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ITALIAN AMERICAN RADICAL CULTURE IN NEW YORK CITY:
THE POLITICS AND ARTS OF THE *SOVVERSIVI*, 1890-1940

By

MARCELLA BENCIVENNI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2003

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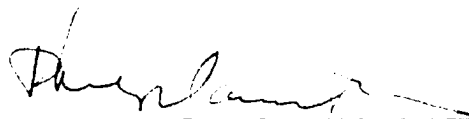
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

ITALIAN AMERICAN RADICAL CULTURE: THE POLITICS
AND ARTS OF THE *SOVVERSIVI*, 1890-1940.

by

Marcella Bencivenni

Adviser: Professor Philip V. Cannistraro

This dissertation joins a recent body of scholarship in recovering the “lost world” of Italian American radicalism and correcting the distortions and omissions of earlier historiography. While specialists in the field have focused their attention on the political and organizational aspects of Italian American radicalism, this is the first study that specifically investigates its culture. Combining a variety of qualitative and quantitative sources -- from the personal papers of radical leaders, to their press, arts, and literature -- this work recreates the milieu, activities, and dreams of an exceptional group of revolutionaries (collectively called *sovversivi*, rebels) who fought tirelessly to improve the conditions of life of their community and the working class. Contrary to prevalent views of Italian immigrants as anti-intellectual, materialist, and apolitical, the *sovversivi* displayed not only a great interest for politics but also a high aesthetic and literary sensitivity. Besides political parties, unions, and working-class organizations, they engaged in wide range of cultural and recreational activities. And in addition to political pamphlets and manifestos, they generated a wealth of artistic and literary works: short stories, poems, plays,

drawings, and cartoons. This dissertation focuses on this rich cultural arena, providing an in-depth analysis of the cultural forms through which Italian American radicals voiced their political beliefs.

The organization of the dissertation reflects the multifaceted nature of Italian American radicalism and adopts mostly a thematic format. Chapter one provides a synopsis of the Italian American radical movement in New York City from its origins to the Second World War, and presents a social portrait of the main leaders. The subsequent chapters explore the most important cultural forms and institutions of the *sovversivi*'s radical politics: the press, literature, poetry, theater, and cartoons. The epilogue serves as a conclusion, explaining the demise of Italian American radicalism.

By restoring the traditions, ideas, and art of the *sovversivi*, this dissertation will enrich the field of Italian American history and immigration studies, bringing attention to hitherto ignored themes and sources, stimulating comparisons with other ethnic groups, and offering an array of hypothesis that can be tested and expanded in future historical and cultural studies.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation has benefited greatly from the critical reading of several colleagues. I am especially indebted to Hilary Hallett, Carol Quirke, and Carol Giardina for their attentive, stimulating, and intelligent comments. I could not have found better intellectual critics. Not only did they offer important suggestions and corrections, they also provided crucial support and encouragement throughout the long and frustrating process of writing the dissertation. More importantly, their comradeship made possible to transform the competitive, and sometime alienating, life of graduate school into an enriching communal experience.

I am also thankful to Ernest Ialongo for reading the full draft of the dissertation and to Carol Quirke for editing Chapter 6 shortly before I submitted it to my Dissertation Committee for approval. Thanks also to Peter Vellon for illuminating me on the complicated procedures of bureaucracy without losing his patience.

As always, a number of personal friends have also contributed to this dissertation over the years in many important ways. I would like to thank Ujju Aggarwal for her exaggerated (but greatly appreciated) praises and her political fervor; Raffaele Santore for his optimism and generosity; Henry Hansmann, Marina Santilli and Lisa for making me feel at home; and above all Lucien O'Neill for his infinite patience, love, and understanding. Obviously, none of them made the writing any easier but they helped me stay sane, reminding me that there is more in life than academics.

I also had the great fortune of working with the best mentor a student can wish for. Philip Cannistraro warrants more than an acknowledgment, without him this dissertation would have never been written. He helped me conceive the project and freely

offered time, expertise, and support. Unfortunately, this kind of dedication to students is becoming rarer and rarer in today's increasingly dehumanized academy. The other members of the Dissertation Committee have also been very helpful and generous. Even though Nunzio Pernicone officially appears as the fifth reader, he has carefully read the whole work at various stages, correcting my writing, sharing his research, and offering critical suggestions. Marta Petrusiewicz has been enormously helpful throughout my graduate studies, providing free counsel and guidance since my very first day in New York. Much thanks also to Jerry Markowitz for his enthusiastic support and his availability and to David Nasaw who has been inspiring me to study the relation of politics and culture. Finally, I am also obliged to Prof. Paul Avrich for sharing his research on Italian American anarchism and lending me his notes.

I am very grateful to a number of institutions which made it possible for me to finish this dissertation without living on the street. The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute gave me financial assistance and, more importantly, has provided me with the luxury of a private office (with real windows!) where I could escape the noise and coziness of my studio in the East Village. I owe special thanks to Dr. Joseph Scelsa, Rosaria Musco, Carmine Pizzirusso, Geoffrey Claroni, and Marianna Prestigiacomo for all their help and support. I am also very grateful to the Davis-Putter Scholarship Fund and the National Italian American Foundations for awarding me a grant. Financial aid was also provided by CUNY through the E.P. Thompson Dissertation Fellowship, the Writing Fellowship and the PSC-CUNY tuition award.

I reserved the last paragraph for the most important persons, my parents, Benito and Marisa, who gave me unwavering love and support. There are no words to express my

gratitude for everything they did, and still do, for me; the least I can do is dedicate this dissertation to them.

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Glossary of Italian Terms:

Cafone (pl. *cafoni*)= Literally a peasant, but by extension also a stupid, a semi-literate, ill-mannered person.

Campanilismo = Parochialism, excessive attachment to one's native town or village. From the word *campanile* (church bell tower), it refers to the sense of identity and belonging shared by all those who lived within the territory where the ringing of the church bell could still be heard.

Colonia italiana (pl. *colonie italiane*)= Literally Italian colony; it was the designation that Italians used to refer to the Italian immigrant communities all over the world.

Compaesano (pl. *compaesani*)= fellow villager

Contadino (pl. *contadini*)= Peasant, landless farm laborer, who was hired by the day on great estates.

Festa = Communal feast.

Fuoruscito (pl. *fuorusciti*) = Exiles, but referred especially to anti-Fascist refugees.

Italianità: Italianness, Italian sentiment or identity; usually referred to culture rather than politics. It emerged from the Risorgimento and in Italian American studies it is used to define and locate Italian American identity.

Mezzogiorno = Literally midday, in Italian language is often used to refer to southern Italy.

Prominente (pl. *prominenti*) = prominent, powerful men of Little Italies. Italian American radicals used this term in a pejorative way, suggesting that these men were corrupted and opportunistic.

Risorgimento = Literally, resurrection, resurgence; it refers to both the historical period and the political movement that led to the Unification of Italy in 1861.

Scabbismo = In English scabbism; it refers to act of breaking the strike.

Sovversivo (pl. *sovversivi* – f. *sovversiva/e*) = subversive, word that Italian authorities used to designate leftist radicals of all political persuasions (anarchists, socialists, syndicalists, communists).

Via vecchia / via nuova: the old, traditional way and the new, modern way. This contrast refers to the struggle of second and third generation Italian American to Americanize.

Introduction

For many decades historians paid little or no attention to radicalism among the Italian immigrants, with the exception of the Sacco-Vanzetti case.¹ Scholars, however, have recently begun to recognize the significance of the Italian American radical experience; as a result the scholarship on the subject is rapidly growing. On May 1997, Professor Philip V. Cannistraro organized a conference aptly entitled "The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism," where more than sixty scholars from different fields documented the importance of the radical dimension to Italian American history.² Considerable information is now available on the anarchist movement, the Italian Socialist Federation, the unions, and, to a lesser extent, the Italian section of the Communist Party.³ But no existing work has brought together the various shades and

¹ The reasons for the lack of scholarly interest in radicalism are complex. However, they can be, at least in part, linked to the paucity of adequate and readily accessible sources (most of the primary documents are in Italian), to early American prejudices against Italian immigrants, who were seen as incapable of contributing to the revolution because of their rural background, and, above all, to the increasing identification and self-identification, after World War II, of Italian Americans with reactionary and conservative politics.

² The papers presented at the conference will soon be published in a book under the title *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism: Labor, Politics, and Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), edited by Philip V. Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer.

³ On the Italian American Left and the working-class movement see for example: Paul Buhle, "Italian American Radicals and Labor in Rhode Island, 1905-1930," *Radical Historical Review*, 17 (Spring 1978), 121-151; Bruno Cartosio, "Gli emigrati italiani e l'Industrial Workers of the World," in Bruno Bezza, ed., *Gli Italiani fuori d'Italia*, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1983), 359-395; Edwin Fenton, *Immigrants and Unions: A Case Study: Italians and American Labor, 1870-1920* (New York: Arno Press, 1975); Donna Gabaccia, *Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Nunzio Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant

components of the Italian American Left. Moreover, while scholars have thoroughly examined the organizational and political aspects of Italian American radicalism, this dissertation is the first study that specifically investigates its culture.

Culture, as Raymond Williams has explained, is one of the most complicated words to define, not only because of its intricate historical development but because it has assumed a wide range of meanings, which often overlap.⁴ Here by “culture” I refer to both the general process of intellectual and artistic developments and a particular way of life – a system of values, principles, and ideas. The term “radical” is used to encompass the whole spectrum of class-based ideologies typically associated with the political Left – anarchism, socialism, syndicalism, and communism, – all of which viewed capitalism as the primary source of human oppression.

Radicalism in New York,” in Philip V. Cannistraro ed., *The Italians of New York: Five Centuries of Struggle and Achievement* (John D. Calandra Institute and The New York Historical Society, 1999), 77-90; Michael Topp, *Those Without a Country: The Transnationalism of the Italian American Syndicalist Movement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Rudolph Vecoli ed., *Italian American Radicalism: Old World Origins and New World Developments* (Proceedings of the American Italian Historical Association, 1973); and Elisabetta Vezzosi, *Il socialismo indifferente: immigrati italiani e il partito socialista negli Stati Uniti* (Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 1991). On anarchism see above all Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Philip V. Cannistraro, “Mussolini, Sacco-Vanzetti, and the Anarchists: The Transatlantic Context,” *Journal of Modern History*, 68, 1 (March 1996), 31-62; and Nunzio Pernicone, “Luigi Galleani and Italian Anarchist Terrorism in the United States,” *Studi Emigrazione*, 30, 111 (September 1993), 469-488. On communism see Gerald Meyer, “Italian Americans and the American Communist Party,” forthcoming in Cannistraro and Meyer, eds., *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*.

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 87-93. By Williams see also *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), and *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).

This dissertation, then, is, on one level, a political study of the social consciousness of Italian American radicals, and, on another level, it is an investigation of their cultural world. It is an attempt to recreate their milieu, their societies, their morals, and their dreams. I am especially interested in how Italian American radicals have voiced their political beliefs through culture, what themes they have privileged, and what kind of institutions they established. I begin with some obvious questions: what is Italian American radical culture? Where did it come from? What made it radical? What made it particularly Italian American? What is its significance in American and ethnic history?

Too often it is assumed that a direct, simple connection exists between politics and culture, and that culture is a mere reflection of politics. This reasoning bears upon the Marxist doctrine of historical materialism, the idea that the modes of production and the consequent socio-political structure of society constitute the basis on which cultural practices are formed. "It is not," wrote Marx, "the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness."⁵ However, as Antonio Gramsci helped to clarify, in Marx's use the verb "determine" does not mean, as is often implied, total control, encapsulation, or passive dependence. Without denying the primacy of economic and social forces in determining social consciousness, Gramsci pointed out that the relationship between the base and the superstructure can be best understood in terms of interaction and reciprocity. Gramsci saw that power does not depend on economic or political supremacy alone but also on cultural and moral ascendancy. His special contribution to Marxist philosophy and

⁵ Karl Marx, Preface to his *Critique of Political Economy* (1859).

cultural theory was to recognize the complexity of the formula of base and superstructure and emphasize the importance of cultural factors in bringing forth social change. In doing so, Gramsci left more room for the autonomy of ideas and the agency of human action.⁶

To study radicalism is then to study also the realm of culture in its broadest sense. We must, as Robin Kelley has suggested, acknowledge “the importance of the cultural terrain as a site of struggle.”⁷ For even if the economic element is indeed determinant, it cannot be separated from consciousness, the general social process, and the body of experiences and practices that it determines.⁸

The underlying premise of this work is that Italian American radicalism, as well as any political movement, cannot be understood merely as a component of the social structure, or defined simply in relation to the means of production. My investigation shows that Italian American radicals had active values and beliefs that were influential in their own right. Their radicalism was rooted in social *as well as* cultural experiences, embodied in a system of values, traditions, and institutions that they brought with them from Italy and adapted to the new American circumstances.

⁶ Gramsci ideas were expounded principally in his *Quaderni del carcere*, 6 Vols. (Turin: Editori Riuniti, 1996, first edition 1949). In English see *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1999), especially “Problems of Philosophy and History,” and “Problems of Marxism.” For a critical study of Gramsci’s major ideas see James Joll, *Antonio Gramsci* (New York: Penguin, 1977); and John Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford University Press, 1967).

⁷ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo 'Mama's DisFUNKtional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 8.

⁸ Cf. Williams, *Culture and Society*, 281.

Contrary to generalized perceptions of southern Italians as anti-intellectual, materialist, and apolitical, Italian radical immigrants displayed not only a great interest for politics but also a high aesthetic and literary sensitivity. Besides political parties, unions, and working-class organizations, they engaged in wide range of cultural and recreational activities. They formed Sunday and evening schools, they sponsored conferences and lectures, they published radical newspapers, they created radical bookstores, orchestras, and theaters, they organized dances, concerts, and picnics. And in addition to political pamphlets and manifestos, these *sovversivi* (as radicals of all persuasion were called in Italian) generated a wealth of artistic and literary works: short stories, poems, plays, drawings, and cartoons.

This dissertation focuses on this rich cultural arena, offering an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of Italian American radical literature and art. A play, a popular novel, the content of a newspaper can sometimes convey more truth than a political document. They provide unique insights into the human side, the emotions, and consciousness of their practitioners and their times. As cultural historian Warren Susman provocatively put it: "Mickey Mouse may in fact be more important to an understanding of the 1930s than Franklin Roosevelt.... If we want to know how people experienced the world, FDR had his role but so did Mickey Mouse."⁹

This dissertation draws on another important concept of Gramsci's theorization of culture: the crucial role of the intellectuals in the revolutionary process as an essential mediating force between society and the masses. Gramsci made clear that any class or

social group has its own “intelligentsia” (intellectual elite) and that every person is in some ways an intellectual:

There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*. Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a “philosopher,” an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.¹⁰

What distinguishes the “true” intellectuals, for Gramsci, is the social function they fulfill as constructors, organizers, and “permanent persuaders.”¹¹ The intellectuals, in other words, are the “functionaries” of the relation of society and its superstructures. Composed largely of political émigrés, self-taught workers, and labor organizers, the Italian American radical cadre fulfilled precisely this role. The *sovversivi* provided crucial leadership, mediating between the old and new world, and developing powerful strategies to resolve the social and political tensions of industrial capitalism.¹²

Combining biography with cultural and political history, one of the major objectives of this dissertation is to shed light on hitherto obscure radical leaders. With the exception of a few biographical studies of Carlo Tresca, Sacco and Vanzetti, and successful politicians such as La Guardia, Marcantonio, or Cacchione, the leadership of

⁹ Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 103.

¹⁰ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, “The Intellectuals,” 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

the Italian American Left is practically unknown.¹³ Yet, there were many -- like the poet Arturo Giovannitti, the cartoonist Fort Velona, the playwright Alessandro Sica, the union organizer Angela Bambace, and the journalist Girolamo Valenti -- who became leading figures in the Italian American community and the American labor movement, inspiring and organizing the immigrant workers. Despite their significant ideological differences, these exceptional men and women shared a distinct culture, a vision of man and society committed to the ideals of equality, social justice, and brotherhood.

Politically, they failed to create a viable alternative to capitalism. Yet they served important social functions as intellectual critics and leaders of working-class organizations, producing a sub-culture within American society, and the Italian American community in particular, committed to fighting economic exploitation, political

¹² On the role and forms of ethnic leadership see John Higham, ed., *Ethnic Leadership in America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979), especially his introductory chapter: "The Forms of Ethnic Leadership."

¹³ For example Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*; Dorothy Gallagher, *All the Right Enemies: The Life and Murder of Carlo Tresca* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Nunzio Pernicone "Carlo Tresca and the Sacco Vanzetti Case," *Journal of American History*, 66 (December 1979), 535-47, and "Carlo Tresca: Life and Death of a Revolutionary," in Richard N. Juliani and Philip V. Cannistraro, eds., *Italian Americans: The Search of a Usable Past* (Proceedings of the American Italian Historical Association, 1986), 216-35; Frances Russell, "The Last of the Anarchists: The Strange Story of Carlo Tresca," *Modern Age*, 8 (Winter 1963-64), 61-76. On other Italian American radical politicians see Simon Gerson, *Pete: The Story of Peter V. Cacchione, New York's First Communist Councilman* (New York: International Publishers, 1976); Arthur Mann, *La Guardia: A Fighter Against His Time, 1882-1933* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1959); Thomas Kessner, *Fiorello H. La Guardia and the Making of Modern New York* (New York: Penguin, 1991); Howard Zinn, *La Guardia in Congress*, Columbia University, 1958; Salvatore LaGumina, *Vito Marcantonio* (Dubuque, IA.: Kendall Kunt, 1969) Allan Shaffer, *Vito Marcantonio, Radical in Congress* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1966); Gerald Meyer, *Vito Marcantonio: Radical Politician, 1902-1954* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

and cultural oppression, and social inequality. Without their efforts, unionism among Italian Americans might not have occurred for another generation.

This dissertation builds upon the relatively new and rapidly growing field of Italian American studies. It joins a recent body of scholarship in challenging the belief, expounded by an earlier generation of Italian American, and American, scholars, that Italian immigrants were a compact block of ultraconservatives, apathetic and apolitical, whose only concern was the preservation of *la via vecchia* (the old way). This thesis derives from the increasing identification, and self-identification, of Italian Americans with reactionary and conservative politics. Indirectly, it also reflects the influence of the theory of "amoral familism," developed by sociologist Edward Banfield in the late 1950s. According to this characterization, Italian peasants were traditional, conservative, and incapable of collective actions because their entire world-view revolved around, and was limited to, the family.¹⁴

A perfect example of the tenacious grip that Banfield's theory had among scholars is Richard Gambino's *Blood of my Blood*, published in 1974 and still widely used as a college textbook¹⁵ Written amidst the ethnic revivalism of the early 1970s with the goal of redeeming the image of Italian Americans, Gambino's book not only ignored completely radicalism but went as far as to argue that Italian Americans have never really cared for politics or ideologies. "Italian Americans as a group," writes Gambino, "are

¹⁴ Edward Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1958).

neither liberal nor conservative, radical nor reactionary. They are reactive. They ignore politics until and unless their ethnically originated values are accosted.”¹⁶ By dismissing Italian American contributions to, and participation in, American politics, Gambino has manipulated historical truth and distorted the identity of the Italian Americans. Clearly, he has assumed that Italian immigrants were a homogenous group with a set of fixed values and attitudes. As a result, not only has he oversimplified the experience of Italian Americans but, ironically, he has also reinforced many of the myths generally associated with them.

As many scholars have demonstrated, the response of Italian immigrants to the New World was not uniformly passive and acquiescent. Rudolph Vecoli, in his seminal critique on the highly generalized conceptions of immigrant life presented by Oscar Handlin, offered an alternative picture of the Italian American experience, showing the ways in which Italian immigrants imported and adapted their cultures to American society.¹⁷ Using community and comparative studies as primary modes of investigation, successive scholars have significantly advanced our understanding of Italian American history, restoring agency to the immigrants and emphasizing the complexity and diversity of their responses to the New World.¹⁸

¹⁵ Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of Italian Americans* (New York: Guernica, 1996, first edition 1974).

¹⁶ Gambino, *Blood of My Blood*, 327.

¹⁷ Rudolph Vecoli, “Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of the *Uprooted*,” *Journal of American History* (December 1964), 404-17.

¹⁸ See for example, Samuel Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

Much in line with the New Social History's emphasis on people's agency, this dissertation makes clear that opportunities for equality and independence were not given to Italian immigrants but were won by their collective efforts. Far from accommodating to the status quo, Italian Americans contributed in crucial ways to establishing a radical tradition in the United States. As labor historians have recognized, they played a central role in the working class struggles of the 1910s-1930s and made important contributions to the labor unions, especially the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World, the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.¹⁹

Yet, although there exist many comprehensive studies of Italian American history, none of the available surveys takes into serious account the radical dimension of Italian immigrant politics.²⁰ Only Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale in their recent *La Storia*

1999); John Briggs, *An Italian Passage: Immigrants to Three Italian Cities, 1880-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Donna Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

¹⁹ See for example Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW* (New York: Quadrangle, 1969); Fenton, *Immigrants and Unions*; Philip Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World*, 3 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1965); Salvatore Salerno, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the IWW* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); and Topp, *Those Without a Country*. Fenton's work is the most deeply researched and sensitive to the question of the interaction between Italian immigrants and the American labor movement. Fenton recognizes the influences of radical politics on Italian immigrants but he shows a poor understanding of Italian radicalism.

have included a short chapter dedicated to radical activities. But, even though this represents an important step forward in the attempt to incorporate radical politics within the general history of Italian Americans, the authors' analysis remains superficial and in general informative rather than interpretative.²¹

Existing literature on Italian American radicalism has focused on four distinct components of the Italian immigrant Left: the working-class movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the socialist movement, the anarchist movement, and the anti-Fascist movement. The most suggestive study of the Italian American labor movement can be found in the work of Rudolph Vecoli.²²

²⁰ On the general history of Italian Americans see for example: Erik Amfitheatrof, *The Children of Columbus* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973); Alexander DeConde, *Half Bitter, Half Sweet* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971); Luciano Iorizzo and Salvatore Mondello, *The Italian Americans* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971); Humbert Nelli, *From Immigrant to Ethnic: The Italian Americans* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983); Andrew Rolle, *The American Italians: Their History and Culture* (Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, Pub. Co., 1972); and Allan Schoener, *The Italian Americans* (New York: MacMillan, 1987). None of them explores the subject of Italian American radicalism. For an alternative approach that incorporates radicalism see Irving Howe on the Jewish immigrant experience: *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989, first edition 1976).

²¹ Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: Harper, 1993).

²² Rudolph Vecoli, "The Italian Immigrants in the United States: Labor Movement from 1880 to 1929," in Bezza, ed., *Gli italiani fuori d'Italia*, 257-306; "Italian American Workers, 1880-1920: *Padrone* Slaves or Primitive Rebels?," in Silvano M. Tomasi, ed., *Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1977), 25-49; "Primo Maggio: May Day Observances among Italian Immigrant Workers, 1890-1920," *Labor's Heritage*, 7 (Spring 1996), 28-4; "Anthony Capraro and the Lawrence Strike of 1919," in Pozzetta, ed., *Pane e Lavoro: The Italian American Working Class* (Toronto: Proceedings of the American Italian Historical Association, 1980), 1-27; "Free Country: The American Republic Viewed by the American Left, 1880-1920," in Marianne Debouzy, ed., *In The Shadow of the Statue of Liberty* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 35-56; and "Italian Immigrants and Working-class

Vecoli has challenged traditional stereotypes of Italian American workers as either “padrone slaves” (unorganizable wage-cutters and strikebreakers) or “primitive rebels” (unsophisticated and uncontrollable radicals), pointing out the variety and complexity of Italian American labor experiences, traditions, and ideologies. More importantly, Vecoli’s findings suggest that radical influences among Italian workers were greater than generally assumed and that there were close links between the labor movement and radical organizations. Yet, negative stereotypes of ignorant, violent, and apolitical Italian Americans endure in the popular images of the Mafioso, reinforced by endless Hollywood movies, television series, and commercials. This dissertation doesn’t simply challenge these stereotypes: it aims at recovering and legitimizing an important, although forgotten, part of Italian American history, arguing that the leadership and morals of the *sovversivi* can illuminate and guide the current agenda of Italian Americans -- and other vilified groups as well.

Paul Buhle has written important studies on American radicalism and organized the Oral History of the American Left project, which includes many Italian radicals.²³ His recent anthology co-edited by Dan Georgakas shows the contributions of various ethnic groups to the American Left and suggests the important inter-connections between

Movements in the United States: Personal Reflections on Class and Ethnicity.” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (1993), 293-305.

²³ Paul Buhle, “Italian American Radicals and Labor in Rhode Island, 1905-1930,” *Marxism in the USA from 1870 to the Present: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London: Verso, 1987), and *A Dreamer’s Paradise Lost: Louis Fraina/Lewis Corey and the Decline of Radicalism in the US* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995). The oral history project is located at Tamiment Library at New York University.

ethnicity, working-class identity, and radical organizations.²⁴ Building upon this scholarship, my study too shows that class politics and ethnic identity are not necessarily opposites. Contrary to the belief that Italian immigration tended to avoid radicalism by putting concerns of family and religion before larger social interests, Italian ethnicity served in many ways as a catalyst rather than an obstacle to class-consciousness and organization. Italian American radicalism was inspired not only by a spirit of class struggle but also by ethnic injuries. In fighting for a better life in America, Italian workers were demanding economic as well as racial equality. Ethnic identity explains also why Italian Americans voted in mass for radical politicians like Marcantonio, Cacchione, and La Guardia, while at the same time they supported Mussolini.

The Italian American anarchist movement has been the particular focus of Nunzio Pernicone and Paul Avrich.²⁵ Their work outlines the relation between Italian and Italian American anarchism, demonstrating the historical link between old world and new settlements. This continuity was possible because of the role played by the numerous anarchist refugees who came to America to escape political repression in Italy. Figures like Luigi Galleani, Errico Malatesta, Francesco Saverio Merlino, and Pietro Gori, as we will see, were crucial in establishing radical networks within the Italian community and

²⁴ Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, *The Immigrant Left in the US* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

²⁵ Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and "Luigi Galleani and Italian Anarchist Terrorism in the United States;" Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*. See also Cannistraro, "Mussolini, Sacco-Vanzetti and the Anarchists: The Transatlantic Context;" George Carey, "The Vessel, the Deed and the Idea: Anarchists in Paterson, NJ, 1895-1908," *Antipode* (1979), 46-58; and Vecoli, ed. *Italian American*

mediating between the politics of class internationalism and ethnicity. To a degree and a span of time unique among all other ethnic groups in the United States, anarchists were able to create a genuine radical subculture that endured for three quarters of a century.

Italian American radicals also played a central role in building an anti-Fascist movement against Benito Mussolini in America. In his seminal work *Mussolini and Fascism: The View From America*, John Diggins pointed out that, although in the early 1930s the Italian anti-Fascist movement in the United States numbered only ten percent of the total Italian American population, it was a significant force in fighting Fascist propaganda and exposing Fascist activities in the United States. Philip Cannistraro has added to this discussion with a considerable number of studies on Italian Americans and Fascism, including his edition of Gaetano Salvemini's influential study of Italian American Fascist activities. Cannistraro's article on union leader Luigi Antonini, offers insights on the nature of the anti-Fascist movement and the important role played by Italian American émigrés (*fuorusciti*) as intellectual critics of the Italian immigrant community.²⁶

Radicalism: Old World Origins and New World Developments. Pernicone is writing a biography of Carlo Tresca as immigrant radical.

²⁶ On Italian American Fascism and anti-Fascism see Philip V. Cannistraro, *Backshirts in Little Italy: Italian American and Fascism, 1920-1929* (West Lafayette: Bordighera, 1999), "Luigi Antonini and the Italian Anti-Fascist Movement in the United States," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 5 (Fall 1985), 21-40 and "Fascism and Italian Americans," in Tomasi, ed. *Italian Americans: New Perspectives*; Charles Denzell, "The Italian anti-Fascist Immigration, 1922-1943," *Journal of Central European Affairs*, 12 (April 1952), 20-55 and John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

Collectively, these works reveal the richness and complexity of Italian American radicalism.²⁷ But their emphasis on, and preoccupation with, the exceptional elements of each one of the Italian American leftist groups have obscured their common cultural and ethical values, which represent the most interesting and compelling aspect of Italian American radicalism.

Another theme that needs more attention is the question of the transformation of Italian American radicalism. As the current scholarship has pointed out, Italian American radical ideas cannot be understood outside of the Italian context. At the same time, however, they were not simply a static import from the old country. The different environments and circumstances existing in America gave Italian immigrant radical culture a character of its own. This dissertation underscores the complex relations of Italian immigrants to both Italy and the United States, as they struggled to resist, and at the same time assimilate American culture. It also shows that the effects of assimilation on Italian immigrant radical culture were disastrous, as Americanization translated more and more into anti-radicalism.

²⁷ Other works on the subject of the Italian American Left include Grazia Dore's *La democrazia italiana e l'emigrazione in America* (Brescia, Morcelliana, 1964) and, more recently, Elisabetta Vezzosi's *Il socialismo indifferente* (Rome: Edizioni Il Lavoro, 1991) which have explored the question of Italian Socialism in the United States. Adriana Dadà has written a dissertation on Tresca's *Il Martello*. Other contributions on the general topic of Italian American radicalism can be found in the proceedings of the American Italian Historical Association and the contributions of a few Italian scholars. See for example Vecoli, ed., *Italian American Radicalism: Old World Origins and New World Developments*; Jerome Krase and William Egleman, eds., *The Melting Pot and Beyond: Italian Americans in the Year 2000* (1987); Geroge Pozzetta, ed., *Pane e Lavoro: The Italian American Working Class* (1980); and Frank Femminella, ed., *Power and Class: Italian American Experience Today* (1971).

While this study addresses questions relating specifically to Italian American history, it also builds upon the work of many cultural historians like Robin Kelley, Paul Buhle, Alan Wald, Maurice Isserman, and Michael Denning, who have attacked the static notion of culture espoused by older Marxist historians and suggested new ways to study radical culture.²⁸ By looking at Italian American radicalism through the lenses of culture it is my hope to make accessible the lost tradition of Italian American cultural radicalism to other scholars and stimulate comparisons with other ethnic groups in the United States.²⁹

Examining the years of 1890-1940, this dissertation focuses on New York City. Even though, Italian American radicalism assumed peculiar characteristics depending on its geographical location, New York is in many ways representative of Italian American radical culture at large. New York was the city with the highest percentage of Italian immigrants and was both politically and intellectually the most active radical community.

²⁸ See for example: Paul Buhle, *Popular Culture in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo 'Mama's DisFUNKtional, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), and *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: New York Press, 1994); Alan Wald, *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1994), and *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Fall of the anti-Stalinist Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Are You On? The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982).

²⁹ With the important exception of Michael Denning, scholars of American radical cultural have failed to discuss Italian American contributions.

The broad periodization was chosen with the intent of showing the evolution of Italian American radicalism and the impact of assimilation upon radical ideas.

The organization of this dissertation reflects the multifaceted nature of Italian American radical culture and adopts mostly a thematic format. Chapter one provides a synopsis of the Italian American radical movement and a social portrait of the *sovversivi* – their organizations, their political ideas, and their activities. It is a general profile of a group that was politically very different and fragmented, but shared similar experiences and moral beliefs. The subsequent chapters explore the most significant cultural forms through which Italian American radicals expressed their ideas, discussing their significance as social locations.

The large number of radical newspapers published by Italian immigrants in the United States points to the fact that a critical portion of their ideological struggle took place in the pages of the press.³⁰ Chapter two examines this crucial institution, providing a broad overview of the themes, programs and content of the radical papers published in the New York metropolitan area. Chapters three and four enter more specifically into the intellectual realm, looking at Italian American radical culture through the medium of literature. The poetry and politics of Arturo Giovannitti, one of the central figures of Italian American radicalism, are the specific subject of Chapter four.

The *sovversivi* recognized the importance of leisure to the immigrant community and built vibrant institutions that entertained the immigrants while also educating them to revolutionary ideals. Anarchists, more than any other group sponsored countless

recreational activities such as picnics, dances, May Day parades, and lectures. Chapter five looks at the most popular and effective of these initiatives: the theatre. It looks at the functions of the radical stage and the plays that were available to the immigrants. The last chapter explores the cultural politics of the Italian American anti-Fascist movement, focusing on radical cartoons, caricatures, and satire. The material for this chapter is the anti-Fascist press and especially the work of artist Fort Velona. The epilogue serves as a conclusion, explaining the demise of Italian American radicalism.

With the exception of the first chapter which relies extensively on secondary literature, this study is based almost exclusively on primary sources and unexplored material, ranging from the personal papers of Italian American radicals, to the radical press they published, and the literature and art they produced. The most complete repository of Italian American radical history can be found at the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. The manuscript collections include personal papers of Italian American radicals such as Arturo Giovannitti, Antonio Crivello, Angela Bambace, Anthony Capraro, Alessandro Sisca, and Fort Velona. The IHRC also has an extensive library of the Italian American radical press, including some original issues. The collection counts over fifty titles of radical newspapers and periodicals, ranging from socialist, anarchist, and labor publications. Finally, the library holds a significant number of rare materials such as song books, poetry, drama, tracts, manifestos, and memoirs.

³⁰ See Dick Hoerder, ed., *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America, 1840s-1970s: An Annotated Bibliography*, Vol. III (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

A number of important labor collections are at the Tamiment Library at New York University. They include the papers of socialist and anti-Fascist Girolamo Valenti, and socialist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, who was very close to Italian radicals because of her love affair with Carlo Tresca. The Tamiment also has campaign material and documentation on Italian American unions such as the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union (local 89) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (local 48).

The New York Public Library holds the papers of the Tresca Memorial Committee and microfilm versions of some important periodicals such as *Il Fuoco* (1914-1915), *Il Proletario* (1896-1942), *Il Nuovo Mondo* (1925-1931), *Il Martello* (1917-1946), *La Stampa Libera* (1931-1938), and *La Parola del Popolo* (1937-1948). Some documentation about anti-Fascist riots, strikes, deportations can be found in the State Department, the Justice Department, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (in relation to deportation proceedings, or anti-radical investigations). The Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Central State Archive) in Rome contains especially important sources on the relationship between the immigrant radicals and their countrymen in Italy, such as correspondence and exchange of information, publications, and police reports on radical activities in the United States.

By restoring the traditions and lives of the *sovversivi*, this dissertation provides a comprehensive view and in-depth analysis of Italian American radical culture, offering an array of hypotheses that can be tested and expanded in future historical and cultural studies.

CHAPTER I ITALIAN AMERICAN RADICALISM

The roots

The story of Italian American radicalism begins with the massive emigration of Italians who entered the United States between 1880 and 1920. Over five million, four fifths of them from the southern regions and the islands, migrated to North America during this period. Italians became the largest nationality of the “new immigrants” from southern and eastern Europe, constituting over twenty percent of the total immigration.¹ The great exodus of Italians from the South was above all the result of economic and social pressures.² Like other European countries, Italy experienced a terrible agrarian crisis in the 1870s.³ To make things worse, the South was also plagued by a series of

¹ Cf. Rudolph Vecoli, “The Italian Immigrants in the United States,” in Bruno Bezza, ed., *Gli Italiani fuori d'Italia* (Milan: F. Angeli, 1983); Gianfausto Rosoli, ed., *Un secolo di emigrazione italiana: 1876-1976* (Rome: Centro Studi Emigrazione, 1978); and Dora Marucco, “Le statistiche dell'emigrazione italiana,” in Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, and Emilio Franzina, eds., *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana. Partenze* (Rome: Donzelli, 2001), 61-76. The term “new immigration” refers to the migration of Slavs, Italians, and East European Jews, which added to the old one formed by British, Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians.

