



Anti-Italian Bias: Surreal or Not Surreal, That is the Question

Jerry Krase (January 28, 2011)



When they are covered in the media, Italians and Italian Americans are usually the butts of their own jokes and for some of us this is not a laughing matter. Fighting back is like Huckleberry Finn attacking a tar baby, and then some.



Recently I spoke at the Calandra Italian American Institute about my essay "Shark Tale—"Puzza da Cap"" in Bill Connell and Fred Gardaphe's *Anti-Italianism Essays on a Prejudice*. And, almost every time I speak about the besmirched reputation of the ethnic group to which I accidentally belong, I reflect on how little things have changed since, at least according to Connell, William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Unfortunately, blaming The Bard for anti-Italian bias is like blaming God for snowstorms. Curse Him/Her if you wish but you still have to shovel your way out, and if you die in the process you'll go to where you'll wish it was still snowing.

Apropos of painful thoughts, much of the bad opinion people have of Italians and Italian Americans emanates from the antics of a few members of the groups in question. The fact is that WE (NOI) do lots of stupid and, occasionally, even really bad stuff. However, there is a real issue of discrimination, which is that just about the only news we get to read about US (NOI), outside of the Italian American ethnic press such as OGGI, seems to be bad news, and despite aphorisms to the contrary, all publicity is not good publicity. For example, Italians and Italian Americans are hardly ever front-page news in the American media, which usually have more important things to squawk about in the first six pages such as The Oscars and Afghanistan. So when last week I was greeted by two mega-stories that concerned my Italian roots in the "all the news that's fit to print" paper I was, to say the least, nonplused. (Sconcertato). The first story was the round-up of 125 of my alleged friends and relatives by "de Feds" (as we say). Lucky for me most of the guys from the seven families are being detained in Brooklyn so I don't have to travel very far to visit.

Charges include murder, as well as "the more run-of-the-mill" stuff like racketeering, extortion, loan-sharking, money laundering, gambling, etc. according to William K. Rashbaum. "Names from mob lore" included former Patriarca boss Luigi Manocchio, 83, who it was said "dressed in women's clothing to avoid capture decades ago." "Baby Shacks" was arrested in Florida for shaking down strip clubs back home in Providence, R.I. The sweep employed almost a thousand federal, state and local agents who targeted small-time bookmakers, shakedown artists, mob middle managers, and 34 "made members" of New York's Bonanno, Colombo, Gambino, Genovese and Luchese along with a few from other families in New Jersey and New England.

U.S. Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. said that the mob is weakened, and probably not national in scope but was still a major threat "to the economic well-being of this country."

Closer to home the alleged crimes include defrauding New York City in connection with La Festa di Santa Rosalia in Bensonhurst. In Manhattan, 26 Gambinos were charged with racketeering, extortion, assault, arson and (for 30 years) marijuana and cocaine trafficking. These mob roundups are a kind of decennial ritual for law enforcement; like the annual roundup of bookies here in the Big Apple a week or so before the Super Bowl that forces the cops, judges and prosecutors to make their bets on-line. It is not surprising that so many of these mob guys are aging members of the least successful groups. One seldom hears about all the moguls of Italian descent in the finance industry. Then again, given the recent economic crisis perhaps we don't want to talk about that either.

The other big story was about the randy role model Italian politician "Surreal - A Soap Opera Starring Berlusconi" by Rachel Donadio

"KARIMA EL-MAHROUG, the beautiful 18-year-old nightclub dancer nicknamed Ruby Rubacuori (Ruby Heart-Stealer) at the center of a sex scandal involving Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, went on television last week to explain herself. As her gripping testimony, décolletage and muted leopard-print top drove up ratings on a channel owned by Mr. Berlusconi, Ms. Mahroug said she had never had sex with him — "He never even laid a finger on me" — and never asked for 5 million euros (\$6.7 million) to keep quiet. "I'm capable of exaggerating, but not that," she said. Nor, she said, had she ever worked as a prostitute, although she did say Mr. Berlusconi gave her 7,000 euros in cash after the first party she attended at his house (when they were introduced, she said, "Hi, I'm Ruby, and I'm 24," she recalled)." Ruby was not perturbed by her voice on wiretaps saying she had been going to Silvio's parties since she was 16.



