

# “We Only Done What Any Red-Blooded American Boys Would Do:” The Making of Italian Americans in East New York, 1966

MARIA C. LIZZI

The phone rang at Frank Fauci’s East New York restaurant as New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay and his staff arrived at the Brooklyn neighborhood’s Livonia Avenue. The caller growled a simple message before hanging up: “You and your guinea friends will get it in the end.” Outside, Fauci could hear the crowd that had gathered to confront the mayor growing increasingly louder as Lindsay approached. “Go back to Africa, Lindsay! And take your niggers with you!” yelled one angry young man. In response, an African-American youth hollered back, “We’ll get you, whitey!” At the same time, members of SPONGE, the Society for the Prevention of Negroes Getting Everything, took up the chant, “Two-four-six-eight! We don’t want to integrate!” The mayor and his aides, on their way to a meeting with local community leaders, made their way down the street, lined with both the screaming protesters and the furniture of families who had abruptly decided to move out of the neighborhood (“Too Many with Nothing to Do – But Trouble” 1966, 3; Montgomery 1966, 1).<sup>1</sup>

Lindsay’s visit came as a response to weeks of low-level violence between three groups of teens, which had escalated following the firebombing of a white-owned “gypsy cab” company, or car service. Following the firebombing, the neighborhood erupted; armed gangs of residents roamed the streets looking for a fight, while firemen navigated their way through the broken glass from shattered storefronts as they attempted to quench burning vacant buildings that had fallen victim to arson. Lindsay’s pacifying visit had little effect as the violence continued even in the presence of New York City policemen; in fact, the police became the target of the residents’ rage. A young African-American man, aiming at a policeman, missed his intended victim and instead fatally shot an eleven-year-old African-American boy who had been allowed out in the hopes of meeting the mayor. Rather than classify these events as a *riot*, the press and the Lindsay administration shied away from the term, choosing instead to refer to the events in East New York as “more along the lines of old time gang fights,” instead of a riot directed at authority or property (Rosenfeld and Seely 1966).

Problems with terminology plagued the Lindsay administration and the press as they attempted to describe and then cope with the events in East New York in July of 1966. In addition to avoiding the use of the term

riot, identifying the disorders' participants proved equally problematic. The majority of observers agreed on the identity of two of the groups of youths—one group was African American and the other Puerto Rican. The African-American and Puerto Rican groups clashed with each other and had also joined together to fight the third group, whose identity varied depending on who was describing them. The rhetoric used by the third group implied that they were angry whites, as did the response they received from some of the neighborhood's African-American and Puerto Rican residents. However, the administration and the press highlighted the ethnic identity, rather than the race, of the third group, choosing to refer to them not as whites, but as Italians. In doing so, they ignored the third group's self-identification as white Americans and referenced the ethnic signifier ("the guineas") applied to the group by both minority residents who employed readily available ethnic stereotypes and assumptions and other neighborhood whites who condemned the group's violent behavior and sought to distance themselves from it (Kempton 1966; "Koota Weighs Probe of Paid Racial Agents" 1966; Hofmann 1966c).

The identification of the white rioters as Italian Americans dictated not only how the mayor's office responded to events in East New York but also the treatment the situation has received by both historians and sociologists in the decades that followed. In his 2008 book, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*, historian Rick Perlstein wrote of the rioters: "'We don't want you here, nigger-lover!' the *Italian* kids organized into a gang called SPONGE shouted" (emphasis added) (Perlstein 2008, 109). If what happened was nothing more than gang warfare, it was warfare between Italian Americans, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans. No "whites" were involved.

On the one hand, the Lindsay administration and the New York media identified the disorder in East New York as more along the lines of an "old time gang fight" than an expressive riot of the type that rocked the nation during the long, hot summers of the late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Yet this assessment ignores the fact that the third group of disorder participants acted as neighborhood "defenders," defending "their" territory from racial "threats" and residential incursion in much the same way white Americans of mixed ethnic backgrounds had throughout the post-World War II period. At its onset, it was a "gang fight" with more in common with earlier anti-integration riots that pitted white residents against minorities who were new to the neighborhood (Gottelher 2007, 5). In this sense, the East York disorder was yet another example of the white backlash against minorities, which scholars, such as historians David Freund and David Roediger, have demonstrated began well before the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, what happened in East New York did resemble the riots that occurred that same month in Cleveland (Michney 2006). While the third group of disorder participants "defended" what was once a white neighborhood, the "new" East New Yorkers, African Americans and Puerto Ricans, fought for what the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders would identify as "fuller participation in the social order and the material benefits enjoyed by the majority of American citizens." "Rather than rejecting the American system," these East New Yorkers "were anxious to obtain a place for themselves in it," a place already attained by the third group of rioters, whether they recognized it or not (United States 1968, 4). It may have been difficult for this group to retain its sense of privilege because its members were joined, regardless of their race or ethnic background, with other East New Yorkers by their anger at a system that they felt had abandoned them. Through their violence, which was directed both at each other and at the larger social system, all residents voiced dissatisfaction with the state of their neighborhood and the quality of city services, their growing sense of frustration because their pleas for help were being ignored, and the sense of futility that accompanied attempting to solve problems far beyond their control.<sup>4</sup> Although the disorder in East New York may have begun as one type of riot or disorder, it quickly transformed into an easily recognizable riot against the existing power structure.

