

Organized Culture

Fred Gardaphe (February 09, 2010)



If you believe that the “Jersey Shore” show of MTV is really gangsters without guns, then you should do something about it. But since when have we become afraid of our youth? Since when has the public behavior of seven 20-something kids been something to pay attention to? This shows that kids don’t really know what it means to be Italian American outside of their family; it also shows that we probably don’t know our kids as well as we think we do. ... So don’t blame MTV; we have failed ourselves. We may think we have created Italian America, but we have yet to create Italian Americans.

Italian Americans have been formally complaining about the way they have been portrayed in the media since as far back as 1931 with little or no effect. That year, Fiorello LaGuardia, then Mayor of New York city, wrote a letter to William H. Hays, the first president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, to protest the portrayal of Italians in the film Little Caesar. Obviously



nothing has changed, yet over the same 80-year period, other racial and ethnic American groups such as Jewish Americans and African Americans have succeeded in changing the way their images have been presented. So what's the difference?

For the past two weekends I have spent the best part of my Saturday attending so-called summits organized by a national organization (of which I am a member) and a group of local people in lower Manhattan. I have listened to the best of what all the speakers had to say and can only say that nothing new was offered. Protests were suggested, and while that might work for the powerful, showing up with dozens of picketers instead of thousands would set us up for laughter and dismissal. Lawsuits were mentioned that will cost thousands of dollars, and while that might work for the wealthy, for us it is wasting money better invested in our cultural community. These tactics worked for other groups because the other groups did something we have yet to do. Want to move beyond organized crime or organized buffoonery? Try organizing our culture!

In the Italian immigrants' efforts to become American they eschewed education in favor of work; and only later, on the shoulders of money, began to consider the benefits of formal education. We were above the average in income long before we were above the average in education. When we sent our children to school, we thought we were doing the right thing, and so we focused on getting scholarships, money that however well intended, would take our children further away from their Italian-American neighborhoods and families where ethnic identities were formed and maintained. We rebelled against earlier generations, who didn't trust education, who had a natural sense of the changes that would occur in school, and feared what they didn't know. The basis of fear is ignorance—exactly what we are facing today.

Those of us born and raised in Little Italys who went to school, left our homes with a memory and a sense of being Italian American that was reinforced in those neighborhoods. Without transmitting that memory to the next generation we lost them. The more education they receive, the further they get from us, and the protection those communities offered. The result is the creation of Americans with Italian names who do not see anything wrong in writing, producing, directing and acting in films that, while protected by the First Amendment, offend other Italian Americans. So where's the disconnect? To get our culture back, we need to learn from Black America.

Let's take a brief look at African-America history. When white people watched African slaves entertaining themselves on plantations, they imitated them through minstrel shows that quickly became popular throughout the country. When freed slaves wanted to make their way into mainstream U.S. entertainment, they were limited to playing in those same minstrel shows. They outdid the white actors and in the process brought a little more humanity to their portrayals. As soon as a Black middleclass evolved, blacks took offense at these portrayals and protested in much the same way the Italian-American community has for over 80 years. But they didn't limit their strategies to protest. Led by such intellectuals as Harvard educated W.E.B. DuBois, they focused on developing what he referred to as the "Talented Tenth". Through the establishment of black colleges, black studies, black businesses, black cultural products and consumers, African Americans educated themselves and by the 1920s created arts to be studied and emulated; by the 1960s they created a social and political awareness that challenged racist histories and legacies, and by the 1970s were able to produce independent filmmakers such as Spike Lee and television producers like Bill Cosby who made sure the rest of the world saw their lives in different ways.

While Italian Americans have been busy becoming good Americans, America has spent a great deal of time nurturing what we might call our "Untalented Tenth." Why has the bottom of Italian-American culture gained the spotlight and infamy? Because we have never organized our culture the way others have, and now we are paying for it by fighting sophisticated image-makers with out-of-date weapons.

Basta with using neighborhood strategies to attack national problems. You can't think locally and act globally. We must nationalize the education of Italian Americans first, in order to understand why the Coppolas, Scorseses, Chases achieved success through the minstrel show mill and why not a single Italian American with any kind of real power in politics, the media, the arts, religion, ever came to the aid of those who wanted to protest defamation of Italian Americans; second, You to understand why you don't know, but should know, names like Ardizzone, Bacarella, Ciabattari, deVries, Ermelino,



Farella, Gillan, Hendin, Ingrasciotta, Janotta, Krase, Lentricchia, Musolino, Norelli, Postiglione, Rimanelli, Savoca, Timpanelli, Valerio, and Zandy.

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What MTV produces is legally their right. Had we done our work right over the past 80 years, others would have joined us in confronting defamatory programs. Had we educated our children, we might not have created those MTV employees who produce and maintain this show. So don’t blame MTV; we have failed ourselves.

When you don’t see your reflection in a mirror you begin to look for other identities to take on; you become the figurative vampire, living off the blood of others; and that’s just what these “Jersey Shore” kids are doing. We know they are no more Italian than the pizzas of Pizza Hut or the food of Olive Garden, so why the protests? Because, as some of the leaders have said, this is the way the rest of the country sees us as? Really? Want to know this for a statistical fact? Commission a serious study to check on this! Contact the Italian-American communities throughout the U.S. and begin communicating, sharing ideas, strategies and resources.

Want to change “Jersey Shore”—give the Situation and all his buddies scholarships to study in Italy. Let them go to the Mediterranean shore and see if they can entertain audiences acting like that.

To kill an infestation you can target every instance and keep busy stamping it out one bug at a time, or you can locate the source. I suggest we form a multi-fronted strategy that focuses on the nest.

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Next “Nota Bene”: A Strategy for Organizing Italian America

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