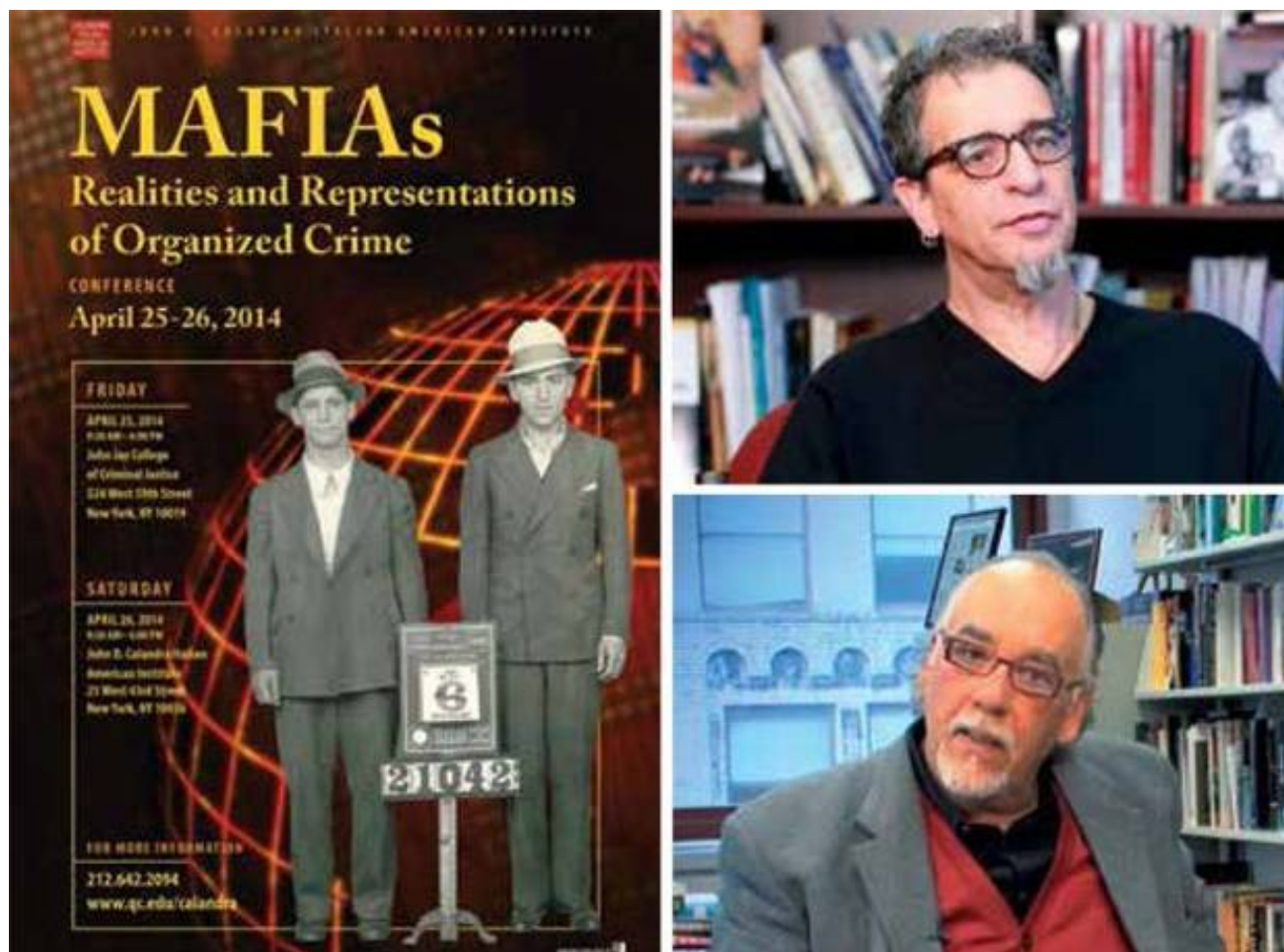


Investigating Mafia(s) on a Global Scale

O. C. (June 17, 2014)



In a recent two-day conference at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, dozens of scholars from the U.S., Italy and elsewhere looked into the global mafia phenomenon from a multi-disciplinary perspective. The guest of honor was Italy's former Interior Minister Vincenzo Scotti, whose book about the relationship between the Mafia and the State in Italy has just been translated into English.

Dozens of speakers and a very large audience crowded into the Manhattan headquarters of the [Calandra Italian American Institute](#) [2] (Queens College, CUNY) to attend its annual two-day conference—this year dedicated to an especially hot topic.

We sat down with two of the organizers, [Dr. Joseph Sciorra](#) [3], Director of Academic Programs at the Institute, and [Fred Gardaphe](#) [4], Distinguished Professor of English and Italian American Studies at



Queens College, and talked about the ideas behind this amazing gathering of mafia experts from all around the world.

