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Bernard Beck

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PART II: MULTICULTURAL WINDOWS

Media Images

The Myth That Would Not Die: The Sopranos, Mafia Movies, and Italians in America

Bernard Beck
Department of Sociology
Northwestern University

The Return of Columbus

Everyone knows that Italian explorers began the European transformation of the New World. When masses of Italians immigrated to America at the end of the last century, however, they arrived in an English-speaking country in which they were strangers. The mainstream culture of that America had not come from those early Italian arrivals; the Americans and the Italian immigrants were strangers to one another. Over the course of a century, both the host society and the incoming group got an idea of one another and of the peculiar new way of living, which was emerging here and transforming both of them: the crowded, multicultural, industrial city. Among the many new features of urban life that appeared were modern crime, criminal business, and the organized forces intended to deal with it. We got a new form of cops and robbers. We also got new ways of understanding crime and how it works in a modern society. It is not surprising that the new activity and the new members of society came to be thought of together.

For more than 100 years, American culture has nurtured a peculiar theme, defining modern criminal business as an Italian invention and finding the Italian version most interesting, if not always the most alarming. Of course, every immigrant group was associated in the minds of their hosts with some stereotyped occupation. The Greeks ran restaurants, the Chinese ran laundries, and the Irish were policemen. Every new group in turn was also associated in the minds of respectable citizens, at least for awhile, with disreputable activities such as crime, sports, and manual labor. These were often the most accessible ways of making a living and achieving social mobility. So many groups trying to define their ethnic pride must live down some gangsters and can boast of famous athletes.

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However, Italians were and are especially identified with organized crime, even as they have grown and prospered as an American group. Success, respectability, and familiarity have not freed them from the taint of the Mob. This enduring image has become a staple of the American commercial culture and folk consciousness. Through the dissemination of American ideas in movies and popular culture, Italians have come to stand for organized criminality all over the world.

Brave New World

Several new developments have occurred during the last 2 centuries. Together, they produce this contemporary cultural monolith—the Italian movie gangster world. In America, the worldwide movement of industrialism and
big cities happened quickly and without significant interference. The institutions of urban living had to evolve quickly and uncontrollably. These cities were not ancient centers changed by modern conditions. They sprang virtually from the American landscape, leaving the inhabitants, almost all of them newcomers to city life, to figure out the rules afterward.

A large industrial labor force was needed immediately, and great numbers of peasants and other traditional people from other parts of the world were recruited for the jobs. These newcomers were strangers not only to city life and industrial organization, but also to America itself, with its foreign language, history, culture, and (usually) religion. They came from places now identified as large countries, but in many cases those countries were very recent packages of formerly separate regions. So those who came from the various parts of Italy were more likely to be self-defined by local rather than national origin. In America, as a result, they undertook the difficult task of becoming Italians in unconscious collaboration with a multitude of strangers who were now to be called their compatriots.

Finally, modern conditions and capitalist values created the possibility of large-scale organizations devoted to illegal enterprises. Crime, like manufacturing, was transformed by the scale and openness of modern society into a complex activity requiring and making possible the coordination and management of large numbers of workers. Simultaneously, large and complex systems of what we now call the criminal justice system appeared, including modern police forces, court systems, and penal institutions. To further complicate the picture, the diverse cultures and values of the immigrants produced conflicts over many of the laws that were enacted for the regulation of American life but having their inspiration in the beliefs of the dominant and narrow group of the native born. This emergent multiculturalism was no secret to the pillars of the American community. Their constant fear over this period of change was the deleterious and immoral effect of the strangers who were necessary for economic development but abhorrent to respectable communities. It was a neat ideological trick to attribute the origin of the new, modern forms of crime to the newly arrived immigrants. In fact, both appeared as a consequence of the basic and irresistible growth of the most modern of modern societies.

Life Could Be a Dream

Another ingredient of this modern American stew was the rise of popular culture. A growing accompaniment to the new realities of modern life was a burgeoning industry of ideas and images mass produced with modern technologies and distributed through the market place as a bonus of urban life. The concentration of population and the organization of large scale enterprise made it possible and necessary to create culture that would be shared by a large American population. Otherwise, there would be no mechanism for Americans to share common values and sentiments. Except for their common reception of this kind of culture, they could not affirm their common membership in a moral community. The demands of modern living were increasingly palliated by a stream of culture whose hyper-reality often mattered more than the concrete reality of daily life. It has become more true than ever that our understanding of the larger world is more important to us, and that understanding comes through popular culture. Therefore, our images and understandings of immigrants, of subcultures, and of the human nature of diverse peoples are heavily influenced by what we receive through that culture.

On the other hand, that culture is received and used by us for a variety of thinking and feeling tasks. It is a popular insight that in the modern world, information and entertainment are no longer distinct. Our use of entertainment requires that cultural products follow the rules of cultural convention. Nowhere is this iron law of popular narrative more evident than in movies and television. The fate of diverse subgroups in our society depends on the roles assigned to them in such popular dramas, and those roles are assigned in accordance with the needs of plot construction more than the needs of accuracy.

