

“Friends of Ours.” Strategies of Minority Self-Assertion and Self-Definition on *The Sopranos*¹

1. Introduction: The Godfather on the Couch

Identity is never just a property of groups or persons themselves. In most cases, it is a combination of “own” attributes and ascribed ones. Identity is negotiated, acquired, often dynamic rather than static.

Group identity is first and foremost not simply the identity of a group itself, but of a group of individuals; it is the composition of the group, a composition of individuals sharing similar backgrounds. The social component of identity can be said to be constituted by the social framework in which the individual lives their life – starting with the family, but including, more and more, the immediate surrounding, neighborhood, school, community; places where political factors grow in importance. Individual existence exists within the shadow of political bonds and boundaries. The private is as much determined by the public as the public is shaped by the private identities of its constituents.

In the case of minority identities, identity can be an especially fragile construction. Its definition and constant re-assertion need to occur within the framework of a larger majority culture that will often be at odds with the more private and secluded identity of the family upbringing and local surroundings.

The basic conflict involving individuality, as most prominently described by psychoanalysts like Erich Fromm and Arno Grün, juxtaposes individual wishes with the demands and expectations of others; the wider that gap becomes, the more the individual will feel threatened and insecure; even more so once public values that are at odds with private ones become internalized and the conflict becomes invisible to the individual.

In recent years, psychoanalysis has become a continuing theme within American popular culture. Fictional characters are put on the couch within the fictional environment itself, be it indirectly, by incorporating psycho-analytical theories like the Oedipus conflict into the plot, as it is currently happening on *Angel* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or directly, as on *Ally McBeal*, *Frasier*, *Analyze This* and *The Sopranos*.

In the case of *The Sopranos*, we have a scenario both completely normal and utterly outrageous. Tony Soprano is the head of an Italian-American family living in a perfectly stereotypical Middle-American suburban household with two parents, a son and a daughter, in a New Jersey small town. Tony Soprano is also the head of a mafia family. His deceased father had been in the mafia, his uncle Corrado Junior is in the mafia as well. Tony has inherited the job, just as his son, Anthony Jr., will if Tony doesn't do anything about it. And so

¹ Talk held at the conference “Multiple Cultures – Multiple Perspectives. Questions of Identity and Urbanity in a Transnational Context. 3rd Annual Students Conference.” Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, May 15-17, 2003; and at “Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor? Immigration and Citizenship in the US and the EU. 4th Transatlantic Students Symposium.” Georgetown University, Washington D.C., March 4-12, 2006

he has decided to make his nephew Christopher his protégé and favorite henchman; blood relation being necessary to run the mafia family as much as the other one.

Blood, i.e. not only heritage but ethnicity, determines your chances of social movement within the mafia structures. However loyal you are, if not both your parents or at least your mother have been Italian, you're reduced to a life of subservience. The family business is based upon racial categories, "friends of ours", made men, need to be Italian without any doubt. (The same terminology, "to be made", can be found in a different case where blood matters, when somebody is "made" a vampire.)

It is that Italian identity, within an American context, that serves as justification for mob activities; a continued and constantly re-asserted identity whose fragility becomes apparent the more it is emphasized; just as ruthlessness and violence are being shown to not originate from a position of inner strength but from self-doubt and anger.

Ironically, Tony Soprano suffers from panic attacks², an impossible situation for a mobster who is always supposed to be the epitome of hyper-masculine strength, ruthlessness and repression. He goes to see a psychiatrist, an Italian one of course. In the course of his therapy, he will be confronted with his feelings towards the legacy handed over to him by his father, and, more importantly, towards his over-towering mother, who will later be involved in a plot to kill him. The more it becomes evident that his interest in therapy is only supposed to strengthen his role in a world of unquestioned masculinity, and the more he proves himself worthy within the mafia family, the more his other family falls apart.

[cf. *Sopranos* Trailer]

2. Double Identity: Mafia and/vs. Italian

This double identity, being a mobster and being Italian, is not unproblematic. Within the Italian-American community, there has always been harsh criticism directed against the portrayal of Italians as mobsters. On the other hand, the mafia component mostly serves as kind of an amplifier for traditional family values. *The Godfather* movies were firstly a family saga, only secondly a treatise on crime. The mafia becomes a terminology, an allegorical framework not entirely different from the world of monsters, demons and superpowers found within the realm of science fiction, horror and fantasy. It can be understood as a narrative strategy that allows for certain things to happen, for certain things to be said that wouldn't work in a less radicalized surrounding.

