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Marc DiPaolo

Southwestern Oklahoma State University, marc.dipaolo@swosu.edu

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The Dilemma of the Italian American Male

Marc DiPaolo

"There's nothing extraordinary about American gangsters," protested [James] Bond. "They're not Americans. Mostly a lot of Italian bums with monogrammed shirts who spend the day eating spaghetti and meat-balls and squirting scent over themselves ... greaseballs who filled themselves up with pizza pie and beer all week and on Saturdays knocked off a garage or drug store so as to pay their way at the races."

— Ian Fleming, *Diamonds Are Forever* (1956)

GENNIFER FLOWERS: Well, I don't particularly care for [Governor Mario] Cuomo's ... uh ... demeanor.

GOVERNOR BILL CLINTON: Boy, he is so aggressive.

FLOWERS: Well, he seems like he could get real mean.... I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't have some Mafioso major connections.

CLINTON: Well, he acts like one. [laughs]

— Transcript of a telephone conversation tape-recorded in late 1991 and released by *The Star* tabloid newspaper in January 1992.

The Immigrant Stigma of the Mafia Don

As David Chase's landmark HBO television series *The Sopranos* came to an end, select television critics proclaimed it "the greatest TV show of all time," columnist Peggy Noonan called it "a masterpiece," and — despite some dissatisfaction with the open-ended finale — there was great public mourning over the passing of the gritty crime soap opera. However, a solid contingent of Italian Americans were just as glad to see yet another mass-media portrayal of their people as degenerate Mafia killers fade into memory. Traditionally, American movies and television shows featuring those of Italian

descent in "non-Mafia" roles are few and far between. The restaurant owners of *Big Night* and *For Roseanna*, the various fake Italians played by Chico Marx, and the military men in *Crimson Tide*, *Band of Brothers*, and *From Here to Eternity* are the exceptions that prove the rule. Fortunately, while Sylvester Stallone's character Rocky Balboa spent a brief stint as hired muscle for Italian loan sharks, he was too nice to break legs to collect on loans and quit the Mafia early in the first *Rocky* movie to become a professional boxer. In addition, a small-but-notable subset of Italian American characters on film and television *fight* crime rather than *commit* crimes. Though not Italian American himself, actor Peter Falk played the brilliantly intuitive homicide investigator Lt. Columbo in the 1968 telefilm *Prescription Murder*. He continued to play the character for decades afterward in a series of *Columbo* television movies, continuing to outsmart rich, establishment villains who underestimate his intelligence because his slovenly appearance tricks them into thinking that he is a poor, unintelligent, immigrant cop. Film and television followed up with further examples of noble Italian American police officers, including Al Giardello, Yaphet Kotto's half-Italian American, half-African American protagonist from *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (1993–1999), space station security chief Michael Garibaldi in the science fiction series *Babylon 5* (1993–1998), and portrayals of real-life Italian crime fighters in the movies *Serpico* (1973), *The Untouchables* (1987), *Rudy: The Rudy Giuliani Story* (2003), and *Donnie Brasco* (1997).

While all of these crime fighters are presented in a respectful light, and are shown exhibiting varying degrees of heroism, there is one Italian American crime fighter who has all of the grotesque traits of a gangster from a Martin Scorsese film, while ostensibly acting on the side of the angels. The vigilante known as the Punisher is just as coarse, sexist, violent, and apish as any character from *Goodfellas* (1990), but he turns all of his anger and murderous impulses against his own people in the Mafia, hoping to sanitize the Italian American community by killing every last gangster he can get his hands on. He is a character right out of a 1970s exploitation film like *Dirty Harry* (1971) or *Death Wish* (1974), but first appeared as an anti-hero in *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic books in 1974 before graduating to his own comic book and two feature films. It is the extreme example of the Punisher that I am most concerned with exploring here. I intend to place his actions and motivations in a broader context by comparing him to less exploitative portrayals of Italian law enforcement, especially Lt. Columbo and Joe Pistone (a.k.a. Donnie Brasco). Finally, I will examine where Italian Americans are, in the 21st century, in their process of enculturation in American society and consider to what extent their position is mirrored by, and diverges from, the lives of Italian Americans as represented on film and television up to this point.

Italians vs. Italians: The Dilemma of the Italian American Crime Fighter

As refreshing as it is to see Italian Americans presented as upstanding citizens, and while many of these characters are well-written and superbly acted, a fascinating dramatic and sociological tension is created on any occasion when one of these Italian crime fighters is ordered to pursue an Italian criminal. In some ways, watching an Italian cop incarcerate an Italian criminal is a cathartic experience. It makes the average middle-class Italian hope that such a story dramatizes, symbolically, the fact that Italians no longer need to turn to crime in order to survive and thrive in America, and can put their underworld stigma behind them — and I say “stigma,” rather than “past” as statistically, very few Italian Americans turned to crime, either in order to survive prejudice and a lack of job opportunities, or to recreate the Sicilian mafia on U.S. shores.¹ On the other hand, the extent to which Italians still exist somewhat on the margins of American society makes one wonder if the Italian cop isn't being too hard on one of his own. After all, despite the fact that many members of other disenfranchised groups certainly have even less access to the so-called “American Dream,” Italians do not have the same job opportunities as the individuals who compose the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant community that still thinks of itself as the rightfully privileged American mainstream. If such is the case, then is an Italian crime fighter who arrests and/or kills Italian criminals some kind of Italian “Uncle Tom?” The issue comes up time and again in crime dramas featuring Italians, and is at its most compelling in stories featuring the *Untouchables*, Donnie Brasco, Columbo, and the Punisher.

One of the first notable real-life Italian crime fighters is Frank Basile, a man who understood underworld culture and joined Eliot Ness' squad of *Untouchables* during the Prohibition era to help bring down the empire Al Capone built on illegal alcohol trafficking. While Ness and Oscar Fraley do not do much to develop Basile's character in their book-length account of the mob war, they express admiration for Basile and terrible anger at Capone for ordering Basile's murder. Presumably, Capone targeted Basile for assassination because he was angry that Basile worked against his own people. Capone may have also felt it would be easier to get away with killing a mere Italian than a member of the U.S. Treasury Department (although he would later try to kill Ness as well). Basile is not widely remembered by the American public, and is hardly a household name, but he was the inspiration for Andy Garcia's character in Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987). In the film, Garcia is a dedicated member of the team who had attempted to distance himself from Italian criminals, and from his Italian heritage, by changing his

name from Giuseppe Petri to George Stone. Sean Connery's character, Irish cop Jim Malone, admits to having some prejudices against Italians, and calls Capone's men Dagos and WOPs, but admonishes Stone for changing his name, and insists on affectionately calling him Giuseppe. Stone, thankfully, is more fortunate than the real-life inspiration for his character and survives to see Capone jailed for tax evasion. The film presents Stone as being a more righteous Italian American than Capone mainly because Capone is a cruel, murderous, unelected "head" of Chicago, and Stone is bravely defiant of Capone's unjust rule. Consequently, the film virtually sidesteps a very natural audience caveat that few Americans feel that Prohibition was a just or enforceable law, and that Capone was merely providing the public "what they wanted."