Whether it had more in common with the other anti-integration riots of the post-World War II period or it was a riot directed at white authority, the persistent identification of the third group of rioters as Italian American clearly illustrates the difficulty many white ethnics faced in the mid-1960s. As they attempted to define the nature of their American identity, they faced a new and different definition of Americanism than the one to which earlier generations had grown accustomed, one that no longer hinged upon the whiteness accorded by homeownership. This changing definition of Americanism helps explain why two politically potent phenomena appeared to emerge in the 1960s: the white backlash and the New Ethnic Movement, the movement in which white ethnics used their ethnic identities for political purposes. The careful avoidance of such terms as *riot* and *white* to describe the third group of rioters denied the motivations of all groups involved. By avoiding these terms, the Lindsay administration and others in political power could project their own ideals of what it meant to be both white and an American on to the participants in East New York's violent disorder.

When the *New York Times* asked, "How could East New York happen in America?" the question was not in reference to the rioting but to the block-busting and resulting devastation that turned a wholly livable working-class

neighborhood into what urban planner Walter Thabit described as one of the city's worst ghettos ("City Hearing on Block Busting" 1962, 1; Thabit 2003). From the turn of the twentieth century until the late 1950s, East New York had been a mixed white ethnic neighborhood, made up largely of Italians, Jews, Lithuanians, and Poles (Thabit 1966). The neighborhood "gave form to their escape" from the overcrowded tenements and ethnic ghettos of Manhattan, wrote columnist Pete Hamill. The neat two-family brick homes with small gardens, therefore, meant more than just housing to these residents (Hamill 1966, 3).

For many working-class white ethnics across the urban North, the neighborhoods filled with small homes signified what historian Thomas J. Sugrue called a "tenuous" hold on affluence and participation in the "American system" mentioned in the Kerner Commission report (Sugrue 1995, 555, 564). In fact, the promise of homeownership, argues cultural historian Jim Cullen in *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, shapes a central portion of that oft-referred to, but seldom defined, "American Dream." For millions of Americans, both white and minority, homeownership became not only a mark of relative affluence but also the path to further promise – the promise of a higher standard of living, better educational opportunities for their children, and a way in which they could form and maintain important social and cultural networks (Cullen 2003, 133–58). Although the analysis of homeownership and its extended meanings has, in works such as Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontiers*, Andrew Weise's *A Place of Their Own*, and Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound*, focused mainly on life in the quickly growing suburbs, city-dwellers dreamed the same dream in their urban neighborhoods.

Although the dream was shared by people of all races, the same color boundaries that pervaded American society until the Civil Rights Movement affected access to the American Dream of homeownership. Many East New Yorkers of European descent had either saved their homes from foreclosure or purchased them by taking advantage of the New Deal and post-World War II housing programs opened only to white Americans, a fact of which they either had never been aware or later seemed to conveniently forget. The sheer access to these programs also solidified their identity as worthy members of the American system, a system into which they believed they had been contributing all along. In applying for Federal Housing Administration (FHA) or Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) loans, applicants in the 1930s couched their claims in terms of their new rights as Americans. One Italian-American resident of Chicago wrote to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "I am an American citizen for the past thirty years and my children were born in America, and as such

I believe I am entitled to some consideration. Your Excellency made these loans possible for destitute cases just like mine" (Cohen 1990, 276). By 1935, the HOLC alone refinanced 20 percent of urban homes, homes that were in areas that the HOLC and FHA rated as not "unstable" or "declining." The presence of a single non-white-owned home was enough for the HOLC and FHA to declare an entire neighborhood in "decline" and redline it, preventing those living there from obtaining financing, regardless of their color (Cohen 1990, 274). Therefore, a government-financed home, as Roediger and Freund illustrate, defined its owner's whiteness in concrete form (Roediger 2005; Freund 2007).

One of the cornerstones of Roosevelt's 1944 "Second Bill of Rights" was the "right to a decent home" (Roosevelt 1944). Administered by the Veteran's Administration, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the GI Bill) alone granted 2.4 million home loans between 1945 and 1952 (Cohen 2004, 141). Yet, post-World War II programs designed to help all returning veterans purchase homes routinely discriminated against African-American buyers. The postwar promise of universal homeownership applied only to white Americans, Americans who had "won" their homes and identity through "sacrifice" for their country. As one Italian American told Studs Terkel, "Suddenly, we looked up, we owned property. Italians could buy. The GI Bill, the American Dream. Guys my age had really become Americanized. . . . They feel they have achieved" (Terkel 1984, 142). That these white Americans would come to define their *Americanism* in terms of their homes and neighborhoods should come as no surprise. They, writes Sugrue, viewed a decent home and neighborhood as both a "prerequisite of citizenship" and one of their fundamental "rights" as white citizens. In fact, many of the homeowners' organizations and neighborhood associations that sprung up throughout the urban North opposed integration in terms of their "American rights" (Sugrue 1995). For those in July 1966 East New York, these "rights" would collide with deadly force with another strand of the American Dream, that of racial and social equality.

