



Guido: an Italian American Youth Style

Anthony Julian Tamburri (January 22, 2010)

This colloquium is not about the MTV show “Jersey Shore” and it does not justify it in any manner. This colloquium is about the phenomenon of the “Guido” that, regardless of its merits or lack thereof, has its origins and is associated with Italians in America. Whether one likes it or not, this component of Italian-American youth—an articulation of cultural expression, call it what one wishes—does exist. We are not asking anyone “to accept” this or any other “sub-culture” that may exist in the Italian-American community. Yet, precisely because this culture has been show-cased on television, and precisely because it has remained unknown to many, we need to be sure that we can speak to it in an informed manner.

What follows are the introductory remarks of Prod. Anthony J. Tamburri, Dean of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, at the colloquium “Guido: an Italian American Youth Style” (January 21, 2010).

First, I want to thank those who have helped make this colloquium possible. At the top of the list are Professor Donald Tricario and Johnny DeCarlo, for accepting our invitation and—in light of the heated discussions that followed our initial press release—for being here today. That said, I cannot underscore enough that fact that they are our guests here at the Calandra Institute, as you all are. We expect that all present, who might disagree with anything said today, will do so in a respectful manner. We here at Calandra will simply not tolerate any gratuitous insults or vituperous offense.

I also want to thank Dr. Joseph Sciorra, who organized this event, and Dr. Fred Gardaphè who found himself in the unenviable position of being the object of unflattering commentary and who responded with much grace and aplomb. Finally, I need to thank Italics, under the direction of William Schempp, and i-Italy.org, under the direction of Drs. Letizia Airos and Ottorino Cappelli. These two outlets, both now multi-media, while located in New York, can prove to be the national networks for all things Italians. This, too, we shall explore in the near future.

Now, let me start out by doing what we were taught not to do in Ciceronian Rhetorical Studies and underscore what this is NOT. Our colloquium is NOT an “educational” lecture, as someone stated to me; in our brief announcement nowhere is this adjective present. It is also NOT geared to “young and impressionable minds,” as someone wrote. Though I would submit to all of you present that many undergraduate college courses across the country address social issues much more debatable than the one we shall discuss here today. Our intended audience is a general one, open to the public at large. Also, I need to underscore further that this a colloquium (1) that does NOT glorify the notion of this one component of Italian-American youth about which little is known, and (2) that does NOT glorify the MTV show “Jersey Shore.”



As for the first point, whether one likes it or not, there is this component of Italian-American youth—an articulation of cultural expression, call it what one wishes—that manifests itself in this manner and that has been dubbed “Guido.” We may not like it, but it does exist, as there are also members of other ethnicities that have taken on what is widely considered negative nomenclature and adopted it as their moniker. I would remind the audience of the “gangsta rap” group that eventually called itself by the abbreviation NWA (“Niggers With Attitude”), which lasted from 1986-1991. The African-American community addressed this and other issues they found problematic, and continue to do so today.

We are not asking anyone “to accept” this or any other “sub-culture” that may exist in the Italian-American community. Yet, precisely because this culture has been show-cased on television, and precisely because it has remained unknown to many, we need to be sure that we can speak to it in an informed manner, rather than let a commercial enterprise that is MTV decide to appropriate it, distort it, pass it off as real and authentic, and, hence, representative (falsely, I would add) of Italian-American youth at large. For as much as those in our community who are familiar with this sub-culture and may not like it, we simply need to be aware of it and, further, know its roots so we can better comprehend its existence in an informed manner.

Like some adults in our community, some of our young engage in life styles that are not acceptable by the majority. The question then is, What do we do about it? As a community at large, and especially our national organizations and institutes, we need to investigate such phenomena in order to be as informed as possible about what is happening beyond the center, the mainstream, of our community.

As for the second point in my opening paragraphs, our colloquium was indeed prompted by the MTV show, the entire process of which raised a series of questions and angered Italian Americans, just as NWA did in the African-American community. But this colloquium is NOT about the show and it does NOT justify it any manner; nowhere did we imply either. This colloquium is about the phenomenon of the “Guido” that, regardless of its merits or lack thereof, has its origins and is associated with Italians in America.

Such problematic questions, as I have discussed many times with others in the past, are what we as a community at large have not addressed. We have, instead, let others take possession of these issues—Italian Americans and non Italian Americans in the media, for example—and we have been left to react, and we have done so separately. We have rarely, as a community, had our own forums on this and other matters that have arisen in the past once we have gone through that primary phase of reacting to the issue, something valid by all means but only a first step. (I have, for instance, blogged about this in the past with regard to the lack of substantive cultural philanthropy; only one national organization has engaged in endowed professorships, and individuals in this regard are far and few in between.)

Whether it is this current issue, or what some have previously dubbed the “Madonna” factor and all the “wannabes” of the 1990s, or the more general issue of why we are often associated with much troubling imagery such as, first and foremost, organized crime, as a community at large we have not taken possession of the discussion. We have not, that is, engaged in any profound discussion and investigation of the “whys” and “what-fors” of any of the hot-button issues mentioned above, or any other matter, as far as I know, that have troubled members of the Italian-American community.

This colloquium is a first step in such a practice. That said, let me also underscore that this colloquium can indeed be a first-step in our (not just Calandra’s, but the entire Italian-American community’s) investigation of this and other issues that some find problematic.



In order for us to embark on such a path, therefore, I am asking those in leadership positions of [NIAF](#) [1], [NOIAW](#) [2], [OSIA](#) [3], and [UNICO](#) [4] here present today to remain after the conclusion of this event, so we might share some preliminary ideas on what to do next. Subsequent to this meeting, we can surely discuss what other problematic issues we need to address in a more analytical manner that we have not done before.

This is a long-term commitment that asks us to gather as a community of Italian Americans at large (NIAF, NOIAW, OSIA, UNICO, other national Italian-American organizations such as [AATI](#) [5] and [AIHA](#) [6], [ILICA](#) [7], and scholars, teachers, and writers) and investigate the myriad of topics such as those mentioned above that others have defined for us. Other ethnicities have done so, as I mentioned above with regard to NWA. I especially have in mind the so-called “town-gown” combination of, for instance, Bill Cosby and Professor Alvin Poussaint. The Italian and Italian-American communities here in the United States have not done so, and I would submit to you that, as much of a stretch as it may seem in this context, the current situation of the Advanced Placement Exam in Italian is symptomatic of such an absence of these practices.

As you well know, the Calandra Institute is a university research institute dedicated to, among other things, the study, research, and analysis of Italian-American history and culture, which includes investigating even, or dare I say equally so, those issues that we find problematic. That said, I am announcing a new program we will soon launch, the occasional meeting of the minds, which will discuss contemporary issues we should indeed be addressing. These meetings will be broadcast live on the Internet by Italics, and subsequently archived on-line in order to be then accessible for later viewing.

In closing, I am confident this will prove to be the productively informative event it was originally planned to be.

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[1] <http://ww.niaf.org>

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