

From “Godfather to “Mama’s Boys” - The ever degenerating southern-Italian American media image. So who cares?

Tom Verso (April 08, 2012)



There is a clear pattern of increasingly negative dramatic images of southern-Italian Americans in American media from the 1970s Godfather movie to the current reality shows. It is a sociologically verifiable FACT that southern-Italian Americans are unique in the pantheon of American ethnic groups portrayed at best as high-minded murderous gangsters (e.g. Godfather) or sadistic sociopaths (e.g. Casino) or the current ‘reality’ show’s mindless buffoons who live for sensual sensations. But, southern-Italian Americans take it in stride – paying it no mind. “Perché”?

And the HITS (double entente) keep coming!
“Down the Food Chain”

The Godfather movies presented us with southern-Italian American murders and gangsters in high literary form. The leading characters come off as tragic (in the ancient Greek sense of the word) protagonist struggling with destiny.



Then came Goodfellows: the principle southern-Italian characters were more realistic murders and gangsters, not the stuff of high literature. However, they were well-developed characters, in the context of an excellent literary plot, showing the range of human complexity: both good and bad. With Donnie Brasco, pretenses to literature were gone. The southern-Italian American was essentially portrayed as base; not too smart, petty juvenile behaving criminals – pathetic comes to mind for the characters, and the dramatic elements were melodramatic rather than literary. Casino brought out a relatively new, or at least more detailed developed, southern-Italian American gangster character – the full-blown sociopathic killer (Joe Pesci character). And just to add emphasis to the sociopath Italian American, the juxtaposing character is the mathematically brilliant and ultra composed gentle Jewish gambler/businessman (Robert De Niro character). And let's not forget the quintessential cafoni Kansas City mob.

Buried in the morass of melodramatic Sopranos' plots one can find brilliant literary moments (Christopher and Paulie lost in the woods – forget-about-it). However, for the most part, the inane southern-Italian American characters in the series can retrospectively be seen as the precursors of Reality Show southern-Italian American buffoons.

Jersey Shore I would characterize as 'soft-porn' – southern-Italian American characters not necessarily preoccupied with sex per se, but more generally projecting and seeking after sexual persona.

HBO's **Boardwalk-Empire**, following Casino's lead, again gives us images of southern-Italian Americans that make Jewish mothers happy they are not Italians. Boardwalk-Empire juxtaposes the quiet unemotional mathematically brilliant Jewish gambler/gangster Arnold Rothstein with the mindless raging killer sociopaths Lucky Luciano and Al Capone. Indeed, Rothstein controls the raging Luciano character like a trained pit-bull with the wave of his hand.

Waiting in the wings is Mamma's Boys, Brooklyn 11223 and Rambug which the trailers suggest: just when you thought there could be no great negative portrayal of southern-Italian Americans – you were wrong. It just got worse!

Clearly movies and TV are trying to prove that the people who came to Ellis Island from southern Italy 100 years ago must have been a notch above Neanderthal – how else could one explain the portrayal of their sub-cortical driven progeny?

Why southern-Italian Americans alone?

I cannot think of, or find evidence of, any race/ethnic group in America that has been so systematically over decades portrayed so profoundly negative down to the present.

There is an overwhelming preponderance of documentary evidence demonstrating that mass media news and entertainment is not allowed de jure and de facto to systematically portray other racial/ethnic groups negatively. It is simply politically incorrect to do so, and legal, financial and career consequence accrue to those who flaunt these pervasive politically incorrect mores.

The renowned SUNY Professor Emeritus Fred Gardaphe's reflection on this topic is noteworthy:

"Italian Americans have been formally complaining about the way they have been portrayed in the media since as far back as 1931 with little or no effect ... Obviously nothing has changed, yet over the same 80-year period, other racial and ethnic American groups such as Jewish Americans and African Americans have succeeded in changing the way their images have been presented...Tactics [such as] protests and lawsuits worked for other groups...

"So what's the difference?"

("Guido. [Italian American Youth and Identity Politics](#) [2]" Editors Airos & Cappelli, Bordighera Press 2011, p. 69 emp.+)

Prof. Gardaphe goes on to discuss his highly informed and thought out answer about the "difference". However, a more succinct, "cut to the chase" answer comes from Prof. Laura Roberto quoting Gramsci:

" 'No mass action is possible, if the masses in question are not convinced of the ends they wish to attain and the methods to be applied' " (Ibid. p.68)

The proverbial bottom line: southern-Italian Americans characterized as a whole (i.e. all seventeen million) really don't care how the media portrays them; ergo no mass protest and social action.

To my mind this is our greatest virtue.

We do not need others to affirm our virtues, and we 'pay no mind' to their talk ("sparate" – the "vecchi" use to say). We are a self-confident people. We are an ancient people. Ours was a high civilization when northern Europeans were, in Disraeli's words, "running around with blue paint on their bodies". Our Patria Meridionale was the chrysalis were the ancient Mediterranean culture transformed into Western civilization.

Accordingly, we confidently "take the good with the bad". We appreciate the virtues of southern-



Italian media characters and we can laugh at ourselves when presented as comic characters. Cafoni images don't exercise us. We have known them; we laugh at them both in real life and media portrayals.

Clearly, as noted above, there is a trend of increasing negative images. This is an interesting sociological question. What is the cause of media representations generally and southern-Italian Americans particularly?

Nevertheless, the eighty-year history of southern-Italian American portrayals in media is our history. In all those films and programs we can find the good & bad, the beautiful & ugly, the tragic & comic aspects of our culture.

What differentiates southern-Italian American media images from other ethnic groups?

Our media images are not cleansed of the bad, ugly and comic. Ours is not idealized good, beautiful and tragic. Our collective media image, (albeit at times hyperbolic for dramatic effect – movies are not social history) is a microcosmic totality of our reality (the proverbial “universe in the grain of sand”).

So what's to protest?

Taken as a double entendre line from Jersey Shore, Robert Viscusi perfectly finished his contribution to the above-mentioned “Guido...”

“Love the Situation”!

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