Italian-Americans: the dons of suburbia

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ABSTRACT

Since World War II, the path of least resistance toward middle-class status has led to the suburbs, and Italian-Americans have enthusiastically made their way along it. [...] formulaic stories about Italian-American gangsters have helped Italianness sustain its cachet as a dominant ethnic identity in this country.

FULL TEXT

I'VE NEVER had much of an opinion either way about Columbus Day, but it seems like a good occasion to consider the important role played by people of Italian descent in the settlement and development of a new world in America. I mean the suburbs, of course. There isn't a more suburban ethnic group in this country than Italian-Americans, and it's worth considering what that might mean.

First, the numbers. In an analysis of the 2000 census, the sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee found that 73.5 percent of Italian-Americans who lived in metropolitan areas lived in the suburbs, a percentage that tied them for first place with Polish-Americans, with Irish-Americans and German-Americans coming in third and fourth. And 91.2 percent of Italian-Americans lived in metropolitan areas, a higher percentage than for any other non-Hispanic white ethnic group. (Polish-Americans came in second at 88.3 percent.) Put those two statistics together, and Italian-Americans can make a pretty strong claim to the title of pound-for-pound champions of suburbanization.

That would seem to suggest a history of assimilation and success. Since World War II, the path of least resistance toward middle-class status has led to the suburbs, and Italian-Americans have enthusiastically made their way along it. You'd think they'd be pretty happy about that, and for the most part they are. With sazeech and peppers sizzling on the grill and a nice glass of wine in hand, they can sit back and survey the back yard and consider how pleased the land-hungry peasants and tenement-dwelling immigrants among their ancestors would be to see them so cozily established in a prosperous nation.

But some of our favorite stories about that success, stories that are wildly popular among Italian-Americans and in the culture at large, raise serious doubts about the meaning of Italian-Americans' journey to suburbia.

Exhibit A is the "Godfather" movies, which rank high in the canon of immigrant narratives. They're all about what is gained and lost in the Corleones' journey from Sicily to Little Italy to a family compound in suburban Long Island. An isolated mansion on the shore of Lake Tahoe comes next. By then they're as far away as they can get from the old neighborhood, that place of festas, aspiration, and peoplehood, and from its connection to the old country.

As much as the "Godfather" movies glorify the potency of Italian-American gangsters, they also retell a familiar story in which immigrants must compromise themselves in the name of making it in America. Detailing the damage and bad faith on the dark side of assimilation, they treat the atomization of suburbia as very dangerous

business. By the end of "Godfather II," Michael has made it by the standard American measures - he owns a big house and his kids can have any thing they want - but at the cost of divesting himself of any vital bond to other people, including his own family. He's a man without a tribe.

"The Sopranos" picks up the story right there, with Tony and Carmela anxiously marooned in their suburban McMansion. She lunches and shops and dabbles in real estate, wondering if it's evil to enjoy the good life provided by her successful husband. He pines for a nostalgically idealized old neighborhood but faints at the sight of capicola (OK, fine: gabagool) in the refrigerator.

You still hear the occasional Sons of Italy-type complain that mafia stories are stereotypes that do harm to Italian-Americans. Such critics may have their hearts in the right place (may, I say), but in their analysis of culture I think they get it exactly wrong. Those stories have been a boon to Italian-Americans in at least two ways.

First, the "Godfather" movies and their many imitators have filled our cultural tool boxes with ways to imagine what it means to be of Italian descent, to be an immigrant, to make it in this country. Because they invite us to brood over assimilation and suburbanization, among other things, they afford us opportunities to consider whether it has been worth it to accept the offer of American belonging that so many immigrants have been unable to refuse.

Second, formulaic stories about Italian-American gangsters have helped Italianness sustain its cachet as a dominant ethnic identity in this country. Like Columbus's voyage, I'm a Spanish-Italian co-production, but Spanish is a recessive trait in American immigrant identity. Popular culture has not supplied me with much material I can use to fashion an identity as a Spanish-American. Meanwhile, we're surrounded by constant reminders of how and why to be Italian-American, cultural Lego pieces that even those with no familial link to Italy can use to assemble a sense of self. I never have found much use for Columbus, but "don't ever take sides with anyone against the family" is extremely handy equipment for living. Just ask my Chinese-German-Spanish-Italian-American kids.

So happy - or whatever - Columbus Day. There's still time to rent "Godfather I" and "II" and a season of "The Sopranos" (chances are good you own at least one of these already) and spend the day sampling that most American of epics, the story of the suburbanization of Italian-Americans.

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