Donadio seemed surprised that Italians are rather blase about Berlusconi's 17 year-long performance. If she really understood Italy, she would have known that the term "surreal" is inappropriate for Italian politics as Berlusconi's conduct is hardly: bizarre, fantastic, dreamlike, unreal, odd, weird, strange (surreale, bizzarro, fantastico, dreamlike, irreal, dispari, bizzarro, sconosciuto)

What IS (E) surreal was that while Ruby's sexy interview and cleavage captured headlines in the US and Italy, Berlusconi's straight-laced political opponents were hosting Gary Hart at a meeting during the 'crisis': **ROME** - The Lingotto. L'obiettivo dell'appuntamento convocato oggi a Torino da Walter Veltroni sembra molto lontano dalla semplice riunione di area. Vuole essere una convention, una kermesse dove tutto il Partito democratico possa ritrovarsi. Dopo Veltroni parleranno Gentiloni, Chiamparino, Civati, Salvati e Soru. Prenderanno la parola anche Gary Hart e Anthony Giddens. (The purpose of the meeting convened today in Turin by Walter Veltroni was more than a simple assembly. He wants it to be a convention, a festival where all those in the DP might reunite. After Veltroni will speak Gentiloni, Chiamparino, Salvati e Soru. Also, saying some words will be Gary Hart and Anthnoy Giddens.)

Even more surreal is the fact that Silvio and his minions have based much of their popular appeal in Italy on anti-immigrant, anti-african, anti-Moslem rhetoric, therefore "Sleeping with the Enemy" might have been a more appropriate title for Donadio's missive about the Morrocan-born teenager who stole his heart.

Finally, the connection between bad news about Italians in America and Italy could not be made any stronger than by the most recent installment of the saga of "Jersey Shore" which is a kind of Shark Tale for immature adults of all ethnic persuasions. Three perfectly timed parallel stories about this no class, low-class show caught my attention as they well served the public relations firm looking to attract more brainless viewers.

The First was "Jersey Shore" cast to embarrass Italian Americans" by Linda Stasi in the Post which, given the Post's generally anti-cerebral readership, even though Stasi's piece is superbly anti-Jersey Shore, is a perfect fit for the "any publicity is good publicity" bit.

Just when the Italians were finally getting over the barbarian sacking of Rome 1,600 years ago, a bunch of invaders so savage they make Visigoths look like a marauding army of Helen Mirrens are headed their way.

The Guidos are coming! The Guidos are coming! Hide your children! Hide your spouses! Hide your hair gel. The second fall of the Roman Empire is upon us. Yes, in the latest, ever-expanding racist portrayal of Italian-Americans on TV as brain-damaged house pets, the half-wits of "Jersey Shore" are being sent "back" to the old country to strut their stuff and embarrass all us normal Italian-Americans who are tarred with their tanning brushes....

But to TV suits, stereotyping Italian-Americans as ill-mannered pigs has proven to be a very profitable win-win. After all, what do they have to worry about -- the Mafia? Weren't they all arrested last week.

The second reaction to the same press release was "Jersey Shore" season four move to Italy is a "freak show" enrages Italian American group UNICO" by Joyce Chen in the Daily News Italian-American group UNICO National calls the 'Jersey Shore' cast move to Italy a 'freak show.' Not everyone is thrilled that the rowdy residents of Seaside Heights are invading European shores. UNICO National, an Italian-American watchdog group, is up in arms over MTV's recent announcement



that the "Jersey Shore" guidos and guidettes are taking on Italy for the fourth season of the show.

"It will not only hurt Italians but all Americans," a rep from the interest group told TMZ. "Their outrageous, reprehensible behavior will make us look like buffoons and bimbos."

Added the group: "People used to go to the circus to see the freak show - that is what this will be."

MTV announced Tuesday that the hit reality show will be shooting its next bout of GTL in Europe this spring, with the show airing later this year.

The network insists that the continent-hopping is necessary for the successful show to evolve...

Members of the "Jersey Shore" clan are nervous about their trek to Italy as well. "I'm excited to see my roots," Pauly D told MTV News "I have family in Italy, but I don't speak with them since I don't know the language. My mother still talks to them, though. [And] I know Vinny has family there. But none of us have ever been. It's gonna be fun."....

Finally (finalmente) "Jersey Shore arriva in Italia, con uno strascico do polemiche," needs no translation because you already read it in English. "Sara girata in Italia la quarta edizione di "Jersey Shore", il discusso reality trasmesso da Mtv sui giovani (coatti) italo-americani.... etcetera, etcetera (blah, blah) " Come ho detto prima, quanto agli italiani ed agli Americani italiani, tutta la pubblicità non è buona pubblicità.

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