Roberto Saviano and the Problems of Italian America

Anthony Julian Tamburri (January 04, 2012)

Along with the various observations that have been made by three of our esteemed colleagues (De Stefano, Gardaphé, Krase), and I must emphasize that I am in agreement as well with other sentiments that they raise, one must indeed recognize the merits of Roberto Saviano's work these past four-plus years. He has put himself, literally, on the line, and we might readily agree that no "fame" or "wealth," however significant or insignificant it may be, is worth the risk.

As I move forward here, it should become apparent that Saviano's talk, as well informed and keen as it was with regard to Italy's organized crime and its cancerous metathesis, also speaks to the issues of Italian America. The answers for many of the issues raised by Saviano and by our three keen colleagues here lie in neither of the two camps—the Italian or the Italian/American—rather, they lie somewhere in between the two cognitive fields of—whatever fancy term we might decide to use—semiotics and/or hermeneutic horizons. Each cognitive community refuses to engage the other

in its analytical thinking, reasons for which both fields demonstrate, not too irregularly, a cognitive (tautology desired) dissonance. And so, dear reader, allow me to use Roberto Saviano (con tanto di cappello nei suoi riguardi) as a trampoline for speaking to an underside of the issue that the multitude, I would submit, is either in denial of realizing or incapable of comprehending in an integral manner.

I agree with Jerry Krase [2], that Saviano does not possess that intimate knowledge of Italian America that would be required for a truly in-depth experience into the Italian/American mindset. While Saviano is impressively well versed in his knowledge of the Italian scene, his remarks about the States exhibit a certain knowledge gap. This, for me, raises the general issue of how Italy sees us—if and when it decides to look our way. I have dealt with this question of benign neglect in my Italian book, Una semiotica dell'etnicità, where I demonstrated how the Italian intellectuals of American Studies do not consider our literary productions as anything tantamount to warranting the least of their attention.

In a similar vein, a certain component of the Italian/American community knows little of its Italian and Italian/American history, and, as a consequence, has latched on to the Duchamp-esque ready-made sign that is the /Mafia/. De Stefano [3] is ever so correct in telling us that there has "never been a grassroots, activist anti-Mafia movement here in the United States," where "[i]nstead, we've had anti-defamation protests, led largely by successful Italian Americans who see the persistent Mafia image as an affront to their socioeconomic standing." I am reminded often of what Richard Alba apparently stated (if memory does not fail me) at the first conference of Distinguished Professor of Italian Americana, held at the Calandra Institute in September 2010, that Italian Americans, so it seemed, felt they needed to forget their history in order for them to move forward in the board rooms of non-Italian America. Thus, by moving forward in such a manner, the coincidental parallel can only be a history gap and, consequently, the falsely presumed un-necessity to know, if not actually analyze, said history.

This, of course, is where Gardaphé's [4]statement acquires its greatest value within this context. The lack of intimacy with our history has led those fiercely proud Italian Americans "to combat fictional representations the way Don Quixote went after windmills." For, as Krase also poignantly states, Italian Americans "should ignore the lucrative excesses of the likes of David Chase, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese [and] instead learn and share the reality rather than the reality shows of Italian and Italian American history" (my emphasis). Precisely because, to return to Gardaphé, "[o]nly though knowledge of self and of Italian American cultural history can Italian Americans successfully develop a culture that both defeats and transcends the mafia stigma that has stained their public image." All of this underscores, as De Stefano rightly pointed out, "a call for more diverse portrayals, based in the realities of contemporary Italian American life," which reminds us that the "the anti-defamationists do have a point—up to a point," as De Stefano correctly distinguishes.

