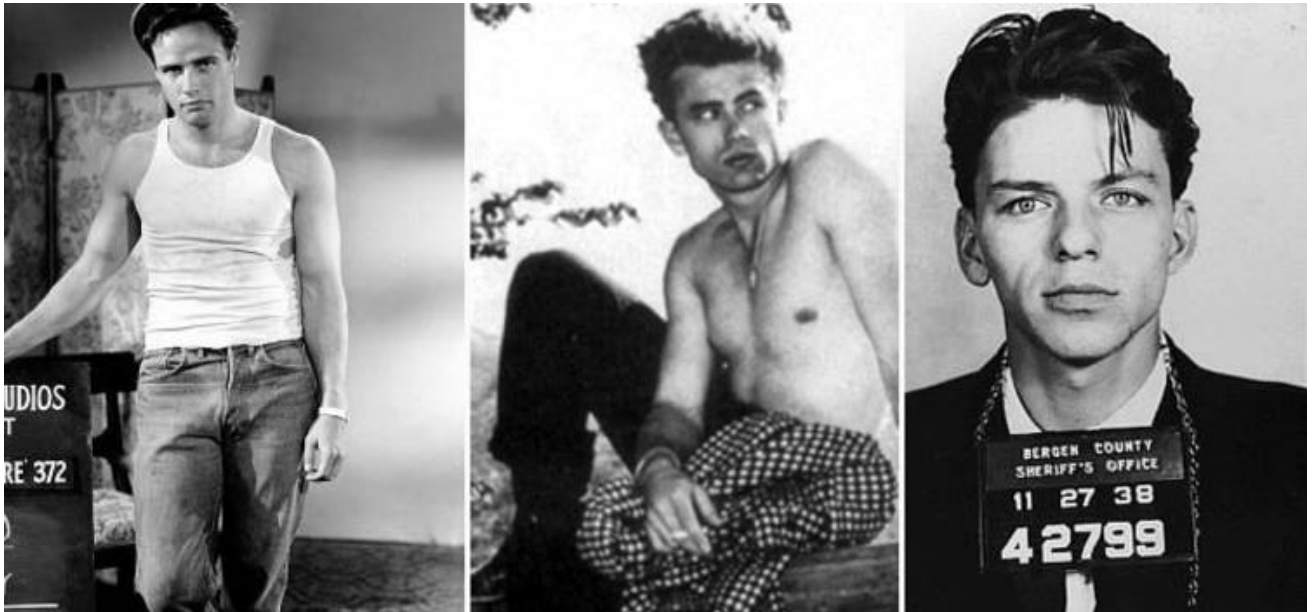


Guido: A Generational Rebellion. Interview with Donna M. Chirico

Ottorino Cappelli (February 05, 2010)



I am not sure why mimicking the guido style is any better or worse than folks in a previous generation trying to be like James Dean or the pre-*Godfather* Marlon Brando. It is one generation's rebellion against the previous generation. And it was the disobedience and unruly behavior, now "forgotten", that helped to make Sinatra an icon for a particular generation. This rebellion is needed to move toward establishment of identity as a new group that is independent from the previous generation. It is outrageous that anyone should claim a specific topic is forbidden ground for interchange. It is in the reasoned discussions about such topics as guido culture that can help us as a community reach a consensus.

What do you think of the MTV show [Jersey Shore](#) [2]? Is the show as much a depiction of Italian Americans in general as it is the 'guidos' themselves?

Given the endless stereotypes depicted on television, it is hard to understand why one particular negative portrayal garners criticism while others go unscathed. The irony with *Jersey Shore* is that the controversy within the Italian American community has added to the popularity of the show. Yet, *Jersey Shore* is mild when compared to other shows with respect to language and overt negative behavior. [Cops](#) [2], the first reality television show that aired in 1989, with its graphic accounts of hate, violence, and abuse presents highly disturbing imagery that is not tempered by the intervention of actors or any need for figuring out what is real. The show has no narration, the camera just follows the police officers as the crimes or accidents unfold. *Jersey Shore* is a trifle, comic not brutal in the same direct way.



