

Italian Americans and the Mythology of Crime: “The Godfather Paradox”

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the portrayal of Italian Americans in American media. The Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), the largest and longest-established national organization for men and women of Italian heritage in the USA, denounces the entertainment industry for damaging the collective reputation of Italian Americans. Particularly, the OSIA charges Coppola’s trilogy *The Godfather* with being “the principal agent responsible” for promulgating a discriminatory ethnic stereotype that all Italians are criminals, while accusing the series *The Sopranos* of having reinforced this notion. Yet, the authors of these works of fiction, both Italian Americans, maintain that exploring their own ethnic identities led them to utilize the Mafia as a metaphor for American society. We will see that, not only it is unjust to accuse a movie trilogy to be the “the principal agent responsible” for such stereotype, but I would submit that *The Godfather* has helped to mitigate the negative image of the Mafioso existing in American cinema long before Coppola’s films, turning it into a liminal figure conveying a positive impression formerly missing. An examination of early American gangster movie stereotyping and scholarship on Italian American studies will substantiate the claim that neither *The Godfather* nor *The Sopranos* have truly damaged the image of Italians in America. Paradoxically, the Italian-as-a-gangster stereotype has helped Italian Americans to break out of the margins. As Gardaphé put it, *The Sopranos* was for the new millennium what *Dallas* was for the 1980s, showing that Italian Americans have finally achieved integration in America.

Keywords: Italian American studies, Italian American film, ethnic prejudice, mafia movies, Italian American stereotyping

This article examines the portrayal of Italian Americans in American media. I am interested in how the Italian American ethnic culture is narrated and exploited by Italian Americans and by others.

The Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), the largest and longest-established national organization for men and women of Italian heritage in the USA, has long denounced the entertainment industry for damaging the collective reputation of Italian Americans. Specifically, the OSIA, on its website, charges director Francis Ford Coppola’s trilogy, *The Godfather*, with being “the principal agent responsible” for promulgating a discriminatory ethnic stereotype that all Italians are criminals. They also accuse HBO’s television series *The*

Sopranos for perpetuating it. Yet, the authors of these works of fiction, both Italian Americans, maintain that exploring their own ethnic identities led them to utilize the Mafia as a metaphor for American society. We will see that, not only is it extreme to accuse a movie trilogy to be the “the principal agent responsible” for such stereotype, but I would submit that *The Godfather* might have transformed the negative image of the Mafioso into a liminal figure that also conveys a positive impression in the minds of the public.

Furthermore, it must be recognized that the critical, artistic, and audience success of these films in America, as well as in Italy, represent an ethnic achievement of vast proportions. By portraying the “dark side” of Italianness, actors, directors, and authors such as Pacino, Gandolfini, Coppola, and Chase, exemplify accomplished Italian Americans creating a successful product; thus, again paradoxically, conveying a positive image.

America identified the Italian Mafia as being a threat to society in the late 1800s. In the 1930s, the connection of Italian Americans with organized crime gave rise to a screen persona that embodied the failure of the illusory American Dream and created the powerful myth of the fierce Italian gangster. In 1972, *The Godfather*, based on Mario Puzo’s Mafia-based book of the same name, became a sensation in American pop culture, not only because of its box-office success and critical acclaims, but also because it added new depth to the character of the Italian Mafioso. Indeed, Puzo and Coppola being of Italian origins, they offered a more authentic, or seemingly authentic, dramatization of the Italian American character immersing it in its Italian ethnic background. There is no doubt that *The Godfather* saga established forceful models that future books, films, and TV series would try to emulate up to now. Yet, with *The Godfather* the Italian-as-a-gangster stereotype shed its quality of being exclusively a sinister criminal, as it was up until then. Instead, the stereotype acquired a new dimension that, for the first time, was at least forged by Italian Americans themselves and not by other ethnic groups. Years later, the HBO hit, *The Sopranos*, also created by an Italian American, re-presented the stereotype, setting the story in modern times to illustrate the complexities of the contemporary American family.

Joseph Conforti argues that, in stereotyping, “the image is held by people outside the stereotyped group,” thus leaving little or no control available to the latter to prevent or reduce that representation (2). As we shall see, American media formed the “initial” stereotype in the late 1800s and the Hollywood industry, together with the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, and the FBI rekindled it later¹. However, by the 1970s, with *The Godfather*, the “management,” as it were, of this image shifted in the hands of Italian Americans themselves. Accordingly, the stereotype of the Mafioso fine-tuned into a more ethnic accuracy that, if on the one hand granted more authenticity to the image, it also contributed to tone down the stereotype’s absolute negativity, subsequently becoming a treasured icon in American imagery.

