

Sodom versus Gomorra

Jerry Krase (December 21, 2011)



In the second of a series of commentaries by Italian-American intellectuals on Roberto Saviano's recent talk about Mafia at the New York University, sociologist Jerome Krase "agree(s) wholeheartedly with Saviano, that in order to escape from 'unbearable' anti-Italian prejudice of which they are victims, those people who label themselves or are labeled by others as 'Italian Americans' should ignore the lucrative excesses of the likes of David Chase, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese but instead learn and share the reality rather than the reality shows of Italian and Italian American history." However, he adds: "Saviano seems not to know the 'American' version of the Italian scene. As do others, he expresses an Italocentric view of both Italians and Italian Americans. Unfortunately, Italians are as little interested in the real Italian American experience as Italian Americans are in the real Italy."

"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. 8, 2011
(see the related videos to the left)

I was pleased to be asked, as an American of partial Sicilian descent, to comment upon some of Roberto Saviano's remarks made at an international conference on the Mafia held at NYU on December 8. To begin I'd like to parse a sentence attributed to him: "We Italians have the best law, the best anti-mafia law in the world and we have taught the world anti-mafia methods." That boastful phrasing perhaps resonates better in Italian to Italians than in English to everyone else. In this sentence, ignoring the meaning of "best"—what is meant by the term "we?" Having a reasonably good understanding of both Italians and Italian it seems to me that there is/was hardly a national "we" in Italy.

As a consequence of this absence of collective identity and will, it is only natural that Italy would have the "best" anti-Mafia law in that the Mafia (and variants thereof) abounds in nations in which legal excellence is met by popular indifference to it. The fact that "most consultations in anti-Mafia matters go through Italy" is also hardly something to crow about; somewhat like patients riddled with cancer who attract legions of oncologists.

The problem of the mafia has always been seen as il problema mezzogiorno/la questione meridionale and when it raises its ugly head north of Rome it is viewed, as are darker skinned cousins, as some kind of "foreign" scourge. Given the increasing influence of non-Italian criminal organizations in Italy, it won't be long before we hear of nostalgia for the indigenous mobs. In The Big Apple, the remnants of the Italian mobs occasionally get attention in the press but newcomers like the Eastern European and Latin American versions have more than made up for the loss.

I have nothing but sad admiration for Giovanni Falcone (and Paolo Borsellino) as well as the other judges, prosecutors, and activists who have valiantly struggled against their own people and their own governments. It is the people and their governments who have made mafia possible and therefore so difficult to eradicate. The mafia has never corrupted Italian society and government. Corrupt Italian society and government makes mafia possible (as is also true in the rest of the world).

Both Falcone and Borellino were martyred near the place from which my grandparents escaped more than a hundred years ago. When I asked my mother what the word mafia meant, "strong" is what she told me. In Brooklyn, my godfather Gus the barber, was threatened by what they then called the Black Hand that if he didn't pay, his daughter would be kidnapped. I asked my mother why they didn't go to the police. She said because the police were worse. Neither were called "mafia" by her.

Two years ago I visited Palermo and my grandparents village of Marineo. In Palermo I carried my camera in plain view as I walked thorough Falcone and Borsellino's boyhood Kalsa, and other nearby neighborhoods. I am sure they, like me, had no trouble spotting the people who didn't want their pictures taken. I spent my teenage years in a similar neighborhood in Brooklyn playing in stickball games on which bets were made by spectators and players alike on a street down the block from the 80th NYPD Precinct where and when the infamous Knapp Commission reported that only two of the 180 patrolmen assigned there were not taking graft. For some of my friends the "bad" cops were "good" role models. As Commission Chiarman Whitman Knapp said there weren't rotten apples in the barrel ... the barrel itself was rotten. Looking today at international finance it seems that some of my friends might have gone to Wall Street. In fact, international bankers are far more dangerous to 99% of Italians and Americans than any mafia has ever been; as the "Occupy" folks already know. It seems to me that "global investigative journalists" have consistently ignored the biggest mafia. In a related way, the fact that the leaders of the various mafia in Italy have been hiding in plain sight for so long parallels their blindness to far worse financial criminals, who by extension own the mass of the mass media.



In Italy and the USA investigative crime spectacles tend to repeat. These extravaganzas usually feature heroes like Saviano whose exceptionalism pretends to be the rule. The “We” is proud of Saviano as they are of Galileo and others whose courage and genius they lack. Simulated dragon-slayers are also an ethnic genre. The Staten Island chapter of the National Organization of Italian American Women asked me to comment at an event celebrating Elizabeth Bettina’s excessively titled *It Happened in Italy, Untold Stories of How People of Italy Defied the Horrors of the Holocaust*. It took place at the Staten Island Jewish Community Center where more than 400 people (half of whom were Jewish and the other half Italian, or perhaps 400 half-Italian Jews) were enraptured by stories of exceptional courage and tolerance that, the Italians at least, would love to believe were characteristics of both the nation and its fascist wartime leaders. I need not report on my words other than to say they were less celebratory.

Finally, I agree wholeheartedly with Saviano, that in order to escape from “unbearable” anti-Italian prejudice of which they are victims, those people who label themselves or are labeled by others as “Italian Americans” should ignore the lucrative excesses of the likes of David Chase, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese but instead learn and share the reality rather than the reality shows of Italian and Italian American history. Unfortunately this is a historical simulacrum that “We” continue to create. I am pleased that Saviano has done so well but he suffers from a common ailment of “media meteorites” like Geraldo Rivera in that the sudden attention gives them delusions of grandeur. Ironically, Saviano’s popularity in the USA, as elsewhere, is fueled as much by his talent and courage as the lucrative trafficking in Mafiasmo and Italian political buffoons who make good copy. If it isn’t already in the pipeline, I can see the premiere of *The Roberto Saviano Show* in which he will investigate everything from UFO’s to Silvio Berlusconi’s cosmetic surgeons. (<http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/geraldo/index.html> [2]).

Saviano seems not to know the “American” version of the Italian scene. As do others, he expresses an Italocentric view of both Italians and Italian Americans. Unfortunately, Italians are as little interested in the real Italian American experience as Italian Americans are in the real Italy. I am also certain that most American Italians are hardly offended by the on-air ethnic stereotypical trash. If I remember correctly, their American Italian heroes like Rudy Giuliani, Alphonse D’Amato and Mario Cuomo have all publicly voiced their appreciation of *The Godfather* and *Sopranos*. On the other hand, he may be mistaking the many American Italian ethnic interest groups have mounted campaigns against “defamation,” the millions of Americans of Italian descent. He need not fear their wrath because even the best of them have difficulty finding dues paying members.

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