

SALVATORE J. LAGUMINA AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY

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Salvatore J. LaGumina, Professor Emeritus at Nassau Community College, SUNY, established himself as an early proponent, in the 1960s, of the ethnic factor in American history, while dedicating himself to the objective study of the Italian-American experience. Author of seventeen books, more than a hundred scholarly articles, consultant to educational institutions, a founder of the American Italian Historical Association (1966), he has recorded and analyzed the complex nature of immigration and ethnicity in society. He has been instrumental in guiding a rising intelligentsia to create a systematic program of Italian-American Studies as an academic discipline that is worthy of objective research and constant revision. At its 15th annual national conference at St. John's University School of Law in October 2007, he received the SCSS lifetime achievement award and the Nassau Community College Center for Catholic Studies Award for his contributions in understanding Italian American History and its relationship to Catholicism.

The great Italian statesman and historian Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) has stated that all "true history is contemporary history." By this he meant history was more than a chronicle of events; history had to be meaningful in drawing comparisons of the past with the present. Croce's inference can be applied to American historians who have interpreted the past in light of their own age. Revising and reinterpreting the American past has been a continuing trend in historiography.

Simply stated, the writing of American history may be marked by three periods: Puritan, Patrician, and Professional. In the first stage, Puritan historians (John Winthrop, William Bradford) recorded and interpreted events from a religious point of view to justify the settlement of America during the seventeenth century. Next, the Patrician historians (Thomas Jefferson, Washington Irving, Francis Parkman, David Ramsay, William H. Prescott, George Bancroft) were an elite class who had little connection with religious institutions. They felt obligated to record the past through the late nineteenth century from a dominant secular social position. They sought to improve society. They believed that the historical record "revealed a progressive advance toward greater

human rights down through the ages; and that peoples of Anglo Saxon origin had a special destiny to bring democracy to the rest of the world.”

The Puritan and Patrician historians were amateurs, although some of their writings exhibited high literary quality. The third group may be labeled professional historians (Frederick Jackson Turner, Henry Adams, Charles A. Beard, Vernon L. Parrington) who led the field for the next century. They were trained in the field, taught, did research and writing, and were affiliated with colleges and universities. They earned a living at their craft. They were guided by scientific methods. They set standards, and constantly critiqued and revised each other’s work.¹

Since World War II, there has been a fragmentation of professional historiography. Newer trends evolved, marked by interpretations from the perspective of the new political history, economic history, conservative, social history, radical history, urban history, ethno-cultural history, women’s history, intellectual history, etc. These trends occurred with the development of the computer, with an emphasis on interdisciplinary procedures.

The work of Salvatore J. LaGumina, Professor Emeritus and Director of the Center for Italian Studies at Nassau Community College, SUNY, reflects Benedetto Croce’s view that all “true history is contemporary history.” Professor LaGumina’s insightful analysis of the twentieth century has provided a re-evaluation and understanding of earlier historical events in light of contemporary events. He concluded that the World War II era marked the great watershed for Italian Americans. The children and grandchildren of more than 5,000,000 Italian immigrants who had arrived in the United States since 1880 were now acquiring the education, wealth, and organizational talent to gain respect and power. Their participation in World War II and later conflicts, allowed them to utilize the benefits of the GI Bill of Rights. They continued to work hard. They faced less discrimination. They focused on family traditions. They proved their love and loyalty to their adopted land. The success of Joe DiMaggio and Frank Sinatra as icons of popular culture contributed enormously to the acceptance of Italian Americans by the American public. Professor LaGumina interpreted these events as significant in the understanding of this large ethnic-immigrant group, as well as gaining a true understanding of the flow of American history.

Professor LaGumina emerged as an aspiring scholar in this postwar era, completing undergraduate work at Duquesne University, going on to St. John’s University for his master’s and doctoral degrees. In his work at St. John’s, he noted that Italian Americans and other white ethnic groups from the great migration at the turn of the twentieth

century were not included in American history. His seminal doctoral dissertation focused on Vito Marcantonio, the congressman from New York's East Harlem who served in the U. S. House of Representatives from 1934 to 1950, with the exception of one term. His dissertation, *Vito Marcantonio, Labor and the New Deal, 1935-1940*, was completed in 1966. As a controversial civil rights leader, Marcantonio's base of support comprised Italian Americans, and later Puerto Ricans and blacks. LaGumina's revisionist interpretation of the work on Marcantonio emphasized the ethno-cultural factor in politics. His work was published in 1969, *Vito Marcantonio: The People's Politician*, (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt).

