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Silkroad and Transatlantic Paths from
Family to Solitude



Silkroad and Transatlantic Trails from Family to Solitude

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Pretty much all of us have argued with our elders. This amounts to a kind of culture clash because our conventions are rarely the same as our parents. Going back to the Medieval era and farther, philosophers have likewise engaged in intergenerational and intercultural exchanges, for example, with St. Thomas Aquinas debating and building on older ideas from the Islamic world. *The Godfather* movies encapsulate something close to this, exploring divergences between individuals born in different centuries on opposite sides of the Atlantic.

Based mostly on Mario Puzo's 1969 novel, the first two films revolve around father and son, Vito and Michael Corleone. Vito—who likes to be called Godfather—spent his early years in Sicily, fleeing a vendetta as a child and relocating to the US at the very beginning of the 20th century. There, he wed Carmela, also of Sicilian stock, having four children, including his last-born son Michael, who is destined to head the family. While retaining some of Vito's Old-World ways, Michael is Americanized. He marries Kay, a New Hampshire woman. His management style is more corporate than his father's, and the Corleone family enters increasingly into the American world of big business, for instance, acquiring Los Vegas casino holdings.

The Godfather films accordingly supply an elegy to the decay of older Sicilian ideologies as they're supplanted by the customs of a brash young America. But Sicily itself has a complex history. It was Arabized under Muslim rule in the Middle Ages. In this same period, it was part of a larger political jurisdiction that included North Africa. Going back to ancient Rome, moreover, Sicily was a hub on Silkroad routes through places like Iran, India and China, not to mention Africa. These regions not only traded goods, but likely ideas as well. Consequently, it's

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unsurprising that the values advanced by Old-World characters like Vito converge with philosophies that developed along the Silkroad.

Silkroad mindsets tend to stress interconnectivity, whereas mainstream American attitudes lay heavier weight on individualism, and the *Godfather* movies interrogate tensions between these polarities. The first film opens during the wedding of Vito's daughter, thereby emphasizing family. On this day, Vito grants favors to people in the larger Italian community on the provision that they may be asked for a small service in the future, showing that he regards social and business relations as tightly knotted. Concern for family also leads his youngest son into crime, but Michael's purpose rapidly orients towards building individual power within the underworld kingdom he inherits from his father, all at the expense of family. This condemns him to loneliness. Michael tries to resuscitate relations with estranged loved-ones in the last film, but too late since the final scene shows him in Sicily reminiscing about family members sacrificed to business, just before he dies of old-age in solitude in the land of his father.

Greco-Italian-American Tragedies

Obviously, no *Godfather* character gets close to what any reasonable ethicist would applaud. But Vito's code at least retains some moral orthodoxy because it's geared towards providing for his family. To the extent that a worthy personality trait provokes his fall into crime, the *Godfather* movies mirror the tragic literature of ancient Greece, which was geographically and culturally close to Sicily.

As with many others, Vito's fundamental morality derives from his mother. But unlike most of us, he's centrally shaped by one catastrophic event: his mom's death. The scenario is that the local Mafia chieftain, Don Ciccio, had her husband and eldest son murdered, leading her to

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go and beg for Vito's life. The Don refuses, saying the boy will grow up to seek revenge, prompting Vito's mother to threaten the man with a knife while screaming for her son to run. She takes a shotgun blast to her chest, which Vito witnesses. Her sacrifice for family impresses itself upon him, as does a second lesson: the importance of respect, which is what allows Don Ciccio to get men to do his bidding.

Vito takes the first lesson—protecting family—to heart. After the ordeal with his mother, he flees across the Atlantic to New York City, making it his new home, eventually marrying Carmela and starting a family. Initially supporting them with a job at a grocery shop, he rapidly learns it's difficult to earn a living without social status, more so because the police and courts do not protect the Italian community. This is what allows Don Fanucci—a preening extortionist—to compel the shopkeeper to surrender Vito's job to another. Rather than getting angry, Vito respectfully thanks his tearful boss for being a father figure, saying he won't forget it.

