ITALIAN-AMERICANS COMING INTO THEIR OWN

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Body

HERE ARE A NUMBER OF ways to assess the quiet yet spectacular rise of ***Italian-Americans*** in the United States today, but one of the best perspectives is from the 57th-floor windows of the Governor's New York City office in the World Trade Center. The view takes in Ellis Island, twin symbol of opportunity and pain to countless immigrants, and, beyond, the flat and colorless industrial precincts of Jersey City.

It was there that young Andrea Cuomo, a recent arrival in 1926 from the south of Italy, toiled as the classic pick-and-shovel immigrant. He dug ditches and cleaned sewers and became, in the words of social historians who ***came*** later, part of the human "dung" that fertilized America's industrial growth.

Andrea Cuomo's son - whose birth was attended by midwives, who spoke only Italian until the age of 8, who was counseled by "wellintentioned" law-school officials to change his vowel-laden last name if he wanted to get ahead in life - now occupies the Governor's chair. From this eyrie of power, with its clear vista upon emblems of his personal past, it is tempting to suggest that Mario M. Cuomo has traveled a great distance in one generation.
Highlights of the Italian-American community, which represents 7% of the population

"Very little distance," he says, quietly disagreeing. "Very little distance. If my father had had my education, it would have been no distance. In terms of economic condition, we've improved. But as a family, as individuals, as people of merit and excellence, I don't think I've yet improved on my father."

Italian-Americans have sometimes been regarded as being slow to assimilate and climb America's social and economic ladders, even by their ***own*** historians, but now - as they swell the ranks of the middle class, amass power and wealth, and help set the decade's social and political agendas as never before - it may be that they have simply measured success, as Mario Cuomo has done, by a different yardstick, and made their way to the mainstream by a slightly different route. Barely a century ago, in 1880, the number of Italians in the United States totaled a mere 44,000. Now, Americans of Italian descent represent an estimated 7 percent of the population, and in recent years they have attained a kind of critical mass in terms of affluence, education, aspiration and self-acceptance - so much so that the political analyst Theodore H. White, in his 1982 book "America in Search of Itself," identifies ***Italian-Americans*** as "the most important among the rising ethnic groups."

To be sure, the Italian-American community has never been slack in the production of distinguished individuals, but those of earlier generations flourished - like the Italians themselves -in highly circumscribed worlds. In stadiums, it was Joe DiMaggio; under the spotlights, it was Frank Sinatra; and in city government, it was Fiorello H. La Guardia, the consummate local politician of his era. But today's ***Italian-Americans*** have stepped out, as it were, and become prominent players with national impact as well as a national following, taking the initiative in crucial political and social issues.

Lido (Lee) A. Iacocca, chairman of the Chrysler Corporation, has ***come*** to represent a no-nonsense integrity and can-do dash in the executive suite. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago, has brought humanism and militance together in the movement of Roman Catholic bishops opposed to nuclear arms. Eleanor Cutri Smeal, who recently concluded five years as president of the National Organization for Women, is credited with giving feminism a grassroots appeal attractive to middle-class housewives. Perhaps more important, they represent merely the brightest lights in a general fluorescence of Italians in American life, a fluorescence confirmed almost on a daily basis.

If it isn't Jim Valvano coaching North Carolina State to the college basketball championship, for example, it is Joe Paterno coaching Penn State to a national title in college football, or Tommy Lasorda and Billy Martin managing World Series teams. If it isn't a new movie by Francis Ford Coppola or Martin Scorsese, it is a new interpretation of architecture by the architect Robert Venturi, the "father of postmodernism." If it isn't a new Broadway musical by Michael Bennett ("Dreamgirls"), it is a new shopping mall built by Edward J. DeBartolo Sr., the Youngstown, Ohio, businessman and sports magnate who is probably the wealthiest Italian-American in the country - reportedly worth more than $500 million. And in the world of higher education, there are now such names as A. Bartlett Giamatti of Yale and John Lo Schiavo of the University of San Francisco.

Is there a single thread that runs through these people? If anything, it is the unusual propensity to merge, rather than separate, the professional and the personal. Borrowing from a culture in which the extended family can easily include 30 to 40 "close" relatives, Italians thrive on community. They are accustomed to large numbers of people, and they seem to have developed an emotional facility in dealing with them. Even in large companies, they have a knack for keeping things on a human scale. "The professional community," explains one Italian-American psychotherapist, "becomes the next family."

Probably the most significant symbol of the Italian-American emergence is Governor Cuomo, who has practically made a political doctrine out of the concept of family. "With us, it's going from small family to big family, the state of New York. Everything I do revolves around the notion of sharing benefits and burdens in the community. And that's family."

