

Delirious Naples in New York: A conversation with Stan Pugliese

Ottorino Cappelli (November 14, 2011)



HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY

presents

A Conference

DELIRIOUS NAPLES:

FOR A CULTURAL, INTELLECTUAL, AND
URBAN HISTORY OF THE CITY OF THE SUN

HOFSTRA CULTURAL CENTER, HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY
WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 17, 18, 2011

and

CASA ITALIANA ZERILLI-MARIMÒ, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2011

In memoriam

Thomas V. Belmonte (1946-1995), author of *The Broken Fountain*

A four-day conference on Naples starts on November 16 at Hofstra University.

Naples seems to be “fashionable” in the U.S. these days. John Turturro’s acclaimed film [Passione](#) [2] has contributed to a trend of interest that culminated last week in a long article in the [New York Times’s Travel section](#) [3]. Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò (NYU) and the Lincoln Center have been organizing for several years the film festival 41° Parallelo, dedicated to a cinematographic ‘connection’ between Naples and New York (it starts this year on [November 30](#) [4]). Few people know the name of the Mayor of Rome, but many remember Naples’ mayor Antonio Bassolino when he came to New York in the late 1990s to sell the city’s bonds to Wall Street investors in the hope to fund his Neapolitan Renaissance. Many more would know of course about Camorra (the infamous Neapolitan ‘mafia’), at least through [Roberto Saviano’s popular book Gomorrah](#) [5] and its [cinematographic version by Matteo Garrone](#) [6]. And almost everybody knows of course of the months-long “rubbish scandal” that recently brought the city and its political class to its knees, including Bassolino himself.



Building in part on this peak of attention, Hofstra University has organized an impressive four-day conference “Delirious Naples”: For a Cultural, Intellectual, and Urban History of the City of the Sun (November 16 to 19: [download the full program here](#) [7]).

The title is designed after that of [Delirious New York](#) [8]—the influential cultural, architectural, and social history of New York published in the 1970s by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas—due mainly to the passion for architectural theory nurtured by the conference director, **Prof. Pellegrino D’Acierno**, who among many other things is the fine translator of Manfredo Tafuri’s classic study of the avant-gardes in architecture (*The Sphere and the Labyrinth*). So in its conception, the conference represent a multi-faceted homage to the idea that Naples and New York have more in common than one may at first be inclined to believe.

“I’m not sure if Naples is fashionable, but it certainly is fascinating. Even the negative image of Naples is part of its fascination,” the other conference co-organizer **Prof. Stanislao Pugliese** tells us. “A bit like New York was fascinating in the 1970s, before it became ‘corporatized’, before Time Square become Disneyland”—and, we might add, before Little Italy was transformed from the Italian-Neapolitan heart of New York into one of the city’s ethnic theme parks.

“In the 1970s and 1980s, people used to talk about New York as a dangerous, dirty and corrupted city. The same with Naples today. But even in the midst all this corruption, poverty, pollution, garbage, Naples today, like New York then, still manages to be a city of enormous cultural vitality.” And this juxtaposition between *la bella vita* that it offers and the human tragedy it barely conceals is indeed part of Naples fascination, according to Pugliese.

No wonder then that Pellegrino D’Acierno writes, in his introductory message to the [booklet](#) [7] that accompanies the event, that “this conference is addressed to “lovers of paradoxes.”

“Naples—he writes—presents itself as an irresolvable paradox: a city in economic and political decline (despite its revival under Antonio Bassolino in the 1990s), which, nonetheless, produces a vital and profound intellectual life and a brilliant and exuberant artistic, literary and urban culture that approaches the condition of the ‘national-popular culture’ that Antonio Gramsci so ardently prescribed.”

The many paradoxes of Naples as well as the Naples-New York parallel are at the heart of an intensely rich program that starts on November 16 at Hofstra University with an exhibit by independent artist and writer B. Amore (*Naples-New York: An Installation*), continues its explorations throughout three days of discussions among dozens of scholars and artists, writers and actors, and finally ends at New York University’s Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò on November 19, with a day full of talks, performances and screenings, a lecture by Pellegrino D’Acierno himself (*On Being Exorbitant: The Neapolitan Conception of the World*), and a round table on “Contemporary Naples.”