Professor LaGumina developed as an influential intellectual leader during the 1960s and 1970s, when the ethnic factor played an important role in society. It coincided with the rise of the civil rights revolution and the black power movement. Italian ethnic consciousness rose, along with other European nationality groups, demanding a rightful place in society, and in the historical record. He often paid tribute to Giovanni Schiavo (1898-1983), an early pioneer in Italian American history.

As a keen observer of these developments and looking to correct the historical record, Professor LaGumina, in December, 1966, met at the LaGuardia Memorial House in New York City with a small group of scholars that included scholars Rudolph J. Vecoli, Silvano Tomasi, Frank Cordasco, Louis Silveri, and Leonard Covello to organize the American Italian Historical Association, which would lay the foundation for Italian-American Studies. Founder-educator Leonard Covello led the way in modeling the AIHA after the American Jewish Historical Association.

Previously, work had been accomplished on the history and culture of Italians in America, but that work had been impressionistic, filiopietistic, lacking institutional support, and without a sustaining network of scholars. Thus, Professor LaGumina was instrumental in guiding a rising Italian-American intelligentsia to help create a systematic program of Italian-American Studies as an academic discipline that was worthy of objective research and constant revision. Today there are numerous Italian-American Studies programs at institutions of higher learning across the nation. Because of the increasing esteem and acceptance of Italian-American Studies as an academic discipline, public and private funding has made possible these advanced programs.

It must be emphasized that Professor LaGumina's early work predated Richard Gambino's book, *Blood of My Blood* (New York:

Doubleday, 1974), which affirmed Italian-American ethnicity. Drawn from historical, sociological, and scholarly sources, Professor Gambino presented with clarity and profound understanding a vivid view “of a people, Italian-Americans.” It remains a classic. Similar related developments occurred. For example, Alex Haley’s novel, *Roots* (NY: Doubleday, 1976), made such an immediate impact that it led to the ABC television serialization in 1977. NBC television produced and presented *Holocaust* the following year. Ethnic groups were now included in American pluralism along with racial groups.

As part of this movement, the work of the American Italian Historical Association has led to an increasing amount of research, documentation, and publications, becoming an important part of the ethnic/immigration canon. Professor LaGumina has served as vice president, president, and has been repeatedly elected to the AIHA Executive Council. He established the guidelines for AIHA conferences, of which the first three were held at Casa Italiana, Columbia University, New York City. Since then, annual conferences have been held around the country. This year’s Fortieth Annual Conference met in Denver, Colorado.

From 1966 to the present, he is the only person to be totally and continuously involved in the work of the Association. He has emphasized the interdisciplinary nature of the AIHA. He has pointed out the difference between the study of Italian culture and language from that of the experience of Italian Americans living in the United States. He summed it up best when he stated:

In undertaking this work we would not only become knowledgeable regarding the Italian American ethnic experience, but even more important add a significant dimension of the American experience that had hitherto been dimly understood and largely ignored. To concentrate on the experiences of Italian Americans was a concept not easily understood, being readily confused and identified with studying the culture and language of Italy. While the latter estimable goal was willingly acknowledged, the history of Americans of Italian descent received lesser attention. It was precisely to fill the gap of knowledge and information about Italian Americans that animated the founders of the AIHA and that served as its *raison d’être*. Thus, while we honored and encouraged the study of Italian culture and language, we viewed that interest not as an end in itself but as a vital background for understanding the heritage of Americans of Italian descent.²

Once Professor LaGumina established himself as a major proponent of the ethno/cultural factor in history, he dedicated himself to the objective study of the Italian-American experience. He has written, edited, and co-edited seventeen books, produced more than one hundred scholarly articles, and served as a consultant to the National Ethnic Heritage Studies Program, and in similar roles for American ethnic groups such as the American Jewish Congress and the New York public schools. He is a frequent guest on radio and television programs. He has lectured in Italy, at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Fordham, Catholic University of America, University of Illinois, Rutgers, New School for Social Research, Graduate Center of CUNY, and various SUNY campuses. He has held the position of Director of the Ethnic Studies Program at Wesleyan University and has guided graduate students working on their dissertations. He is the founder and first president of the Long Island Chapter of the American Italian Historical Association. In fact, he has been the most productive Italian-American scholar in the past four decades.