In the late 1950s, as the minority population of neighboring Brownsville began redefining the western boundaries of East New York, real estate agents began what the city's Human Rights Commission would later call one of the most aggressive and vicious forms of blockbusting in the city. They took advantage of a number of residents' fears—those of dropping home values, racial violence, and also the threat to their own identity as whites. The effects were seen almost immediately as many of the area's younger and more financially secure residents left the neighborhood for Queens or Long Island. For example, in a single year, real estate speculators



bought twenty-five out of fifty-seven homes on one street ("City Hearing on Block Busting" 1962). The neighborhood that witnesses described in the 1962 hearings on blockbusting as "comfortable and well-kept" with "old trees [lining] the wide streets" was only four years later designated a "disaster area" by Deputy Mayor Robert Price (Burks 1966, 41). The effects of blockbusting had left East New York what one reporter called a "declining neighborhood of broken homes, vacant stores and high crime rates" (Burks 1966, 44). Barry Gottehrer, one of Lindsay's aides, described the East New York he discovered in the summer of 1966 as:

an abandoned neighborhood, with one of the highest rates of infant mortality, drug abuse, abandoned buildings and welfare, and the lowest employment in the city. Many poor people, mostly black and Puerto Rican, who had been moved out of condemned buildings and out of welfare hotels, were finally dumped here, as were the "problem families" who had been evicted from public housing. It was symptomatic not only of the failure of city government but of the disorganization of the community that here were 300,000 people, a community the size of St. Paul, and City Hall hardly knew of its existence. (Gottehrer 2007, 5)

What was once the geographical location of the American Dream changed almost overnight into the land of urban crisis, a forgotten neighborhood of concentrated poverty and physical decay ("Too Many with Nothing to Do – But Trouble" 1966). Undoubtedly, the remaining whites, who now owned only 40 percent of the East New York's homes, cast the neighborhood's problems in racial terms. "[Real estate speculators] ran all the good people out," said one white store owner, "now anything might happen" (Terrell 1966, 2). Those whites who stayed were either "left behind," unable to move for financial reasons or age, or individuals who had decided "to stay put." Consequently, those who had chosen to remain adopted something of a siege mentality. As a local minister, Reverend Malcolm Evans, told the *Village Voice*, "The remnants can't make enough money selling today to buy decent homes anywhere else. In desperation, they're digging in" (Kempton 1966, 1).<sup>5</sup>

In 1960, the population of East New York was 85 percent white; by 1965, it was 80 percent African American and Puerto Rican (Thabit 2003, 11). Of the remaining whites, 40 percent were Italian Americans, 40 percent were Jewish, and the last 20 percent was a mix of other white ethnic groups (Thabit 1967). It is difficult to imagine, in a neighborhood where over half of the whites were non-Italian, that only Italian Americans were involved in the rioting. In fact, several accounts dispute the characterization of the rioters as simply Italian. As Rabbi Samuel Schrage told the *New York Post*,

"There were Irish among them, Italians, Poles and even some of my own landsmen. And we knew, unfortunately, others were coming into the area" ("The Rabbi and Gallo: Strange Alliance" 1966, 2). In addition to investigating the ethnic mix of rioters, the Brooklyn District Attorney Aaron Koota also looked into the role played by outsiders. Reportedly, James Madole, leader of the neo-Nazi National Renaissance Party, had been spotted in the neighborhood (as had African nationalists). In Koota's mind, this raised the question as to whether or not the "racial disturbances were 'spontaneous protests by local residents or inflamed by professional agitators'" (Ross and Abelman 1966, 2; Lieberman 1966; Kirkman 1966).

Even East New York's supposedly homegrown organized agitators, the members of SPONGE, were of mixed ethnicity. Representing the group in a City Hall meeting with the mayor was "red-haired James (Sandy) McMenemon." Why was McMenemon speaking for the group?, a *New York Times* reporter asked a young Italian-American SPONGE member. "Because Irish, Jewish, and Polish guys are on our side, that's why," he responded (Hofmann 1966a, 48). Although SPONGE members may have been conscious of their ethnic differences and maintained individual cultural ethnic identities, they did not think of their group in ethnic terms. They thought of themselves as a group of *whites* joined together in opposition to a nonwhite "enemy" ("SPONGE: A Society Keyed to Secrecy" 1965; "Mayor's Pleas to 'Cool It' Off Nets Results" 1966).