He remains comfortably aware of his ethnic background and easily interprets the historical moment through a familial lens. "Most of the Italians who ***came*** through Ellis Island were like my mother and father," says the 50-year-old Governor, whose parents abandoned two mountain villages in the Campania region south of Naples. "No education. No skills. They called them cafoni (rubes). They were the lowest strata, economically and socially.

"We are their sons and daughters, educated for the first time," he continues. "What's happening now is that the generation of turnof-the-century Mediterranean immigrants is just now gathering to itself the kind of strength, affluence and comfort that allows it to reach out for power."

That process, in fact, has been perceptible for more than a decade. ***Italian-Americans*** no longer resemble the stereotypical image of opera-loving blue-collar ethnics airing laundry, and personal grievances, from the windows of Italian ghettos. Instead, they are upwardly mobile - doggedly so. According to Alfred J. Tella, special adviser to the director of the Census Bureau, their presence in white-collar positions now appears to mirror national averages, they have moved to the suburbs, and they have no more children than the average American family. As breadwinners, they have made steady but striking progress: In 1979, Americans of purely Italian ancestry had a median family income of $16,993, out-earning all other ethnic groups except the Scots and the Germans (both of whom arrived well ahead of the Italians).

"It's the story of a three-generation success," says Mr. Tella, who estimates the number of ***Italian-Americans*** at approximately 15 million. "Around the turn of the century, menial labor was synonymous with Italians. But they sacrificed a lot to get an education for their children, and they all wanted to ***own*** their ***own*** houses. Those were the twin drives. Now Italians have fully caught up with non-Italians in the upper echelons of professional and managerial occupations." MONG WHITE ETHNIC groups, there is probably no other culture that has so conscientiously and successfully husbanded its traditional values - from the close-knit family structure to the exuberant celebration of feasts -into the present moment. To be sure, some traditions, such as the use of the Italian language, have eroded,

prompting some observers to regard ethnic identity in the later generations as mainly cosmetic. But surveys over the last two decades by the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago, for example, consistently show that ***Italian-Americans*** retain closer family ties than virtually every other ethnic or religious group. It has been a happy accident, in fact, that the Italians, by stubbornly refusing to abandon their old customs, have hung on long enough to see those values take on enhanced value as they move more boldly into the mainstream. ''A sense of respect and loyalty, a respect for family members, the cohesiveness of the family - I think of these values as fundamental to our interactions with other people,'' says Aileen Riotto Sirey, a psychotherapist and president of the National Organization of Italian-American Women. Those attitudes reflect a particularly Italian way of looking at things. ''***Italian-Americans*** are not generally rigid in terms of their professions being all-consuming - you'll seldom find a single-faceted Italian-American who devotes 20 hours a day to one narrow activity,'' notes former United States Attorney General Benjamin R. Civiletti, 47, whose ancestors ***came*** from Palermo and Genoa. ''That gives them not only a diversity of views, and a healthiness of mental outlook, but also the ability to endure problems and cope.''

And cope they did, during a long and painful journey to social acceptance in this country. Given the cachet that all things Italian enjoy today - from food to fashion to a certain vivaciousness of life style - it is difficult to conceive of just how great a liability it once was to be Italian in this country.

More than five million Italians have emigrated to the United States since 1820. Like other nationalities that preceded and followed them, the Italians encountered hatred and discrimination, but discrimination was a feature of their native land, too.

THE GREAT MASS OF ITALIANS arrived around the turn of the century (some four million Italians ***came*** here between 1880 and 1920), and about three-fourths of the total ***came*** from the Mezzogiorno, the beautifully stark and historically underdeveloped regions east and south of Rome that even today have as much in common with the third world as with Western Europe.

The southern Italians, who were contemptuously dismissed as ''Africans'' by northerners in their ***own*** country, had endured centuries of oppression in their native provinces. From the ancient Greeks to the revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi to the Germans during World War II, southern Italy has been overrun by outsiders, and few were as benevolent as Garibaldi. In a place where political foundations shifted frequently and unpredictably, loyalty to any institution beyond the family was dangerous and unwise - fostering an attitude of suspicion that became ingrained over the centuries.

Although a handful of the immigrants were professionals, the majority, according to the sociologist William V. D'Antonio, were unskilled, unschooled and illiterate even in their ***own*** language. In many cases, they had never traveled beyond the limits of their rural villages before trying to resettle in America's most bustling metropolises - New York, Boston, Philadelphia and virtually every other major city in the industrial East. (Relatively fewer numbers settled in the Middle West or on the West Coast.) Some of the immigrants who ***came*** to America were dark-skinned and, to many American minds, sinister looking. And many had no intention of staying.

Fully half of the Italians who emigrated to this country ultimately returned to Italy, a rarely noted fact that reveals a fundamental ambivalence about being in the United States in the first place. Mostly male and single, the first wave of immigrants, known as ''sojourners'' or ''economic opportunists,'' ***came*** to America simply to make money; they would then return to Italy, buy land, and settle down.