The word “Mafia” became widespread throughout America on October 18, 1890, when newspapers reported the murder of a New Orleans Police Superintendent supposedly assassinated by “the Sicilians.” The community of New Orleans organized a lynch mob to avenge the murder of the officer. The case reverberated across the country as “it was the first

¹ American newspapers started reporting crimes allegedly perpetrated by the Black Hand (as the Mafia was previously called) by the late 1880s, and the early movie production picked up on this theme. In the 1930s, the formulaic type of the ethnic gangster started to take shape in cinema, thanks to movies such as *Little Caesar* (1930) and *Scarface* (1932). After a hiatus, the word Mafia started appearing on American press in the 1960s, when the Federal Bureau of Narcotics introduced an anti-Mafia crusade that was subsequently protracted by the FBI.

time in the criminal history of the city that the Sicilians have attacked any one save those of their nationality” (Smith, *Mafia* 82), creating a collective anxiety that Smith identifies as a prototypical scare of an alien conspiracy. Back in the 1890s, the government chose to blame the increasing criminal activity of all new ethnic groups (therefore not only Italians) on a more vague parasitic alien conspiracy that they would identify as Mafia, which could also serve as an “instrument to contain immigration” says Lawton (87).

Since the early days of cinema, a great number of movies portrayed Italian immigrants. The films created in the first half of the 20th Century contributed to form and fix a stereotype that invariably depicted the Italians as hot-blooded and prone to unlawfulness. Miller and Woll, in their *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Film and Television*, explain that in English literature, from Shakespeare to the Gothic novels, dark, overly sexual and fierce Mediterranean characters were “plotting intrigues, threatening English virginity and liberty ... American literature stole shamelessly from [these] English traditions” (276). In America, Italians were regarded as being of an “inferior race” and considered “violent, impulsive, ignorant, impossible to educate and to discipline if not through force” (Pretelli 48). Though there was no explicit link between Italians and the villains of movies prior to the 1930s, they showed the thugs as aliens, often Mediterranean-looking, thus spreading the idea of the “dark” immigrant as the delinquent (Miller & Woll 278-279).

World War I ended both the migratory flux and the fear of an outside criminality settling in the USA, but during Prohibition (1920-1933) the attention of public opinion towards crime intensified again. Following Mussolini’s weakening of the Sicilian Mafia, a number of Sicilian *capomafiosi* fled to America looking for refuge only to find the perfect circumstances to resume their criminal business through bootlegging. Mafia was a vague entity, but, because of prominent criminal figures such as Al Capone, the Hollywood Italian-as-a-gangster stereotype would develop precisely in those years.

With the depression (1929 – 1939), Hollywood became interested in ethnic delinquency. As a result, the gangster became the embodiment of America’s social afflictions: “In fact,” Claims Cortes “Italian American gangsters became a major film personification of America’s social failure, including the crisis of the increasingly elusive American Dream” (110). *Little Caesar* (1930) and *Scarface* (1932), both inspired by the life of Al Capone, are the first movies that explicitly introduced the notion of the Italian-as-a-gangster.

During World War II, the Hollywood Italian gangster figure was set aside because of the Production Code Administration which banned the showing of fire arms. Smith pinpoints a second Mafia craze only in the 1960s. “It was not until the testimony of Joseph Valachi in the fall of 1963 that the concept of a real alien conspiracy called Mafia took hold permanently,” Smith asserts (*Mafia* 84). Valachi was imprisoned in Atlanta’s when he testified his membership to a national criminal organization called Cosa Nostra, describing its internal structure. During the 1950s, the number of articles per year that mentioned the Mafia in the *New York Times Index* ranged from a minimum of one to a maximum of 11. By contrast, in 1963 there were already 67 articles alluding to the Mafia, and in 1969, 359 (Smith, *Mystique* 292).

