



The Guido Controversy: Dirty Laundry and Deep Rugs. An Interview with Gianfranco Norelli

Ottorino Cappelli (January 20, 2010)



The Director of "Pane Amaro" (Bitter Bread), an acclaimed documentary about the life and history of early Italian immigrants in the U.S., talks about whether sweeping dirt under the rug is the way to deal with undesirable facts. His film touched upon several difficult topics, including the lynching of thirty-nine Italian immigrants across the United States between 1886 and 1916. "Occasionally you do find some people who, when faced with difficult, uneasy subjects, react by closing their eyes; they prefer not to know about them and even try to prevent you from talking about them. They use a metaphor, you know, they say that we shouldn't 'wash our dirty laundry in public'. And I think it doesn't advance the conversation. I do believe that we need to explore difficult issues such as this."

There has been a wave of protests lately from the Italian-American community about MTV's reality show "Jersey Shore." Recently though some people have harshly criticized the Calandra Institute, a research institution at CUNY, for sponsoring an academic colloquium on the guido lifestyle. What is your opinion on these issues?

I only saw a few excerpts of "Jersey Shore" and it did not appeal to me. I can see why people consider it demeaning and offensive. But I think it is important to keep our focus on the fact that if there is a phenomenon among the Italian American youth that is similar to that portrayed in the show, we need to study it, we need to understand what causes it and what are the consequences. Only if we understand it we may prevent these stereotypes from becoming common currency in the media. So I think the Calandra Institute is doing a very important job in sponsoring an academic discussion of this subject—this segment of the Italian American youth culture, not just the MTV show. In any



group there can be some problematic experiences, but they don't go away just by not talking about them. In a sense, I think we have the responsibility to appropriate this kind of investigation and discussions—it is our business, as Italian Americans, more than anybody else's. And there could be no better place than the Calandra Institute, and a colloquium with a social scientist who has studied this phenomenon for a number of years...

In other words, it is one thing if the media exploit a phenomenon for commercial reasons, and maybe circulate offensive stereotypes, but it is a different matter when a cultural institution affords the same phenomenon with the purpose of investigating it...

Yes. If we are trying to understand the roots of a problematic behavior of some Italian American youths, we are not "endorsing" it in any way, and surely we are not "glorifying" it. These phenomena may be more or less widespread or isolated, representative or unique, but once we get to the point we are at, we cannot deny that they do exist. And if they exist, only by bringing them into full light and by exposing them to serious intellectual scrutiny can we really understand them. And because we are talking about youths... this is also the only way we can provide young people with the tools to understand whether there is any value for them in this phenomenon, whether there is any good in being associated with it, or if it has negative consequences.

A scene from Gianfranco Norelli's 'Pane Amaro', produced by RAI (in Italian) You have had a somewhat similar experience with "Pane Amaro". Your film too has been accused by some people of touching upon subjects that "make us look bad", of talking about things that should not be mentioned...

We have shown Pane Amaro in a lot of places, in New York, in Washington, in New Jersey. Recently we showed it in twelve different venues in California, in Nevada, and in Canada. And occasionally, yes, we did have some people lamenting the fact that some scenes... Because, for instance, we talk about things like the lynching of early Italian immigrants a century or so ago. All in all, 39 Italians were lynched across the United States. And some viewers were very disturbed and said we shouldn't be talking about this. It was offending them maybe because it was too graphic, too traumatic... a kind of dark page of our history that some don't want to remember. The majority of the viewers, however, found that learning about these episodes that were unknown to them was important and found it very valuable. But occasionally you do find some people who, when faced with difficult, uneasy subjects, react by closing their eyes; they prefer not to know about them and even try to prevent you from talking about them. They use a metaphor, you know, they say that we shouldn't "wash our dirty laundry in public". And I think it doesn't advance the conversation.

It is also important to emphasize that such attitude of denial is not necessarily the typical reaction of all Italian American associations. Your film for instance has been supported by the National Italian American Foundation.

Sure. NIAF was among the important funding sources for "Pane Amaro". They understood the value of serious investigation into our history.

You have investigated so deeply the grandfathers and great-grandfathers of today's Italian American youths... Would you think that a subject such as this "guido lifestyle" would make an interesting topic for one of your next documentaries?

Well, yes... first of all, of course, I'd like to know more about it. And this is why I value any serious investigation on this subject. Documentaries can be a useful way to study an issue and to have it come alive for an audience. And I do believe that we need to explore difficult issues such as this. Sweeping it under the rug will not make it go away.



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