In this respect, the Italian experience was markedly different from that of the Irish (the major immigrant group preceding them) and the Eastern European Jews (a group that arrived simultaneously). The Irish became central in Democratic politics and cultivated the Roman Catholic Church (including its parochial school) as an instrument of assimilation, just as the Jews used education and the business world as points of entry. The Italians, by contrast, entrusted their fate to no outside institution.

The Italian family, in fact, served to maintain and perpetuate that immigrant sense of being on the fringe. In the Italian-American home of the first generation, the family spoke Italian, cooked Italian, married Italian and acted Italian. Acting Italian meant, quite simply, putting the family above all other interests. In many ways, the family unit operated much like a cork in a vast and turbulent sea: As a crucial survival device, it provided unusual

psychological buoyancy and kept families afloat in periods of poverty and assaults on human dignity. But it also proved impermeable to outside influences, according to Richard Gambino, a historian, in his book "Blood of my Blood." And this had negative ramifications as well for several generations.

The control of family destinies was in the hands of the father, a figure both feared and revered. A psychological profile of the traditional father, as it emerges in a recently published guide for psychological counselors, "Ethnicity and Family Therapy," describes a "benevolent despot" who is authoritarian, rigid and highly committed to the notion of providing for - and protecting - his family. He demands respect from his wife and children, and regards defiance as "an utterly intolerable insult." Out of compensation for a particular type of fatalism (a historical sense of lack of control over outside events), the authors of the chapter "Italian American," Marie Rotunno and Monica McGoldrick, suggest, "Italians emphasized the ability to maintain control over their ***own*** families."

The Italian mother, in the view of authorities on Italian family structure, exerted considerable power and influence within the family, contrary to popular conception. She was considered the emotional heart of the group, and her responsibilities were prodigious. She ran the family's exchequer, the nursery, the infirmary, the kitchen, the cannery and a special domestic classroom that schooled the children in emotional loyalties, the principal one being the paramount importance of the family. This message was reinforced by the mother's manner, which was overprotective and intense, encouraging particularly tight bonds between mother and son. These inherited responsibilities, moral as well as economic and practical, were so overwhelming that second-generation Italians grew up with a heightened sense of familial obligation, which in turn occasioned unusual anxiety when it ***came*** to separation from family. "Sons were supposed to suffer shame and guilt for not following their fathers' ways," writes the psychohistorian Andrew Rolle, a professor of history at Occidental College in Los Angeles, in his book "The ***Italian Americans***: Troubled Roots."

"The strong sense of respect for elders, for the mother and father, binds you until you fall into a pattern of 'what father wants, father gets,' " says 66-year-old Mary Sansone, executive director of the Brooklyn-based Congress of ***Italian-Americans*** Organization, "and it spills over into attitudes toward people in authority." The legacy, Mrs. Sansone notes in a sentiment echoed by others, is that "***Italian-Americans*** don't fight for things."

That questioning of authority - whether social or familial - traditionally leaves Italians feeling uncomfortable. Marie Rotunno and Monica McGoldrick note that adolescence, for example, is an "extremely stressful" period for Italian families, and point out that separation from the family is so difficult and painful that traditional mileposts of achievement -marriage, a job promotion involving a transfer, or acceptance at an out-of-town university - is as likely to provoke crisis as celebration.

It may be, in fact, that Italian-American children in all but the most enlightened households trimmed the sails of their personal ambitions simply to avoid a conflict with the parents. A New York psychologist, Joseph Giordano, director of the American Jewish Committee's Louis Caplan Center on Group Identity and Mental Health, identifies the mixed messages of Italian families as "Make it. Be successful. But don't go too far."

"If you are inculcated with the values of a group, then to reject, to challenge, to give them up means a conflict of loyalty - a kind of disloyalty," says Rudolph J. Vecoli, professor of history at the University of Minnesota and and director of the Immigration History Research Center there. "You're being untrue to your family, your parents and your ancestral heritage. That is true of many ethnic groups. But to make that break is perhaps more of a trauma for ***Italian-Americans*** than for others." Ironically, the other side of that fierce loyalty has contributed to the prevailing nightmare of Italian-American life: the Mafia. The same qualities that conferred great survivability on the Italians - loyalty to family, distrust of outsiders, strict adherence to codes of behavior and, in a phrase coined by Edward C. Banfield, professor of government at Havard University, the "amoral familism" that placed family ahead of society - also produced excellent criminals. In kinship, says Francis A.J. Ianni, a historian of organized crime, "the Italians had a cultural model that allowed them to control organized crime better and longer than anyone else."

