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Paisan with a Ph.D.: An Essay on Identity

Mario Moussa

1. *HEY, PAISAN!*

"Hey, paisan!"

He walked toward me with arms outstretched, eyes glowing with drunkenness. The others, shaking, bumping, and lip-syncing to Tommy James and the Shondells, were still on the dance-floor.

"Paisan!"

Was I his destination? Soon enough, as he weaved closer, I realized with shock and disgust that the label was intended for me.

Teeth gleaming, he extended his hand. *"Mario, hey, paisan!"*

I glared into his vague, watery eyes, set in a head swaying three feet above mine. Then I glared at my wife, seated next to me. She raised her eyebrows. I already knew: it wasn't her fault, and I couldn't insult one of the wedding guests. When I turned back to him and looked up, I offered a handshake and nodded.

He was enthusiastic. *"Paisan! Mario!"*

In Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where Jews, Italians and

blacks are rarely seen, an Italian American named Mario is a *paisan*. This is where my wife's brother had chosen to live and marry. He had adapted, comfortably, by confining his Jewishness to discrete middle-America gestures. He described the man who had conducted the wedding ceremony, for example, as a "Jewish minister" Jewish enough to refer to the Torah, but definitely Christian enough to "profess," as the minister himself put it, that Jesus is God. Who could be offended?

In such a place, in these circumstances, and for one night only, I allowed myself to be a *paisan* with a Ph.D. An Italian American philosopher.

2. THE PHILOSOPHER AS A YOUNG PAISAN

What deeply ethnic experiences, transformed in the alembic of the mind, steered this *paisan* toward a Ph.D.? I drift backwards, the memories bobbing up and down like branches in a stream. . . .

On Sundays, after returning home from Mass, she took off her flat-brimmed hat, changed out of her special-occasion dress (one of two, with lace running alongside the buttons down the chest) into a plain blue smock, and walked determinedly down the hall from the bedroom to the kitchen, where, aproned to protect herself from splattering juices, she stirred the heavy red sauce and salted the chicken.

So my mother passed every Sunday afternoon that I can remember from my childhood in Brooklyn. While she prepared the midday meal, doling out chores to my sister in a mixture of Italian and English, my father and the rest of the family, my two brothers and I, would read in the small den off the kitchen. My father typically began with the *New York Times* and then moved on to novels, mostly the classics of Western literature, which he read in the Modern Library editions. From time to time, without introduction, he would launch into a reading from *The Idiot*, the *Eclogues*, or whatever he happened to be reading that week. My brothers and I would look up from our brightly colored pages, the chiseled prose mixing with images of Spiderman and the Silver Surfer and with the pang of Marvel Comics angst. My father, a simple laborer, never offered a commentary on his readings. Loving what he felt was the timelessness of literature, he assumed that the words themselves, free of interpretation, were enough.

In this manner was I introduced to the complexity of intellectual life: to its exclusions (for men only), to its contradictions

(high culture, low culture), to its aspirations (the escape from parochial opinions, transparent beauty). In this manner, too, was I first conscious of myself as an Italian American philosopher.

3. DOES BEING A PAISAN, OR EVEN ITALIAN AMERICAN, MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

In fact, I am not a *paisan*. I am, at best, Italian American.

My mother, who is not Italian American, rarely cooked tomato sauce. Born in a small town outside Houston, she speaks English, and only English, with a thick Texas accent. On Sundays, after Mass, my family went out to eat as often as we ate at home.

We lived in a suburb outside Chicago, and my father was, at the time, vice-president of an international corporation. He is still working as an executive and never learned to speak Italian. I cannot remember him, not once, reading a novel or anything else besides newspapers (the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Wall Street Journal*) and magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *Reader's Digest*), mostly in a leather chair next to a standing lamp in our family room. On the walls were maps of colonial America, photographs of my father receiving awards at corporate functions, a curled brass horn with a rubber bulb at one end, and faux carriage-lanterns fitted with electric light bulbs.

My parents' names are Lillian and Meyer. Many people, hearing those names, assume my family is Jewish. (My wife's parents said, "Lillian and Meyer? Are you sure they're not Jewish?")

I had one brother, named Wayne, ten years older than I. At the time of his death, eight years ago, he was working for the corporation where our father had been a vice-president. Having spent little time with my brother, I remember little about him. One of the few things I can still see clearly is how "American" he looked: square-shouldered, tall, fair-skinned (more Czech than Italian, our father used to say). By the time I was old enough to clearly remember Sundays as Sundays, my brother was living in another city.