It is important to cite several of his distinguished publications and place them in historical context. He chaired the first conference of the American Italian Historical Association, October 26, 1968, at Columbia University's Casa Italiana. Its theme was *Ethnicity in American Political Life: The Italian American Experience*. From this conference, the first AIHA Proceedings was published under the same title. He has maintained this theme in his writings throughout his career.³ In his Preface, LaGumina states: "More than an expression of filiopietism the following pages can read profitably with an eye to the present as the past is reviewed."

Scholars of Italian-American Studies owe much to him for professional guidance. Through his influential leadership the principle of ethnicity and the importance of immigration in American history began to play a central role in the profession, especially in advancing the work of the AIHA. In 1974, he, with the collaboration of Frank J. Cavaoli, produced a book entitled, *The Ethnic Dimension in American Society* (Boston: Holbrook Press), which went through at least four printings. The Preface stated, "The central theme of this book is that the American experience can be understood through a study of immigrants and ethnic minorities." A work of 364 pages, it included all ethnic groups and their experiences; there were special chapters on "The Black Man's Experience" and "Immigration Policy and Ethnicity." Ten years later, they wrote a similar book with a similar theme, *The Peripheral Americans* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Kreiger Publishing). This book was also widely used in colleges and schools around the nation. He initiated

and guided the production of the Italian-American encyclopedia, whose co-editors and contributors were Frank J. Cavaioli, Professors Joseph A. Varacalli, and Salvatore Primeggia.

Professor LaGumina made another breakthrough when he wrote the first authoritative book on discrimination against Italian Americans, *WOP, A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973). It has been republished by Guernica Editions, Toronto, and remains the standard work on the topic. If there were any doubt that this indignity of discrimination existed, he overcame such doubt by fully delineating events with primary sources. He cited first-hand accounts of outright bias in American history from college presidents, newspapers, magazines, cartoons, legislators, poems, and songs. *The New York Times Harper's, Century Magazine, and Life* exemplified the prevailing prejudice against this large ethnic group. The book has made historians aware that anti-Italian discrimination did exist and had been a part of the historical past.

In 1979, he organized, under a State University of New York grant, the Conversations in the Discipline conference entitled *Ethnicity in Suburbia: The Long Island Experience*, which was conducted at Nassau Community College. The College published the conference research papers the following year.

Professor LaGumina continued to pursue this theme by emphasizing the Italian-American experience in suburbia in attempting to provide a deeper understanding of ethnicity when he wrote *From Steerage to Suburb: The Long Island Italians* (Staten Island, NY: Center for Migration Studies, 1988). In his research, he concluded that Italian Americans had established themselves as the largest ethnic group on Long Island after World War II, a fact that necessitated an investigation of the social, economic, and political impact they had on the region. Of course, he acknowledged they were there long before the rise of suburbanization, and had already contributed to the island's growth. Professor LaGumina stated: "extant literature on Italian Americans has been based on a preoccupation of city life." He rejected the argument that suburbanization had led to their complete acculturation. His investigation demonstrated that Italian Americans exhibited "meaningful ethnic consciousness or ethnic vitality . . . and that immigrant groups have survived as subcultures outside the cities."⁴

Next, he turned his attention to politics and the role of Italian Americans in New York City. In his book, *New York at Mid-Century, The Impellitteri Years* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), Professor LaGumina analyzed the life of Sicilian-born political leader Vincent

Impellitteri and the impact he had on New York City during his mayoralty. Heretofore, most research had concentrated on popular New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. Professor LaGumina's examination of the public and private papers of Mayor Impellitteri provided an important understanding of New York City life and politics.

Continuing to teach full time, he remained busy with organizational work, consulting, doing research, and publishing monographs. His reputation and influence in the field grew. Archival centers emerged, and the canon of Italian American History and Studies now began to fill library shelves. He helped to form alliances between Italian and Italian-American scholars. He led in the creation of college courses in the Italian-American experience. He expressed a need to record, in one volume, the research that had accumulated in the last 50 years and make it readily available to all. The result was *The Italian American Experience: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000). His co-editors and contributors to this comprehensive volume were Frank J. Cavaoli, Salvatore Primeggia, and Joseph A. Varacalli. Seven years in the making, the encyclopedia has provided a scientific account of the history and culture of Italian Americans, from the colonial period to the present, by 166 scholars in more than 400 articles. It contained more than 100 original photographs and extensive bibliography in 735 pages. It remains the standard reference throughout the United States and the world.

