

Fear and (Self-) Loathing in Italian America

Joey Skee (February 04, 2010)



The Specter of the Gavon Haunts the Prominenti.



Italian Americans are Under Attack!

That was the subject line of the email blast that appeared in my inbox this past month, originally sent by the [**National Italian American Foundation**](#) [2] as part of its membership drive. The connection between anti-defamation efforts and membership recruitment piqued my interest in the recent outbreak of alarm gripping the larger consortium of prominenti. This media-induced panic attack is reminiscent of the conflated hysteria around [**cinematic aliens and communists**](#) [3] that characterized the Cold War era.



American studies scholar Laura Cook Kenna reminds us in her 2007 dissertation, [**Dangerous Men, Dangerous Media**](#) [4]: Constructing Ethnicity, Race, and Media's Impact Through the Gangster Image, 1959-2007, that anti-defamation efforts after World War II increasingly linked Italian-American identity with American patriotism and political conservatism as part of the Cold War mentality. The playbook that was drafted during the 1950s continues to fuel the anti-defamation response; the boogeyman du jour that is "Jersey Shore" is a generational crisis. (Of course, there are middle aged and elderly Italian Americans who are not troubled by such media depictions, and even enjoy them, and there are twenty-somethings who suffer agita at such programming.)



The graying prominenti, who become apoplectic with each perceived media slight, were climbing the corporate ladder in an age when a vowel at the end of a name did influence job promotion or the offer of a law firm partnership. (The overt gendered aspect of this history should not go unmentioned.) In 2010, [Italian Americans are not being routinely denied jobs, housing, or made the subject of police harassment](#) [5] because of their ethnicity. Yet past hurts resurface with the mere flicker of the screen. [Historian Robert Harney](#) [6]’s discerning essay, “Cabato and Other Parentela,” notes that bigotry in North America fostered “an ethnic inferiority complex,” a state of self-loathing among the elite that led to an aversion to proletarian histories and vernacular expressivity. The specter of the gavon lingers like the pungent odor of grilling sausages and peppers in the weave of a three-piece suit.



One great fear that is repeatedly revealed is that “they,” i.e., the “Americans,” who live in exotic lands like Nebraska and Kansas, will think ill of Italian Americans. The recurring (sub)urban legend involves a telephone call made to a corporate representative who, upon hearing the caller’s Italian surname (often linked to an east coast city like New York or Philadelphia) proclaims, “Oh, you’re Italian! You must be in the mafia.”

So what?

It doesn’t matter.

Such a statement is like the insignificant buzzing of a gnat that has no lasting impact on our lives. Unless, of course, one’s social persona is fragile, then such a comment is elevated into an INSULT, not only for the individual but also for all those hard-working, immigrant ancestors—cue the violins—who came to these shores . . . Well, you know the script.

The script consists of specific verbal cues and symbolic language. One such cue involves the undefined notion of “community.” [Anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo](#) [7] points out that “community” is “an ideological construct” meant to convey a unity of belief and interests about a network of individuals. There are voting blocks and there are consumers, but there is no one single “community.” The fiction that is the “Italian-American community” is a means for individuals to jockey for political power and social prestige.

The script also relies on hyperbolic language. The Italian-American plight is the “[demonization of a people \[that\] is a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions](#)” [8].” Those who disagree with the anti-defamation agenda are branded as having “[whacky destructive views](#)” [9]” and are simply “traitors.”



Ultimately, those with different opinions are compared to Holocaust deniers. One can trace this language through a series of protests from “Jersey Shore,” to the “The Sopranos,” to “The Godfather,” ad nauseum. (But strangely not those unremitting [Super Mario Brothers](#) [11]!)

This hysterical language, coupled with humorless sanctimony, is evident in another email that popped up in my inbox in response to an online video, in which the sender was unable to discern the obvious truth that this was a parody.

"YOU DON'T THINK WE HAVE A PROBLEM WAKE UP look to this officially sanctioned MTV video on YouTube directed at Italian Americans offended by Jersey Shore it isn't enough for Viacom and MTV to humiliate us with the show with this YouTube video they are directly spitting in our face laughing at us ... the show is bad enough but now even more THERE IS NO OTHER ETHNIC GROUP ON EARTH ... none MTV would ever sanction a video like this being produced and distributed .. it is beyond offense and proves just how WEAK they believe we are that they can get away with this crap .."
(quoted verbatim)

This is not mere “[irony deficiency](#) [12]” but a case of acute anemia.

The buzz around New York is that the thin-skinned prominenti are searching for an “Italian-American Al Sharpton,” a person who will speak with one voice against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortunes plaguing the Italian-American community. In times like this, when the hurt, the fear, and the anger overwhelm the psyche of Italian America, we should turn to our resident headshrinker, Dr. Jennifer Melfi, for insight.

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- [1] <http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/1304801scifi1265255540.jpg>
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- [6] <http://www.utoronto.ca/ethnicstudies/harney.html>



- [7] <http://www.anthropology.northwestern.edu/faculty/dileonardo.html>
- [8] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/opinion/I31italian.html?ref=opinion>
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- [12] <http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/ironydeficiencyterm.htm>