Out of this extremity, Vito falls somewhat reluctantly into burglary with Peter Clemenza and Sal Tessio, only to have Fanucci try to extort money from the three. This is when Vito, after careful planning, kills Fanucci, immediately returning home and telling baby Michael that he loves him, reinforcing that the murder was committed for his family.

Vito is consequently a tragic figure in the vein of the ancient Greek character Oedipus. This is insofar as conventional virtues—love in Vito's case, truth seeking in Oedipus's—instigate the downfall of both. Vito in fact sometimes places family above business and his public status. This happens when he enters a business arrangement he disagrees with and relinquishes vengeance for the murder of his first-born son, Santino ("Sonny") to ensure the safe return of Michael, who's hiding in Sicily.

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At a glance, Michael's fall looks similar because he's initially kept from his family's criminal activities, only stooping to murder to stop enemies from finishing off his father, who's recovering from bullet wounds. Soon, however, Michael seeks power at almost any cost. This supplants his wish to protect family, so that he diverges from Greek characters, who typically get in trouble because of good impulses, not bad ones.

The first film in the trilogy accents the contrast between father and son by starting with Vito presiding at his daughter's wedding and concluding with Michael having her husband killed. As the new head of the family, Michael rules over an almost spiritless age, something reinforced by the rarity with which people call him Godfather. At least until the last film, Michael would rather be feared than loved, as he topples his father's traditions for the sake of business, a fact emphasized in the concluding scene when the door closes to cut him off from his wife, who he'll divorce in years to come.

Sicilians Bearing Gifts

Virgil's *Aeneid* is an epic poem that warns us to beware of Greeks bearing gifts, but its author was actually Roman, dying in the southern part of the Italian peninsula not too far from Sicily. The adage is made in reference to the Trojan Horse that had Greek warriors hidden inside, set to attack after the gift was taken behind enemy walls. The proverb can be construed as a caution against accepting kindnesses from those with ulterior motives. Applied to Vito, however, the meaning is more nuanced. On the one hand, he seems to act with concern when aiding supplicants from the Italian-American community. On the other, he often sees favors as a future investment—a sort of emergency “cache,” as Michael says in the novel—that he may call upon in the future.

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Gift giving is familiar to almost everyone. But older hospitality-oriented civilizations engage in the practice as an informal mode of economic exchange, which is less common in mainstream America. It's appropriate, then that the movie begins with the fittingly named Amerigo Bonasera, who doesn't comprehend the etiquette of favor-for-favor arrangements. Amerigo laments that he believes in America, which made his fortune, yet failed his family by not punishing men who assaulted his daughter, Maria. He offers money for the slaying of the attackers.

Vito finds this request offensive. One reason is that cash isn't the currency he trades in with supplicants. Another is that he isn't in the murder-for-hire business. A third is that Amerigo doesn't even think to call him Godfather until reminded. He grumbles that Amerigo never sought his advice or friendship in the years they've known one another, despite the fact that his wife is Maria's godmother. In his role as adjudicator and patriarch, Vito expounds temperance, saying that since Amerigo's daughter survived, death is unjust. But Vito agrees to make the attackers suffer after Amerigo pleads, "Be my friend, Godfather," also kissing his hand.

This scene shows that Vito wants to be loved, not just feared. He enjoys small gifts as tokens of respect, like a few free oranges from a street vender, though money is no object. While Vito expects to be able to call upon those he has helped, as when requiring Amerigo to deploy all his skills as a mortician to make the bullet-riddled body of Sonny presentable for the funeral, he demanded this service to avoid further traumatizing his wife, Carmela. So love for others also motivates Vito, who collects this small debt out of tenderness and not for business.

