

Do the Correct Thing

Jerry Krase (June 20, 2008)



Looking for and unfortunately finding common elements in "The Race Debate in America and Italy"

Ottotino Cappelli borrows from my "homie," (fellow Brooklynite), Spike Lee, to start "[The Race Debate in America and Italy](#)", by asking "[Should We Do the Right Thing?](#) [2]" My reply is, "What is the "Right" thing to do? Sal's (Danny Aiello) answer was "you gotta do what you gotta do.", just before Mookie (Spike) threw a trash can into his Pizza Parlor window. Our debate is neatly framed by Maria Laurino asking if Italian-Americans could back Barack Obama in the next US Presidential Election, and Bill Dal Cerro asking whether Lee called the kettle black by complaining about Clint Eastwood (Hollywood's) biased portrayal of Blacks given Spike's own limited palette when it comes to Italians. Finally, Capelli asks if, given the recent "outburst of racism in Italy," "Have Italians-in-Italy learned any lessons from the troubled story of their own migration?" The honest answers to all three of these questions may not matter for, as did Mookie, they will do what they must whether it is



correct on not.

In my last Blog I wrote about a tour of Brooklyn for French visitors who asked me "Is America ready to elect a Black President?" I replied that "if only a fifth of America wasn't racist Obama could win." What I forgot to mention is that my tour was for the US State Department's International Visitor's Program. My tourists' perceptions of America were featured in a [New York Times article](#) [3]. One aim of the IVP is to counter the "news" about the US in the, often unfriendly, international media. As a frequent critic of my own government, my credibility is hard to question. Now that Europe is changing due to immigration, an increasingly important goal is bridging the gap between hyphenated-Europeans and hyphenated Americans. Next week when I host two Hyphenated-Italians, I am sure that I will be queried on both the reception of immigrants in Italy as well as the attitude of Italian Americans toward Barack Obama.

The short answer to the question of whether most Italian Americans would vote for (half Black) Barack Obama in the coming presidential election is "no." Respectable polls show that Obama is currently favored by about 42% of white voters. There is no reason to believe that Italian Americans are more favorably inclined toward his colorful candidacy. It is possible however that a majority of Italian Americans who actually go to the polls on Election Day in November, out of sight of their neighbors, might vote for him. I am also sure that most of my Italian American female friends will vote for Obama on Election Day. In general, Obama has great appeal to women of any color. As to bias by Italian Americans against Obama because he is Black, I am sad to say that many are very biased when it comes to Blacks. I don't think Italian Americans are more biased than other Americans, they are simply honest, and vocal, about it. Going back to Bill Dal Cerro's criticism of Spike's anti-Italian bias, I must point out that Lee similarly criticized Italian American Hollywood icon, Quentin Tarantino (whom Spike called a "wannabe black") because of Quentin's depictions of Blacks in his films.

There is great irony in the Italian American voter preference for the allegedly "White" Republican Presidential candidate John McCain. It is ironic, because the Irish and Italians spent decades trying to convince other Americans that they were White. Both Irish and Italians also became White by ignoring their shared history and distancing themselves from the Africans with whom they were commonly associated. McCain proudly traces his roots to Ireland. In almost every history about Italians in America one finds claims of discrimination against Italians by the Irish, yet no one has suggested that Italians ought not to vote for John McCain because of his Irish heritage.

As to racism in Italy, there are parallels to the Italian American "wannabe whites" with the Italian "wannabe light Europeans" (as opposed to dark Mediterraneans). The racially-based northern versus southern Italian biases also seem to continue. It cannot be denied that Italy has a huge problem with illegal immigration as well as with crime associated with a growing immigrant underclass. However, attacks on the Roma and others by thugs, and blaming immigrants in general for every national failure are sad examples of mass psychological projection and avoidance. As with other left and right wing Fascist movements in the US and abroad, rampaging thugs act out the repressed feelings of "respectable" people who seek excuses for their own failure by blaming others. The highly publicized problem of foreign prostitutes, especially those of African origin, is the best example of avoidance and projection by Italian authorities. It doesn't make sense, to me at least, that African women are forcing Italian men to buy their services by parading their wares along remote roads. Prostitution is a demand-side business. It ends when you end the demand. The same is true of legal and illegal immigrant labor. Without immigrant labor in Italy, the now shaky economy would probably collapse. So what do Italian Americans and Italians gotta do? They gotta act in their own interests and not on their biases. The problem today is that it is hard to figure out what those interests are. So, people turn to dependable biases. In both America and Italy the mass media are more likely to confound than to clarify. During recent political campaigns in both countries the media avoided connecting the candidates with growing real problems that went undebated and unabated. For example, at the end of the Italian national elections the garbage piles in Naples, the power of organized criminals, and the number of foreign prostitutes was larger than at the start. In the United States, people continue to lose their homes, politicians threaten new invasions, and the national deficit reaches new depths because the most important issue seems to be only skin deep. Doing the correct thing may be difficult but it gotta be done before it's too late.



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