Gay Talese writes in *Unto the Sons*, which I read looking for reflections of my own upbringing, that he was "olive-skinned in a freckle-faced town." So was I, but I never felt so different from my classmates or neighbors. At least the differences rarely seemed related to being Italian. Largely they had to do with class, whether, for example, your parents had gone to college and where and with money, just plain how much you had.

 4. WHO IS A PHILOSOPHER, ITALIAN AMERICAN OR OTHERWISE?

A philosopher typically produces arguments concerning what it is proper to think or do about matters of large significance. In the past, for example, philosophers debated among themselves about such topics as the nature of scientific objectivity, the epistemological status of claims about paintings and poems, and the morality of war. Nowadays, since the topic of "identity"—racial, sexual, ethnic identity—has become popular, many philosophers have begun to argue over what it means to be something: a woman, a black, a gay. Most non-philosophers will probably be surprised to find that no one is anything, at least not what most people, in my experience, say they are when moved to talk about themselves. Consider Judith Butler's argument about identity: the "I" turns out to be a "deployment" of grammar, which is itself deployed by the shudder-quoted "I."

Like many postmodern philosophers, Butler goes to great lengths to demonstrate that she is really a "she" and that others should always be dutifully protected by their quotes, like a helmeted race-car driver. In the conclusion to her book *Gender Trouble*, she begins a sentence in the low-gear way philosophers often do: "I have argued . . ." only to shift into deconstructive overdrive, snaking through a series of tight theoretical turns signposted by parentheses. Watch:

(I' deploy the grammar that governs the genre of the philosophical conclusion, but note that it is the grammar itself that deploys and enables this 'I,' even as the 'I' that insists itself here repeats, redeploys, and—as the critics will determine—contests the philosophical grammar by which it is both enabled and restricted.)

Whew! I have watched the replay many times, and I still marvel at how "she" almost—almost—makes it through this theoretical stretch without slamming into a wall.

Readers accustomed to such daredevil driving might expect a philosopher (e. g., "me") to tell them who a philosopher really is, or what an ethnic—an Italian American—philosopher, or at least this ethnic philosopher, this simulacrum-*paisan* with a Ph.D., really is. Those readers familiar with postmodernism, as I assume most readers of *DIFFERENTIA* are, might expect an analysis of what a(n) (Italian American) philosopher is/"is" (not)—not being the existential condition forced upon all language-users. I, however, can only, tentatively, deploy some stories about the "person" "I" commonly referred to as "myself."

5. *AM I REALLY AN ITALIAN AMERICAN ANYWAY?*

There was, as usual, story after story. About my grandfather's overcoats that held thousands of dollars, almost lost when the long-since moth-balled garments, pockets still stuffed with cash, were donated to the Salvation Army. About my father as a little boy, on a visit to his uncle's strawberry farm in Shreveport, Louisiana, riding an entire day on a mule who, as this animal is known to do, afterwards gobbled up so much water he died. About the New Orleans policemen who entertained their mistresses, for free, at my grandfather's restaurant in the middle of the night, until my grandmother, concerned more about the money than the morals, put a stop to the revelry.

This was a typical story-intoxicated gathering of the Italian side of my family—cousins, second-cousins, great aunts—all of them from New Orleans. My wife was meeting some of them for the first time. Most of the stories were familiar even to my wife, who had already heard them from me or my parents, but the one told by my second-cousin Charley was definitely new. And it was a shock to most of us.

Charley spoke as much with his body as with his words. A world-class wrestling referee, he had been a wrestler himself (he was thick and muscular) and now he used his outsized arms to lob the story at you like a medicine ball, with a heaving motion.

What came lobbing at me was this: we weren't really Italian.

"I was riding in the car with Robert Goulet," Charley said, "in the annual Italian American Parade, going right down Saint Charles Street. He was kissin' everybody—women, children, blacks. Blacks! He was kissin' blacks! I wanted to say, 'You idiot, are they Italian?'

"Afterwards, I was telling Jules about it, and he said, 'You know, we're not Italian anyway. We come from Albania.' I said to myself, 'Oh shit! I was riding at the head of the Italian American parade and I'm Albanian?' It took me fifty years to discover I'm Albanian?"

My father had always told me his family came from Sicily, but what I heard from Charley in New Orleans was that, early in this century, they left Albania for an area of Sicily called the Plains of Greece. So, am I really Italian American? Or Albanian?

When I related Charley's story to my father, my father said, "Bullshit, we're Italian."

When I pressed the point, and told him others at the party supported Charley's story, my father said, "Oh yeah? Maybe. Well, I'm too old to become Albanian anyway. I'm Italian."