Joseph D. Pistone, an American of Sicilian extraction and another real-life crime fighter, helped bring down New York's Bonanno crime family by operating undercover as one of their number for six years during the late 1970s. Pistone's book *Donnie Brasco*, named after the alias he assumed while working undercover, inspired the Johnny Depp vehicle *Donnie Brasco* (1997), the independent film *10th & Wolf* (2006), several fiction novels featuring the further adventures of Donnie Brasco, and the short-lived television series *Falcone*. Consequently, Pistone has become as much of a folk hero in the annals of crime drama as he is a real person, prompting *New York Post* entertainment critic Linda Stasi to complain of his ubiquitous presence. In the film *Donnie Brasco*, Depp plays Pistone as a figure who spies upon his fellow Italians with great reluctance. He relates strongly to mob culture and is in danger of embracing the gangster personality. He feels like a Judas figure when he betrays his mobster friend "Lefty" Ruggiero. He also butts heads with his "white," establishment superiors in the FBI. However, the Joe Pistone in the book *Donnie Brasco* is vastly different from the one in the film. Pistone's own written account of his feelings — both at the time he was undercover and since — seems far less conflicted. In fact, Pistone appears almost detached in his attitude towards the two hundred criminals that were indicted for crimes based on evidence that he gathered. Aside from voicing disapproval of their lifestyle, their corrupting influence, and their lack of intelligence, Pistone claims to have felt neither malice nor great sympathy for those he spied on. At the conclusion of *Donnie Brasco*, he writes:

People wanted to know whether I felt I was on a mission to clean out the Mafia because I'm Italian-American.

I didn't carry out the mission on behalf of upstanding Italian-Americans. I wasn't an ethnic policeman.... I would have accepted any undercover assignment against any group the FBI targeted.

I am proud about how it turned out, however.

Italian-Americans have told me they are proud that I had the courage to do it and that I showed the nation that not all Italians side with the Mafia....

Now we know the Mafia is not invincible.

It is also clear that the Mafia preys on Italians as well as other people....

On the other hand, some people asked, "How could you have done it to other Italians?"

I don't feel that way. I busted a group of people involved in illegal activities.

Not viewing the probe from an ethnic point of view was important for keeping proper perspective. Another reason the investigation was successful was that I knew, no matter what I did, that I was not going to reform anybody in or around the Mafia, that the people I was getting close to were going to lie, steal, cheat, and murder whether I was there or not. My goal was to gather evidence for later prosecutions. I was not a social worker [407-408].

Pistone likes the film adaptation of his book very much, and has not, to my knowledge, voiced objections to Depp's portrayal of him as more conflicted than he lets on in the book. It is possible that both portrayals of Pistone are, to an extent, true. However, they are almost irreconcilably different, and represent two different, believable reactions for someone in Pistone's position. The Pistone in the film sees what he is doing as a crime against his own people and feels guilty for it, while the Pistone of the book sees the case in terms of law-breakers versus law abiders and feels no such conflict. Both reactions are fascinating.

Barry Harvey, himself a former undercover agent and a twenty-four-year veteran of the Pennsylvania State Police's Organized Crime Division in Philadelphia, has also noticed the discrepancy between the book and the film and believes that the truth is somewhere in between. However, he suspects that Pistone feels the most guilt over the fact that the several of the individuals who brought him into the inner circle of the mob — not knowing that he was an undercover agent — were later killed by other gangsters as punishment for the mistake. As Harvey explained in an October 8, 2008, e-mail to me, "I have personally used individuals such as Lefty who I certainly did not care for but still had some reservations about using them and what would happen to them.... [W]orking undercover requires lies and deceit. You must 'like' someone no matter if you do or not if that person is useful. Relationships are formed, and just because someone is a criminal does not necessarily mean they are not likeable. I will never forget a long-term undercover assignment I had in which I became friendly with a group of people and one in particular. At the end of the investigation when this one person was arrested, he cried and told me 'I thought we were friends.' ...[So] even if Pistone did not like Lefty he knew that he, Pistone, would be directly responsible for Lefty's death. Maybe that is where the 'guilt' comes from [more than from being Italian like Lefty]."

Unlike Pistone, Lt. Columbo only infrequently found himself investigating Italian criminals. An evil vineyard owner and wine connoisseur played by Donald Pleasance in *Any Old Port in a Storm* (1973) springs to mind as a rare Italian adversary. However, Columbo's Italian heritage has been mentioned repeatedly during the course of the series, and is often the subject of light-hearted humor. One of the most memorable conversations in the history of the show takes place between Columbo and his Italian American dentist, Dr. Perenchino, in the story *Columbo: Candidate for Crime* (1973). As Perenchino examines Columbo's wisdom teeth and listens to opera playing on the radio, he launches into a monologue about anti-Italian prejudice in America: "Ah, when people talk about Italians, do they think cops, dentists, tenors? The Pope, not even? The Pope is Italian, ain't he? They think ... they think *Mafiosa, Mafiosa, Mafiosa*."

At the time the episode was broadcast, the Pope *was* Italian: Pope Paul VI. The script (written by Irving Pearlberg, Alvin R. Friedman, Roland Kibbee, and Dean Hargrove from a story by Larry Cohen) involved a senatorial hopeful (played by Jackie Cooper), killing his controlling campaign manager and blaming the death on members of the underworld whom he has sworn to bring down. Amusingly, when Dr. Perenchino hears on the radio that the famous public figure was killed, he predicts that the real killer will likely be a rich white guy who tries to pin it on the Mafia. As Columbo leaves the dentist's office to begin his investigation, Perenchino says, "You are an Italian cop. No matter who you catch for this murder, they're still gonna say it's the Mafia and that you're covering for them.... Take my advice, lieutenant, change your name!"

Columbo has no comment. Nor does he change his name. He merely proceeds to prove that the senator was the killer and makes a successful arrest at the end of the episode. Interestingly enough, Perenchino is convinced that, as an Italian American on the police force, Columbo is in constant danger of becoming a victim of his own ethnicity, but the series never presents Columbo's status on the force, or his reputation, as being threatened by his class or culture. In fact, Columbo's entire *modus operandi* works because he follows Sun Tzu's dictum, "Appear strong when you are weak and weak when you are strong." He appears weak, but his position in the fabric of the criminal justice system, and in American society, is secure. He is able to fool his criminal adversaries into underestimating him by pretending to be on the margins of society when, in actuality, he commands the respect of his superiors and the power to jail white-collar criminals who, in the real world, often-times *would* be beyond the reach of a mere working-class homicide investigator. In fact, Columbo is unassailable, even when wealthy murderers, like the psychiatrist played by Gene Barry in *Prescription Murder*, are friends

with the district attorney, or use bribes or threats to shake Columbo off their trail. Columbo is never taken off the case, and never faces an opponent too rich or politically powerful to buy his way to freedom. Indeed, this almost counterintuitive consistency of outcome makes some viewers wonder if Columbo is secretly wealthy himself, has some kind of politically invincible ally, or if his whole persona as a frumpy, poor, cop is a put-on and he's not even really Italian but secretly some rich, white guy himself who only pretends to drive a broken-down car and wear a hand-me-down raincoat when he's off-duty.

