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III

The Italian-American Image During the Twentieth Century

By Norman Simms '06



A pattern of discrimination and assimilation is found when studying various ethnic groups. This pattern is consistent with every immigrant group except the Italian immigrants. Various ethnic groups have been stereotyped through out the history of America. The pattern follows three stages. First, the immigrants arrive in the United States and settle in ethnic communities. Nativists' attitudes lead the mainstream society (American, white, male) to negatively characterize the immigrant groups and coin racial slurs (where different ethnic groups are considered to be different races) in order to insult and degrade the group. Second, the amount of non-immigrant members of the ethnic community steadily increases and is more willing to assimilate; thus a larger number of the immigrants become assimilated into American society. Third, the higher percentage of members of the ethnic community being assimilated results in the gradual fading of the prejudice. Eventually the prejudice fades out of existence and all that is left is empty slurs (ex. Mick) and meaningless stereotypes (ex. alcoholic Germans). By analyzing this pattern of assimilation, the unique experience of Italian-Americans, in which the stereotype persists after assimilation, can be seen.

Film provides a clear view of how society views its various elements; it is therefore an effective tool for analyzing the Italian experience. A significant amount of immigration did not start until the early 1900s; thus it is the best period of time to analyze the Italian-American experience¹. During the Twentieth Century, there have been four significant stages in film. These stages are 1900-1928, 1928-1945, 1945-1970, and 1970 to the present. Each of these stages marks a significant evolution (or mutation) of the image of Italian-Americans in film.

The first stage lasts from approximately 1900 to 1928. This era encompasses the early days of film and is dominated by the silent screen. Many films were produced

¹ Severo, Richard. "New York's Italians: a question of identity." *Minority Problems*. Ed. Carolaine B. Rose, and Arnold M. Rose. New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1965. 73.

about the most interesting people in America, the various immigrant groups. Films like *The Italian* (1914) and *The Organ Grinder* (1909) showed immigrants struggling to assimilate into the American culture.² The movies combined both comical and serious elements to show how these various groups became Americanized. In many films, the various immigrant groups were stereotyped. Irish and German characters were always becoming intoxicated and acting belligerently, Jews would go to comical lengths to avoid spending money, and Italians would go weeks without a shower. Though these types of films were in high demand, an occasional serious film was released that showed how hard the average immigrants life was (ex. *The Italian* – 1914).

World War I and the early years of the Great Depression resulted in an overall fear of anyone who was foreign or looked different. Films were produced to reflect this increasing paranoia with pictures like *Dangerous Hours* (1919) which depicted an Italian-American “bomb-throwing labor radical.”³ The formerly humorous immigrants suddenly became dangerous individuals who sought to sabotage America.

This stage illustrates the first section of the pattern. The Italian immigrants began arriving in significant numbers in the early 1900s. They settled in Italian communities and were characterized as unhygienic and stupid. The terms “Daigo” and “Wop” were used to verbally assault the Italian-Americans much in the same way that “Spic” is used to attack those of Hispanic origin. Jokes, such as, “Where is the safest place to hide a diamond in Italy? Under a bar of soap,”⁴ became common and reinforced the stereotype. Often, the Italian worker’s willingness to work any job (even the lowliest) was mocked as an expression of both stupidity and desperation. Few serious attempts were made to discuss how the Italian culture made the source of a man’s pride his family and his honor, not his job. Despite the strong prejudices of this era, the Italian-American would face increasing prejudice in the years to come.

The second stage is from approximately 1928 to 1945. This was the beginning of the “talkies” (modern film). It was at this time that the full impact of the Great Depression was felt by the entire country. A mixture of paranoia and anger with the banks led to the popularity of gangsters. The belief in mainstream society that most immigrant groups were involved in crime led to the main characters in films being portrayed as ethnic gangsters who robbed banks and then endured shoot outs and car chases with police in order to make their escapes. These characters ranged from murderous, as seen in *Night Ride* (1931), to comical, as seen in *Manhattan Merry-Go-Round* (1938). No matter the style of the film these characters were violent in nature and that image of violence reinforced the negative stereotypes of the various immigrant groups.

The limited elements of truth made it easier for the mainstream society to accept the definition of entire groups as criminals. These snippets of truth were the result of a general trend in which a limited number of members of the ethnic community sought to use crime to advance both socially and economically. This tendency was the product of the mainstream society’s refusal to allow the immigrants to advance by honest and legal

² I-A Cortes, Carlos E. "Italian-Americans in Film: From Immigrants to Icons." *MELUS* 14 (1987): 108

³ I-A Cortes, Carlos E. "Italian-Americans in Film: From Immigrants to Icons." *MELUS* 14 (1987): 109

⁴ Simmons, Donald C. "Anti-Italian-American Riddles in New England." *The Journal of American Folklore* 79 (1966): 477.

means because of racial prejudice. Al Capone is the paradigm of this because he was a self-made man who went from a poor son of immigrants to the leader of a large, successful crime syndicate.

