

The Dehumanization of The “Other”

Anthony Julian Tamburri (September 04, 2015)



As some of us heard from Italy’s Chamber of Deputies president Laura Boldrini the other day at the Consulate General of Italy here in New York, over 60 million people are “in flux” throughout the world, as I write. “In flux” is a recently coined phrase that refers, here, to the current world-wide migration that we all witness to some degree or another on a daily basis. What we see for the most part in the news concerns the more recent deluge of an exodus, one can readily state, that occurs throughout the Mediterranean; a flow of human beings that in recent history truly has no equal...

A significant number of these migrants are coming from middle-eastern and/or Mediterranean, war-torn countries, where previous governments — despotic for sure — have been crushed and their leaders subsequently eliminated through incarceration if not swift execution. Unfortunately, what



remains in those countries is a series of weak national governments that exist only because they have the protection of the military. The bulk of the population, middle- to working-class, is left to fend for themselves.

Where, in addition, religion has come into play — and it has indeed in no small part — no one perceived to be of the opposite faith is spared. It becomes for many, in a literal sense, a question of life and death. So much so is this the case, that those who do leave, do so in an abjectly desperate attempt to save theirs and their family's lives in spite of the tremendous gamble involved. Sadly, Aylan, the three-year-old boy in the photo seen around the world, and his brother, Galip, whose bodies washed up on shore yesterday, will never see another day.

Like the infamously tragic events of the past caught in photos — from the naked Vietnamese girl of the 1970s and other photos chronicling subsequent tragedies — perhaps this one will serve as the wake-up call, it should surely be — for Europe and the rest of the world, the U.S. Included — to do something, finally, to end such senseless loss of life. In so doing, we need also to be aware of the power of language. What do I mean? At the opening I used the phrase “in flux” instead of emigration, immigration, or, perhaps more desirable of the three, migration, a term more frequently used among public officials and scholars these days. But that term, as well as the previous two, may have its negative effect. It may readily call to mind, as I believe it often does, the notion of one's stereotypical image of the so-called “illegal” immigrant who enters a country in the most clandestine of manners, and (1) steals jobs from the local citizens, and (2) engages in violent acts against those same local citizens.

We know, instead, that recent figures in the United States debunk such biases and prejudices. Thus, the demystification of such stereotypes lies in both a new awareness of the situation at hand — that immigrants have a lower crime rate — as well as in the language we use. We need to be better aware of the power of language and how, in an attempt to be cute, if not seriously clever, we engage in a linguistic dehumanization of our brethren, especially those who are forced into a life-saving, and at the same time life-threatening, exodus from their homeland.

What do I mean by linguistic dehumanization? There are numerous examples from the past century of verbal description and visual images in which the Italian immigrant was presented in a most dehumanizing manner: either disposed of by being placed in a cage and dunked into a river or, more insidious, being represented as creatures with human heads and rodent bodies. This, one might say, is of the past. For sure, I am speaking of written and visual representations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. So, then, allow me to use a more recent example, one that has its origins in the current presidential campaign of our neighboring state's governor/presidential



candidate Chris Christie.

A few days ago Christie stated that “[y]ou go on online and at any moment, FedEx can tell you where [your] package is. [...] Yet we let people come into this country with visas, and the minute they come in, we lose track of them.” Christie went on to state that FedEx could surely advise the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on how to set up a system for tracking people. Well, as I have quoted ad nauseam, this recalls the 1990 C+C Music Factory’s disco hit, “Things That Make You Go Hmmm.” That is to say, with his statement Christie automatically reduced all visitors to the United States as packages, parcel post: things readily tracked in a continuum so we always know where they are.

When reported by the New York Times, we read, that “A FedEx spokeswoman declined to comment on Mr. Christie’s remarks.” The follow-up question, to be sure (and pardon my sarcasm), would be, “Is a signature required?” Of course no one from FedEx would respond. The more serious question, of course, is, “Has Christie, an American of both Irish and Italian descent, forgotten his roots?” The dehumanization of such thoughts reeks of the above-mentioned late nineteenth-century nativism, when the Italians (and the Irish before them) were treated as the fundamentally indentured laborers they were. Further still, as already mentioned above, they were depicted as half human in the popular press of the time.

The question that remains, I presume, is, “How have we arrived at this moment in our history, given the tragedies of the Nazi and Fascist European regimes of the ventennio nero as well as the more progressive social and gender changes of the 1960s and 1970s both here in the United States and abroad?” We in the U.S. are a nation of immigrants; we are children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of those who have built, indeed rebuilt, this nation, especially after the civil war of 1860. Somewhere along the line, a notion of “pure” Americanism —whatever that may be — has risen its ugly head, obscuring — especially with regard to those of southern European ancestry (read, Italians) — the prejudiced history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century toward the European immigrant who came here and dug the mines, paved the roads, and built the bridges: work that “Americans” of that time left to the swarthy immigrants from places like Italy, for example.

Is this what the despair of electoral politics breeds? Does the desire to win cancel out all sense of decency toward those who are here today, as well as toward those whose grandparents came a century ago? Does, to return to the tragic photo of Aylan, the hegemony of one religion grant to those who follow said religion the right to dehumanize, indeed execute in instances, their religious “others” to the point of driving them to risk their lives purely to survive?



I repeat, in closing, that the United States has and continues to be a nation of immigrants, dating back to the days of the Mayflower, to overstate the obvious, up through the great migration of 1880 to 1924, not to mention more recent years. Yet, we, too, in our own way, have fallen prey to the fear of the foreigner, a paradox to be sure. Could it be that because of an unawareness of our past histories, we got caught up in a situation of diachronic amnesia for which any lack of knowledge of our ancestors' trials and tribulations during the proverbial four-decade period of 1880-1924 adumbrates such past challenges and blinds us to the current challenges of the new immigrants? Have we thus fallen into a state of synchronicity for which current phenomena rein and all connections to the past are lost precisely because, as a result of socio-economic progress and all that it may signify to those "moving on up," we erroneously adopt the assumption that southern European immigrants and their progeny have assimilated into mainstream America? The consequence of such amnesia may, in fact, be an inability to recognize affinities between the above-mentioned trials and tribulations of our ancestors and those who are "in flux" today, all of which may result in a willy-nilly insensitivity toward current day immigration both to the United States as well as elsewhere.

The ignorance of such histories clamors oh so loudly. Che volgarità, ragazzi!

Anthony Julian Tamburri is Dean of The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, (Queens College, CUNY) and Distinguished Professor of European Languages and Literatures. His latest authored book is *Re-reading Italian Americana: Generalities and Specificities on Literature and Criticism* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2014).

Source URL: <http://test.iitaly.org/magazine/article/dehumanization-other>

Links

[1] <http://test.iitaly.org/files/giornali1441343104jpg>