In many ways, the Punisher is not as compelling a figure as either Pistone or the fictional Columbo, but the twisted caricature of Italians that he represents is worth discussing, even if the comic books in which he appears are not on the same level of "popular art" quality as the *Columbo* television series, and his films are not as stellar as the Mike-Newell-directed *Donnie Brasco*. The Punisher has appeared in two eponymous films, a direct-to-video release in 1989 featuring Dolph Lundgren as the Punisher and a theatrical release in 2004 starring Thomas Jane in the title role. In addition to the films, the Punisher has appeared in cartoons and video games, and has inspired a number of novelty T-shirt designs and action figures. Originally created as an adversary for Spider-Man in "The Punisher Strikes Twice!" *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129 (1974), Frank Castiglione is a Vietnam veteran, ex-Catholic seminarian, and former New York City cop who went crazy after the Costa crime family gunned down his wife and two children during a family picnic in Central Park, Manhattan. Wishing that he had died with his family, Frank donned a black Kevlar suit with a white skull emblazoned on the chest, adopted the identity of The Punisher, and declared a one-man war on crime. After successfully avenging his loved ones by slaughtering the mobsters who played a role in their deaths, he continued his campaign to protect other families from the horrors he suffered by killing every violent criminal he felt was beyond the reach of the deeply flawed (and perhaps too liberal) criminal justice system.

The Punisher's story has a visceral appeal to anyone of non-Italian descent as an indulgent, *id*-unhinged revenge narrative, and he is interesting to Italians as one of the few Italian comic book "heroes" (with Tony "Iron Man" Stark, the sexy magician Zatanna, and Helena "The Huntress" Bertinelli as three of the few exceptions), but he is a exploitative character that raises unpleasant questions about crime, racism, immigration, and war in American society. These questions are all disturbing, and the answers the Punisher tries to give are still more disturbing, but they are worth considering in greater detail here.

The Punisher as Self-Hating Italian American

Punisher stories tend to walk a fine-line between trying to evoke audience sympathy with the character, and attempting to justify his mad quest, while others try to assume a more ironic, satirical, or critical distance. The 2004 film goes to great lengths to justify Castle's murderous campaign against Howard Saint by having Saint responsible for the deaths of Castle's *entire extended family*. In the film, Saint sends his hired killers to the Castle family reunion and they machine gun everyone in attendance. The film also strives to justify Castle's decision to quit the police force and take the law into his own hands. Castle is also unwilling to go to the police or the judiciary system because (in the extended cut of the film released on DVD in 2006), his African-American partner, Weeks, helped Saint find and eliminate Castle's family members. Saint is also, presumably, the richest man in Tampa, and has the police in his pocket. Unlike Columbo, who is influential enough in the criminal justice system to bring down any criminal he finds evidence against, so no matter how wealthy that "perp" is, Castle is powerless to fight crime within the system. Therefore, he removes his policeman's badge and becomes a vigilante.

While the police are not always evil in the Punisher universe, they are often ineffective. The Lundgren film, for example, portrays the police as weak and inefficient, but not corrupt. In that version of the story, Louis Gossett Jr. plays Castle's former partner, Jake Berkowitz, who is a decent man who hopes to capture Castle and get his friend treatment for mental illness. When Berkowitz is finally reunited with his former partner, he cries when he sees just how much of the humanity has been burned out of Castle's eyes. Louis Gossett Jr.'s acting in the scene is superb, and it makes the film worth watching for that segment alone. His character also provides a heart, humanity, and decency to a film that is otherwise cynical and coldhearted. He is the moral center of the story, and his perspective represents a genuine alternative to the worldview offered by the mentally ill Punisher. Since Berkowitz exists as a goodhearted cop in the Lundgren film, the movie raises the possibility that the Punisher could have, if he wanted, fought crime more mercifully and within the system, alongside his old friend. The excuse the Punisher uses that he alone can fight crime has even less resonance in the comic book universe, in which characters like Spider-Man and Daredevil are arguably just as effective at fighting crime while still being merciful.

The Punisher's creator, Gerry Conway, wrote Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, and Batman comic books throughout the 1970s and 1980s, has written television scripts for TV shows such as *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Matlock*, and recently became the co-executive producer for *Law & Order*:

Criminal Intent. According to Conway, he came up with the basic premise and look of the Punisher, and artist John Romita finalized the design for penciller Ross Andru to draw in the final comic book. As Conway explains, "My idea of the Punisher was that he was a guy who was driven by his need for vengeance but was not so driven that he couldn't see what was going on around him." Conway did not intend to present the Punisher as insane, but acknowledges that writers who have written the character since have done so.

Interestingly, Conway never referred to the character as anything but the Punisher, but writer Steven Grant made the always swarthy figure an Italian in 1986's *The Punisher* # 1. Grant's script revealed that the Punisher was born Frank Castiglione to Sicilian immigrants living in New York, Mario and Louise Castiglione. The parents Americanized the family name to "Castle" in 1956, when Castle was six. Since Frank had an Italian surname for the first few years of his life, and then saw his surname changed at an impressionable age, the change probably contributed to his conflicted feelings about his own ethnicity.

Future writers, such as Mike Baron, expanded upon the Punisher's Italian background by revealing that Frank Castle was a Roman Catholic, and that he briefly studied to become a priest but left the seminary when he discovered that he had difficulty forgiving those who confessed to committing grievous sins during the Sacrament of Confession (see the 1989 graphic novel *The Punisher—Intruder*). It was later revealed that Castle met his future wife, Maria Falconio, after leaving the seminary, and enlisted in the Marines and served in Vietnam, after his marriage. By making the Punisher a former seminarian, the comic book achieved three things: it added a layer of characterization to a fairly one-dimensional figure; it tapped into the evocative hypocrisy best exemplified by Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* films of the churchgoing murderer, and it gave the Punisher a history of religious zealotry that transferred from traditional Catholicism—which has come to embrace a "consistent life ethic" over the past several decades, opposing the death penalty, abortion, and euthanasia—to a harsh, fanatical mission to kill virtually every career criminal he encounters.

