

Goodfellas

di Murray N. Rothbard

Hollywood has brought us two great, romantic genres, two forms of movies where the war of good versus evil could play itself out against a background of an entire complex fictive world grounded in a present or past reality. In this world, coherent action and struggle can emerge dramatically by heroes, villains, their rank and file supporters, and by innocents caught in the crossfire. The first classic genre was, of course, the Western: epitomized in *Stagecoach*, the great John Wayne movies, and countless others (one of my favorites: the long-forgotten *The Bounty Hunter*, in which Henry Fonda heroically plays a privatized and highly effective law enforcer hated – naturally – both by the villains and by the sheriffs and deputies whom he outcompetes for far higher pay). Unfortunately, the Western movie is no more, felled perhaps by endless and unimaginative repetition, but possibly, too, by the dogged leftist insistence in the later Westerns for the Indians to be the Good Guys and the whites the Bad. Look, fellas, it doesn't matter what the literal historical truth may or may not have been; the leftist reversal – the insistence on destroying familiar heroes – simply don't work, it didn't scan, and it helped destroy the Western genre.

The more recent innovative Hollywood genre, ranking with the Western, is the Mafia movie: the clash of heroes and villains against a mythic but reality-grounded world, updated to twentieth-century America. Some of the great directors have contributed gems to this genre. John Huston's *Prizzi's Honor*, playing off Jack Nicholson and the incomparable Kathleen Turner, was marvelous. But the great classic, the definitive, superb Mafia movie was *The Godfathers I and II*, in which Francis Ford Coppola poured out a work of genius, grounded in his own and novelist Mario Puzo's cultural history, which he has never approached since.

The Godfathers were perfection: an epic world, a world of drama and struggle, tautly organized and memorably written, beautifully and broodingly photographed, in which greed struggled with the great virtues of loyalty to the famiglia.

The key to *The Godfathers* and to success in the Mafia genre is the realization and dramatic portrayal of the fact that the Mafia, although leading a life outside the law, is, at its best, simply entrepreneurs and businessmen supplying the consumers with goods and services of which they have been unaccountably deprived by a Puritan WASP culture.

The unforgettable images of mob violence juxtaposed with solemn Church rites were not meant, as left-liberals would have it, to show the hypocrisy of evil men. For these Mafiosi, as mainly Italian Catholics, are *indeed* deeply religious; they represent one important way in which Italian Catholics were able to cope with, and make their way in, a totally alien world dominated by WASP Puritan insistence that a whole range of products eagerly sought by consumers be outlawed.

Hence the systemic violence of Mafia life. Violence, in *The Godfather* films, is never engaged in for the Hell of it, or for random kicks; the point is that since the government police and courts will not enforce contracts they deem to be illegal, debts incurred in the Mafia world have to be enforced by violence, by the secular arm. But the violence simply enforces the Mafia equivalent of the law: the codes of honor and loyalty without which the whole enterprise would simply be random and pointless violence.

In many cases, especially where “syndicates” are allowed to form and are not broken-up by government terror, the various organized syndicates will mediate and arbitrate disputes, and thereby reduce violence to a minimum. Just as governments in the Lockean paradigm are supposed to be enforcers of commonly-agreed-on rules and property rights, so “organized crime,” when working properly, does the same. Except that in its state of illegality it operates in an atmosphere charged with difficulty and danger.

It is interesting to observe the contrasting attitudes of our left-liberal culture to the two kinds of crime, organized versus unorganized. Organized crime is essentially anarcho-capitalist, a productive industry struggling to govern itself; apart from attempts to monopolize and injure competitors, it is

productive and non-aggressive. Unorganized, or street, crime, in contrast, is random, punkish, viciously aggressive against the innocent, and has no redeeming social feature. Wouldn't you know, then, that our leftist culture hates and reviles the Mafia and organized crime, while it lovingly excuses, and apologizes for, chaotic and random street punks violence which amounts to "anarchy" in the bad, or common meaning. In a sense, street violence embodies the ideal of left-anarchism: since it constitutes an assault on the rights of person and property, and on the rule of law that codifies such rights.

One great scene in *The Godfather* embodies the difference between right and left anarchism. One errant, former member of the Corleone famiglia abases himself before The Godfather (Marlon Brando). A certain punk had raped and brutalized his daughter. He went to the police and the courts, and the punk was, at last, let go (presumably by crafty ACLU-type lawyers and a soft judicial system). This distraught father now comes to Don Corleone for justice.

Brando gently upbraids the father: "Why didn't you come to me? Why did you go to The State?" The inference is clear: the State isn't engaged in equity and justice; to obtain justice, you must come to the famiglia. Finally, Brando relents: "What would you have me do?" The father whispers in the Godfather's ear. "No, no, that is too much. We will take care of him properly." So not only do we see anarcho-capitalist justice carried out, but it is clear that the Mafia code has a nicely fashioned theory of proportionate justice. In a world where the idea that the punishment should fit the crime has been abandoned and still struggled over by libertarian theorists it is heart-warming to see that the Mafia has worked it out in practice.