According to Smith, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics launched a meticulous anti-Mafia crusade to partially justify its failure in stopping the progress of heroin smuggling (*Mystique* 289). The Mafia became a scapegoat for all the authorities’ fiascos, a super-criminal organized conspiratorial entity that was impossible to overpower. According to Richard A. Capozzola, a

retired professor and former New York Police Commissioner, the Mafia-mania was a creation of the government, established in order to keep the Italians under control while evading the real sources of crime in America (Gardaphé, “Capire il gangster” 58). After a series of investigations and reports about organized crime, in 1967 the President’s Commission on Law enforcement and Administration of Justice declared that “the core of organized crime in the United States consists of 24 groups operating as criminal cartels across the Nation. *Their membership is exclusively men of Italian descent*” (122).

Thus, it appears that the definition of the Mafia as a powerful criminal organization, looming over America and lead by Americans of Italian descent, is not simply a creation of Hollywood, much less of Puzo or Coppola, but finds its roots in a more tangible, albeit equally fictitious fabrication of government propaganda. Italians were seen as the corruptors and intimidators of both business and government, as if no other group had ever broken the law. The responsibility of *The Godfather* saga is to have exploited a well-established myth to narrate a tale of Italian Americans. “*The Godfather*, ... and other motion pictures, ... seriously explored broader aspects of the Italian American experience, in which the Mafia served as only one element” (Cortes 118).

I would like to suggest that Coppola’s new approach to the myth transformed the figure of the utterly dishonorable Italian gangster to a more human and glamorous character, that in some ways has tempered the preceding negative image. With *The Godfather*, the Italian outlaw is not evil per se anymore as he was in earlier movies. He is not yet another outsider who arrived in the USA bringing along his typical Italian fierceness and dishonesty to corrupt a vulnerable America. As Fred Gardaphé appropriately indicates, in Italian American movies from the 1970s onwards, the gangster figure becomes the symbol of the transformation of the Italian American male, from laborer to holder of the power, granting him a place in American society.

In the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement launched by African Americans forced America to acknowledge its ethnic diversity, giving legitimacy to the claims of other groups: “ethnicity,” explains Alba, “became a topic of serious investigation for social scientists and discussion in the popular media” (7). Ethnic pride, combined with the insistence with which the media and the authorities covered the Mafia, led Mario Puzo to write *The Godfather* in 1969, which became a best-seller. As Gardaphé explains, the book not only appealed to an American audience, but also made a great impact on the Italian American community. In “Breaking and Entering”, his personal account of his experience with the Italian American literature, Gardaphé declares that: “Because of its stock of familiar characters, *The Godfather* was the first novel with which I could completely identify” (178). Paramount Pictures acquired the rights of the novel to make it into a movie and resolved to hire an ethnic Italian crew to give more credibility to the narrative. In Paramount’s vice-president’s own words, the movie had to be “ethnic to the core. You must smell the spaghetti” (Phillips 88).

The film had enormous success throughout the country and abroad, not only for the expertise of Coppola and the excellence of the actors – many of them also of Italian descent – but also for the meticulousness with which Italian ethnicity was portrayed. Indeed, as Cortes points out, *The Godfather* can be regarded as “one of the richest and most incisive portrayals of Italian American life yet captured on film” (118). As Regina Soria asserts, “The wedding scene made an enormous impression on the Italian American audience, they saw themselves, the way their families lived, it gave them a tremendous sense of pride. To the non Italian, it

inspired a feeling of admiration almost of envy. They understood that the power of a family is to be together, to participate together to the family events” (3).

Despite previous ethnic typecasting, Italian American associations started to complain about the stereotype only after *The Godfather* (Gardaphé, “Capire il gangster” 57). Some compared the mass defamation and denigration of Italian Americans to an “ethnic genocide” (Gardaphé, “Capire il gangster” 58). Many Italian Americans feel disenfranchised by the persistent stereotyping of their ethnicity.

The stereotype of the Italian-as-a-gangster is celebrated by the American public, and, though it can be treated as a dramatic device in works of art, as in the case of *The Godfather* or *The Sopranos*, it is frequently misused as an easy means to draw on the expectations of the American public. Movies like *Married to the Mob* (1988) or *Mickey Blue Eyes* (1999) are only two of the plethora of films that incorporate the Italian Mafioso in a predictable and objectionable way. If by trying to prevent the defamation of the Italian Americans and their heritage, the intentions of the OSIA and other Italian American associations are by all means admirable and well-meaning, I expect nonetheless that it would be a rather difficult task to find films presenting Italian Americans that do not, more or less blatantly, make use the list of stereotypes attached to them.