Despite the third group of rioters' self-definition as whites, their obvious alliance based on their race rather than their ethnicity, and the observations of knowledgeable witnesses on their ethnic composition, the press and the Lindsay administration continued to characterize the individuals as Italians. Most often, they referred to the third group as "young Italians" or "Italian youths" and repeatedly called the neighborhood a "Negro-Puerto Rican-Italian ghetto." A small number of papers described the rioters as either "Italian Americans" or "American Italians." Most, however, implied that the rioters' actions and identities had very little to do with being white Americans (Cotter 1966; "City Hires a Brooklyn Rioter" 1966; Rosenfeld and Seely 1966; Cook 1966; Berry 1966).

Why were the East New York rioters classified as simply Italian? In part, the Lindsay administration used this as a distancing technique to separate Lindsay's liberal version of white Americanism from the conservative and racially reactionary one of these East New Yorkers. From the beginning of his administration, Lindsay set forth a vision of New York and a goal for his administration that was directly at odds with the message being proclaimed on the streets of East New York. In his 1965 Inaugural Address,

Lindsay proclaimed that he would dedicate himself to selflessly building a “brotherhood” of all New Yorkers, devoid of ignorance and prejudice:

The New York for which we are fighting is as old as the vision of brotherhood. It is a city in which there will be new light in tired eyes, and the sound of laughter in homes. Our enemies in this battle are greed, ignorance, bureaucracy, prejudices, and defeatism—in high places and low. . . . We shall go forth with the selfless perspective—with the knowledge that what we do here may gain us neither gratitude nor glory except in the judgment of a later age. (Roberts 2010, 39–41)

According to Lindsay’s perspective, the rioters in the third group were not victims of ignorance or prejudice; instead, they were the main perpetrators of both.<sup>6</sup>

The nonuse of the term *white* also points to the then-unacknowledged or unrecognized existence of differing definitions of what whiteness meant. As historian and whiteness scholar Matthew Frye Jacobson points out in *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*, two differing types of whiteness, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant “Plymouth Rock whiteness” and the “Ellis Island whiteness” of descendents of largely southern and eastern Europe, came into conflict in the 1960s. The difference in background between the liberal, patrician “Plymouth Rock” white, Lindsay, and the increasingly conservative, middle and working-class “Ellis Island” whites of New York played itself out both in the streets and at the polls (Jacobson 2006, 7).

Lindsay, one of the nation’s most liberal mayors, appeared to believe that whiteness, in any form, accorded New Yorkers of all classes certain privileges that were not shared by African Americans and other minorities. Consequently, the mayor pushed for white New Yorkers to use their privileged position to help the classically underprivileged. Pete Hamill, summing up Lindsay’s attitude in a 2010 essay, wrote, “Lindsay moved ahead, determined to push hard to bring blacks and Latinos into the mainstream (social and political) of New York life” (Hamill 2010, 64). Lindsay’s goal of racial integration in all aspects of city life pushed hardest against the working and middle-class Ellis Island whites who still remembered the not-so-distant days when they had fought the ethnic and racialized discrimination of entitled Plymouth Rock whites.

Why would the mayor choose to emphasize the “Italian” identity of the rioters if he truly wished to remind them of their “white privilege”? In doing so, he was reminding other New Yorkers, particularly minorities, that the actions taken by the third group of rioters were not representative of his version of whiteness. This also served to remind the descendants



of southern and eastern European immigrants that Plymouth Rock whites still retained the power to both convey and deny whiteness and its accompanying privileges, based on whether or not those groups embraced the "proper" behaviors. Emphasizing the group's otherness reinforced the message that it was engaging in behaviors that were not acceptable to *real* whites, and other whites should not model their actions on those of the "Italians." For Italian Americans, whose whiteness had long been questioned, this was a not-so-subtle way of reminding them that their status was still, as both Roediger and historian Stefano Luconi's work illustrates, open to debate (Roediger 2005; Luconi 2001).

If the Lindsay administration and the press displayed an undisclosed racial bias against a class of whites in labeling the white rioters as Italian, they employed a not-so-subtle use of ethnic stereotypes as well. Based on stereotypes perpetuated by movies and television, the youthful rioters supposedly "looked and acted Italian." As one writer reported, "The Italians insisted on acting like stereotypes: they played the tough guy role learned from 1,000 George Raft pictures, and did a lot of muscle-flexing, side-of-the-mouth-talking and hair combing" (Hamill 1966, 37). It is ironic that the writer seems to have based his identification of these youths on his acceptance of the same Italian-American gangster stereotypes.

While its presence dates back to the earliest days of mass Italian immigration to the United States, the Mafia stereotype flourished in the 1950s and 1960s, beginning with Senator Estes Kefauver's Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce. The 1950–1951 hearings, which were televised nationally, brought alleged racketeers with Italian-sounding names and expressive hands into American living rooms. Yet, as historian Michael Woodwiss writes in *Organized Crime and American Power*, "all significant gangsters had been born or at least nurtured in the United States." The committee found, despite all witnesses' denial of its existence and the discovery that people of all ethnicities ran rackets, that there was a nationwide organized crime syndicate of foreign origins, the Sicilian Mafia, operating within the United States (Woodwiss 2001, 245–7).