² For a general account of the factors leading to the massive emigration of southern Italians see John and Beatrice MacDonald, “Italy’s Rural Social Structure and Emigration,” *Occidente*, 12 (1956), 437-457; and “Chain Migration, Ethnic Neighborhood Formation and Social Networks,” *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, 42 (January, 1964), 82-91. For a more recent study see Andreina De Clementi, “La grande emigrazione: dalle origini alla chiusura degli sbocchi americani,” in Bevilacqua, Clementi, and Franzina, *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, 187-212.

³ The completion of the American railway system and improvements of steamship transportation, combined with the increasing mechanization of agricultural production, allowed Americans to sell grain and other cereals for less than Europeans could produce. As a result, the prices of wheat, corn, as well as other Italian agricultural goods – including wine, olive oil, and fruit – drastically declined. In response, the Italian government raised taxes and erected protective tariffs, a policy that ultimately intensified the already severe economic imbalance between North and South. The new protectionist policies also led in 1888 to a ten-year “tariff war” with France, which brought further

natural disasters: first the epidemics of malaria and cholera (1884-87), then the volcanic eruptions of Vesuvius and Etna (1906) and finally the earthquakes of 1908, which destroyed much of the Sicilian province of Messina and part of Calabria. The extraordinary growth of the population (from eighteen millions in 1801 to thirty-two millions in 1901) and the spreading of political revolt gave additional impetus for massive emigration. Stimulated by American economic expansion and increased demand for wage labor, great numbers of Italians began to leave their villages and seek fortune across the Atlantic.

With the exception of a small portion of artisans and craftsmen, the great majority of Italian immigrants entered the American labor market as wage earners, especially as unskilled, manual workers.⁴ About eighty percent of them were *contadini*, land-poor peasants, who generally lived in small villages under pre-modern social and economic conditions.⁵ Their rural origin was a significant factor in their reception by the American people and their adaptation to the new environment. As in the case of other new immigrant groups, southern Italians' appearance, habits, and cultural traditions were perceived by Americans as backward, primitive, and ultimately inferior.⁶ In addition, it

misery to Italian peasants. See Piero Bevilacqua, "Società rurale ed emigrazione;" and Clementi, "La grande emigrazione dalle origini alla chiusura degli sbocchi americani," both in Bevilacqua, Clementi and Franzina, *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*.

⁴ Between 1899 and 1910 only 0.5 percent of all emigrants from Italy were listed as professionals, 1, 5% were artisans, and 83.9 percent were unskilled workers, mostly tenant farmers and common laborers. Cf. Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), "Table 1: Occupational experiences of Italian, Jewish, and all immigrants arriving in the United States, 1899-1910," 33-34.

⁵ For a social profile of the *contadini* see Rudolph Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago, A Critique of *The Uprooted*," *Journal of American History* (December 1964), 404-417.

has become increasingly clear that Italian immigrants were not considered “white.”⁷ Documents issued by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Bureau, for example, used “south Italian” as an official racial designation that put Italians in a middle ground within the racial order of white-over-black. As Matthew Jacobson pointed out, it was not just that Italians did not look white, but they did not *act* white.⁸ They were believed to be by nature emotional, bloody-minded, treacherous, and revengeful – “the descendents of bandits and assassins who have transported to this country the lawless passions, the cut-throat practices and oath-bound societies of their native country, [who] are to us a pest without mitigation.”⁹ Their distance from “whiteness” was marked by epithets like “Dago,” “Wop,” and “Guinea,” which became practically synonymous with

⁶ Prejudices against southern Italians came also from Northern Europeans as well northern Italians. Criminologists such as Alfredo Niceforo and Cesare Lombroso provided “scientific” arguments of the alleged racial inferiority of southern Italians, arguing that the moral and social structure of the South revealed an inferior civilization. Cf. Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 74.

⁷ Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer, “Italian American Radicalism: An Interpretative History,” in idem. eds., *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism* (Westport: Praeger, forthcoming). See also Peter Vellon, “A Darker Past: Italian Americans, African Americans, and the Permutations of Race, 1886-1921,” unpublished dissertation. City University of New York, 2003.

⁸ Mathew F. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 52-62.

⁹ This commentary was published in the *New York Times* the day after the infamous lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans, on March 14 1891, after a jury had acquitted six of them of the charge of murdering the local chief of the police. Cited in Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 211. See also Alexander De Conde, *Half Bitter, Half Sweet: An Excursion into Italian American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), 121-126.

Italian. Anti-Italian feelings emerged more dramatically in the South and Midwest, where American mobs lynched Italian immigrants on at least a dozen occasions.¹⁰

Even American labor officials shared these nativist prejudices, casting Italian immigrants as “undesirable.” To Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, Italian workers were nothing more than unorganizable wage-cutters, incapable of appreciating the value of unionism because of their rural background.¹¹ Ironically, as more and more Italians became involved in strikes and upheavals, another stereotype, diametrically opposed, emerged: that of the violent, uncontrollable Italian anarchist.¹²

Contrary to generalized clichés, the *contadini* were not an undistinguished mass of “amoral familists” -- conservative, subservient, apathetic, poorly educated, and incapable of collective actions.¹³ The agrarian character of Italian peasants did not prevent them from organizing themselves or understanding the principles of unionism

¹⁰ On ethnic prejudices against Italian Americans see Salvatore LaGumina, ed., *Wop! A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1973).

¹¹ By the 1880s, when Italians began to arrive in flows, American labor organizations began to support legislative restrictions against Italians, arguing that they were undercutting the American workers' standards of living. See Rudolph Vecoli, “Pane e giustizia,” *La Parola del Popolo* (September/October 1976), 57. See also Charles Anthony Zappia, “Unionism and the Italian American Worker: A History of the New York City Italian Locals in the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, 1900-1934,” unpublished dissertation, University of California, 1994.

¹² See Rudolph Vecoli, “Italian American Workers, 1880-1920: *Padrone* Slaves or Primitive Rebels?,” in S.M. Tomasi, ed., *Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1977).

¹³ See above all Edward Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

and socialism.¹⁴ As Carlo Tresca, one of most important Italian immigrant radicals, observed, “you did not need to read Karl Marx to be convinced that society as it stood had to be changed.”¹⁵

Moreover, as a group of Italian scholars have recently pointed out, Italian rural society was not fixed, immutable, and static, as is typically described. The life of the *contadini* was in fact characterized by great mobility, job flexibility, and social ferment.¹⁶ Italian immigrants who came to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had left a country struck by economic transformations, political turmoil, and social insurrections. Hopes that Italian unification would bring prosperity and progress along with political unity were belied. The Italian state, created only in 1861, failed to generate the schools, roads, and social reforms so needed by Italians, especially in the South. Conditions of life throughout the peninsula actually worsened after the agrarian crisis of 1870s, widening the distance between the semi-feudal South and the increasingly capitalist North.¹⁷ These circumstances – increasing social and

¹⁴ Bruno Cartosio, “Sicilian Radicals in Two Worlds,” in Marianne Debouzy, ed., *In the Shadow of the Statue of Liberty: Immigrants, Workers and Citizens in the American Republic, 1880-1920* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 117-128.

¹⁵ Carlo Tresca, Unpublished “Autobiography,” 109. New York Public Library, Manuscript and Archives Division.

¹⁶ Contrary to generalized descriptions, rural life was not exclusively made of field labor. The *contadini* frequently worked also as masons, joiners, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and spinners. The seasonal nature of Italian rural economy – olives, nuts citrus, grain, and wine harvests – also gave great mobility to rural life, inducing peasants to constant moving and migrant flows. For a revisionist interpretation of the South see above all Franco Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano* (Rome: Laterza, 1997); Mario Alcaro, *Sull'identità meridionale: Forme di una cultura meridionale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999); and Bevilacqua, “Società rurale e emigrazione.”

economic inequality, economic unrest, and dissatisfaction with the new government – created an ideal milieu for radicalism.

Three political ideologies – Mazzinianism, anarchism, and socialism – competed for the loyalties of Italian workers.¹⁸ The pioneering leader of the *Risorgimento*, Giuseppe Mazzini proposed a program of national unity that combined republican ideas, egalitarianism, and inter-class cooperation. It was in this spirit that the first workers' organizations, *Società di Mutuo soccorso* (mutual aid societies), were formed in Piedmont during the 1850s. These institutions provided legal, medical, and educational assistance to its members and, at the same time, helped propagandize socialistic ideas and organize the workers. By 1885, there were almost 5,000 mutual aid societies spread throughout Italy.¹⁹

In the years following the formation of the International Workingman's Association (the First International) by Karl Marx in 1864, the dominant radical force in Italy became anarchism. The Russian anarchist Mikhael Bakunin arrived in Italy the same year and quickly attracted many converts, including a large number of anti-Marxist

¹⁷ A combination of historical and economic factors accounts for the impoverishment of the South: the depletion of the soil, the spread of malaria and cholera, the persistence of a rigid system of feudalism, the international agricultural crisis of late nineteenth century, and the economic policies of the new Kingdom that favored industrial development in the North at the expense of the rural South. For different perspectives on the so-called "southern question" see above all Antonio Gramsci, *La questione meridionale* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1991); Rosario Villari, ed., *Il Sud nella storia d'Italia*, 2 vols. (Bari: Laterza, 1966); and Marta Petrusiewicz, *Come il meridione divenne una questione: Rappresentazione del Sud prima e dopo il Quarantotto* (Soveria Mannelli, CZ, Italy: Rubettino, 1998).

¹⁸ Alexander De Grand, *The Italian Left in the Twentieth Century: A History of the Socialist and Communist Parties* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 6.

¹⁹ Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 161.

intellectuals, especially in Naples and the region of Emilia Romagna. Bakunin advocated immediate social revolution and the destruction of the state and all existing political institutions. His anti-statism and idea of federalism found fertile ground in a society where localism was strong and resentment at the state, which seemed to do little more than oppress its people, was growing. Moreover, his stress on the importance of the peasantry in carrying out the social revolution naturally fit the Italian situation. Claiming 26,000 members by 1873, Italian anarchists became the leaders of the anti-authoritarian wing of the International and remained the most influential political force until the turn of the nineteenth century.²⁰

By the early 1890s, as Marxist works were translated into Italian, socialism made some inroads, and in 1892 the Italian Socialist Party was formed. Out of this socialist milieu emerged the *Fasci dei Lavoratori* (literally bundles of workers), a movement launched by Sicilian intellectuals and artisans, which rapidly spread into rural areas, eventually boasting more than 300,000 active members.

The *Fasci* led a series of violent uprisings, of which the most famous was a three-month long strike in 1893 against landowners and state taxes in western Sicily. Eventually, the *Fasci* movement was crushed. Pressured by the frightened gentry, Prime Minister Francesco Crispi responded with the imposition of martial law and a six-year-long period of violent repression. All leaders were arrested, more than one thousand

²⁰ For a history of Italian anarchism see Nunzio Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), and Pier Carlo Masini, *Storia degli anarchici italiani da Bakunin a Malatesta* (Milan: Rizzoli Editori, 1969).

Sicilians were deported to penal islands, a hundred thousand voters were disenfranchised, and socialism, in all its forms, was declared illegal.²¹

Yet, the riots and demonstrations of the 1880s and 1890s had important political repercussions: they awakened the political consciences of thousands of men and women and increased their dissatisfaction with the liberal government. Not a few converted to socialism.²² Despite their geographical isolation, the peasantry was not untouched by these events. The Italian labor movement in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, for example, managed to attract many peasants in the North and in the southern regions of Sicily and Puglia. In 1901, agricultural workers constituted twenty-three percent of the 661,478 official members of Italian unions and chambers of labor – the highest percentage of all European countries.²³ The peasants, as Denis Mack Smith has pointed out, were potentially the most rebellious element in Italian society.²⁴

Consequently, among the mass of Italian immigrants who went to the United States between the 1890s and 1910s, there were many who had direct or indirect experience of insurrectionism and unionism, as well as a little familiarity with socialistic ideologies. Some, as we will see, had already been important leaders and organizers in Italy and emigrated to escape political persecution. When they did so, they brought their traditions of militancy and protest with them, establishing important connections between

²¹ Denis Mack Smith, *Modern Italy: A Political History* (Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, 1959), 161; Cartosio, "Sicilian Radicals in Two Worlds," 120; and John Alcorn, "Sophisticated Liberals," in Spencer M. Di Scala, ed., *Italian Socialism: Between Politics and History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 41-41.

²² Martin Clark, *Modern Italy: 1871-1982* (London: Longman, 1984), 104.

²³ Cartosio, "Sicilian Radicals in Two World," 130.

radicalism in the old and new countries.²⁵ Since the late nineteenth century, Italian anarchists, socialists, communists, and anti-Fascists who came to live in the United States developed and sustained through correspondence, newspapers, and publications a network of regular contacts with comrades in Europe. In doing so, they built a political movement and community that was “transnational” – that sought to shape the course of political events in both Italy and the United States. As many have suggested, this transnational connection between old and new worlds became one of the central defining elements of the Italian American radical movement.²⁶

But Italian American radicalism was not shaped by Italian circumstances alone. Thousands of Italian immigrant workers were radicalized by their experience in America to a greater degree than previously assumed.²⁷ Images of a “wonderful new life,” and a “Land of Plenty” where everybody could prosper, gripped the imaginations of Italians.

²⁴ Smith, *Modern Italy*, 157.

²⁵ See Donna Gabaccia, *Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

²⁶ Michael Topp, *Those Without a Country, The Political Culture of Italian American Syndicalists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 5. Randolph Bourne was the first to use the term trans-nationalism, in opposition to Americanization, suggesting the inclusion of immigrants’ distinctive cultures into American values and traditions. “Toward a Trans-national America,” *Atlantic Monthly* (July 1916). On the transnational dimension of immigrant radicalism in America see: Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, eds., *The Immigrant Left in the United States* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); and George Pozzetta, ed., *Immigrant Radicals: View From the Left* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991). On Italian transnationalism see, in addition to Topp’s *Those Without a Country*, Ernesto Ragionieri, “Italiani all’estero ed emigrazione di lavoratori italiani: un tema di storia del movimento operaio,” *Belfagor*, 17 (November 1962), 641-69; and Donna Gabaccia and Fraser Ottanelli, eds., *Italian Workers in the World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

²⁷ Cf. Nunzio Pernicone, “Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York,” in Philip V. Cannistraro, ed., *The Italians of New York* (The John D. Calabdra Institute and The New York Historical Society, 2000), 81.

sending them across the Atlantic. “America! America!” wrote Carlo Tresca, “ Work and money. Money and fortune. Vision of lands to till, of harvests to reap!”²⁸ Real life in the New World, however, proved to be full of privation, loneliness and back-breaking toil.

Their disillusionment was a major catalyst towards radical ideologies. The experiences of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the two anarchists executed in 1927, offer perhaps the best example of the way in which the harsh social conditions of life in America radicalized immigrants. As Paul Avrich has documented, before their arrival in the United States, both Sacco and Vanzetti had shown little inclination towards radical activities and ideas. They converted to political radicalism largely as a result of the discrimination and exploitation they faced in the New World. Like thousands of others, they immigrated at a young age with heads full of dreams and great expectations but they soon encountered “all the brutalities of life, all the injustice, the corruption in which humanity struggles tragically.”²⁹ In anarchism, they found a new ideal, a philosophy of life, and a faith that gave their lives new purpose and meaning.³⁰

Radical ideas in general, and anarchism in particular, were reinforced by a significant number of charismatic radical leaders who came to the United States to escape the harsh repression that followed the uprisings of the *Fasci Siciliani* and the infamous *Fatti di Maggio*, (May Events) – a series of riots and labor protests that took place in

²⁸ Tresca, “Autobiography,” 89.

²⁹ Bartolomeo Vanzetti, *The Story of a Proletarian Life* (Boston, 1923), 18. Cited in Vecoli, “The American Republic Viewed by the Italian Left,” in Debouzy, *In the Shadow of the Statue of Liberty*, 40.

³⁰ Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 27.

1898 in Milan, Puglia, Marche, and Sicily and were suppressed violently by the army.³¹ Beginning in the 1890s, virtually every famous Italian anarchist visited the New World. The first to arrive was Francesco Saverio Merlino, one of the most scholarly theorists of Italian anarchism. He remained in America only one year, from 1892 to 1893, but during this time launched two important anarchist publications: *Il Grido degli Oppressi* (The Cry of the Oppressed, 1892-1893) and the English-language *Solidarity*. The anarchist poet and playwright Pietro Gori followed in 1895. He also spent only a year in the United States, but conducted perhaps as many as four hundred meetings throughout the country. A powerful and persuasive speaker, through his poems, plays, and speeches, he won many converts. Along with the Catalan anarchist Pedro Esteve, he also helped establish *La Questione Sociale* (The Social Question, 1895-1915) in Paterson, New Jersey, which became one of the most influential organs of Italian anarchism in America. Two other notable anarchists, Errico Malatesta and Giuseppe Ciancabilla, arrived in the United States in the late 1890s. As in the case of Merlino and Gori, their propaganda tours, which filled lecture halls to capacity, gave anarchism a strong impetus. Ciancabilla, who remained in America until his sudden death in 1904, helped spread anarchism westward through his newspapers *L'Aurora* (The Dawn, 1899-1902) and *La Protesta Umana* (The Human Protest, 1902-1904), published respectively in Spring Valley, Illinois, and San Francisco. Malatesta was along with Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin one of the great revolutionaries of international anarchism. Even though he stayed only a few

³¹ In the Milan demonstration, King Umberto's soldiers killed eighty people and wounded 450. Clark, *Modern Italy*, 103-104. For a historical interpretation of the May Events see Louise Tilly, "I Fatti di Maggio: The Working Class of Milan and the Rebellion of 1898," in R. J. Bezucha, ed., *Modern European Social History* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1972), 124-158.

months, he had an enormous influence among Italian immigrants, especially among the founders and readers of *La Questione Sociale* of Paterson.³²

But more than any other, the figure who influenced the Italian anarchist movement in America was Luigi Galleani (1861-1931). From a middle-class family, Galleani was born in Vercelli, near the northern Italian city of Turin. Originally trained as a lawyer, he soon abandoned practicing law and, swept up in the socialist ferment of the 1880s, turned his energy to radical activism. His writings, defiant speeches, and central role in workers' organizations soon brought him to the attention of Italian authorities, resulting in several arrests and the eventual confinement on the island of Pantelleria, off the coast of Sicily. Aided by the French anarchist Elisée Réclus, he escaped, went first to Egypt, then London, and finally, in October 1901 landed in the United States. Unlike the anarchist *émigrés* who preceded him, Galleani decided to stay. He originally settled in Paterson, New Jersey, where he assumed the leadership of *La Questione Sociale*. A year later, finding himself charged with inciting riots during a strike of Paterson's silk workers, he moved to Barre, Vermont, where stone and marble cutters from Tuscany had established an anarchist group in 1894. Here he launched his own newspaper: *Cronaca Sovversiva* (Subversive Chronicle), which became the most influential organ of Italian anarchism in America, distributed also in Europe, South America, and Australia. For sixteen years, until his deportation in 1919, Galleani's eloquent and fierce voice roared throughout the pages of *Cronaca* calling for "propaganda of the deed" – the overthrow of

³² On the arrival and activities of these Italian anarchists in America see Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background*, chapter III. For biographical information on them, see Franco Andreucci and Tommaso Detti, eds., *Il movimento operaio italiano. Dizionario biografico*, 7 vols. (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1975-1979), and Bettini Leonardo,

capitalism by insurrectionary violence and armed retaliation.³³ He also rejected all forms of government and organization, including labor unions, which he believed would inevitably become as corrupt as the system they opposed. His breed of anarchism (intransigent anarchist-communism) dominated the Italian American anarchist movement and inspired one of the most extreme groups of militant revolutionaries in the United States, which included Sacco and Vanzetti.³⁴ In 1922, after Galleani was deported, his disciples founded in New York *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* (The Mustering of the Incurables), which continued to be published until 1971.

Italian socialist leaders also came to stay temporarily or permanently in America but to a lesser extent than the anarchists. This difference had in large part to do with the formation of the Socialist Party in Italy in 1892, and the subsequent need for representatives and organizers there. Still, men like Bernardino Verro, Camillo Cianfarra, Dino Rondani, Gioacchino Artoni, and, above all, Giacinto Menotti Serrati, one of the founders of the Italian Socialist Party, were crucial in laying the roots of the Italian

Bibliografia dell'anarchismo, 2 vols. (Florence: CP Editrice, 1972). For a general history of Italian anarchism and its leaders see Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892*.

³³ The so-called "propaganda of the deed," intended to affirm socialist principles through direct action, escalated at the turn of the nineteenth century, when several presidents and monarchs were assassinated: French President Carnot by Sante Caserio in 1894, Spanish Prime Minister Canovas del Castillo by Michele Angiolillo in 1897, Empress Elizabeth of Austria by Luigi Luccheni in 1898, Italian King Umberto I by Gaetano Bresci in 1900, American President McKinley by Leon Colgoz in 1901.

³⁴ On Galleani see: Rudolph Vecoli, "Galleani Luigi," in Mary Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 251-253; M. Nejorotti, "Galleani L.," in Andreucci and Detti, *Il movimento operaio italiano. Dizionario biografico*, vol. II, 418-24; Ugo Fedeli, *Luigi Galleani. Quarant'anni di lotte rivoluzionarie* (Cesena: Edizioni L'Antistato, 1956); and Nunzio Pernicone, "Luigi Galleani and Italian Anarchist Terrorism in the United States," *Studi Emigrazione*, XXX, n. 111 (September 1993), 469-488.

socialist movement in the United States. Meanwhile, thousands of quarry workers from Tuscany, weavers from Piedmont, peasants from Reggio Emilia, and artisans from Sicily, who had participated in the uprisings of the late nineteenth century, began to arrive, providing rank-and-file support for the emergent socialist movement.³⁵ By 1900 there were thirty official Italian sections of the Socialist Party throughout the East Coast (two in New York) and countless independent circles. "Their activities," wrote Italian American socialist historian Mario De Ciampis, "were already remarkable in 1896, consisting of incessant propaganda, organization of cooperatives, and formations of circles wherever they could gather some comrades."³⁶ On November 7 of that year, Italian socialists in Pittsburgh founded the socialist newspaper *Il Proletario* (The Proletarian) which remained the major organ of Italian revolutionary socialism in the United States for several decades.³⁷

By the beginning of the twentieth century, thanks to the ideas and experiences brought by visiting radical leaders and rank-and-file militants, Italian immigrants possessed a rich radical culture that paralleled ideologically that of the motherland. As in Italy, the Italian American Left covered, to a far greater extent than any other ethnic group in the United States, the entire spectrum of class-based radicalism -- Marxism, syndicalism, anarchism, and, later on, communism.³⁸ The ultimate goal of these

³⁵ Vecoli, "The American Republic Viewed by the Italian Left," 27.

³⁶ Mario De Ciampis, "Storia del movimento socialista rivoluzionario italiano," *La Parola del Popolo* (December 1958-January 1959), 137.

³⁷ For a detailed history of *Il Proletario* see De Ciampis, "Storia del movimento socialista rivoluzionario italiano."

ideologies was the same: overthrow capitalism, emancipate the workers, and realize economic and social equality. But serious disagreements existed about the goals of the revolution and the tactics to be adopted vis-à-vis the state. Marxists, for example, advocated the political seizure of state power by an avant-garde, disciplined, and centrally organized workers' party. In contrast, anarchists considered the state incompatible with liberty. Therefore, they rejected every form of authority and advocated total abstention from politics, including voting, election to public offices, and membership in political parties.³⁹ Syndicalists represented a middle ground between the two, calling for direct action in the form of general strikes, sabotage, and revolutionary insurrection.⁴⁰

Quarrels originating in Italy over issues of doctrines and tactics were transported to American soil, creating insurmountable barriers among local radical groups. Personal rivalries over the leadership of the Italian American Left further weakened the movement, fomenting feuds, hostility and suspicions. The inability to overcome these differences represented one of the major limitations of Italian American radicals and seriously endangered their common struggle against capitalism.

³⁸ Michael Topp, "The Italian American Left: Transnationalism and the Quest for Unity," in Buhle and Georgakas, eds., *The Immigrant Left in the United States*, 121. For a general history of Italian Socialism see Alexander De Grand, *The Italian Left in the Twentieth Century: A History of the Socialist and Communist Party* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

³⁹ Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism*, 21.

The Italian American Radical Movement in New York

By the 1880s, New York was indisputably the leading city of the United States.⁴¹ It was not only the largest American metropolis but also the most cosmopolitan and heterogeneous, welcoming the bulk of Europe's immigration. By 1900, nearly half of the entire population of New York City was foreign born. The Italian community had grown steadily after 1880. In that year, the census counted only 12,000 foreign born Italians, but in 1900 the number had increased to 145,000. By 1920, more than 400,000 Italian immigrants lived in the city; together with the Jews, they constituted the largest ethnic group.⁴² It was natural for new immigrants to settle near their co-nationals. Most of early Italian immigrants gravitated towards the inexpensive and filthy areas of the Mulberry Bend district. However, by the First World War, over seventy centers of Italian settlements – the so-called Little Italies – existed throughout all the five boroughs, with East Harlem being the largest.⁴³

The appeal of New York rested on a firm economic foundation. The city was the nation's capital of finance and commerce, as well as an important center of

⁴⁰ Mack Smith, *Modern Italy*, 195.

⁴¹ A massive construction of new roads, bridges, and tunnels enormously expanded its territory, and in 1898, Greater New York was officially created. Urban transportation, street lighting, public health, and sanitation were undergoing significant improvement. Wall Street, the theater district, and the \$2 million Metropolitan Opera House (1883) became emblematic of the city's financial and cultural prestige. Perhaps most striking, was the development of the skyscraper, which rapidly altered the cityscape, becoming the distinctive trait of urban America. George J. Lankevich, *American Metropolis: A History of New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 112-121. For a general history of New York see Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴² Cf. Kessner, *The Golden Door*, 14-17.

manufacturing, with leading industries in clothing, printing, publishing, meat packing, and retailing.⁴⁴ To a great extent, it was New York's strong job market, especially the garment industries and construction, that lured Italians to settle there. As symbolized by the Statue of Liberty presiding over its harbor, New York for the millions of immigrants arriving in the United States meant liberty, opportunity, and hope.⁴⁵

Despite the difficulties and pressures of American industrial life, Italians were able to build vibrant communities that replicated the traditions, cultures, and institutions of the old country.⁴⁶ Along with the much celebrated family values, religious rituals, and culinary art, Italian immigrants also transplanted their radical ideas.⁴⁷ As early as 1882 an Italian Socialist Club was organized in Brooklyn while New York's first anarchist association, "Gruppo Rivoluzionario Carlo Cafiero," appeared in Manhattan on Bleecker Street in 1885.⁴⁸ The first Italian radical newspaper in New York, *L'Anarchico* (The Anarchist) was founded in 1888; eighty more Italian-language radical papers followed

⁴³ See Donna Gabaccia, "Peopling 'Little Italy,'" and Gerald Meyer, "Italian Harlem: Portrait of a Community," both in Cannistraro, *The Italians of New York*.

⁴⁴ Lankevich, *American Metropolis*, 126

⁴⁵ Cited in Kessner, *The Golden Door*, 10.

⁴⁶ As many have noted, the creation of the Little Italies were in large part a response to hostile reception that Italians faced in the United States. See Donna Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change Among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1925* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

⁴⁷ The only study devoted specifically to Italian radicalism in New York is Pernicone's already cited "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York City." Another important source of information is Edwin Fenton, *Immigrants and Unions: A Case Study, Italians and American Labor, 1870-1920* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

⁴⁸ Mario De Ciampis, "Italiani in America," *La Parola del Popolo* (September/October 1976), 72.

over the next fifty years, making New York the journalistic capital of Italian immigrant radicalism.⁴⁹

Among the contending radical philosophies of the Italian American Left in the New York area, anarchism and syndicalism predominated until the end of the First World War, and were more widespread among Italian immigrants than among any other ethnic group. The prevalence of anarchist ideas in the Little Italies reflected in part the influence of anarchism in Italy and the important role of anarchist émigrés in America. But, above all, it rested on the specific nature and conditions of Italian immigration. Unlike other immigrants, the Italians did not come to America with the intention of settling permanently. Most planned to return to their native towns as soon as they had accumulated enough money to buy land back in their village, and in fact about half did repatriate.⁵⁰ For this reason, they remained largely indifferent to American politics, language and customs – an attitude that was strongly encouraged by American prejudices and discrimination. Moreover, by 1910 less than twenty-five percent of Italian immigrants were naturalized and eligible to vote; consequently the majority of Italians had no voice in political and legal reforms. Anarchism and syndicalism, which rejected electoral politics and espoused direct revolutionary action, were in many ways more compatible to the needs of these “birds of passage” eager to improve their conditions as soon as possible. The methods of struggle of anarchism and syndicalism – sabotage,

⁴⁹ See Dick Hoerder, *The Immigrant Labor Press in America*, vol. III (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); and Pernicone, “Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York City,” 83.

⁵⁰ This “sojourner mentality” was reflected in the composition of the Italian immigration which consisted initially almost exclusively of working age males. Kessner, *The Golden Door*, 30-31.

strike, spontaneous and direct action – were also closer to the revolutionary experiences and the radical tradition of the *contadini*.⁵¹

Another factor that spurred sympathy towards anarchism in America was the Haymarket affair of 1886 – the bomb explosion in Chicago which killed several policemen and led to the hanging of four anarchists and the suicide of a fifth in his cell.⁵² The unfairness of the proceedings and the savagery of the sentences fired the imagination of young idealists, Italian and non-Italian alike, and won numerous converts to the cause.⁵³ Italian anarchist papers referred to the Haymarket incident and to its martyrs time and time again with the greatest admiration.⁵⁴

Anarchists banded together in autonomous *circoli* (affinity groups), such as the “Germinal Club,” “I Risorti” (The Resurrected), “La Falange,” (The Phalanx), the “Bresci Group,” “Il Gruppo Diritto all’Esistenza” (Right to Existence Group), and the “Camillo Berneri Group.”⁵⁵ Due to anarchists’ hostility towards formal organization and fear of governmental suppression, no official records exist to reconstruct the history of

⁵¹ Pernicone, “Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York City,” 78.

⁵² On the Haymarket affair see Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), and Dave Roediger and Franklin Rosemont, eds., *Haymarket Scrapbook* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 1986).

⁵³ Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, 46.

⁵⁴ All anarchist newspapers dedicated special issues to the commemoration of the Haymarket martyrs. See for example: *La Questione Sociale*, “Numero Speciale: I Martiri di Chicago,” November 10, 1906.

⁵⁵ Information about these groups and their activities can be found in anarchist newspapers. The Germinal Club was formed at Brooklyn in 1899, the group “I Risorti” at Paterson, New Jersey, in 1902, “La Falange,” at Brooklyn in 1904, the Bresci Group, at Harlem in 1901, the Berneri Group in New York in 1939. See *La Questione Sociale*,

these *circoli*. However, from the newspapers that have survived one can infer that anarchist groups among Italian immigrants in the United States were very active and widespread. Each circle held weekly meetings, usually in the evening or Sundays, for the purposes of self-education and debate. They also frequently sponsored public lectures, study groups, as well as social events such as plays, dances, and picnics.⁵⁶

Typically, anarchist groups were small and short-lived, but a few, as “Il Gruppo Diritto all’Esistenza” or the “Bresci Group,” counted a few hundred members and lasted almost two decades until the fierce repression of 1917-1920. Often we can also get a sense of the anarchists’ influence from the newspapers they published. Italian American anarchists in fact produced more journals than any other ethnic group in the United States, totaling one-fifth of the about five hundred anarchist papers published between 1870 and 1940 in a dozen or more different languages. In addition to periodicals, they also generated a flood of books and pamphlets which were sold at social gathering and through their newspapers.⁵⁷

Italian anarchist groups in New York covered the entire spectrum of anarchist ideologies, but the most important were principally followers of either the organizational or the anti-organizational currents of anarchist-communism, represented respectively by *La Questione Sociale* of Paterson and Galleani’s *Cronaca Sovversiva*.⁵⁸ Anarcho-communists accepted Marx’s critique of capitalism but rejected his program for social

February 11, 1899, 4; September 27 1902, 4. “Il Gruppo Diritto all’Esistenza” was the group that published *La Questione Sociale* of Paterson.

⁵⁶ See Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, 55.

⁵⁷ Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, 54.

⁵⁸ Pernicone, “Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York,” 78.

change through the establishment of a socialist state. Government, whether socialist or bourgeois, was for them always the expression of power and centralized authority, and therefore inherently oppressive and repressive. To ensure liberty, the state had to be abolished and society organized along federalist lines, with local and regional confederations of voluntary associations.⁵⁹ “What we want,” explained *La Questione Sociale*, “is a society with neither kings nor governments, a social state of things in which everyone is free to do as he/she chooses. Neither slaves, nor masters, neither rulers, nor ruled, but all free, all equal: in a word anarchy.”⁶⁰ Anarcho-communists assumed that, once free from any chain and legal obligation, people could, without compulsion, dedicate their energies to pursue their own interest in junction with that of the community. “From everyone according to his/her strength and to everyone according to his/her needs,” this was the formula of anarchist-communism.⁶¹

While sharing the notion that real social change could be reached only through a social revolution, *La Questione Sociale* also believed in the need to organize workers and cooperate with unions and other groups committed to improving the conditions of the working class. For example, following the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905, *La Questione Sociale* supported the new industrial union, encouraging strikes against silk manufacturers in Paterson. Indeed, its group, “Il Gruppo Diritto all’esistenza,” leaned toward the principles of industrial unionism well in advance

⁵⁹ The major theorists of anarcho-communism were the Russian Peter Kropotkin and the Italian Errico Malatesta. See Avrich, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), abridged edition, 4-5.

⁶⁰ “The Social Question,” unsigned, English Supplement to *La Questione Sociale*, August 30, 1901.

of the IWW's inaugural convention. Many of its early articles focused on the European syndicalist movement, urging American workers to adopt tactics such as general strikes, direct action, and sabotage in their struggle against industrialists and manufacturers.⁶²

In sharp contrast with *La Questione Sociale*, *Cronaca Sovversiva*, the paper launched by Galleani in Barre, Vermont, in June 1903 embraced the anti-organizational line, distinguishing itself for its extremism and sectarianism. Like most anarchist papers, *Cronaca Sovversiva* had a circulation of no more than four or five thousand. However, the paper's fiery intransigence and the depth of its hatred of capitalism won the unconditional loyalty of some fifty or sixty followers, constituting one of most extreme groups of militant revolutionaries in the United States.

The defining elements of *Cronaca Sovversiva* were those espoused by its editor: unconditional devotion to the anarchist cause, overthrow of capitalism and government by social revolution, and unrelenting opposition to all forms of structured organization, including labor unions, socialism and even anarchist federations. Another defining aspect of Galleani's anarchism was the glorification of violence. Not only did he consider armed revolt a legitimate, but also an indispensable element of the revolutionary struggle against capitalism.⁶³ The violent nature of Galleani's "propaganda of the deed" transpired also through the vocabulary and the tone of his publication. From its subtitle and Latin motto

⁶¹ "Agli amici e compagni," unsigned, *La Questione Sociale*, July 15, 1895, 1.

⁶² See Salerno, "No God, No Master: Italian Anarchists and the Industrial Workers of the World," in Cannistraro and Meyer, *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*.