Though we may doubt that Amerigo really sees Vito as a friend, others are genuinely devoted. One such individual is Enzo, who Vito prevented from being deported at the request of the young man's father-in-law. Enzo arrives at the hospital with flowers for the recovering Don,

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who's had his protection detail removed at the command of a corrupt police captain. Michael expects an assassination attempt, urging Enzo to go so that he's not caught in the crossfire. Enzo, despite obvious fear, insists on staying, and with Michael, pretends to be an armed bodyguard, scaring away the would-be attackers. This kind of relationship is key to Vito's way of organizing things and his role as patriarch and adjudicator, which relies on an older currency: genuine bonds.

Family Ties and Continental Drift

Although favor-for-favor stances may have been indigenous to Sicily, this form of social comportment additionally infuses largely Muslim areas in Western Asia and North Africa. Here, it's worth remembering that Sicily was Arabized under Muslim rule, also connecting to easterly territories like Persia and India via Silkroad trade routes. Though we should be wary of equating views from different parts of the globe, more than one tradition along the Silkroad agreed that we find meaning in things beyond ourselves, a theme echoed by *The Godfather* films.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is perhaps the most famous text to come out of India and is in the Hindu lineage. The poet Rumi is a widely read Sufi Muslim from Persia, or what is modern-day Iran. Despite their religious differences, both concur that we become more enlightened if we engage in just actions without concern for our personal desires. One reason is that this breaks down boundaries between ourselves and others and ultimately is said to help us merge with the divine, which is equivalent to the cosmos in the *Gita*.

Though Vito's life falls short of the ethical standards of ancient religious texts, his purpose and identity is at least grounded in his commitment to something beyond himself, namely, family. It is appropriate, then, that the setup for the *Gita* and *The Godfather* are similar.

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The first film of course starts with dancing, singing and other wedding festivities. The *Gita's* lead-in (found in a larger book of which it is a part) is similarly a community event with games and a princess selecting husbands. As with *The Godfather*, the *Gita* stresses the importance of social roles, the duties of spouses being a case in point.

India was an intellectual capital and a place where many different religions emerged or met. Persia was likewise a philosophic and scientific powerhouse during the Middle Ages. Persia abutted Arabic- and Turkic-speaking regions. It was also sandwiched between the Indian subcontinent, Europe and Africa (the latter a center of learning with the world's first two universities). All this was reflected in Rumi's poems, which were written in Persian, Arabic, Turkish and Greek. Vito likewise is spread between places. After all, he bridges North America and Europe, and Sicily was specifically a place where cultures converged. Together, this suggests a second way of living a cosmic existence: being "cosmopolitan," a word with Greek roots that connote a citizen of the universe or world.

Drifting farther to the south, Vito's family orientation also resonates with an African tradition, "ubuntu," which is a word, concept and philosophical outlook that stresses metaphysical and moral interconnectedness of humans. Ubuntu additionally emphasizes place, which is key to *The Godfather*, with the Corleones named after Vito's home village in Sicily, albeit due to a misunderstanding with a US border agent. Though unquestionably Sub-Saharan, a few scholars speculate that ubuntu has partial origins in North Africa, which in any case adopts compatible social practices. Among these is the idea that we develop importantly human qualities like language, cooking and religion in group contexts and that it's contradictory to pursue individual wellbeing at the expense of the community since the two entwine.

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Ubuntu strongly emphasizes an etiquette of receiving guests, a social grace Vito exhibits at the beginning of *The Godfather*. Vito's home in America was in a residential neighborhood, and there are many scenes—typically set in warmer months—with family members gathering and children playing on the grounds, also in line with ubuntu ideals.

Michael, by contrast, was born and raised in North America and drifts towards isolationist values. His estate is in a remote compound in the country. Family gatherings are rare. This is punctuated by the camera resting on an empty dining room table at one point. Numerous scenes in the second movie, which shows Michael at the height of his power, are also set in cooler months, as if to highlight his lack of warmth. As compared to his father, Michael lives like an elite CEO, segregated from his community.