Mike Baron is one of the writers who have written the Punisher in a highly sympathetic light, and he is not the only creative figure at Marvel Entertainment who seems to regard the character with a measure of understanding, perhaps even a little admiration. According to Ari Arad, an executive at Marvel Studios who worked on the 2004 film adaptation, the Punisher is not insane, but a man whose morality is so different that it makes him a pariah. "His system of ethics, his moral code, is very different from most people's, but it is specific and it exists. He doesn't kill innocent people. He has a

benchmark for people that deserve to die and he's going to kill them, but it is not an arbitrary benchmark and it is not one that he violates."

Somehow surviving all of his run-ins with criminals, and never successfully being contained by the police, the Punisher's war on crime has lasted (in the fictional timeline of his comic book adventures) for thirty years. Law enforcement characters within his comic book adventures have charged him with the deaths of *thousands* of criminals. While the character exists in a universe of superheroes, he himself is not supposed to have any superpowers, but his longevity and invincibility cannot be accounted for by normal means (not even his nifty Kevlar body armor), so certain writers have suggested that he has been granted supernatural abilities, possibly by the devil (as suggested in Garth Ennis' *The Punisher: Born*), to wage his war for so long. While the Punisher is an equal-opportunity killer, having slain street gang members, corporate criminals inspired by the Enron offenders, Muslim terrorists, and members of the Italian, Irish, Japanese, and Russian mobs, he has the most personal anger for the Italians, because it was they who killed his family. Consequently, the adventures in which he squares off against the Mafia are the ones that have the most dramatic resonance.

For example, in "Red X-Mas," writers Jimmy Palmiotti and Justin Gray introduced a close circle of Mafia widows who decide to avenge their husbands' murders by putting a contract out on the man who killed their husbands — Frank Castle. Ringleader Regina Napolitano, who lost three consecutive mates to Castle's crusade, talks the other widows into contributing \$5,000 a piece to hire a female assassin from Sicily named Suspiria (the name is an in-joke nod to an Italian horror film directed by gore-master Dario Argento). The leather-clad S&M sexpot Suspiria fails to kill Castle and, in an ironic twist, the two later become lovers because of their mutual love of carnage. In the meantime, Castle tracks down and kills Regina, and warns the other widows to donate several thousands of dollars to charity and leave the country or he will hunt them down one by one. As he puts it, "Just because you married a bunch of greaseballs, doesn't make you gangsters. I'm giving you a stay of execution."

In the Boaz-Yakin-scripted film adaptation starring Dolph Lundgren, Castle's vendetta against the various Italian crime families has weakened their hold on the city to the extent that the Japanese Yakuza is able to move in on their territory. While the Punisher is initially delighted to see a gang war brewing and jokes that he can finally go on vacation and let the Yakuza finish off the Italians for him, he feels compelled to help his enemies when Yakuza boss Lady Tanaka kidnaps the children of all of the Mafia dons and threatens to sell them into slavery. The Punisher reluctantly teams up with the same gangster who ordered his family killed, Gianni Franco (played by Jeroen

Krabbe), in order to rescue the children, who he sees as innocent of any wrongdoing and undeserving of being punished for their fathers' crimes. At the end of the film, the Punisher rescues the children, but kills Franco in front of his own son, Tommy. The Punisher warns Tommy not to grow up to be like his father. "You're a good boy, Tommy. Grow up to be a good man ... because if not, I'll be waiting."

This horrifying and evocative scene in the film inspired a variety of similar scenes in later comic books in which the Punisher, dressed in the garb of Santa Claus, would kill criminals in front of children and then pause to explain to the shocked little ones, "They were naughty." The unsubtle message is, "Be good little children, or the Punisher will come to get you."

Because the Punisher is such a one-note character, he tends to be at his most interesting when he is sparing lives, rather than taking them, but he is still more iconic in his "boogeyman of the underworld" persona than he is a three-dimensional character. That is why, when screenwriter Michael France was assigned to write a first draft of a screenplay for the 2004 adaptation of *The Punisher*, he felt the challenge was to make the character fresh when the "you killed my family — prepare to die" story and character had been done a thousand times." France felt that the key to the character was the fact that, on the one hand, Castle enjoyed killing criminals, and on the other, he hated his existence as the Punisher and would "trade anything at all to have his family back." To tackle this duality in the Punisher, France rewrote the origin story a little, placing Castle in the same conflict that Joe Pistone faced in the film *Donnie Brasco*. In France's version, Castle was an undercover FBI agent and family man who had infiltrated the Mafia and was enjoying both his existence as a mobster and as a husband and father. Unsure who "the real Frank" was, father or gangster, Castle decided to quit the FBI and leave the evil influence of the Mafia behind. Unfortunately, his extraction from the field doesn't go well, his cover is blown, and his old associates seek revenge by killing Castle's family. As France explains, "Frank Castle the family man dies with his family and he reverts to the man he's been pretending to be for years while undercover: a completely ruthless psycho who goes after the mobsters who killed his family."

France's idea played up the Punisher's Italian identity and blurred the distinction between Castle and the gangsters he fought by making Castle the son of a mobster. "I had another character angle which was so dark I understand why [it didn't make it into the final film]. In the movie, Frank's father is a lawman played by Roy Scheider. But in my drafts, I established that Frank's father was actually a hitman in New York City named "Il Punisco" — "The Punisher." — and Frank was always ashamed of that. He joined the FBI to prove that he wasn't at all like his father — but the fact is, he was such a

good killer that every day he was on the job as an undercover cop, he was proving that he was exactly like his father."

The film as eventually made seemed reluctant to engage in Italian stereotyping, avoiding revealing that, according to the comic books, Castle's birth name was Castiglione. It also dropped France's idea for the Punisher's father as Il Punisco, and changed the guilty party responsible for the Castle family killings from the Costa family to Howard Saint, a figure who is presumably not Italian even though he is played by Italian American actor John Travolta. While Italian villains are not present, other villains in the film are far more stereotypical, including a steroid enhanced Russian assassin similar to *Rocky IV*'s Ivan Drago, and the Toro Brothers, Hispanic gangsters inspired by the Spider-Man villains the Lobo Brothers. Still worse, the film features a psychotic gay assassin named Quentin Glass and Saint's bloodthirsty wife, Vivian, who coaxed her husband into having Castle's entire family killed instead of just putting a hit on Castle himself.² The presence of these villains in particular is a nod to yet another stereotype with a questionable foundation in fact — that the modern-day Italian American male has an unfortunate tendency toward prejudice against feminists and gay men. Despite the fact that the audience is meant to feel somewhat sorry for Vivian and Quentin in the end, when they fall victim to Castle's elaborate (and cruel) revenge scheme, their respective sexual orientation and gender cast the film's already politically incorrect sensibilities in an even darker light. Interestingly, in making the villains a multi-ethnic cast of stereotyped villains instead of a group of Italians, the film goes from being potentially offensive to Italians, and prejudiced against Italians, to potentially offensive to women, gays, Hispanics, Russians, and other groups who might see themselves in the Punisher's sleazy rogue's gallery. And, as much as the Punisher hates his own people, this is not the first time he has slaughtered unflatteringly portrayed members of other minority groups. Therefore, the recent Punisher film is not the first film to seem racist against ... just about everyone.

