

Dialogue and Debate, Part two: An Italian-American Controversy

Fred Gardaphe (January 09, 2010)



Editorial Note: On January 21 (10am) the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute will host a colloquium entitled "Guido: An Italian-American Youth Style." Guest speakers include Professor Donald Tricarico, a sociologist who has been studying the "guido culture" for a number of years, and Mr. Jonny DeCarlo, a self-professed guido and a freelance writer. Born out of the MTV reality show "Jersey Shore" and the subsequent anti-defamation charges by national Italian-American organizations, the colloquium proposes an objective, intellectual investigation of this component of Italian-American youth, which is often ignored or misunderstood. Some exponents of the Italian-American community have objected to the Calandra Institute holding such colloquium at all, seeing it as a "legitimation" of the guido lifestyle, ultimately playing into the hands of MTV and those who defame Italian Americans. Critics have singled out, among others, Fred Gardaphe, Distinguished Professor of Italian American Studies, for supporting the Calandra Institute's initiative and stating in a Time Magazine interview that the wave of negative response to Jersey Shore come from what he calls "irony deficiency" in the Italian-American community. Here are Professor Gardaphe's responses



to his critics and all those who believe in boycotting intellectual investigations.

Dear Mr. Fratta,

I'm glad that this controversy has brought our voices and ideas into conversation. For too long our community has kept business separate from intellectual pursuit. I believe you, like most Italian Americans, are not familiar with the work that I have produced over the last 30 years and perhaps this interaction will result in a greater awareness of the work I and many others have produced. Many of us have spent our lives examining the phenomenon of Italian immigration to the United States with the purpose of understanding and improving the lot of the Italian American. Communication between us can help improve our community by promoting the sharing of knowledge and resources in pursuit of better lives.

We agree on many things and so I suggest we base the foundation of our discussions on that and then debate that upon which we do not agree. I would never challenge another person's beliefs and so agree with you that Mr. Piccolo is "not wrong in his beliefs". You are right that "we should be joining forces and begin attacking the problem". This initial colloquium is part of making that happen. By framing the problem and examining it from various angles we will be better able to formulate strategies for solutions.

Politicians usually arm themselves with studies conducted by academic think tanks and perhaps that's what's been the problem with our politicians. When the Calandra Institute provided our politicians with the information about the Italian American dropout rate those politicians rallied to solve that problem. Would this have been done if someone had said the Institute should spend more time promoting the positive instead of investigating dropouts? Cancer never was a good thing, and when people started studying it we started finding solutions. And if we don't study phenomena of our own community, then we are left with reacting to what the news and entertainment media present.

This colloquium, one of many the Calandra Institute has offered since its inception, is not focused on the MTV television show, rather the culture that the show purports to represent. Who better than to give us insight into just what the fuss is all about than a social scientist who has actually studied the subculture for many years. This colloquium is a signal to the world that we are taking control of our own representations. This colloquium is not the first, nor will it be the last word on this subject. A few years ago the Calandra did a similar colloquium on youth culture at Queens College and not one Italian American organization responded to it.

My students at Queens College will be hosting a roundtable in the spring on Italian American youth lifestyles that will be part of a larger series on Italian American youth culture. Through these events we hope for all to gain a better understanding of what is happening to those who will someday take over the leadership of our community. This is why it is so important that all of our leaders should plan on attending these and other events. I must say that when I was their age, a while ago, no one in the Italian community paid attention to my attempts to forge an Italian American identity, which I did through many successful and unsuccessful attempts.

Let's make this the beginning of better interaction among leaders in the business, social, educational and cultural institutions of Italian America. Combining the brains, brawn and beauty of our community can only help us all no matter where we work or live.



I hope that with the support of leaders such as your self we can begin to work together to better understand what it meant, means and will mean to be Italian Americans.

Sincerely,

Fred Gardaphe

Dear Mr. Piccolo,

I want to thank you for drawing attention through your recent blog to the Calandra Institute's upcoming colloquium that was designed to investigate what is known "Guido" has been in existence for 30 years. Too often the Italian American community does not pay attention to the good work done at and through the Calandra Institute.

In that blog, "['Guido' The New Way to Mock Italian Americans](#) [2]" you say there are "so called 'intellectuals'...trapped by their own Bull Shit" I assume you are referring to me [editor note: for the statements published in the [Time Magazine](#) [3],] and so I address this as my personal response to your claims.