⁶³ See Pernicone, "Luigi Galleani and Italian Anarchist Terrorism in the United States," 470-475.

to the literature published in its pages, *Cronaca Sovversiva* reflected an aggressive language that was as incendiary as the ideas it conveyed.⁶⁴

Although the Italian anarchists in New York were predominantly anarchist-communist in orientation, other views were represented as well. For example, Libero Tancredi's *Il Novatore* (The Innovator), Cesare Stami's *La Rivolta degli Angeli* (The Angels' Revolt), and Arrigoni's *Eresia di oggi e di domani* (Today's and Tomorrow's Heresy) embraced the doctrine of individualist anarchism, popularized by the German philosopher Max Stirner.⁶⁵ Rejecting Kropotkin's communism and any form of collective organization, individualist anarchists emphasized personal freedom and individual action over anything else. Individualism was seen as the most natural aspect of human nature and consequently as the founding principle of society. More than a theory to propagate, individualism was "a way of conceiving individual life and living it highly, like a man, with all the beauties of the present and anticipating the values of the future."⁶⁶ Socialism, with its emphasis on collectivism and association, was impossible to realize because

⁶⁴ The subtitle was "Anarchist weekly of revolutionary propaganda," its motto "Ut redeat miseris abeat fortuna superbis" (In order for the poor to be redeemed, wealth must be taken from the rich).

⁶⁵ *Il Novatore* was originally published by Massimo Rocca (1884-1973) in Rome in 1906 to combat the increasing divisions between advocates and opponents of formal organization, but was soon suppressed by Italian government. Using the pseudonym of Libero Tancredi, he then republished it with the help of Alfredo Consalvi in New York at 500 E. 16th Street, from October 15, 1910 until May 1, 1911, when he returned to Italy. His incendiary rhetoric degenerated in 1915 into support of Fascism's revolutionary nationalism. He initially joined Mussolini in his interventionist campaign but later, in the 1920s, he broke with him. Subtitled "Journal of the Anomalous, it Comes Out When We Like It," *La Rivolta degli Angeli* was published irregularly from December 1923 to May 1926. *Eresia* instead was founded in April 1928 and lasted a year only. Ostracized by the Italian anarchist movement, these papers were never influential among the Italian comrades in the United States as well.

“what guides and rules life is not, and will never be, oneness but distinction, difference, and variety among single individuals, single interpretations, and single actions.”⁶⁷

Anarchist individualists also rejected rigid, orthodox doctrines and dogmas and stressed instead the ever-changing and dynamic aspects of life. As the editors of *Il Novatore* declared: “we are intellectually heterodox to any formula and affirm an independent opinion of individual revolt and revolution of class, which goes beyond the narrow organizational roads of syndicalism, ignores future utopias, and is the negation of any socialist and humanitarian tendency.... We believe neither in religion nor in science, neither in heaven nor earth, but in energy and life.”⁶⁸

Along with the anarchists, the dominant force of the early Italian American radical movement in New York was the *Federazione Socialista Italiana*, Italian Socialist Federation (FSI). Founded in 1902 upon the initiative of Giacinto Menotti Serrati, who had arrived from Italy to assume the directorship of *Il Proletario*, the FSI intended to bring together the numerous Italian socialist circles that had sprang in the northeastern United States and coordinate their activities and resources. But the creation of the FSI was also a direct response to American developments. Until 1901 the American Left was represented by the Socialist Labor Party of Daniel De Leon, which had evolved from the Workingmen’s Party of America formed in 1876. However, in 1897 Eugene Debs founded a separate party, the Social Democracy of America, which four years later merged with a secessionist wing of the Socialist Labor Party led by Morris Hillquit to

⁶⁶ “Continuando,” *Il Novatore*, October 15, 1910, 2.

⁶⁷ Camillo Signorini, “Il mio individualismo,” *Il Novatore*, November 30, 1910, 56.

⁶⁸ “Dopo sei mesi,” and “Continuando,” *Il Novatore*, April 1, 1911, 1 and October 15, 1910, 3.

form the Socialist Party of America.⁶⁹ The split posed a delicate question: to which party should the Italian immigrant socialists adhere? Serrati suggested that they withhold their affiliation from both parties which he considered politically too timid and near-xenophobic, and establish instead their own federation, focusing on issues specific to their community.⁷⁰

Despite efforts to unite Italian immigrant socialists, the FSI was split between reformist and revolutionary socialists, a struggle paralleling that of the many other socialists in Italy as well Europe and America. The first argued that social change should be achieved through gradual reforms and parliamentary democracy; the latter rejected any compromise with liberals, insisting instead that the overthrow of capitalism could be realized only through social revolution.⁷¹ The leader of the Italian reformist wing in America was Giuseppe Bertelli, a professor from Empoli, Tuscany, where he had been an active member of the *Fasci dei Lavoratori* and the PSI. Bertelli arrived in the United States in 1906 to assume the editorship of *Il Proletario*.⁷² After a few months, he became convinced that the FSI was too isolated and that Italian immigrant workers could fight successfully for their rights only if they assimilated into American society. His campaign

⁶⁹ James Weinstein, *Ambiguous Legacy: The Left in American Politics* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), 6.

⁷⁰ For a history of the FSI see De Ciampis, "Storia del movimento socialista rivoluzionario italiano;" Topp, *Those Without a Country*, part I; and Anna Maria Martellone, "Per una storia della sinistra italiana negli Stati Uniti," in Franca Assante, ed., *Il movimento migratorio italiano dall'Unità nazionale ai giorni nostri* (Geneve: 1978).

⁷¹ See Topp, *Those Without a Country*, 32-36.

⁷² Bertelli, Giuseppe, "Cenni Biografici," Casellario Politico Centrale (CPC), busta 554, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Rome.

to bring the FSI under the aegis of the American Socialist Party was ultimately unsuccessful. Frustrated, in 1908 he left the FSI and moved to Chicago, where he launched *La Parola dei Socialisti* (The Socialists' Word).⁷³ Two years later, he formed another Italian Socialist Federation organized as a section of the Socialist Party (ISFSP). The new federation counted one thousand supporters, including resourceful men such as Arturo Caroti, Emilio Grandinetti, Alberico Molinari, and Gioacchino Artoni, who would play a crucial role in the Italian American labor movement as strike leaders and union organizers. Reformist socialism, however, was never influential in New York's Italian American communities, which were dominated by anarchists and revolutionary socialists.⁷⁴

The founding of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905 marked a turning point for Italian American radicalism. Although it is not clear whether Italian socialists were present at the first convention of the IWW, they showed great enthusiasm for the new organization and, in 1911, the FSI embraced revolutionary syndicalism as its official ideology.⁷⁵ Italian attraction to the IWW stemmed from two factors: the exclusion of

⁷³ *La Parola dei Socialisti* had initially a circulation of about 3,000 and was published until 1914. During the War, as the government withdrew postal subscription facilities, the paper changed its name frequently, first to *La Parola Proletaria* (Proletarian Word) then to *La Fiaccola* (The Torch) and *Avanti!* (Forward!). Finally, in 1921 it became *La Parola del Popolo* which was published until the late seventies. See Hoerder, *The Immigrant Labor Press*, 97-98.

⁷⁴ De Ciampis, "Storia del movimento socialista rivoluzionario italiano," 146-147 and 154-156. For a history of the Italian Federation of the SPA see Elisabetta Vezzosi, *Il socialismo indifferente: Immigrati italiani e Socialist Party negli Stati Uniti del primo Novecento* (Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 1991).

⁷⁵ For the relation of Italians to syndicalism see especially Bruno Cartosio, "Gli emigrati italiani e l'Industrial Workers of the World," in Bezza, *Gli Italiani fuori d'Italia*, 359-395.

Italian workers from the American Federation of Labor, which was openly hostile to all unskilled workers, and the IWW's doctrines and tactics, which borrowed heavily from anarchism and syndicalism.⁷⁶

The driving force behind the spread of revolutionary syndicalism among Italian immigrants was Carlo Tresca, who remained a major figure of the Italian American Left and the American labor movement from his arrival to the United States in 1904 until his assassination in 1943.⁷⁷ A native of Abruzzo, where he was born on March 9, 1879, Tresca embraced socialism at a young age, becoming at twenty-two secretary of the Italian Railroad Workers Union and editor of a local socialist newspaper, *Il Germe* (The Seed). In 1904, he decided to emigrate, like other rebels, to escape a prison term stemming from his political activities. He first settled in Philadelphia where upon the request of the Italian Socialist Federation he assumed the editorship of *Il Proletario*. Tresca rejected political activity aimed at seizing state power, and insisted that capitalism could only be overthrown by the workers' own revolutionary organizations. Only the methods and actions of syndicalism – sabotage, strikes, boycotts – and a truly revolutionary consciousness could bring material gains for workers. His campaign to propagate syndicalist ideas was very successful: under his leadership the circulation of *Il*

⁷⁶ The hostility of the AFL stemmed in part from its craft orientation but also from the racial, nativist bias of the trade unionists, who considered recent immigrants as inferior, and dangerous. On the IWW's ideology see Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall be All: A History of the IWW* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 84-96.

⁷⁷ For a profile of Tresca see Nunzio Pernicone, "Carlo Tresca: Life and Death of a Revolutionary," in Richard N. Juliani and Philip Cannistraro, eds., *Italian Americans: the Search for a Usable Past* (Proceedings of the American Italian Historical Association, 1986), 216-35 and "Tresca, Carlo," in M. Buhle, P. Buhle, and Georgakas, *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 780-782. The murder of Carlo Tresca still remains a mystery. See

Proletario increased from 4,000 to 5,600 and FSI's sections grew from thirty to eighty with more than one thousand members.⁷⁸

The period from 1910 to 1919 marked the pinnacle of the FSI's success. The new ties to the IWW ended the isolation of the FSI and catapulted Italian immigrant radicals such as Carlo Tresca, Arturo Giovannitti, and Joseph Ettor into national prominence. Italian workers in this period were at the forefront of labor struggles across the country, providing both leadership and mass militancy. As labor historians have long documented, they constituted the backbone of the IWW throughout the Northeast, playing a decisive role in all major strikes that hit America in the years before World War I.⁷⁹

As more and more Italian immigrants engaged in strikes, unions became another important center of Italian American radical activism. Italian workers in New York gravitated essentially to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), founded in 1900 and 1914 respectively. Initially, almost all the leaders of these unions were Jewish but, as the number of Italian workers in the garment industry increased, Italian Americans were able to secure their own locals.⁸⁰ Paramount among these were Local 63 (Italian Coatmakers)

Dorothy Gallagher, *All the Right Enemies: The Life and Murder of Carlo Tresca* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

⁷⁸ Pernicone, "Carlo Tresca: Life and Death of a Revolutionary," 214, and De Ciampis, "Storia del movimento socialista rivoluzionario italiano," 144-146.

⁷⁹ For example the Lawrence strikes of 1912 and 1919, the Paterson strikes of 1902 and 1913, the Mesabi Iron Range strikes of 1907 and 1916, and the garments workers' strikes of 1907, 1910, and 1919 in New York City. On Italian involvement in these strikes and the IWW see: Fenton, *Immigrants and Unions*, 320-366; Philip Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1965); 306-50, and Dubofsky, *We Shall be All: A History of the IWW*, 228-58.

of the ACWA, established in 1914 and led by August Bellanca, and Locals 48 and 89 of the ILGWU. The first represented the Italian Cloakmakers and was created in 1916 under the leadership of Salvatore Ninfo, a Sicilian immigrant who had arrived in New York in 1899.⁸¹ Local 89 became instead the union of Italian dressmakers. It was formed in 1919 and run by the imperious Luigi Antonini, a newcomer from southern Italy who began working as a presser in New York and eventually became Vice President of the ILGWU.⁸²

These institutions unionized thousands of Italian workers and contributed enormously to raising class-consciousness.⁸³ Their major success rested in organizing women, who represented the overwhelming majority of the workers in the dress and

⁸⁰ In 1912, there were 60,000 cloakmakers affiliated with the Joint Board: 35,000 were Jewish and 20,000 Italian. Yet, twenty-five of the thirty employees paid by the Joint Board were Jews. See Zappia, "Unionism and the Italian-American Worker," 196.

⁸¹ The son of a tailor, Salvatore Ninfo (1883-1960) left Italy at the age of sixteen. After working as construction worker in New York, he began working in the needle trades, where he became a cloak operator in 1902. A strong advocate of trade unionism he worked for the AFL between 1903 and 1906, and then for the ILGWU. See Zappia, "Unionism and Italian American Workers," 189-190; and *Who's Who in American Labor* (1946).

⁸² Luigi Antonini (1883-1968) was born in Vallata Irpinia, near Naples, from a respectable middle class family (his father was a school teacher, his mother a member of the local gentry). After graduating from a technical school, he joined for a brief period the army. When he came to the United States in 1908 he had endorsed socialism and working class revolution. Throughout his life he strove to organize and educate his co-nationals and played a major role in the history of the ILGWU and the Italian American community. See Arturo Giovannitti, "Luigi Antonini: The Man and the Leader," (1934). In Antonino Crivello Papers, Box 1, Immigration History Research Center (IHRC), Minneapolis.

⁸³ For a history of Local 89 see Serafino Romualdi, "Storia della locale 89," Fifteenth Anniversary pamphlet, 1934. In Antonino Crivello Papers, Box 1, IHRC. For a general history of garment workers see Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1924).

shirtwaist industry.⁸⁴ Because of the conservative nature of Italian traditional culture with its emphasis on family, Italian female workers were initially reluctant to join the unions. Gender roles in the Italian family were clearly defined: the man was the head of the family and its breadwinner, his wife was confined to the role of mother and housekeeper. Catholicism played a crucial role in reinforcing these social expectations, teaching women to be submissive and virtuous. However, as more Italian women entered the garment industry, labor leaders increased their attention to the plight and needs of female workers.⁸⁵ From 1909 Italian American unionists created organizations specifically devoted to organizing Italian women workers – such as the Women’s Mutual Benefit Association which offered girls medical benefits but required that they attended monthly meeting, or the Italian Girls Industrial League which educated its members to trade unionism. To draw more Italian American women in the labor movement, in 1913 Luigi Antonini and Alfredo Consiglio also launched *L’Operaia* (The Working Woman), a working class paper geared particularly to the education of Italian female workers.⁸⁶ The unions’ consistent efforts eventually paid off. An overwhelming majority of Italian working women participated in the strikes of the late 1910s, distinguishing themselves on

⁸⁴ Of the 29,439 workers in the dress and waist shops in New York in 1913, 24,128 were women, that is eighty-four percent. Cited in Colomba M. Furio, “The Cultural Background of the Italian Immigrant Woman and Its Impact on Her Unionization in the New York City Garment Industry, 1880-1919,” in George E. Pozzetta, ed., *Pane e Lavoro: The Italian American Working Class* (Toronto: Proceedings of the American Italian Historical Association, 1980), 89.

⁸⁵ For a history of Italian immigrant women in the unions see Colomba M. Furio, “Immigrant Women and Industry: A Case Study, Italian Immigrant Women and the Garment Industry, 1880-1950,” unpublished dissertation, New York University, 1979; and Jean Vincenza Scarpaci, “Angela Bambace and the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union,” in Pozzetta, *Pane e Lavoro*, 99-118.

picket lines, at strikers' meetings, and on organizational committees. Some of them, police rolls reported, proved to be "exceedingly energetic and bellicose."⁸⁷

The establishment of separate unions demonstrated the capacity and desire of Italians to form their own organizations and to overcome ethnic barriers. Emphasizing organization, discipline and practical ends, this "new unionism" helped break down the insularity and isolation of Italian radicals. In doing so, however, it also moved them away from the language of revolutionary unionism, revealing that they were undergoing increasing Americanization.⁸⁸ Perhaps, more importantly, unions helped reduce the factionalism of Italian American radicals, providing a common ground for cooperation and interaction. In 1919, socialists, syndicalists, organizational anarchists, and communists – basically all radical elements except the *Galleanisti* – collaborated to found the Italian Chamber of Labor, a federation of all Italian labor organizations in New York and the surrounding area.⁸⁹

Along with the rest of the American Left, Italian American radicalism sharply declined after the Great War, weakened by strong internal dissent over the conflict and the impact of systematic governmental repression. The so-called "interventionist crisis" – the debate over Italian participation into the conflict – revealed serious divisions within the Italian Left over issues concerning ideology and national identity. Following the

⁸⁶ Furio, "The Cultural Background of the Italian Immigrant," 92.

⁸⁷ Fenton, *Immigrants and Unions*, 526.

⁸⁸ See Zappia, "Unionism and the Italian-American Worker," Chapter Three.

⁸⁹ Chambers of Labor were very popular in Italy. After the war, they could be found in all major Italian cities with a total membership of over two millions workers. They served as social and educational centers, providing job placement and labor organization. See Topp, "The Italian American Left," 137-139.

example of eminent Italian socialists such as Arturo Labriola, Paolo Orano, and Benito Mussolini, several Italian American radicals began to openly support the war. Some did so out of a general concern with world security, while others feared that a victory of Germany would represent a threat to Italy's independence; most, however, were simply driven by nationalist feelings and pride, which were probably strengthened by the discrimination and sense of isolation experienced in America. This split opened a wound within the Italian and Italian American Left, especially among syndicalists, that had repercussions long after the war and contributed in part to the rise of Fascism.⁹⁰

A more serious blow, however, was inflicted by the massive repression of radicals and dissenters that the American government carried out from 1917 to 1921 under draconian laws such as the Espionage Act (1917) and the Sedition Act (1918).⁹¹ Irreparable damage was done: radical headquarters were shuttered, newspapers suppressed, hundreds assaulted, arrested, and sentenced to prison. Along with other socialist and IWW organizations, the Italian Socialist Federation, which had served as the main catalyst of radical activities for two decades, was severely crippled by the Red Scare. Like other radical papers, its organ, *Il Proletario*, was denied mailing privileges

⁹⁰ On the interventionist debate and its effect of Italian American radicalism see Marcella Bencivenni, "A Magazine of Arts and Struggle: The Experience of *Il Fuoco*," *Italian American Review*, 8.1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 75-80, and Topp, *Those Without a Country*, 135-173.

⁹¹ The Espionage Act set penalties of up to twenty years of prison and fines up to \$ 10,000 for persons aiding the enemy, interfering with the drafts, or encouraging disloyalty in the armed forces. The Sedition Act extended these penalties to anyone obstructing the sale of Liberty Bonds, discouraging recruitment, or speaking, writing and publishing anything against the government, constitution, flag, or uniform of the United States. Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, 93-93. For further information on governmental repression during the Red Scare see William Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (New York: Harper, 1963).

and its top members were arrested and in some cases deported.⁹² Italian anarchists, who American authorities considered responsible of the rash of bombings that occurred between 1914-1919, were prime targets of the anti-radical crusade. On April 14, 1917, for example, federal agents invaded the office of *L'Era Nuova* (the heir of *La Questione Sociale*), arresting its editor and suppressing the newspaper soon afterwards. Two months later, in June 1917 and then again in February 1918, police raided *Cronaca Sovversiva* groups, securing more than three thousands names and addresses of readers and subscribers, which led to about one hundred arrest warrants. Charged with conspiracy against the United States, in 1919 Luigi Galleani, "the bugbear of American authorities," was indicted and deported along with at least eight of his most dedicated followers.⁹³

Among those caught up in the FBI rounds-up were Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, arrested in 1920 under charges of robbery and murder in a small shoe factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts.⁹⁴ The following year they were tried, found guilty, and, although the evidence against them was contradictory and inconclusive, they were sentenced to death. Italian American radicals responded quickly, forming a defense committee, and winning the support of labor organizations, the Socialist Party, and the

⁹² For example Giovanni Baldazzi, Dulio Mari, Luigi Parenti, and Angelo Faggi. See De Ciampis, "Italiani d'America," 85; and Constantine Panunzio, *The Deportation Cases of 1919-1920* (New York: Federal Council of Churches of Christ, 1921).

⁹³ Already in 1914 the police, suspecting the Bresci Group of subversive activities, had hired an Italian American officer, Amedeo Polignani, to infiltrate the group. Winning the confidence of two members, Frank Abarno and Carmine Carbone, Polignani convinced them to place a bomb at St. Patrick cathedral. As they were ready to carry on the plan, the police seized and arrested them. Both were convicted and sentenced to six to twelve years in prison. See Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, 94-101, 122-136; and Pernicone, "Luigi Galleani and Italian Anarchist Terrorism in the United States," 469-89.

American Civil Liberties Union. But despite worldwide sympathy, on August 23, 1927 the two Italian anarchists were electrocuted.⁹⁵ As Vanzetti said in court before the sentencing, their conviction was due more to prejudices against their foreign birth and radical beliefs, than to solid evidence of criminal guilt. In a passionate and moving outburst, he declared: "I am suffering because I am a radical and indeed I am a radical; I have suffered because I was an Italian and indeed I am an Italian."⁹⁶

Even though Italian American radicalism as a whole declined in the twenties, the Russian Revolution and the rise of Italian Fascism helped revitalize the movement, giving radicals new purpose and meaning. Members of the FSI and the IWW embraced communism, and, on November 6, 1921, organized the *Federazione dei Lavoratori Italiani d'America* (Federation of Italian Workers in America), a section of the American Labor Alliance. Located on 81 East Tenth Street, the federation aimed at "uniting all avant-garde elements of the Italian subversive movement in the United States."⁹⁷ Among its founding members were Nino Capraro, Ignazio Camarda, Antonio Presi, Frank

⁹⁴ Two employees were shot to death and nearly \$16,000 of the company's payroll was stolen.

⁹⁵ The Sacco and Vanzetti case, no doubt the best-known event associated with Italian American radicalism, has generated a considerable body of scholarship. See for example: John Dos Passos, *Facing the Chair: Story of the Americanization of Two Foreignborn Workmen* (Boston: Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, 1927); Herbert B. Ehrmann, *The Case That Will Not Die: Commonwealth vs. Sacco and Vanzetti* (Boston: Little Brown, 1969); David Felix, *Protest: Sacco-Vanzetti and the Intellectuals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965); Roberta Strauss Feurlicht, *Justice Crucified: The Story of Sacco and Vanzetti* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977); Robert Montgomery, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Murder and the Myth* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1960); Francis Russel, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Case Resolved* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986); and above all Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*.

⁹⁶ Marion Denman Frankfurter and Gardner Jackson, eds., *Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti* (New York: Penguin, 1997). Cited also in Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 300.

Bellanca, Flavio Venanzi, and Taddeo Cuomo. The official organ of the new federation was *Alba Nuova* (New Dawn, 1921-1924) which led the way to the founding of the daily communist *Il Lavoratore* (The Worker, 1924-1931).

In the meantime, a continuous flood of anti-Fascist exiles (called *fuorusciti*) provided the moribund Italian American Left with new leadership and organization. In April 1923, a coalition of anti-Fascist groups led by the Chamber of Labor formed the Anti-Fascist Alliance of North America (AFANA) with the goal of forging a united front to combat Fascist activities and propaganda in the Little Italies. For the next two decades, Italian American radicals of all persuasions waged a massive campaign against local Blackshirts and Fascist emissaries, exposing the threat that Fascism posed in Italy and the United States. They provided legal help for the *fuorusciti*, launched anti-Fascist newspapers, organized rallies and demonstrations, sponsored lectures, and on more than one occasion battled the enemy hand-to-hand in the streets of New York.⁹⁸

The Great Depression and the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) stimulated labor and working class protest in America to an unprecedented degree.⁹⁹ In New York City alone, there were more than 100,000 Italians in various unions. By 1934, Local 89 was the largest local in the United States with forty thousand members and a widespread labor publication, *La Giustizia* (Justice). In addition to its Central Section in Manhattan, it had district offices also in the Bronx, Harlem,

⁹⁷ *Alba Nuova*, October/November 1921, 4.

⁹⁸ On Italian American anti-Fascism see John P. Diggins, "The Italo-American Anti-Fascist Opposition," *Journal of American History* (December 1967), 579-98; and Vanni Buscemi Montana, *Amarostico: testimonianze euroamericane* (Livorno, Italy: U. Bastogi Editore, 1975). Italian American anti-Fascism is the focus of Chapter 6.

Williamsburg, Bensonhurst, and East New York. To meet the needs of the greatly expanded membership, in 1934 Antonini began a series of weekly radio addresses called the “Voice of the Local 89.”¹⁰⁰

The 1930s marked in the Italian American Left a shift away from anarchism and toward an increased influence of the Communist Party.¹⁰¹ The Italian section of the Communist Party numbered about 1,000 members by 1928, a small but steady contingent which counted among its members Mike Salerno, Maria Testa, Luigi Candela, Ubaldo Cazzoli, Tony Cattonar, Antonio Siracusa, and Giuseppe Magliacano.¹⁰² By 1947, the Garibaldi-American Fraternal Society, the Italian section of the procommunist Industrial Workers Order, had nearly 11,000 members organized into thirty-nine lodges.¹⁰³

Meanwhile, the expansion of education and the rise of mass-culture transformed second-generation working-class culture, engendering, in Michael Denning’s words, a “Cultural Front” that crossed ethnic, racial, and class lines.¹⁰⁴ Important Italian American radical writers and artists like Pietro Di Donato, Ralph Fasanella, Carl Marzani, and Louis Fraina were a product of this new multi-ethnic laboring culture.¹⁰⁵ Out of the New

⁹⁹ See Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁰⁰ Zappia, “Unionism and the Italian American Worker,” 327-328.

¹⁰¹ Gerald Meyer, “Italian Americans and the American Communist Party,” in *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*.

¹⁰² For a brief history of Italian American communism in New York see Eric Salerno, *Rossi a Manhattan* (Rome: Quiritta, 2001).

¹⁰³ Meyer, “Italian Americans and the American Communist Party.”

¹⁰⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

Deal Left also emerged successful Italian American radical politicians like Peter Cacchione, New York's councilman for the Communist Party for three consecutive terms (1941-1947), Vito Marcantonio, congressman for East Harlem from 1934 to 1948, and New York's mayor Fiorello La Guardia. But this generation was remarkably different from the immigrant radical leaders of the earlier century. They were politicized in the Italian American settlements rather than in Italy and were familiar with the world of American politics. For this reason, they were able to transcend the cultural conflicts that had limited the influence of the earlier leaders within the larger American society. In many ways, however, their radicalism was nurtured and sustained by the traditions of militancy that early immigrants had brought with them from Italy.

The *Sovversivi* and Italian American Radical Culture:

From the 1860s to the fall of Fascism, Italian authorities had used the word “*sovversivo*” (subversive) to describe individuals, movements, and ideologies typically connected with the political Left. Radicals themselves, both in Italy and across the Atlantic, preferred to call themselves *sovversivi*.¹⁰⁶ This collective self-identification suggests that Italian (and Italian American) radicals, whether socialists, anarchists, syndicalists, or communists, had something in common. While they may have disagreed about doctrine, all *sovversivi* shared a set of political ideas typically associated with the European Left: liberty, justice, equality, and democracy. All of them were also firm anti-capitalist, anti-militarist, anti-nationalist, and anti-clerical. Perhaps most importantly, they

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of these radicals see Fred Gardaphè, “Follow the Red brick Road: Recovering Radical Traditions of Italian/American Writers,” in Cannistraro and Meyer, *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*.

all had the same dream: the establishment of brotherhood and social equality for every man and woman in earth.

In this respect, the most important dimension of their radicalism was not political but humanist. Foremost, they were idealists of a compassionate and ardent nature who grieved for the plight of the poor and struggled to create a better world. In the words of the poet Arturo Giovannitti, they believed:

That a great day shall come, O Master, when
Even as from a putrid clod a flower,
So in thy heart shall bloom the love of men. -
A day when sweet and noble tasks shall hallow
These charnels where thy slaves now drudge
And plod,
And thou no more a groveling swine shalt wallow
Amid the puddles of their sweat and blood.¹⁰⁷

The *sovversivi* deeply distrusted the American Dream with its ethic of profit, individualism, and self-interest, and fought with unflagging devotion against economic exploitation, injustice, and political and cultural oppression. But their struggle was not directed against American capitalism alone. With equal, if not greater, intensity they fought against the established elite of their own community – the local businessmen, politicians, consular officials, and priests who controlled the political and social life of the Little Italies and who used their power at the expense of poorer immigrants. The *sovversivi* in fact understood that one of the major obstacles in organizing immigrant workers derived from the hegemonic power of priests and *prominenti*. Before the workers could join the revolutionary struggle against capitalism, they had to be liberated from their superstitions, their provincialism, and their servility towards the boss. Much of the

¹⁰⁶ Cannistraro and Meyer, “Italian American Radicalism: An Interpretative History.”

sovversivi's energy was expended therefore in a massive campaign to educate the immigrant masses and combat the influence of the local elite.¹⁰⁸

For example, they formed Sunday and evening schools which offered free classes on various subjects, ranging from the English language to economics, literature, and political science. Perhaps the most important of these schools in New York was the Leonardo Da Vinci Art School, organized in 1923 by a group of artists headed by Onorio Ruotolo, a distinguished sculptor. Originally located in the Church of St. Mark's at 288 East 10th Street, the "Leonardo," as it was fondly called, offered classes in Fine and Applied Arts to poor students of all races absolutely free of charge. In a few years, the school rapidly expanded, produced excellent work, and won a considerable reputation. Enrollment grew from 75 to 600 students in 1934, and "The Friend of Italian Arts Association" was organized for the support of the school.¹⁰⁹

In addition to schools, the *sovversivi* established countless *Circoli educativi* (educational circles) and *Università Popolari* (Popular Universities) which sponsored weekly lectures on themes such as "Art and Revolution," "Socialism and Religion," "Women and Family," "Zola and Tolstoy." The "Circolo di Cultura Moderna" (Circle of Modern Culture), for example, was established in 1916 in Harlem at 314 E. 106 Street to encourage the spread of culture among Italian workers.¹¹⁰ Another important literary

¹⁰⁷ Arturo Giovannitti "Utopia," in *Arrows in the Gale* (Riverside, CT: Hillacre Bookhouse, 1914), 56.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Vecoli, "The Italian Immigrants in the United States Labor Movement, 276-277."

¹⁰⁹ "Memorandum for Mr. Fairfield Osborne, Director of the National Youth Administration." Onorio Ruotolo Papers, Box 2, Folder 10, IHRC. See also Lucio Ruotolo, "Onorio Ruotolo and the Leonardo Da Vinci Art School," *Italian American Review* (Winter 2000), 1-20.

circle, the Mario Rapisardi Literary Society, so called in honor of a famous Sicilian poet, was founded on February 6, 1921 by a newly formed group of communists. Located on 123 E. 23rd Street in Manhattan, the Society intended “to concentrate all its efforts about the work necessary to awaken the workers’ minds and to the creation of the conscience of one’s rights and might through knowledge.”¹¹¹

Every circle provided access to literary material through self-organized “*librerie rosse*.” These red bookstores featured a large assortment of books and pamphlets, ranging from social novels and dramas, to booklets of propaganda and anti-clerical tracts. Many of them were the works of renowned international literary and political figures like Zola, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Hugo, Gorki, Lenin, Marx, Kropotkin, and Bakunin. Others, instead, were written by the local literati and published by small houses in the city such as the “Avanti Publishing Co” or the “Casa Editrice Il Martello.”¹¹²

Beyond their struggle to politicize and educate the immigrant workers, the *soversivi* engaged in a wide range of cultural activities that sustained their values and at the same time enriched the social life of the immigrant community. In doing so, they provided an alternative culture that was in stark opposition to both the hegemonic culture of the *prominenti* and the individualist culture of capitalist America.¹¹³ They established, for example, their own holidays and memorial days in place of traditional national and

¹¹⁰ “Circolo di cultura moderna,” *Il Grido della Folla*, May 20, 1916, 4.

¹¹¹ “Mario Rapisardi Literary Society,” *Alba Nuova*, September 1921, 3

¹¹² A list of the books offered by these “red bookstores” was published in the last page of radical newspapers.

¹¹³ On Italian American radical culture see Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City* (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 1998), 143-169.

religious celebrations. Rather than Christmas, Fourth of July, September 20 (the anniversary of the capture of Rome) and Columbus Day, they commemorated May 1 (the international day of labor), November 7 (the anniversary of the Russian Revolution), November 11 (the anniversary of the Haymarket execution), and March 18 (the anniversary of the Paris Commune). Every year on these dates they published special issues and held massive demonstrations, rallies, and meetings followed by theatrical performances, dances, and concerts.

They also created their own orchestras and theaters, dedicated to social themes and revolutionary rhetoric. Radical drama groups, known as *filodrammatiche rosse*, were particularly successful. Hardly a week went by without a theatrical performance. Hundreds of plays and social dramas by Ibsen, Gorki, and Zola or local radical literati such as Arturo Giovannitti, Alberico Molinari, Riccardo Cordiferno (pen name of Alessandro Sisca), and Vincenzo Vacirca, were presented with great success (see Chapter 4). The *sovversivi* also organized dances, concerts, picnics and festivals, always fusing revolutionary themes with traditional social activities. At the end of the fall, for example, they held a traditional Italian peasant custom called *la festa della frutta*, a harvest festival with raffles, games, and music. Regularly advertised in the radical papers, these events served as an occasion for propaganda and fund-raising, but also satisfied the recreational needs of the immigrants.

The cultural life of the *sovversivi* gave rise to small, distinct radical communities throughout the United States.¹¹⁴ The most important of these radical settlements in New

¹¹⁴ Among the most important Italian American radical communities were those of Ybor City, in Tampa Florida; San Francisco; Barre, Vermont; and Paterson, New Jersey. See Gary Mormino, "The Radical World of Ybor City;" and Paola Sensi Isolani, "Italian

York flourished in Manhattan, in the area stretching from Eighth to Twenty-third Street and Fifth to Second Avenue, with Union Square – the historic plaza of American working-class struggles – as its epicenter. The large majority of radical organizations, affinity groups, and unions had their offices and newspapers in this district including the Italian Chamber of Labor, Local 48 of the ACWU, and Local 89 of the ILGWU.¹¹⁵

Many American socialist schools and social centers like the Manhattan Lyceum, Webster Hall (now a trendy disco), the Thalia Theatre, and the People's House enriched this radical district, providing the locals for conferences, dances, concerts, and plays.¹¹⁶ Finally, a multitude of cafés and restaurants offered cheap meals and distraction, serving often also as a meeting place. Especially famous was John Pucciatti's Spaghetti's House on 12th Street and Second Avenue (now simply John's), where for one dollar Italian radicals could enjoy an appetizer, some pasta, an entrée, and a bottle of wine deliberately served in coffee cups to evade the prohibitionist laws of the time.¹¹⁷

The heart of the Italian radical movement in New York City was an immigrant generation of intellectuals, artists, editors, and publishers who had grown up in the turbulent years following the unification of Italy. This group included anarchists and socialist emigrés, educated and self-taught immigrants who were radicalized in America,

Radicals and Union Activists in San Francisco," both in Cannistraro and Meyer, *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*; Mari Tomasi, "The Italian Story in Vermont," *Vermont History*, 28, 1 (January 1960), 73-87; and George W. Carey, "The Vessel, the Deed, and the Idea: Anarchists in Paterson, 1895-1908," *Antipode*, 10/11 (1979), 46-58.

¹¹⁵ Nunzio Pernicone, "Carlo Tresca's Il Martello," *Italian American Review*, 8, 1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 7-56.

¹¹⁶ The locations of these buildings were in order of citation: 66 E. 4th Street, 119 E. 11th Street, 46 Bowery, and 7 E. 15th Street

and a large number of anti-Fascist refuges. Among the most important and colorful figures were the anarcho-syndicalist Carlo Tresca, the revolutionary poet Arturo Giovanitti, the playwright Riccardo Cordiferro, the cartoonist Fort Velona, the socialists Vincenzo Vacirca and Girolamo Valenti, the communists Antonio Capraro and Vittorio Vidali, the labor organizers Antonino Crivello, Frank Bellanca, and Luigi Antonini. Children of the *Risorgimento*, these *sovversivi* were influenced by the republicanism, anti-clericalism, and socialist ideas that circulated at the time. Many of them had childhood memories of the heroic battle for Italian unification; they idolized the radical leaders of the *Risorgimento*, and inherited from them an enduring love of freedom and democracy. As Tresca recalled in his autobiography, “we were hearing from our fathers the most wonderful tales about their struggles in Garibaldi ranks, about their march on Rome for the sake of Free Thought. Free thinking was in vogue, all in all the country was filled with political unrest.”¹¹⁸ Many of them became politically active at a young age in Italy but others embraced radicalism in America.