I am more offended by the gender stereotypes in Jersey Shore than by the ethnic ones as these are more insidious. Reality shows continue to send the message that men and women have gender specific behaviors and roles. [Bad Girls Club](#) [3], *The Swan*, *Married by America*, all offer outrageous depictions of women, their intellects, and their ambitions. Watching these shows leads one to assume that every American woman wants to be surgically reconstructed so she can land a rich, hunky guy and live an indolent life poolside while sipping piña colodas. Jersey Shore now adds a specific ethnicity to this mix. My sense is that guido/guidette is another version of the gender split that nonetheless supports distinctively American prejudices about men and women. The male characters on Jersey Shore use the same epithets used about women that other shows use. Women are the generic bitches, sluts, whores, or worse. Listen to how this languaging has made its way into adolescent culture. You will hear 10-year-old girls refer to each other in these terms. Being called a guidette seems innocuous.

[College Hill](#) [4] on BET presented the first Black reality show with its own set of ethnic stereotypes, shares similar party images with Jersey Shore. Perhaps being set on a college campus rather than in a beach offsets the negativity.



relation with the Italian American experience in New York/New Jersey area?

I am not sure why mimicking the guido style is any better or worse than folks in a previous generation trying to be like James Dean or the pre-Godfather Marlon Brando. It is one generation's rebellion against the previous generation. This rebellion is needed to move toward establishment of identity as a new group that is independent from the previous generation. (It is also different from the establishment of individual identity.) Frank Sinatra engaged in despicable personal behaviors, especially toward women, through much of his early life. Somehow these behaviors are blotted out and instead certain Italian Americans canonize the singer as a model Italian American success. Imagine if we had video images of these behaviors. It was the disobedience and unruly behavior, now "forgotten", that helped to make Sinatra an icon for a particular generation.

Again, the current guido culture is taking the prevailing traits out there and applying them to a specific ethnic group. It makes sense that for a group that is so far removed from its original ethnic identity as is the case for 3rd, 4th and now 5th generation Italian Americans that any attempts to recoup that primary sense of ethnicity would now include aspects common to all in a particular age range. The concept that assimilation precludes maintaining ethnic ties is out of date; but the original culture is so distant that what is seen among younger members of a group are the stereotypes, caricatures, or idealized images of that culture that have been handed down along with a cherished family recipe or photograph.

How much of what a 20-year-old knows about Italian culture comes from authentic experience and how much comes from watching films like [The Godfather?](#) [6] And, what is more disturbing: Nicole (Snooki) of Jersey Shore saying "What up, bitch?" or Carlo in The Godfather beating his pregnant wife Connie because she is acting like a bitch? Both images are similar and need to be scrutinized.

Finally, what is your opinion on "anti-defamation" with reference both to this particular episode (including criticism of the Calandra Institute's colloquium on Guido) and, in general, as an "identity mobilization" tool?

I am a scholar. The word itself comes to us from the Greek via Latin for school. The implication is that a school is a place where lectures are given, where conversations and philosophies are discussed and debated. It is outrageous that anyone should claim a specific topic is forbidden ground for interchange. Conversations about Jersey Shore, Cops, College Hill and similar shows are taking place in classrooms throughout the United States. It is essential that young people discuss what they are seeing so they can process these ideas and images in rational way. The [Calandra Institute](#) [7] as the leading center of research on Italian American concerns is obliged to take the lead on this issue and present the controversy in a scholarly way open to debate by all.

Identity formation is a central component in the movement toward maturity and psychological health. Young people must role play. They must explore identities to find identity. In the arena of social psychology, Multicultural Theory argues that having a strong in-group identification and by implication a secure sense of ethnic identity allows the individual to display greater tolerance for the out-group. In this model having a strong Italian American identity allows a person to explore alternative ways to assimilate or achieve from those particular to Italian American culture because these would not be seen as repellent or being at odds with Italian American culture per se. One can then accept being Italian American as part of a personal identity that includes other dimensions as opposed to claiming to be solely Italian American on the basis of what the in-group deems acceptable. This individual is able to live outside the "old neighborhood" and not feel that doing so threatens personal identity; one can be Italian American and be part of mainstream society simultaneously.

This ability requires a confidence of personal identity that must be achieved during adolescence through early young adulthood to further identity development through adulthood. In American society at large, it is exceedingly difficult to keep young people away from cultural influences that caregivers may deem inappropriate or detrimental.

My observation is that just as the adolescent must first come to terms with personal identity before



moving through adulthood, the Italian American community must establish a sense of group identity before it can have a fully embodied voice in American culture at large that goes beyond the frivolous. I do not assume that there will be solidarity in this identity; yet, there must be a concordat on matters of mutual interest. It is in the reasoned discussions about such topics as guido culture that can help us as a community reach a consensus.

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