

## Book Reviews

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### *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia.*

By Jordan Stanger-Ross.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.

208 pages.

Jordan Stanger-Ross has written a very useful study that focuses on what community means and how it is created for an ethnic group. Using a comparative approach for the cities of Toronto and Philadelphia in the postwar 1950s to 1980s period, he analyzes the impact of various factors on the development of two Italian-American urban communities. This nuanced approach, which considers real estate markets, church attendance, marriage patterns, and employment, indicates that ethnicity did not fade as some “whiteness” historians have claimed but existed alongside a sense of whiteness. Did all those whose ancestry was European become European Americans in the mid- to late-twentieth century with little distinction between them? As the author shows, this transformation did not occur for many Italian Americans.

However, the way in which ethnicity continued, as illustrated in these two cities, shows the impact of place in shaping Italian ethnicity. Ethnic persistence is only one of the issues the author explores. More important for understanding ethnicity is how it was lived in diverse cities. Italians in Philadelphia and Toronto would recognize each other as having the same ancestry but would not recognize how that ancestral tie took distinct forms based on locale. Ethnicity developed in different ways according to each neighborhood’s and each city’s historical path. For example, in south Philadelphia the inability to sell homes for a profit tied Italian Americans to their neighborhood and led to a protection of turf against incoming African Americans. Ethnicity in Philadelphia was based on maintaining an ethnic enclave and preserving the parish against racial incursion. This observation is not new and actually formed the basis for some historians’ claims that the 1970s white ethnic revival was based on a reaction to the Civil Rights Movement and black residential entrance into white neighborhoods. Yet, in Toronto, Italians were not tied to their particular Little Italy area and did not react to an outsider presence to maintain their ethnic cohesion. Real estate prices encouraged house selling and dispersed the ethnic group throughout the city and into the suburbs. However, Toronto’s Italians still had a community, although it was citywide, that came together in Little Italy for religious and other events and in regard to business connections. Ethnic ties were strong in both cities but different based on particular regional/urban variations. The fact that ethnic bonds could survive after the main ethnic enclave had disappeared and without an evident racial factor is an important finding for understanding contemporary ethnicity. The author also acknowledges that his research and conclusions do not represent all Italian Americans in these cities and carefully indicates that there was diversity within the ethnic community in regard to class, immigration period, and gender that led to varied results.

Religious connections also indicated separate directions for St. Agnes/St. Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church in Toronto and Philadelphia’s Annunciation of the

Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Thomas Aquinas parishes. The south Philadelphia parishes were, as is usual, territorially bounded, but in Toronto's parish the church drew from across the city particularly during special events such as processions. Parish boundaries were defined in dissimilar ways in the two cities. As the author notes, Toronto's ethnicity was elastic in regard to parish and place; it was not an indication of a particular residential boundary.

Courtship and marriage patterns are an interesting aspect of ethnic life that the author considers. As one might expect, these patterns in south Philadelphia were related to proximity. Living in the Italian neighborhood resulted in courtship and marriage with other neighborhood Italians. But in Toronto a dispersed Italian community still saw endogamy as an important part of ethnic life. The break-up of the old neighborhood did not result in more out-marriage; ethnic bonds remained strong. In regard to work and employment niches, south Philadelphia's local attachments, which were so strong in regard to marriage and church programs, did not function well for jobs. Work choices did not depend on local social/ethnic networks. The neighborhood focus that was evident in other aspects of Italian life in Philadelphia did not function in relation to work. South Philadelphia Italians found work throughout the metro area and ethnic niches in employment faded. In Toronto, ethnic attachments were important for finding employment and in maintaining ethnic niches even with their dispersed community.

The author observes that "local contexts shape ethnic experience" (137). The two cities' Italian Americans had different lives, but both had strong communities and social networks. The ethnicity that was lived was not the same, and it is this diversity that Stanger-Ross explores. Ethnicity persisted whether it drew from local neighborhood ties or from metrowide bonds. As a historian, the author has done the field a great service by bringing his study into a time when most urban white ethnic neighborhoods have disappeared or are disappearing. While other historians can speak of symbolic ethnicity and the fading of ethnic consciousness, Stanger-Ross brings hard evidence to a better explanation of what has occurred. A close examination of Italian-American life shows that ethnic identity survived well into the twentieth century. As the book concludes, ethnicity did not disappear; it continued "to shape lives" (141). But locale is a significant element in understanding how ethnicity can mold communities. Italian ethnic life was formulated in different ways in south Philadelphia and Toronto. If more cities were to be considered, similar findings surely would emerge. Hopefully, other historians will research this issue for various ethnic groups so that the field can move beyond facile interpretations of America's assimilatory process. More comparative work is needed to understand how ethnicity remains an important aspect of urban life and how locale determines the particular ethnic lifestyle.

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