He has served as a consultant to the National Italian American Foundation, which produced his work, *Milestones of the Italian American Experience* (2003) in the form of a compact disk. He compiled a time line that graphically captured "the richness and highlights" of Italian-American contributions that covered the years 1492 to 2003, for distribution by NIAF. Editor John Marino of NIAF stated the work was intended to serve "as an interactive research and educational tool" for all interested persons.

Professor LaGumina's crowning achievement is his personal recollections in his recently published book, *The Humble and the Heroic, Wartime Italian Americans* (Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2006), which is a detailed examination of the role Italian Americans played during World War II, "a time for testing," as he put it. Despite experiencing discrimination and prejudice, Italian Americans represented the largest nationality group to participate in the war. Their patriotism was exemplary. As a youth growing up in Brooklyn, he witnessed reactions of Italian Americans to wartime events. He combined scholarship with memoir in the Americanization process of this large ethnic group, of which he was a part. It is a study from the

heart and the mind as he weaves primary-source accounts of ordinary and extraordinary people. Where American historians failed to address this aspect of the war, he included the contributions and travails of Italian Americans. For this important book, he received the 2007 Pietro di Donato/John Fante Literary Award from the New York Grand Lodge Order of the Sons of Italy in America.

Professor LaGumina has been active in researching the history and relationship of Italian Americans and the Catholic Church. He is a co-editor and contributor with Joseph A. Varacalli, Salvatore Primeggia, and Donald D'Elia in *Models and Images of Catholicism*, published by the Center for Italian Studies at SUNY Stony Brook. The volume describes how various philosophies, academic disciplines, and ethnic groups have represented Catholicism in both scholarship and popular life.

He again joined with Joseph A. Varacalli, Salvatore Primeggia, and Donald D'Elia to publish *The Saints in the Lives of Italian-Americans*. The work provides an interdisciplinary investigation consisting of fourteen essays from sociological, historical, psychological, philosophical, and theological perspectives. Professor LaGumina has been honored by *Radio Maria*, an international Italian Catholic organization, for his lifetime achievements.

His work has helped older organizations such as the Order of the Sons of Italy and the National Italian American Foundation to become more involved in promoting the legitimate history of Italian Americans based on scientific research. He exhibited a clear style, and earned the esteem of colleagues and the public.

Professor LaGumina's scholarly work on American historiography has been significant. The publications cited here are examples of other publications he has produced, especially his many essays. His work in creating a modern scientific canon of Italian American historiography has forever changed the way contemporary history is written and understood. His vision of revising American history included the ethnocultural factor, with an emphasis on immigration history. His publications examined the role of ordinary as well as extraordinary people. His influence has led to the preservation of Italian-American memorabilia and artifacts at archival centers, especially the Center for Migration Studies in Staten Island, New York, and the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota, where Italian and Italian-American collections are stored.

Professor LaGumina recorded and analyzed the complex nature of the immigration process and ethnicity in society. He viewed the affirmation of Italian-American ethnicity as an important part of this group's political and intellectual development. Though proud of his

heritage, he concentrated on a scientific and objective approach to integrate Italian-American history into American civilization. He recognized other ethnic groups as being an important part of the historical record. He implemented his belief when he helped found the American Italian Historical Association, which has brought together a group of scholars committed to an interdisciplinary system of gathering data and analyzing that data to achieve a true understanding of the Italian experience in America. The model has been established. The work continues. Revisions lie ahead, especially as immigration increases and the ethnic composition of the nation evolves. Professor Salvatore J. LaGumina has enabled students and scholars to gain greater understanding of the past and the present.

Notes

1. Gerald N. Grob and George Athan Billias, *Interpretations of American History*, 1978.
2. Frank J. Cavaoli, *The American Italian Historical Association at the Millennium* (American Italian Historical Association, 2000), p. 22; Steven J. Belluscio, editor, *Constructing a Bibliography*, AIHA: 1968-2003 (Boca Raton, Fl. 2004); see also Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Resurgence of American Immigration History," *American Studies International*, XVII (Winter 1979): 46-66.
3. Salvatore J. LaGumina, *Ethnicity in American Political Life: The Italian American Experience* (Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1969).
4. Salvatore J. LaGumina, *From Steerage to Suburb: Long Island Italians* (Staten Island, NY: Center for Migration Studies, 1988), p. 3.