The Punisher as a Racist Vigilante

Unlike the Punisher, who kills plenty of non-Italians, but who reserves a special hatred for his own people, the Irish-American vigilantes Connor and Murphy MacManus featured in *The Boondock Saints* (1999) are functionally protectors of the Irish-American community in Boston. After hearing a sermon during Sunday mass about the importance of fighting evil in society, the MacManus twins defend the local Irish bar from being shaken down by Russian Mafia extortionists. They kill the gangsters in self-defense and become

neighborhood heroes. Afterwards, the MacManus brothers go on a killing spree, focusing their attention on purging Boston of the Russian and Italian mobs, but claiming to be against all criminals who prey upon the innocent. Like the Punisher, the Boondock Saints are religious fanatics who think God is on their side when they kill criminals. While these "Boondock Saints" are briefly pursued by a gay FBI agent played by Willem Dafoe, his character ultimately comes to see the wisdom of their actions, and does not arrest them. There is some indication that he even joins them at the end of the film.

The Boondock Saints was written and directed by Troy Duffy, who reportedly felt compelled to write the screenplay as a form of therapy after he saw a murdered woman being removed from an apartment across the hall from him. As Duffy explained in an interview:

I decided right there that out of sheer frustration and not being able to afford a psychologist, I was going to write this, think about it. People watching the news sometimes get so disgusted by what they see. Susan Smith drowning her kids ... guys going into McDonald's, lighting up the whole place. You hear things that disgust you so much that even if you're Mother Teresa, there comes a breaking point. One day you're gonna watch the news and you're gonna say, 'Whoever did that despicable things should pay with their life' [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Boondock_Saints].

Duffy's rage at the sight of the murdered woman is understandable, and I admit that my own upbringing in a safe, middle-class, Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Staten Island prevents me from feeling the immediacy of crime in the same way that Duffy experienced it. He was forced to live in an apartment building in which ugly crimes were committed. I was not. Nevertheless, there is a disturbingly racist overtone to the film *The Boondock Saints*. In fact, one of the Italians who ultimately joins forces with the MacManus brothers against his own people, tells a racist joke in which a genie solves all of white America's "problems" by teleporting all Hispanics to Mexico and all blacks back to Africa. The joke is not only mean-spirited, but makes one wonder if the Boondock Saints are not performing the same function as the genie, only by killing minorities instead of deporting them. The symbolism of the MacManus brothers as guardians of American "whiteness" is particularly ironic if one considers the fact that, when the Irish first came to America, they were greeted with terrible racism from the whites who already lived here, and were the targets of NINA ("No Irish Need Apply") laws, just as the Italian immigrants were considered "non-white" and discriminated against as well. So the anger and hatred that the Boondock Saints level against immigrants who came to America after them seems hypocritical in the extreme.

And the Boondock Saints are not alone in this hypocritical racism.

Indeed, while Italian Americans as a whole are reportedly left-leaning

Democrats, a few too many of those who live on Staten Island have, in my own personal experience, a surprising tendency towards being arch conservatives that are particularly prone to racism. They look back upon the "old neighborhood" in Brooklyn where they and their parents and grandparents lived before the family relocated to Staten Island, see that the apartment buildings that they had kept up so well have fallen into disrepair under the stewardship of Russian, Muslim, Hispanic, or black newcomers, and they feel nothing but anger and confusion about the new minorities who have taken over what used to be "little Italy." These Italians forget that they were once poor minorities, too.

This perspective is a contentious one, especially since the many Italian Americans who are not prone to racist feelings do not deserve to be painted with the same broad brush as those who do. Also, arguably, there is an inconsistency in any article that disavows one stereotype (the mafia stigma) while reinforcing another (the racist Italian American). However, while there are statistically few Italian Americans in the mafia, the question of Italian American racism is raised consistently and convincingly enough in the media, and in sociological works, that it seems harder to refute. Recent articles published online at the Italian American Digital Project (www.i-italy.org) have taken a strong stand against Italian and Italian American racism. These articles and blog posts have been largely supportive of the Presidential candidacy of Barack Obama, have criticized anti-immigration rhetoric in Italy and the United States, and have attempted to determine the extent to which the media coverage of the 1989 murder of African-American teenager Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst justifiably painted the Brooklyn Italian American community as essentially racist.

Significantly, Martin Scorsese and Robert DeNiro have both directed films that were based on true stories in which an Italian American male faces his own prejudice, and the prejudice of his peers when he contemplates dating a black woman — *Mean Streets* (1973) and *A Bronx Tale* (1993). These films hint that anti-black sentiments are common in Italian American communities. In addition, Spike Lee has nailed Italian Americans to the wall for being anti-black, and has been strident enough, and persistent enough in his criticism that he has been accused of being himself racist anti-Italian and painting them in too broad, and negative a brush. (For example, Lee's attempt to cast an Italian American cop as *moderately* likeable *despite* being racist in the 2006 film *Inside Man* is still a bitter pill for many Italian American viewers to swallow, as the police officer, once again, is a racist Italian American.)

On the other hand, Lee may well be right to be as persistent and as critical as he is of Italian Americans. Some sociologists have documented a phenomenon of recurrent cases of antiquated notions of race in the Italian

American community. For example, Jennifer Guglielmo explores the inexplicable, and frustrating, tensions between Italian Americans and other minorities, especially African-Americans, in the introduction to her book *Are Italians White? How Race Is Made in America* (2003):

Italians are niggaz with short memories. In late June, 2002, Chuck Nice, an African American deejay at WAXQ-FM in New York City casually made this remark on-air while hosting an early morning talk show. Within days, a response came back. The Order of the Sons of Italy in America, the oldest and largest organization of Italian Americans in the United States, announced that it was "puzzled by such a statement and the station's refusal to do an on-air apology. We understand that Mr. Nice is an African American, but we don't understand why it is wrong for a white person to call an African American that name, but okay for an African American to use it to describe white people." What the organization's spokesperson saw as so offensive was not the entire phrase, just the epithet, which made no sense since it was used by an African American to describe whites. What they seem to have missed, however, was how this radio host was calling Italians out on their particular whiteness: Italians were not always white, and the loss of this memory is one of the tragedies of racism in America [1].

The forgetfulness that both Nice and Guglielmo describe is particularly hard to forgive in light of the fact that, while Italians faced prejudice and obstacles in light of their status as immigrants, their suffering as marginalized Americans is miniscule in comparison to what African-Americans have gone through, from the age of slavery up through the present. As Malcolm X wrote in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965):

How is the black man going to get "civil rights" before first he wins his human rights? If the American black man will start thinking about his human rights, and then start thinking of himself as part of one of the world's great peoples, he will see he has a case for the United Nations. I can't think of a better case! Four hundred years of black blood and sweat invested here in America, and the white man still has the black man begging for what every immigrant fresh off the ship can take for granted the minute he walks off the gangplank [806].

