A recent discussion with Amara Lakhous in New York is more of an exchange of ideas than an interview. We are convinced that his novel Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio, recently published in English, and his personal experience as an immigrant can also resonate with those here in America.

Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio was just released in English. It takes the form of a monologue in many voices (each chapter is narrated by one of the characters in first person) that gives the reader a new perspective on Rome, a metropolis that is still adapting to its growing multi-cultural society.
We sat down with Amara Lakhous at the Calandra Institute for an exchange of ideas that was more than an interview. We are convinced that his novel and his personal experience as an immigrant can also ignite a similar discussion here in America. There is a profound gaze in his eyes, and great determination in his demeanor as well as great calmness. Lakhous, who has lived in Italy since he was thirteen, tells us almost immediately with pride: “I became an Italian citizen four months ago and I define myself as Italian-Algerian.”

“This is the first time that I have been to New York. It is the biggest city that I have ever seen. Algiers is a neighborhood in comparison. In certain respects my life in Piazza Vittorio was similar to life in my country. But there I found what I would define as the cultural and social laboratory of the future. It can be said that New York is the future of the world. In New York, one gets lost in the cultures, in the streets, in the history. This place is a preview of what Italy could become in a few years.”

And describing his walks in Manhattan: “When one walks through Italian streets there is a feeling of being a minority, of insecurity. There is a delicate, difficult, and at times hostile relationship with one’s surroundings. Here, at least in appearance, I have not had this feeling. I immediately felt equal.”

But for him Italy is also a place of freedom, a place that accepted and saved him: “I escaped, the same way anti-Fascists escaped Italy, and I had a great opportunity to continue to live and do the things that made me happy. I enrolled in college. I learned Italian and thanks to Italy I succeeded in mending the rift with Algeria.”

For Lakhous, his relationship with the Italian language is fundamental: “One acquires freedom through language. It is power. It means to arm oneself with a powerful tool of survival, to live well, and to matter as a person. To quote an expression: tell me how you speak and I will tell you who you are. The ability to communicate offers status. It is not a tool in the same way eyeglasses are; it is a way of seeing. Thinking about language, you enter in confidence and you receive the soul of a people; you conquer part of the culture’s identity. Then the relationship with your native language changes, as does your way of speaking and thinking. And the beautiful thing is that you also change the language you acquire.”

He tells his story and describes the relationship with his fellow countrymen with great simplicity, and with every word, comma, and accent you hear the intensity of someone who has lived in the first person.

“How can we reform democracy in the Arab world? I believe that immigrants have a great opportunity to do so. That is, to live democracy in their everyday lives, to live as Muslims in a spiritual dimension but not a political one, to live religion as a private dimension and to become a model [for the rest of the world].

Today we live with globalization, and we communicate with our faraway relatives for fee. For example, I speak with my mother through Skype. Governments cannot practice long distance
censorship. I am optimistic. Europe is also near the Arab world; they share common ties and memories. Muslim immigrants can become part of the process of mediation and democratization.”

The title of his novel refers to the “clash of civilizations” theorized by Samuel Huntington and it is deliberately ironic: “It is a definition that has caused damage, even more so because it has been amplified by the media. Huntington has a responsibility, because of his choice of title. Civilizations that clash? That’s incorrect. If we want to say that civilization is culture and poetry, then I have never heard anyone speaking of a clash between Italian and Lebanese poets. Clashes are over oil, power…. Civilizations don’t clash. No civilization is born of nothing; it takes something from the previous one and gives to the successive one. The theory of clashing of civilizations, especially after September 11, has truly become a culinary recipe in the sense that it is simple and uses ingredients that are seemingly straightforward. We take for granted that there are two defined blocs – the West on one side and the Muslim world on the other. It’s erroneous; the Muslim world is not a separate bloc and the West is not a separate bloc. There are differences between the United States and Europe. There are differences between Italy and Holland. In Spain there are gay marriages, in Holland euthanasia…. The same is true for the Arab Muslim world; there are incredible differences. With my novel I wanted to present the idea that the “clash of civilizations” is a pretext to justify political and economic choices.”

The author states that he has chosen to never directly address politics in his novels, but between the pages of his book it is evident that he is aware of the social and political power of literature. We remind him of the influence of Saviano’s novel Gomorra, successful in fighting and frightening the comorra more than any other means.

“Literature is powerful because it moves from the abstract to the concrete. The value of Saviano’s book lies in his ability to tell real stories about real people. When one reads it, one cannot remain indifferent; one must take a position. One may identify with certain characters or keep them at a distance. In reading Gomorra an honest reader cannot help but reject the “system.” One can only react with repugnance, disgust. Literature has this power; it does not leave you indifferent.”

We must also discuss the difficult relationship that Italians continue to have with their own history of immigration.

“The relationship with memory is delicate. When we try to remember the past, we are presented
with two difficulties. If what we have lived is negative, remembering means to relive it; if it is positive then it becomes longing and therefore sadness.

It is a big problem. There is no way out; we must confront memory and assume responsibility while also taking suffering into account. This is why I use the metaphor of the “garden of memory.” If you have a garden, you must take care of it. It needs water and weeds must be pulled. If we do not take care of our memory, we risk finding ourselves in a garbage dump. Italians have been emigrants and they have created many positive things; it is enough to consider how much money they sent back home. They sent their children to school, they became important people, and they opened up to the world. There are also negative aspects, such as the mafia and the collective memory of great poverty…. I was impressed by a woman who I met here: she told me that up until a few years ago she did not want to be called an Italian-American....”

Amara Lakhous is currently working on a new novel: “I am writing it directly in Italian. I first wrote Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio in Arabic and then I re-wrote in Italian. This story is also set in modern day Italy but it deals with the experience of Italian immigration abroad and within Italy....”

A film based on his book is also set to be released: “I did not participate in writing the screenplay. They did not involve me as I would have liked. It is different than the story in my novel; there are two new characters. But film is one thing, literature is another. The message of my novel will be passed on, even in this way.”

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Amara Lakhous was born in Algiers in 1970 and has lived in Rome since 1995. He has a degree in philosophy from the University of Algiers and in cultural anthropology from La Sapienza in Rome. He currently works as a professional journalist. His first novel Bedbugs and the Pirate was published in 1999.

(Translated by Giulia Prestia)

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Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio
Amara Lakhous [2], Ann Goldstein (translator) [3]
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