

Introduction to the Special Issue on Organized Crime

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On March 20, 1971, the *New York Times* ran the front-page headline “‘Godfather’ Film Won’t Mention Mafia” (Lichtenstein 1971, 1). The story reported that producer Al Ruddy of Paramount Pictures and representatives of the Italian American Civil Rights League had agreed to strike the words *mafia* and *Cosa Nostra* from the script of the film *The Godfather*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola and based on Mario Puzo’s 1969 best-selling novel of the same name. One of the League representatives was Anthony Colombo. His father, Joseph Colombo Sr., was one of the organization’s founders—and head of the Colombo crime family—and had nefariously appropriated the role of Italian American leader and spokesperson. Until that moment the production of the film had experienced intimidation, theft, and violence. So this was a propitious deal of quid pro quo; in exchange for script censorship, all the difficulties that had plagued pre-production and production ceased, and mob-controlled labor unions began cooperating with the filming (Seal 2009).

This sordid collusion was complicated by the fact that Italian American *prominenti* (literally “prominent ones”)—including U.S. congressmen, New York State legislators, judges, businessmen, and representatives of the chapter-based national organization Order Sons of Italy—had been bemoaning the film’s production as “anti-Italian” and threatening to wage an economic boycott and to stage protests of the movie (Pileggi 1971, 36–37). A blurring occurred in which the mobbed-up League was conflated in the popular imagination with civic-minded spokespeople, thus diminishing the latter’s seemingly altruistic efforts (Kenna 2007, 193). But as historian Philip V. Cannistraro notes, “the *prominenti*’s constant preoccupation with the Mafia issue” (2005, 83), dating to the early 1930s when newspaper owner Generoso Pope launched an anti-defamation campaign against cinematic depictions of *mafiosi*, has historically been a self-serving agenda. “The dual focus of *prominentismo* has always been to promote the separate, self-aggrandizing interest of their own particular elite rather than the community as a whole, and to stress what Italian Americans are not” (Cannistraro 2005, 84). It is no surprise, then, as Fred Gardaphé observes, that “more unified acts by Italian Americans have been launched against fictional portrayal of the mafia than ever were mounted against real mafiosi in the United States” (2015, 365).

The extraordinary detente between Paramount and the League resulted in a peculiar comingling of actors and gangsters. Hollywood principals like Marlon Brando (Vito Corleone) and Robert Duvall (Tom Hagen) met with criminals to prepare for their parts. James Caan socialized with mobsters on and off the set, picking up gestures, accents, and phrases for his role as Mafia heir apparent Sonny Corelone. According to one source, undercover agents who saw Caan in the presence of crime boss Carmine Persico were convinced that the young actor was an up-and-coming hood (Pileggi 1971, 48). The actor-gangster identity crisis reached such bizarre heights that “one supporting actor got so confused about who he was that he joined a carload of enforcers on a trip to Jersey to beat up scabs in a labor dispute” (1971, 48). Others who were vying for roles claimed spurious and genuine mob connections like Alex Rocco (Moe Greene) and Gianni Russo (Carlo Rizzi) (Seal 2009). And some used their own Mafia connections to secure a part in this extravagant Hollywood period film. Pop crooner Al Martino (Johnny Fontane) revealed, “I had to step on some toes to get people to realize that I was in the effing movie. I went to my godfather, Russ Bufalino,” the Pennsylvania mob boss (Seal 2009).

This encounter and exchange between the realities and representations of organized crime was further confounded when some gangsters were cast as bit players and extras. One noted example was ex-wrestler Lenny Montana who had been a bodyguard for the Colombo crime family when he was given the part of Luca Brasi (Seal 2009). In its search for authenticity, *The Godfather* film contributed to the replication of refracted Mafia imagery in a mediated house of mirrors. The film’s legacy of converging mediascape and ethnoscape continues to reverberate in numerous cultural productions such as *The Sopranos*, *Mob Wives*, the “hip wop” rendition of rap music (Sciorra 2011, 33–51), and countless television commercials and web skits and parodies.

This special issue of the *Italian American Review* on organized crime brings together six essays exploring the realities and representations of Italian Americans and criminality. Given the historical association of Italian Americans with organized crime in the United States, it behooves us as scholars of Italian American studies to tackle this subject with all the intellectual rigor of our various disciplinary insights. As we know, organized crime is not unique to any one country or ethnic group but rather develops out of specific economic and social conditions across the globe at different historical moments. As the sole university research institute for Italian American studies, the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute and its scholarly journal are uniquely positioned to address this topic.

The Calandra Institute's seventh annual conference, titled "MAFIAs: Realities and Representations of Organized Crime" (April 25–26, 2014), is the origin of this special issue. The event sought to cover a variety of worldwide manifestations of organized crime, not just those concerning Italians or Italian Americans. Conference participants spoke on topics pertaining to Jewish and Polish American mobsters in the United States as well as organized crime in Colombia, India, Japan, Pakistan, and Sweden. The breadth of this conference program exhibited a wide and deep intellectual discourse across various disciplinary fields.

Given the *Italian American Review's* purview, I, as journal editor, asked conference participants who were addressing the specificity of Italian Americans to submit their expanded papers for peer review. I would be remiss not to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who read all five essays. In addition, I invited keynote speaker Jane Schneider to submit to the journal a revised version of her conference paper.

