensioning, “The Italian Americans” authors may seem rather convincing in their claims that the common perception of Italians in America is largely factually wrong, a product of America’s racism or literary fiction at best. Therefore, logically – the authors argue – an alternative is necessary, a narrative closer to (our) truth and enabling the Italian community to develop a far more satisfactory vision of their past, or a new collective memory.

### 3. *IF THEY ARE NOT AMERICAN, WHO THE HELL IS?!* A NEW ITALIAN AMERICAN MEMORY

A cornerstone of the positive collective memory model proposed, revealed already at the very outset, is that Italianness ought to be identified primarily with the Roseto effect, or the Italian town in Pennsylvania whose population was medically studied in 1964 as a community with exceptionally low heart attack statistics despite unhealthy eating and lifestyle. “We ate everything wrong but we loved it. [...] I want to die with a meatball in my mouth” – say elderly, fat, happy Italians, and the narrator’s comment is that Italian Americans would not die prematurely as within the stronghold of their family they generally feel “emotionally safe” and simply “know how to live” (Maggio I 2015, 02:15–03:49). Apart from the Roseto effect, an overarching idea behind the series, pivotal in constructing a new positive Italian American collective memory, is a catalogue of successful individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to their fields and thus made America exceptionally prosperous.

Already the first episode, though heavily burdened with accounts of Italian suffering before, during and after the Atlantic crossing, brings several profiles of Italian American heroes, depicted as human remedies to those problems traditionally linked to the Italian community. Among them there is Giuseppe (Joe) Petrosino (1860–1909) (Romano 2010: 45), “probably the most famous crime fighter at the turn of the century” (Maggio I 2015, 30:57–31:07), the founder of the Italian Squad within the Irish-dominated New York City Police Department. Thanks to their knowledge of numerous Italian dialects they proved largely successful in fighting the early Mafia-type organisation, “The Black Hand”. Determined to open the Italian ghetto by convincing his compatriots to trust U.S. public institutions, Petrosino was assassinated while investigating Mafia suspects in Sicily. “In New York over 250,000 people lined the streets to mourn him” (Maggio I 2015, 32:37–32:42) – the narrator concludes, delivering a clear message: even if some Italians were Black Hand gangsters, there were far more Italians among their victims who sincerely supported Joe Petrosino’s quest for legality.

Similarly, the stereotype of uncultured, rude and destitute Italians is challenged with the story of their success in San Francisco. When their Little Italy of North Beach crumbled as a result of the 1906 earthquake, it was promptly rebuilt with the help of Amadeo Giannini (1870–1949), a self-made-man founder of the North California-based Bank of Italy, “an institution for the little fellows” (Bonadio 1994). Giannini will base the success of his business upon “handshake loans” and direct contact with his Italian customers. In 1930 his bank became Bank of America. The narrator’s comment is to be expected, quoting one of his North Beach clients saying: “Before Giannini I was a Dago and after Giannini I was an American” (Maggio I 2015, 42:10–42:20). Italian could thus stand for superior culture, solidarity in crisis and economic efficiency, all combining to streamline the immigrants into mainstream American life.

Episode two – “Becoming Americans (1914–1930)” – highlights several stories of those Italians whose achievements mark conspicuous milestones in their community’s long march toward acceptance. Rudolph Valentino (1895–1926), an immigrant from the Italian South, landing at Ellis Island at the age of eighteen, found his way to Hollywood (Ellenberger 2005). Instead of the stereotypical “Italian” characters like thieves or peasants at best, he was offered those of Indian rajahs, Spanish bullfighters and Arab sheikhs. The narrator admits bitterly that “despite his efforts to play mainstream roles, producers and audiences would only accept him as a dark, exotic foreigner” (Maggio II 2015, 2:53–3:01). Nevertheless, dubbed “Vaselino”, he undeniably “held an irresistible charm for American women” (Maggio II 2015, 1:13–1:22). In other words, we are told, in Rudolph Valentino the stereotypical image of an Italian as a short, fat and primitive *cafone* was overshadowed by that of a sun-tanned, muscular and sexy, attractive and enviable “laughing lover”.

The portrayal of the Italian labour movement and its struggle constitutes yet another example of how harmful stereotypes can be substituted with alternative examples of Italian American leadership in U.S. public life. Although the American public is well familiar with the names of two anarchists: Nicola Sacco (1891–1927) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1888–1927) (Avrich 1991), in the documentary emphasis is put elsewhere. It is the Lawrence, Massachusetts textile mill strikes of 1912, reportedly led by Italian workers under Italian and American flags, that allow the filmmakers to illustrate Italian American courage, determination and solidarity. As the strikes protract and workers lose their spirit, a new Italian leader, Arturo Giovannitti (1884–1959) (Bencivenni 2011: 168), takes the stage. A poet, ex-seminarian and activist within the Industrial Workers of the World Movement, addresses them with an inspirational speech, called the “Sermon on the Common”:

Blessed are they that mourn their martyred dead: for they shall avenge them upon their murderers and be comforted.