While I agree with Malcolm X's point wholeheartedly, in my experience, most Italian Americans either don't understand what he is saying, or are too offended by his argument to consider the possibility that it might be true. Italian Americans from Staten Island forget that they, like the blacks, have suffered from prejudice. They forget that the early Italian Americans in America were *allies with the black activists of the late eighteen hundreds and early nineteen hundreds*, and that Italians were famously lynched in New Orleans. They also forget that they, in comparison to African-Americans, have suffered little. Instead, Staten Island Italian Americans in particular wonder why they were able to class-jump from a one-room apartment in Bay Ridge to a semi-attached home in Staten Island while other minorities seem mired in poverty,

incapable of making such a class jump. This kind of thinking leads to Staten Island Italians wishing that the old neighborhoods would somehow be "cleaned up" by the Italian equivalent of the Boondock Saints, or the Punisher. These sentiments are harsh and despicable, and shared by the vast majority of Italian- and Irish-Americans I knew growing up in Staten Island. Many of these same Staten Islanders, not coincidentally, were big fans of *The Punisher* comic book growing up.

Ironically, such horrible sentiments have been most effectively countered by a voice for tolerance that comes from the unlikelyst of quarters, the Irish-American, right-leaning Fox News personality who bills himself as a moderate when he is anything but ... Bill O'Reilly. Using personal memories and anecdotal evidence rather than statistics, O'Reilly nevertheless gives a reasonable response to Italian Americans like those I grew up around, who blamed the wrong people for the deterioration of the neighborhoods they used to live in. As O'Reilly writes in *The O'Reilly Factor: The Good, the Bad, and the Completely Ridiculous in American Life* (2000):

The attitude of my [prejudiced] friend's parents came, I think, from the history of our lily-white town. Levittown was populated in the 1950s, mostly by whites who fled Brooklyn after World War II. This sudden exodus was caused by evil real estate agents. They began buying up small apartment houses and moving black families in. This was not an enlightened plan to promote integration and harmony among the races. They knew that many Irish, Italian, and Jewish families would succumb to prejudice-and to well-placed rumors-by selling their row houses in a panic.

That's how "blockbusting" began. Real estate prices dropped drastically in many working-class sections of Brooklyn. The real estate people, the blockbusters themselves, snapped up the houses cheap. Then they subdivided them, squeezing two black-families into a one-family structure. One thing led to another, and the quality of some neighborhoods spiraled downward fast. The agents, now acting as landlords, made a killing on rent but provided little maintenance.

I know what I'm talking about because my family experienced it. My grandfather meticulously maintained his home on West Street in Brooklyn because he owned it. The black families coming into these areas usually could not afford to own. As renters, they reasonably expected their landlords to be responsible for maintenance and repairs. Few of these landlords bothered. Maintenance cut into profits.

Naturally, many of the blocks owned by blockbusters began to deteriorate. Some whites blamed the black renters for this decline, but they were looking only at the surface. The slums had been created by blockbusters, and they were never really held accountable. Setting one race against another, they used fear and prejudice to make money, not caring that well-kept, peaceful neighborhoods were destroyed [156-157].

While there is evidence to support O'Reilly's claims, such a reflection on the creation of "bad neighborhoods" rarely filters into popular crime nar-

ratives, be they *Punisher* comic books or episodes of *NYPD Blue*, which are more concerned with depicting the punishment of an individual criminal for a particular crime than with looking at the root causes of poverty, crime, and race and class divisions. Only the comic book *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, written during the activist 1970s by Dennis O'Neil, dares to show a superhero (the Robin-Hood-like Green Arrow) join a gang of minorities in attacking a fat, white businessman for being a slum lord rather than depict a superhero defending a "respectable businessman from an unreasonable mob." It is a striking, progressive image, watching the Caucasian Green Arrow condemn the greedy white businessmen, but it is, again, the exception that proves the rule. Far more common in the world of comic books is the sight of the Punisher acting as racial purist, killing a black or Hispanic mugger/rapist in an alley after the grotesque criminal accosted a pretty white woman at the point of a switchblade. Iconic, and disturbing, scenes such as those demonstrate why, arguably, the Punisher reflects and amplifies the tendencies of conservative readers to, in a racist fashion, scapegoat entire groups for the problems of society without thinking of meaningful ways of dealing with poverty and crime. Obviously, the white-supremacist, wish-fulfillment fantasy of the Punisher is not a meaningful way of thinking about how to fix the problems of the decaying inner cities in America, but many reactionary readers seem to think it is.

Unfortunately, a lot of the men who write stories for the Punisher do not appear to be aware of the racist dimensions of the character. Some are, and present him as a villainous or satirical figure. Other stories are written by people with ambivalent feelings for the character and the result is a work that is hard to decode as either racist or satirical, but that seems to lean towards racism, like the uncomfortable viewing experience that is Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. But a lot of Italians love the Punisher comics as much as they love the movie *Taxi Driver*, and I am suspicious of the motives of fans of both works of pop art. Why, exactly, do they love these stories so much? Can this love be healthy? And what is an alternative to this kind of narrative of black/Italian hostility?

Eddie Murphy has a famous comedy routine where he makes fun of Italian Americans for investing too much in the myth of Rocky Balboa, and accuses the film series of race-baiting and escalating tensions between blacks and Italians because three of Rocky's main opponents are formidable African Americans whom audience members are invited to root against. While I see where he is coming from, the friendship that Rocky eventually cultivates with Apollo Creed in *Rocky III* and *IV*, the training he does under Tony Burton, the affection he gives to Little Marie's son Steps, and the respect he ultimately gives the Mason "the Line" Dixon, who defeats Rocky at the end of *Rocky*

Balboa, is an infinitely preferable model of black/Italian relationships than those seen just about anywhere else in the popular media.

And, coming at it from another angle, unlike most Italian American characters in film, Rocky has the advantage of being *a really nice guy*.

Amazing!

The *Rocky* films are not perfect, but they are the best we've got so far outside of the genre of the crime film, and the respective legacies of *The Godfather* and *The Punisher*.

The Legacy of the Punisher

The Punisher comic books belong to the same disturbing pop culture family as 1970s and 1980s slasher movies, exploitation crime films, and rape revenge narratives like *I Spit on Your Grave*. Film historians have argued that these exploitation films were a natural outgrowth of the horrors of the Vietnam War, as well as a backlash against the "Love Generation," and all endorsed a conservative worldview. Unsurprisingly, in the contemporary political environment created by the Iraq War, the Punisher is back and Quentin Tarantino is gleefully trying to resurrect the 1970s exploitation film in *Grindhouse*. And everything old is new again.