Cannoli Crime and Chinese Punishment

The Silkroad went from Mediterranean Europe through India and into China. Ancient Chinese philosophy customarily divides into three major traditions: Confucianism, Daoism and Legalism. This is in addition to a fourth perspective—Buddhism—which percolated into the region from India. Legalism is the most aggressive of these outlooks, also the most obviously connected to Mafia social structures.

Legalism refers to Chinese political philosophies that came to fruition during the Warring States period, a time of military conflict and governmental consolidation that began around 500 BCE. A core idea of Legalism was that people can be made to do anything through reward and punishment, a tactic Tom Hagen illustrates. He does so first by offering favors to the movie director Jack Waltz in exchange for casting Vito's Godson, Johnny Fontane. When this fails, men decapitate Waltz's prize racehorse, so that he awakes with its bloody head in his bed as a

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gruesome punishment and simultaneously a threat that ends up motivating the behavior the Corleone family wants.

Vito took a similar tack years earlier when trying to get a big band leader to release Johnny Fontane from an unfavorable music contract. He first offered \$10,000. After this failed, Vito returned with the notorious Luca Brasi, and got the release for \$1000 by assuring the band leader that “either his brains—or his signature—would be on the contract.”

Legalists preferred public punishment, regarding it as a lesson to the community. The Corleones sometimes employ the same principle, as when Peter Clemenza and Rocco Lampone forgo the usual practice of disposing of a corpse, instead leaving Paulie’s body to be found as a message to other would-be traitors. This scene has the famous line: “Leave the gun. Take the cannoli.”

Legalist scholars also advocated that leaders should command inferiors, who then dictate to lower-rank individuals, continuing in this top-down way through the hierarchical chain. This is a further feature that pervades many social structures, including mafia syndicates. Legalists additionally stipulated that penalties for disobedience should be harsh and immediate. Indeed, one ancient text—attributed to Han Fei—suggested that even a hardened criminal will not pick up molten gold because the instantaneous result is severe scalding. Han Fei argued that bad behavior similarly warrants swift pain, and the prompt killing of Paulie mirrors this sentiment.

In some ways, Michael adheres more to Legalist tenets than his father, particularly strictures demanding total obedience, the idea being nobody under the ruler is above the law. Michael acts on this when he has his brother killed for violating his expectations, even though the breach was not fully intentional. By contrast, Vito’s commitments get a little closer to an approach advanced by the Chinese thinker, Mozi, who lived during the heyday of Legalism and

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taught that we can avoid fighting by making it unprofitable for enemies. Father and son, to be sure, both employ violence in ways that would have appalled Mozi. But Michael does so with greater frequency and brutality. By comparison, his father regularly gets results without murder.

So, rather than killing or even causing physical injury to Woltz, the horse's head communicates that further resistance will be costly. Likewise, Vito sues for peace in order to bring his son home, but with the thinly veiled threat that any harm to Michael will be severely injurious to the rival crime families. Sometimes no threats are needed. In one instance, Vito merely approaches a greedy landlord in a placating way, asking him not to evict a widow and her son, even offering to pay additional rent on the woman's behalf. However, upon asking around, the landlord discovers Vito isn't to be trifled with, and obsequiously reduces the rent.

Far Eastern Dons

Confucius's ideas were collected by students into the *Analects* after his death around 479 BCE. Confucius stressed hierarchy and piety to parents or elders, something obviously seen in *The Godfather* movies. Yet Confucius moved more towards meritocracy than was standard in his day because he insisted advisers should be chosen on the basis of ability, not birth. In *The Godfather*, Tom Haggen is an example. He's not Italian, nor is he related by blood to the Corleones. Yet he's the consigliere because of his loyalty, sagacity and legal training. He also gets shuffled out of the role at a time of heightened aggression because he's "not a wartime consigliere," meaning again that the role is assigned based on merit.