Contrary to the belief that radical leadership came from the northern cities of Italy, the most important *sovversivi* in New York were sons of the south. However, they were not representative of the typical Italian southern immigrant: unlike their destitute *compaesani* the majority of them were educated men of middle class or upper class origin. Moreover, unlike the majority of southern Italians who were forced to migrate in search of *pane e lavoro* (bread and work), they came to America to escape governmental oppression or to follow their spirit of adventure. The leadership of the Italian American

¹¹⁷ Montana, *Amarostico*, 101 and 110. Many Italian American radical papers published ads on John’s Restaurant.

¹¹⁸ Tresca, “Autobiography,” 29.

Left, however, was not exclusively bourgeois. Self-educated radical leaders like Efrem Bartoletti and Gioacchino Artoni, for example, came from the ranks of the working class. This description of Artoni provided by his friend Arturo Meunier is illuminating:

This man born from nothing, with an instruction that did not go beyond elementary education, scourged by misery and illness, with a numerous family to support – this outcast, who should have been a victim of his own destiny, found the strength to educate himself, to study the social question, to read incessantly, and to grasp the multiple problems of the proletariat.¹¹⁹

Indeed, the educational campaign launched by the *sovversivi* spurred an enormous passion for learning among Italian workers. As a result, there were many who spent their free time reading and studying, often attaining high levels of knowledge and intellectual sophistication.¹²⁰

The Italian radical movement was male dominated but women were not completely absent.¹²¹ Although only a few of them achieved positions of power and prestige, they were active on a local level, especially in the Italian unions and community

¹¹⁹ Arturo Meunier, "Omaggio a Gioacchino Artoni," written in occasion of Artoni's death in 1937 and published in *La Parola del Popolo*, (December 1958-January 1959), 58. Artoni was born near Reggio Emilia in 1866 and had emigrated in the United States in 1898. He worked in the mines in Pennsylvania and then in textile industry in New Jersey. He was one of the first organizers of the Italian branch of the ACWA and one of the most important Italian American socialists. In the early twentieth century he organized a drama group and a choir at Paterson, NJ. Because of his generosity and dedication to the community, Italian workers called him affectionately *Papà* Artoni. For more information see Giacomo Battistoni, "Ricordando I settant'anni di Gioacchino Artoni," *La Stampa Libera*, August 16, 1936.

¹²⁰ Cf. Vecoli, "The Italian Immigrants in the United States," 278; and Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York," 82.

¹²¹ On Italian women and radicalism see: Jennifer Guglielmo, "Italian American Women's Political Activism in New York City, 1890s-1940s," in Cannistraro, *The Italians of New York*, 103-113.

organizing. They participated at political meetings, lectures, recreational activities, and often played a crucial role as fund-raisers for solidarity campaigns.¹²² In some cases, they organized their own propaganda groups, in which they discussed not only radical ideologies but also feminism. For instance, as early as 1902 women in Paterson, New Jersey and New York formed respectively the women's anarchist group "Emancipazione della donna," (Woman's emancipation) and the "Gruppo femminile di propaganda," (Women's propaganda group).¹²³ A few women were present even among the extreme movement led by Galleani. It was a woman, Gabriella Antolini (known as Ella to her comrades), who risked her life to take a bag full of dynamite by train from Steubenville to Chicago in 1919. The dynamite served to prepare a bomb in retaliation for the arrest of eleven *galleanisti*, including Mary Nardini (dubbed by the press "the queen of the anarchists"), for the alleged shooting of two detectives. Discovered by the train's porter, Ella was convicted of federal crimes and sent to the Missouri State Penitentiary at Jefferson City, where the famous Emma Goldman was also held.¹²⁴

Usually, the most outspoken women were radicalized by their families or their partners. This was the case with Ella, Mary Nardini, and Maria Roda, probably the youngest and fiercest of Italian immigrant *sovversive*. Her father was a textile worker and one of the most active anarchists of Como, Rodas' native town. His house – noted Italian authorities – served as a refuge for local comrades or anarchists just passing through.

¹²² On September 15, 1895 *La Questione Sociale* for example described the success of Pietro Gori's conference on the "Woman and family."

¹²³ See *La Questione Sociale*, January 4 and 11, 1902, 3 and 4.

¹²⁴ American authorities were unable to show that Ella was an anarchist, so in 1920 she was allowed to go free. See Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, 104-118.

Faithful to his principles, he educated his four daughters to the love of anarchism, encouraging them to sing anarchist songs as they walked on the streets.¹²⁵ As a result of her father's teachings, Maria became a convinced anarchist at a young age and in 1891 was sentenced to five months in prison for seditious acts. Upon her release, she migrated to America and settled in Paterson, where part of her family now lived. She married Pedro Esteve, the Catalan anarchist who along with Pietro Gori had established *La Questione Sociale*, and soon became very active in both local anarchist groups and feminist circles, achieving great popularity among Italian and non-Italian anarchists alike.¹²⁶ Slender, with brown eyes and brown curly hair, she hypnotized hundreds with her eloquence and beauty. Even the famous Emma Goldman fell under the spell of this young Italian woman, "the most exquisite creature" she had ever seen.¹²⁷

Along with Maria Roda, the most important Italian American radical women in New York City's metropolitan area were Bellalma Forzato Spezia and Virgilia D'Andrea, also two of the radical movement best poets (see Chapter 3). But it was in the unions and the IWW that Italian women's activism flourished most. Angela Bambace is probably the best examples of these extraordinary women. Her involvement with the labor movement began in 1917 as a young sewing machine operator, when she joined, along with her sister Maria, Local 89 of the ILGWU. At the union meetings, they listened to socialist orators and labor organizers and became aware of the importance of unionism. It was at

¹²⁵ Cesare Balzarini Roda, CPC, busta 4367, ACS, Rome.

¹²⁶ Maria Balzarini Roda, CPC, busta 4368, ACS, Rome.

¹²⁷ Emma Goldman, *Living My life*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1970, 1931), I, 150-151.

one of these meetings that Maria met her husband, the Sicilian Nino Capraro, a communist and organizer for the ACWA.¹²⁸

Both sisters helped organize the strike of the Waistmakers workers in 1919, suffering the first of many arrests. They visited the homes of non-strikers and spent endless hours talking to families about the importance of unity and solidarity. Their knowledge of “the old way” and their ability to speak to workers in their own language won many converts. By 1927, Angela Bambace, a divorced mother involved with the anarchist Luigi Quintiliano, had become one of the most active garment union organizers. Demonstrating great ability and leadership, in 1956 she was elected Vice-President and Member of the general Executive Board of the ILGWU.¹²⁹

Despite their struggles for freedom, equality, and social justice and their devotion to the cause of the poor and the oppressed, the *sovversivi*’s dream of revolution remained unfulfilled. However, for all their political failures, they played a crucial role in the Italian immigrant community and the American labor movement, serving important functions as social critics and leaders of working-class organizations. Considering themselves as a revolutionary vanguard, the *sovversivi* undertook the formidable task of politicizing and organizing the masses of Italian workers in America. As Carlo Tresca

¹²⁸ Capraro arrived in The United States in 1904. In 1908, an agent-provocateur framed him on charges of carrying a concealed weapon and he was sentenced to four years in prison. During the time in jail he studied political theory and became in his words a ‘mature revolutionary.’ Through a *compaesano*, August Bellanca, he became an organizer for the ACWA. He played a central role in the Lawrence strike of 1919. See Rudolph Vecoli, “Anthony Capraro and the Lawrence Strike of 1919,” in Pozzetta, ed., *Pane e Lavoro*, 3-27.

¹²⁹ Angela Bambace Papers, Box 1, folder 6. IHRC.

explained, they were “champions of Free Thought, who had to combat the Fever of Darkness.”¹³⁰

For almost half century, they worked to enlighten the minds of workers, to make them conscious of their class interests and rights, and to inspire them toward a more humane and higher form of social life.¹³¹ Moved by love for the poor and hatred of privilege, they transformed the lives of thousands, obtaining job security, better wages, and legal rights for exploited immigrant workers. Without their efforts, the despised “dagoes” would have probably never become part of the American labor movement.¹³²

¹³⁰ Tresca, “Autobiography,” 30.

¹³¹ Fort Velona, “Genesi del movimento socialista democratico e della “Parola del Popolo,” *La Parola del Popolo* (December 1958-January 1960), 19.

¹³² Vecoli, “The Italian Immigrants in the United States,” 275.

CHAPTER II

A LITERARY CLASS WAR: THE ITALIAN AMERICAN RADICAL PRESS

*"Un proletario colto è sempre, indiscutibilmente sempre, un proletario rivoluzionario."*¹

On January 10, 1888 Italian anarchists belonging to the socialist-anarchist-revolutionary group "Carlo Cafiero" met in their office at 108 Thompson Street in New York City to launch the first Italian language radical newspaper in the United States: *L'Anarchico* (The Anarchist).² As the editors explained, the paper fulfilled the need felt by group members "to express and give voice to their ideas."³ From 1888 to the Second World War, Italian immigrants published nearly two hundred radical periodicals in North

¹ "An educated proletarian is always, unquestionably always, a revolutionary proletarian." All translations from Italian to English are mine, unless noted. Slogan of *Circolo di Cultura Moderna* (Modern Culture Club) which operated in the mid-1910s at 314 East 106 Street in New York City. Published in *Il Grido della Folla*, May 20, 1916, 4.

² Carlo Cafiero (1846-1892) was one of the founders of the socialist-anarchist movement in Italy and Europe. Born in Barletta, southern Italy, from a family of rich landowners, he studied law in Naples and diplomacy in Florence. In 1870 he went to London, and, after meeting Marx and Engels, he joined the International. Back in Italy, he assumed a leading role in organizing the International putting his wealth at the service of the movement. His activism soon led Italian authorities to harass and eventually arrest him. In prison he suffered a serious breakdown which led to his death in 1892. Anarchists considered him a hero. See Nunzio Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 63-65; Franco Andreucci and Tommaso Detti, eds, *Il movimento operaio italiano. Dizionario biografico, 1853-1943*, 6 Vols. (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1976), III, 701-710; "Carlo Cafiero," *Grido degli Oppressi*, August 4, 1892, 1-2; and "Carlo Cafiero," *La Questione Sociale, Numero Speciale Dedicato all'Internazionale*, June 29, 1907, 2.

³ "Ai compagni d'Italia," *L'Anarchico*, February 1, 1888, 1. Sold at 2 cents. *L'Anarchico* was published monthly until June 1888. The editor and director are unknown but the February issue counted eight-eight subscribers, including six women. Only two issues have survived. They are available in microfilms at the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC), in Minneapolis.

America; they were the most prolific ethnic group after the Germans and the Jews.⁴ At the center of this considerable journalistic activity stood New York City with eighty-one papers. But Italian radical publications had a wide geographic distribution, including almost every state and smaller industrial and mining towns as well as the great metropolitan cities.⁵ Most of the newspapers originated during the first two decades of the twentieth century, especially between 1908 and 1919, when eighty new periodicals were founded. Like other radical presses, after the First World War, the *sovversivi*'s publishing activity declined as a result of governmental repression. But the rise of Fascism in 1922 spurred a boom of new papers, including the dailies *Il Nuovo Mondo* (The New World, 1925-31) and *La Stampa Libera* (The Free Press, 1931-38).

The importance of the press to study the political and social life of ethnic groups is nowadays well acknowledged. Virtually all nationalities now living in the United States established their own newspapers shortly after arriving in the adopted country.⁶ The press became a vital component of immigrant life -- a sort of bridge between the new

⁴ Germans published a total of 240 radical papers while the Jewish radical press comprised 207 mastheads. The exact number of Italian radical publication is 189. Taken together German, Jewish, and Italian radical newspapers account for about fifty percent of the whole ethnic radical press in the United States. Other important labor presses include those of the Scandinavians (with 160 newspapers) and Eastern Europeans (Polish, Czech, Slovaks, and Hungarians, with 150 newspapers). See Dick Hoerder, *The Immigrant Labor Press in America*, 3 Vols. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), I, 30.

⁵ The most important city besides New York was Chicago with twenty-one mastheads; Philadelphia had ten, San Francisco nine, Paterson, New Jersey, seven, Boston and Pueblo, Colorado, six, and Barre, Vermont, five. For a complete list see Hoerder, *The Immigrant Labor Press*, III, 137-141.

⁶ For a study of the early immigrant press in the United States see Robert E. Park, *The Immigrant Press and Its Control* (New York: Harper, 1922).

and old worlds, keeping immigrants in touch with the far homeland while also supplying crucial information to access the unknown American society.

Even though political parties, unions, and federations were important constituents of the Italian immigrant Left, the real institutional base of the movement was its press.⁷ Like a wide mirror, the press reflected the whole of the *sorversivi*'s world, serving as the primary medium of communication for hundreds of comrades throughout the United States and across the Atlantic, and as a forum to discuss and disseminate radical ideas. In the pages of the newspapers that have survived we find detailed information on the activities, milieu, and organizations of Italian-speaking radicals. We learn, for example, of their countless *circoli* (political and literary groups), their public conferences, their evening schools, and their drama groups – an incredibly rich and sophisticated web of associations that mixed culture, politics, and ideology. Not only are newspapers a goldmine of political information on Italian American radicalism, they also are an unmatched source to study the literary culture of the *sorversivi*. Serialized fiction, plays, poetry, as well as drawings and humor, often accompanied by cartoons and caricatures, were in fact regularly featured in Italian American radical journals, as well as in the radical press at large.

Characteristic of the Italian American radical press was its variety and irregularity. To a greater degree than any other ethnic radical press in the United States, the newspapers of the *sorversivi* included organs of unions and parties as well as

⁷ Nunzio Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York," in Philip V. Cannistraro, ed., *The Italians of New York. Five Centuries of Struggle and Achievement* (The New York Historical Society, 2000), 83.

periodicals of different political groups, with the anarchists predominating.⁸ Italian-language radical papers also had probably the highest birth and death rate of any of the ethnic periodicals: about half of the publications lasted less than two years. This precariousness reflected two objective problems: the elevated mobility of Italian immigrants, which slowed the formation of a stable working-class community, and the disproportional high costs of publication and distribution in comparison to the widespread destitution of Italian workers.

In his study of the immigrant press, Robert Park called radical publications “mendicant papers” – papers that “are either regularly supported by the parties and societies they represent, or [that] are constantly driven to appeal to the generosity of their constituency to keep them alive.”⁹ This was particularly true of the Italian American radical papers. From inception, they were constantly on the verge of economic failure.

⁸ The anarchists published nearly one-hundred newspapers. In New York alone they issued at least twenty-four mastheads: *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* (1922-1971), *L'Anarchia* (Anarchy, 1918-19); *L'Anarchico* (The Anarchist, 1888); *L'Arvenire* (The Future, 1943-44); *La Difesa* (The Defense, 1923-24); *Il Diritto*, (The Right, 1918-19), *Domani* (Tomorrow, Brooklyn, 1919); *La Frusta dei Cloak-makers* (The Cloak-makers' Lash, 1922-24); *Il Grido degli Oppressi* (The Cry of the oppressed, 1892-94); *Il Grido della Folla* (The Cry of the Crowd, 1916); *La Guardia Rossa* (The Red Guard, 1919-21); *L'Inevitabile* (The Inevitable, 1920); *La Libertà* (Freedom, 1902); *Il Novatore* (The Innovator, 1910-11); *Nuovi Tempi* (New Times, 1918); *L'Ordine* (The Order, 1919-20); *Il Pensiero* (the Thought, 1938-39); *La Questione Sociale* (The Social Question, 1914-16); *Il Ribelle* (The Rebel, 1939); *La Riscossa* (The Revenge, 1916-1917); *La Rivolta degli Angeli* (The Revolt of the Angels, 1923-1926); *Sorgiamo!* (Let us arise!, 1908-9); *Umanità Nuova* (New Humanity, Brooklyn, 1924-25); *L'Uomo Nuovo* (The New Man, 1916-17). Cf. Leonardo Bettini, *Bibliografia dell'anarchismo, Periodici e numeri unici anarchici pubblicati all'estero* (Florence: CP Editrice, 1976); and Hoerder, *The Immigrant Labor Press*, III.

⁹ See Park, *The Immigrant Press and Its Control*, 360. Cited also in Bruno Cartosio, “Italian Workers and Their Press, 1900-1920,” in Christiane Harzig and Dick Hoerder, eds., *The Press of Labor Migrants in Europe and North America* (Bremen: Publications of the Labor Newspaper Preservation Project, 1985), 425.

Even the most successful newspapers were regularly threatening to suspend publication due to lack of funds. Appeals for the workers to renew their subscriptions, pay up, or send a contribution appeared in almost every issue. Part of the problem was that the *sovversivi* limited or rejected advertisements. To them, ads connoted commercialism and threatened the ideological integrity of the paper, as advertisers could be subject to external pressures. Thus, the survival of the Italian American radical press depended almost exclusively on newsstand sales, the contributions of sympathizers, and, especially, on subscriptions, often encouraged with special gifts such as books, prints, or pens. Considering that the audience was almost exclusively working class, often including the poorest section of the immigrants, it is not surprising that funds for publishing were always in short supply.¹⁰

When the deficit reached unsustainable figures (\$ 300-2,000), the editors turned to *sottoscrizioni straordinarie* (ad hoc contributions) and fund-raising events such as picnics, dances, concerts, theatrical performances, or harvest festivals, which were regularly advertised in the pages of their newspapers. These initiatives generally met with the great enthusiasm of workers. For example, socialist Gioacchino Artoni collected five hundred dollars on behalf of *Il Proletario* through the performances of his dramatic society during the winter of 1903.¹¹ That year additional \$4,100 were collected to launch *Il Proletario* as a daily, half of the capital deemed necessary to finance the project.¹²

¹⁰ See also Nunzio Pernicone, "Introduction" to the Special Issue on the Italian American Radical Press, *Italian American Review*, 8, 1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 2.

¹¹ Giacomo Battistoni, "Ricordando i settant'anni di Gioacchino Artoni," *La Stampa Libera*, August 16, 1936.

In addition to lack of funds, the *sorversivi* were often forced to suspend their publications by governmental authorities. The distribution of Italian American radical papers depended entirely on second class mailing privileges, as first class was too expensive and third class too slow. Cancellation of second class mailing permits became the most common method used by American government to shut down radical papers, especially during the First World War.¹³ As specified by the Trading With the Enemy Act of 1917, foreign-language radical papers had to submit English translations of articles dealing with political issues to local post offices. As Park reported:

If the department of the Post Office was convinced that it [a paper] did not intend to obey the law and was actively aiding the enemy, that paper was permanently denied the use of the mails. [...] The publishers might send out their papers by express or even by freight. Under these circumstances however, editors and publishers were pretty sure, sooner or later, to come under the surveillance of the Department of Justice.¹⁴

The *sorversivi* had often no alternative but to discontinue publication and resume their journalistic activities under new mastheads.¹⁵

Despite these odds, Italian American radicals were able to establish newspapers which endured many years, playing an important role in the history of the Little Italies.

¹² Mario De Ciampis, "Storia del movimento rivoluzionario socialista italiano," *La Parola del Popolo* (December 1958 - January 1959), 142.

¹³ Pernicone, "Introduction" to the Special Issue on the Italian American Radical Press, 2.

¹⁴ Park, *The Immigrant Press and Its Control*, 441-442.

¹⁵ *Cronaca Sorversiva*, for example, changed first into *L'Anarchia*, then *Il Diritto*, and finally *Il Refrattario* between 1918 and 1919. Similarly, *Il Proletario* relocated to Chicago in 1916 and was renamed *La Difesa*, then *Il Nuovo Proletario*, until, finally, in 1920 it resumed its original title. See also *La Questione Sociale* which became *L'Era Nuova* in 1908 after being suppressed by federal authorities, the anarchist *Il Pensiero* (1938-39), organ of the "Camillo Berneri Group," which became *Il Ribelle* in 1939; or the communist *Alba Nuova* (1921-24) which led the way to the founding of the daily *Il Lavoratore* (1924-1931).

About one third of them lasted for ten to fifteen years and one tenth for more than fifteen years.¹⁶ Among the most influential Italian radical newspapers published in the New York City area were: the socialist/syndicalist *Il Proletario* (The Proletarian, 1896-46), the socialist *Il Lavoro* (Labor, 1915-1932); the anarcho-syndicalist *Il Martello* (The Hammer, 1916-46); the anarchist *La Questione Sociale* (The Social Question, 1895-1908; followed by *L'Era Nuova*, The New Era, 1909-1914) and *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* (The Mustering of the Incurables, 1922-71); the anti-Fascist *Il Nuovo Mondo* (The New World, 1925-31) and its successor *La Stampa Libera* (The Free Press, 1931-38), the communist *Alba Nuova* (New Dawn, 1921-24), *Il Lavoratore* (The Worker, 1924-1931), and *L'Unità del Popolo* (People's Unity, 1939-51).

Most of the papers listed above were sponsored by political groups, parties, or unions, reflecting the need of specific factions to articulate and propagate their political visions and social values. It was common practice even among Italian branches of labor unions to have their own separate papers of propaganda and information. For example, *La Lotta di Classe* (The Class Struggle, 1912-1916) became the official Italian-language organ of the Cloak and Skirt Makers Union, *La Giustizia* (Justice, 1919-) that of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, *Il Lavoro* (Labor, 1914-32) that of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, *L'Operaia* (The Working Woman, 1915-19) that of the Local 25 of the ILGWU.

A large number of Italian American radical newspapers also fall in the category of "personal journalism." They were "one-man papers," the enterprise of single individuals, who usually supported themselves with their writing, supplemented by lecturing and

¹⁶ Hoerder, *The Immigrant Labor Press*, III, 6-10.

organizing.¹⁷ This is the case for example of the famed anarcho-syndicalist Carlo Tresca, who published and edited three newspapers: *La Plebe*, *L'Avvenire*, and *Il Martello*.¹⁸ The papers followed Tresca's own life, relocating as he moved from one city to another, interrupting their publication as he was arrested or in financial distress, and resurrecting under a new name when they were suppressed by governmental authorities. As Nunzio Pernicone has pointed out, "Although political and financial circumstances occasionally obliged him to entrust legal ownership to a front man or his editorial group, *Il Martello* was always Tresca's newspaper: a journalistic reflection of his revolutionary program and fighting spirit."¹⁹

Another example is *Cronaca Sovversiva*, one of the most important and lasting anarchist periodicals, which reflected almost entirely the ideas and program of its editor, the anti-organizational anarchist Luigi Galleani.²⁰ Other less successful publications

¹⁷ The term "personal journalism," was first used by Park in his *The Immigrant Press and Its Control*.

¹⁸ *La Plebe* (The Populace) was founded in Philadelphia on August 24, 1907 and in July 1909 was transferred to Steubenville, Ohio, and renamed *L'Avvenire* (The Future). In 1910 Tresca relocated *L'Avvenire* to New Kensington, Pennsylvania, and in 1912 transferred it once more to New York, where he had moved. *L'Avvenire* continued its publications until 1917, when, following America's entry into World War I, it was suppressed by governmental authorities. *Il Martello* (The Hammer) was Tresca's most enduring and significant legacy. Tresca had purchased *Il Martello* from Luigi Preziosi at the end of 1917 and soon made it his forte for twenty-six years. See Nunzio Pernicone, "Carlo Tresca's *Il Martello*," *Italian American Review*, 8, 1 (Spring/Summer 2001).

¹⁹ Pernicone, "Carlo Tresca's *Il Martello*," 7.

²⁰ First published in Barre, Vermont, from 1903 to 1912, *Cronaca Sovversiva* (Subversive Chronicle) relocated to Lynn, Massachusetts, where it continued to be published until Galleani's deportation to Italy in June 1919. With a circulation of some 5,000, *Cronaca Sovversiva*, exerted a powerful influence over a substantial segment of Italian immigrant workers, converting many to the principles of anti-organizational anarchism. After Galleani's departure, in 1921 Galleani's foremost disciples founded a

bound to the efforts of one or a few persons were Giuseppe Ciancabilla's anarchist *L'Aurora* (The Dawn, 1899-1902), Giovanni Gallina's progressive *La Sentinella* (The Sentry, 1903-07), Libero Tancredi's (alias Massimo Rocca) anarchist *Il Novatore* (The Innovator, 1910-11), Ruotolo's and Giovannitti's literary review *Il Fuoco* (The Fire, 1914-15), Aldino Felicani's *Questione Sociale* (1914-16) and *Controcorrente* (1938-1967), Antonio Capraro's communist *Utopia* (1927-28), and Vincenzo Vacirca's anti-Fascist *Il Solco* (The Furrow, 1927-28) and *La Strada* (The Street, 1937-38).

The long list suggests an exceptionally large presence of intellectual figures within the Italian American radical movement, who gave their time, energy, and passion to the realization of an ideal. Their newspapers provide firsthand sources for the study of the beliefs, values, and ideologies that inspired and motivated them.

The *sorversivi* also used to publish *numeri unici* (single issues) to bring attention to urgent events, such as a strike, a political campaign, or the arrest of a comrade. This was for example the case of *Risorgimento* (Resurrection) and *Libertas* (Freedom), published respectively in May 1919, in the midst of the Red Scare, and in August 1927, two days before the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. Coming at a time of repression and political stagnation, they aimed at awakening Italian workers from the apathy and fears that had followed World War I, bringing attention to the unresolved problems and issues

new publication in New York, *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* that continued to propagate Galleani's belief in the absolute negation of authority and the total destruction of the capitalist order by any means necessary. Despite fierce polemics and a considerable decline of its readership, *L'Adunata* was published until 1971. See Nunzio Pernicone, "Luigi Galleani and Italian Anarchist Terrorism in the United States," *Studi Emigrazione/Études Migrations*, XXX, n. 111, 1993, 469-488, and Rudolph Vecoli, "Luigi Galleani" in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1992), 251-53.

of the working class.²¹ They urged Italian immigrants to fight more actively for their freedom and emancipation and called for a greater commitment on the part of the Italian workers to the cause of freedom and justice. “Comrades,” read the program of *Libertas*, “the time has already come! There is no time left! Let’s stir ourselves up! Let’s rouse! And forward! We want Freedom!... COMRADES ! LET’S CONQUER FREEDOM AND WE SHALL RAISE THE WORLD!”²²

Numeri unici were also published for special occasions such as the commemoration of radical festivities -- May Day, the anniversary of the Russian Revolution, or the anniversary of the Haymarket’s tragedy. Anarchists also released single issues in memoriam of the heroes and martyrs of the international anarchist movement. For example, *La Questione Sociale* always had a “*Numero d’occasione*” (special issue) on July 29 to honor Gaetano Bresci, the Italian anarchist who on July 29, 1900 shot and killed King Umberto I.

For the anarchists, people like Bresci were heroes because they had sacrificed their own lives to free the world of a tyrant. Published with the contributions of readers and sympathizers, these four-to-eight page special issues were mostly celebratory biographies of anarchist *giustizieri* (avengers), with poems and articles commenting on the significance of their action.

²¹ Unfortunately both publications are incomplete. The surviving pages are on microfilms at the IHRC.

²² *Libertas, Numero Unico*, August 21, 1927, 3.

Format, Aesthetics, and Circulation: Some General Notes on Italian American Radical Papers.

With the exception of the dailies *Il Nuovo Mondo*, *La Stampa Libera* and for a short time *Il Proletario* and *Il Lavoratore*, New York's Italian radical papers were weeklies, biweeklies, monthlies or bimonthlies.²³ They were usually four to eight pages if weekly, fifteen pages or more if monthly magazines, measuring respectively about 17x22 and 10x13 inches.²⁴ During the early period, their price ranged from 2 to 5 cents and increased to 5-15 cents after 1920. The differences in price reflected differences of length, format, and periodicity. The cost of publication and distribution amounted to about \$40-100 for weekly papers and about \$300 for monthly reviews or special issues. As much as \$5,000-8,000 were typically needed to launch a newspaper.²⁵ Aldino Felicani, a noted anarchist and editor who organized the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, remembered the heroic struggles to start his papers. When a group wanted to begin a paper, he noted, "we just announced that our paper would come out on such and such date and that we needed money to publish it. That was sufficient to bring us enough

²³ *Il Proletario* was a daily from May to July 1903. *Il Lavoratore* was a daily at its inception in 1924.

²⁴ A typical Italian American radical newspaper looked more or less as follows: the title, written in large, bold, capital letters, occupied the top center of the front page. Right below the heading appeared in a smaller font the subtitle. On the left appeared the editorial office's address, and the names of the director and editor of the paper; on the right, the paper's price with the circulation figures occasionally; and on the center the date of publication.

²⁵ These figures are based on the accounts of the radical papers.

money to publish the paper.”²⁶ While this form of financing helped produce many papers on a quick notice it seldom assured a long life.

Most radical papers provided incredibly detailed accounts of all their monthly transactions, publishing the names of all subscribers and other sources of income, as well as all their expenses. From the figures of these reports, it is often possible to estimate the average circulation of the Italian radical press and identify the main sources of financial support. Most newspapers remained restricted to a few thousand readers. Yet, there were others like *Il Proletario* or *Il Martello* that averaged 5,000-8,000 copies (with peaks of 10,000) and were distributed in Italian immigrant communities across the United States and often in Europe as well. The communist press was particularly influential in the late thirties, achieving a circulation of 7,000 copies with *L'Unità Operaia* and peaking at 10,000 with *L'Unità del Popolo*.²⁷ As early as 1923, *Alba Nuova*, the first Italian American communist paper, claimed 6,000 subscribers and a circulation of nearly 20,000 copies.²⁸ The anti-Fascist dailies *Il Nuovo Mondo* and *La Stampa Libera* had the largest circulation of all papers, selling between 25,000 and 35,000 copies.

There is no question that, in comparison to the commercial press, which reached hundreds of thousands, the radical figures are rather small (although not smaller than

²⁶ “Reminiscences of Aldino Felicani,” 26. Columbia Oral History Collection, Columbia University. Cited in George Pozzetta, “The Italian Immigrant Press,” in *American Immigration and Ethnicity Series*, vol. 5, 248.

²⁷ Ambrogio Donini, “L'Unità del popolo e lo stato operaio,” in Antonio Varsori, ed., *L'antifascismo italiano negli Stati Uniti durante la seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome: Archivio Trimestrale, 1984), 340. Cited in Gerald Meyer, “L'Unità del Popolo: The Voice of Italian American Communism, 1939-51,” *Italian American Review*, 8,1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 128.

²⁸ “Per Alba Nuova,” *Alba Nuova*, August 18, 1923, 1.

those of other ethnic groups of the same period, with the only exception of the Jews). At the same time, however, this data challenges the extremely conservative and acquiescent image that is usually associated with Italian immigrants. Indeed, considered as a whole, the radical press accounted for perhaps as much as one third of the city's Italian language circulation.²⁹ Besides, actual readership of radical newspapers was often appreciably higher than what circulation figures suggest. Due to the poverty of the Italian immigrants, each copy of radical papers was usually passed among several workers. Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta's study of Italian American radical activities in Tampa, Florida, demonstrated, for example, that Italian immigrant workers there developed the practice of a *lectore* (lecturer) reading radical papers and novels to them during breaks at the factory – a practice which originated among the Spaniards.³⁰

Due to financial crisis, internal divisions, and governmental repression, the large majority of Italian American radical papers changed their periodicity, format, editorship, or place of location at one time or the other. *Il Proletario* is perhaps the best example of such irregularity. Founded in Pittsburgh in November 1896 by a group of socialists from Reggio Emilia, during its fifty-years history the paper relocated five times, constantly changing its format and periodicity, and counting so many different editors that a list of these individuals reads as a “who’s who” of the Italian immigrant Left.³¹

²⁹ Cannistraro and Meyer, “Italian American Radicalism: An Interpretative History,” in idem *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*, forthcoming (Westport: Praeger).

³⁰ George Pozzetta and Gary Mormino, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, Florida, 1885-1985* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

³¹ After a few months from its first issue, *Il Proletario* suspended publishing due to the turn of the century economic crisis. It resumed its publication in 1898 in Paterson, New

Virtually all mastheads featured a subtitle. The subtitle served to express the political identity of the paper and clarify its party affiliation. Therefore, it was common for a newspaper to change its subtitle when its politics shifted orientation. For example, *Il Proletario* began its publication as "A weekly newspaper of the Italian socialists in the US," and then became the "Official Organ of the IWW in the Italian language," when it officially converted to syndicalism. Similarly, *Il Fuoco* went from "Bimonthly magazine of art and struggle" to "Nationalist bimonthly" in 1915, when it shifted from an anti-war position to an interventionist stance.³²

Another common feature to Italian language radical papers was the use of revolutionary slogans and citations, usually published below or on the side of the title. Again, the purpose was to define as clearly as possible the political stances of the editorial board and give the reader a precise idea of the paper's ideological orientation.

Jersey, as a biweekly, under the directorship of Camillo Cianfarra, a socialist from Rome, who later became a correspondent for *The New York Times*. In August 1899 it was transferred to New York and published for a few months in consolidation with the *Giovane Italia*, a republican paper directed by Giacinto Piccoli. After a brief suspension due to internal conflicts, from 1904 to 1909 *Il Proletario* was published in Philadelphia, and then moved back again to New York. Due to the Red Scare, between 1918 and 1919, *Il Proletario* was renamed *Nuovo Proletario* and transferred to Chicago. In 1921 it resumed its original name and moved first to Brooklyn and then in 1938 to New York City. Among *Il Proletario*'s foremost editors were in chronological order: Dino Rondani (1898), Camillo Cianfarra (1900), Giacinto M. Serrati, (1902-1903); the anarcho-syndicalist Carlo Tresca (1904-06), the socialist poet Arturo Giovannitti (1911), Edmondo Rossoni (1912-14), a revolutionary syndicalist who advocated Italy's entry to World War I and later became a leading Fascist, Antonio Presi (1918-19), Maris Baldini (1923-25), Raimondo Fazio (1932-34 and 1938-1946), Mario De Ciampis (1935-37). *Il Proletario* also counted among its contributors many important figures of the Italian American labor movement, such as Arturo Caroti, Giocchino Artoni, Bellalma Forzato-Spezia, Giovanni Molinari, Giovanni Sala, and Flavio Venanzi. See De Ciampis, "Storia del movimento socialista rivoluzionario italiano," 136-163, and "Nel cinquantennio del giornale," *Il Proletario*, May 1946, 3.

Thus, slogans like “Science to god – Anarchy to the authorities” of *L'Anarchico* or “Neither slaves, nor masters. Neither oppressors, nor oppressed” of *Il Grido degli Oppressi* anticipated the bellicose character of these publications, which called for the destruction of existing political, religious, and economic institutions. Marx’s historic motto: “Workers of the world unite!” or union slogans like “For organization and class struggle” were instead typical of socialist and communist papers, which stressed working class unity and solidarity. Finally, citations like Italian reformist socialist Camillo Prampolini’s, “We neither preach hatred to people nor to the wealthy class, but we preach the urgent necessity of a special reform which will make collective property the basis of human society,” which appeared in *L'Avanti* (1905), the socialist paper edited by Teofilo Petriella in Newark, reflected a more moderate approach to the struggle against capitalism.³³ In addition to revolutionary slogans, Italian American radical papers featured quotes by literary figures like Emile Zola, Victor Hugo, Rousseau and even religious figures, which illustrated the *sovversivi*’s ethical beliefs and moral values.

