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## The Italian / American Experience: A Collection of Writings by Louis Gesauldi

Regina Davis-Sowers  
*Santa Clara University*

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**Gesualdi, Louis J. *The Italian/American Experience: A Collection of Writings*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2012. xii + 93 pages. Paper, \$25.00.**

In *The Italian/American Experience: A Collection of Writings*, sociologist Louis J. Gesualdi presents a collection of writings to correct the inaccurate and negative popular beliefs regarding the Italian American experience. He particularly examines the stereotypes of Italian Americans from Southern Italy by offering counterarguments for research findings that historically have been used to explain differences of success between Italians and Italian Americans from Northern Italy and Southern Italy. In a book of less than 100 pages, Gesualdi argues very persuasively that past research has failed to understand the lives of southern Italians and Italian Americans, resulting in misconceptions regarding the achievements of Italian Americans in comparison with other white ethnic groups. He also seeks to “provide useful information on Italian American heritage” (p. xi).

It is apparent from the introduction that Gesualdi’s objective is to offer a more positive portrait of Italian Americans. He argues that the southern region of Italy has been misunderstood, particularly the ideas regarding whether or not the southern region was dependent on the more economically advanced northern region of Italy. The first part of the book includes critiques of past research studies and books. Gesualdi questions the methodology and results of previous studies, offering research findings that present a more positive view of Southern Italy and Italian Americans. The book is powerful in that it confronts findings regarding the role of culture in explaining differences among ethnic groups, but, because the emphasis is on proving that any negative findings regarding Italian Americans are incorrect and any data with favorable portrayals of Italian Americans are correct, it loses some of its explanatory power.

Gesualdi begins with a short history of economic and social relations between Southern Italy and Northern Italy, arguing that the former was not dependent on the latter, but was instead instrumental in the northern region’s success. He then presents critiques of the most notable scholars and theories of Italian American studies, most notably the cultural trait approach to explaining social behavior. He examines popularly held beliefs regarding Italian Americans and crime, and he praises the research of the historian Giovanni Schiavo, known as a founder of Italian American studies, whose work portrays positive findings regarding the Italian American experience.

The strength of this book, and one of the reasons I believe the book would be valuable to social scientists who study race and ethnicity, particularly scholars of Whiteness studies, is that Gesualdi’s pride and passion for all things Italian disproves the beliefs that white ethnic groups do not think of themselves in terms of their ethnicity. Sociologist Mary Waters’ notion of optional ethnicities or symbolic ethnicity argues that for whites, unlike for people of color, ethnicity does not have psychological or social costs, meaning that ethnicity does not impact the lives of whites or how white ethnics view themselves as Americans. But, in Chapter 5 of his book, Gesualdi discusses how media connections of Italian Americans with organized crime lead to mistaken notions of Italian Americans. At the end of this chapter, he offers ways that Italian Americans can take responsibility for countering these incorrect ideas. So his concerns with past and current views of Italian Americans appear to render ethnicity as important to white ethnics as to people of color. Throughout the first half of the book, the pride of being Italian American and of the success of Italian Americans is evident.

Another strength of the book is that Gesualdi includes research ideas for studying Italian Americans in the twenty-first century, an annotated bibliography of articles and books on Italian

Americans, a list of organizations and journals the specialize in Italian American culture, and a brief directory of leading researchers in the discipline of Italian American studies. He has created a wonderful source for anyone interested in studying Italian Americans, and has provided a framework for examining the role of race and ethnicity in the lives of white ethnic groups.

One weakness is the brevity of the book, which does not allow for a balanced examination regarding the scholars and theories that Gesualdi seeks to disprove. The chapters are very short, many less than three pages, which does not allow for a more nuanced presentation of the facts. Also, the annotated bibliography lists only researchers with positive findings on Italian Americans. Yet, in spite of these weaknesses, this is a valuable book on ethnicity. Because of its brevity, this would be a good book to assign to undergraduates and graduate students in race and ethnic relations classes, Whiteness studies, and Italian American studies. Also, the book is accessible to non-academics as well, and would be appropriate for Italian Americans who are interested in a short history of the Italian American experience. Gesualdi has written a book that should make all Italian Americans proud of their heritage, as it tackles some of the most negative generalizations and beliefs regarding Italian Americans, past and present.

Regina Davis-Sowers, Ph.D.  
Lecturer of Sociology  
Santa Clara University  
Santa Clara, California