During World War II, the film industry began producing films that displayed a strongly anti-Italian-American image in an effort to foster support for the war. These films displayed Italians as “pompous, stupid, incompetent, and...cowardly.”⁵ While this was an attack against Italians (as opposed to Italian-Americans), the negative characterization was easily applied to Italian-Americans. The end of World War II marked the end of this era and the climax of prejudice against white ethnic immigrants. The United States had been at war with Italy and Germany and despite the loyalty shown through military service by thousands of Italian-Americans and German-Americans, the negative stereotype continued and became more vehement.

It was during this era that mainstream American prejudice was the strongest against the Italian-Americans. Not only were they Catholic, and Southern Mediterranean, but they were from a country with which the United States was at war and many innocent Italians were sent to internment camps at the beginning of the war. When they were released, Roosevelt’s statement that the United States had nothing to fear of immigrants from a country full of opera singers added the characteristic of cowardliness to the Italian-American stereotype. The end of the war was to prove to be a turning point for the Italian-Americans. They proved their loyalty repeatedly during the war and the mainstream population was willing to accept them once Italy was no longer a threat. Many of the Italian-Americans were more open to assimilation and some even Americanized their names (ex. Dominic → Dan). The prejudice that had reached its climax had begun to fade.

The third stage lasted from approximately 1945 to 1970. This was the post-war era and the beginning of the civil rights movements. Various ethnic and women’s groups were rising up and demanding equal treatment. In film this had the effect of popularizing screen diversity. The new role of the various ethnic groups being portrayed as victims instead of victimizers helped to eliminate some of the negative criminal stereotypes. This change in character role was evidence that many of the white ethnic groups were now largely assimilated into American culture and had been accepted by the mainstream society. Chinese, African-American, and other non-white ethnic groups were still portrayed in criminal or violent roles because they still had not been accepted by the American society. Films began to show Italian-Americans as “struggling immigrants (*Teresa* – 1951) or wealthy playboys (*An Affair to Remember* – 1957), high school basket cases (*Blackboard Jungle* – 1955) or angry delinquents (*Dino* – 1957), unsavory press agents (*Sweet Smell of Success* – 1957) or lovable losers (*A Hole in the Head* – 1959).⁶ Despite these new roles, the only somewhat accepted Italian-American characters still had a violent nature and used these violent tendencies to help them achieve success.

Another phenomenon began shaping at this time. Senate investigations into the workings of the Italian Mob (organized crime syndicate) were supported by Robert Kennedy and J. Edgar Hoover. These investigations were public knowledge in the 1950s

⁵ J-A Cortes, Carlos E. "Italian-Americans in Film: From Immigrants to Icons." MELUS 14 (1987): 112

⁶ I-A Cortes, Carlos E. "Italian-Americans in Film: From Immigrants to Icons." MELUS 14 (1987): 115-116

and 1960s and words like "Mafia," "Cosa Nostra," "Mob," and "Syndicate" became household words that everyone from Texas to Maine knew.⁷ In film, the image of the gangster created between 1928 and 1945 was brought back and modified to include the notion of a secret, family crime organization. Gone were the days of the lone gangster and in were the days of a violent, clannish organization whose influence stretched beyond the United States.

There is no denying that there was an extensive and organized Italian crime organization in the United States and the Mafia was a real organization that had existed in Sicily and Southern Italy since the French occupation of those territories. Mussolini exiled and jailed many of the high ranking members of the Mafia in Italy in order to secure his power; thus many members of the Italian Mafia fled to the United States. This migration occurred in the mid 1940s though organized Italian-American crime had been in existence since the early 1900s; however organized crime, prostitution, and gambling had existed in the United States before Italians could even arrive in large numbers. Americans were not corrupted by the Italian Mafia because it was America that corrupted the Italian immigrants.

Before this stage was over, Italians had achieved assimilation. They were accepted by the American society and had freed themselves from the shackles of their traditional stereotype. They were no longer "dirty morons" but regular white Americans. America's obsession with the Italian Mob, however, resulted in an unexpected shift of the traditional pattern. The old stereotype was dead, but now there was a stronger one to replace it. All Italian-Americans were seen as either being or having connections to the Mafia. The Italians became the only white ethnic group to achieve full assimilation into American culture and acceptance by American society while retaining a strong, negative stereotypical image. This image would again evolve during the next stage.

