

Campanilismo among Italian Americans: The Case of Sicilianness in Jerre Mangione's Works

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ABSTRACT: This short article is part of a work in progress and intends to exploit narrative sources in order to contribute to documenting the Sicilian experience in the United States in the wake of the mass arrivals from Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. It focuses in particular on the survival of *campanilismo* in the newcomers' adoptive society. Specifically, this essay highlights historical evidence for the preservation of a regional or even a localistic identity among Sicilian immigrants in Rochester, New York, as they are portrayed in Jerre Mangione's nonfictional writings. The analysis will concentrate primarily on two autobiographical books, *Mount Allegro* and *An Ethnic at Large*.

Keywords: Jerre Mangione, *campanilismo*, Sicilian Americans, ethnic identity, Rochester

The belated achievement of national political unification in Italy let most inhabitants of this country long retain a regional, provincial or even local sense of affiliation. Such an attitude is better known by the term *campanilismo*, after the Italian word for bell tower, and implies that people's attachments were usually confined to their respective hometowns or, as the Italian expression indicates, within the earshot of the bells of their own villages (Manconi).¹

These feelings were generally replicated among the immigrants who arrived in the United States from different places in Italy between the late nineteenth century and the closing of mass immigration to North America in the mid 1920s. Disparate dialects, traditions, and even foodways – as well as local antipathies and rivalries – separated the Italian settlers (Orsi 34). Therefore, the newcomers and their children usually found it difficult to think of themselves as members of the same ethnic minority and defined themselves by their association with their native regions or villages rather than with their country of birth (Malpezzi and Clements 27-35). As one of these immigrants remarked at the turn of the twentieth century, “for me, as for the others, Italy is the little village where I was raised” (quoted in Williams 17).

This brief essay is part of a work in progress and aims at offering a case study of *campanilismo* among Sicilian newcomers in the United States in the wake of Italians' mass exodus to America between the early 1880s and the mid 1920s.² It draws upon author Jerre

¹ This insularity could lead to jealousies and conflicts. Yet, regardless of one's disposition towards outsiders, *campanilismo* generally “suggests a marked tendency among the Italians [...] to move and act in very narrow social circles” (Lopreato 104).

² For Sicilian emigration to the United States, see Martellone 412-23.

Mangione's nonfictional publications, focusing mainly on *Mount Allegro* (hereafter *MA*) and *An Ethnic at Large* (hereafter *AEAL*), the "complementary autobiographical sequel" to the former book (Boelhower, *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States* 180). Specifically, the purpose of this article is to pick up evidence for the maintenance of a Sicilian or an even more localistic identity by Mangione himself as well as by the writer's relatives and acquaintances who resided in the city of Rochester, New York, in the decades before World War II.³

Previous research has pointed out that each volume of Mangione's autobiographical writings "represents a progressive stage of identity development: from Sicilian to American and eventually to Sicilian American" (Gardaphé, *Italian Signs* 79). Still this study intends to analyze Mangione's nonfiction production as a source for historical indications of Sicilianness and subnational attachments among the immigrants to the United States from the largest Mediterranean island.

Mangione, an accomplished writer and scholar, was the US-born son of Sicilian immigrants who had moved to Rochester at the turn of the twentieth century. As Chiara Mazzucchelli has recently pointed out, he was the "founding father" of a Sicilian-American literary tradition that can be somehow separated from the main corpus of Italian-American literature as a whole (70). Going beyond the cultural sphere, however, the contents of Mangione's works also provide historical testimonies about the retention of a Sicilian self-perception among the newcomers from this specific region and their progeny in the United States in the period preceding World War II. Far from being a work of fiction as its publisher originally marketed it (*AEAL* 299; McDowell), *Mount Allegro* is a memoirs and, at least in some respect, even an ethnographic study of Rochester's Sicilian-American community. Mangione, too, considered himself "a social historian" (Mulas 74). In addition and more generally, notwithstanding their undeniable subjectivity, immigrants' autobiographies can be reasonably accepted as valuable historical sources documenting the newcomers' experience in their adoptive society (Serra 14-16). As Fred L. Gardaphé has remarked, *Mount Allegro* "offers vignettes of life" rather than a fictitious narrative ("From Oral Tradition to Written Word" 300). Whether "a spectator" or "a participant" in Rochester's community (Unali 202), Mangione provides a cross-section of Sicilian life in the United States. Olga Peragallo has aptly observed that he "is able to detach himself from his environment and to analyze the feelings and reactions of his people" (145).