The November 1957 police and FBI raid of Joseph Barbara's home in Apalachin, New York, furthered the popular connection between Italian Americans and organized crime. While police rightly believed they had interrupted an important mob meeting, those detained—some after fleeing through the bucolic countryside disposing of guns and cash as they ran—claimed that they had gathered to visit the ailing Barbara and enjoy nothing more than a wholesome American barbecue. Half of those arrested at Apalachin had been born in Italy; the other half were American by birth (Bernstein 2002, 3).

With the 1963 testimony of mobster Joseph Valachi before a Senate subcommittee, the government finally got the confirmation that the Kefauver Commission failed to obtain: The *Cosa Nostra*, or Mafia, did exist. Several Italian-American organizations, such as the American Italian Anti-Defamation League, emerged to fight the association of Italian Americans with organized crime, but what they failed to emphasize was the very American nature of the Mafia Valachi exposed. It should be noted that members of the Anti-Defamation League did not point to flaws within the American system that made the existence of the Mafia possible, but rather concentrated on defending their own ethnic identity and further associating themselves with an idealized version of Americanism. As sociologist Richard Gambino writes in *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of Italian Americans*, “the ideals of honesty, trust, a fair deal, etc., are much professed [by Americans] but have never been practiced” (Gambino 1974, 302). Gambino goes on to state that, in contrast to these ideals, almost every area of American life is rife with corruption and deceitful, devious practices. The average American dreamer who tuned into television’s *The Untouchables* (or “*Cops and Wops*,” as it became known in popular parlance) would have had a difficult time embracing Gambino’s argument or finding validity in historian Gus Tyler’s claim that “organized crime (was) a product and reflection of our national culture” (Maas 1968, xviii).

Reporters and the Lindsay administration identified not only the rioters as stereotypical Italian-American Mafia wannabes but also claimed that the incident that began the riot was a particularly “Italian” event. As restaurant owner Frank Fauci described the situation: “There was no real trouble until last week when [African Americans] bombed a cab service where the white kids hang out” (“Too Many with Nothing to Do—But Trouble” 1966, 3). This gypsy cab company was referred to by many papers and Lindsay aides as “Italian owned”; therefore, they treated the riot as the result of Italians retaliating to “defend” their own. There was only one problem: The cab company, Shapiro’s, was not owned by an Italian American (Hamill 1966; “Too Many with Nothing to Do—But Trouble” 1966; Kempton 1966).

As the misidentification of Shapiro’s business suggests, existing stereotypes of Jewish Americans also apparently came into play. A survey of the ethnic stereotypes held by Princeton University undergraduates found that those students saw Italian Americans as passionate, impulsive, and quick-tempered. The same undergraduates associated Jewish Americans with intelligence, industriousness, and ambition rather than the habits of “Murder Incorporated,” based in neighboring Brownsville (Karlins 1969, 4–5). When coupled with existing Mafia stereotypes, the stereotype of

Italian Americans as a people who were prone to unthinking, violent action emerged in direct opposition to the stereotype of cerebral, passive Jewish Americans. Additionally, as political scientists Mark R. Levy and Michael S. Kramer (1972) show in *The Ethnic Factor: How America's Minorities Decide Elections* and historian Joshua Zeitz (2007) argues in *White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics*, Jewish Americans, as opposed to a majority of Italian Americans, supported more liberal racial policies. In 1966, the popular perception of Jewish Americans, backed by voting analysis, maintained that they were not prone to rioting.

Yet, in his study of reactions to integration in another Brooklyn neighborhood in the following decade, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism*, sociologist Jonathan Rieder discovered that reactions to neighborhood change broke down, not solely along ethnic lines but along the lines of education and class (Rieder 1987). In East New York, Italian Americans and Jewish Americans united based on their working-class status and their self-identification as "threatened" white Americans and, along with other whites, resorted to physical violence. That race combined with social class, rather than ethnic identity, to determine responses to integration can be seen in sociologists Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon's thorough examination of Jewish-American reactions to neighborhood racial change in Boston (1992), *The Death of an American Jewish Community: A Tragedy of Good Intentions*. While the Lindsay administration and the press may have disregarded this fact, neither could ignore the emergence of working-class Jewish-American self-protection societies, like the Maccabees, and the 1968 formation of the Jewish Defense League (JDL), under the leadership of Rabbi Meir Kahane. Groups such as these, which were willing to physically fight for their "rights" as Jewish Americans, upended existing stereotypes of passivity and liberalism. A 1969 advertisement placed by the JDL showed a photo of tough-looking young men wielding pipes with a caption that read: "Is this any way for a nice Jewish boy to behave?" (Kahane 1979, 134). Kahane answered yes, and in him, an advocate of "defense," ethnic stereotypes combined to produce, as one Italian-American woman said, "Just what we need: A Jewish Italian" (Levy and Kramer 1972, 183).