The secret bands known as "mafie" in 19th-century Sicily were usually agents of absentee landlords, and kept the peasantry in line. Other loose-knit groups of peasants formed outlaw bands and fought against oppressive landowners. According to the historian Humbert Nelli, it was probably the latter that, as immigrants in America,

formed the turn-of-the-century Black Hand terrorist groups. Although historians are still unclear on the ties, if any, between the outlaws of the Old World and the criminals of the new, there is general agreement that the Mafia in America seemed to evolve out of Italian gangs that preyed on Italian immigrants in Italian neighborhoods, just as Irish and Jewish gangs developed in their respective ghettos. Familiarity with Mafia techniques in the older country (either first-hand or, more likely, by reputation) probably filtered through to the New World so that rackets such as paid protection that marked the old Sicilian mafie may have been adopted as effective tactics by American immigrant criminals. The ascendancy of ***Italian-Americans*** in the criminal underworld coincided, by historical accident, with the advent of Prohibition, when organized crime paid as never before: Petty extortionists and racketeers became millionaire bootleggers overnight. But the Prohi-bition gangs were never exclusively Italian, says Ralph Salerno, a former New York City Police Department supervisor of detectives in the organizedcrime unit; during this period, Italian, Irish and Jewish gangsters formed close working relationships that are still apparent today.

Despite the deep resentment that ***Italian-Americans*** feel about being linked with the Mafia (as well as the obvious truth that only a tiny minority are involved in illegal activity), many have never been particularly eager to dissociate the criminals from the law-abiders in their midst. Part of this may stem from a legitimate fear of the underworld. Many observers have pointed out that historically the Mafia has never shown any ethnic chauvinism and is just as likely to exploit ***Italian-Americans*** as any other group. And part may stem simply from the traditional Italian virtue of minding one's ***own*** business. "You mind your ***own*** business because you don't want to get involved," says Donald Tricarico, assistant professor of social science at Queensboro Community College, who has studied the Italian community in Greenwich Village."There's no recourse to the state and there's no protection."

Although some people persist in the notion that the Mafia is merely a figment of the public's and the media's imagination, responsible ***Italian-Americans*** acknowledge the Italian-American role in organized crime - but with qualifications. "I think it is folly for anyone in the Italian-American community to say there is not a small, small segment involved in crime," says Frank D. Stella, president of the National Italian-American Foundation. But Mr. Stella and others complain that the Mafia and organized crime have become synonymous, and that ***Italian-Americans*** have unfairly been identified as the core group of any criminal enterprise. These complaints are echoed by Thomas P. Puccio, one of a number of ***Italian-Americans*** who have established reputations as aggressive foes of organized crime.

"The public has been led to believe that organized crime and the Mafia were equivalent in every sense of the word," says Mr. Puccio, 38, former head of the Justice Department's Organized Crime Strike Force for the Eastern District of New York and now a partner in the Park Avenue law firm of Fisher, Puccio & Wilker. "It's very easy to say, 'O.K., the Mafia is the enemy.' It makes a nice neat little package. It sells. It's noncontroversial. You don't make any enemies. You don't step on anyone's toes. If you're running a Senate committee, you ***come*** out with names that look like a menu in an Italian restaurant, and you bring in people with bags over their heads. It's very, very simple."

"The only problem with it," adds Mr. Puccio after a pause, "is that even if you prosecuted every known member of the Mafia in this country, you're not going to put an end to organized crime to any significant degree."

Italian hoodlums largely supplanted the Irish in the criminal world in the early years of the century, but Italians were utterly powerless to dislodge the Irish from another key element of immigrant life: the Roman Catholic Church. The tone of Irish-Italian religious relations was set in the 19th century, when Italian parishioners were routinely relegated to the basement of Irish churches for their services. They have never really managed to climb out.

Italians represent about 20 percent of the nation's Catholics, according to Lydio F. Tomasi, director of the Center for Migration Studies of New York. Yet until the elevation last February of Chicago Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin to the status of cardinal, there had never been a single Italian-American cardinal in the history of the American church. Cardinal Bernardin, son of an immigrant stone cutter from the Trentino region of northern Italy, stands alone in the upper echelons of the church. According to a recent check based on The Official Catholic Directory, only 17 of the country's 309 bishops have Italian surnames; none of the 39 archbishops are Italian, and only one of the nine cardinals is Italian.

The standard explanation for this imbalance is that the Irish, with the head start of a generation and fluency in the language, were able to dominate the church hierarchy before the Italians began to arrive. The Irish often emigrated to the United States with their parish structure intact: The priest as well as teachers and townspeople transferred en masse to the New World, concentrating their power and providing a useful vehicle - the parochial school - to preach the gospel of assimilation.