Like other leftist publishers, Italian American radical editors also used frequently graphic logos to characterize their papers. The symbols used were those typical of international labor and working class struggle: hammers, sickles, scythes, torches, broken chains, working men, and sunrises. Metaphors of rebellion, these images became a constitutive part of proletarian art and radical culture, and were naturally adopted by the *sovversivi*. The masthead of *Il Proletario*, for example, pictured a worker with a sickle in the act of hoeing the ground, while right below the title appeared a rising sun irradiating

³² For a detailed analysis of *Il Fuoco*, see Marcella Bencivenni, “A Magazine of Art and Struggle: The Experience of *Il Fuoco*, 1914-1915,” *Italian American Review*, 8,1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 57-84.

energy and light. The overwhelming message was that of hope for a better future of the working class. Similarly, the masthead of Felicani's *La Questione Sociale* featured an old but strong man hammering swords, with a lion and a sheep peacefully sleeping at his feet. As the editors explained, the picture "reproduced the giant of rebellion, who with his powerful muscles transforms a bunch of swords into an instrument of work— those swords that serve today to oppress thousands of workers for the whims of bloody kings and emperors who rule the world."³⁴ The image of the animals, traditionally at war and now miraculously together, symbolized, in this case too, a message of peace and brotherhood.

In general, a vigorous masculinity pervaded the iconography of radical papers, exemplified in the virility and strength of working-class men's bodies.³⁵ Images of male workers dominated union newspapers and radical magazines (but not only those of Italian language), constructing work and revolution as essentially male. However, as more Italian women began to enter the garment industry in the late 1910s and gain political visibility, this rhetoric of masculine labor was challenged and new representations of women began to appear in radical papers. For example, *L'Operaia*'s graphic logo featured a sensual, bare-breasted Roman-like woman, wrapped in a toga, holding a burning torch in her left hand and a pamphlet of the Local 25 in her right hand. While this image betrayed traditional conceptions of womanhood, still defined essentially as

³³ Camillo Prampolini (1857-1930) was one of the leaders of reformist socialism in Italy.

³⁴ *La Questione Sociale*, July 24, 1915, 2.

³⁵ On the issue of masculinity and Italian radicalism see Michael M. Topp, *Those Without a Country: The Political Culture of Italian American Syndicalists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), Chapter 4, "Nationality and Masculinity Splinter the FSI."

feminine, delicate, and sensual, it also communicated a new sense of female empowerment.

Other graphic logos were more sophisticated: Giovannitti's anti-Fascist bimonthly *Il Veltro* featured a greyhound, accompanied by the verse: "Verrà che la farà morir di doglia." The symbol and the lyric referred to an early passage of the *Divine Comedy*, where Dante in his imaginary descent into the inferno is scared by a she-wolf and is rescued by the Roman poet Virgil, who foretells him:

Molti son li animali a cui s'ammoglia,	She mates with many living souls and shall
e piu' saranno ancora, infin che 'l Veltro	yet mate with many more, until the Greyhound
verrà, che la farà morir con doglia.	arrives, inflicting painful death on her.
Questi non cibera' terra ne' peltro,	That Hound will never feed on land or pewter,
ma sapienza, amore e virtute.	but find his fare in wisdom, love and virtue:
e sua nazione sara' fra feltro e feltro.	his place of birth shall be between two felts. ³⁶

In Dante's verses the symbolic value of the greyhound is not clear. Literary critics have speculated that it could stand for Christ, or a religious or political figure of the time.

Instead, in the case of Giovannitti's paper, the allegory is self-evident: Fascism represents the wolf, while "Il Veltro" is the working class, the force that will crush all human greed and vices and finally establish a world of love, wisdom, and virtue. *Il Veltro's* iconography is interesting in yet another way; it reveals the exceptional literary sophistication of some Italian American radicals and suggests that most Italian immigrants in the twenties had achieved a higher formal education, or at least had a deeper cultural background, than is generally assumed.³⁷ "A newspaper of the working

³⁶ Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Inferno*, translated by Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), Canto I, lines 100-105.

³⁷ In introducing the paper the editors did not explain the meaning of *Il Veltro* but simply said that it referred to Dante's prophecy, symbol of all aspirations of freedom. They

class." *Il Veliro* used Dante to counter Fascist nationalist propaganda and evoke a sense of *italianità* (Italianess) that was rooted in Italy's best literary and artistic traditions.

A number of magazines also featured color illustrated covers with drawings by renowned American radical artists such as Art Young, Robert Minor, and John Sloan, typically associated with the Ash Can School founded by Robert Henry in 1908.³⁸ Their drawings usually depicted scenes of lower-class urban life -- its poverty, degradation but also its dynamism -- as well as political events, such as working class strikes, wars, and social revolts. Their commitment to realism and the use of art as a form of social criticism naturally fitted the program and intentions of the *sovversivi*, some of whom had also personal ties with American radical artists.³⁹

Italian American radical papers presented also drawings or satirical cartoons by Italian artists such as Gabriele Galantara and Giuseppe Scalarini, or Italian Americans such as Onorio Ruotolo and Fort Velona. Gabriele Galantara (art name Rata Langa), became one of the most famous satirical cartoonists of the early twentieth century. His drawings were published in Italian periodicals like *La rana*, *Avanti!*, the French *Assiette au beurre*, and above all *L'Asino*, which he founded with Guido Podrecca in 1892. A member of the Socialist Party, in the twenties he used his art to attack Fascism, for which he was arrested in 1926.

assumed that the readers would be familiar with Dante's lyrics. See *Il Veltro*, August 15, 1924, 12.

³⁸ For a study of these artists see Richard Fitzgerald, *Art and Politics: Cartoonists of the Masses and Liberator* (Westport, Conn.: Associated University Press, 1981).

³⁹ For example Carlo Tresca and Arturo Giovannitti.

Giuseppe Scalarini was one of the most important artistic contributors of *Avanti!*, the official organ of the Italian Socialist Party. He distinguished himself for his anti-militarist and anti-capitalist cartoons, which caused him several arrests and convictions.⁴⁰ Onorio Ruotolo and Fort Velona were Italian immigrants who achieved a considerable reputation in the Little Italies during the 1920s. A gifted man of art and letters, Ruotolo became a renowned sculptor. Notably, he was one of the founders and the director of the famed Leonardo Da Vinci's Art School. Velona, instead, is remembered principally for his anti-Fascist cartoons, his caricatures, and labor-union illustrations.⁴¹

Besides conforming to the new forms and techniques of modern journalism, the illustrated cover served to anticipate the content, themes and character of the paper. *Il Fuoco*'s first issue, for example, featured a red and black drawing, depicting a naked, virile man riding a black, impetuous horse and holding a torch in his right hand. Evoking Nietzsche's irrationality, and suggesting at the same time transgression, dynamism, instinct and strength, it captured the intent and nature of *Il Fuoco*. As its editors explained, *Il Fuoco*, which means fire, stood for a radical transformation of Italian American arts and morals, committed to modernize, educate, and emancipate Italian immigrants. Better than words, the drawing was able to give expression to *Il Fuoco*'s

⁴⁰ Cf. Franco Andreucci and Tommaso Detti, eds., *Il movimento operaio italiano. Dizionario biografico, 1853-1943* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1976), 6 Vols. Among the Italian American magazines that published extensively drawings, cartoons, and caricatures see *Il Fuoco*, *Il Solco*, the early *Alba Nuova*, *L'Asino*, *Guardia Rossa*, and *La Stampa Libera*.

⁴¹ For more information on Ruotolo see Lucio Ruotolo, "Onorio Ruotolo and the Leonardo Da Vinci School," *Italian American Review*, 7, 2 (Winter 2000), 1-20, and Bencivenni, "A Magazine of Art and Struggle: The Experience of *Il Fuoco*," 57-62. For information on Velona see Chapter 6.

iconoclastic spirit and emphasize at once its modernism, experimentation, and irreverence.

Programs and themes of Italian American radical papers:

Paralleling the strong ideological differences of the Italian immigrant Left, the radical press included papers of every political stripe. Socialists, syndicalists, anarchists, communists, labor organizers -- all had their own separate organs of information and propaganda, all claiming to represent in some way the true interests of the working class. With the important exception of their common struggle against the *prominenti* and Fascism, the Italian American radical press never represented a united front.

However, no matter what their ideology, all Italian American radical papers had similar goals and functions. To start with, they provided an essential network of regular contacts for radical leaders, organizers, and the Italian immigrant community. Under columns entitled "*Il lavoro dei compagni*," "*Vita e notizie del nostro movimento*," or "*Movimento sociale*," the *sovversivi* published announcements about lectures, conferences, and political meetings, as well as bulletins of information on strikes, elections, and labor resolutions.⁴² On the last page, a short posting called "*Piccola posta*" or "*Corrispondenze*" covered brief communications and messages from readers and comrades, along with meticulous financial reports. On the last page were also listed the addresses of existing and newly formed radical affinity groups, with announcements of upcoming political and social events.

⁴² The columns' titles translate literally as "The activity of the comrades," "Life and news of our movement," and "Social movement."

Radical papers also served as vehicles to raise funds for radical campaigns, such as strikes, arrests, or international causes, and mobilize public opinion. All famous cases of persecuted revolutionaries, Italian and non Italian alike, found support in the pages of Italian American radical papers: notably Giovannitti and Ettor in 1912, Carlo Tresca in 1916, Tom Mooney and the IWW members in 1919, and, of course, Sacco and Vanzetti throughout the twenties. Considering the extent of poverty among Italian immigrants, the results of these solidarity campaigns were often outstanding. *Alba Nuova*, for example, collected hundreds of dollars for the Friends of Soviet Russia -- the relief campaign organized in 1922 to fight hunger in the ex-USSR -- and for the victims of Fascism.⁴³

The radical press was above all an instrument of social protest. Its primary purpose was to raise class-consciousness and lead workers in a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, social inequality, and oppression. Radical editors intended to "concentrate their efforts to awaken the workers' minds and to the creation of the conscience of one's rights and might through knowledge so that the unchaining of man's arms may be possible for the solution of the only problem: that of life -- for everybody!"⁴⁴ To this purpose, they published sophisticated articles on political theory and ideology, with the intent of helping the readers familiarize themselves with the principles and ideas of revolutionary class struggle. In editorial columns called "*Notizie a fucio*" (news in bundles) they also offered coverage of local and international news, providing information on contemporary political, social and cultural developments. Special

⁴³ See for example, "Friends of Soviet Russia. Rendiconto generale," June 1, 1922, 4, which shows a total amount of \$524.68, and "Fundraising for the victims of Fascism," February 10, 1923, 4, which reports \$676.53.

⁴⁴ "Mario Rapisardi Literary Society," *Alba Nuova*, September 1921, 3.

attention was given to strikes, wars, political repression, or anything that concerned the workers.

All Italian American radical papers also shared a commitment to educate, inform, and emancipate the immigrants. The *sovversivi*, indeed, had always emphasized education and knowledge as the precondition to revolutionary organizing and activity. As Riccardo Cordiferro pointed out in one of his well-attended conferences, “the workers’ most important conquest, the conquest of all conquests, is the conquest of the book.”⁴⁵ Not only did radical papers publish general articles which aimed at combating ignorance and prejudices; they also talked of specific issues relevant to the everyday life of the immigrants, like personal hygiene, alcoholism, criminality, and children’s education. As the editors of *Il Proletario* pointed out, “we don’t simply want to launch a socialist paper” but also “a paper that, beyond the politics of parties and class struggle, carries out a daily act of purification and moral recovery.”⁴⁶ In the same spirit, a group of concerned Italian American physicians, including Ettore Tresca, Carlo’s younger brother, founded *La Parola del Medico* (The Doctor’s World) in 1916. Devoted entirely to health education, the paper featured articles on diet, medicines, and disease in an effort to instruct immigrants in proper medical practices and thwart the impact of fraudulent doctors.

Literature and poetry were also a regular feature of all Italian American radical papers. Novels by literary figures of the caliber of Tolstoy, Zola, and Ibsen were often

⁴⁵ Riccardo Cordiferro (pen name of Alessandro Sisca), “La conquista del libro,” conference held at the Settlement of All Nations, New York, December 2, 1920. Alessandro Sisca Papers, IHRC, Box 1, folder 1 and Box 8.

⁴⁶ “Pel giornale quotidiano,” *Il Proletario*, December 6, 1902, 1.

serialized. Italian poets of social protest such as Pietro Gori, Mario Rapisardi and Ada Negri also appeared regularly. The radical press, as we will see in the following chapter, also provided a venue for many *sorversivi* who ventured into literary writing.

The *sorversivi* abhorred the coarseness, backwardness, provincialism, and bigotry of Italian immigrant life, and wanted to create a new, modern culture free of superstitions and prejudices. The campaign to improve the living and intellectual conditions of New York's *colonia italiana* took two forms: a critique of Italian peasant culture, with its fatalism, superstition, and backwardness, and an attack on established Italian American institutions and powerful men.

Radical papers criticized, for example, the celebration of religious festivals, such as "the Madonna del Carmine" on July 16 or the local saints, with their processions, simulacrums, and rituals.⁴⁷ Barefoot, holding candles and banners, and reciting prayers, as many as twenty thousand immigrants, mostly women, would regularly drag themselves along the streets of New York, often for miles and miles.⁴⁸ For the *sorversivi*, such cultural mores were unacceptable reminiscences of a medieval world, the product of ignorance, fanatical bigotry, and prejudice. Often sponsored by the local church, these religious rituals helped perpetuate and reinforce fatalist attitudes and passive perseverance. Radicals especially detested the idea that immigrants would spend as much as \$ 12,000 on fireworks, banners, and other banal decorations, instead of using this money for more serious and urgent matters.

⁴⁷ See for example: "La festa della Madonna del Carmine." *Il Proletario*, July 20, 1901, 1.

To emphasize the absurdity of these religious cults, *Il Proletario* printed “an open letter” to the “Dear Madonna del Carmine, c/o Eternal Father – Heaven,” in which the author questioned the Madonna’s miraculous powers and wanted to know if she was the best and most powerful of all Madonnas!⁴⁹ It is hard to tell whether it was a real letter written by a reader or a joke construed by a journalist of *Il Proletario* to ridicule immigrants’ religious creeds. In any event, the letter exemplified the literary *extravaganza* of the *sovversivi*, who often resorted to satire and other forms of popular culture to expose the ignorance and ingenuity of Italian immigrants.

Largely atheists and anti-clerics, the *sovversivi* fiercely attacked religion in their papers, exposing the theoretical incongruities of religious beliefs as well as the clergy’s corruption. Much in line with Marx’s belief that religion is the opium of the people, for the *sovversivi* institutional religions were just an opportunistic invention of the dominant classes to justify social inequalities and keep the masses enslaved. Through jokes, satire and cartoons, they constantly attacked religious truths, such as the creation of the world, the Immaculate Conception, or the existence of hell and heaven, countering them with scientific explanations. As Carlo Tresca put it: “We socialists, at least the majority, are positivists. For this reason we don’t believe in the existence of a supernatural being, and reject every prejudice, every religious belief.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid. On Italian American religious practices see Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁴⁹ Gaetano Mirtillo, “Lettera aperta a Nostra Signora del Carmine,” *Il Proletario*, July 1, 1903, 3-4.

⁵⁰ “Contraddittorio Tresca – Rev. Petrarca,” *Il Proletario*, July 16, 1905, 1.

The *sovversivi* also held Catholicism largely responsible for the widespread acquiescence and ignorance of Italian immigrants. “The church,” pointed out *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, “pretends to deplore the abuses and injustices of the world, but at the same time preaches resignation, submission, and passive acceptance of one’s own destiny.”⁵¹ Workers’ liberation, insisted Giacinto Menotti Serrati, cannot be God’s work but the result of class organization and struggle. “What the workers need,” continued Serrati, “is not prayers but action, not humbleness but determination, not resignation but struggle.”⁵²

But there was another reason why the *sovversivi* hated priests and the church so much. The Roman Catholic Church proved to be a major bulwark against the radicalization of the United States working class, combating all forms of radical activity and countering radical propaganda with its own. Especially in the twenties, with the advent of Fascism and the signing of the Lateran Accords between Mussolini and Pope Pius XI in 1929, the church in the United States worked side by side with *prominenti* and consuls to oppose radicalism and silence the *sovversivi*.⁵³

Along with religion, the *sovversivi* also attacked the practice of erecting monuments, organizing banquets, and participating in nationalistic parades to commemorate Italy. These events were indeed a strategy of Italian authorities to spread nationalist sentiments and consensus among the immigrants, thus preventing workers

⁵¹ “Perchè noi combattiamo la religione,” unsigned, *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, August 4, 1892, 3-4.

⁵² G. M. Parrasio (pen name for Giacinto Menotti Serrati), “Il Perchè,” *Il Proletario*, December 25, 1903, 1.

⁵³ Cannistraro and Meyer, “Italian American Radicalism: An Interpretative History.”

from questioning and contesting the policies of the Italian government and local *prominenti*. The *sovversivi* did not oppose nationalism per se, but the belief that people should accept uncritically whatever actions the state deems appropriate. As Elisee Reclus, the editor of *La Questione Sociale*, noted: "It is certainly a commendable thing to love the motherland, the co-nationals, the art and letters of one's own country. But the name of patriotism is a façade to hide something completely different. It is not enough to love one's own country and childhood friends, to speak the language and love the culture, but it is necessary to march at the sound of the drums and trumpets, to throb with pride at the view of the national flag, sustaining it even when it is wrong. And, above all, a good patriot must hate anyone who lives beyond the national frontier."⁵⁴ Intended this way, nationalism represented a threat to working class internationalism and unity, promoting racial hatred and ethnic divisions.

Significantly, all radical papers also attacked nationalist views based on consanguinity and race. For the *sovversivi* these theories were an instrument of the dominant class to pit people against each other, and destroy class solidarity. As Ludovico Caminita, editor of *La Questione Sociale*, explained in his article "Odio di razza?" (Racial Hatred?), "That which goes with the name of racial hatred is nothing but the result of a conflict of economic interests [a phenomenon the *sovversivi* dubbed *gelosia di mestiere*, professional jealousy], which the bourgeoisie created and maintains for the sake of its class hegemony."⁵⁵ Similarly, James Warbasse, an eminent Italian American socialist doctor, made clear to workers that:

⁵⁴ Elisee Reclus, "La Patria," *La Questione Sociale*, May 16, 1903, 1.

⁵⁵ Ludovico Caminita, "Odio di razza?," *La Questione Sociale*, May 19, 1906, 2.

the patriotism imposed on them is nothing but shabby provincialism; that the racial prejudice instilled into their minds since birth is nothing but blind hate without any rational foundation; that the religion they are fed is meant to make them superstitious and passive slaves of authority; and that all these creeds are fomented by the same powers that make and want wars.⁵⁶

Real nationalism for the *sorversivi* was more a matter of class than race. It went beyond the narrow, provincial love for the country, underscoring a profound, authentic internationalism that went back to the *Risorgimento*'s radical republican tradition. During the struggle against Fascism, Gino Bardi, the editor of *L'Unità del Popolo*, stressed this connection by citing Mazzini's nationalist creed: "I love my fatherland because I love all fatherlands."⁵⁷

Discussion on nationalism escalated during the First World War, especially when Italy decided to enter the conflict. Patriotic fervor pushed almost 300,000 Italian Americans to join the United States army and 65,000 to return to Italy to fight.⁵⁸ As we saw earlier, also several radicals in both Italy and the United States supported the war. Despite the positive responses to the calls of patriotism, or perhaps because of it, the *sorversivi* intensified their antimilitary campaigns and desperately tried to resurrect internationalist ideas. The savagery of the war, the unprecedented loss of human lives, and the massive repression against radicals fired their spirits, stimulating a boom of new libertarian and revolutionary papers. Among them were *Il Grido della Folla* (The Cry of the People, 1916), *La Riscossa* (The Revenge, 1916-17) and *L'Anarchia* (Anarchy, 1918-

⁵⁶ James Warbasse, "Le cause psicologiche della guerra europea," *Il Fuoco*, November 15, 1914, 8.

⁵⁷ Gino Bardi, "Siamo Ariani?," cited in Gerald Meyer, "*L'Unità del Popolo*: The Voice of Italian American Communism, 1939-1951," 135.

19). Featuring anti-militarist slogans such as “Humankind has the right to live and love,” or “We want to live. We want to fight. We want to win,” these publications focused mainly on the war and the need to revitalize the working class movement. They countered the patriotic propaganda exerted by mainstream media and the state, and pushed workers toward internationalism and unity against their real enemy, capitalism. They repeated over and over that the Great War was an imperialistic war, rooted in economic and material interests, which in no way would benefit the workers. As *La Riscossa* pointed out, the workers’ salvation rested in their capability of gathering close around the banner of social revolution. “Then, only then will they be capable of doing their own war: the proletarian and social war.”⁵⁹

Despite their short life, these publications are significant because they give an idea of the *sovversivi*’s continuous efforts to resist and counter the conservative policies of the American government. “Let’s give back an aspiration to the proletarian movement and a goal to the revolution,” wrote Maffei in *Il Grido Della Folla*’s opening editorial. “We don’t want to be oppressed or exploited any longer. The air of this society smells. Let’s demolish it. Let’s raze it. Let’s destroy capitalism. Let’s annihilate the church. To arms!”⁶⁰ The call to arms was not metaphorical -- all readers who subscribed to the paper would receive a revolver as a present.

⁵⁸ Cannistraro and Meyer, “Italian American Radicalism: An Interpretative History.”

⁵⁹ T. Concordia, “Per la rivoluzione proletaria e sociale.” *La Riscossa*, January 1917, 3. Edited by Gasparino Cannone and managed by Giuseppe Labita, *La Riscossa* was published monthly in Brooklyn by the “Riscossa Group.” Consisting of four pages, it was free and lived of the contributions of friends and sympathizers. Most of its contributors used pseudonyms. It featured articles by Arturo Giovannitti and Ludovico Caminita.

⁶⁰ Maffei, “Alla rivolta,” *Il Grido della Folla*, May 20, 1916, 1.

Of all the wars the radical press fought, the most courageous was without doubt the muckraking campaign against powerful Italian American men, the so-called “*prominenti*,” -- ultra-conservative businessmen and professionals who often achieved wealth and prestige at the expense of the poor Italian immigrants. The *prominente*, or *padrone*, (boss), as the Italians called him, served as an intermediary between the immigrants and America. His major role was to recruit co-nationals for railroad companies and contractors, but he also served as a banker, saloon and boarding house keeper, and political leader. Of course, he charged the workers for all his services, including exorbitant fees for jobs and travel expenses, despite the fact that employers also paid him a commission. Unfortunately, given their ignorance of English and the American ways, Italian immigrants became totally dependent upon the *padrone* for jobs and guidance.⁶¹

For the *sovversivi*, the *prominenti* were the main cause of the misery, degradation, and moral apathy of Italian workers. As the editors of the anarchist *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, pointed out in a early article on New York’s *colonia italiana*, these individuals ruled the Little Italies: they had the monopoly of jobs and controlled all established institutions -- the banks, the consulate, the press.⁶² The newly arrived immigrant generally had little choice but to acquire the “favor” of the boss. Like other new immigrants, Italians did not speak English, did not know the new country, and were not

⁶¹ On the *padrone*-system see Rudolph Vecoli, “Pane e Giustizia.” *La Parola del Popolo*, “The USA Bicentennial” (1976), 56-58.

⁶² See “La colonia italiana di New York,” *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, June 5, 1892, 2. *Il Grido degli Oppressi* (*The Cry of the Oppressed*) was the second Italian anarchist paper to appear in the United States. It was founded by Saverio Merlino in Bleeker Street, in New York City, and published twice a month until October 1894.

Protestant. These difficulties made them ideal preys of speculators, bosses, and tricksters who with great cunning stripped the immigrants of all their possessions. In order to get a job they needed the help of the boss, who would get from 2 to 6 dollars for the number of workers he recruited for the *padrone*, and an additional \$1.75-2.00 from the worker's salary.⁶³ Newspapers even published stories of workers who were not paid at all, forced to work through threats and intimidation. In 1892, for example, twenty-five Italian workers went to the mines in Pennsylvania, convinced that they could make up to \$1.50 a day. When they arrived at the mines, they found seventy-five more workers, mostly Italians and Greeks, all working for 0.75 cents. They were kept under control all the time, to make sure that nobody would try to escape, and when the workers refused to work on Sunday they were threatened with guns to go back to the mines.⁶⁴ Stories like this were unfortunately not rare. While Italian immigrants performed the hardest jobs, mining, building bridges, railways, roads, or sweeping the snow away, Italian bosses and *padroni* became richer and richer. As *Il Grido degli Oppressi* sadly commented: "the worse enemy of the Italian people are the Italians."⁶⁵

The campaign against the world of *prominenti* was not limited to exposing the abuses of power of the Italian bosses. Italian American radicals seized every opportunity to denigrate and mock their role and offices as well. The two most frequent targets were the consulate and the commercial press. Described as "the greatest den of *cafoneria coloniale*" (colonial vulgarity), the consulate was portrayed as one of the most corrupted

⁶³ "La colonia italiana di New York," 2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁶⁵ "Alla colonia italiana," *Il Grido Degli Oppressi*, June 5, 1892. 1.

Italian American institutions. Instead of helping the immigrants, the consuls exploited and oppressed the workers, exacting extremely high fees for immigration documents, and cooperating with Italian authorities to monitor the *sovversivi* and combat radicalism. The consuls did nothing to put an end to the exploitation of the workers by the local bosses and bankers, or improve the living conditions of the immigrants. Radical papers constantly exposed the “dirty” role of the consulate, often demanding from the consuls to defend themselves publicly against the accusation of corruption and extortion.⁶⁶

These polemics often ended in court. The repeated accusations against his office and his person, led Consul Naselli of Philadelphia to sue Carlo Tresca and Giuseppe and Giovanni De Silvestro in 1905 under libel charges for a series of defamatory articles published in *Il Proletario* that year. Naselli’s prosecution asked for damages of \$ 15,000, using copies of *Il Proletario* that contained articles against the state and governmental authorities to predispose the jury negatively against the defendants. Eventually, the judge reduced the bill to a total of \$1,000 but the defendants were condemned to three months in prison.⁶⁷ Courts’ decisions were often harsher: Italian consuls were very influential and benefited from the protection of *prominenti* who had in turn a strong connection to American authorities. Yet, despite the dangers of conviction, radical papers never gave

⁶⁶ Among others see especially “I consoli italiani,” *Il Proletario* June 30, 1899, 2; Raimondo Fazio, “A cosa serve il consolato di New York” and “Limitiamo le funzioni consolari,” *Il Fuoco*, November 1 and 15, 1914, 15-16.

⁶⁷ According to *Il Proletario* which covered the trial, in ruling his decision, the judge was positively influenced by the defense’s arguments. When asked how much he charged Italian workers for a proxy, a shameful Naselli admitted that he required ten lire in gold, which corresponded to \$2.00. The fee was extremely high in proportion to the average salary of an Italian immigrant worker, which ranged between six and ten dollars a week. See “Contro le camorre consolari,” *Il Proletario*, September 24, 1905.

up their struggle, and continued exposing the corruption and mal-administration of the so called “*camorra coloniale*.”⁶⁸

The attack on the consulate was nothing compared to the warfare the *sovversivi* staged against the newspapers controlled by the *prominenti*. Supported by the church and Italian authorities, and financed by the most powerful men of the Little Italies, the Italian American conservative press became the most effective instrument to inspire nationalist sentiments among the immigrants and combat radicalism. For the *sovversivi*, mainstream newspapers like *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* (Italian-American Progress) and *L'Araldo Italiano* (The Italian Herald) were to be held in large part responsible for the moral degradation and apathy of the Italian communities.⁶⁹ Indeed, the *prominenti*'s press often worked against the best interests of their readers. Motivated exclusively by profit, these Italian papers used as their principal models sensational tabloids, flooding their columns with lurid details of murders, kidnappings, and passionate crimes. Fifty percent of their publishing space was devoted to ads, a large number of which were from medical imposters, real estate swindlers, and unscrupulous employment agents. Gino Speranza, a successful lawyer and reformer, lamented the poor quality of the Italian American

⁶⁸ The term *camorra coloniale* (colonial mafia) was coined by Tresca and was used regularly by the *sovversivi* to refer to the *prominenti*, the consular officials, and the Catholic priests.

⁶⁹ *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* was established in 1889 by Carlo Barsotti, a wealthy New York contractor-labor agent. It quickly became the most influential Italian daily newspaper in the United States with an estimated circulation of 118,58 by 1918. *L'Araldo Italiano* was established in 1894 by Giovanni Vicario and Vincenzo Polidori; by 1915 had a circulation of about 15,000. See George E. Pozzetta, “The Italian Immigrant Press of New York City: The Early Years, 1880-1915,” 240-255, and *N.W. Ayer & Son's Newspaper Annual and Directory* (Philadelphia: Ayer & Son, 1918).

commercial press, referring often to *Il Progresso* as a “blackmailing journal.”⁷⁰ Even *La Follia*, a popular non-radical, humorous newspaper, made fun of the editors and contributors of newspapers like *Il Progresso* exposing their intellectual mediocrity, materialism, and even their grammatical errors!

For the *sorversivi*, the press was an instrument of political information, education, social criticism, and ideological debate. It embodied a principle, an idea, a moral tendency – the ultimate expression of the collective interests of a group. In contrast to mainstream Italian American journalists, who essentially wrote for money, the *sorversivi* published, edited and wrote their papers out of political conviction, and only in a few cases took regular salaries. Conservative papers, on the other hand, lacked any program, value, or ideology, their only goal being profit making. They were the most evident exemplification of the large influence of established *camorra coloniale* (colonial bossism), which pursued self-interest at the expense of the workers.

In a series of articles called: “Let’s boycott bourgeois papers,” *Il Proletario* conducted in the early twentieth century an intense campaign against the most popular Italian American newspapers.⁷¹ The main goal of this journalistic warfare was to expose the dishonesty, self-interest, and hypocrisy of these “men of letters,” and generate anger and skepticism among the immigrants. As Serrati pointed out in a letter to the comrades: “The Italian immigrant working class will never achieve consciousness of its interests as

⁷⁰ Pozzetta, “The Italian Immigrant Press,” 243.

⁷¹ “Il Giornalismo coloniale. Boicottiamo i giornali italiani!,” *Il Proletario*, June 28, 1902-August 16, 1902, 1. See also: “Contro i camorristi del Progresso,” September 6, 1902, 1; and “La bile di un asino al soldo di Barsotti,” November 20, 1904, 1.

long as there exists a press hungry for dollars, flattering and false, which corrupts the workers' character and disfigures their mind and heart."⁷²

As with the consuls, the *sovversivi* often engaged in fierce personal polemics against the main figures of Italian American commercial press. The most hated were Carlo Barsotti, Agostino De Biasi, respectively the publisher and the best known journalist of *Il Progresso*, and Luigi Barzini, chief editor of the pro-Fascist *Il Corriere d'America*. In the thirties, the main enemy became instead Generoso Pope, who had purchased both newspapers along with *Il Bollettino della Sera* and used his influence to spread Fascism among the immigrants.

Student of immigrant communities, Luigi Villari described these prominent men as "pseudo-intellectual failures, ex-barbers, ex-pharmacists, ex-bank clerks, ex-tailors, who take to the pen because they failed at other trades."⁷³ They were constant targets of offenses, accusations, and satire in the radical press. Called the worse imaginable names – "cancerous plagues," "rotten rubbish," "kings of *cafoni*" – and compared to odious beasts such as asses, pigs, or chameleons, they embodied everything the *sovversivi* hated: selfishness, opportunism, falsehood, and greed. As one reader put it, they were "common people with no morals or conscience.... Every day there emerge new ones like poisoned mushrooms. They are all the same: they belong to the category of the cheats and thieves."⁷⁴

⁷² G.M. Parrasio (Serrati), "Ai compagni ed ai simpatizzanti!," *Il Proletario*, August 23, 1902, Supplement n. 34.

⁷³ Gino Speranza, "Review of Villari's *Gli Stati Uniti*," *The Survey*, 1914, 85. Cited in Pozzetta, "the Italian Immigrant Press," 36.

⁷⁴ "I prominenti," *Il Grido della Folla*, June 15, 1916, 4.

Another topic of discussion in the radical press was the so-called “woman’s question.” Although men dominated the Italian American Left, radical papers embraced the cause of women’s emancipation and equality, stressing the importance of mobilizing female workers. As early as 1890s *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, *Il Proletario* and especially *La Questione Sociale* featured articles of a feminist nature, many written by women themselves. In a special section called “*La pagina della donna*,” (the woman’s page), socialist and anarchist Italian immigrant women addressed their *compagne* (female comrades), exposing their double oppression (by capitalism and by men) and urging their “sisters” to join the revolutionary vanguard. Maria Roda’s appeal to her female co-workers in 1897 was probably the most powerful of all calls to feminist action. “Let’s show,” she wrote, “to the man who suppresses our will, who does not allow us to think and act freely, who considers us inferior to him, imposing on us his authority, as father, brother and husband, and, believing himself stronger than us, tramples us, oppresses us, and sometimes even hits us -- let’s show him that we want freedom and equality too.”⁷⁵ In another powerful manifesto, “Alba” emphasized that: “we women, more than anybody else should be revolutionaries. Not only are we oppressed and despised like men, we also are haggled and weighted flesh of pleasure. We should be the first to support the anarchist-socialist-revolutionary movement because it only can bring peace to our hovels and free us from the yoke of the capitalist, the priest, the state, and the husband too.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Maria Roda, “Alle operaie,” *La Questione Sociale*, September 15, 1897, 4.

⁷⁶ Alba, “Alle mie compagne,” *Il Grido degli oppressi*, December 9, 1893, 2, and “Due metodi,” December 30, 1893, 1. See also in *La Questione Sociale* Maria Barbieri, “Ribelliamoci!,” November 18, 1905; Anna Maria Mozzoni, “Alle figlie del popolo,” July 15, 1895, 3-4; Virgilia Buongiorno, “Alle compagne lavoratrici,” October 15, 1895, 4; A. Ferretti, “La donna. Com’era, come e’ e come sara’,” February 29 1896, 2; Evening, “La

Women organizers powerfully denounced sexism, but they also blamed women for being vain, superficial, and interested only in mundane affairs and gossip. As they explained, these attitudes reinforced men's views of women as intellectually inferior, and represented a major obstacle for women's emancipation. "How can we gain the trust of men," wrote another woman under the name Titi, "if all we worry about is our aesthetic appearance?"⁷⁷

L'Operaia was the first Italian working class paper for women. It was launched by Alfredo Consiglio and Luigi Antonini in 1913 through Local 25 of the ILGWU to encourage unionism among Italian American women. Like other labor publications, *L'Operaia* functioned as the union's primary vehicle of information and propaganda. Its eight pages contained announcements of meetings and conferences, new accounts on strikes, labor reforms and movement activities, as well as working class literature and poetry.

Sold at 50 cents a year, *L'Operaia*'s primary mission was to make women realize that they were being exploited and that only through unionism and solidarity they could improve their conditions. This message was perhaps best illustrated by a drawing that pictured a woman in the act of protecting with a sword her children from the attack of an aggressive eagle. The following phrase accompanied the drawing: "ITALIAN WOMEN! – Rise, you too, in defense of your children against the rapacious eagle that wants to starve us out: Capitalism!" *L'Operaia*'s editors understood that the major obstacle in

donna dell'avvenire," and A. Guabello, "Alle donne," February 18, 1899, 1-2; Susanna Carruette, "La donna del domani," November 6, 1901, 2.

