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# Tufts Daily

Current Issue: Wednesday, February 27, 2008

 

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## Panelists address American xenophobia

**Rob Silverblatt****Issue date:** 10/25/06 **Section:** [News](#)

"Think about what it takes to go from a rural village in Honduras or El Salvador, leave your family behind, and start something new," immigration attorney Michael Maggio told an audience last night in Braker Hall.

"What has made this country is people with creative ideas, people who are risk takers. That is the hallmark of capitalism." Many of these innovative people, he said, are immigrants.

Maggio, along with immigration activists Maria Elena Letona and Carlos Saavedra, spoke as part of an immigration panel hosted by the Association of Latin American Students, Students Acting for Immigrant Rights at Tufts, and the Latino Center. It was held in celebration of Latino Heritage Month.

Maggio, a renowned specialist in immigration law working in Washington, D.C., began the event by tracing the roots of discrimination in American society to a time when Thomas Jefferson was considered by many to be a traitor because of his support for French ideas.

Moving forward into the 19th century, he highlighted the discrimination that many Chinese railroad employees faced, specifically in the form of a law that required them to prove their citizenship with testimony from a white witness.

"The Supreme Court said it makes sense for Congress to require one white witness because the Chinese are a race of liars," he said, capturing the prevalent sentiment at the time.

This discrimination has also applied to Italians and Catholics, among other ethnic groups and religions.

"Italians, in case you didn't know, [are] lazy, smelly, oversexed, and will never integrate with society," he said, referencing the findings of a Congressional commission in the early 20th century.

He went on to compare the plight that Muslims face today to the situation that many Catholics faced in America.

"They believed that Catholics were taking orders from the Pope and there was going to be a Catholic takeover," he said. This discrimination, he said, has become "part of the fabric of our society."

Maria Elena Letona, the Executive Director of the Centro Presente, a Cambridge-based advocacy group for immigrant rights, expanded on the implications of this discrimination.

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Maria Elena Latora, leader of the Cambridge immigrant rights group Centro Presente.

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