Mount Allegro – the section of "five or six blocks" (*MA* 38) in Rochester, where Gerlando Amoroso (Mangione's fictional alias) was born and spent his childhood – was a Sicilian enclave. It was not called "Little Italy," as if it had included immigrants from other Italian regions, and drew its popular denomination from "the Sicilian hill town of that name" (*MA* 39). Indeed, Mangione observes that "Rochester, like so many Eastern American cities, had an extensive 'Little Italy' but our neighborhood was not part of it" ("On Being a Sicilian American" 44). The concentration of Sicilian immigrants and their offspring in the Mount Allegro district arose from the newcomers' habit of clustering together both in US cities in general (MacDonald and MacDonald) and in Rochester in particular (Briggs 119). This attitude is well documented in Mangione's works. As he argues, the conventional rule was that "a good Sicilian son stuck near his family; the only time he left it was to marry, and even then he lived close by so that he could see his relatives often" (*MA* 227). Those who moved away the district eventually realized that they "couldn't bear to be away from their Sicilian neighbors and moved back into Mount Allegro" (*MA* 207).

³ For historical data about Italians in Rochester, see Briggs 73-118.

Everyday practices contributed to strengthening the residents' awareness of their subnational roots and identity. Mangione notes that "my parents, who spoke only Sicilian, insisted we speak their tongue" at home (*AEAL* 13). He also stresses that his fellow Sicilians hardly interacted with people who were not from their ancestral or native island: "Nearly all their business and social life was conducted in their own native language. In a world filled with *forestieri* whose language and customs were incomprehensible, they depended on one another's company even more than they had in Sicily" (Mangione, "My Experience" 67). Banquet gatherings provided opportunities to tell stories about Sicily and, thereby, further encouraged participants to commit themselves to their ethnic heritage (*AEAL* 15). Foodways played a similar role. As William Boelhower has noted in *Through a Glass Darkly*, "There are few moments like the ethnic feast where ethnic identity can be so positively affirmed and socially reinforced" (113). Mangione's father cherished his own regional identity by preparing *cannoli*, a traditional Sicilian pastry filled with sweetened cheese. So did his relatives and friends who ate them (*MA* 128-30). The residents of Mount Allegro were reminded of their regional attachment even when they raised their eyes up toward the sky at night. To the neighborhood dwellers, "the sickly yellow glow" of the sulfur emissions from the nearby Bausch & Lomb optical plant looked like "the lemon gloves in Sicily" (*MA* 39).

To Mangione's relatives, joining forces among fellow Sicilians and emphasizing their common regional ancestry were "their way of coping with an alien world that was generally hostile" (*AEAL* 15). Among the reasons for writing *Mount Allegro* Mangione mentioned his desire to correct the public perception of Sicilian Americans who, in his view, "had been much maligned" in the United States (Mulas 74).

Mangione himself felt proud of his regional heritage. He moved out of Rochester's ethnic neighborhood of Mount Allegro and resided in Syracuse, New York State, between 1928 and 1931 to attend the local university. To pursue his academic education, as Fred Gardaphé has observed, Mangione "left the ethnocentric world of his family" (*Italian Signs* 76). Nonetheless, he did not disavow his ancestral heritage and, according to Justin Vitiello, revealed "nostalgia" for his regional roots while he was living far from fellow Sicilian Americans (71). Mangione acknowledges, for example, that "the influence of my relatives was stronger than that of my teachers" (*MA* 225). Indeed, when he interviewed English novelist John Cowper Powys for the newspaper of Syracuse University in the late 1920s, Mangione made a point of introducing himself as a "full-blooded Sicilian with parents from the ancient province of Agrigento" (*AEAL* 43). The incident that offered him the opportunity to reveal his regional and provincial ancestry is mentioned in *An Ethnic at Large* to stress "the glories of Sicilian civilization which [...] antedated that of Rome by two thousand years" (*AEAL* 43). The citation does not correspond to Mangione's own words. The quotation is a statement by Powys. Actually, Mangione intends to rely on the allegedly laudatory words of such an authoritative source as the British writer in order to counterbalance the hackneyed Mafia-related stereotypes and other derogatory perceptions of Sicilian Americans in US society.

Mangione further acknowledges his regional roots during his first visit to Sicily, a trip which he undertook in 1936 "to explore my ethnic identity" and, therefore, was a homage to his own *sicilianità per se* (*AEAL* 176). On the ship that was taking him to Palermo, Mangione overheard some members of the crew speaking in dialect and felt "the emotion of being a full-blooded Sicilian in direct touch with his life source" (*AEAL* 180).

A strong sense of regional consciousness often implied the development of Sicilian pride among the immigrants. For instance, in the opinion of Mangione's mother, "Sicily is one of the

most beautiful lands in the world. [...] Sicily has fruits and flowers beyond the imagination of Americans” (MA 20). According to his relatives “the air was perfect in Sicily, neither cold nor damp [...]. The wine tasted better” (MA 18). Similarly, to the writer himself, Sicilian bread is “finer and tastier than any other Italian bread” (MA 133) and the Sicilian dialect is “rich as ever in nuance” (AEAL 180). Mangione’s aunt Giovanna even contends that “God lived closer to Sicily than he did to America” (MA 18).