And what of the Italian Americans of the Iraq war generation?

Who are they and what is their relationship to this grotesque character?

In recent years, the growth of the discipline of Italian American studies in academia has inspired the writing of several excellent books about the Italian American experience by members of the "baby-boom" generation. These works, which include Robert Viscusi's *Buried Caesars* (2006) and Alfred Lubrano's *Limbo* (2004), have used autobiographical anecdotes, historical research, and sociological data to chronicle the journey of enculturation that many Italian American families made over a period of several generations. Such works invariably begin with a discussion of the arrival of the main wave of immigrants at Ellis Island and follow the displaced Italians to urban centers such as Rochester or Brooklyn, where they survived in an alien land by clustering together in "Little Italy" neighborhoods and toiling in jobs involving hard physical labor and unjustly low pay. From such humble beginnings, these working-class Italians saved enough to send their children to college, or to enable their progeny to begin their own small businesses. Within the span of two or three generations, many Italian Americans felt that they had finally achieved the much-vaunted American Dream when the descendants of immigrants began trading in their one-bedroom city apartments for (semi-attached) homes in the suburbs of places like New Jersey and Staten Island.

Both Viscusi and Lubrano speak of the present-day Italian American as a middle-class figure, often a college professor in the humanities, or an executive with one home in Park Avenue and another in Tuscany, who is weary of the immigrant stereotype of the Mafia don that haunts the Italian American public image and who has a love-hate relationship with films like *The Godfather*. For these authors, the greatest problem facing their contemporaries are identity issues tied up with the fact that, as financially and socially successful as Italian Americans are, they do not feel "at home" anywhere. For Lubrano, the feeling of "Limbo" is one of class. Italians who were the first members of their family to graduate college never felt at home in the Protestant, middle-class communities they moved into (or the "WASPy" occupations they entered), nor could they ever feel at home again in the working-class communities they left behind. According to Viscusi, national identity remains the most contested problem as Italian Americans are still not truly accepted either by the Italy they left behind or the America they came to. As he writes:

...consider the difficulties immigrant Italians needed to face in developing a discourse of their own entitlement in the millennial European project called *America* [after the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci]. These new arrivals in no way could identify themselves directly with the ruling peoples. The Anglo-Americans had resisted the entry of the Irish Catholics. But now these groups began to cooperate in the definitive marginalizing of the Italians, who found themselves forming, and still do, a part of the vivid and highly decorated frame of American society, along with the blacks, the Latinos, and the Eastern European Jews. Naturally, a society as mobile as that of the United States always has room to absorb some members of these border peoples into the operating centers, but much larger proportions remain, as before, to a greater or lesser degree visibly tattooed with their tribal or racial otherness. For Italians this exclusion has been less rigid than for blacks or Latinos, but more rigid than for Jews and Irish Catholics. In short, to the regional and class divisions of Italy has been added in the United States the machinery of ethnic boundary markers. The borders are such that Italians who cross them must do so at the risk of losing their own possibilities of historical self-awareness.

...Not surprisingly, many Italians have refused to pay this price [146-147].

Despite the obvious anxiety in evidence here, the general narrative arc presented by both books suggests that, despite the presence of many obstacles—such as anti-Catholic bigotry, first-generation immigrant poverty—the Italians have succeeded in improving their lot in America with each successive generation.

As Viscusi observes,

Italians now come to New York, not to organize garbage trucks and cocaine dealers, but to represent major manufacturers, traders, and banks. They have offices along Park Avenue. They win lucrative contracts to build bridges and

pipelines all over the world.... From Greenwich, Connecticut, to Palo Alto, California, Italian American professionals have the financial and educational capital to appreciate the finer — that is, the more socially dominant — meanings of the word *Italian*.... These graduates of Stanford and Harvard do not resemble the candy store bookies and Brooklyn torpedoes who populate American Mafia films. As Italian Americans move toward the notion that *Italian* means something central and authoritative, their impatience with the immigrant stigma grows. Some spend huge amounts of money protesting the Mafia mythology. Others simply buy themselves villas in Tuscany [31].

However, despite the fact that previous generations of Italian Americans have seen their quality of life improve, and have seen the creation of a class of Italian Americans who can afford to buy a house in Tuscany, this is the first generation in which Italians appear to be losing ground in their quests to finally achieve, and retain, their status as full-fledged Americans while holding on to their Italian heritage. Lubrano and Viscusi both effectively end their discussion with the “baby-boom” generation, and do not consider how members of Generation X, or the Millennial Generation, have fared in the face of additional problems such as the dissolution of the American family, the political polarization of the Culture Wars and the War on Terror, and the slowdown of the American economy. Naturally, all of these issues plague the baby boomers as well, but they are having a particularly disastrous effect on young Americans in general, who have not yet made their careers or begun their families.

Even as Rudolph Giuliani failed his 2008 bid to become the first Italian (and the second Roman Catholic) U.S. president, middle-class suburban Italian families seem to be fighting to keep up with their mortgages, health care and utility bills, and debt from college loans and credit cards used to help keep the family up with inflation. The financial strain has caused many Italian Americans in their twenties and thirties to wonder why they bothered going to college when all that is open to them is a middle management job that involves sitting in a cubicle in an understaffed office entering data into a computer for more than forty hours a week with no health benefits and no chance of promotion. Truly, they are members of the Generation Debt described by Anya Kamenez in her 2006 book of that title. As such, many Italian Americans wonder whether they will ever earn enough money so they can marry, buy a house of their own, or have children, and some males lament the possibility of ever meeting a woman who has not been so scarred by her parents’ divorce that she is even willing to consider marriage. Also, while Italians have traditionally not been big drinkers, reserving their alcohol intake for a glass or two of wine at dinner, the younger generations of Italian Americans have taken, in recent years, to succumbing to the youth party culture and, on Staten Island, are now part of a demographic of “Northeast ... white,

middle-class, teenage" Catholics who are "one of the highest demographics of underage drinkers" who "drink, and drink savagely" (Zailckas xv).