Although many Italian Catholics now send their children to parochial schools, the exact opposite was true of the immigrant generation. They distrusted the church, as they distrusted most outside institutions. The experience of southern Italian peasants in particular had schooled them in a deep, visceral anticlericalism. To the Italians, Irish Catholicism seemed to be severe, doctrinaire, unemotional and conservative; to the Irish, Italian Catholics were excessively superstititious, overly influenced by folk customs, fatalistic, almost pagan.

Many ***Italian-Americans*** feel they were discouraged from entering or advancing in the church. "The ethnic wars were very much the thing in the previous generation," says James A. Serritella, a former seminarian who now serves as the attorney for the Archdiocese of Chicago. "The Italians were very religious, but in the early generations they did not have great affection for the clergy. The Irish were Anglo-Saxon when they got here: They built institutions, like the church, and worked through them. The Italians built families, and worked through them." Indeed, the relative paucity of Italian-American priests can in part be explained by the horror with which Italian-American parents viewed the loss of a good able-bodied male to religious life.

Church officials regarded the faith of the Italian immigrants as suspect - they had the reputation, according to scholars, of focusing on the pageantry of weddings, funerals and baptisms while ignoring the obligations of religious observance such as attending mass regularly and contributing money to the church. One sociologist comments that ***Italian-Americans*** took the church with "half a ton of salt," and so were not receptive to the messages of the Irish church. Msgr. Geno Baroni, a former Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, recalls that his father, an immigrant miner from northern Italy, always wondered why so many sermons in their hometown parish of Acosta, Pa., were directed to the issues of liquor and sex. "He never saw that as a problem," Monsignor Baroni says with a laugh. "But the church was predominantly Irish, and those were apparently issues for them." Nor was Monsignor Baroni immune from the influence: Local nuns frequently advised him to change his name from Geno to the more Hibernian Kevin for confirmation.

Monsignor Baroni, now based in the Archdiocese of Washington, says he was not unaware of the Irish domination in the church, but can cite no specific incident of discrimination. "No one tried to stop me because I was Italian," he says, "but I was always sensitive to it." In their climb out of the ethnic ghettos and into the suburbs, the second generation had the bitter luxury of choices - painful choices. In many cases, ***Italian-Americans*** were forced to choose mutually exclusive avenues of conformity: either to family values (which perpetuated the old order) or to societal values (which abided by the melting-pot principle).

In those days, just as the Irish and Germans had before, it was deemed desirable and healthy to allow one's ethnic uniqueness to boil away in a cauldron of American conformity. And indeed, many Italians - to cite Geno Baroni's term - were "accommodationists." They boiled the vowels off the end of their names, they abandoned their roots, they repudiated their families and their past. That is one reason, in fact, why estimates of the Italian-American population - anyone with ancestors born in Italy - vary so markedly, from 12 million to 25 million. It has been suggested that a large number of ***Italian-Americans*** decline to "self-identify" themselves as Italians, preferring to consider themselves only American.

United States District Court Judge John J. Sirica, who gained national prominence with his role in the Watergate investigation, typifies the old attitude when he addresses newly sworn-in citizens in his courtroom. "I tell them: 'You must always be proud of your ethnic heritage, but now that you have sworn allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, you must now consider yourself American.' When I'm asked," he adds, "I don't say I'm Italian. I say I'm American."

Judge Sirica's childhood, interestingly, was fairly itinerant, as he lived a "gypsy life" with his family in various locations, and it appears that both geography and the size of local Italian populations greatly affected one's ability to break away from the family and establish an independent identity.

In areas of the country where Italians were few and the local population unsettled, such as the 19th-century California of A.P. Giannini or the Texas of Jack Valenti's ancestors, Italians were quicker to enter the mainstream and quicker to assimilate. Mr. Giannini established the Bank of Italy in San Francisco in 1904; now known as the Bank of America, it is the second-largest in the country. Other major West Coast companies - including Del Monte and Italian Swiss Colony - began as ideas in Italian immigrant minds.

The experiences of Mr. Valenti, who grew up in a mixed middleclass neighborhood in Houston, argues that the cultural density of Italian neighborhoods retarded rather than encouraged assimilation. "I grew up in a distinctly non-Italian landscape," says Mr. Valenti, 61, whose grandparents, natives of Palermo, arrived in Galveston in 1885. "If there had been 100,000 Italians in Houston, I probably would have moved in that group, and I would have felt uncomfortable outside it." Instead, Mr. Valenti mingled. "Early on," he recalls, "my grandfather determined the grandchildren should not speak Italian. To his shrewd Sicilian mind, he realized that when you have to live with a majority, the best way to get along would be to mingle with that society. And you had to speak English to do that." Mr. Valenti eventually became a close aide of President Lyndon B. Johnson and now is president of the Motion Picture Association of America.

