

Too Italian, or Not Italian Enough?

Anthony Julian Tamburri (February 09, 2008)



This article and the issues to which it pertains raise at least one thorny question, to say the least. In addition, it creates an uncomfortable situation, I would contend, for all involved, Italian Americans and not: for those Italian Americans who feel compelled to write such a blog; for those Italian Americans who read it, regardless of which side of the fence they may stand; and for those, non Italian Americans, who read it, many of whom – I would not be surprised – will throw up their arms in wide-eyed wonder, trying to figure out what all the fuss is about.

What exactly does it mean to be “too Italian”? This one seemingly innocent phrase to the ethnically insensitive – and indeed it follows a series of analogues already used for Senator Barak Obama – raises a series of thoughts too numerous to list and discuss adequately in this venue. Nevertheless, in an article a week or so ago, published by the New York Times, James Barron (“They Kind of Knew It Wouldn’t Work”) quoted a certain “retired jewelry designer who was having her nails done in Howard Beach, Queens,” who, as Barron continued, “never believed that Mr. Giuliani had a real chance



nationally” because he was, she continued, “too New York, too Italian, and he had too many wives.” Leaving aside the former mayor’s love life (multiple marriages) and his place of geo-cultural formation (New York), what is most disturbing is the reference to his ethnicity. What exactly does “too Italian” mean? How does being of any ethnic origin disqualify someone tout court from any office — local, state, or national? Woe to s/he who would dare use the same expression, substituting instead, as Louisa Del Giudice has also pointed out in a letter to the NYTimes (which has yet to appear), the adjectives “African American,” “Hispanic,” “Jewish.” And what about the forum that publishes such a phrase, without any contextualization that calls into question its use? Have we resorted back to the thinking of those days of yester-yore, specifically that pre-World War II period when certain social thought processes found it legitimate to marginalize, to say the least, those who were not part of the mainstream? Or, as some claim today, Italian Americans remain the one ethnic group anyone can insult with immunity? I shudder at the thought that such thinking might have been imparted to a later generation.

“What’s all the fuss?” (or some other expression filled with expletive deletives) has its origins in what we used to hear, when, forty and fifty years ago, we felt uncomfortable at being called “black-eyed guinea friends,” and did not know, as a child, how to respond to our non-Italian/American friend’s mother. It’s what makes our conservative brethren go wild when they see the various movies and TV shows that represent Italian Americans as Mafiosi; and some variation thereof is what we also experience when we discuss Italian Americans as non-white.

The debate within the Italian/American community about representation in the media, with specific regard to cultural productions such as *The Sopranos*, is split, to be sure. There are those who have and continue to deplore the series, on the one hand; then there are those, on the other hand, who have always praised it. Then, to the surprise of others still, there are those who have changed their position one hundred and eighty degrees. I have in mind, in this regard, the anti-Sopranos elderly gentleman whose daughter is an actress. After his initial abhorrence at her having accepted a part in the series, he eventually saw the program through a different lens, as his daughter was now part of the cast. He realized, as he stated, that once he literally sat down and watched the show, it was actually a great drama; a program about relationships, family (blood ties, that is), and other relevant and interesting things that concern the human condition. Well, then..., what was all the fuss about after all? Rhetorical question, to be sure. It is completely understandable that Italian Americans would be split on this issue, precisely because we are, as an ethnic community, split down the middle not only on this but also on a number of other hot-button issues.

All of the above is to underscore the fact that we remain split within our own community about such issues, as well as the quasi pressure cooker of media representation. Of course, *The Sopranos* was only the latest (Do we still expect to see that NBC program *Mafia Wives*?) in a plethora of images that have their celluloid origins as far back as 1904, when one first saw on screen the “swarthy, stiletto-carrying, oversexed” Italian, as the adjectives, still today, seem to be used. Of course, now there are those other phrases, those seemingly innocuous, cute expressions that, I guess, are to sum it all up.

I know of at least two people who wrote letters, which, now more than a week or so later, have yet to appear. How many other Italian Americans thought it was worth their time to send off their thoughts? Or, how many other Italian Americans thought it was not worth their time to send off a letter, Or, yet again, how many Italian Americans thought it was cute to call Giuliani, regardless of our political persuasion, “too Italian”? Or, as I asked above, what responsibility does a news medium have toward the reporting of such statements without pointing out their offensive charge?

The seemingly lack of response, and the coincidental silence from the community, can only call more attention to the greater need of an increase in awareness within the Italian/American community as well as the development of an Italian/American “narrative,” as Robert Viscusi so keenly put it close to twenty years ago.



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