Thus, we are left with two issues to sum up. First, a call for more diverse portrayals must be preceded by a thorough examination of what we have witnessed thus far on both the large and small screen. Namely, if we are to become exorcised over imagery in the proverbial trio of films such as The Godfather (1972), Mean Streets (1973), and GoodFellas (1989), then we must also take issue with some of the more seemingly positive portrayals, which, in the end, might end up proving just as damaging. One seemingly ignored Italian American on television is the George Costanza character from Seinfeld; a more cumbersome figure would be difficult to create. He is socially awkward, self-loathing, stingy, neurotic, and dominated by his parents, characteristics we may readily associate with the Italian mammone (mamma's boy). Such buffoonery, simplicity of thought, and, to some extent, goofiness also prove to be part and parcel of the "Italian" family of Everybody Loves Raymond. We need to reach the inevitable conclusion that it is not just the /Mafia/ that is damaging to the image of Italian Americans; there are these other types of images as well, as we have just seen—not to mention others still that spring from other corners of our Italian/American community.

Indeed, the notion of benign neglect is just as damaging, as Saviano pointed out in his talk, even though he does not articulate the phrase per sè. Benign neglect, to be sure, comes in many forms: the lack of attention to the community that is exercised by mainstream media; the lack of attention to the cultural and artistic performances of Italian Americans from non-Italian Americans; the insensitivity that is exercised by non-Italian Americans when they make those seemingly funny and silly jokes, such as an email this past fall that was sent by a mid-level functionary at a CUNY senior college [see attachment below], and, very much not so dulcis in fundo, the lack of attention to any and all of the above from members within our Italian/American community. This, of course, brings me to my second point. We, as a community, must deal with the issues at hand, not expecting someone else to fix it. But a simple letter of apology, or a sponsor withdrawn, is no great victory. We must go further, and in order to do so, it requires that we engage in that age-old Italian Renaissance notion of "agere et intelligere"; briefly, to do (agere) and to understand (intelligere). But these terms have nuances to them that better underscore the necessities of our challenges; for agere has that extended meaning of doing in the sense of setting something in motion—to make happen, we might say. This, we can do in two ways, to be sure: (a) contribute to the expenses (i.e., philanthropy), and (b) attend the events. Both activities set something in motion and make things happen. Intelligere, in turn, carries the general meaning of "to understand," which then extends to the notion of deploying knowledge. But intelligere has yet another meaning if we look to its etymology: the "intus" signals inwardness and the "legere" signals reading. We must, that is, to echo all three of our esteemed colleagues mentioned above, look inward, and in so doing acquire Gardaphé's "knowledge of self and of Italian American cultural history" so that we are able consequently to deploy knowledge about our Italian/American community to the public at large. This is what Saviano has done with regard to organized crime in Italy; he has engaged in the act of intelligere only to be able to agere so that the Italian public at large can have a better handle on the situation of organized crime within their geo-political community.

We must, in the end, interrogate ourselves before we can impugn others. We must engage in a conversation, come together (cum + versari), and identify those common causes that impact on us as a community at large. We must engage in that activity of dialogue and debate, another age-old Renaissance practice, more so now than ever before, and eschew most vigorously denigration and dismissal, which seems to be, at times, the more prevalent practice, precisely because we have not learned to engage in any form of critical dialogue.

Unfortunately, we have yet to develop the art of dialogue and debate, through which we might readily discount the disagreements and, more important, recognize the areas of agreement. Blind ideologies, misinformed histories, in some cases total lack of knowledge of such histories—as well as the proverbial, facile egocentric-based, behavioral pattern that has been manifested by many—have lead to various and, dare I say unnecessary, impasses and roadblocks that, otherwise, might have surely allowed the individuals and their various and sundry groups to engage in a collaborative politics of culture that could only move forward a more general agenda of Italian Americana. As Saviano urges us to do, in a welcomed rebuke of this form, as well, of benign neglect, "Parliamone!"

PS: Un caloroso augurio a tutti quanti per un 2012 alquanto più collaborativo da tutti gli angoli della comunità italiano/americana. E a quelli che non riescono a digerire in qualunque forma sia questo che altri messaggi simili offerti recentemente da altri, gli offro un aforisma pasoliniano da ponderare: "Sei così ipocrita, che come l'ipocrisia ti avrà ucciso, sarai all'inferno, e ti crederai in paradiso."

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