I have never been referred to as a "Guido" nor do I portray the behavior that might warrant such a characterization. First of all you claim that what I say makes me "dumb" and "a traitor for a few pieces of silver" thrown my way. Such accusations are unfounded; I ask you here for a personal apology and a public withdrawal of those accusations. The work I do and have been doing for a good thirty years has never been funded by any insidious source that has enticed me to "betray" or even worse as you put it "piss on" my community.

On the contrary, my work has been motivated by my need to understand that community, and my responses to the exploration of that information has been the more than seven books I have written on the subject of the Italian American community. I have dedicated my professional life to this exploration, and your characterization of me is crude and could be construed as libelous. I have not garnished monetary wealth from this work and simply have a respected reputation that you have publicly attempted to defame. Your public apology would be greatly appreciated.

I don't believe that Donald Tricarico, as you say, "glorifies guido". Tricarico is a sociologist who has spent time trying to understand aspects of the larger Italian American community that often gets manipulated by the media. Guido culture is not something the media created; in fact, Italian American culture, for better or worse, has created Guido culture, and that I believe is something that must be investigated and understood before we can move further in any discussion. Dr. Tricarico, as any good social scientist describes Guido culture for those who are interested. He doesn't "Love it" or Hate it.

I can understand your anger and your fear at the recent dominance of this culture's representation in the media. Once again, a small segment of the Italian American population is getting the attention



that the major part of Italian American culture has never respectfully received. This has been one of the greatest problems that our community has faced, and one that we hope to address through intellectual investigation and through the promotion of alternative artistic and media works. This has been the foundation of what has been produced by the Calandra Institute since its inception and one of the reasons I was drawn to my current affiliation.

I find the Calandra Institute's wording of this upcoming participation in the upcoming colloquium to be accurate and appropriate. Guido culture is something that is "non-traditional" and represents the way a number of Americans of Italian descent have chosen to identify themselves as being Italian American. No one ever said they represent the whole of the culture, and actually, within Dr. Tricarico's work, you will find the information you need to more cogently critique what you see as a negative representation of Italian American culture.

Whatever it is one feels about Guido culture, all Italian Americans share some responsibility for having created it. Whether those inside Guido culture have created their identities out of arrogant animosity toward what some consider to be traditional representations of Italian American culture--both within and without the Italian community--or through some interpretation based on attentive admiration of publicly presented versions of Italian American culture, what needs to be examined is just what is and what isn't Italian or American about Guido culture, and what is or isn't of our own creation. That is what I feel is the work at hand.

I have many students who feel that Guido culture does not represent them, the same way that most Italian Americans feel that gangster culture does not reflect them. I also have students who feel comfortable within versions of Guido culture. This is simply a reality that such a colloquium will enable us to examine.

I have never once publicly applauded the MTV television program that has brought attention back to this culture, and I do not accept your interpretation of a recent misquoting of my response to one reporter as enthusiastic support of it. In fact, I simply said that it is just more of what MTV has been throwing out for years without much protest from other communities. The reporter mistook my interpretation of "guappo" for "guido" and that's where some of the confusion might lie.

I do believe strongly in there being an irony deficiency within some members of the Italian American community that does not allow them to connect to the more artistic mis-representations of Italian America that appear in the arts. I never said irony deficiency was a right or wrong thing, those are your words. I simply identified it and have been working to document it and explain it, much the same way Dr. Tricarico has worked to document and interpret Guido culture.

That Guidos take pride in themselves is no reason to encourage "young Italian boys and girls" to join them. Such reasoning would lead to the suggestion that the First Amendment is at the root of all this representative evil.

I think this colloquium is a great opportunity for all Americans to better understand all sides of this issue. By calling for a boycott, or even worse a cancellation, of this colloquium you are not only denying the right of free speech, but also the necessity of intellectual investigation of all aspects of the community. It is imperative that we debate intelligently and respectfully all issues, whatever we may think of them. I find this quite sad and little more than a reminder that the generation gaps inside Italian America will continue to grow and remain unbridged.

Professor Tricarico does not need any "proof" of his credibility; but we all need to consider his



research as we attempt to fashion powerful ways of addressing Italian American identities today and for the future. I hope you, as well as others who might consider not attending, will consider joining us for what promises to be a significantly informative, and thus beneficial discussion for all.

Related Links: <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1947338,00.html> [3]

Source URL: <http://test.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/op-eds/article/dialogue-and-debate-part-two-italian-american-controversy>

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[1] <http://test.iitaly.org/files/saturday-night-fever-061263200580jpg>

[2] <http://www.i-italy.us/profiles/blogs/guido-is-another-term-for>

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