The fourth and final stage began around 1970 and has continued to the present. It has been the era of commercialization. Acceptance of ethnicity has turned into an ethnic revival. The consequence is that ethnicity has become popular in mainstream society; thus it has become marketable. This marketing has taken the form of a large number of films about the Italian Mob. The most famous mafia movies of this era are *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather, Part II* (1974).⁸ These movies portray the Mafia as an international organization whose influence spreads from Southern Italy and Rome to the United States and Cuba. *The Godfather* illustrates the importance of family values and the immigrant's struggle to avoid assimilation into the American culture. When Michael takes over in *Godfather, Part II*, the organization embraces capitalism (Americanization) as it assimilates the characteristics of a business. The characters in the movie live in expensive homes, wear expensive clothing, interact with the social elites, and conduct all their illegal deals in secret meetings behind closed doors. This was exactly how most Americans pictured the mafia. The assumption that these contemporary

⁷ Vecoli, Rudolph. "The Italian Americans." *Center Magazine* July 1974: 39

⁸ Cortes, Carlos E. "Italian-Americans in Film: From Immigrants to Icons." *MELUS* 14 (1987): 117

gangsters could so easily blend in with the American society made every Italian a possible gangster⁹.

This belief has died down to some extent today, but it is kept alive by the multiple films and television shows that center around Italian-American organized criminal organizations. Most Americans acknowledge that the majority of Italians are not criminals, but the belief continues that if one is an Italian-American, he or she has some direct or indirect connection to a criminal organization.

This situation of being fully assimilated and accepted by most Americans and yet still having a negative stereotype is a unique situation. Should Italian-Americans feel offended by this prevalent image? Should shows like *The Sopranos* be cancelled? In the late 1970s, Italian-American organizations did protest this stereotype with some degree of success. They successively had the terms "Mafia" and "Cosa Nostra" banned from use by the Justice Department and the media as a whole, but this topic is still very popular; thus it is very profitable for filmmakers.¹⁰ This issue of whether or not to deal with the new stereotype is debated in the Italian-American community today. Two interviews provided insight into the arguments for active protest against this stereotype or for taking no action and embracing the current popularity of Italians in the media.

Salvatore Scalora is an undergraduate student at LaSalle University and the grandson of Italian immigrants. He supports the current image of Italian-Americans in the media and when asked his opinion on this issue, Mr. Scalora responded, "Why should Italians be ashamed about the Mafia? It was created to protect and help Italians when American society wouldn't." This statement indicates that the Mafia had a strong degree of influence over Italian-Americans but that the influence was largely positive. He saw this stereotype as constructive because it celebrated an important part of the Italian-American heritage.¹¹

Mrs. Domenica Simms immigrated into the United States in January of 1956 at the age of eight. In an interview with Mrs. Simms, she indicated that the stereotype does not just distort the image of the Italian-American but it "takes away from all those who worked so hard at honest jobs to succeed in the United States." The stereotype is not a celebration of heritage but an insult to all the hard work done by honest Italian-Americans. Mrs. Simms also stated that of her and her five other siblings (four girls and two boys), five have college degrees and of those, four have post-undergraduate degrees. She makes clear, however, that her family has never had any ties, either direct or indirect, with any criminal organization.¹²

These two conflicting testimonies reflect the nature that exists in every immigrant population. The desire to maintain one's heritage versus the desire to assimilate into the American culture and become a part of American society is indicated in each testimony, respectively. This conflict is not limited only to Italian-Americans, but is a strong part of

⁹ Nerenberg, Ellen. "Pulp Fiction, 'Italian Style'." Italy: Fiction, Theater, Poetry, Film Since 1950. Ed. Robert S. Dombroski. Middle Village: Council on National Literatures, 2000. 127-145.

¹⁰ Vecoli, Rudolph. "The Italian Americans." Center Magazine July 1974: 40.

¹¹ Scalora, Salvator. Personal interview. 22 Apr. 2005.

¹² Simms, Domenica. Telephone interview. 20 Apr. 2005.

the experience of all immigrant groups, whether Chinese or Polish, and is a struggle that continues today among the current immigrant populations (ex. Mexican immigrant communities).

Amongst all immigrant groups, there is a pattern of assimilation and discrimination once they reach the United States. This pattern begins with the formation of ethnic communities and prejudice from the nativists. The prejudices result in the creation of negative stereotypes about these communities. As the community becomes assimilated, the prejudice and hatred begins to fade away. Once the community has been fully assimilated into the American culture, they become accepted by the mainstream American society and the stereotypes become meaningless jokes. The Italians proved to have a unique experience because after their assimilation and acceptance, they were still given a new, serious, negative stereotype that persists to the present day, and is still quite visible in film, which is the most effective tool in analyzing the way in which society views its members.

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