

In Search of the Italian Identity

Luca Delbello & Roberta Michelino (November 24, 2013)



ILICA, Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance, organized a conference at John Jay College about the Italian identity and its significance in today's world

"A constructive dialogue." In [Vincenzo Marra](#) [2]'s words, President of ILICA, we find the epitome of an evening where different intellectuals and writers met to discuss and debate the complexity of the word "identity."

The symposium was enriched by the presence of five Italian authors and five Italian-American scholars. Each of the panelists brought to the table a piece of their own intellectual experience to expand on a notion often wrongfully considered static and unchangeable. The panel came together, first and foremost, to tell stories. Stories that we need in order to be able to establish meaningful connections with "others."



The first speaker to take the podium for the introductory speech was [Robert Pignatello](#). [3] Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of John Jay College. With his remarks he opened the session and welcomed the panelists.

[Anthony Tamburri](#). [4] Dean of the John D. Calandra Institute, briefly introduced the panel and gave the word to [Donna Chirico](#). [5] Dean of York College. Her speech focused on the places of Italian culture and the unveiling of true "Italianness," which can only be obtained through the elimination of the elements at the level of surface and the eradication of stereotypes.

The possibility of telling stories becomes an essential characteristic of a shared experience. Overlooking this crucial element would be making the mistake of confirming the version of the story that "others" assign to us, she added.

[Pino Aprile](#). [6] journalist and writer, reminded the audience of the dialectical process involving every social relationship. The same dialectical becoming belongs to the creation of different identities, which inevitably become protagonists of a constant exchange of values, forever enriching themselves in this unending dialogue.

[Fred Gardaphè](#) [7], Distinguished professor at Queens College, criticized the lack of projection into the future of Italian Americans, their habit to live in nostalgic memories, stuck in a past where it's easier to be cuddled in a never-ending remembering. The creation of knowledge through the establishment of one's culture, he added, remains one of the main tasks of intellectuals and public figures.

[Lorenzo Del Boca](#). [8] Italian journalist, added that a true Italian identity is nowhere to be found, as only multiple identities exist within the fabric of Italian society.

[Robert Viscusi](#). [9] professor at the Brooklyn College, urged the audience to understand how story telling is an active part of our life. "Culture seems a memory palace," and argued that Berlusconi contributed to worsen the Italian image in the world.

Also Giuseppe Novero, journalist at Mediaset, was one of the panelists. He argued for the importance of family and school in creating an identity, and of the subsequent moments of society and work. These elements are in crisis and we find ourselves in an anomic existential condition.

[Massimo Vedovelli](#). [10] former Dean at the Università per stranieri di Siena, fiercely criticized the passive attitude of Italians towards the crisis. "Ours is a crisis of decadence more than a crisis of technicalities, our social conditions are terrible," he added. Italians don't read neither buy books anymore, not even students with University degrees.

"We are failing because we can't really think of recovery" and "a poor Italy doesn't help anyone," he stated.

[Gianfranco Viesti](#) [11], professor of economics at the Università di Bari, posited that former Prime Minister of Italy Berlusconi was part of a deterioration of culture. He's been telling stories of a nation of cheaters.

Anthony Tamburri closed the conference by reminding the audience that "Italian identity" remains a social construct and doesn't need to be built as a fortress in which we lock ourselves up and miss confrontation and dialogue with "others." Italians are those who were born in Italy, those with Italian ancestors and everyone who develops an interest in Italian culture.



The purpose of the assimilatory societal pressures in the project of nation-building has often been, arguably, to strip the 'others' of their 'otherness'. Uniformity had to be the rule for those ethnic groups who differed from the “powerful collectives” and were seen as an indigestible part.

What Tamburri was championing has to do with a certain and necessary degree of flexibility within the borders of the word “identity,” crucial to avoid complete assimilation and indispensable to develop a true dialectical exchange. This aspect of openness remains the premise on which we can dig in our past to look into our future.

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