A major concern of the OSIA, and of the Italian American community in general, was the revival of the Italian-as-a-gangster stereotype carried out by HBO’s series *The Sopranos*. However, critics have regarded *The Sopranos* as one of the finest productions of American television, with nine million spectators following the third season (Scaglioni). Author David Chase, whose real name is De Cesare, was asked as to his reaction to the many voices of Italian Americana protesting about his endorsing the Italian Mafioso stereotype. He answered that, because of their incredible achievements, Italian Americans are evidently “the best advertisement for America”, and that they should not feel threatened by such fictional representation.

According to Scaglioni, former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and former senator from New Jersey Robert G. Torricelli affirmed to be fans of *The Sopranos*, while political analyst Joseph La Palombara stated that “the series, far from being yet another predictable depiction of the Mafia, is actually a portrayal of American society and of the strains of those who are in the margins”. Certainly, the Italian American gangster character is now a classic, an icon, a hero, a leading figure among many in American imagery. It has now reached the status of an idol, comparable to that of the cowboy, the detective, or the superhero.

In 1990, a survey by Response Analysis Corporation found that 74 percent of Americans associate Italian Americans with organized crime. What is even more astonishing is that 78 percent of Italian Americans agreed (Gambino 287). But is that statistically proven? When asked in a 2000 census what their ancestry was, 15,723,000 Americans answered “Italian”, boosting Italian Americans to the fifth largest ethnic group in the United States (Vecoli, “To Be or Not To Be” 1). According to 1999 FBI statistics, only 0.3% of the Italian American community is involved in organized crime and the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) stated that out of 500,000 individuals connected to organized crime in America, only 1,700 were of Italian descent (Lawton 82-83).

Did *The Godfather* saga really damage the hard-working, law-abiding community of all Americans of Italian descent? Statistics show that Italians are not significant in the criminal panorama. In the past forty years, Italian Americans have surpassed the national average of

schooling and income, showing a spectacular economic and cultural upward mobility (Gambino 283). In fact, 66% of the Italian American community is composed of white collars or managers and 96% of Italian Americans declare to being proud of their origins (Nese). Spaghetti and pizza have almost completely lost their ethnic connotation, having merged so well into American dining habits. The Italian language and culture is studied in all major American universities, and their popularity is increasing year by year, even among non-Italian Americans.

In conclusion, I have tried to demonstrate that, although the stereotype of the Italian-as-a-gangster, as perpetuated by *The Godfather* in the 1970s and by *The Sopranos* in the 2000s, is perceived by some as an albatross looming over the Italian American community, in fact it has not seriously damaged the lives of the law-abiding Italian Americans. Moreover, we have seen how the stereotype of the Italian prior to the publication of Puzo's novel was actually more malevolent towards Italians, if we consider the reputation of being either violent *Dagos*, dim-witted immigrants or utterly immoral gangsters. "If not sinister," stresses Miller and Woll, "the Italian was clownish" (276). It is with *The Godfather* that the character assumes a more literary and sociological nature. *The Godfather* is a critique of American capitalism and its corrosive action onto family values, Dika argues (86).

Mario Puzo pointed out that, with the exception of Pietro Di Donato's earliest novel *Christ in Concrete*, "in literature, the writers of Italian descent have hardly made any impact at all on the American public" (*The Godfather Papers* 200). Indeed, it is with Mario Puzo himself, says Gardaphé, that an Italian American author is recognized again within American society ("Capire il gangster" 72). *The Godfather* established a new trend in the portrayal of crime. John G. Cawelti identifies Puzo's work "as a turning point of evolution of popular literature" and compares the phenomenon to Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Ian Fleming's James Bond (325).

Arguably, Puzo has been more beneficial than detrimental to the Italian American community. And the same can be said for other Italian Americans, like Coppola, Pacino, Chase and Gandolfini, who are acclaimed for their artistic talent and loved by the American audiences. Paradoxically, the stereotype of the Italian as-a-gangster has helped Italian Americans to break out of the margins. As Gardaphé asserts, *The Sopranos* is for the new millennium what *Dallas* was for the 1980s, thus attesting that Italian Americans have finally achieved integration in American society ("Capire il gangster" 74).

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