It is also interesting to try to trace the migratory patterns of Italian Americans, many of whom cannot afford to be homeowners, but do not feel at home returning to the apartment buildings their families owned in the past, since new ethnic groups have moved in and the neighborhoods are less "Italian," or, in the case of Greenwich Village, far too expensive for most. However, the richer Italians are part of an intriguing white-flight pattern. Some have moved off of Staten Island over the years, searching for greener pastures in New Jersey, joining other former Brooklyn residents who bypassed New York's least famous borough. Other Italians moved to Florida, but later grew tired of Florida and decided to take a home in North Carolina. (Local lingo dubs these North Carolina transplants from Florida "half-backs" because they moved half-way back to Brooklyn.) Despite these maneuvers, there is a general sense among Staten Islanders that there's no place to move *to*. Partly due to economic factors, partly due to a lack of imagination or a general sense of fear, they feel fundamentally trapped on Staten Island, as if it were some kind of black hole. They are not very interested in Italy, or most of the rest of the country, or even Manhattan, which is expensive and a pain to commute to given the lack of subway access, affordable parking, and the erratic bus schedule. If they do move, they want it to be to another "Little Italy," for fear that, should they try moving to a town without a sizable Italian populace, they will be greeted with disdain by the non-Italian neighbors. In addition, as Italians disperse across America, it becomes harder to maintain their traditional culture in any meaningful way — especially when, thanks to falling Italian and Italian American birthrates — there are fewer and fewer birds of the same feathers to flock together. It is even difficult sometimes to eat "real" Italian food when the closest thing Italian Americans living in rural or suburban areas can find to Italian food is Olive Garden (!) or whatever Wal-Mart chooses to stock in its generic ethnic foods isle.

Given that they are facing this situation, Italian Americans of today might consider the possibility that American society, and the American Dream, is in need of serious reform. As they face this reality, it might behoove them to remember that, as bad as their problems are, there are other groups suffering far more serious calamities in the United States, who never succeeded in making the class jump that they did in the first place, and who might reasonably feel that worrying about a "middle class squeeze" constitutes living a charmed life. Italian Americans might finally embrace a life of progressivism and activism in a way they haven't done in decades. On the other hand, Italians caught in such a squeeze may buy into racist propaganda that only outsourcing of jobs to India or illegal immigration from Mexico are to blame

for their woes, and feel their inclination towards prejudice magnify into full-blown racism.³ And they may become still more conservative and reactionary as a culture.

Italian Americans are at a cross-roads. Since there aren't any media representations of Italians *as we are today*, that speak to our current situation, we need to come up with a new vision of who we are in the twenty-first century, what we stand for, how we want to relate to members of other cultures and other races, what kind of Italians we want to be, and what kind of Americans we want to be. Since so many of the Italian Americans shown on film and television are not Italian Americans *as we actually are*, but Italian Americans as the rest of the country *needs us to be* to satisfy their own fantasies — larger-than-life gangsters as mythic symbols of “the modern urban cowboy” who act on the needs of the *id* in ways that mainstream America, with its overdeveloped *superego*, cannot — there are few popular culture role models for who we are and what we really represent. However, in some ways, even the most sensationalistic figures of Italians presented in the mass media offer us possible models of our current situation, and no Italian figure is more interesting to me, and more apropos of our situation at the moment, than the figure of the Italian American member of law enforcement. As an image of Italian Americans from a previous generation who has endured in this one, Columbo continues to serve as the best example of an Italian American in popular culture that is currently available to us — if one were inclined to look to fictional characters for inspiration, of course.

Columbo is a creature of intellect who understands how society works. He spends his time fighting the corrupt, white-collar criminals who undermine our democratic system and exploit the poor instead of wasting his time scapegoating the disenfranchised and the desperate. He treats other police officers with warmth and respect, whether they are Italian, African-American, or any other race or ethnicity. He is also comfortably American, comfortably Italian, and does not hate himself or anyone else. He is a great male role model for young Italian men.

The Punisher, on the other hand, represents Italian Americans at their worst: anti-feminist, homophobic, racist, self-loathing, Catholic zealots who are caught up in the pro-Mafia/anti-Mafia polemic and unwilling to see themselves, and the world, in a broader, more enlightened context. The Punisher represents a retreat into a fantasy patriarchy in which he is the Caesar in the “Old Italian” tradition and wants to exert his will to make a new “Little Italy” in America where all other races need not apply for residence, and only Italians who have never been in the Mafia are allowed entrance.

If anything, the Punisher may still serve us well as an example of what not to do as a next step for the Italian American community, and the indi-

vidual Italian American male... The Punisher represents a warning to us not to make any of the choices Frank Castle made. He is an illiterate moron who thinks that all of society's problems can be solved with the barrel of a gun. As appealing as the Punisher's anti-Mafia stance might be to some of us, the Punisher is, ultimately, wrong about crime, wrong about women, wrong about race, and wrong about Italians.

The last thing that Italian Americans should be interested in is imitating a dead-end character like him. In the end, despite their flaws, Italian American men are better than that, and should act accordingly.

Special thanks to the following readers for their insights and opinions: Barry Harvey, assistant professor of criminal justice, Alvernia College; Catherine Porzio, professor emeritus of English, New York City Technical College; and Marc Lucht, assistant professor of philosophy, Alvernia College.

Notes

1. According to Barry Harvey, a twenty-four-year veteran of the Pennsylvania State Police's Organized Crime Division, it is difficult to ascertain how many (and what percentage) of Italian Americans were a part of the mafia throughout its history, from the Prohibition era to the present. "As the mafia is a 'secret' organization it usually is very difficult to determine accurate numbers. There are members and then there are associates. Most figures are merely estimates by law enforcement agencies or writers who specialize in organized crime.... [However, t]here is no doubt that the percentage of Italian Americans belonging (actually "made members") to the mafia is very small." As Harvey observes, "The original mafia came about as a pseudo government when there was none in Sicily. The local don was the most respected man in the village and functioned as a government would. The mafia, or men of respect, formed around this don to perform services for the community. It was a tradition and part of the heritage. When groups of Sicilians and Italians immigrated to the United States they found themselves living in overcrowded cities where once again the real government ignored them so the men of respect once again became very powerful in the little Italys etc. They viewed themselves as honorable men bringing with them a tradition, rules, and a structure. For the most part these men were looked up to in the neighborhoods.... They would not exist if they were not supported by the public through the use of their "services" and through the support and respect of the Italian/Sicilian people who live in the neighborhoods. So on the one hand they do not like the depiction of all Italians as mafia but on the other hand the mafia is supported and held up as something special in the neighborhoods where they thrive."

2. According to Barry Harvey, "One of the unique things about the Mafia is that they are a criminal organization with tradition and rules, a code of conduct if you will, ways of doing things. Unlike some portrayals, they are not random killers. They do not kill people's wives and families even to get even. They accept the fact that they can be killed at any time as part of their 'occupation' but wives and families are usually off limits. They are very specific killers. So the depiction of them killing a family and then this Punisher taking revenge on them is very far from the truth."

3. These are likely contributing factors to the problem of employment in America, but I am surprised at the extent to which some Staten Islanders seem to express jealousy

of (and hostility to) exploited migrant workers, impoverished illegal immigrants (to whom President Bush rightly wished to grant amnesty), and Third World peoples. My casting these workers as victims may, in a sense, be as much of an unenlightened, prejudiced perspective as casting them as "job thieves," but I speak out of equal concern for their well-being, as well of the well-being of out-of-work Americans, while anti-immigration talk tends to label non-Americans as somehow subhuman and worthy of contempt in a manner that deeply disturbs me.

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