"Wherever you are reared, that stamps you for life," adds the author Gay Talese, who was raised in Ocean City, N.J., the son of immigrants from the Calabrian town of Maida. "Being an outsider, an Italian-American in a small town, I became American very quickly - in language and in attitude and in distance from Italian-American culture. If I had grown up in the North End of Boston or in San Francisco, I'm sure I would have become a very different person."

Distance, of course, is an aberrant quality to ***Italian-Americans*** precisely because it contradicts, and therefore threatens, the warmth and proximity so central to family survival. And yet distance is exactly what many second-generation ***Italian-Americans*** sought - distance from embarrassing ethnic rituals, distance from all the cultural idiosyncracies that contributed to a negative stereotype in the eyes of much of mainstream America.

Second-generation ***Italian-Americans*** in particular lived in a kind of psychological limbo. One of the great battlegrounds for this ambivalence occurred over the issue of education. To the first generation, the family was as likely to regard education as a kind of abrasive cultural agent that scrubbed away family values as to consider it a crucial vehicle for acculturation and advancement. Census Bureau data from 1979, for example, indicate that education levels among individuals with two Italian parents ranked near the bottom among ethnic groups, while individuals with one Italian parent (that is, the products of intermarriage) ranked near the top.

Education is among the factors that account for the gradual and inexorable rise of ***Italian-Americans*** in American society. And, with the improved economic status of the second and third generations, the ties of the Italian family began to loosen enough to accommodate greater individual ambition. "The Italian-American family tends to be more egaliatrian, more middle class now, and mobility is easier," notes Lydio F. Tomasi of New York's Center for Migration Studies. "It is easier for someone to move to another city to take a job in a corporation."

While education was almost anathema to the first generation, second- and third-generation ***Italian-Americans*** are almost obsessive in seeking a quality education for their children. This attitude, which some observers date to the post-World War II years, has had a dramatic impact on the number of college-educated Italian-Amereicans.

Finally, there seems to be much less stigma attached to being Italian - in the eyes both of society as a whole and of the ***Italian-Americans*** themselves. This has translated not only into less prejudice, but also into a more confident self-image.

Education was crucial in the metamorphosis of Geraldine A. Ferraro from typical Italian daughter into Congresswoman, for she had to overcome that familial hostility to education - and to educated women. Although she received a scholarship from Marymount College, she had to fight to gain approval to attend, especially after an

uncle in the extended family counseled her widowed mother: "Why bother? She's pretty. She's a girl. She'll get married."

Another likely explanation for the education gap is that firstgeneration Italians were survivalists, and survival in those days inevitably was interpreted in economic terms. Southern Italians, with a background of endless poverty, the vagaries of earthquakes, and political instability, perfected a kind of poor man's carpe diem: With their food and their feast days and their celebrations, they enjoyed the present and tended to have a constricted view ofthe future. For many, this meant skipping college and instead entering careers that promised quick payoffs and rapid advancement. "A career as a pharmacist has clear and attainable rewards," says Richard N. Juliani, associate professor of sociology at Villanova. "But the guy who wants to take a Ph.D. in philosophy has a tough time explaining that to his family."

In the first generation, they became construction workers and cobblers and tailors and bakers - if they managed to escape commonlaborer status. The second generation slowly expanded the horizon of career ambition to include jobs such as firemen, policemen and civil servants. Training for the professions was rare; careers in academia were rarer still.

Thus, A. Bartlett Giamatti, president of Yale University, and John Lo Schiavo, president of the University of San Francisco, both respected educators, are anomalies in the Italian-American world, which still has been slow to penetrate intellectual and academic circles. "In proportion to our numbers, certainly the word 'lagging' would be appropriate," says Dr. Edmund D. Pellegrino, who recently completed a four-year stint as president of Catholic University in Washington, and is currently professor of medicine at Georgetown University Medical Center. "I'm thinking about academic achievement, fundamental research, scholarly endeavor and contributions to the intellectual foundations," he says. "Just look at Nobel Prize winners. How many ***Italian-Americans*** are there?"

Only four. And all the ***Italian-Americans*** who have won Nobel Prizes ***came*** to the United States with reputations and careers already established. Prof. Salvador Luria of the biology department at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and director of the Center for Cancer Research, has been a seminal force in molecular biology and is a 1969 Nobel laureate for his work in the physiology of medicine. He says that in 1940, when he arrived in the United States (he was originally from Turin), there was only a handful of Italian-American scientists. "The main reason," says the 70-year-old scientist, who makes a point of stating that he does not think of himself as Italian-American, "is that once immigrant groups become established, they get into the law or medicine or the priesthood, but not into science."

Entry into all those fields, as well as politics was restricted by prejudice. Mr. Valenti, who early on abandoned his ambitions to run for public office but who later was a force in national politics, likened being Italian and Catholic in Texas to "a fellow having a harelip or a high, squeaky voice - it was just one of those handicaps that make it difficult for you."