While stressing merit, Confucius simultaneously advocated a harmonious social order where people know their place. He said a father should take care of his sons, and rulers their people, just as sons and citizens should show deference to their superiors. Punishments can also

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be avoided by a skilled leader, who inspires admiration, devotion and therewith loyal behavior, as Vito in fact does with Enzo, Clemenza and others.

For all this, subordinates should respectfully raise questions if their superiors are making mistakes, which is in the interest of harmony and the collective good. So, a leader following Confucian ideals will at times voice decisions only after hashing ideas out with subordinates, trying to reach agreement, thereby benefiting from collective wisdom and promoting harmony.

To be sure, Vito's criminal activity deviates from the upright proclivities of Confucianism (not to mention Buddhism and Daoism). But aside from this, the Corleone family structure runs pretty close to the great sage's ideal for society. There's deference to authority inasmuch as people honor Vito (and later Michael) as a wise elder. Simultaneously, subordinates such as Sonny and Tom advise and occasionally disagree with Vito, although recognizing he has final say. Vito's primarily interest is preserving his family, understood conventionally and also more broadly to include everyone under his care. This means he's after a kind of social harmony.

As compared to Confucianism, Daoist and Buddhist practices lean towards separation from society (for example, in monasteries) to cultivate personal enlightenment. Yet all these traditions esteem harmony as a central virtue. Despite arising outside of China, Buddhism shares a second feature with Daoism: an emphasis on relationality. Daoism emblemizes this with the symbol of Yin and Yang, which indicates that the cosmos consists of harmonies of contraries that mutually produce and support one another. As the *Dao De Jing* asserts, plenitude and absence generate each other, and difficulty and ease are mutually revealing, just as parents and children only *are* in virtue of one another, to put it in the terms of *The Godfather*. Buddhist teachings similarly hold that things rely upon one another for their existence. So, to give an example from physics, an object has no length in isolation since its dimensions vary according to

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the relative velocity at which it's encountered. A further point Buddhists stress is that everything is changing—in effect, always dying and being reborn.

On these grounds, Buddhists reject the idea that humans even have a self since anything identifiable as such is here now and gone an instant later. Buddhists add that the distinction between “me” and “not-me” doesn't make sense since individuals and their worlds are mutually defining. This view gets close to Daoist ideas. It's also not far from Confucianism. But this isn't because Confucius denied that the self exists. It's because he stressed relationality, believing the self is formed from hierarchal layers with family members, friends and the broader social-political community, and if we strip all this away, there's nothing left. Michael's lonely life attests to this since, by the end of the film, he's a hollow shell of a man precisely because he has no family relations. Vito likewise reinforces Confucian concepts of self since social bonds are everything to him. These ties literally make him who he is: the Godfather.

Vito's management style sometimes also conforms to a Daoist principle called *wu-wei*, meaning “effortless action.” The idea here is that one can win by doing nothing. A leader acting within these precepts might take a hands-off approach when subordinates are functioning fine, and let them do their own thing, only interfering when underlings are way off course. This isn't exactly Vito's way, yet he exhibits something close to *wu-wei* when he offers to pay additional rent that the greedy landlord will get from another family on the condition that the widow be allowed to stay with her son and dog, which was the provocation for her eviction. Not only does the landlord let her stay upon learning who Vito is. He keeps lowering the rent as Vito sits with a passive smile. So, Vito's strategy here is to more or less do nothing until he gets the desired result.

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Vito's motivations for aiding the widow are also illuminating. He probably would have just given her a little money to assist with a move had his wife not been present during the discussion as the woman's advocate. Since it's doubtful that Vito had much to gain from helping the widow, aside from slightly fortifying his reputation as patriarch, we have to conclude that while he has mild sympathy for her, his loving devotion to his wife is the main motivator.

This returns us to where we began. Vito descends into crime because he loves his family more than anything. Michael falls for the same reason, but comes to sacrifice what he was trying to protect. Acknowledging that "times are changing" and tacitly that he was born in a different land than his father when his mother says "you can never lose your family," Michael relinquishes just that for personal power.