In consequence, the cultural role of the Italian American community and its identification with organized crime are dictated by literary even more than by sociological principles. The changes in Italian American lives are reflected in the popular culture only as variations on this basic theme. The efforts of actual Italian American people and organizations to adjust their terms of image and identity in America are limited by the refusal of the public-as-movie-audience to abandon their beloved, cherished Mafia images. All of the serious concerns that subcultural groups have in a modern society, such as the limits of assimilation, the relevance of maintaining separate identity, and the value of preserving traditional culture, are affected for Italian Americans by the looming presence of the organized crime image. And as with other groups, their own understandings of themselves are subject to those images, just as the understandings of the general public are. Most problematic is the fact that the characteristics attributed to Italian American people and culture in those images are felt by them and by others to be admirable as well as deplorable, fascinating as well as terrifying, endearing as well as off-putting. Those characteristics include some that Italians are happy to identify with, such as warmth, family closeness, loyalty, courage, eloquence, humor, and concern for personal honor. In fact, as the most recent vehicles show, the movie images of Italian Americans in organized crime are used by Italian Americans as sources of amusement and models of personal style.
Is This the End of Rico?

The Sopranos (Landress & Chase, 1999), which began in 1998, is a weekly dramatic series made for cable TV and shown on Home Box Office. It has been critically acclaimed and nominated for a number of Emmy Awards. It has also been criticized by several Italian American individuals and organizations as the latest installment in the never-ending offensive story of the Italian gangster world. This kind of movie or television show has been wildly popular with audiences in America and around the world since the 1930s, if not earlier. Although Italians were pictured in them from the very beginning, as in Scarface (Hawks, Hughes, & Rosson, 1932), other immigrant groups have also been highlighted in gangster movies from that period until the present. Another 1930s classic, Angels With Dirty Faces (Bischoff & Curtiz, 1938), dealt with Irish gangsters, as does State of Grace (Dowd, Ostrow, Rotholz, & Joanou, 1990) from the 1990s. Other groups include Jews, as in Once Upon a Time in America (Milchan & Leone, 1984) and Bugsy (Beatty, Johnson, & Levinson, 1991); Chinese, as in Year of the Dragon (De Laurentis & Cimino, 1985) and countless Triad movies; Japanese, as in Rising Sun (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1993) and countless Yakuza Movies; African Americans, as in Kansas City (Altman, 1996) and Hoodlum (Mancuso & Duke, 1997); Hispanics, as in the most recent Scarface (Bregman & DePalma, 1983); and even White South Africans from the Apartheid era in Lethal Weapon 2 (Donner & Silver, 1989). Although these other groups may have had to suffer under temporary reputations for organized criminality, they have been able to move on in American life, leaving those images behind them. There has been no such escape for Italians.

One of the most interesting features of the continuing survival of the Italian movie gangster, so deplored by Italian American advocates, is the centrality within the genre of the present generation of distinguished Italian American filmmakers—directors including Francis Ford Coppola (The Godfather; Ruddy & Coppola, 1972, and its sequels), and Martin Scorsese (Goodfellas; Winkler & Scorsese, 1990); actors, including Marlon Brando (The Godfather; Ruddy & Coppola, 1972; The Freshman; Lobell & Bergman, 1990), Robert DeNiro (The Godfather: Part II; Coppola, 1974; Goodfellas; Winkler & Scorsese, 1990; Once Upon a Time in America; Milchan & Leone, 1984; Analyze This; Rosenthal, Weinstein, & Ramis, 1999), Al Pacino (The Godfather; Ruddy & Coppola, 1972; Scarface; Bregman & DePalma, 1983) and Joe Pesci (Goodfellas; Winkler & Scorsese, 1990; Lethal Weapon 2; Donner & Silver, 1989); and writers, especially Mario Puzo, author of The Godfather. The Sopranos (Landress & Chase, 1999) has already raised James Gandolfini, Lorraine Bracco, and Edie Falco to prominence for their performances.

The growing interest in exploring the Italian character of organized crime that these film artists demonstrate is evidence of its deep meaning to Italian Americans, to their sense of identity, and to the unresolved issues this community faces in negotiating its role in American society. Moreover, the content of the movies has changed over time to reflect the changing matters that concern successive generations of Italian Americans. From the problems of working class immigrants in the first generation to the quandaries of suburban middle class life in the third and fourth, movies about gangsters turn out to be movies about being Italian. Violence, legality, and respectability remain central issues, but they are found side by side with questions about preserving traditional loyalties, family bonds, and a distinctive national culture that ranges from cooking to emotional displays. These are not the concerns imposed on this culturally embattled ethnic group by a mainstream culture that is derogatory and repressive. They are the concerns raised from within that community by its most accomplished children.

After reviewing the history of gangster movies, Italian and non-Italian, a student might think that the enduring association of Italians with organized crime in the American popular imagination reflects recognition of the peculiar interest that the Italian version has, in the positive and attractive qualities it highlights. These qualities are seen as peculiarly and admirably Italian by members of the group and by outsiders. It is certainly not necessary to be involved in organized crime to be authentically Italian. However, that corner of the Italian American experience may be a landmark for those exploring ethnic identity without accepting the cultural judgments of the overwhelming generic American culture. In the fictional world of the Italian gangster movie, there is a foundation for someone who would resist becoming altogether too “Merigan.”

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