

Decidedly Not Italian Enough

Joey Skee (February 10, 2008)



Some thoughts on why I chose to remain silent and why I now think it's worth a blog post, thanks to Anthony Tamburri.

The first thought I had after reading James Barron's "They Kind of Knew It Wouldn't Work" in the New York Times was, "Here come the crybabies," those over sensitive Italian-Americans peeved by every perceived media slight and denigration. While I certainly don't think my colleague (and Calandra Institute supervisor) Anthony Tamburri falls into the category of whining media police by any stretch of the imagination – on the contrary, he is constantly offering intellectually stimulating challenges to our understanding of Italian-American cultural production – I have to admit I was somewhat taken aback by his recent "too Italian" Giuliani post. The phrase "too Italian" unquestionably raises intriguing questions about perceptions of Italianità in the public sphere that I am thankful Anthony explored on this site and that I would like to augment. Yet I would argue the specific case of this



Times article is a non-issue and certainly not worth a letter to the editor.

My reading of the Times quote of “retired jewelry designer” and Giuliani supporter (“I love Giuliani . . .”) Dorothy Kaliades was that this was a succinctly astute assessment of the failed Giuliani campaign, albeit missing one crucial component, i.e., 9/11 tedium. Her statement was a political reading of America beyond the Hudson River. I was left with the impression that Kaliades, a(n assumed) white ethnic (Greek American, by birth or marriage) from a much-maligned, “outer” borough neighborhood long identified as Italian-American, was sympathetic to the issue of Giuliani’s ethnicity within the sphere of national presidential politics.

In addition to Giuliani being “too Italian,” Kaliades lists several key factors that need to be considered collectively if we are to understand her position and the ruined Giuliani candidacy.

She raises the specter of Giuliani’s personal family relationships and, ultimately, character (“he had too many wives” and “his kids won’t talk to him.”). It wasn’t only his two divorces that were deemed political liabilities but [the particularly nasty ways he separated from his wives](#) [2]: the contested annulment from his first wife; the philandering while in office on the city dime; his second wife learning about his filing for divorce from a news conference announcement; his attempts to evict her from Gracie Mansion so as facilitate moving in his lover, etc. For many, it was Giuliani’s sleaziness that did him in. It seemed like Ms. Kaliades called it right.

Another observation Kaliades made was the very simple fact that Giuliani was a New Yorker, which conservative Christian Republicans associate with other despised groups, in particular, Jews, gays, liberals, and others. The fact that he was the former mayor is not insignificant. I’ll never forget my high school history teacher discussing Teddy Roosevelt’s failed 1886 bid for the city’s mayoral race as a good thing because, as he pronounced, [“No former mayor of New York City ever became president.”](#) [3]

A quick google search for “Giuliani + too + Italian” simply leads back to the Kaliades quote. Giuliani’s “Italianness” doesn’t appear to have been an issue this election year. The possibility of it being raised had Giuliani won his party’s candidacy is a moot point now.

(It seems that the political left’s [association of Giuliani with Fascist leader Benito Mussolini](#) [4] might have been more cause for Italian-American activists to speak up but I didn’t hear any raised voices on that issue.)

As Anthony notes, the phrase “not black enough” has plagued Barak Obama’s candidacy. This issue was brought up by such national figures (and not just one person in a nail salon, excuse me) as Jessie Jackson and Al Sharpton, themselves previous presidential hopefuls deemed “too black” and ultimately “too radical.” The African-American barometer of racial politics was also directed at the recent mayoral runs of Cory Booker in Newark and Michael Nutter in Philadelphia. (Even rumors of New York City mayor Mike Bloomberg’s possible presidential bid have raised the issue of him “being too Jewish”.) This is a historically important issue within the black community, especially as it concerns integration, education, and even violence among the youth.

It seems to me that the question of being “too Italian” or not is one that needs to be posed inwards. The objection of Italian-American leaders to mediated mafiosi like The Sopranos is imbued with what I call the fear of the gavon’. Middle class and upper middle class strivers take offense at the HBO show, the Scorsese opus, and countless other mob-related cultural products because they depict characters that are to a large degree just too damn Italian, stained with the mark of marinara sauce on their sleeveless “guinea Ts.” The Italian-American abhorrence of community-based, déclassé gavons is brilliantly addressed in The Sopranos episode [“Marco Polo](#) [5]” in the show’s fifth season, in which Carmela confronts her mother Mary De Angelis’s self-hatred when her mobster son-in-law, bedecked with a necklace of Italian sausages for the grill, shows up at a backyard barbecue attended by her “cultured Italian” friends, Russ Fegoli, Ph.D. in international affairs and a retired “assistant to the Ambassador to the Vatican.” Tony is just a tad bit too Italian for her taste.





Five years ago, Johnny De Carlo posted an email with the subject line "[Confessions of a Goomba](#) [6]" to the list serve H-Itam, challenging upper middle class decorum and ways of being Italian:

I'm proud to be Italian-American and proud to be a goomba. And I'm real. I'm happy in my neighborhood and with my family and friends and my car and my clothes and my local job and my Church and everything else. I don't need to go be a politician or an activist for some cause. I don't see how that makes me a bad person or how that makes me bad for Italian-American society. We are simple people who know where our ancestors came from and know where we come from and live and have pride in that.

De Carlo represents one of those people deemed "too Italian" by some members of the Italian-American community.

When I was a kid, my father told me what amounted to a morality tale, one I would hear from other Italian Americans as I got older. This account involved Frank Sinatra's now infamous torpedoing of Jimmy Roselli's singing career over perceived insults. For my father and the others who tell this mythic tale, Sinatra was a bully who abused his power as when he berated a female croupier during the height of his fame. His abusive and often misogynistic behavior was anathema to what my father understood to be the proper Italian-American male.

Giuliani is often cited for his bullying and mean-spiritedness. This candidate made much of being a Catholic in his pandering to the religious right, but anyone who endured his mayoralty knows that he was anything but Christian in his public and political behavior, especially as it concerned the poor, the downtrodden, and people of color. The Kaliades quote was followed by another from Richard Martin, 58, a retired cabdriver residing in Harlem: "'I have been asking myself, how could Giuliani ever have the audacity to run for president,' said Mr. Martin, who is black. 'His governing style would be considered mean, indifferent and, I would have to say, racist or prejudiced'." From my father's perspective and mine as well, Giuliani, like Sinatra, was not "too Italian" but not Italian enough.

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