

An Italian Think-Tank in the U.S.

Letizia Airos (May 20, 2008)



A conversation with Anthony Julian Tamburri at the end of the conference on “Italians in the Americas”. The Dean makes a point on the degrees of perception and diffusion of Italian American culture both in the United States and in Italy. There is much to do and topics such as politics and psychology must be examined in depth and studied. Today the Calandra Institute, under the aegis of CUNY, has got what it takes to become an out-and-out Italian think-tank in America.

In front of me sits Anthony Julian Tamburri, Dean of the [J.D. Calandra Institute](#) [2]. We are surrounded by books, notes, photocopies, videotapes, and literary magazines. A careful observer, taking a look at his office which is a few steps away from the New York Public Library, immediately perceives that no book is positioned casually. Taking a volume from a bookcase just to read a



phrase, a paragraph, is the gesture his friends and colleagues are used to seeing the most.

This time I am meeting with him to gather his impressions on the conference "Italians in the Americas", organized by the Institute. But the conversation develops and little by little becomes an intense reflection that goes far beyond considerations of the three days of fruitful work. The symposium, after all, is not just a point of arrival for him – after a year and a half of heading the institute – but also a starting point for further challenges.

Tamburri starts visibly satisfied: "It worked out very well. First of all because the topics were many, and different from those usually tackled in Italian American conventions. For instance, there were two really interesting contributions on Italians in Latin America: one by David Aliano on Fascism and the other by Stefano Lucconi on political mobilization in Argentina and in the United States. Then, thanks to the studies performed by Vincenzo Milione and Maddalena Tirabassi, we have had the chance to reflect, with the help of precise data, on the numbers concerning emigration into the Americas."

Speakers coming from different countries participated in the conference. In fact, in the title of the conference, Tamburri refers to the term Americas in an inclusive sense. What do Italians in the Americas have in common in his opinion?

"The way they feel about Italy", he says. And with particular intensity, adds: "Everybody looks towards Italy, although in different ways. For example, the welcome that Brazil and Argentina gave their immigrants was very different from the one the United States gave. Just think that Argentina is a country that also has Mediterranean characteristics."

Is there something specific then, to the experience in the United States, as well as a concept of "continuous renegotiation of identity", as Fred Gardaphe had questioned in his inaugural dissertation?

"Yes. The history of immigration in the United States is really peculiar. Even if we compare it to Canada's immigration history. If we analyze not only the studies, but also the novels and the movies on the argument, we are made very much aware of this."

Speaking as Dean of the Calandra Institute, what are the topics tackled at the convention that could be better developed in the future?

"From an academic point of view, psychology and politics. Next autumn the Calandra Institute will publish a volume encompassing 30 years of socio-psychological studies. They're works written by professors that came here as fellows, by scholars who have had different kinds of relations with the Calandra Institute and by members of our staff. The greatest part is still unpublished. Now, in "Italians in the Americas" there is a very important – and in some aspects unique – section dedicated to psychology with Donna H. Di Cello, Elizabeth Messina and Antonio Terracciano. They have analyzed psychological racism and existing stereotypes, with reference to Lombroso, regarding southern people. As far as politics are concerned, there is a section entitled "Is there an Italian/American body politic?" The really enlightening considerations of the two political scientists Ottorino Cappelli and Rodrigo Praino are to be considered a starting point for a more profound analysis about the Italian American political network."

I would need much more space to report on the contents of a conversation that had become increasingly more pleasant and interesting...



“There were many different discoveries... There are many important topics to which renewed attention should be given. The process of renegotiation of identity on which we have to work must include a rediscovery; we have to go way back in history and ask ourselves questions, even ones that aren't nice or comfortable. We have to find answers and articulate them, even if they're not the ones we were expecting.”

Many think anyone and everyone of Italian heritage should reach this goal, even people in the mother country.

“ Surely Italy itself must still come to terms with its emigration. The so-called ‘dominating culture’ has preferred to keep quiet until a few years ago. That is the reason why literary works such as *Pane Amaro* (Bitter Bread) by Elena Gianini Belotti and the movie bearing the same name by Gianfranco Norelli, the novel *Vita* (Life) by Melania Mazzucco and also the movie *My name is Tanino* by Paolo Virzi, even if in some sense debatable, are so important.”

And what about in the U.S.? The popularity of Italian American culture in Hollywood movies is undeniable, even if the way it is presented has caused several controversies in the community.