Anti-Italian prejudice continues to be a factor, according to some, although it is less pronounced than it was a generation ago, when a faculty counselor at St. John's University assured Edmund Pellegrino (a summa cum laude, double major, with a string of academic awards) that he would get into medical school - if he changed his last name. The Order Sons of Italy in America believes that same bias accounts for under-representation in the executive suite. A recent survey of the nation's 800 largest corporations revealed that only 3.2 percent of board members or executives had Italian surnames. "For the percentage of the population that we are," says Matthew Nizza, head of the organization's Commission for Social Justice, "we really don't have our proper status in the larger corporations." People such as Benjamin F. Biaggini, chairman of Southern Pacific, and Emil J. (Buzzie) Bavasi, executive vice president of the California Angels baseball team, indicate, however, that some ***Italian-Americans*** have had long-running engagements in the executive suite.

Italian-Americans are rarely thought of as rights activists, but Eleanor Cutri Smeal makes it clear that her early exposure to anti-Italian bias, as well as the attitudes of her enlightened mother, influenced her later devotion to women's rights. "If everything in life has been according to Hoyle, it's hard for some people to believe that discrimination exists," says the 43-year-old Mrs. Smeal. "But if you've seen discrimination on another level, you

know it exists. My whole family background was to make things better for the next generation, and that's what I feel we're doing in the women's movement.' If political success represents some ultimate referendum on ethnic acceptability, then ***Italian-Americans*** are unquestionably better off than a generation ago. In 1948, when Representative Peter W. Rodino Jr., Democrat of New Jersey, was first elected to the House of Representatives, there were no Italians in the Senate and only about half a dozen in the House. Now in his 18th term, Mr. Rodino is the elder statesman of an Italian delegation that numbers 29 representatives and four senators. And New York now has ***Italian-Americans*** as Governor, Lieutenant Governor (Alfred B. DelBello), and junior Senator (Alfonse M. D'Amato).

More important, the political climate has sufficiently evolved so that ***Italian-Americans*** are now commonly mentioned for national office. There is hopeful -though hardly implausible -talk for the first time of sending one to Washington, either as President or Vice President.

At the moment of their election last November, Mr. Cuomo and Gov. Richard Celeste of Ohio became Democrats of national prominence. Senator Pete V. Domenici, Republican of New Mexico and chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, has been mentioned as a possible national candidate. And Geraldine A. Ferraro, the third-term Congresswoman from Queens, served as deputy national chairman of Jimmy Carter's re-election campaign during her first term in Congress and is widely regarded as a bright spot on the Democratic Party horizon.

But true to its roots, Italian-American politics reveals it-self as a paradoxical world where no single issue (such as Israel for the Jews) holds the center together and where blood does not always run as thick as party glue.

Italian-Americans have historically been known as working-class Democrats, but that distinction is becoming increasingly fuzzy: They supported Ronald Reagan in 1980 by a margin of 50 to 38, according to ABC News exit polls. This is read as evidence of an increasingly suburban, middle-class, family-oriented bloc of voters - the same constituency that sent Mr. D'Amato to the Senate in 1980.

But the ***Italian-Americans*** have also been accused of failing to support their ***own***. That tendency accounted for several interesting aspects of last fall's gubernatorial contest. Prior to the Democratic primary, Bronx Congressman Mario Biaggi made television commercials for Mr. Cuomo's opponent, New York Mayor Edward Koch; and prior to the general election, a letter of support signed by Mr. D'Amato was sent to tens of thousands of ***Italian-Americans*** statewide, urging them to vote for the Republican candidate, Lewis E. Lehrman.

Italian-Americans form the largest ethnic bloc in New York State, but they never acted the part until the Democratic gubernatorial primary last September. ''In the Cuomo election,'' says Salvatore J. La Gumina, professor of history at Nassau Community College and a long-time student of Italian-American politics, ''they were able to utilize the electoral process in the primary to wrest the nomination away from the official party candidate.'' According to ABC News exit polls, Italian voters supported Mr. Cuomo by a margin of 64 to 35 over Mayor Koch in the primary and by 58 to 39 over Mr. Lehrman in the general election. Jewish voters, viewed as more steadfast Democrats, supported Mr. Cuomo over Mr. Lehrman by an even wider margin than the Italians, 63 to 36.

The campaign, not surprisingly, left a bitter aftertaste with some. ''I myself received a letter from D'Amato,'' complains Rocco Caporale, a sociology professor at St. John's University and head of the Institute for Italian American Studies. ''As an Italian-American, I was insulted. I don't see that esprit, that spirit of community, in the Italians as in the Jews. The Italians are gallant. They give away their votes. We ***come*** from a country that is terribly divided, distrustful of others - it has been a hallmark for centuries, and continues even today. We are incapable of cooperation.'' Indeed, it is often overlooked that Italy became a united country only recently in history; Italians identified with a local region, such as Sicily or the Abruzzzi, instead of a nation. This insularity was reinforced by a language that was split into so many dialects that some Italians could not communicate with fellow countrymen.

