

Bambini, Ragazzi, Giovani

George De Stefano (May 01, 2015)

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The Calandra Institute's annual conference focuses on children and youth, in Italy and the Italian diaspora

What do we talk about when we talk about Italian and Italian American families?

Quite often it's how "the family" is the foundation of culture and community, and how family cohesion enabled poor Italians, in Italy and in the diaspora, to survive poverty and deprivation.

But children and youth, and their particular needs and concerns, are critical to the discussion, too. That's why this year the theme of the Calandra Italian American Institute's annual conference was "Bambini, Ragazzi, Giovani: Children and Youth in Italy and the Italian Diaspora." The conference, held April 24-25 at the Institute's Manhattan headquarters, lived up to its title, with a transnational focus that brought together academics, independent scholars, creative writers, and journalists from North America and Italy.

The two-day event covered a broad range of topics – children's participation in urban planning projects in Italian cities, literary and cinematic portrayals, Italian American fathers and daughters, immigrant newsboys (and girls) in US cities, second-generation Chinese immigrants in Italy, and Mafia murders of children and youths. Speakers also discussed the plight of biracial children of African American soldiers in post-World War II Italy; Italian-Libyan children and youth "forgotten by history"; how Fascism inculcated its ideals through children's literature; and much more. "Bambini, Ragazzi, Giovani," like previous Calandra conferences, attested to the intellectual rigor and fecundity of Italian/Italian American studies in the twenty-first century.

In the conference's keynote presentation, Raymond Lorenzo, a Brooklyn-born urban planner, described his "personal voyage" working with children and youth in Italy from 1977 to 2014. Lorenzo, affiliated with the [Umbra Institute](#) [3] in Perugia, founded the [ABCittà Cooperative](#) [4] and heads its scientific/technical committee. The cooperative, based in Milan but operating on the national and international levels, sponsors projects designed to improve the lives of city children and their families. They include urban gardens managed by Milan schoolchildren; a children's "town council" in Lecce; a "places to grow" initiative in the crime-plagued Scampia housing projects near Naples; and a partnership with a Rome-based association to promote the rights and social integration of Rom ("gypsy") children and their families.



Lorenzo stressed that the full participation of children and youth was a core principle of all ABCittà projects. Their participation – their ideas, enthusiasm, and energy – benefits them and adults, and the cities they live in. Without it, he said, urban planning projects too often reflect what planners think is desirable, not what residents need and want.

Lion Calandra, a journalist and member of the editorial board of the New York Daily News, gave a revealing, and disturbing talk about organized crime killings of Italian children and youth. They died when caught in gunfights between gangs; or were executed with family members who were mobsters; or were murdered because they witnessed crimes. Calandra said that since 2000, criminal groups have killed eighty children, most recently in 2014. She noted, however, that the killings didn't begin with the current millennium; in fact, they had been occurring at least a decade earlier.

The Mafia fictions of Hollywood and TV often portray gangsters as family men, who, in the words of Vito Corleone, have "a sentimental weakness" for their children. Calandra demolished this pop culture mythology by putting names and faces to some of the youngest victims of organized crime violence. They included Nicola Campolongo, a three-year-old boy killed with his grandfather in Palermo, both their bodies burned beyond recognition; Annalisa Durante, a Neapolitan teenager shot in the head during a gunfight between two camorra gangs; and Giuseppe di Matteredo, an eleven-year-old Sicilian whom Mafia boss Giovanni Brusca kidnapped to keep the boy's father, a mafioso, from testifying against Cosa Nostra. When the pentito father didn't comply, Brusca's thugs strangled Giuseppe and dissolved his body in a vat of acid so his parents couldn't give him a funeral.

Calandra observed that contrary to the so-called code of honor that supposedly protects women and children, the principle that actually governs Italy's organized crime groups is the primacy of the organized crime "family." Clan members, she noted, must always be available to do their boss' bidding, "even if one's wife is about to give birth or if it means leaving the side of a dying child."

In another informative talk, Maryann McDonald Carolan, a professor of film studies, presented and discussed clips from "[Miss Little China](#)," [5] a 2009 documentary by Vincenzo De Cecco and Riccardo Cremona about Chinese immigrants in Italy. (The title refers to a beauty pageant organized in Milan by a young Chinese-Italian entrepreneur.) Carolan observed that native Italians often hold stereotypical views of Chinese as insular people who do little but work. Their Italian-born children, however, are developing new, hybrid Italian-Chinese identities. In the film, one teenager, speaking fluent Italian, complains that she does not want to be like her parents, working "tutti i giorni." She, like other young Italians, wants fun, leisure, and long vacations.

Different Perspectives, Diverse Voices

Joseph Sciorra, Ph.D., the Calandra Institute's director for academic and cultural programs, explained why children and youth were the focus of this year's conference. "The family is an idea that is often promoted as being fundamental to Italian and Italian American identity and culture," he added. "But sometimes the issues of children are not fully explored when that value is touted. So the idea was to kind of tease out and flesh out what that idea means by focusing on children and youth."

"Each year, we try to pick a theme that is broad-based enough that we'll get a diversity of submissions and one that resonates with various aspects of Italian American and Italian diasporic studies. We include the larger diaspora to understand Italian migration as a transnational phenomenon, and also Italy, so that the conversation is not bounded by any one border but understood in a larger perspective," whether the theme is children and youth, or, as with recent Calandra conferences, organized crime and language.



As in past years, the 2015 conference was a multidisciplinary gathering. "Italian American studies, and diaspora studies, are interdisciplinary by definition," said Sciorra. "To create an exciting and rounded program, it's best to allow different perspectives. We're always looking for a diversity of voices."

"The conferences are important because Calandra is a research institution. But the idea is to present not only our staff's research but to be a public conduit for scholarship that is happening all over the world. Scholars and creative people know about the Calandra Institute. They understand that we offer a forum that is open to different ideas. By having our conferences every year at the end of April, people have come to expect that whether they're a presenter or an audience member, Calandra is the place to be to explore topics related to Italy and the Italian diaspora."

Migrating Objects: Material Culture and Italian Identities is the theme of the Calandra Institute's next annual conference, April 28-30, 2016. For more information, visit the Institute's [website](#) [6].

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