⁷⁷ Titi, "Alle mie sorelle proletarie," *La Questione Sociale*, June 23, 1906, 1. She wrote regularly between June 9 and August 25, 1906.

organizing female workers rested in southern Italian culture with its rigid family structure and gendered division of roles.

Bellalma Forzato-Spezia, the paper's most important female contributor, in her articles urged women to break free from the hegemony of the priest and the Catholic Church and attend instead union meetings and other political gatherings. She showed how religion with its emphasis on women's acquiescence and submission to men was probably the strongest deterrent to organizing Italian working women, and stressed education as the key to their enfranchisement and emancipation.⁷⁸ She also discussed the woman question in relation to the law, showing how the legal code discriminated against women, on the assumption that they were "incapable," "irresponsible," and "weak."⁷⁹ Feminist issues were not confined to *L'Operaia* alone. *Il Fuoco* and *Il Lavoro*, for example, had regular columns aimed at discussing "the wide and complex problem of the woman in relation to the modern times, considering her a social entity that thinks and acts, instead of merely erotic material."⁸⁰

However, the attitudes of radical men towards the woman question were not free of prejudices and masculine rhetoric. On the one hand, many radical men, notably the anarchists, understood that women's traditional roles had to be reconsidered and men themselves had to redefine the way they treated their wives and daughters. On the other

⁷⁸ Bellalma Forzato-Spezia, "Alle madri proletarie," and "Emancipiamoci!," *L'Operaia*, September 13, 1913, 7 and January 10, 1914, 6.

⁷⁹ "La donna nella legislazione moderna," *L'Operaia*, December 11, 1913, 4

⁸⁰ Isabel Bass, "La pagina della donna nuova," *Il Fuoco*, March 31, 1915, 7, and April 15, 1915, 12. Bellalma Forzato Spezia, "Nel mondo femminile," March 10, 1917, 2; Ines Bidelli, "La donna," April 21, 1917, 2; R. Rende, "Sul femminismo," January 19, 2-3, all in *Il Lavoro*.

hand, as Titi wrote: “There are many men who claim they are free thinkers, socialists, anarchists but within the family are the opposite of the propagandist, the apostle, the emancipated individual.”⁸¹ Similarly, while women stressed the need of working as a precondition of female emancipation and economic independence, some men insisted that the natural and most suitable place for a woman was the house. Echoing the views of Italian socialist Tullio Rossi-Doria, many insisted that female industrial work represented a threat to the family as well as to men’s employment, leading to a decrease of salaries and job competition.⁸² Emphasizing women’s alleged innate qualities, like sensitivity, gentleness, idealism, and altruism, men argued that women’s special contributions to the socialist cause lay in their role as mothers and educators of tomorrow’s generation. “No one better than the woman -- wrote *L'Operaia* – can carry on such an important act of redemption: no one better than her can preach the gospel of human brotherhood, adding to the sweet word the charitable work of social philanthropy.”⁸³

Among other publications, *Il Lavoro* is a perfect example of the *sovversivi*’s ambiguous position towards the woman question.⁸⁴ While it welcomed women as partners who should attend meetings and write articles, it was yet quite reluctant to support unconditionally suffrage for women or total equality between genders. *Il Lavoro*’s editors supported feminism “as long as it did not question the specificity of the

⁸¹ Titi, “Alle mie sorelle proletarie,” and “Alle donne: Emancipiamoci!,” *La Questione Sociale*, July 7, 1906, 3.

⁸² See above all: “Madre Operaia,” *La Questione Sociale*, May 3, 1902, 1.

⁸³ “La donna nuova,” *L'Operaia*, October 4, 1913, 7.

respective genders, or attempted to set women against men.”⁸⁵ Indeed, most Italian radical papers never completely separated the woman question from the issue of working class struggle. Women’s oppression for them was related not to gender but class. Even communist papers opposed feminists’ attempts at seeking unity within female ranks first, and persisted in viewing women’s liberation and activism as something to be worked out with male comrades. “The Communist Party,” wrote *Alba Nuova*, “must not organize women in independent organizations. Rather it must include them in local political organizations as members with rights identical to those of men, allowing them to participate in all directive organs and giving them access to all positions within the party.”⁸⁶

Prejudices against women surfaced even more powerfully in the private life of the *sorversivi*. When Angela Bambace married Romolo Camponeschi, her father’s choice as a suitor and husband, in 1919 she had to suspend her union activism. Her decision to return to work and to resume her political activism in 1925, breaking away from the traditional role of wife and mother, eventually led to their divorce. During the legal litigation for the custody of their children, he used her political radicalism as evidence of her unfitness as a mother and she lost the custody of the children. When she fell in love and moved in with Luigi Quintiliano, an anarchist who had emigrated from Rome in

⁸⁴ Benedicte Deschamps, “*Il Lavoro* (1915-1932),” *Italian American Review*, 8,1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 85-120.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 96.

⁸⁶ “Le donne nel partito,” *Alba Nuova*, February 16, 1924, 3.

1910, things did not change much. For all his radicalism and libertarian ideas, Quintiliano too resented her political involvement and demanded her unconditional attention.⁸⁷

Quintiliano's contradictory behavior – a radical outside, a despot at home – was not anomalous. Arturo Giovannitti, a man often cited by his contemporaries for his sensitivity and devotion to the workers, verbally abused his wife.⁸⁸ Carlo Tresca, during his twelve-year relationship with Elisabeth Gurley Flynn, was chronically unfaithful to her, including an affair with her younger sister, Bina. As Flynn sadly commented in her memoir "...if I would only stay home and 'keep house' for Carlo all would be well. But I rejected that solution. I said: He had a good Italian wife who cooked spaghetti and was a model housekeeper. Why didn't he stay with her?"⁸⁹

Indeed, it was difficult even for Italian radical women to liberate themselves from the idea of domesticity and their traditional roles of wives and mothers. With the important exception of anarchist women, who, consistent with their ideological precepts, rejected the systems of power and authority within their family too, most Italian women looked for a compromise between old values and new ones.⁹⁰

Despite its ambiguities, the radical press was of paramount importance in the fight to awaken and organize women. By the end of 1910s, Italian immigrant women had not only become faithful union members but also active militants. When, following the

⁸⁷ Jean Scarpaci, "Angela Bambace and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union: The Search for an Elusive Activist," 104-110.

⁸⁸ See Len Giovannitti, *The Nature of the Beast* (New York: Random House, 1977).

⁸⁹ Elisabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl* (New York: International Publishers, 1955), 333-334.

second Lawrence Strike, Local 89, so called in commemoration of the year of the French Revolution, was established on November 11, 1919. many women were part of its administration.⁹¹

The radical press accomplished other important goals as well. It was instrumental in raising class-consciousness and advancing the moral and social conditions of Italian American communities. In opposition to the commercial press that often worked against the best interests of the immigrants, the *sorversivi*'s papers showed a genuine concern for the welfare of their co-nationals. High ethical standards, a noble sense of mission, and a high quality of writing testified to the *sorversivi*'s belief in the educational value of the press. Through their papers, they fought countless battles to defend the workers' rights and combat discrimination, illiteracy, bossism, social injustice, economic inequality, and Fascism. These campaigns brought direct benefits not only to the workers but to the ethnic group as a whole.

⁹⁰ See Elisabetta Vezzosi, "Immigrate italiane e socialismo negli Stati Uniti agli inizio del Novecento," *Il Veltro: Rivista della civiltà italiana*, January-April 1990, 163.

⁹¹ Among them were Laura di Guglielmo, Anna Fama, Maria and Angela Bambace, Lina Manetta, Angelna Limanti, Maria Prestianni, Anna Squillante and Millie Terreno. See Furio, "The Cultural Background of the Italian Immigrant Woman," in Pozzetta, ed., *Pane e Lavoro*, 95-96.

CHAPTER III ITALIAN AMERICAN LITERARY RADICALISM

*"What intellectuals write for public consumption is more important than what movements they join or what petitions they sign."*¹

In addition to parties, labor unions, and newspapers Italian American radical politics also spawned a rich artistic and literary culture. The revolutionary socialist Arturo Giovannitti, for example, emerged as one of the most articulate poetic voices of the radical movement of the early twentieth century, greatly admired not only by his co-nationals but by Americans as well.² Sculptor and illustrator Onorio Ruotolo became one of New York's most distinguished artists,³ while Pietro Di Donato, whose *Christ in Concrete* was chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club novel in 1939, has been recognized as one of the most effective "proletarian" writers.⁴ While we now know something of these

¹ Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), xv.

² Giovannitti's best poems are included in two American anthologies of verses, Louis Untermeyer, *American Poetry Since 1900* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1923) and Joyce Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964). There are also four volumes of Giovannitti's poems, two in Italian and two in English: *Arrows in the Gale* (Riverside, Conn.: Hillacre Bookhouse, 1914), *Parole e Sangue* (New York: Labor Press, 1938), *Quando canta il gallo* (Chicago: E. Clemente & Sons, 1957) and *The Collected Poems of Arturo Giovannitti* (Chicago: E. Clemente & Sons, 1962)

³ Among Ruotolo's most important works are: bust of Theodore Dreiser, life masks of Helen Keller and Ann Sullivan Macy (National Portrait Gallery); bust of Lenin, "Doomed," Statue of Black Woman (Stanford's Cantor Center for Visual Arts); bust of Caruso (Metropolitan Opera, Lincoln Center); and the Woodrow Wilson Memorial (University of Virginia).

⁴ See for example Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (London and New York: Verso, 1998).

authors, no attempt has been made to study the larger radical culture of which they were a part. Martino Marazzi has recently published an important study on the literary world of Little Italies; important, despite its serious shortcomings, because it also includes the literary contributions of the first generation of Italian Americans radicals.⁵ Fred L. Gardaphè has looked instead at the radical writing of second-generation Italian Americans who emerged from the Depression (Pietro Di Donato, John Fante, Jerre Mangione, Frances Winwar, Louis Fraina, and Carl Marzani), a tradition almost completely ignored by American scholars.⁶ In general, however, as Pernicone once lamented, the role of literature in the life of the *sovversivi* and the narratives, poems, and dramas they produced still remain an untouched field.⁷ Significantly, this indifference

⁵ Martino Marazzi, *Misteri di Little Italy: Storie e testi della letteratura italoamericana* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001). Like other survey studies, Marazzi's book tends to inform rather than explain. He also discusses literature from a strictly literary point of view, failing to contextualize the culture of Italian immigrants and obscuring the enormous political distance that separated the *sovversivi*'s culture from the world of *prominenti*. Another important contribution to the history of Italian American literature is the anthology in two volumes edited by Francesco Durante, *Italoamericana. Storia e letteratura degli italiani negli Stati Uniti, 1776-1880* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001), the second volume has not been published yet.

⁶ See Fred L. Gardaphè, "Left Out: Three Italian American Writers of the 1930s," in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture*, Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon, eds. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 60-77, and "Follow the Red Brick Road: Recovering Traditions of Italian/American Writers," in Philip V. Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer, eds., *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism: Ideas, Politics, and Labor*, forthcoming. The only American scholar to include Italian American radical writers in discussing the 1930s culture is Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front*. French Warren in his classic *Social Novel at the End of an Era* does acknowledge Di Donato but his discussion is very brief and dismissive.

⁷ Nunzio Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's "Son of the Abyss" and the Westmoreland Strike of 1910-1911)," *Italian Americana*, XVII, 2 (Summer 1999), 178.

towards the radical tradition persists even though more and more scholars recognize that the best early Italian American writing came from the pen of political radicals.⁸

The reasons for the lack of interest in Italian American literary radicalism can be attributed in part to objective difficulties inherent in the sources themselves (almost all writings are in Italian) but also to the marginal role that American and Italian American literary studies have traditionally given to radicalism. Although the legacy of the United States cultural Left is now under serious reconsideration (especially regarding the thirties),⁹ conventional approaches of literary professionals, with their emphasis on the aesthetic categories of "quality," "value," and "cultural achievement," have tended to treat literary radicalism as a subaltern phenomenon, dismissing it, often indiscriminately, as nothing but political propaganda, and assuming that the official attitude of socialists, anarchists, and communists towards culture was a negative one.¹⁰

Contrary to general perception, the *sovversivi* held literary and artistic expressions in very high regard. "Art," explained the communist-oriented paper *Alba Nuova*, "is the

⁸ See for example Kenneth Ciongoli and Jay Parini, eds., *Beyond the Godfather: Italian American Writers on the Real Italian American Experience* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997). The director of the Casa Italiana at Columbia University, Giuseppe Prezzolini, who was also a supporter of Fascism, in his study of Italian immigrants, *I trapiantati*, admitted that the *sovversivi* wrote in a much better and more sophisticated language than mainstream or professional writers.

⁹ In addition to classics such as Walter B. Rideout's *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954* (1965), Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left* (1961), and James B. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans* (1968), the new scholarship of American radical culture include the works of Alan Wald (1987, 1992), Cary Nelson (1989), Paula Rabinowitz (1991), James Bloom (1992), Barbara Foley (1993), and Michael Denning (1998).

highest expression of the human mind,"¹¹ and "to disregard the importance of culture and education in the name of political activism is the equivalent of sowing without reaping."¹² Not only did the *sovversivi* recognize the central role of art and literature in human life, they also engaged in sophisticated discussions about the relation of art to revolution, together with an effort to create an entirely new aesthetic culture to fit the needs of workers.¹³ Nor were they indifferent to canons of beauty and style; as one anarchist pointed out, "independently from the subject or the topic that a writer chooses to focus on, the most important thing is the art of writing, the artist's ability to write well."¹⁴

Moreover, the *sovversivi*'s interest and sensitiveness to literature and art is evident from the pages of their newspapers, which published in great abundance serialized novels, short dramas, poetry, and drawings. Many of these writings were the works of great contemporary novelists but original writings, mostly in the form of short stories and poems, were also regularly featured. With some significant exceptions, these were not the works of literary professionals but the endeavors of amateurs and self-taught workers, who often used pseudonyms or did not even bother to sign their works. The plots varied but the themes were those typical of proletarian and socialist literature (I use these terms interchangeably), by which I mean a literature written for the workers, about workers, and

¹⁰ For this argument see especially Alan M. Wald, Introduction to Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, first edition 1961).

¹¹ Salvato Rossi, "L'arte e la rivoluzione," *Alba Nuova*, May 1, 1922, 2.

¹² "La cultura proletaria," unsigned, *Alba Nuova*, September 1, 1923, 2.

¹³ See for example: "Il socialismo e l'arte," unsigned, *Il Proletario*, February 17 and 24, 1907, 3-4.

from a left-wing perspective: narratives of political oppression and injustice, working class life, and revolution. The term “proletarian” in American literature is generally used to refer to the literary works produced by the generation of artists and intellectuals of the thirties, who aligned themselves with the Left and revealed a fervent class consciousness.¹⁵

However, as the following discussion will show, the literary writing of Italian American radicals was in many ways proletarian long before the Depression-era. True, the *sovversivi* never used the term proletarian literature, but they did consciously align with the workers and were directly involved in the labor movements of their time. This allowed them to write from the “inside” and speak of a world the workers could identify with. Moreover, like most proletarian literature, Italian American radical stories and poems included agitators and workers as the main heroes and overt political propaganda as a constitutive part of the text. In this respect, Italian American radical literature would probably fall in the category of agitprop production, or in other words directly political art, art of commitment, art with a message.¹⁶ Behind the literary pieces we can always feel the writer’s sense of responsibility and commitment to transform society. The tone is usually dramatic, the message rhetorical, the intent explicitly didactic.

¹⁴ Carlo Prato, “L’arte di scrivere,” *Il Novatore*, March 16, 1911, 87.

¹⁵ Discussions about the definition of “proletarian” art and literature dominate literary studies of the 1930s. For a good overview of the scholarship see Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), especially chapter 3.

¹⁶ Agitprop is the contraction of agitation and propaganda. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 57.

While many would probably see in this overt political propaganda the major weakness of Italian American radical production (or for that matter of all radical works), along with a justification of its alleged inferiority, I believe that a close and serious reading of these texts can tell us much about the political base on which Italian American radical culture was constructed.

Thus, instead of defining abstractly Italian American radical literature, in the following pages I will analyze some of the texts themselves. What kinds of writings, genres, language, and formulas did the *sorversivi* produce? What literary traditions were they indebted to? What were the sense, tone, and intention of their writing? Finally, what do they tell us about the Italian American experience? By discussing these questions, I hope to legitimize the rereading of this literature and encourage a re-evaluation of the Left cultural tradition in Italian Americana, a tradition that despite its richness has not been yet acknowledged.

The novelettes

Until the 1930s, when the expansion of mass culture and secondary education made books more marketable, the central literary form of Italian American radicalism was the short story, not the novel. The absence of novels had probably to do also with the *sorversivi*'s intense absorption in labor struggles and propaganda, which made short stories more suitable to express their political culture. Called *novelle* or *bozzetti*, these tales ranged in length from about 1,000 to 5,000 words and were published in newspapers and magazines, appearing, if they were too long, in serial form in two or three

consecutive issues.¹⁷ Focusing on a single major incident and character, most of them were variations on the theme of class oppression and social inequality: they were explorations into how “the other half” lived, dramatizations of the world of labor and immigration. Their primary characters were working-class men and women, prostitutes, beggars, orphans, hoboes – in other words the oppressed, the poor, the outcast. Using the same literary strategies and narrative modes of muck-racking literature, these stories aimed at describing and exposing the bitter conditions brought by industrial capitalism, while at the same time giving expression to the struggle and aspirations of radical agitators. Realism, in this respect, was closely identified with social purpose.

Not surprisingly, immigrant life, with its degradation and hardship, was one of the most popular subjects of Italian American narration. The massive migration of poor Italians between 1890 and 1920 represented without doubt the starting point in the making of the Italian American literary consciousness. Like most new immigrants, Italians lived in horribly crowded and unsanitary slums and worked under brutal conditions for preposterously low pay.¹⁸ Struck by the poor living conditions of their co-nationals, many felt compelled to voice the disillusionment of life in the New World. For example, “Scenes from the Street” recreates the desperation of an immigrant woman who

¹⁷ Significantly, as a modern genre, the novelette originated in the fourteenth century in Italy with Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, a collection of one-hundred short stories.

¹⁸ For a first-hand documentary study of early immigrant life see especially Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971, first edition 1890).

has no money to feed her children. A victim of capitalism, she is eventually arrested by a policeman for accepting a crust of bread from a kind passer-by.¹⁹

Similarly, "A Little Immigrant" tells the story of a young Italian boy, "about ten years old, thin, pale, with big and intense eyes that revealed infinite sadness," who is forced to sell plaster figurines in the rich neighborhoods of New York City.²⁰ The poor life of the child is set against the background of the indifferent, superficial world of the well-to-do families. As Walter Rideout has pointed out, the device of juxtaposition was a standard technique in radical novels.²¹ The contrast, in this case, served to uncover the miserable conditions of life of the immigrants, to arouse moral indignation, social criticism and compassion, and, above all, to expose the faults of capitalism. The story ends with a cliché of socialist literature: the cry for revenge and promise of justice. Describing the death of the boy, who is knocked down by the carriage of a rich lady, the author emphatically declares: "The blood of one of the many martyrs of civilization has stamped on the rich clothes the curse of the unfortunates who demand justice – and will get it!"²² Significantly, this inclination to admonish and castigate connotes the degree to which the *sovversivi* believed in the imminent coming of the revolution and the inevitable overthrow of capitalism.

¹⁹ See for example: Fanny Barberis- Monticelli, "Scene della strada," *La Lotta*, February 20, 1909, 1, a story of an Italian woman arrested on the charge of begging.

²⁰ Matilde Bertoluzzi, "Il piccolo emigrato," *Il Proletario*, September 16, 1899, 2.

²¹ Walter B. Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965, first edition 1956), 16.

²² Bertoluzzi, "Il piccolo emigrato."

As these two stories exemplify, early Italian American radical writing had its roots in the literature of protest, social realism, and naturalism that emerged in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Zolà's novels seem in particular to have been a source of inspiration and a model for many stories. The *sorversivi*'s reading and admiration of Zolà is evident by the widespread publication in radical papers of his novels, famous citations, and critical reviews of his works. Like Zolà, Italian American radical novelists paid great attention to the setting of the story and the milieu of the characters, providing specific names of streets, cities, as well as detailed descriptions of personalities. This literary pretense to objectivity and historical truth was often reinforced by the use of subtitles like "*storia dal vero*" (real story), meant to assure readers of the authenticity of the narration. Italian American radical stories came especially close to Zolà in their attempt to illustrate the demoralizing effect of industrialization on human character and fate. For example, in "The anarchist and the prostitute" the author, a certain Ronchi, describes the condition of prostitution (the prostitute in the story is significantly named Nanà) as a cause/effect result of capitalist society.²³

The story entitled "Amate!" (You Must Love!) illustrates another characteristic theme of the *sorversivi*'s worldview: that of universal love and brotherhood. Elena is a woman destroyed by the loss of her beloved son. She feels she has no longer a reason to live, until, with the help of a socialist friend, she realizes that she can and must love again. "Love!... Love!...", insists the friend, "Human beings were born to love infinitely,

²³ A. Ronchi, "L'anarchico e la prostituta," *La Questione Sociale*, March 24, 1906, 3-4.

and the only law in our world should be love."²⁴ Expressions like this one, which dominate Italian American radical prose, shed light to the *sovversivi*'s idealistic and humanitarian spirit. Italian socialists, and even more so the anarchists, believed that human nature is fundamentally good and that it is the environment that promotes hatred. Consequently, they assumed that after socialism replaced the harsh and unjust structure of capitalism love would certainly rule.

The *sovversivi*'s belief in love, as the highest of all values, was consistent with their antimilitarism. Italian radicals had always been traditionally anti-military and anti-nationalistic. The reasons for their opposition were ethical, cultural, and, of course, political. Like other rebels, they traced the origins of militarism to economic and material interests, and considered it nothing more than an instrument of the established classes to oppress and suppress the working class.

As the First World War broke out, dozens of antimilitary stories were published in anarchist, socialist, and syndicalist papers.²⁵ Most of these tales dramatized the horror and brutality of the war. They mocked the patriotic and nationalist propaganda to which so many workers fell victim, and, through the dramatic experiences of fictional soldiers,

²⁴ Matilde Bertoluzzi, "Amate!," *Il Proletario*, November 25, 1899.

²⁵ See for example Evening, "Una fucilazione," *La Questione Sociale*, November 19, 1898, 2-3; E. Perrella, "Ricordi," *Avanti*, July 23, 1904, 3; Duvicu (Ludovico Caminita), "La guerra," *La Questione Sociale*, June 2, 1906, 3; Titi, "Bozzetto militare," *La Questione Sociale*, January 26, 1907, 3; Arturo Giovannitti, "Come era nel principio," *Il Fuoco*, April 15, 1915, 6-7, "Il disertore," *Il Fuoco*, May 31, 1915, and "La lanterna verde," *Il Fuoco*, November 1, 1914 (originally published with the title "La Cantoniera" in *Il Proletario*, September 17- October 15, 1909), "Una voce nella tempesta," *Lotta di classe*, May 3, 1918; Oronzina Tanzarella, "L'epidemia," *Lotta di classe*, March 31, 1916, 3.

mothers, and wives, showed the real side of war: the pain, destruction, and suffering caused by warfare. These stories attacked the rhetorical language of heroism (expressions such as "sacred duty," "holy war," "crusade for democracy"), challenging the construct of manhood in terms of physical strength, impassivity, and virility, that the conservative press blatantly employed to encourage patriotism. Far from positive, these traits -- insisted radical writers -- incarnated the brutal, primitive and irrational side of men, destroying the most important element of human character, dignity.

The comments of the anarchist poet Virgilia D'Andrea on the subject of the war are illuminating. When asked whether it was right to abandon the national fight of the Italian "brothers" of Trento and Trieste she answered: "And the men of the rest of world, aren't they equally our brothers? Those Italians who are forced to go abroad to work, don't they feel more at home among the textile workers, the farmers, the miners in Germany than among the arrogant and insolent prominent men in our country?"²⁶

The most prolific and popular anti-war writer was Arturo Giovannitti, whose stories were published above all in *Il Fuoco*, the bimonthly he edited with Onorio Ruotolo in 1914-15.²⁷ The most lyrical and intense of these stories, *Come era nel principio* (As It was in the Beginning), which in 1917 was transformed into a successful play, described a mutilated soldier and a mourning woman who met in a destroyed, empty village after the war was over. The man represents anguish, violence, death; the woman

²⁶ Virgilia D'Andrea, *Torçe nella notte* (New York, 1933), 31.

²⁷ For a more detailed discussion of Giovannitti's stories see Marcella Bencivenni, "A Magazine of Art and Struggle: The Experience of *Il Fuoco*, 1914-1915," *Italian American Review*, 8,1 (Spring/Summer 2001).

instead stands for hope, peace, and life. Significantly, Giovannitti chooses May 1, Europe's labor day, as the imaginary date of his story, denoting a symbolic new beginning. "Today," the woman explains, "the great mystery of life will occur again.... But this time the apple that I eat and you eat after me will be that of supreme knowledge, and all those who are born of me will not kill their brothers and will not earn bread by the sweat of their brows." When the man asks the woman how they should name their firstborn, whether *Amore* (Love) is appropriate, she replies: "No, it will not be a man, it will be a woman and we'll name her *Giustizia* (Justice)."²⁸ (In Italian the noun *amore* is masculine while *giustizia* is feminine)

Italian American radical fiction took also the narrative form of Christian parables or fairy tales, using religious allegories, symbols, and metaphors to make political propaganda. Like the religious parables of the Gospel, these radical tales illustrated a moral lesson, using characters and actions that personified the qualities and meanings that the author wanted to be read beneath the story itself. In one instance, for example, the socialist agitator is compared to a madman (and implicitly to Christ): unappreciated and mocked at first by his countrymen, he then becomes the spokesman for the commoners of his village.²⁹ Despite its exaggerated rhetoric and prophetic tone, this kind of writing is important because it reveals the religious texture of the *sovversivi*'s culture. Even though they overtly rejected religion, the Catholic culture in which they were raised still infiltrated their imagination, surfacing in the form of symbols, myths, and images. At the

²⁸ Arturo Giovannitti, "Come era nel principio," *Il Fuoco*, 7.

same time, however, the use of religious allegories may have easily been a deliberate strategy to attract immigrants, especially women.

Another popular theme of Italian American literary radicalism was that of conversion to socialism. Usually written using the first person as the narrative voice, these stories traced the worker's ideological evolution, from the passive acceptance of the status quo to class awakening, and, eventually, the acceptance of socialist principles. For example "The Night of a Worker" is at once a lament of the miserable life of workers and a utopian vision of a just society where there are no oppressed, no poor, no slaves. No matter how poor the results, these texts are historically significant because they document the pride which the workers felt for the incipient literature of their own class.³⁰

Finally, Italian American radical stories also took the form of direct dialogue among workers. This narrative mode was first used by anarchists, notably Errico Malatesta, but became a very popular form of literary propaganda in all radical papers.³¹ The dialogues involved two or more persons, either men or women, and recreated real or

²⁹ "Il matto," unsigned, *Il Proletario*, May 1, 1902, 5-6. See also "I doveri dei ricchi," unsigned, *Il Proletario*, October 28, 1899, 2-3.

³⁰ G. "La notte di un operaio," *Avanti*, December 31, 1904, 2; "Quello che dice un contadino," unsigned, *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, June 14, 1893, 3; Senofonte Entrata, "Atto di fede del contadino," *Avanti*, October 4, 1904, 4.

³¹ Errico Malatesta, *Fra contadini*, and *Al caffè*. See for example "Dialogo tra mastro Onofrio e mastro Cola," *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, October 24, 1892, 2-3; "Tra padre e figlio," *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, March 18, 1893, 2-3; "Quattro chiacchiere," unsigned, *Il Proletario*, October 7, 1899, 2-3; Il villano, "Cristiani e socialisti," *Il Proletario*, October 21, 1899, 2-3; "La proprietà," unsigned, *Il Proletario*, November 4, 1899, 2; Paola Lombroso, "Il socialismo in salotto," *Il Proletario*, July 7, 1900, 2; "Il diritto del

likely possible conversations among Italian immigrants. One of the speakers was a bigot, fatalist, skeptical of politics, and submissive; the other was instead rebellious, erudite, and aggressive. Using the question/answer format, the writer explained complex principles and theories of socialism and anarchism (such as the abolition of private property, the concept of class struggle, the importance of unions, or anticlericalism), clarifying some of the most widespread misconceptions about radical ideologies.

- Is it really true – asks a young lady – that socialists want to share everything?
- Miss, you must be kidding me....
- No, no for real! I heard it from a married man, a “*commendatore*,” well educated, an economist!
- Then, Mister *Commendatore* must have made fun of you, he was in bad faith, or he is stupid. No, we, socialists do not want to share everything, first of all because a just distribution of goods would be impossible. Men would naturally want to be in competition, the strongest, smartest, and luckiest would prevail, individual conflicts would arise and slowly we would be in the same situation as today: rich on the one side, poor on the other. Instead, we want that the means of production, land and all that is used to produce, become collective property, the patrimony of all, not a few.³²

Similarly, in a column under the title of “Popular Propaganda,” *La Questione Sociale*

published a conversational serial between two fictional immigrants, Giacomo and

Michele, with the obvious intent of educating its readers to the principles of anarchism.

- Well *compare* Giacomo, I will let you come to my house because I have known you for the longest time but the fact that you belong to the anarchist sect does bother me; well – if you pardon my frankness – I believe you have lost your mind.
- I am grateful – dear Michele – of the affection you have for me, but don’t you see? You feel sorry for me because you don’t know what is anarchy. Otherwise you’d be an anarchist too.

padrone,” *Il Proletario*, August 16, 1900, 2-3; “L’alcool è veleno,” *La Questione Sociale*, November 8, 1914, 3.

³² Carlo Monticelli, “Il diritto di proprietà”, *Il Proletario*, July 28, 1900, 2-3.

- No, never. It's enough for me to know that anarchists don't want any master, religion, state, or motherland. They want to destroy society. You call that nothing?
- No, my dear friend, anarchists do not aim at destroying society. What do we mean by society? An association of individuals who work for the commonwealth, because they know that other people's good is their good too. In other words, in a society everyone must work for the collective welfare if...
- Excuse me; what does COLLECTIVE mean?
- It means of EVERYBODY. Thus, all of us must work to improve the conditions of all if we want to improve our own. [...] Now, this should be the case, but it is not. Then how could you say that we want to destroy society when, considered in its real meaning, society does not even exist?
- Slow down, *compare* Giacomo. Do not confound me. I, for society, mean all those things that govern us, that rule us, that make us live.
- I see, you mean all institutions that constitute our actual social system.
- Exactly. See you can speak like a literary man.
- Well, the institutions, yes we do want to destroy them and we are right to do so. You'll see...³³

Two things are striking about these pieces: the vivacity of the language, informal and yet very precise and alive, and the literary artificiality of the conversations despite their pretense to realism. This peculiar literary form was probably a response to the problem of education among Italian immigrants and peasants. It moved away from abstract theories and explained in simple words, in a language the workers could understand, the principles and goals of various radical ideologies, while deconstructing the prejudices and bigotry of Italian immigrant culture.

This literary strategy was also used to educate Italian workers, especially women, to the principles of unionism and combat the problem of "scabbism." For example, the labor paper *Il Lavoro* had in 1917 a regular column called "*Cose piane tra vicine*" (Soft Things Among Female Neighbors), which employed the conversational format to

³³ Sereno. "Propaganda popolare," *La Questione Sociale*, December 15, and December 22, 1906, 2.

encourage the unionization of women.³⁴ Drawing inspiration from genuine settings and characters, these dialogues used a “real” language, often characterized by ironic and satirical tones to accentuate the ignorance and naiveté of immigrants.

Besides the major subjects with which most of these stories were concerned – conversion to socialism, the inevitability of socialist revolution, immigrant life, anti-militarism, propaganda, -- Italian American radical fiction also displayed themes and narrative strategies typical of popular romance. For example, the passionate, difficult love between a man and a woman from different social classes or different political beliefs was a common plot used to popularize radical ideas. In one of the stories, Pietro Zanelli is a well-educated Italian immigrant, libertarian, and anti-militarist. He belongs to a Socialist circle, and writes for the party’s newspaper articles against the government, the priests, and the bourgeoisie. Unfortunately, he is in love with Marta, a rich and beautiful girl, whose family has political ideas very different from Pietro. It is the second year of the First World War and Marta decides to participate in a military parade that will take place on Fifth Avenue to support the United States’ entry to the conflict. Only when she reads the pain and contempt in Pietro’s eyes does she realize the implications of her action. Terribly sorry, she asks for his forgiveness and promises him she will never obstruct his political ideas. They eventually get married (she has to be content with civil marriage) and live happily ever after.³⁵

³⁴ See for example Nerina Gilioli Volenterio, “Cose piane tra vicine,” *Il Lavoro*, August 25, 1917, 3, and October 27, 1917, 2.

³⁵ G. Procopio, “La Vendetta di Marta,” *Lotta di Classe*, June 2 through June 16, 1916.

The theme of impossible love due to political circumstances became particularly widespread in anti-Fascist literature. Cesiria is a young peasant girl, living with her old father and her brother Attilio, an idler and bully, addicted to gambling and fraud, who joins the Fascist "*squadra d'azione*" of his town. When Cesiria falls in love with her neighbor Ambrogio, a serious young man, who spends his free time reading libertarian books and studying social issues, Attilio confronts his sister with the intention of putting an end to their relationship. In contrast to the naïve female character of the previous story, Cesiria exhibits a strong personality and political consciousness of her own. Ready to die for her love, if necessary, she does not let her brother intimidate her and rages against him: "From idler to slacker the step was short: at last you became a disgusting criminal!"³⁶

Similarly, Clara Vacirca's serialized novel *Cupido tra le camicie nere* (Cupid Among the Black Shirts) used romance to spread anti-Fascist sentiments. Fascism, with its oppressive methods, is the major obstacle to the pure and great love of two subversives.³⁷ What is interesting in these stories is the use of literary conventions and themes typical of melodrama -- sensation, mawkish sentiment, bourgeois setting -- in combination with the principles of engaged, committed art. Despite their contempt for bourgeois culture, the *sovversivi* were unable to break completely free from the canons of popular literature, and made use in their stories of intricate plots, suspense, and happy

³⁶ Maltempo, "La verità: novella." *Libertas*, August 1927, 9-10.

³⁷ Published by La Strada Publishing Co., New York, 1938. By Clara Vacirca Palumbo see also the short story "Il Miracolo," (*Il Solco*, February 27, 1927, 39-41), in which she mocks religious bigotry and peasant culture.

ending. However, the use of melodrama was not necessarily passive: as with religion, the *sorversivi* may have very well consciously employed popular themes to attract more readers. The apparent conflict between the two genres was resolved by creating one-dimensional characters and stories with explicit revolutionary messages. The major goal in fact was to persuade the reader through the exemplary life of the hero, or heroine, to convert to radicalism.