The prime force pushing for unanimity and cooperation is the National Italian American Foundation, founded in 1975 by Representative Frank Annunzio, Democrat of Illinois, former Secretary of Transportation John A. Volpe, Msgr. Geno Baroni and the Minnesota businessman Jeno F. Paulucci. The foundation promotes scholarship funds, conducts ethnic conferences and has lobbied for increased representation of ***Italian-Americans*** in Cabinet-level positions, ambassadorial posts and judgeships -particularly an appointment to the Supreme Court.

"It's high time that ***Italian-Americans*** were considered - or pushed themselves ahead - for these high positions," says the blunt-talking Mr. Paulucci, 64-year-old son of immigrants whose Italian frozenfoods company and other business interests now make him worth a reported $150 million. "Politically, they appoint Jews, blacks and so forth. Why not ***Italian-Americans***? Why have we been excluded?"

Frank D. Stella, a Detroit businessman and current president of the foundation, says that President Reagan has in fact appointed three ***Italian-Americans*** to high-ranking judgeships and placed 21 in what he calls "high-level" positions, such as Associate Attorney General Rudolph W. Giuliani (recently nominated to be United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York). But there was ill-concealed embarrassment and anger among many ***Italian-Americans*** when Mr. Reagan declined an invitation to the foundation's fourth biennial awards banquet last September.

Mr. Paulucci and others have repeatedly described the Italian-American voting bloc as a "sleeping giant." Is it showing signs of stirring?

"When you are speaking of national campaigns, there's a good portion of ***Italian-Americans*** in states such as New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Jersey," answers Representative Ferraro. "These are states with a large number of electoral votes, where ***Italian-Americans*** can make a difference. Whether they will or not," she says, "I don't know."

The question may not be entirely moot. Recently, an Italian journalist asked Mr. Cuomo about his Presidential aspirations in 1988. At first the Governor demurred with the Italian phrase "Pian piano" - roughly, "One thing at a time." But he also recalled a favorite proverb of his mother, Immaculata: "Chi va pian piano, non arriva mai." Translation: "He who takes his time never arrives at all." If you had been out of the country for the last two decades, like Joseph V. Vittoria, the progress of ***Italian-Americans*** would hardly seem pian piano. "When I ***came*** back from Europe," says Mr. Vittoria, president of Avis Inc. and former president of Hertz, "I was almost overwhelmed by the growth of Italian influence. There was a tremendous increase in the Italian presence here."

Perhaps the single most important change in ***Italian-Americans*** over that period is the way they perceive themselves. Self-esteem, once weighted down by ethnicity, now fairly soars in an atmosphere where cultural pluralism has supplanted the melting-pot ideal. A recent survey of 213 third-generation ***Italian-Americans*** in their early 30's, all of whom had grown up in the heavily Italian Bensonhurst neighborhood of Brooklyn, revealed overwhelmingly positive feelings about their Italian roots. To the question "Would you change your ethnic identity?" not a single person in the sample said yes - a possibility almost inconceivable a generation ago. "This is a group," says Carmela Sansone-Pacelli, who conducted the survey, "that has ***come*** a long way."

And that is what William D'Antonio learned, in a more personally profound way, last fall. Mr. D'Antonio, executive officer of the American Sociological Association, visited his two college-age daughters on successive weekends. At the University of Vermont, his daughter Raissa told about a psychology paper she had written on the theme "Five Things I Like About Myself"; one of those things was that she liked being Italian. Mr. D'Antonio reacted with surprise: "You said that?"

The following weekend, he visited his daughter Laura at Yale. "I'm the only 100 percent Italian in my dorm," she announced at one point, "but I know at least a dozen people who wish they were Italian." This final observation had double significance for Mr. D'Antonio. Forty years ago, he was a struggling, self-conscious scholarship freshman at Yale himself, steeped in ambivalence about his ethnic background. To put it simply, he was ashamed to be Italian. "In 1943, I would not have been able to admit that I was Italian, much less imagine any dozen people who wished they were Italian," he muses now, still shaking his head at the novelty of the thought. "It really does signify a change in how we think about ourselves."

Graphic

Illustrations: photo of Mario Cuomo and family photos of Peter W. Rodino, Alfred B. DelBello, Richard Celeste and Frank Annunzio photo of Lee Iacocca photos of Buzzie Bavasi, Tommy Lasorda, Billy Martin, and Joe Paterno photos of William D'Antonio, John Lo Schiavo, Edmund D. Pelligrino

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