Blessed are the rebels: for they shall reconquer the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after equality: for they shall eat the fruit of their labor.

Blessed are the strong: for they shall not taste the bitterness of pity.  
Blessed are the sincere in heart: for they shall see truth.  
Blessed are they that do battle against wrong: for they shall be called the children of Liberty.  
(Maggio II 2015, 18:21–19:04)

Rather than a violent, subversive and sterile, even if justifiable, movement of the depressed, Italian labour radicalism now becomes a legitimate, progressive and thus commendable struggle for better living conditions, guided by Italians in the interest of the American society and, globally, the “industrial workers of the world”.

Episode three is focused on how the Italian American community was put to the toughest loyalty test and how this proved a defining moment for them as mainstream U.S. citizens. In the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack and Mussolini’s declaration of war on the United States on December 11, 1941, almost 700,000 Italians not holding American citizenship were identified as enemy aliens, detained or threatened with deportation (Basile Chopas 2017: 2). The documentary then offers oral testimonies from living witnesses of those events still recalling their “deep sense of betrayal” by America, their country of choice, often referring to this experience as “la Mala Notte”, Italian for “the horrible night” or “the nightmare” (Maggio III 2015, 50:25–52:22). However, one might find the reaction of the Italian American community – as presented in the series – rather staggering. Whatever sense of loyalty to Italy and the fascist regime had been visible in interwar America, it all but disappeared: “With the country at war Italian American patriotism was on full display. Overnight images of Mussolini were torn down in Little Italies throughout the country. [...] We are Americans” (Maggio III 2015, 32:31–33:11). If such an unanimity of the whole community may look exaggerated, it certainly is a fact it was favoured by some influential opinion leaders, like Generoso Pope (1891–1950) (Pope 2011) – “the Rupert Murdoch of the Italian American community” (Maggio III 2015, 24:15–24:18). Even though he had previously sought (and gained) Mussolini’s personal friendship and support, the owner of “Il Progresso Italo-Americano”, the largest U.S. Italian-language newspaper, now renounced his fascist sympathies and declared his unconditional allegiance to the American republic. Frank Capra, Sicilian-born, one of Hollywood’s most successful directors of his time, made “Why We Fight. A Series of Seven Information Films” for the federal government. Watched by 54 million Americans, in the narrator’s words, it featured “an homage to America’s most noble ideals about freedom and liberty” (Maggio III 2015, 34:21–34:26) and thus meant a substantial input into the U.S. propaganda machine. Even the American feminist icon, Rosy the Riveter, in fact turns out to be a 21-year-old Italian American girl from New York, Rosy Bonavita (Maggio III 2015, 33:18–33:27).

When forced to choose between their two identities clashing at that stage of global history, against the predictions of U.S. authorities expecting them to side with their old country, Italian Americans on the whole undeniably sent a clear message. The measures against Italian “enemy aliens” were repealed on Columbus Day, October 12, 1942, as the U.S. Attorney General, Francis Biddle, came up with

an unprecedented declaration: “You, Italians, have stood the test. Your loyalty has been proved” (Maggio III 2015, 50:58–51:05). The government couldn’t ignore the 1,5 million Italians serving – in the still racially segregated U.S. Army – alongside white (but not black) people of other ancestries: “These platoons were kind of white melting pots. [...] Italians had been part of a triumphant national endeavour and it had emboldened their sense of Americanness” (Maggio III 2015, 53:52–54:40”) – we are told by the narrator. Paradoxically, racial segregation secured Italians the privileged status of white men, isolating them from black Americans, and finally brought an end to a century-old popular controversy over the perception of their colour. One of the experts on the show adds emphatically: “The war was a dividing line. [...] If they are not American, who the hell is?!” (Maggio III 2015, 55:02–55:15).