The mafia identity allows the protagonist to cross borders very easily, borders usually erected by standards of normality and morality. There are no such standards for him, they may apply to the world surrounding him, like his family, which also contributes to family breakdown, yet they do not apply to his own behavior necessarily. He has the impulsiveness of a child, and being a mafia godfather, he doesn't need to submit himself to anything that would control such impulses. His is a world of regular adultery, relentless violence and bigotry; honest to his impulses in a certain way, and surely interesting to an audience used to the necessity of fitting in and being politically correct. The mafia identity is challenged only by those who compete with him in their quest for power, and the means to assure others of his power are crude but simplistic: Those who disagree, disappear.

The Italian identity is more complex. First of all, his Italian identity is strongly intertwined with his mafia identity. Yet in some cases it may seem that it is only his mafia identity that allows him to continue to be Italian: Mafia means power, influence, control; via

² A similar setup can be found in *Analyze This* and *Analyze That*.

said power, his Italian-ness can continue to exist, it may not be accepted for what it is, but that doesn't matter in a political surrounding based upon the language of power.

But there is also an Italian identity existing aside from, or despite of, mafia identity. Elements of this can be seen not only on *The Sopranos* but as well in films like *The Godfather*. The very opening of *The Godfather* is mirrored in the pilot episode of *The Sopranos*: A family festivity, a marriage in the film, a barbecue in the television series; the central elements being food, nuclear and extended family and friends. The *fiesta*, an element of *gioia di vivere*, extends also into gatherings of either family. There's always some Italian food around, meals become a ritual, a celebration; food is a theme, not just a background element. The Sopranos family is friends with a restaurant owner, the mafia family uses the convenient location of a butcher shop as one of their cover-up businesses. The notoriety of the motif of food may also be illustrated by the availability of books like *The Sopranos Family Cookbook* and *The Mafia Cookbook*, which is garnished with an alleged gunshot mark.

There's also the church. Unlike *The Godfather's* Michael Corleone, Tony Soprano has no ambitions whatsoever regarding affiliation with the church, nor does he seek redemption. The tragedy of Michael was that from the very beginning, he wanted out, he felt uncomfortable with his role in the mafia, to him, it was an obstacle, he played the role he was expected to, yet his cruelty and relentlessness were part of that pose he did not want to perform. Michael was eager to seek forgiveness from a higher authority till he discovered that the basis of that authority was as flawed as what he was running away from; for Tony Soprano, however, redemption is no option, he needs the mafia, he accepts no other authority than his own, his personality depends on the power over others given to him. Also, the church at the turn of the century has lost its authoritative voice, it's becoming an institution that's supposed to provide a service in accordance with the wishes of the customers.

What remains as parts of Italian-ness are little fragments of spoken Italian utterances, yet they need to remain fragments as the American family no longer speaks Italian; the language of the mother country has been lost. Thus, after a visit to Naples, Tony decides to employ a native Italian, Furio, to get a taste of the original.

As the most pervasive of all traits only remains the family, a central value also shared by non-Italian Americans. So the basis for continued Italian-ness as an active self-othering looks rather frail; Italian identity has to be reconstructed and reaffirmed. That happens within the context of Middle American culture, and through an active confrontation with other ethnic groups, not so much with the general American public, but with other minority identities, just like children in their quest for approval will target their efforts not against their parents or an authority but against others in a similar position of second-rate-ness.

3. Strategies of Self-Assertion

In the mafia mind-set, Tony Soprano leads his troops into battle like a true general. While he also has to fight competing families, the conflict with non-Italian groups has a different kind of quality. Prisoners are not taken, the relations to other groups, be they Jewish, Russian, Native American or African American, are dictated by a strong sense of competition, using a rather mild term.

[cf. Scene: Romans, in "Denial, Anger, Acceptance"]

When Tony's daughter Meadow dates a fellow student who happens to be both Jewish and Black, Tony's bigotry manifests itself most clearly.

[cf. Scene: Meadow/Tony, in "Proshai, Livushka"]

In other cases, when he can afford it, when it serves him business-wise, he makes a deal with a Black city official to oust other Blacks from a neighborhood he wants the Italian-American community to reclaim. His racism thus is characterized by a set of stereotypes, it is not necessarily destructive, yet when push comes to shove, it's only Italians who get to deserve the benefit of a doubt. When Tony has to kill two of his colleagues, he does so hesitantly, and it continues to haunt him. When it's not Italians, there's no second thought. Does his Italian-centeredness arise of a position of strength, as he claims or rather of a feeling of weakness?

Italians are Italians, but people of a different background are never just that, they are always attributed with negative, deprecatory stereotypes. It feels as if there is the need to self-assert one's own identity by defining it as a position that is directed against others; or that the continued existence of others is needed to reaffirm one's own specificity.