According to Pugliese, New York is the best place to held such a stimulating cultural kermesse, because despite their past and presents problems, and all the resulting stereotypes, both these cities “are living, culturally stimulating places in the 21st century. And I also believe that Naples, maybe because it has never been a modern city, can teach us how to be post-modern. It’s a paradox we are going to stress, Naples is a city of paradoxes, and much more complex than the stereotypes would lead us to believe.”

“At our conference I am going to speak about the difficulty of writing a cultural history of Naples for a popular audience without falling into clichés. On the one hand, you have ‘See Naples and Die’, you have all these people on the Grand Tour, and ‘O sole mio and pizza and spaghetti and all that; on the other hand you just have Camorra and rubbish... So how do you navigate between these two extremes? Does the truth exist somewhere in between or does it exist in some kind of interaction between these opposite poles of thinking about Naples? And, most of all: What can Naples teach us? You see a city that has been around for 30 centuries... they must know something!”

Pugliese will discuss these topics in the afternoon session of November 16 (Learning from Naples/Reading Naples as a Literary Text, at 1:15pm) together with Pellegrino D’Acierno, Nelson Moe (Barnard College, Columbia University) and Fred Gardaphé, Distinguished Professor of Italian



American Studies (John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, CUNY).

Among the reasons of such widespread interest about Naples in New York, one should not forget to mention the fact that this is one of the most Italian cities of the world—and, given the regional composition of Italian immigration, actually one of the most Neapolitan. Hundreds of thousands of descendants of Neapolitan immigrants live here and—contrary to a well-entrenched stereotypes—they have indeed become part of the political, economic, and cultural establishment of the city.

The very biography of the two organizers of the conference suggests this. Professor D'Acerno's father was a graduate of University of Naples' Medical School who came to the U.S. in 1920s. D'Acerno lost him when he was only 5 years old, and this conference is at least in part a tribute to his memory. Stan Pugliese's father also came from the Naples area (actually from Montefalcione, in the Avellino province), while his mother was from the nearby region of Calabria. His origins are not the least of the reasons why he is now working on this cultural history of Naples, which he will present at the conference: "When I was growing up, whenever my brother and I got into trouble my mother would yell at us 'Questi scugnizzi napoletani! [You damn Neapolitan street kids!] Wait until your father comes home...' So, you know, I grew up with this stereotype of the scugnizzo in my mind... and I always wanted to know and write about these things."

The "Delirious Naples" conference, in sum, promises to be a very varied and most stimulating event. Yet, if professors Pugliese and D'Acerno may accept a constructive criticism coming from a Neapolitan colleague working in the field of social sciences, it is that it focuses overwhelmingly on literature and history, cinema and music, arts, architecture and general cultural studies—while it almost completely overlooks an analysis of contemporary Neapolitan society, economy and politics. This may in turn reflect an enduring stereotype, this time in the minds of American academics, whereby Naples sometimes transmutes into a figment of cultural imaginary in which the real city disappears together with its social and class struggles, its economic inequalities, and its fierce political competition.

Pugliese agrees that this is a weakness—not so much of this conference, but of the general field of Italian Studies in America and promises that they will try to address some of these issues in the final round table at NYU's Casa Italiana on Saturday, November 19 ("Napul'è" - Learning from Contemporary Naples, at 4:30pm).

So, if you really cannot make it for the bulk of the conference at Hofstra University during the week, do not miss the last day at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò.

Source URL: <http://newsite.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/art-culture/article/delirious-naples-in-new-york-conversation-stan-pugliese>

Links

- [1] <http://newsite.iitaly.org/files/delirious-naples1321461441.jpg>
- [2] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7auYtB7Tzs>
- [3] <http://travel.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/travel/a-gothic-tour-of-italy.html?scp=4&sq=naples&st=cse>
- [4] <http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/node/634>
- [5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roberto_Saviano
- [6] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gomorra_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gomorra_(film))
- [7] http://www.hofstra.edu/pdf/Community/culctr/culctr_regprog_naples111611.pdf
- [8] <http://www.amazon.com/Delirious-New-York-Retroactive-Manifesto/dp/1885254008>