Joseph Sciorra: We wanted to look at organized crime from a global perspective. As we are an Italian American Institute, it is obvious that in part we would be dealing with Italian and Italian American criminality, but we wanted to expand beyond those two realms. Because organized crime is not unique to any one group or period. So we have invited people to come speak about organized crime in Japan, Sweden, India, among Polish-Americans, African-Americans, and to diversify—and thus improve—our understanding of this topic.

Are you satisfied with the results?

JS: Absolutely. I am really very pleased with the presentations we had as well as with the reaction of the audience. So many people came here and said how important this conference has been and how meaningful it has been to have this conversation here.

Fred Gardaphe: I think the way we envisioned this conference—MAFIAs in the plural—is very important. First because, although we have talked about the Italian and Sicilian Mafia, showing that organized crime is not just something that belongs to Italians provides a better understanding of the Mafia and does a great service to the Italian-American community. Second because, as Italy's former Interior Minister [Vincenzo Scotti](#) [5] said in his talk at the Conference, "The only way to fight the Mafia is to fight it globally rather than locally."

There also were some negative reactions from members of the Italian-American community who objected even to the idea of having this conference.

JS: When we sent out our call for papers in May of last year there were a number of people including scholars and colleagues of ours who began to circulate complaints about the very idea of having such a conference, given the predominance of organized crime and Mafia in Italian-American imagery in the media. It is a foolish idea that scholars should be censoring themselves! On the contrary, I believe we should be looking at this subject with all the serious rigor and interdisciplinary background that we have. There is a notion that ethnic studies should only promote the positive. I disagree with that idea. How else to unpack those negative stereotypical images if not by treating them seriously? A number of scholars here looked at the emergence of the negative image of Italian Americans coupled with organized crime. They documented it and so we learned from that. And to not have such scholarship presented publicly would be a travesty.

FG: A long time ago, when I was a member of the American Italian Historical Association [now the [Italian American Studies Association](#) [6]] someone came up with the idea of having a conference on the Mafia. And there was a great professor, Peter Sammartino, buonanima, who said, "We are historians, can't we just forget about the past?" It was the funniest thing I ever heard in my life. But he was dead serious. Academics at that time did not want to talk about the Mafia. Many people were just afraid. Every time the subject of having a conference on Mafia came up the reaction was: "That would be our last conference. The only conference we could have after it would be a conference on death. Because they'd kill us!"

Do you feel that Italian-American scholars are in a better position than others to investigate this topic?

JS: Yes, absolutely. Because we focus on Italian-American culture, we are in contact with a number of scholars who deal with Italian-American history and culture. So we're in a unique position to bring to the fore all this amazing scholarly work being done.

FG: For me there is also a personal dimension to this. I was born in the streets, I became an academic because I wanted to educate the streets, I wanted to go back to the streets and tell them what I learned. But I also wanted to bring my experiences of the streets into academia, so that [people there] would study reality, not fantasies. At the conference I read parts of a book I am writing now about my life growing up within organized crime in Chicago. When people think of the Mafia, they think about what they see on TV, in films. But for me Mafia has always been something



that is part of life. Some people I knew committed crimes and others did not, but everybody participated in one way or another.

You went to the podium wearing a black suit and a white tie - the stereotypical image of a gangster...

FG: Yes, I wanted to play the stereotype. But I also wanted to make people think about what it means when the Mafia is part of your life. It took me a long time before I understood that I was inside the Mafia. I didn't understand why my father was killed. The police said it was some crazy man who came into the store and killed him and ran away... Or why my grandfather was killed, or my godfather... I was just told lies about these people. And as I grew older I realized that the very men I was working for (after my grandfather died my mother put me to work for some Men fearing I was going to get in trouble) were the men who were involved in killing Kennedy... It took me 40 years!

What about today? What is left of the power of those men today?

FG: The way it was explained to me when I was young was: "Look, we came to this country and we were not a part of the system. We had to create our system until we figured out how to get into the big system." The system was not intended to stay a separate kingdom forever. They wanted to enter legitimate businesses, politics, the legal system, and they did. Nobody wants to be a criminal. No gangster wants to look around every day to see if someone is going to shoot him. The men I was working for became successful and sent their kids to college. They became assimilated in such a way that even their children today don't know anything about it. Those people were fundamentally proud to be Americans because they couldn't succeed unless America succeeded. They believed in America. And they sent their kind to fight in the army, to die for the country they were able to steal money from.

JS: And that's another good reason why we should contribute to the knowledge of this phenomenon. To really fight the Italian-American mafia stereotype in the media we should not bury the facts under positive images. That's omertà. We as scholars need to study, to know, to bring facts out into the open air.

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