6. CAN A PHILOSOPHER BE ITALIAN AMERICAN?

Being a "white ethnic," as Stephen Steinberg says, it took me some time to develop my ethnic consciousness, even if it wasn't my own ethnicity of which I finally became conscious.

When I was an undergraduate studying philosophy, I certainly never thought of myself as a budding Italian American philosopher, or an Italian American anything. Or, really, any kind of anything at all. Despite my very ethnic-sounding name, which often drew friendly remarks like "*paisan*," "gumba," and "Mario" (delivered in a tremulous operatic burst), I always felt I had no ethnicity. It was easy for me to assume that when I did philosophy, I was just thinking in the universal categories of rational thought that any and all human beings use.

In the ethnically benighted seventies, most philosophy students were taught, sometimes explicitly, to make this assumption.

7. A PHILOSOPHER FIRST

Philosophy, as it always does, eventually made for complications.

I knew a woman in graduate school who once said to me, "I consider myself to be a philosopher before a woman. I am, of course, a woman. But I am a philosopher first." At the time, I wondered what it meant to be a philosopher, or anything, first. I started thinking, Who was I "first"? How did "first" apply here? Like the person who told Wittgenstein about having imagined "sewing a dress" meant sewing one thread on to another until a dress appeared, I had strange malformed thoughts about being something "first," accompanied by vague images of shadows moving like urgent pedestrians among clouds and fog. I was trying to fix that word, first.

8. I'LL BE YOUR PAISAN TONIGHT

Try this: Never throw, place, or in any way put a hat on the bed, not for a second. The decision to always follow this principle may be the first step toward becoming an Italian American.

My father once screamed like hell when I, too young even to know what a superstition was, put a fedora on the bed. "Never put a hat on the bed," he said, breathlessly, after leaping across me to grab the offending object. Now, isn't that Italian?

There have also been times when, in explaining away some indiscretion, he described himself as "a curly-haired Italian." That meant his passion somehow got the best of him. It also meant, in my mind, that I was Italian, too. I felt Italian. Wouldn't you? (But would you feel Italian "first"?)

So I have, in certain limited circumstances, been Italian, even a *paisan* and a gumba.

At the same time, objectively speaking, I am only half Italian, since my mother is a full-blooded Czech. Her grandparents, that is, emigrated from Prague to Needville, Texas, in the late nineteenth century. In the sometimes friendly, sometimes acrimonious wars of identity fought in my family, she often made a point of saying I was as much Czech as Italian. (And nowadays, as my mother has taken to saying, one should be careful not to confuse "Czech" with "Slovak," a reinigorated ethnic distinction. Just to make sure the record is straight: she is a Czech [therefore, so she says, a believer in democracy and human freedom] and, by extension, so am I.)

The espousal of the label "curly-headed Italian," like the assertion of the right to define the family as, at least, half-Czech, shows, I think, that identity is a claim made in very particular circumstances. If I were to pony up and, finally, make good on my claim to be a philosopher, I would offer the following authoritative passage from Erving Goffman's *Interaction Ritual* to support my observation about identity:

In considering the individual's participation in social action, we must understand that in a sense he does not participate as a total person but rather in terms of a special capacity or status; in short, in terms of a special self.

What I would add to Goffman's point is that sometimes people choose their "special selves" and sometimes resignedly accept those forced on them. For the drunkard at the wedding, for example, I played the role of *paisan*. That was a relatively inconsequential example of being forced to play a role; other, more serious examples include women being forced to play "bitches," blacks "niggers," gays "queers."

9. ITALIAN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

By and large, there is nothing Italian American, or anything ethnic, about being a professional philosopher in this country. As long as graduate school training continues to prepare students to thrive in the academy, now a highly professionalized institution, Ph.D.s in philosophy will no doubt be philosophers “first” in that they must define themselves as philosophers—their professional “special selves”—in sanctioned ways. They must, among themselves, discuss certain problems in certain ways; disseminate those problems, through their students, in certain ways; and write about those problems, in certain publications, again in certain ways. In this limited sense, my classmate from graduate school was right in claiming to be a philosopher, not a woman, “first.” It may be, though, that being a home-grown Italian American philosopher, like my father or his younger sister, is different.

They are both given to philosophizing—about the appeal and the drudgery of working, about the basic human need for sartorial display, even about the afterlife and God’s place in it. Having had successes and failures in their lives and careers, they have learned to take comfort in a “philosophical attitude,” as they say. I was the audience for many speeches about the ephemeral quality of happiness, about the fundamental illusoriness of accomplishment, about the relative importance of material wealth and spiritual contentment (a very complicated relationship).

For better or worse, this, I think, is Italian American philosophy.