With Italian Americans ultimately on the safe side, the fourth and final episode brings two crucial topics. Firstly, not without good reasons for such timing, no sooner than once a solid positive image of the community has been built, viewers are now confronted with what is presented as nothing less than the inflated Mafia mythology. Starting from the 1963 Joe Valachi (1904–1971) hearings, with an ex-mobster revealing the real story of the Cosa Nostra, we hear of “the public’s [gruesome] fascination” with the topic (Maggio IV 2015, 14:20–14:24). This is pushed even further, as it has been already mentioned, with Mario Puzo’s (1920–1999) “The Godfather” (1969) (Puzo 2013). The blame is put yet again on the American general public, uninterested in the gloomy Italian immigrant stories previously published by Puzo, but thrilled at the prospect of reading about the gangsters, in that way compelling the author to write his Mafia novel (Maggio IV 2015, 17:21). Although especially “The Godfather” movie is judged to be a major Italian success due to its authenticity (produced jointly by Mario Puzo and the young director, Francis Ford Coppola) (Maggio IV 2015, 19:49), it is admitted it stirs mixed reactions among the Italian American community. While some confess they felt a sense of nostalgia and intimacy about discovering the genuine story of the hard immigrant lot, the movie also provoked fierce street protests “against discrimination and defamation”, with a number of Italian Americans “made extremely uncomfortable by the portrayal of all these gangsters with Italian names”. In the end all agree, for good and for bad, “The Godfather” has acquired the popularly perceived status of a “de facto history of the Italians in America” (Maggio IV 2015, 22:13–23:16).

The episode ends on the positive note of Italian American success in contemporary political life. The real breakthrough is the story of judge Antonin Scalia (1936–2016), the first Italian American nominated to the Supreme Court (Schultz & Schweber 2018). Speaking of this experience Justice Scalia recalls: “When my confirmation was final I got cartloads of mail from Italian Americans expressing their pride in my appointment, I had no idea that it meant that much” (Maggio IV 2015, 24:35–24:40). His belief is that, in the aftermath of “The Godfather” trauma, having a justice on the Supreme Court, as an expression of Italian commitment to the rule of law, might have been more important than a prospect of an Italian at the White House. Finally,

when Mario Cuomo (1932–2015) is elected governor of the State of New York, and is seriously considered as a possible presidential candidate (O’Shaughnessy 2016), a widespread feeling among his community is reportedly that “real Italians will [now] be shown to the world” (Maggio IV 2015, 30:03–30:12).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS: FROM MELTING POT TO SALAD BOWL

The series finale, and therefore also its overall message, turns out to be somewhat unexpected and definitely thought-provoking. As viewers hear the narrator solemnly declaring that “today there are over 15 million Americans of Italian descent. And by every measure they have achieved the American dream” (Maggio IV 2015, 34:43–34:48), it is to be imagined a great many will be under the false impression that this, and this only, is the rather predictable finishing touch of the whole narrative structure. And yet, we are then taken on a journey back to the mythic town of Roseto, Pennsylvania to find out that as researchers returned in the 1980s to verify their sensational heart disease findings they had to conclude with some dismay that “Roseto was no longer the happy, healthy town it once was” (Maggio IV 2015, 36:42–36:45). And so the filmmakers’ actual final message is: “That’s the thing about the American dream: [with] everything you get, you lose something at the same time” (Maggio IV 2015, 35:41–35:45). In this fashion, while evading the simplistic vision of the Italian experience in the U.S. as a stereotypical “rags-to-riches” American success story, at the same time John Maggio attributes positive value to the Italianness that so far had implicitly been treated as a burden and obstacle to Americanization. Ultimately, Roseto effect-related Italianness is sentimentally presented with a sense of loss for the original identity that had to be sacrificed for the sake of successfully pursuing the American dream.

Beyond any doubt, John Maggio’s work is a quality documentary, judging by its length (almost four hours in total), its contributors (highly acclaimed scholars, journalists and TV producers) and its public sponsor (PBS). However, one cannot dispel the feeling that as a result of its own qualities it ought to be classified as a production largely by Italian Americans and for Italian Americans, by insiders and for insiders. In order to assign it a proper place within the panorama of contemporary American culture it must be analysed within the broader context of similar PBS productions (“The American Experience”), which – taken as a whole – reflect America’s politics of memory. Strangely enough, release dates for the equivalent series on “The Irish in America” (1998), “The Jewish Americans” (2008) and “The African Americans” (2013), alongside the Italian version (2015), actually seem to petrify immigrant America’s stereotypical “pecking order”, or a kind of hierarchy outside mainstream WASP society, putting “Micks” (slur for Irish) before “Kikes” (Jews), while “Dagoes” (Italians), denied the privilege of whiteness, are looked

upon in a similar way as “Crows” (Africans). Nevertheless, the entire PBS project is certainly meant to promote mutual understanding, empathy, inclusion and solidarity between the different American ethnicities. It thus constitutes an attempt at (re-) constructing collective memory not just for the Italian Americans, but also for the whole United States, marking its transition from the vision of a “melting pot” to that of a “salad bowl” (Huntington 2004), or “from monologue to polylogue”.

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