Using such stereotypes to identify the rioters served one of the Lindsay administration's goals: Defining the rioters as "Italians" cast their behavior as foreign and, therefore, "Un-American." In doing so, the Lindsay administration revealed its commitment to the cause of civil rights, which had broadened access to basic rights and the chance to claim the American Dream. Participants evidently saw events in East New York as a conflict between an older definition of Americanism, which did not necessarily

include the rights of African Americans, and a new definition of what it meant to be an American. Many East New Yorkers recognized this distinction; one white store owner summed up the chaos by saying, "What this is all about is whether a Negro has a right to walk on New Lots Avenue" (Hamill 1966, 3). African Americans saw it in the same light. When New York City's African-American Human Rights Commissioner William Booth addressed a crowd of African-American rioters, he spoke of their rights as Americans. When one young man shouted out to him, "Why can't we go to New Lots Avenue?" Booth responded, "I'm an American and you're an American and we can go wherever we want!" ("Cops Pour into Tense East New York after Riots" 1966, 16). In this way, preventing individuals from freely walking the city streets was marked as un-American behavior. However, it was also un-American and a violation of basic civil rights to stop any sort of protest, including those by the "Ku Kluxers," as one African-American man referred to the white protestors. Stopping them, Assistant Chief Inspector Lloyd Sealy told members of the Council for a Better East New York, would "infringe on their Constitutional right to assemble" (McCarthy and Price 1966, 2; Editorial 1966; Ross and Abelman 1966; Hamill 1966; Kempton 1966).

White East New Yorkers also viewed their behavior in terms of their "rights" as Americans. In their eyes, they had a right to "defend" their property and their neighborhood. As one man told a reporter, "The Negroes are breaking us up and trying to throw us out of our neighborhood. We're standing our ground and we're not leaving" ("Too Many with Nothing to Do—But Trouble" 1966, 3). Certainly, they were not wrong in believing that they were acting like "typical" white Americans. White Americans of all ethnic backgrounds throughout the urban North had "defended" their neighborhoods from African-American "incursion" in the post-World War II period with a combination of restrictive covenants and violence. Violent neighborhood defense occurred in white working-class neighborhoods from Philadelphia to Chicago. Chicago alone experienced violence in the wake of integration from the 1940s through the 1960s, culminating in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1966 walk through the streets of Gage Park. King said of attacks that he and his fellow marchers encountered there: "I have never seen such hostility and hatred anywhere in my life, even in Selma" (Meyer 2000, 186). Conditions were equally bad in neighboring Cicero, Illinois, where Governor Adlai Stevenson called in the National Guard to confront a rioting crowd of second-generation Americans of Polish, Czech, Italian, and Dutch descent. As in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit, those rioters put aside their ethnic identities to form a violent *white* mob (Luconi 2001, 127).

In addition to their shared sense of whiteness, these "defenders" united in the belief that they fought to protect their fundamental American rights. The rhetoric of the white rioters echoes that of those ethnic residents who saw their homeownership as inseparable from the American Dream and membership in the "American system." As historian Arnold Hirsch describes, those participating in massive resistance in Chicago's Trumbull Park spoke of the right to "defend" their homes, which represented not only their savings but also social and familial ties (Hirsch 1995, 531). Detroit's white rioters quoted the homeownership passage of Roosevelt's "Second Bill of Rights" speech in venomous, anti-integration rants at neighborhood meetings (Sugrue 1995, 564). White East New Yorkers, like thousands of other neighborhood "defenders," cast off their ethnic cultural identities when it came to claiming and protecting these rights.

When East New Yorkers spoke of the confrontations in their neighborhood, they spoke in terms of protecting their rights as property owners: "We built our homes. We took care of them. We furnished them, we grew up in them," said one young "Italian" man ("Too Many with Nothing to Do—But Trouble" 1966, 3). Therefore, he had a right to "defend" his property. Pete Hamill summed up the view of most reporters and the Lindsay administration when he interpreted this defense not as an American right but as nothing more than un-American racism. "The Italians," he wrote, "insisted that breaking a Negro's skull was really part of a crusade for God, country, honor, and mother" (Hamill 1966, 37).

On the other hand, the Lindsay administration and the City Youth Board considered the Mafia's Gallo brothers central to its own crusade for God, country, honor, and an end to racial violence.<sup>7</sup> The Gallo brothers, Al (also known as "Kid Blast") and Larry, were members of the soon-to-be created Gambino crime family, who, with their brother "Crazy Joe," had carried out the most infamous mob hit in New York City history: the gunning down of Albert Anastasia in the barbershop at the Park Sheraton Hotel in Manhattan. The Gallos, with Joe behind bars, had volunteered their services to the Lindsay administration, possibly as a way to keep under the legal radar by providing extra-legal services throughout Brooklyn's neighborhoods in times of racial unrest. It is also likely that they sought to expand their own power base in transitional Italian neighborhoods, which had lost both their Mafia protection as well as their traditional social and political structures, such as fraternal organizations, national churches (which were echoing the area's population shift, and also quickly transitioning), and Italian-American political representation. In an effort to stop the violence in East New York, the City Youth Board formally deputized the Gallo brothers to act on its behalf among the community's Italian-American youths.