Though Tony always stresses that he is interested in history, his interest only serves as a tool to find proof for the greatness of his ancestors' past. When on Columbus Day there is supposed to be a big parade, sudden conflict arises within the community. Once a person like Christopher Columbus is critically examined by those who didn't exactly profit from his voyages, he, like the rest of his extended family, feels threatened by it. To topple such an icon is not after his taste, even more so: it endangers his self-centeredness, his convenient and simplistic view of a world divided into concepts of *them* and *us*.

[cf. Scenes: Columbus Day, in "Christopher" (Satriale discussion, family discussion, stable discussion, street scene)]

4. Self-Definition / Authoritarian Character

Such drastic conflicts like those fictionalized, showcased and commented on *The Sopranos* are not simply racial slurs, they perform a function; they are aimed at asserting a common identity. They are not unmotivated, however inappropriate, crude and wrong they may seem. They constitute a reaction on the side of the minority, or whoever thinks of themselves as minority, to a majority discourse they feel isolated from.

If we follow Fromm's analysis of the authoritarian character, it appears that such kind of behavior originates from a position of weakness and isolation, be it imagined or real, conscious or already internalized, internal or externally induced. The perception of being isolated will not only lead to resisting authorities at odds with one's own position, as illustrated by the mafia identity, an identity that is partly construed and rationalized by its members as an act of civil disobedience and resistance. Such perception will also lead to an aggressive confrontation with other groups that are situated on a roughly similar level of power. Because of the fragility of the minority identity, other minorities are seen as competitors. In real life, that results in efforts of members of the early Hispanic community to "whiten" themselves by adhering to the policy of not accepting Blacks in their restaurants; or in aggressive fights over which groups should benefit from affirmative action programs.

Within the framework of the closed identity, the position of the leader is crucial, he is the construct that others intend to infer their strength from. The mafia structure relies on a strong localized *Führerprinzip*, which is communicated through an analogy with family structures. Through the personalization of such power structures and the insistence on the ideology of the family, it is made even easier to label others as outsiders, and to internalize those bonds and levels of dependency not only structurally but even more so psychologically. The *godfather* of the mafia family is a modern-day *patron* with strong elements of the *paterfamilias*. As the leader, he is not only the center of power, he himself is also made and

sustained by his family; he lasts as long as he can fulfill the expectations projected unto him. Amongst those expectations, the definition and constant affirmation of identity constitute the most crucial component.

5. Epilog

Do such minority conflicts as dramatized on *The Sopranos* point towards a failure of the multiculturalist project? What is the nature of said project? What are the expectations and the preconceptions? Without wanting to give a positive answer to that, let me, in relation to what's been said before, suggest a negative one: What the project cannot be supposed to entail.

Is minority racism the same as racism practiced by a majority culture? There are different backgrounds and motivations -- it may not just be different degrees of intensity, it may be a different structure after all: The fear of losing one's identity leading to a frantic insistence on being different may foster the projection of self-hate unto others, the perceived weakness of others becoming an enticement not only for defamatory sentiments but also defamatory actions, trying to get rid of what's seen as weak within oneself by unleashing that potential against others; and within a minority context, thus assumedly strengthening one's own identity.

As long as minority groups are given the continued impression of being a minority, such reflexes will prevail, leading to the creation of new minorities composed of those who feel misrepresented and disenfranchised by the majority culture, on the national as well as on the global scale.

If the multiplicity of cultural backgrounds becomes just a tapestry inside a common room, and multiple perspectives and identities are not only not fully recognized but also not truly heard, if the *Leitkultur* remains nothing more but a representation of a seemingly democratic majority compromise, the multicultural project would indeed be doomed to failure.

Works Cited

Fromm, Erich. *Die Furcht vor der Freiheit. (Escape From Freedom.)* 1941. München: dtv, 2002.

Gabbard, Glen O. *The Psychology of the Sopranos: Love, Death, Desire and Betrayal in America's Favorite Gangster Family.* New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Gruen, Arno. *Der Verrat am Selbst. Die Angst vor Autonomie bei Mann und Frau.* München: dtv, 1984.

Sopranos, The. Created by: David Chase. Executive Producers: David Chase. Actors: James Gandolfini, Lorraine Bracco, Edie Falco, Michael Imperioli et al. HBO Television et al., 1999-2007.

—. Episode 1.03 "Denial, Anger, Acceptance." Directed by: Nick Gomez. Written by: Mark Saraceni. Original Air Date: 01/24/1999.

—. Episode 3.02 "Proshai, Livushka." Directed by: Timothy Van Patten. Written by: David Chase. Original Air Date: 03/04/2001.

—. Episode 4.03 "Christopher." Directed by: Timothy Van Patten. Written by: Michael Imperioli, Maria Laurino. Original Air Date: 09/29/2002.