On Roberto Saviano, Italy's Anti-Mafia Struggle, and Italian-American Anti-Defamation Activism

George DeStefano (December 17, 2011)



In the first of a series of commentaries by Italian-American intellectuals on Roberto Saviano's recent talk about Mafia at the New York University, George DeStefano holds that Italian American anti-defamationists outraged by Mafia movies and TV shows should adopt the Italian approach, choosing candid and historically-informed discourse rather than ethnic defensiveness.

"We Italians have the best law, the best anti-mafia law in the world and we have taught the world anti-mafia methods. As of today, the majority of the world's most important consultations in anti-mafia matters go through Italy. The investigations we have reported have a lot to do with the Italian approach, with Giovanni Falcone's method, for example. This is how Italians get rid of the unbearable

prejudice they are victims of. By talking about it not by hiding it. Not by getting mad at Tony Soprano or Scorsese, but by communicating and showing what Italian history has been, how many victims there have been in order to tell all this. "

Roberto Saviano at NYU, Dec. 2, 2011 (see video above)

Roberto Saviano, in his December 8 talk at New York University, made two significant and related points about the Mafia: Italy, the nation most afflicted by and associated with organized crime, has shown the world how to fight it – by speaking openly about its nature and confronting it head-on; and that Italian American anti-defamationists outraged by Mafia movies and TV shows should adopt the Italian approach, choosing candid and historically-informed discourse rather than ethnic defensiveness.

“This is how Italians get rid of the unbearable prejudice they are victims of,” Saviano said. “By talking about it not by hiding it. Not by getting mad at Tony Soprano or Scorsese, but by communicating and showing what Italian history has been, how many victims there have been in order to tell all this.”

I agree with Saviano that there has been far too much defensiveness, and not enough reasoned and informed discussion, among Italian Americans about “The Mafia” – both actual Italian organized crime and its pop culture depictions. And too often those Italian Americans who believe they are defending the honor of their ethnic group by denouncing a filmmaker like Martin Scorsese or a fictional gangster like Tony Soprano seem to know or care little about the destructive impact actual organized crime has had in this country, on Italian American communities and on the larger society. They’re more vexed by the representations than by the reality.

But there are important differences between the Italian and Italian American contexts. In Italy, organized crime is a national problem, connected to political economy. It involves not only criminal activity itself but also the intertwining of mafia and not-mafia, the intimate, symbiotic relationships among illegality, business and finance, and politics and governance. In Italy, organized crime controls entire industries, as Saviano and many other journalists, as well as law enforcement officials, have established. A few years ago Italian newspapers reported that profits generated by Italy’s three main mafias – Sicily’s Cosa Nostra [2], Calabria’s ‘Ndrangheta [3], and Naples’ camorra [4] syndicates – account for some six percent of the nation’s gross domestic product. In Italy, collusion between criminals and politicians also has long been a fact of life. In recent years such high-ranking figures as Marcello Dell’Utri [5], a senator who helped found Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia party, and Salvatore Cuffaro [6], a former regional president of Sicily, have been tried and convicted for involvement with organized crime.

In the United States, organized crime certainly has been entangled with politics and legal capitalist enterprise. Fans of “The Godfather” will recall that one of the complaints of Vito Corleone’s rival dons was that he refused to share his connections to judges and politicians. Beginning in the 1920s, gangsters with Italian surnames corrupted entire police departments as well as judges, and had significant influence on municipal politics. (In that they were following in the footsteps of the Irish, Jewish, and Anglo-Saxon gangs that preceded them. Organized crime has provided a route to upward mobility for various groups in this country.) But these days Italian American organized crime is a shadow of what it once was. Vigorous and sustained law enforcement and the changed sociology of Italo-America are the main reasons. The RICO Act [7], and the decades-long prison sentences given convicted gangsters, has proved effective weapons for routing crime syndicates. But more significantly, few young urban Italian Americans nowadays choose the mob life.

Tony Soprano, in an early episode of the much-maligned HBO series, remarked that “My father was in it. My uncle was in it.” Though “The Sopranos” was set in early twenty-first century New Jersey, Tony was acutely aware that the heyday of “this thing of ours” had passed. For most of today’s young Italian Americans, the mafia gangster is a relic, a quaint, if colorful figure on his way to joining the cowboy in our national mythology. This will be even truer for successive generations.

This obviously is not the case in Italy, where, as I have noted, organized crime remains entrenched and powerful. Italy’s various mafias certainly have tarnished the nation’s international image, but

given their terrible impact, Italians have to talk about and confront them. Public discourse can encompass everything from graffiti slogans like “Mafia è una montagna di merda” (the Mafia is a mountain of shit), which I encountered in various places when I was in Sicily a few months ago, to the anti-extortion movement Addiopizzo [8] to detailed investigative journalism that names names and affixes responsibility. Some complain that Roberto Saviano is defaming Italy and Italians – Silvio Berlusconi and others, mostly on the political Right, whose complaints are, to put it mildly, suspect. But far more recognize that Saviano, as well as other investigative journalists, mafia-fighting magistrates, and civil society activists, are playing a valuable and necessary role.

In mentioning anti-mafia activists, I’ve identified another difference between the Italian and Italian American contexts. Unlike in Italy, there has never been a grassroots, activist anti- Mafia movement here in the United States. Instead, we’ve had anti-defamation protests, led largely by successful Italian Americans who see the persistent Mafia image as an affront to their socioeconomic standing. In my book “An Offer We Can’t Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America [9],” I noted that the Mafia gangster indeed has been the paradigmatic representation of Italian Americans in popular culture. I concluded the book with a call for more diverse portrayals, based in the realities of contemporary Italian American life. So the anti- defamationists do have a point – up to a point.

But too often their protests come off as petulant, self-pitying, politically tone-deaf, and, in their wholesale rejection of the artistic qualities of the best Mafia dramas, philistine. They also lack perspective, particularly when it comes to the differences between the Mafia image and other forms of stereotyping. The depiction of Italian Americans as gangsters does not reflect or reinforce exclusion from mainstream American society and its opportunities, as has been the case with demeaning depictions of African Americans. When the more rabid anti-defamationists liken “The Godfather” or “The Sopranos” to D.W. Griffith’s racist “Birth of a Nation [10],” they only discredit themselves and their cause.

But perhaps they are getting a little smarter, a little more nuanced. In 2007, the National Italian American Foundation [11] (NIAF) included Martin Scorsese among the distinguished Italian Americans it honored at its annual awards dinner. Given NIAF’s longstanding disdain for the director of “Mean Streets” and “Goodfellas,” the recognition came as something of a shock to many, including me. Perhaps NIAF finally had realized that it was absurd not to honor an Italian American cinematic genius of worldwide renown. And just possibly they understood that although Scorsese indeed has made movies about gangsters, no Italians were actually harmed in their making.

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