Jane Schneider's "Mafia Emergence: What Kind of State?" sets out to explore the social, political, and economic conditions under which organized crime emerges and flourishes. Beginning her essay with Italy, Schneider also discusses Mafias in Hong Kong, Japan, Russia, Taiwan, and the United States to develop a theory of Mafia formation. In addition, she codifies the parameters of what constitutes a Mafia, as opposed to other forms of organized crime such as gangs or pirates. A key element in defining any criminal organization as Mafia, according to Schneider, is its collusion with an ineffectual state. The breadth of her interdisciplinary study references a wide range of scholarship by anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and economists as she unpacks Mafias' cultural aspects (ritualized behaviors, venues for socializing, art forms) and antisocialist, anticommunist, and anti-labor politicized violence. Schneider's in-depth analysis and broad overview are a fitting opening to this special issue.

Historian Tommaso Caiazza's essay, "'No Mafia Here': Crime, Race, and the Narrative of San Francisco's Italian American 'Model Colony'" looks at mediated depictions of criminality among San Francisco's Italian American communities during the Progressive Era. He is concerned with the intersection of criminality and racialization, or what he calls the "process of racialized criminalization" (32). Caiazza is attuned to both inter- and intra-ethnic dynamics—how the English-language press discussed crime and violence among the city's Italian immigrants but also how the Italian-language press in turn reacted to those depictions. Tensions existed between northern and southern Italian immigrants, as well as between the established and middle-class Italian Americans and the more recently arrived, working-class Italian immigrants. Looking at

newspaper accounts of a brutal murder in 1905, Caiazza expands on the ways race and community were constructed and negotiated. Furthermore, he situates Italian immigrants within a multi-racial city that included Asian Americans and Mexican Americans in explaining how the local *prominenti* created the myth of a “model community” in their attempts to distinguish West Coast Italians from their East Coast counterparts.

The interplay between mediated depictions in U.S. newspapers is further expanded upon in “Early Representations of Organized Crime and Issues of Identity in the Italian American Press (1890–1910)” by Marina Cacioppo. The author looks at the Italian-language press’s creation of counternarratives to derogatory and discriminatory articles about Italian immigrant criminality in the English-language press. Scouring publications like *Collier’s Weekly*, *Harper’s Weekly*, *L’Eco d’Italia*, *L’Araldo Italiano*, and others, Cacioppo examines the discursive accounts of the 1891 lynching of Italians in New Orleans and a 1903 New York City murder. One of the ways that the Italian-language press combatted the xenophobic conflation of Italian immigrants, violence, and criminality in the guise of the Black Hand and the Mafia was with the promotion of Lieutenant Joseph Petrosino of the New York Police Department as a model ethnic and communal hero. In this and other sundry ways, the immigrant press with its *prominenti* editors and journalists helped shape an Italian American identity in the early days of mass migration.

Anthony Tasso updates the mediated *mafioso* by taking a psychological approach to the popular fascination with Italian American gangsters, in particular the heralded *The Godfather* and *The Godfather II* (1972 and 1974), *Goodfellas* (1990), *Casino* (1995), and *The Sopranos* (1999–2007). In “An Examination of Mafia Spectatorship Phenomena from a Psychological Perspective,” Tasso frames his analysis of these works and their audiences on psychological concepts concerning narcissism and omnipotence, rules and structure, familial connectedness, and gender roles. For the author, the spectator of mob films and TV shows experiences an allure of and identification with powerful, violent, and non-socionormative characters who are also engaged in familial collective relationships, albeit of an extremely problematic nature. Ultimately, for Tasso, the viewer’s voyeuristic engagement with mob fare “facilitates the psychological bifurcation” of transgressive, hostile behavior and the “organized” part of crime that “stimulates intrapsychic conflict” (85), a heady and emotional cocktail.

During the first half of the twentieth century, both Italian Americans and Polish Americans in Chicago and its environs were involved in organized crime. Yet, as Louis Corsino explores in his essay “Revisiting the Link between Italian Americans and Organized Crime: The Italian Americans and Polish Americans in the Community Context,” Italian

Americans created an entrenched and vigorous crime operation, known simply as the “Outfit,” while Polish Americans did not. Tracing the trajectories of these two groups in the Illinois city of Chicago Heights (thirty miles south of Chicago) vis-à-vis jobs, housing, residency patterns, social networks, voluntary associations, and discrimination, Corsino does not find much disparity between the two groups. So, why the divergence of the two groups in the involvement with organized crime? Corsino finds that social capital linked to external group affiliations in Chicago proper was key for Italian Americans in Chicago Heights solidifying and expanding their organized crime enterprise.

The final article in this special issue, Peter T. Schneider’s “Havana, Cuba: Contraband Capitalism and Criminal Organization in North America,” takes us to Cuba, which became a haven for the U.S. Mafia’s laundering of money from various illegal activities during the Prohibition era. Contraband capitalism, a term Schneider introduces and explicates in his essay, is the profiteering of desirable yet illegal goods and services. As U.S. gangsters used Cuba as a base for hiding profits made from alcohol, drugs, gambling, prostitution, and other illegal commodities, they also took control of illicit activities on the island. Key players in this transnational enterprise included Santo Trafficante Sr. and his son Santo Trafficante Jr. of Tampa, and Charles “Lucky” Luciano and Meyer Lansky out of New York City. Schneider concludes his article by speculating on “What would have happened to the American Mafia, and its role in American history, had it not been for the Cuban Revolution of 1959?” (112).

Those involved in Italy’s anti-Mafia movement have inspired people worldwide with their courageous strategies for confronting the silence and acquiescence that have existed for too long around criminal activities of this nature. They have successfully extricated themselves from an ideology of *omertà*, complacency, and collusion, in a project of “reversible destiny” (Schneider and Schneider 2003). This special issue of *Italian American Review*, as well as the original Calandra Institute conference, is in keeping with that sentiment of resistance insofar as it aims to shine a light on heinous practices that so many have chosen to willfully ignore for so long.

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