“That’s true. American Italian culture has become very popular in the movie world, essentially when it comes to talking about the Mafia. In the first period of movie history, 252 Mafia movies were made. But from 1972 until 2000 another 700 have come out. Besides Vincent Minnelli and Frank Capra, who we were incapable of appreciating as Italian American directors, there are many others still not identified as Italian Americans. Among them are Stanley Tucci, Greg Mottola, Gary Marshall and also Tom di Cillo, Michael Cimino, Brian De Palma. These are great directors that have not made only Mafia movies. There are many of their works that still need to be interpreted, given that they apparently seem to lack any Italian American cultural content. Our task is to study all these cultural products and teach the public how to appreciate them.”

Certainly Tamburri does not deny Italian Americans’ own responsibilities:

“It's also a problem that exists inside the Italian American community. From a cultural point of view we are still a very young community and we should try to appreciate more fully the so-called cultural products. Books, cinema, figurative art... We have to give research in these fields the same prestige that we attribute to those studies we consider more “useful”, like studies in medicine and economy. *Mens sana in corpore sano* (A Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body).”

So there are many challenges to face. What does it mean for you to face them as the Dean of the Calandra institute ?

“ What is lacking in the Italian American world is what I call a think-tank. Other ethnic groups have their own. Since its foundation the Calandra Institute has had the task and the mission to operate within the research field, but its principal function for a long time was that of assisting and advising CUNY students. In the ‘70s people started to understand that Italian Americans met difficulties in the passage from the blue to the white-collar worker world. The first generation coming to the United States surely did not have these types of expectations or needs. People in the following generations started going to university, but there were some problems. Many students abandoned their studies after a few years, and professors of Italian origin had a difficult time getting promotions. It wasn't t easy dealing with these impasses. In 1979, when the Calandra was founded, this was its principal task. Nowadays there are different problems and in 1995 the institute was re-launched as a



University Research Institute. And now we have to become an out-and-out think-thank.”

Studies in the Italian American field are lacking in the academic world. It’s necessary to create “schools”. What can the Calandra Institute do to promote the establishment of other university chairs?

“We have paved the way, but we have to try to collaborate at a national level. We must immediately create a network of study centers called to work for this goal. We have to carry out a project, a philosophy. And we must build a multilevel dialogue with the cultural institutions in Italy. We have contributed, as an example, to the organization of the Film Festival in Pesaro, in which a section on Italian American cinema was proposed. In September the Calandra Institute will reply with its own festival. And the “American study centers” in Italy can do a lot. Scholars of American Studies have to expand their horizons and also welcome studies performed by Americans of Italian origin. Some time ago there was an Italian magazine that published an edition wholly dedicated to the ethnic groups present in the United States...the only group that went unmentioned were Italian Americans! The same thing, it must be said, is happening here with the very famous American Studies Association (ASA). For the last 8 years in his annual inaugural speech, the president makes not one mention of Americans of Italian origin. It is inconceivable to me that this group goes unrecognized.”

So if nowadays a student wants to undertake Italian American Studies he still has to face many difficulties...

“ He has to be lucky. If he finds a professor interested in Italian American Studies he might make it... Fred Gardaphe and I have discussed the possibility of promoting two or three PhD programs. But a greater amount of information needs to be divulged. To this end the Calandra doesn’t just use traditional TV networks... It has its own TV show on CUNY TV, *Italics*, and a few months ago it started to actively collaborate with the website www.i-italy.org [3] whose editorial unit is hosted in our buildings. Although our TV slot is only 30 minutes long, we can do a lot through the web and also through video technology. People all over the United States, and also in Italy, read us. This month, in particular, we are organizing a number of events to avoid the closing of the AP Italian program. An institute like Calandra, that is a branch of a prestigious university like CUNY, has to act as a true engine for the diffusion of Italian American culture. It also has to be a place where students can do internships. A short time ago we sent out notices telling students they have the chance to do internships at different levels, either in television or in journalism, in marketing and in graphics.”

We asked him to tell us briefly about upcoming scheduled events. The most important ones...

“We have a scheduled event for every month, but four of them are more important for the moment. In September the New American Cinema Festival, in October a symposium entitled FIAC (Forum on Italian American Criticism) in collaboration with Stony Brook. Then, in 2009, in March, the Neapolitan Post Card on the diffusion of Neapolitan music in the world and, in April, the second annual convention entitled *The Land of Our Return*. This will be an important moment for rediscovery and comparison; it’s a phenomenon that still needs studying.”

Anthony Tamburri: a real volcano of ideas, projects, initiatives. We could go on for hours. But we have to part ways and, leaving his study, curiously, a phrase uttered by John Adams in 1819 comes to mind. I still think of it as illuminating on the question of generational “transitions”: “I must study politics and war so that my children will have the chance to study mathematics and philosophy, navigation, commerce and agriculture, and they in turn will give their own children the opportunity to study painting, poetry and music.”



(Translated by [Marina Melchionda](#) [4])

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