The newcomers’ regional pride also led to contempt for and distrust in other-than-Sicilian immigrants (Vecoli 413). *Mount Allegro* offers evidence for that attitude, too. In the view of Mangione’s uncle, for instance, “Neapolitans are some of the most fascinating sinners in the world” (MA 53). By the same token, *campanilismo* exposed people from Sicily to the disdain by individuals from other Italian regions. For example, Robert Di Nella, a schoolmate and a bully of northern extraction, called Mangione “a lousy *siciliano*” (MA 3). In turn, Mangione does not identify himself with Di Nella. In the writer’s eyes, although he was an Italian, with his “blond hair and blue eyes” Di Nella looked more similar to Polish-American Tony Long than to the Sicilian boys with whom Mangione hanged around in his schooldays (MA 3).

Campanilismo, however, also caused the outburst of intraregional rivalries and antipathies that pitted newcomers from diverse places in Sicily one against the other. With this respect, Mangione recalls that whenever his father read accounts of homicides in the local press, he almost automatically assumed that the killer “came from Carrapipi, a small town in Sicily which – according to my relatives – produced nothing but a population of potential thieves, blackmailers, and murderers” (MA 5). Only a few miles separated this village and Girgenti, namely Agrigento, his father’s native place. But the distance – albeit quite short – was enough to trigger off mechanics of reciprocal disrespect by which “the people of Carrapipi considered the natives of Girgenti responsible for the bad reputation Sicilians had” in the United States (MA 6). In turn, newcomers from Girgenti contended that the immigrants from Carrapipi “could not even speak the Sicilian dialect properly” (MA 6).

Neither Mangione nor his relatives and acquaintances in Rochester’s ethnic ghetto felt Italian. In *An Ethnic at Large* he acknowledges that he grew up “Sicilian,” as the title of the opening chapter reads (AEAL 13). In the same volume, he also argues that the issue of attachment and the underlying cultural values swung between the “Sicilian Way” and the “American Way” (AEAL 176). Throughout *Mount Allegro* the identity duality among the neighborhood’s residents is not between Americanness and Italianness. The contrast is between a sense of belonging to the United States and Sicalianness. The behavior at family picnics in public parks epitomized these alternatives. On the one hand, American women left “their infants behind in the care of nurses who fed and cleaned the infants in privacy” (MA 222). On the other, Mangione’s “Sicilian relatives had little regard for privacy. They brought all their infants with them on the picnics and the women had no inhibitions about baring their breasts to feed them” (MA 222).

Against this backdrop, Italianness turns out to be a generic social construction under which people from other ethnic backgrounds labeled immigrants from Italy because they were unable to realize the newcomers’ subnational differences. For example, Mangione recounts that one of his teachers defined him an Italian because his surname ended with a vowel. As the writer puts it, “you were Italian because your last name was Amoroso” (MA 2).

Mangione contends that “the champions of the American melting-pot theory were wrong. Despite three decades of American residence, my Rochester relatives remained Sicilian to the core” (AEAL 187). He reiterates his argument several years later in an interview with Franco

Mulas, in which he states that “The Sicilian environment was a static one. I think the tragedy of the immigrants was that they tried to keep it static. They tried to keep it as much as possible like the environment they had known back home” (Mulas 75). Yet the Sicilianness of Mangione and his fellow ethnics in Rochester is a social construction, too, in the manner of the “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger). For instance, during his first visit to Sicily, the writer realized that the language he spoke at home in the United States was not the real Sicilian dialect because a few words he used were hardly comprehensible to his relatives living in Girgenti “who were amused by my brand of Sicilian” (MA 251).

Especially *An Ethnic at Large* can be also read as Mangione’s endeavors to come to terms with the United States. From this perspective, his autobiographical writings contribute to demonstrating that ethnicity is not unchangeable and inherited but situational because its features undergo a continuous process of re-elaboration, re-description, and renegotiation over time. Sicilianness is no exception, as the incipit of *Mount Allegro* makes it clear. The self-perception of Giustina, Gerlando’s sister, is not tied to a Sicilian identity for ever: “When I grow up I want to become an American,” she proudly proclaims in the opening sentence of the volume (MA 1). But the journey from a regional sense of belonging to a US consciousness on the part of the immigrants’ second generation is a subsequent stage in the reshaping of ethnic identity over the years and, therefore, another chapter in the history of the Sicilian-American experience.

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