Not only did this reinforce the idea of the conflict as a purely Italian-American matter, it also clearly demonstrated exactly how the Lindsay administration defined Italian Americans and what stereotypes it adopted in doing so (Hofmann 1966b; "Koota to See If Gallos Got a Deal in Soothing of Racial Tensions" 1966; Folsom 2008, 160).

As reported in the *New York Post*, the Lindsay administration, the Gallo brothers, and their attorney portrayed the brothers as calling upon their shared ethnicity with the rioters to "spread the word around among youths of Italian descent" to tell their friends to "cool it" (Ellenberg 1966, 5). Shockingly, the Gallos' Italianness played only a small part in their effectiveness as "peacekeepers." Reports abound of their use of physical force: When one youth began to describe the problem he had with the "niggers," Kid Blast reportedly slapped him across the face, picked him up, and slammed him up against a wall. Then, turning to leave the packed room, he told the unconscious boy lying on the floor, "Don't ever say nigger in front of me. I said they are colored people" (Gross 1966b, 3). The promise of serious physical violence lurked silently behind the Gallos' message of peace and brotherly love (Clark 1966; Ellenberg 1966; Gottehrer 2007, 27).

Using the Gallos in this capacity, the Lindsay administration unintentionally reinforced the exact messages it attempted to fight: Taking the law into one's own hands was acceptable as was the use of violent force, and gangs of any type were more powerful than the police. The Youth Board believed that "the embattled 'youngsters in the neighborhood did not look up to policemen,'" wrote a journalist with the *Post* (Ellenberg 1966, 5). While the Mafia may have played a role in some "Italian" neighborhoods, the Lindsay administration had now given a crime family the legal and legitimate means of policing neighborhoods. In one letter to the editor of the *New York Daily News*, the author wondered, "Why do we tax payers have a police department when all we have to do is pay a little tribute to the hoods each month?" (Letter to the Editor 1966, 51).

When Aaron Koota, the Brooklyn District Attorney, and members of the Police Benevolent Association criticized the Lindsay administration for hiring the Gallos, the mayor's aides responded with indignation. When Koota convened a grand jury to examine the Gallos' role in peacemaking, the administration rushed to their defense. Human Rights Commissioner Booth claimed that Koota was violating the Gallos' "human rights" because they, even as members of the Mafia, "have a right to do good." The mayor himself was less assertive with his response; he reminded reporters that, for whatever reason, violence in East New York had not spread, and that, "You can't always deal with people who are leaders in the Boy Scout Movement" (Gross 1966a, 2; Kifner 1966, 16; Pelleck 1966; Schlegel 1966).

Yet, in addition to meeting with members of the gangs involved, including SPONGE, the mayor's office had carefully cultivated a number of African-American and Puerto Rican community groups, ministers and priests; however, the Lindsay administration made the Mafia the representative of the Italian-American community. The Annual Report of the Human Rights Commission for 1966 claimed that in tense situations with racial overtones, "the staff either works with established community groups . . . or it helps interested local residents organize community groups to solve the local problem" (Gross 1966a; Kifner 1966; Pelleck 1966; Schlegel 1966; City of New York Commission on Human Rights 1966, n.p.).

While the Brooklyn DA and Italian-American politicians in later elections took issue with the Gallos' role and Lindsay's use of the Mafia to quash tensions, the existing evidence reveals that Italian-American East New Yorkers did not, at least publically, take issue. They did not for a number of possible reasons. First, and perhaps most obviously, to whom could they complain? Certainly complaining to the Lindsay administration was out of the question. That, coupled with the very real threat of physical violence at the hands of the Gallo brothers, appears to be the simplest interpretation. However, a more nuanced explanation exists, one that takes into account the rejection and acceptance of ethnic stereotypes. In *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia*, Luconi asserts that not all of Philadelphia's Italian Americans were worried about the defamation of their ethnic group by mob-related stereotypes. To support this claim, Luconi cites a letter to the *New York Times* by professor and novelist Jerre Mangione, in which Mangione writes, "the majority of Americans are bright enough to realize that criminal elements represent only a tiny fraction of the Italian American population." In Luconi and Mangione's analyses, most Americans reject the stereotype of Italian Americans as *mafiosi*; it bothers only politicized Italian Americans. There is little cause to believe that the Americans of Italian descent in East New York associated themselves with either the Mafia or with a unified sense of Italian-American identity; in fact, they did not use or claim their ethnic identity politically at all. As first and foremost white Americans, the whites of Italian descent may have rejected the stereotype as one that was not applicable to them, regardless of what the press or the Lindsay administration thought (Luconi 2001, 120).