And now, weighing in, in the Mafia sweepstakes, comes a much-acclaimed new entrant: Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas*. This repellent and loathsome movie, much acclaimed by all of our left-liberal critics (including a rave review in the Marxist weekly *In These Times*), is as far removed from *The Godfather*, in style, content, writing, direction, and overall philosophy as it is possible to be.

Instead of good versus bad entrepreneurs, all working and planning coherently and on a grand scale, *GoodFellas* is peopled exclusively by psychotic punks, scarcely different from ordinary, unorganized street criminals. The violence is random, gratuitous, pointless, and psychotic; everyone, from the protagonist Henry Hill (Ray Liota) on down is a boring creep; there is no one in this horde of "wiseguys" or "goodfellas" that any member of the viewing audience can identify with. The critics all refer to the psycho gang member Tommy (Joe Pesci), but what they don't point out is that everyone else in the gang, including the leader Jimmy Conway (Robert DeNiro) is almost as fully deranged.

When Tommy kills friends or colleagues pointlessly, Jimmy and the others are delighted and are happy to cover up for him. All of these goons are ultra-high-time preference lowlifes: their range of the future approximates ten minutes, in contrast to the carefully planned empire-building of *The Godfather*. Conway, after pulling off a multi-million dollar heist at Kennedy Airport, shoots all of his colleagues to grab all the money. This sort of behavior, as well as the random violence of Tommy, would put these guys out of business within weeks in any real Mafia organization worth its salt. Street punk short-term greed and whim-worship would get you killed in short order.

Since there are no good guys among the *GoodFellas*, the audience doesn't care what happens to them; indeed, one wishes them all to meet their just deserts as quickly as possible, so that the movie will be over. The rest of the film is as odious as the central theme; the direction, as in all of Scorsese, is edgy, hurky-jerky, quasi-psychotic; the photography, in contrast to the epic brooding of *Godfather*, is light, open and airy, totally out of keeping with the theme. The writing is flat and pointless. Great actors like DeNiro are wasted in the movie. And the much-praised Don in the film, Paul Cicero (Paul Sorvino) is grimly quiet and slow moving, but he too is pointless and his role ineffectual, and therefore he fails as any sort of menace.

Contrast the ways in which *Godfather* and *GoodFellas* handle a common theme: the attempt of the leading Don to keep away from traffic in drugs, and the destruction wrought by succumbing to the temptation. In *Godfather*, one Mafia leader of the old school clearly and eloquently rejects traffic in

drugs as immoral, in contrast to other venerable goods and services, such as liquor, gambling and “loan sharking.” “Leave drugs to the animals – the niggers – they have no souls,” he admonished. (All right, I never said that the Mafiosi were racially enlightened.) Here is a powerful and dramatic theme of keeping the old Mafia moral code as against the temptation of making a great deal of money in a technologically innovative field.

But how in contrast does *GoodFellas* handle this conflict? Don Cicero simply orders his gang to stay out of drugs, pointing only to the stiff sentences the Feds were handing out. And whereas in *Godfather*, everyone knows that disobedience to the Don will bring swift retribution, Conway, Hill and the other wiseguys disobey Don Cicero and nothing happens to them. What kind of Don is that? Clearly, the critics admire and apologize for the left-anarchic punks of *GoodFellas* the way they could never admire the Mafiosi of the *Godfather*, despite the universal respect for the older movie’s technical brilliance. Alas, the corrupt nihilist value-system of avant-garde left-liberalism relates happily to the value-system of the deranged *GoodFellas*. “This,” say these critics contentedly of the world of the *GoodFellas*, “is what life is all about. *Godfather* romanticizes life (and is therefore wrong).”

Will *GoodFellas* succeed in wrecking the Mafia genre, the best Hollywood discovery since the death of the Western? There is hope, on two counts. First, I would point out that these punks are not true Mafia; they were never “made” by the Mafia families. These are riffraff, hangers-on, lowlifes compared to the epic grandeur of the world of the Mafia. In fact, in the only act of violence that makes sense in the entire movie, the only one that is not pointless and that is eminently justified, the rotten and demented Tommy gets his just deserts at the hands of the genuine Mafia. Told that he will at last achieve his life-long goal of being “made” by a Mafia family, the monster Tommy reaps his just reward. Bang, bang!

The other ray of hope is that, at long last, and after two decades, *Godfather, Part III* is scheduled to hit the screens around Christmas. What a Christmas gift! The whole crew is back, older and perhaps wiser, continuing the great saga of the Corleone family. The only hitch is that the superb Robert Duvall, one of the great actors of our time and Mr. Consigliere himself, asked for too much money and therefore could not be included in the picture. But that’s OK. If luck is with us, *Godfather III* will restore our vision of what a Mafia film is supposed to look like. Make way, riffraff of the Scorsese famiglia! The true Don, Corleone, is back, and you, like your creature and comrade Tommy, are going to reap your just reward.