The examples discussed above are only a few among the hundreds of Italian American voices which are lost in the pages of radical newspapers and periodicals. While the plots and themes are not entirely original, one is nevertheless struck by the abundance of the stories as well as the incredibly large number of common men and women who ventured into literary writing.³⁸

Poetry

Poetry was perhaps the richest, oldest, and most interesting expression of Italian American literary radicalism. Poetry indeed has always occupied a key role in the Italian literary tradition, assuming a myriad of forms -- from the popular folk poetry of the *cantastorie* (storytellers), to the classical epic of Dante or the romanticism of Leopardi. For generations of immigrants, poetry represented a way to retain a link to their native land and assess their *italianità*. The success and persistence of dialectal poetry over the

³⁸ "I monitori," unsigned, *La Questione Sociale*, July 24, 1906, 3; A. Alberti, "Barattin," *Lotta di Classe*, July 28, 1916, 3; Manfredi Bacciel, "Il suicidio di sua eccellenza," *Avanti*, June 25, 1904, 3; Adamo Zecchi, "Nobile cuore!," *Il Proletario*, August 2, 1902, 2-3.

years is a perfect example of the cultural and ethnic function of poetry among Italian immigrants.³⁹

The importance of poems in the culture of the *sorversivi* becomes particularly evident in the pages of the radical press, which abound in verses, often embellished with drawings, and occasionally published on the first page. Yet, with the single exception of Giovannitti's poetry, this important aspect of Italian American cultural identity has been completely, consciously or unconsciously, ignored -- buried in the pages of equally forgotten newspapers of the Italian immigrant Left. Like the prose, much of the poetic production is spoiled by excessive sentimentalism and revolutionary as well as populist rhetoric. Like much political and social verses, Italian American radical poetry overdoes what it attempts, overstressing its intention and message. But the kind of thoughts and feelings expressed in socialist lyrics are, because of their political significance and educational nature, difficult to manifest without faults of tone. The over-insistence and rhetoric that sound so old-fashioned today were a deliberate, conscious artistic choice to stir and inspire the reader. In other words, when we judge these poems we must always remember that they were written with the intention not to amuse but to educate. In addition, we must always be aware of the literary taste and manners (or aesthetic ideologies) that rule in any given period.⁴⁰ The sense of what is good, true, and beautiful

³⁹ On the dialectal poetry see for example, Vincenzo Ancona, *Malidittu la lingua/ Damned Language*, edited by Anna L. Chairetakakis and Joseph Sciorra, translated by Gaetano Cipolla (New York and Toronto: Legas, 1990), and Herman W. Haller, *The Other Italy: The Literary Canon in Dialect* (Toronto and London: The University of Toronto Press, 1999).

is not absolute but changes overtime, reflecting the standards and tastes of the culture it attempts to convey. As Wallace Sillanpoa pointed out in his break-through article on Giovannitti's poetry, radical poems "should be examined within the cultural context in which the poems were born and in the social context of their intended audience and effect."⁴¹

As in the case of fiction, Italian American radical poetry bore the specific influence of Italian literary traditions and genres, especially the social-realistic tradition of the late nineteenth century, the classical-humanist tradition (Leopardi, Foscolo, Pascoli), and the patriotic tradition of the post-Risorgimento (exemplified by Giosuè Carducci's anti-clerical, republican and libertarian poetry). The most admired poets were the so-called social poets or poets of social protest, notably Mario Rapisardi (1844-1912), Pietro Gori (1865-1911), also known as "the gentle anarchist" or "the knight of the ideal," and Ada Negri (1870-1945), the famous "poetess of revolt." Their poems were constantly reprinted in Italian American radical newspapers and magazines, especially from the early twentieth century to the First World War. Poems like Gori's "Primo Maggio" (The First of May) or Rapisardi's "Canto dei mietitori" (Ballad of the Harvesters) were indeed published so often, and in so many different papers, that they could be considered official anthems of the *sovversivi*'s culture.⁴²

⁴⁰ I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, first published in 1927), 208.

⁴¹ Wallace Sillanpoa, "The Poetry and Poetics of Arturo Giovannitti," in *The Melting Pot and Beyond: Italian Americans in the Year 2000*, Jerome Krase and William Egelman, eds. (Proceedings of the AIHA, 1987), 183.

But poetry in the *colonie italiane* was not exclusively imported from Italy. The Italian American radical movement indeed produced dozens of poets, some well educated and middle class in origin, others emerging from the ranks of the working class.⁴³ In addition to Giovannitti, among the most productive and interesting were Simplicio Righi, Alessandro Sisca, Antonino Crivello, Bellalma Forzato Spezia, Francesco Pitea, and Virgilia D'Andrea. These men and women, however, never considered themselves professional poets or literary persons. Instead, they saw themselves as social rebels, who experimented with poetry writing in their spare time, in addition to organizing the immigrants, founding newspapers, and participating in radical activities. Opposing the nineteenth-century concept of art for art's sake, Italian American radical poets, like most revolutionaries, used poetry as a vehicle to advocate a solution to the social problems of the time.

The generation of the *sovversivi* was born in the post-Risorgimento era (the years following the unification of Italy in 1861) and certainly absorbed the republicanism, anti-clericalism and socialist, libertarian ideas that circulated at the time. Yet, it would be a mistake to consider their poetry a mere carbon copy of that of the Old Country. Italian American poets may have looked back at their motherland for literary models and themes, but they drew inspiration from their American experience. The best Italian American

⁴² Along with Rapisardi, Gori and Negri, many other Italian poets of social protest, such as Felice Cavallotti (1842-1898), Domenico Milelli (1841-1905), Lorenzo Stecchetti (alias Olindo Guerrini, 1845-1916), and Corrado Corradino (1852-1923), filled the pages of radical papers. See Pier Carlo Masini, *Poeti della rivolta, da Carducci a Lucini* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1978).

⁴³ Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's 'Son of Abyss,' and the Westmoreland Strike of 1910-1911," 179.

radical poetry grew out of real conditions and concrete realities of Italian immigrant working-class life. It was the Lawrence strike that inspired Giovannitti's best lyrics, it was the need of unionization that animated Crivello's verses, and it was the corruption of the world of *prominenti* that heartened Cordiferro's bitter satire.

Most of these poets' names are today unknown to non-specialists of the field of Italian American radicalism and are completely absent from literary studies of both American and Italian American poetry and culture. Yet, these men and women enjoyed a considerable popularity within Italian communities in the pre and post World War I eras and exerted a strong influence among their co-nationals.⁴⁴ While not always beautiful by today's literary standards, their poems often possess a high spiritualism and poetic force which naturally appealed to the Italian immigrant masses. With some exceptions, most of this poetic production appeared in the pages of radical papers and was never published in books.

A well respected doctor, Simplicio Righi was one of the earliest militants in the Italian section of the Socialist Labor Party of New York. From 1901 to 1902 he directed the socialist newspaper *Il Proletario*, where he published most of his early poems with the female pseudonym Rosina Vieni.⁴⁵ He also edited a popular serialized column called "Alfabeto igienico del lavoratore" (Hygienic Alphabet of the Worker), which was published simultaneously in different papers and aimed at educating Italian immigrants to healthy norms of life (diet, personal hygiene, physical exercise) and problems like

⁴⁴ Ibid.

alcoholism, venereal diseases, and food poisoning.

Righi's poems are usually melodramatic and laconic, but do not degenerate into mawkishness.⁴⁶ They celebrate the working class, voicing at the same time their sorrows and their aspirations. His middle class background notwithstanding, Righi identified himself as far as possible with the Italian workers and was able to successfully recreate both the material and spiritual world of the immigrants. In one of his most effective poems, published on the front page of *Il Proletario* on May 1, 1902, Righi concedes that the world "today" has much injustice and oppression but also believes that "tomorrow" will bring redemption, freedom, and equality for all. In another poem he gives further voice to the theme of the workers' liberation and triumph, envisioning a future where workers are no longer slaves, where science rules, and the only true deity is consciousness:

Non piu' catene ai polsi ed al pensiero.	No more chains 'round the wrists or the mind.
Maestra e donna ai popoli, la scienza;	Teacher and mother of all peoples, science
Unico nume, il vero,	only numen, the truth,
E, duce, la coscienza. ⁴⁷	And, chief of all, the conscience.

It is not difficult to see in Righi's poetry the influence of the realistic school of the late nineteenth century with its emphasis on the social question -- the increasing attention to the social, economic and environmental conditions brought by industrialization.

⁴⁵ See Mario De Ciampis, "Storia del movimento rivoluzionario socialista," *La Parola del Popolo* (December 1958-January 1959), 136 and 141.

⁴⁶ Righi's poetry is briefly mentioned also in Marazzi, *I misteri di Little Italy*, 91.

⁴⁷ "Domani...." *Il Proletario*, June 9, 1900, 1. All translations of the poems are mine, unless noticed. They are literal translations, therefore in their English version lose much of their poetic strength.

Frequent also is the evocation of Jesus, the redeemer of humankind, with his revolutionary message of brotherhood and equality.⁴⁸

The image of Christ as a militant figure, appearing now as an agitator, now as revolutionary, now as persecuted, was by no means atypical in the *sovversivi*'s poetry. Donald Winters in his important study of the spiritualism of the Wobblies has convincingly documented the "religious texture of the I.W.W. message," pointing out interesting parallels between the themes of political martyrdom and rebellion and Christian images of sacrifice and persecution.⁴⁹ A comparison between Jesus and the revolutionary also appeared in the *sovversivi*'s literature, revealing a dialectic relationship between Italian socialism and Christianity. Despite their proclaimed atheism, the *sovversivi* borrowed from Christianity not only its prophetic tone and Biblical language, but also the values of solidarity, brotherhood, compassion, and universal love with which it is imbued.

Righi's humble, compassionate language and sensitivity, which is significantly reflected in his choice of a female pseudonym (Rosina Vieni) won him the reputation of "poeta gentile," gentle poet. Yet, in the mid-nineteen-twenties he became a Fascist sympathizer, contributing regularly to the literary magazine *Il Carroccio*, edited by Agostino De Biasi, the founder of the first Fascist organization in the United States.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See for example "Piangi, Gesù," *Il Proletario*, December 25, 1904, 1.

⁴⁹ Donald Winters, *The Soul of the Wobblies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985).

⁵⁰ Cf. Marazzi, *I Misteri di Little Italy*, 91.

Righi's ideological evolution (from Socialism to Fascism) was not entirely atypical: Mussolini himself had been an active and prominent socialist leader until the First World War, and so were the *sorversivi* Edmondo Rossoni, Aldo Tarabella, and Libero Tancredi. However, for most Italian immigrants who supported Mussolini, Fascism was, as we will see in Chapter 6, in many ways synonymous with nationalism. Its appeal derived not from a real political awareness but from the post-war atmosphere of nationalist frustration (the so-called "mutilated victory"), as well as a sense of ethnic pride that came with Mussolini's rhetoric of restoring Italy's greatness and splendor.⁵¹ As anti-Fascist historian Gaetano Salvemini pointed out in his study of Italian American Fascist activities, Fascism represented for many immigrants a sort of "psychological bridge," which allowed them to identify with the far homeland.⁵²

If Righi classifies as the idealistic bard of Italian American workers, Antonino Crivello (1888-1969) stands out as their practical prophet. Born in Palermo, Sicily, he immigrated to the United States at the age of fifteen, and became one of the most active and important union organizers of tailors and dressmakers in New York.⁵³ He was also a

⁵¹ On Italian Americans and Fascism see John Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), and Philip V. Cannistraro, "Per una storia dei fasci negli Stati Uniti," *Storia Contemporanea*, 6 (December 1995): 1061-1145, "Fascism and Italian Americans," in Silvio M. Tomasi, ed., *Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1977) and *Blackshirts in Little Italy*, (West Lafayette, Ind.: Bordighera, 2000).

⁵² Gaetano Salvemini, *Italian Fascist Activities in the United States*, edited with an introduction by Philip V. Cannistraro (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1977).

⁵³ In 1917 he was hired as the Italian representative in the Education Ministry of the Local 25 (ILGWU). He then became district manager of the Local 25 in Brooklyn and treasurer of the Dressmakers' Joint Board. In the thirties, Crivello was manager of the Local 144 of

principal founder of *Circolo Libertario Pensiero ed Azione* (Libertarian Circle of Thought and Action) and belonged to many labor and anti-Fascist groups. A man of culture, his education did not pass unnoticed by the Italian Consulate, which in its files pointed out that he spoke and wrote Italian very well.⁵⁴

A convinced and active socialist, Crivello's political creed was, as he himself put it, "Labor Solidarity." "It was a joy," he wrote to his union comrades, "to inspire you with faith in the Union, and to teach you that in Union there is strength. Please make sure that our work has not been in vain, and that you shall proceed with our International and its leadership from victory to victory, towards the highest peak of social justice, progress and civilization."⁵⁵ Crivello's poetry is the quintessence of his unionist faith. Poems such as "Fratello, ascolta!" (Listen, brother!), "Speed up," "Insanity," "Lottiamo!" (We must struggle), "La Parola," (The word), "Dressmakers, Avanti!," (Dressmakers. Forward!) are all calls to action.⁵⁶ Written in the form of folk ballads, generally in end rhyme, they attest to his passionate crusade for unionism, solidarity and working class rights. Addressing Italian immigrants in Italian, English and often Sicilian dialect, he urged them "to awaken, to leave their "hovel," their "indolence" and to finally rebel against those who

Newark, NJ, a position he held for twenty-three years, until blindness forced him to retire. Antonino Crivello Papers, "Biographical sketch," Immigration History Research Center (IHRC), Minneapolis.

⁵⁴ Letter of Italian Consulate to the Ministry of the Interior, April 2, 1914. Antonino Crivello, Casellario Politico Centrale (CPC), busta 1540, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Rome. Organized by the Italian police, the CPC files document the activities of Italian radicals in Italy and abroad.

⁵⁵ Antonino Crivello Papers, "Letter of resignation to the ILGWU," May 24, 1956, Box 1, IHRC.

exploit and oppress them.⁵⁷ “Salvation,” he insisted, “can only be in the unity of those who suffer and are enslaved,” and only “in joined struggle can workers win freedom and put an end to injustice.”⁵⁸ While Crivello’s purpose of developing class consciousness is even too obvious, less apparent perhaps is the impact of his lyrics in unionizing Italian immigrants.

As in the case of American syndicalist poets such as Joe Hill or Ralph Chaplin, Crivello’s words contributed undoubtedly to popularizing working class unity and organization among Italian immigrants. Crivello’s leadership and influence are also evident from the letters of the Italian Consulate to the Ministry of the Interior, in which he is described as an active socialist and “relentless” anti-Fascist. In 1934, for example, Consul Grossardi deemed it necessary to send the Prefect of Rome a copy of a poem Crivello wrote in memory of Antonio Fierro (killed by Fascists on July 14, 1933 in Astoria, Queens), assuring him that he was carefully monitored.⁵⁹

As we have seen, antimilitarism was one of the central components of the *sovversivi*’s *Weltanschauung*. This fervent antimilitarist tradition found in Crivello one of

⁵⁶ Antonino Crivello Papers, Box 2, folders “Poesie II,” and “Poesie III,” IHRC.

⁵⁷ The original verses read: “Se uomo sei, esci dal tuo abituro, /da la tua ignavia, dal tuo viver duro... /De la tua croce un’arma fa’, un martello, /E i dritti tuoi rivendica, fratello.” (From “Fratello, ascolta!”)

⁵⁸ In the original poems: “La salvezza per tutti è una sola: /l’union di chi soffre e protesta, / di chi sgobba. L’alata parola / tutti appella e combatter l’infesta / vil genia che opprime il Lavor.” (From “La parola.”) and “Vincerem lottando uniti, /sfruttatori e parassiti, /vincerem la libertà./Non vogliam essere oppressi. /L’ingiustizia al mondo cessi /Liberiam l’umanità!”(From Lottiamo!).

⁵⁹ Letter from Consul Grossardi to the Prefect of Palermo, April 10, 1934. Antonino Crivello. CPC. busta 1540, ACS.

the best representatives. Set against the background of the Second World War, his “*Guerra!*” (War!) represents, perhaps better than any other among the Italian American radical poems, the anti-militarist soul of the *sovversivi*. Published as a pamphlet and sold at five cents a copy, this long and ambitious poem (218 lines) was dedicated to “every man who in good faith approves the present war, believing it to be a war of vindication.” In it, Crivello exposed the hypocrisy, infamy, and ruthlessness of the war. Condemning the media’s attempt to picture it as a crusade for democracy and freedom, he argued that the real motive of the conflict was the same as always: “the sordid greed of the great and powerful.”⁶⁰ “Let us not be fooled,” he declared in a speech to a union meeting, “We entered the war to save the world for democracy, but instead we saved the world for dictators. Today let us spread good propaganda which cries for peace.”⁶¹

Crivello’s poetic muse was by no means limited to politics. In addition to working-class verses, he wrote sonnets dedicated to family life, his native land, and love. In one of them, “*Sta notti puru cusì!*,” (This Night, Too, You Sew), he re-evoked the grief he felt as an immigrant boy, watching his mother spend all night sewing to make a living, while his father was unemployed. Written in Sicilian, the lyric beautifully dramatizes the great loneliness and desperation behind the immigrant experience:

⁶⁰ *Guerra...!* (Bronx, NY, 1939). Crivello Papers, Box 1. IHRC. In another antiwar poem, “*Ho bisogno di pace*” (I need peace), he voiced his torment and sorrow for humankind, and, with disarming candor, cried: *Perchè far la guerra ci dobbiamo quando/ sta ne la pace il bene? /Perchè aggredirci, con piacere nefando, / e a vicenda forgiarci le catene?* (Why must we make war when / Goodness is in peace? / Why attack each other, with nefarious pleasure, / And forge our chains with one another?).

⁶¹ Antonino Crivello Papers, Box 1, folder “Speeches.” IHRC.

Senza pani è l'America, matruzza?	Without bread is America, mother?
Tutti papà truvò li porti chiùsi!	All doors father found shut!
Puru iddu 'un dormi! Sentu chi singhiùzza... ⁶²	He also can't sleep! I can hear him crying...

Like the political movement, Italian American literary radicalism was male dominated. Women, however, were not completely absent from either politics or literature. Turning over the pages of the radical newspapers, a few female names do occasionally come forth.⁶³ Unfortunately, no records exist about these names, and it is impossible to determine whether they were the pseudonyms of men. Two exceptions are Bellama Forzato Spezia (1877-?), who in the early century achieved a considerable reputation as a socialist, syndicalist, and outspoken feminist, and the anarchist Virgilia d'Andrea (1888-1933).

Born at Mirandola, a small village in the province of Modena, in Northern Italy, Bellalma Spezia emigrated to America along with her husband (of whom only the last name, Forzato, is known) sometime after 1891, following the death of her parents.⁶⁴ Like her father, she was a teacher and, after settling in West Hoboken, NJ, she opened a bookstore on 416 Spring Street, which became renowned for its large selection of booklets of socialist propaganda and social novels. In 1913 she attracted the attention of

⁶² Published in *Biblioteca del Convivio*, vol. 10, Filippo Fichera, ed. (Milan: Editrice Convivio Letterario, s.n.), 30. In addition to the above cited poem, the collection includes seven more poems by Crivello. In Antonino Crivello Papers, Box 1, folder "Poems," IHRC.

⁶³ See for example Teresa Ballerini, "Ai Diatribi," *La Questione Sociale*, October 15, 1896, 2; Antonietta Bonelli, "I Pellagrosi," *Il Proletario*, December 7, 1901, 2; Elena Lavagnini, *Il Proletario*, December 25, 1904, 1; and Hada Peretti, "La vita," *Avanti*, November 23, 1904, 2.

the Italian Consulate in New York for some of her writings and lectures, and as a contributor to the socialist revolutionary newspaper edited by anarcho-syndicalist Carlo Tresca, *L'avvenire*.⁶⁵ In this period she also contributed regularly to *Il Proletario*, *L'Operaia*, and, later on, *Il Lavoro*, with poems and articles on feminism and literary criticism.

Spezia's poetry clearly reveals the influence of her classical and humanistic education, exhibiting a careful attention to the form and the metrics, technical precision, balance, and emotional restraint. Contrary to typical working-class or socialist poetry, which is generally very accessible, Spezia's poetic language is carefully chosen, studied and affected. Most of her poems are long and elaborate, filled with panegyrics, allegories and metaphors. The major theme inherent in her poems is that of the importance of knowledge and education to emancipate the workers. With aggressiveness, she urges the masses, especially women, to fight the prejudices and ignorance that keep them enslaved and follow the road of "Reason."⁶⁶ She especially defies religious faith ("the eternal despot"), insisting over and over that the rhetoric of resignation, inherent in the Christian discourse of Salvation, is one of the most powerful means to control the masses and justify class inequality.⁶⁷ Only after the workers have freed themselves from the yokes of religion, bigotry, and ignorance:

⁶⁴ Bellama Spezia, Biographical file, CPC, busta 4908, ACS.

⁶⁵ The Consulate to the Ministry of the Interior, October 31, 1913. Bellalma Spezia, CPC, busta 4908, ACS.

⁶⁶ See for example, "S'accendeva l'aurora!," *Il Proletario*, February 20, 1915, 1.

⁶⁷ See especially "O donna, vieni!" *Il Proletario*, March 11, 1911, 1-2.

Sorgerà non remota	It will rise not distant
un'aurora sanguigna.	a bloody dawn.
e allor la scalza plebe.	and by then, the barefoot populace.
Niobe non più serva	no longer servant
a una schiatta proterva.	to an insolent race.
svincolerà rombando,	will free itself roaring
sull'espugnata vetta,	on the stormed top,
a volo la vendetta	revenge will take off
e correran gli abissi	and from the abysses of the air
dell'aria i gridi a flutti:	will come running the screams in billows:
"salute o Terra, alfine	Blessed thee oh Earth, at last
equa madre per tutti!" ⁶⁸	just mother to all!

Often, her criticism of meekness betrayed a bourgeois contempt for Italian immigrant workers (or plebeians as she calls them), who with their coarseness contributed to ruin the good name of Italy. For example, in "L'emigrato italiano in America" (The Italian Immigrant to America) she describes Italian immigrants as "squat, lazy, and slack," complaining that because of them:

La regina un dì del mondo, ora è fatta avventuriera.
 Olè! La sordida e pezzente, abbruttita e abbietta Italia!
 Mai nutrirono le Pampas dei selvaggi più vil schiera:
 non son forse i nostri cani di meno ignobil schiatta?
 Basta, basta, troppo è già!⁶⁹

Once the queen of the world, now she has become an adventurer
 The sordid and imploring, ugly and abject Italy!
 Never did the Pampas feed savages of a more cowardly kind:
 Aren't perhaps our dogs of a less ignominious stock?
 Enough, enough, this is already too much.

⁶⁸ "Quel giorno," *Il Proletario*, May 1, 1908, 3.

⁶⁹ Published in *Il Proletario*, May 1, 1907, 2. Other poems by Bellalma Forzato Spezia include "Al Salto del Niagara," *Il Proletario*, December 25, 1907; "Maggiolata nuova," *Il Proletario* May 1, 1909, 1; "Cavallo in fuga," *Il Proletario*, February 11, 1910; "Il Naviglio," *Il Proletario*, May 1, 1910, 6; "Bimbi mutilati," and "Il canto dei secoli," both in *L'Italia Nostra*, January 22, 1916.

Like Righi, Bellalma Spezia began to distance herself from socialism after the outbreak of World War I, when she joined the group of interventionists led by Edmondo Rossoni, and founded along with him and Ruotolo *L'Italia Nostra*, a fiercely nationalist paper. After the death of her husband, in 1926 she returned to Italy, settling with her son in Rome and working as a translator. In 1936 she was officially registered in the Fascist Party, openly in favor of the regime, and her dossier was consequently removed from the police's files on the *sovversivi*.⁷⁰

Very different and more ideologically coherent was the life of Virgilia d'Andrea. Born in Sulmona (Abruzzo), the same town of Tresca's, she arrived to the United States in 1928 and settled in Brooklyn, along with her lover Armando Borghi, a well known anarchist and anti-Fascist. Like many other *fuorusciti* (as Italian anti-Fascist émigrés were commonly known), d'Andrea and Borghi came to America in order to escape Mussolini's political repression. Short, petite, with dark eyes and dark short hair, Italian authorities described her as a woman of "fine intelligence, culture, and education" but also "a violent type, of inconstant character and reprehensible moral behavior."⁷¹ (She believed in free love and refused to marry). In reality, as some of her autobiographical writings reveal, she was a very sensitive and idealistic woman "with the head full of dreams, fantasies and tears."⁷²

⁷⁰ Bellalma Spezia, Police-headquartes, March 2, 1939. CPC, busta 4908, ACS.

⁷¹ Virgilia D'Andrea, "Biographical sketch," CPC, busta 1607, ACS.

⁷² Virgilia D'Andrea, *Torve nella notte* (New York: 1933), 10.

At a very young age she lost her entire family (it is not clear how) and was forced to go to a boarding school run by nuns to become a teacher. Her only consolation there was reading: "I devoured," she recalls in one of her stories, "hundreds and hundreds of books; the poetry of Rapisardi, Leopardi and especially Negri were my favorite."⁷³ Inspired by these readings, she gradually converted to anarchism, becoming, in the words of Italian authorities, a "dangerous propagandist and organizer of radical activities, which she disguised under the cover of anti-Fascism."⁷⁴

When she arrived in America she was already very well-known among the *sovversivi* and revered by many. She conducted lecture tours in Florida, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Massachusetts, which, as the newspapers of the time reported, were always well attended, with people filling the conference rooms to their capacity. D'Andrea's popularity, however, was due to her poetic eloquence as much as her political activism. In 1922, she published her first book of poetry, *Tormento* (Torment), with an introduction by the Italian anarchist theorist par excellence, Errico Malatesta, which sold 8,000 copies and was issued in a second edition in 1929 while she was in exile in France. Italian authorities promptly impounded the book on the ground that it "excited the spirits," and denounced her for incitement to rebellion.⁷⁵

Tormento consists of nineteen poems in rhyme, many of which were originally published in *L'Avanti!*, the official organ of the Italian Socialist Party. As the title of the

⁷³ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁴ Letter from the Italian Consulate, March 9, 1929, CPC, busta 3033, ACS.

⁷⁵ Questura di Milano, February 27, 1923, CPC, busta 1607, ACS.

collection suggests, these poems recount the poet's personal anguish, grief, and anger for the political defeats of the Left that followed the First World War. Most of her poems came in fact in the aftermath of the so-called *biennio rosso* (1919-1920), a time characterized by widespread social protests, strikes, and upheavals, when many had believed that the Bolshevik revolution would naturally extend to Italy and the rest of Europe and socialism would finally triumph. Instead, to the disbelief of leftist radicals, in a few years Italy gave birth to the world's first Fascist régime while Germany established a Nazi party. In the years following Mussolini's seizure of power (1922), the Left in Italy was artfully silenced, its publications were banned and its prominent leaders either arrested or forced into exile. The extent of this political repression is perhaps best exemplified in the assassination of socialist Giacomo Matteotti in 1924 and the imprisonment of communist Antonio Gramsci from 1926 until his death in 1935.

Even in front of such a climate of terror, d'Andrea refused to give up her anarchist dream: her verses speak to the unredeemed and nonaffiliated on the fringes, providing at the same time a radical critique of the movement and a visionary aspiration. As Malatesta explained to her readers: "You will especially find the faith that does not die with defeat – the firm conviction and the sure hope."⁷⁶ This unshakeable devotion to the "Ideal," is perhaps best represented in these verses, written while she was held in prison in 1920:

No, non son vinta.	No, I am not defeated
Vibra, in me, più forte,	It lives in me, stronger,
L'ardente fede ne l'angusta cella.	despite the sad cell the ardent faith.
E frange i ferri e batte le ritorte,	And it transcends the bars and defeats the withes,
L'onda del sogno, che il mio cor flagella.	The dream wave, that scourges my heart.

⁷⁶ Errico Malatesta, Introduction to Virgilia D'Andrea, *Tormento* (Paris: La fraternelle, 1929, first edition 1922), 2.

Contrary to most Italian American radical poetry, which tended primarily to talk of general social and political conditions rather than individual experiences, d'Andrea's poems are very subjective and personal. Themes of revolutionary change and social inequality intermix with her inner feelings, while pessimism about the human condition is softened by the awareness of the power of love and the beauty of life. In this respect her verses display perhaps the influence of Leopardi's romanticism more than Rapisardi's or Negri's social protest. This subjectivity is particularly evident in her second book, *Torces nella notte* (Torches in the Night), published by her comrades in 1933 after her premature death from breast cancer. A combination of prose and poetry, autobiography and history, remembrances and political commentaries, the book consists of sixteen stories, of which seven are tributes to the memory of anarchist martyrs and leaders -- the "torches in the night" to which the title implicitly refers. The book's cover depicts a naked figure of woman, handcuffed, in the act of hurling toward an imaginary abyss, her eyes closed in silent despair, symbolizing perhaps the fall of anarchism. But if d'Andrea recognizes the death of the anarchist movement, the anarchist ideal still remains her main source of inspiration:

Per una grande Idea;
 Di lotta in lotta, di prigioniero in prigioniero;
 Discacciata dalla patria, attraverso
 le vie del mondo,
 senza mai la tua casa,
 il tuo nido di rifugio,
 senza mai un sicuro domani;
 In piedi, dove finisce l'ingiustizia e
 dove passa la sventura;
 In piedi come oggi, tra i feriti, i caduti e
 gli scampati d'una più feroce tragedia;

For a great Ideal
 From struggle to struggle, from prison to
 prison Banned from my country, across
 the streets of the world,
 without ever a home,
 a nest
 without ever a certain tomorrow;
 standing up, where injustice ends and
 comes by bad luck
 standing today, among the wounded, the dead
 and those escaped to a fiercer tragedy;

Verso una visione d'umanità e di giustizia:	Towards a vision of humanity and justice
Verso l'ostinato sogno di pace e di amore:	Towards the stubborn dream of peace and
Sotto le flagellanti burrasche della vita:	love. Under the scourging storms of life
E sempre a bandiera spiegata.	And always with flying colors.

While the poets discussed so far chose formal, classical verses, others used satirical, popular tones to advocate social change. Among them, Riccardo Cordiferro, pen name of Alessandro Sisca (1875-1940), was certainly the most popular.⁷⁷ A prolific writer (he was also a playwright, journalist and lecturer), he wrote hundreds of verses, touching different subjects and genres, but, unlike his theatrical works, his poems remain quite mediocre. Like other radical intellectuals, Cordiferro had no literary pretense or ambition. He considered poetry “the interpreter of human aspirations and passions,” but looked down on “lyrics that have nothing to say and are written only for the so-called aesthetes and intellectuals.”⁷⁸ Despite his classical formation, his poems reflected the themes and motifs of popular culture, and, despite the affectation of the rhymes, the language he used is always frank, simple, even rough at times. This explains Cordiferro’s wide popularity among Italian immigrants, even though, aesthetically speaking, his poetry is probably the poorest among the *sorversivi*. He wrote of a world Italian Americans could identify with and understand; parodying the bigotry and provincialism of Little Italies, unmasking the opportunism, hypocrisy and corruption of the *prominenti* and the priests, and at the same time indicting American society, with its exasperating individualism and harsh

⁷⁷ For a brief discussion of Cordiferro’s poetry see also Marazzi, *I Misteri di Little Italy*, 85-87.

⁷⁸ See Cordiferro’s own introduction to his *Poesie Scelte*, Guido Massarelli, ed. (Campobasso, Italy: Edizioni Pungolo Verde, 1967).

materialism. Whereas Giovannitti or D'Andrea seduced the workers with their eloquence, Cordiferro reached them with his humor and sarcasm, and, after he made them laugh, left them thinking.

With a few exceptions, Cordiferro's poetic production rests above all in the pages of *La Follia*, a popular weekly newspaper he co-founded in New York in 1893 with his father, Francesco, and brother Marziale. Although the paper cannot be defined as radical, at least not by the *sovversivi*'s standards, Cordiferro wrote in it fierce articles and poems of social criticism which often got him into trouble with local authorities. Despite the abundance of material (he wrote incessantly for thirty-five years), he only published two volumes of poetry. *Singhiozzi e Sogghigni* (Sobs and Sneers, 1910) and *Il Poema dell'Amore* (The Poem of Love, 1928).⁷⁹ A third volume, *Poesie scelte* (Selected Poems) appeared posthumously in Italy in 1967, featuring the same introduction Cordiferro wrote for the collection of poems published in 1928.⁸⁰ In addition to poems, he also wrote as many as forty-nine musical romances which were published in rolls and performed by famous lyric tenors of the time.⁸¹

His earliest and most radical poems appeared in the anarchist newspaper *La Questione Sociale* between 1894 and 1898.⁸² Poetry here becomes a means of protest

⁷⁹ His poems are deposited at the IHRC in Minneapolis.

⁸⁰ Riccardo Cordiferro, *Poesie scelte*.

⁸¹ See the detailed bibliographical records written by himself, Sisca Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, IHRC.

⁸² See for example: "Brindisi di Sangue," June 8, 1894, 3; "Ad un pezzente," April 30, 1896, 3; "Ideale," June 15, 1896, 3; "Osanna a Satana," July 15 and August 15, 1896, 3;

against tyrannies and injustices, an angry cry against the inhuman conditions of the immigrant workers, a hymn to revolution and revolt against social inequality and working class oppression. Sarcasm dominates the lyrics, becoming a weapon to attack, expose, and provoke, as for example in this tercet: "Dovremmo chiamarci padroni di tutto/ma abbiamo soltanto nell'anima il lutto.../siam stanchi, siam stanchi per dio di servir."⁸³ (We should own everything/ but we have in our soul only mourning/ we are tired, for goodness' sake, we are tired of serving).

Anticlericalism is another important theme of Cordiferro's poetry. His anticlericalism, like that of many of his generation, was part of the intellectual and social education that he absorbed in Italy during his youth. In the 1870s and 1880s Italy was still struggling in search of a new national identity and its clerical past was for obvious reasons under attack. In "Osanna a Satana" (which echoes Carducci's "A Satana"), Cordiferro opposes Christian theory of existence with an atheist and materialistic conception of life. His religious critique flows into "satanism:" he curses God, responsible of so much misery, and celebrates Satan, symbol of freedom and knowledge.

Political satire is also the cultural form used by Francesco Pitea (1894-1981), a mill worker of Paterson, NJ. Born at Gallico Superiore, a small village in the southern province of Reggio Calabria, Pitea left Italy for America in 1913, joining two of his brothers who had emigrated before him. He worked as a coal miner in West Virginia, then moved to Brooklyn, and finally settled in a town near Paterson, New Jersey, called

"Anno novo," January 15, 1897, 4; and "Ai vili," September 15, 1898, all published in *La Questione Sociale*.

⁸³ "Brindisi di sangue."

Dundee Lake (today's Elmwood Park), where he worked, along with his wife, as a mill machine operator for most of his life. In addition to being active in the labor movement (he was a member of the ILGWU), he was a convinced anti-Fascist and anti-war militant.⁸⁴

His ideas and involvement in the Italian immigrant Left led to his arrest in 1920 and he avoided deportation only through the intervention of his comrades.⁸⁵ Most importantly, he was one of the founders and the director of the anti-Fascist weekly newspaper *La Scopa* (The Broom) published in Paterson for three years (1925-28). It was here, assuming the pseudonym of Libero Arsenio, that Pitea wrote most of his invectives against Mussolini and his Fascist supporters in America. His poems appeared under a column called "*Serenata*" (Serenade), accompanied by a little drawing of a broom-man with a guitar. Like the word serenade suggests, Pitea's intended his verses more as songs than poems. However, unlike a wooer, instead of praising the object of his songs, he launched long denunciations against the abuses of Fascist policy.

His poetry drew inspiration from the historical developments of Fascism and aimed at revealing to the increasing number of immigrants who had embraced Fascism driven by nationalist pride the real nature of Mussolini's ideology. With impudent, pungent, and biting irony he ridiculed Fascism and Mussolini, reducing the Fascist

⁸⁴ Francesco Pitea has never received any scholarly attention. Thanks to Rudolph Vecoli, who interviewed Pitea in August 1965 and collected his poetry and papers, it is now possible to study his life and work. For biographical information see the biographical sketch written by his son Joseph. Francesco Pitea Papers (1910-1988), Miscellaneous Italian Manuscript Collection, IHRC.

⁸⁵ Reported in *La Parola del Popolo* (Dec. 1958-January 1959), 287.