On the other hand, if East New Yorkers accepted and identified with the Mafia stereotype, they would have also had little reason to protest against its application. If they accepted the stereotype, they did so as Americans who happened to be Italian. Rather than view the Mafia stereotype as a negative one, many Italian Americans have instead refashioned the image

to bring them a sense of power and a path to affluence (Gardaphé 2006, 21-44). Certainly, the Gallo brothers, the mobsters rounded up at Apalachin, and even fictional characters, such as Larry in Mario Puzo's 1964 novel, *The Fortune Pilgrim*, appeared to have acquired a portion of the American Dream. To those "stuck" in East New York, both physically and intellectually, mob membership or even identification with the Mafia offered a direct and tangible empowerment, a way out of poverty, and a way to active participation in the "American system." This view explains the birth and wild success of the short-lived Italian American Civil Rights League, which infused Italian Americans with a sense of political ethnic pride and Mafia power (Pileggi 1979, 117-32).

Rather than their power being usurped by the presence of the Gallo brothers, it is possible that the young Italian-American men did, as the Lindsay administration hoped, see them as role models and learn an important lesson from them in what it meant to be a "good" American neighbor. In many incidents of racial violence well into the 1990s, New York's Italian-American youths often identified with the Mafia and sought to both impress and emulate the mob through acts of neighborhood "defense," believing themselves to be "protecting" their neighborhoods. The presence of the Mafia in these situations became a behavioral touchstone, one that deserves further examination (Lizzi 2010, 110-111).

What is clear is that many city residents and members of the Lindsay administration thought of the Gallos as "American heroes." After earlier heroics, Kid Blast dismissed the praises of the public, stating, "We only done what any red-blooded American boys would do" (Cook 1966, 132). This was, of course, the same sentiment East New York's rioters of all races could have used to explain why they were either "defending" their neighborhood or fighting to be accepted into the American system.

Judging by events in East New York in 1966, the roots of that politicized identification as Italian Americans began not with self-identification but with ascription. Instead of thinking of them as nothing more than white Americans and treating them as such, the media and the Lindsay administration had treated the young rioters as Italians, defining them as the main perpetrators of racial violence. In these terms, the new ethnic or ethnically political identity of Italian Americans appears to be one that was projected onto them, rather than one that they initially used or even claimed. Additionally, it also appears clear that the incidents in East New York in July of 1966 should be classified as yet another example of the anti-integration riots that occurred throughout the urban North in the post-World War II period, which culminated in the political movement that became known as the white backlash. However, this backlash flourished politically in the

late 1960s not as a response to integration or the Civil Rights Movement but as a reaction to the projection of the ideals of white privilege onto groups of whites who felt neither privileged nor racially empowered. Without even realizing it, the "red-blooded American boys" who "defended" their mixed ethnic neighborhood after the torching of a Jewish-owned cab company became Italian Americans, leaders of the white backlash.

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### Notes

1. Lawrence R. Samuel (2007, 76–77) asserts that the members of East New York's iteration of SPONGE were the same as those who clashed with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) picketers protesting unfair hiring practices in the building trades at the 1965 World's Fair.
2. Political scientist James Q. Wilson divides riots into two categories: instrumental and expressive. In instrumental riots, there is an effort to achieve an objective. In expressive riots, such as those seen in the late 1960s, the actions of rioters "are either intrinsically satisfying or satisfying because they give expression to a state of mind" (Wilson 1970, 58).
3. For more on the changing definitions of whiteness and the beginnings of the white backlash, see Roediger (2005) and Freund (2007).
4. The John V. Lindsay Papers (Yale University) are filled with letters to the mayor from East New Yorkers of all ethnicities and presumably races, complaining about the neighborhood's lack of services, the growing crime rate, the crumbling infrastructure, and the inability to financially "escape."
5. Italian Americans *appear* to be more attached to their neighborhoods and, thus, more prone to "defense" than other groups. This is due, in part, to a relative lack of social and economic mobility when compared to other white ethnics. Consequently, Italian Americans often stayed in racially transitional neighborhoods, which were, as Nathan Kantrowitz (1973) illustrates, already in closer proximity to minority neighborhoods. In addition, John T. McGreevy (1996) argues that Italian Americans (and other Catholics) often felt deep attachment to a parish or national church, which limited their physical mobility. Finally, Italian neighborhoods were more easily identified as "Italian," even when they had shifted, because they retained widely recognized signifiers of ethnicity, for example, Italian restaurants, businesses bearing Italian names, yard shrines, etc. All of these factors combine to create the appearance of "attachment," even when a neighborhood had already transitioned.
6. Unfortunately, as Vincent J. Cannato notes, Lindsay's legacy is not a pretty one: "A recent survey of American urban historians ranked Lindsay the sixteenth worst big-city mayor between 1820 and 1993" (2001, xi).

7. The City Youth Board was established in 1947 in accordance with the New York State Commission Act. Its principal purpose was to coordinate and supplement the activities of public and private agencies devoted to serving youth. In 1966, it became part of the Human Resources Administration.

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