

Tales of Two Cities

George De Stefano (June 11, 2015)



Naples' Mayor Luigi de Magistris talks about immigration and the ties between his city and New York

Naples, in the famous words of the late singer-songwriter Pino Daniele, is "una carta sporca" – a dirty piece of discarded paper. But that was only one of the images Daniele used to describe his native city in his 1977 song, ["Napule è"](#) [2] (Naples Is).

Daniele also likened Naples to a dream shared by people around the world, who, however, donot know the "whole truth" about the great, troubled, and paradoxical metropolis.



Naples' current mayor, Luigi de Magistris, visited New York last week to promote his city as a tourist destination and culture capital, while stressing historic and contemporary ties between the two port cities, both of which have been shaped and reshaped by immigration.

De Magistris was the main attraction at a June 4 symposium at the Calandra Italian American Institute in Manhattan. He spoke to an overflow crowd comprising mainly Italian Americans and Italian immigrants, many of them Neapolitan. After his brief remarks, the attentive and enthusiastic audience heard from Gennaro Matino, a Neapolitan author and Catholic priest, and from several Italian American scholars who have written about Naples and, as one said, "its place in the imagination of Italian Americans."

The mayor, speaking in Italian with Calandra dean Anthony Tamburri interpreting, cited the similarities between Naples and New York, noting that both are cosmopolitan cities open to the sea that have been enriched by immigration. He remarked that on the first day of his visit (his first to New York), seeing "all kinds of people mixing together reminded me of Naples."

De Magistris observed that Naples, founded by ancient Greeks, "has been invaded by everybody" – Arabs, Spaniards, the French, and Americans.

"Because Naples is a city of many different peoples and because it is a synthesis of all these peoples it cannot be an intolerant, racist city and it will never be a racist city," he said.

But, he observed, "Italy is significantly behind [the US] in its reception of immigrants." Under Italian law, children born in Italy to immigrant parents are not automatically citizens, as in the United States. They must first apply for residency when they reach 18 years of age, and then apply for citizenship. Moreover, there are many undocumented immigrants in Italy who, as de Magistris noted, "are doing jobs Italians don't want to do" but because they entered the country without work permits, they therefore are considered criminals.

In 2013, De Magistris' administration gave honorary citizenship to immigrants and their children, issuing a Charter of Rights that enabled them to access all public services in Naples.

This wasn't the first time de Magistris, a former anti-organized crime prosecutor elected mayor in 2011, challenged Italian law and public policy. Last year, he announced that Naples would record in its civil register same-sex marriages performed abroad. (Marriage equality has not come to Italy, unlike most other western European nations.) De Magistris made his announcement after a court ruled that Grosseto, a Tuscan city, must register the marriage of an Italian same-sex couple who had gotten married in New York.

(Naples' Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe predictably criticized de Magistris, saying the mayor should focus on more important priorities, as if a mayor and his administration couldn't do more than one thing at a time.)

At Calandra, de Magistris deplored the fact that in today's globalized world, "Money and merchandise can easily travel from one place to another, crossing borders, but people cannot." He noted that until a few years ago, Italian fishermen who rescued migrants from sinking boats and saved their lives actually were indicted for promoting illegal immigration.

"But," he said, "ethics and good conscience" have since prevailed over misguided law.



He added, however, that there are many in Italy who, because they regard immigration as "a problem of public order," favor destroying vessels before they embark for Italy. They see, he noted, an ongoing emergency, but they are unwilling to address the causes. Thousands of desperate migrants are coming into Italy because they are fleeing hunger and war. The mayor, however, did not mention that many immigrants are fleeing wars caused or exacerbated by US and Western European intervention, as with Libya.

De Magistris remarked that historical memory can be useful in challenging xenophobia and racism. He said he had recently seen a US government document from 1928 that likened Neapolitans to "Negroes." When Italians today use the term "negri" as a pejorative, de Magistris said he likes to "remind them of how the Neapolitans were categorized a century ago."

Gennaro Matino, speaking after de Magistris, echoed a number of the mayor's comments. Matino, an author and Catholic priest who teaches at l'Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa in Naples, observed that capital and commerce have become globalized, but not rights or justice. He compared past waves of emigration from Naples to today's immigration to Italy. Despite the beauty of Naples' natural and built environments, despite its rich, sedimented culture, its arts, its intellectual and philosophical achievements, millions of Neapolitans have departed for other lands.

"Why did Neapolitans have to leave all this beauty and greatness to go elsewhere to find their fortune and destiny, and work? Why was it not enough to keep people?" he asked.

The lack of a just economic and political order drove them to emigrate, he said. Beauty and art mean little when there is widespread poverty and political repression and disenfranchisement. Today's migrations, Matino said, similarly "are born not out of desire to move but the need to."

After Matino, it was the Italian Americans' turn. Fred Gardaphé, Distinguished Professor of Italian American Studies, Queens College, spoke about images of Naples in Italian American literature and art, and "the role of Naples in the imagination of Italian Americans." He discussed Joseph and Bill Papaleo, respectively an author and a visual artist, whose works offer contrasting perspectives on Naples. Papaleo padre wrote about Neapolitan immigrants struggling to assimilate to American society and culture; figlio Bill, who moved from America to a town outside Naples, is a self-described immigrant whose art often depicts present-day – and nonwhite – immigrants in Italy.

Stanislao Pugliese, Professor of History and Distinguished Professor of Italian and Italian American Studies at Hofstra University, spoke about his forthcoming book, "Dancing on a Volcano in Naples: Scenes from the Siren City." Pugliese, who is of Neapolitan heritage, recalled that as a child he fell asleep to the sounds of his father and his family speaking the Neapolitan language – "language, not dialect."

He called Naples a "death-haunted city with a very particular relationship to death, a cult of the dead, and the souls, the anime in purgatorio."

Pugliese said that the famous saying that Goethe quoted in his "Letters from Italy" – ["See Naples and die"](#) [3]– generally is thought to mean, "When you've seen this city, that's it, you've seen all of life and now you're ready to die." "But others, including its own inhabitants, argue that the correct interpretation of the imperative is that Naples is a city that seems sometimes intent on killing you."

"To me, Naples is a city that forces you to reflect on it, and to reflect on yourself," Pugliese said.



The city is marked by contradictions, as "embodied by the figure of Pulcinella." "Everything and its opposite are true in Naples," he said. "It is a city of infuriating polarity, affliction and luxury, despair and hope, fate and self-creation. Surely no other city in western Europe can compare to it in its diversity." He added that neither Paris nor Venice can "compare to the sheer theatricality found on the streets of Naples."

The evening at Calandra concluded with Robert Viscusi, Professor of English at Brooklyn College and director of its Wolfe Institute for the Humanities. Viscusi read from "[Ellis Island](#)," [4] his epic poem about Italian immigration. "Somewhere in the specific archaeology of this ambitious poem is Neapolitan macchietta, a comic monologue," he remarked.

But before he read, Viscusi addressed Luigi de Magistris. "I have been to Italy a million times," he noted, "and I've walked everywhere, looking for a single, small monument to the millions of Italians who left."

In a hushed voice, and with obvious emotion, he said, "To hear this conversation, with actual living Italians, about migration and the necessity to accept 'the other' is something I never would imagine would happen."

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[1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/demagistriscalandra1434000895jpg>

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeLb-G8GXfk>

[3]

http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Works_of_J._W._von_Goethe/Volume_12/Letters_from_Italy/Part_VII

[4] <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-59954-033-7>