League to “la lega dei manganelli” (league of cudgels), King Vittorio Emanuele to “il ridicolo, re gaglioffo” (dull, ridiculous king), and Mussolini to an “impostor,” a “coward,” an “opportunist,” “a false Caesar” who is ruining Italy.⁸⁶ Even harsher were the words against Fascist *prominenti* in America, such as Vincenzo Giordano of *Il Bollettino della Sera* or Carlo Barsotti of *Il Progresso Italo Americano*, who were nothing more than “patriottardi/ Ben pronti ai ricatti, /Vil, falsi e bugiardi”⁸⁷ (jingoists/ always ready to blackmail/ vile, false and deceitful), and “volta gabbana/ che stanno a campare/ con qualche puttana” (weathercocks/ who live their lives/ with some whore).⁸⁸

Like Cordiferro’s verses, Pitea’s poems cannot be appreciated unless they are seen in their historical context. In the mid-1920s Fascism was forging a large consensus among Italian American, as well as American, public opinion. As Diggins pointed out, such popularity was due both to Mussolini’s charismatic personality and to the hegemonic cultural role of Italian American *prominenti* and American conservatives who saw in Fascism a powerful ally against the threat of communism and anarchy, and consequently used their power and wealth to manipulate public information. To counter Fascist propaganda under these conditions was for the *soversivi* almost impossible

⁸⁶ “Il Duce si lagna al conte Thaon di Revel,” *La Scopa*, July 24, 1925, 4; “Sempre con lui,” *La Scopa*, September 24, 1927, 4, and “E la battaglia continua,” *La Scopa*, July 16, 1927, 4.

⁸⁷ “Giordano e le truffe,” *La Scopa*, October 16, 1925, 4

⁸⁸ “Il Duce si lagna al Conte Thaon di Revel,” In addition to the above cited poems see also in *La Scopa*: “A tutti i prominenti fascisti di America,” May 14, 1927, 4; “E’ nato il futuro imperatore,” October 8, 1927, 4; “Morte agli imbelli,” December 3, 1927, 4. Another poem, “La giustizia,” was published in the single issue *Libertas*, August 1927, 14.

without incurring the risk of being prosecuted. Then, what a better cultural way to expose the incongruity that existed between the appearance of Fascism and its real nature than satire? After all, satire by definition involves the act of “ridiculing folly, vice, stupidity - the whole range of human foibles and frailties – in individuals and institutions.”⁸⁹

Pitea’s poetry was tailored to do exactly that: to present the paradoxes of Fascism while providing a radical critique of the *prominenti*, and it did so in a language fit for the workers. Anti-Fascist satirical poetry was a significant force in articulating anti-Fascist sentiments and spurring a political shift towards liberalism and democracy.

Italian American literary radicalism was not limited to the works discussed here. In fact it could have been easy to pile up further evidence. Vittorio Vidali, Efrem Bartoletti, Onorio Rutolo, Francesco Greco, Giuseppe Zappulla, Nino Caradonna, for example, have also produced a wide range of poems and literary works that touch upon various aspects of Italian American radical culture.⁹⁰ Problems of space, however, have

⁸⁹ Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch, eds., *NTC’s Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1991).

⁹⁰ In addition to several political essays, communist Vittorio Vidali published several poems under the pseudonym of Enea Sormenti in *Alba Nuova*. See for example, “Il Minatore,” February 16, 1924, 3; “Donna,” March 1, 1924, 3; “Il Lavoratore,” March 29, 1924, 3; and “Malgrado tutto,” March 22, 1924, 3. Sculptor Onorio Ruotolo published a collection of poetry *Accordi e dissonanze* (Milan: Convivio Letterario, 1958). Efrem Bartoletti, a self educated miner, published two volumes of poetry, *Nel sogno d'oltretomba: cantico libero* (Scranton, Pennsylvania: 1931) and *Riflessioni poetiche* (Milan: Gastaldi Editore, 1955). Many of his poems appeared in *Il Proletario* in the 1920s and 1930s. Francesco Greco, a carpenter from Calabria, was one of the best known poets in the Calabrian dialect. His poems appeared in various radical papers and a collection of his poems *L'Anima allo Specchio* was published in 1964. Giuseppe Zappulla, an anti-Fascist emigre, was the editor of various literary magazines and the

compelled me to limit the discussion to materials I judged to be representative, focusing on those themes and issues that appeared most commonly. Certainly, not all the prose or the poetry analyzed in this chapter is great literature. Yet, considered as a whole this body of radical work remains important for several reasons. First, their wide production and popularity show that while illiteracy was certainly widespread among Italian immigrants, its rate was considerably lower among the radicals. Contrary to the assumption that Italian immigrants were indifferent to politics and education, radical literary production shows that Italian American literature flourished and grew along with radical ideas. In fact, within the Italian working class community no one was as educated as the *sovversivi*, many of whom reached a degree of intellectual sophistication far beyond the average level of working class education.⁹¹

Italian literary radicalism also brought alive the sense of radical possibility that shaped the immigrant experience of first and second generation Italian Americans. Set against the background of international as well as internal political events, these poems and novelettes supplied hundreds of Italian immigrants with their first understanding of the meaning and possible achievements of socialism. To paraphrase what Donald Winters wrote about the IWW poets, these kind of proletarian songs and writings provided the

author of several stories and poems. See for example *Vette e abissi. Liriche e poemi* (New York: V. Vecchioni Printing co., 1936). Finally, Nino Caradonna, a journalist and writer, published more than ten volumes of poetry, some of which have been translated into various languages.

⁹¹ Nunzio Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's 'Son of the Abyss' and the Westmoreland Strike of 1910-1911," 79.

rootless Italian workers with a vision and faith greater than any other political movement in America.⁹²

Ultimately, the importance of Italian American literary radicalism lies exactly in what is usually considered the major limitation of radical literature: the overt political message and social criticism it conveyed. For all their faults of tone and exaggerations, the poems, dramas, and stories discussed here captured all the key elements of Italian American radical culture. It is in them that we find the clearest expression of the spirit that moved the *sovversivi* – their commitment to the workers, their devotion to the ideas of equality and freedom, their hatred of privilege and arrogance, their desire for a counter-culture different from that of the middle class. What the *sovversivi* hoped for was not only a new political world but also a new cultural world, where literature and art, would help change the way people thought and acted.

⁹² Winters, *The Soul of the Wobblies*, 131.

CHAPTER IV

ARTURO GIOVANNITTI: POET AND PROPHET OF LABOR

Thursday, December 31, 1959 was a sad day for the Italian American community and the American labor movement: Arturo Giovannitti, one of their greatest crusaders and beloved leaders, had passed away. Expressions of sympathy appeared in many newspapers of the time. The obituary published in the *New York Times* recalled him as a key-figure of the American Left:

Until the end of World War II, when his health failed, he wrote and spoke extensively in the struggle to establish organized labor. At various times he was a close associate of Max Eastman, Norman Thomas, David Dubinshky and many others. At fiery labor rallies of the nineteen-twenties and thirties, Mr. Giovannitti was in great demand as a speaker. A colorful figure, with Van Dyke beard, a Lord Byron collar and flowing tie, he addressed Italian and English-speaking audiences with an equally flowery fluency.¹

At the memorial service there were present virtually all major labor leaders, representatives of Italian and Italian American institutions, and, above all, common workers and union members who had been inspired by Giovannitti's struggle.² Luigi Antonini, President of the Italian American Labor Council, commenced the ceremony; his eulogy was followed by the speeches of many other influential personalities of the labor movement and the left such as Jacob Patofsky, President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), Joseph Salerno, Vice-President of the ACWA, Giuseppe

¹ *New York Times*, January 1, 1960.

² The memorial service took place under the auspices of the Italian American Labor Council on January 5, 1960 at 11:00 am, in the large auditorium of the Joint Board Shirtmakers, Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), at 111 East Fifteenth

Lupis of the Italian Parliament, and the American socialist Norman Thomas. All evoked Giovannitti's contributions to organized labor, his crucial role in the Lawrence Strike of 1912, and his poetic eloquence. As Thomas pointed out, "Giovannitti brought to the labor movement the gifts not only of an orator but of a poet of passion and power. These gifts are of extraordinary value; no great movement can live of bread alone. It requires that feeling for humanity, that passion for justice, that outrage against wrong, that faith in brotherhood which the young Giovannitti exemplified and expressed so nobly."³

A few months after the memorial service, Giovannitti's friends assembled a twenty-six page special issue of *La Parola del Popolo*, one of the few Italian American leftist magazines still in print in the fifties, as a homage to his memory. From the remembrances of his friends and the dozen tributes of common workers, it seems clear that among the Italian American working class and the radical intellectuals of the early twentieth century Arturo Giovannitti was a hero, a symbol of the socialist struggle on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Giovannitti's fame rested above all upon the Lawrence strike of 1912, when, along with Joseph Ettor, he risked capital punishment on the fabricated charges of inciting violence and being an accessory to murder. He almost certainly would have never attained the status of a hero without the publicity resultant from the Lawrence case, but it was his poetic talent that enlivened his legend and thrust upon him the role of "prophet" of the workers. As Joseph Salerno noted: he "above all was an artist.... He used his pen as a weapon for the emancipation of the working class

Street in New York City. Information on the ceremony can be find in "I funerali," *Omaggio ad Arturo Giovannitti, La Parola del Popolo* (February/March 1960), 6-8

³ Norman Thomas, in "Omaggio a Arturo Giovannitti," 4.

and the passion of his voice to free mankind from the scourge of poverty and war.... He was an electrifier of multitudes. He was one of the greatest orators of his time. He was the poet of labor."⁴

Giovannitti's dedication to the cause of workers, his life commitment to social justice are indeed carefully reflected in his literary works. He wrote articles, plays, and especially poems throughout his life, even when, in the fifties, he was bedridden by paralysis of the legs. Much of his poetry appeared in the pages of Italian American radical newspapers, and the English magazines *Masses* (1911-1917) and *Liberator* (1918-1924), the best of his work was also pursued by prestigious literary reviews such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Current Opinion*, *The Survey*, and *Current Literature*.⁵ Four collections of his poetry, two in Italian and two in English, have also been published, although none is complete. The earliest one, published in 1914 with an introduction by the famed Helen Keller, contained verses that were critically acclaimed among "the greatest poems ever produced in the English language."⁶

⁴ Joseph Salerno, in *Omaggio ad Arturo Giovannitti*, 18.

⁵ See for example "The Cage," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1913, 751-755, and *Current Opinion*, July 1913, 56-7; "Songs of a Revolutionary," *Current Opinion*, July 1914, 54; "The Walker," *Current Literature*, November 1912, 593; "Malaborgia, A Glimpse of Mulberry Street," *Current Opinion*, December 1915, 430-31; "Revolution," *The Survey*, June 24, 1916, 335; "War, Anthem of Labor," *The Survey*, September 16, 1916, 605.

⁶ "The Social Significance of Arturo Giovannitti," unsigned, *Current Opinion* (January 1913), 25. Giovannitti's poetry collections are: *Arrows in the Gale*, introduction by Helen Keller (Riverside, Conn.: Hillacre Bookhouse, 1914), *Parole e sangue* [Words and Blood] (New York: Labor Press, 1938), *Quando canta il gallo* [When the Cock Crows], introduction by Carmelo Zito (Chicago: E. Clemente & Sons, 1957), and *The Collected Poems of Arturo Giovannitti*, introduction by Norman Thomas (Chicago: E. Clemente &

Yet today, less than fifty years after his death, the legendary “Poet of the Workers” is almost completely forgotten: his memory, like much of Italian American radicalism, has been erased by Americanization and social mobility, his verse exiled to a few old anthologies of radical poetry.⁷ True, labor historians have long recognized Giovannitti’s central role in the Lawrence strike and his name does usually appear in the indices of social and labor histories.⁸ But Giovannitti is completely absent from traditional critical studies of both American and Italian American cultural radicalism, despite the fact that he was considered by many contemporary literary critics, radical and non-radical alike, as one of America’s finest poets.⁹ Daniel Aaron, in his pioneering work

Sons, 1962). The last two collections include the poems originally published in *Arrows in the Gale* and *Parole and Sangue*.

⁷ Wallace Sillanpoa “The Poetry and Politics of Arturo Giovannitti,” in Jerome Krase and William Egelman, eds., *The Melting Pot and Beyond: The Italian Americans in the Year 2000* (Staten Island: American Italian Historical Association, 1987), 175. Giovannitti’s poems are included for example in Joyce Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), Genevieve Taggard, ed., *May Days: An Anthology of Verse from Masses-Liberator, 1912-1924* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925) and Louis Untermeyer, *Modern American Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921).

⁸ See for example Philip Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: The Story of Syndicalism in the United States* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1967), Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1969), Robert D’Attilio, “Giovannitti Arturo,” in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of American Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), and Michael Topp, *Those Without a Country: The Political Culture of Italian American Syndicalists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁹ Giovannitti, for example, is ignored altogether in John Patrick Diggings’ *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: Norton, 1973); James B. Gilbert’s *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968); Christopher Lasch’s *The New Radicalism in America* (New York: Norton,

on American literary radicalism, was one of the few scholars to at least acknowledge Giovannitti, whom he called "The *Liberator*'s bard of revolution."¹⁰ But only Donald Winters has actually discussed Giovannitti's poetry within the larger American context.¹¹

An important attempt to write a book on Giovannitti was made in 1974 by his friends of *La Parola del Popolo* who, in occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of his birth, sponsored a round-table discussion on his life and art. The book project was never realized but the journal published a special issue in Italian with important biographical information and some interesting critical articles.¹² More recently, as part of a more general attempt to recover "the lost world of Italian American radicalism," a few scholars of Italian American studies have offered insightful commentaries on the relation of Giovannitti's poetry to radical politics.¹³ Still, remarkably little has been done to rescue the most popular Italian American poet from complete oblivion.

1965), and is only cursorily mentioned in Christine Stansell's recent *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000).

¹⁰ Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, first edition 1961), 62. Aaron does not discuss Giovannitti but clearly considers him an important part of the radicalism of the Village. He cites Giovannitti along with the other radical rebels of the Greenwich Village as a model "of the intellectual doer who combined imaginative with practical pursuits, art with the life of action," 71.

¹¹ Donald Winters, *The Soul of the Wobblies* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), chapter five.

¹² Nicola Fiorelli, ed., "Arturo Giovannitti: Nenia Sannita," *La Parola del Popolo* (July/August 1974), G1-G32.

¹³ See Nunzio Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's 'Son of the Abyss' and the Westmoreland Strike of 1910-1911," *Italian Americana* (Summer 1999), Vol. XVII, n. 2, 178-192; Lucinda LaBella Mays, "Arturo Giovannitti: Writing from Lawrence," in Domenic

A re-reading of Giovannitti offers a fascinating picture of the spirit, ideology, and culture of the Italian American radical movement. His poetry is a tangible testimonial of the times and places in which he lived and the ideals for which he fought. It represents a "paradigm of the *sovversivi*'s literature of social protest and revolt, and a reflection of the confluence of culture and politics amidst the clash between American capitalism and the Italian immigrant working class."¹⁴ Giovannitti in fact gave literary voice to the radical messages of revolutionary unionism and more particularly to the struggle of Italian American workers against the inhumanity and the gross materialism of industrial capitalism.¹⁵ As some contemporary critics pointed out, he represented the "polyglot internationalism of the industrial workers," the vision of a united humanity, not only for the working class but for all people.¹⁶

Candeloro and Fred Gardaphè, eds., *Italian Ethics: Their Languages, Literature and Lives* (Chicago: American Italian Historical Association, 1990), 79-89; Wallace Sillanpoa "The Poetry and Politics of Arturo Giovannitti," in Jerome Krase and William Egelman, eds., *The Melting Pot and Beyond: The Italian Americans in the Year 2000* (Staten Island: American Italian Historical Association, 1987), 175-189; Joseph Tusiani, "La poesia inglese di Arturo Giovannitti," *La Parola del Popolo* (November/December 1978), 94-99. Brief critical commentaries on Giovannitti's poetry were also written by his friends: Giuseppe Zappulla, "Un poeta che scompare," *Italamerican* (1960?), in Giuseppe Zappulla Papers, Box 1, folder "Poems and Clippings," Immigration History Research Center (IHRC), Minneapolis; Onorio Ruotolo, "Sul libro di Arturo Giovannitti," *La Lucerna* (?), Onorio Ruotolo Papers, Box 5, folder 32, IHRC; and Florindo Vitullo, "Arturo Giovannitti: poeta sociale," *La Parola del Popolo* (June/July 1958), 5.

¹⁴ Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's 'Son of the Abyss' and the Westmoreland Strike," 180.

¹⁵ Mark Starr, in *Omaggio ad Arturo Giovannitti*, 17.

¹⁶ Mary Brown Sumner, "Arturo Giovannitti, *The Survey* (November 2, 1912), 163, and "The Poetry of Syndicalism," unsigned, *Atlantic Monthly* (June 1913), 853.

But what drove Giovannitti, an upper-middle-class, well educated Italian, to sympathize with revolutionary ideologies and to embrace the working-class cause? What is the relationship between Giovannitti the poet and Giovannitti the revolutionary? What is the function of his poetry? And what does Giovannitti's case suggest about the relation of art and propaganda?

Few facts are known about Giovannitti's early years in America. His life, in fact, did not become a matter of public interest until after the Lawrence strike of 1912. Even then, the biographical information provided by journalists and commentators of the time is very general and frequently imprecise.¹⁷ Giovannitti himself rarely discussed his private life, and never explained his political choices and decisions. Personal reminiscences of Giovannitti, however, can be found in the autobiographies of some radicals of the early twentieth century (most notably Elizabeth Gurley Flynn) and especially in the tributes and commemorations of his Italian American friends.¹⁸

¹⁷ See for example: "The Social Significance of Arturo Giovannitti," unsigned, *Current Opinion*, January 1913, 24-26, and Justus Ebert, "Who Arturo Giovannitti is," *Industrial Worker* (May 30, 1912), 1 and 4.

¹⁸ Warm descriptions of Giovannitti can be found in Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's *The Rebel Girl* (New York: International Publishers, 1955), Max Eastman's *Enjoyment of Life* (New York: Harper, 1948), Mabel Dodge's *Intimate Memories: Movers and Shakers* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1936), and the already cited special issues of *La Parola del Popolo*. A very negative portrait is given instead by his son Len, who describes him as an abusive father and husband, addicted to alcohol and women. Len clearly resented the fact that his father was more devoted to the labor movement than his own family, and could not forgive him for having neglected his children. *The Nature of the Beast* (New York: Random House, 1977).

Arturo Massimo Giovannitti was born on January 7, 1884 at Ripabottoni, “a God-forsaken village” of about four thousand inhabitants, in the region of Molise, southern Italy.¹⁹ Italy had recently achieved unification but in Molise, like the rest of the south, the promises of the *Risorgimento* remained unfulfilled. Conditions of life in Ripabottoni were dreadful; poverty, misery, disease, and illiteracy remained endemic. Its people, lamented Giovannitti, were “the same old people addicted to agriculture, stock raising, and other labors that are strictly confined to the surface land.”²⁰ Artisans comprised only a tiny minority of Ripabottoni’s population, professionals were almost non-existent.

Giovannitti’s family was one of the few well-to-do families of the village. This did not mean that they were wealthy but simply that they lived more comfortably than the average people in the South. His father, Domenico Giovannitti, was a pharmacist, his mother, Adelaide Giannina de Levant, had a foreign name suggesting that she might have been a descendant of some noble French family. Giovannitti was the firstborn of three sons, the elder brother, Giuseppe, became a pharmacist like his father, the youngest, Aristide, a lawyer; both died in the First World War.²¹

In keeping with his bourgeois status, after completing primary schooling, Giovannitti went to study in the regional capital, Campobasso, at the prestigious *liceo*

¹⁹ Justus Ebert, *The Trial of a New Society* (Cleveland: IWW Publishing Bureau, 1912), 70.

²⁰ Cited in Ebert, “Who Arturo Giovannitti is,” 1. Giovannitti apparently wrote this for an article on the causes of the Italian war in Tripoli in the *International Socialist Review*.

²¹ Renato Lalli, “In Giovannitti poeta e “guerriero” rivivono i sacri ideali della gente sannita,” in Fiorelli, ed., “Arturo Giovannitti: Nenia Sannita,” *La parola del Popolo* (July/August 1974), G3-G4

‘Mario Pagano,’ the most ancient and, for many years the only, secondary school in Molise. Established originally in 1816 by the Bourbon King Ferdinand I, the school was elevated to a lyceum and renamed after Mario Pagano, a Jacobin martyr of the Neapolitan revolution of 1799. In the late 1890s, the school became famous for its emphasis on the classical and humanist tradition, and especially for its attempt to promote a new national culture in post-Risorgimento Italy. Among its teachers was the philosopher Giovanni Gentile, who later became a minister of the Fascist government.²²

It is impossible to ascertain how much the school influenced the young Giovannitti, but there is no doubt that the anti-clericalism, the republicanism, and the libertarian ideas that circulated at the time had a lasting effect on his mind. He was especially inspired by Giosuè Carducci, the bard of Italian unification, who fiercely attacked all residues of a feudal and clerical past, as well as less known poets of social protest, such as Lorenzo Stecchetti, Felice Cavallotti, and Mario Rapisardi, all of whom attacked the Italian social order. It was also at the ‘Mario Pagano’ that Giovannitti first demonstrated his poetic talent, allegedly winning a national contest.²³ More importantly, it was here that he studied the classics and absorbed the humanistic culture, an influence that would strongly emerge in his literary work.

In 1900, at the age of sixteen, he left the security of home, family, and position and emigrated to America. As he told the jury of Salem in November 1912, it was not

²² Lalli, “In Giovannitti poeta e “guerriero” rivivono i sacri ideali della gente sannita,” G3.

exactly hunger that drove him to leave his country. Rather it was his love for democracy and the hope of finding in the New World the freedom and opportunities that were missing in Italy.²⁴ A restless youth, he could not stand the isolation and provincialism typical of rural villages; he felt so oppressed that at the age of fourteen he even tried to kill himself with a firearm.²⁵

Longing for adventure, he first went to Canada, where he lived for three years, probably working as a railroad laborer and coal miner and, at the same time, studying English and French in Montreal. But these early years were years of deep disillusionment: instead of the equality, opportunity, and freedom that he had envisioned, he crashed into the hard realities of industrial America. "What he saw, through the eyes of the laborer, was the whiplash and legal trickery, the few ruling the many, the misery and exploitation of the helpless."²⁶ Like other immigrants, his initial experience in the 'land of promise' was one of poverty and privation.

²³ Lalli, "In Giovannitti poeta e "guerriero" rivivono i sacri ideali della gente sannita," G4. Cited also in Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's "Son of the Abyss," 181, and Sillampoa, "The Poetry and Politics of Arturo Giovannitti," 178.

²⁴ Giovannitti's *Address to Jury* (Boston: School of Social Science, 1913), published in Italian in "Arturo Giovannitti. Nenia Sannita" G13-G16. Cited also in LaBella Mays, "Arturo Giovannitti: Writing from Lawrence," 79. Other possible reasons for Giovannitti's emigration remain obscure. His son Len confessed that why his father left Italy for Canada is one of the myths of his life. According to a tale that Giovannitti told his son, he was forced to leave Italy after he killed a man in a duel. See Len Giovannitti, *The Nature of the Beast*, 150-151.

²⁵ "Cenni biografici," Casellario Politico Centrale (CPC). Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Rome. Cited in Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's 'Son of the Abyss' and the Westmoreland Strike," 181.

²⁶ Untermeyer, *Modern American Poetry*, 286.

During this period Giovannitti became interested in the work of the Protestant church and, thinking of entering the ministry, began to attend a Presbyterian theological school at McGill University in Montreal. A reason for Giovannitti's early attraction to Protestantism may have been the anti-Catholicism absorbed during his course of studies in Campobasso. Another important factor was probably the influence of the Reverend Alfredo Tagliatela, a Protestant minister who attracted a small following in the regions of Abruzzo and Molise and who became a close friend of Giovannitti in America.²⁷ According to his son, however, the decision to study religion simply rested on material considerations: he wanted to continue his education and the theological school at McGill provided him with free education. Had he chosen a different field of study he would have had to pay tuition.²⁸ Even though this hypothesis is not to be excluded, I believe that the character of Protestantism did have a genuine appeal for Giovannitti and fitted well his personality – his intense mysticism, sensitivity, and concern for people. As he once explained, "I was not exactly a minister, but a sort of missionary. I preached to the people on Sundays and taught them during the week."²⁹

In 1904, after receiving a call to take charge of a Presbyterian mission in Brooklyn, Giovannitti moved to New York and enrolled in the Union Theological

²⁷ Information about Giovannitti's interest in Protestantism is scarce and often contradictory. See Mario De Ciampis "Arturo Massimo Giovannitti, poeta giornalista drammaturgo per la causa dei lavoratori," in Fiorelli, ed., *Arturo Giovannitti, Nenia Sennita*, G-9; Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's "Son of the Abyss," 181; and Sillampoa, "The Poetry and Politics of Arturo Giovannitti," 178.

²⁸ Len Giovannitti, *The Nature of the Beast*, 151.

²⁹ Cited in "The Social Significance of Arturo Giovannitti," 24.

Seminary at Columbia University. About a year later he was sent to Pittsburgh or a nearby town to lead another Protestant mission among Italian immigrants until "socialism came to impersonate religion in his life and led him through the vanishing stages of unbelief into atheism."³⁰ Though Giovannitti might have been influenced by the libertarian ideas circulating in Italy, the origins of his radicalism are to be found in America, not his native country. The major catalyst in fact was the raw spectacle of poverty and exploitation of Italian immigrant workers, especially those working in the coal miners of Pennsylvania, whom he visited as a Presbyterian pastor.³¹ It was here that "he seems to have come, for the first time, into close contact with the socialists and to have espoused their cause."³² In all likelihood, this is also when he first met the charismatic Carlo Tresca, who had recently fled from Italy as a political refugee. The former editor of *Il Proletario*, Tresca had started publishing his own newspaper, *La Plebe*, and lectured regularly in the mining and mill towns around Pittsburgh.³³

³⁰ "The Poetry of Syndicalism," unsigned, *Atlantic Monthly* (June 1913), 853. Cited also in "A Poet of the IWW," unsigned, *The Outlook* (July 5, 1913), 504.

³¹ On Giovannitti's conversion to socialism see Mario De Ciampis "Arturo Massimo Giovannitti, poeta giornalista drammaturgo per la causa dei lavoratori," in Fiorelli, ed., *Arturo Giovannitti, Nenia Sennita* G-9, and Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's 'Son of the Abyss' and the Westmoreland Strike of 1910-1911," 182.

³² "The Social Significance of Arturo Giovannitti," 24.

³³ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography*, 147. On Tresca see Nunzio Pernicone, "Carlo Tresca: Life and Death of a Revolutionary," in Richard N. Juliani and Philip V. Cannistraro, eds., *Italian Americans: The Search for a Usable Past* (Staten Island: American Italian Historical Association, 1988), 216-235, and idem, "Carlo Tresca's *Il Martello*," *Italian American Review*, vol. 8, n. 1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 1-56.

Around 1906 Giovannitti returned to New York, where he resided for the rest of his life. His relationship with the adopted city was, and remained, one of love and hate. New York's exuberance, modernity, and multiculturalism clearly seduced him, as one can garner from this poem:

If this is not the fullness of your glory,
 O American Labor, there is your New York,
 Cosmopolis of Mankind,
 Whose towers you raised to mock the hurricanes
 and to shame and debase the clouds.
 Whose harbor shallows the nations, whose
 people, myriad-tongued,
 absorb and reshape and amalgam
 all creeds, all races in one humanity.³⁴

But it was the ordinary New York, the "City of Hunger and Toil," that inspired his pen and tortured his soul:

I shall sing of your slums where you bleed,
 Your machines, iron claws of your greed,
 And your jails, viscid coils of your mind,
 The light of your eyes that dazzles the sun
 And turns your midnights into moons,
 The street where you buy and resell
 Each day the whole world and mankind.
 Your foundations that reach down to hell
 And the glory of your nameless dead,
 And the bitterness of your bread,
 And the sword that shall hallow your hand,
 And the dawn that shall garland your head!³⁵

³⁴ From "O Labor of America: Heartbeat of Mankind," in *The Collected Poems of Arturo Giovannitti*, 2-4. Giovannitti also listed New York (and Canada) as the places where he would prefer to live. "Psicoanalisi minima," *Quando Canta il Gallo*, 295.

³⁵ This poem was originally published in Italian under the title "La città incredibile," [The incredible city], *Il Fuoco* (March 15, 1915), 8. The English version, slightly different from the Italian, is entitled "New York and I" and can be found in *The Collected Poems of Arturo Giovannitti*, 5-8.

Upon his arrival in New York, Giovannitti began working as a bookkeeper while immersing himself in the Italian immigrant radical milieu. By 1907 he had become an active member of "La Lotta Club" (The Struggle Club) and joined the lower Manhattan section of the Italian Socialist Federation (FSI). Some members of the FSI, which considered atheism a requisite of membership, initially objected to Giovannitti's admission.³⁶ Distrust towards Giovannitti became even greater when he delivered a religious talk to the uptown branch of the Y.M.C.A., an incident that provided the material for the poem "The Blind Men," one of the few English poems written before his Lawrence arrest.³⁷ Evidently, however, it was not long before Giovannitti "dropped God out of his program" and converted unconditionally to syndicalism and revolutionary action.³⁸ Two years later, he joined the editorial staff of *Il Proletario*, and in 1911, at the FSI annual Congress, he was elected general director of the paper, a position that exemplified his growing importance in the Italian American radical movement.

But even after professing himself an atheist, Giovannitti retained a good deal of the Christian ideas he had acquired at the theological seminaries. The religious imprint becomes particularly evident in his poetry, which frequently included scriptural allusions, biblical prophecies, and parallels between the workers' oppression and Jesus' own

³⁶ Notably the syndicalist Raimondo Fazio.

³⁷ Ebert, "Who Arturo Giovannitti is," 1, and Mary Brown Sumner, "Arturo Giovannitti," *The Survey* (November 2, 1912), 164.

³⁸ "The Social Significance of Arturo Giovannitti," 24, and Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's "Son of the Abyss,"" 182.

suffering. The degree of Giovannitti's religiosity and spiritualism is well illustrated in the last stanza of his poem "Credo:"

And I believe in Thee also, Oh Lord, whoever Thou art,
 wherever Thou art, whatever Thy name, Oh Love, Oh
 Truth, Oh Father and Mother of all, not only because
 Thou seest above and beyond my mortal eyes, but because
 I also need in my pride and pain to bend and
 kneel before a Supreme Pity that will illumine, even if it
 does not explain to me, the terrible mystery of Life.³⁹

There are also distinct elements of continuity between Giovannitti's activity as a pastor and as a labor agitator: in both cases he conceived himself as a sort of missionary, a prophet of the poor and the oppressed.⁴⁰ He Christianized socialism; making the struggle to overthrow capitalism congruent with the "pure" Christian values of love, brotherhood, and social equality; Jesus himself became a rebel not unlike the working-class rebels and martyrs of his own time.⁴¹ Ironically, it was the study of theology that turned him into an atheist, out of conviction that "the church strangled the mind." "It was the Bible," explained Giovannitti to his son, "that made me a poet *and* a revolutionary. I enjoyed the lies and was thrilled with the poetry. I became a blasphemer, thanks to the church.... I wanted to tell the masses of the downtrodden that God was not their salvation. They were their own salvation – not singularly, selfishly, but together, united."⁴²

³⁹ "Credo," in *The Collected Poems of Arturo Giovannitti*, 85-86.

⁴⁰ Cf. Pernicone, "Arturo Giovannitti's 'Son of the Abyss' and the Westmoreland Strike," 182.

⁴¹ Cf. Winters, *The Soul of the Wobblies*, 99.

The early period in New York had a lasting impact on Giovannitti's politics and art. The 1910s were years of unprecedented revolt and political struggle in America, when socialism reached millions of people and working-class struggles shook the country. They were also years of great artistic and literary ferment, with clubs, magazines, theaters, and experimental schools arising everywhere in an attempt to break with the past and find fresh and original artistic forms that would incarnate the new spirit of the time. People spoke of a "little Renaissance," a "joyous season," and "confident years;" it was "America's coming-of-age."⁴³ There was, as Max Eastman recalled, "a sense of universal revolt and regeneration of the just-before-dawn of a new day in American art and literature as well as in politics."⁴⁴ New York's Greenwich Village, with its streets filled with bars and cafes and populated by people of all nationalities, became the natural home of this political and cultural radicalism.

Giovannitti found in the free and exuberant ambiance of the Village the excitement and stimulation he had longed for. He became a volcano of energy, participating in everything that had to do with the cause of workers and seeking every

⁴² Len Giovannitti, *The Nature of the Beast*, 151.

⁴³ Van Wyck Brooks, "America's Coming-of-Age," in idem, *Three Essays in America* (New York: E. Dutton & Co., 1970, first published 1934). For critical studies of the 1910s see Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect* (New York: Knopf, 1987), Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odissey of the 1920s* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), John Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*, Leslie Fishbein, *The Radicals and "The Masses," 1911-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), Henry May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Knopf, 1959), and Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001)

⁴⁴ Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Living* (New York: Harper, 1948), 399.

opportunity to discuss political and philosophical matters. The teachings of Marx became his new Bible and the struggle of immigrant workers his *raison d'être*. From 1910 to the end of the First World War, he worked especially closely with the IWW, traveling extensively to spread the message of revolutionary syndicalism, and distinguishing himself as one of the Wobblies' most powerful and eloquent orators, both in his native language and in English.⁴⁵

Contrary to most Italian immigrant radical leaders who remained confined to the world of Little Italy, Giovannitti established strong personal ties to New York's world of radical intellectuals and bohemians. The combination of personal qualities, high education, and language skills (he spoke fluently Italian, English, and French) helped him transcend ethnic barriers and interrelate with the American Left. He became a regular guest of Mabel Dodge's famous salon at 23 Fifth Avenue, where socialists, anarchists, syndicalists, feminists, radical artists, and intellectual bohemians met every Wednesday evening to talk about poetry, philosophy, sex, and revolution.

He also wrote in English for the *Masses*, the celebrated radical magazine of art and politics founded in 1911 by Max Eastman, which Giovannitti eloquently described as "the recording of the Revolution in the making.... An earnest and living thing, a battle call, a shout of defiance, a blazing torch running madly through the night to set afire the powder magazines of the world."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See Massimo Salvadori, "Generazione che passa," and Mario De Ciampis, "Arturo Massimo Giovannitti, poeta giornalista drammaturgo per la causa dei lavoratori," in *Arturo Giovannitti, Nenia Sannita*, respectively G6-G8 and G9-G11.

⁴⁶ Cited in Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 22.

He grew especially close to socialist artists and intellectuals such as Helen Keller, John Macy, Lewis Mumford, and the bohemian rebels of Greenwich Village, notably Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, Art Young, and John Reed, for whom Giovannitti wrote a poem as well as the epitaph on his tomb.⁴⁷ This group of dissidents appeared to some as just “strolling players” and “overgrown children” who wanted to live “vibrantly and indecorously.”⁴⁸

But, as Christine Stansell has observed, they also “injected into the politics of the left a new cultural dimension, as well as psychological identification between working-class and middle-class people, that lent tremendous flexibility and originality to the popular politics of the era.”⁴⁹

Giovannitti was in many ways simultaneously a product and a producer of such a new culture. Like New York’s young rebels, he was a cultural modernist who sought “to break down the dualism between contemplative life and active life,” in an attempt to fuse politics and art.⁵⁰ As he nostalgically recalled in the early 1950s: “We were all bohemians then, writers and artists, coming together of an evening to read to one another or display our paintings to keep our hopes up and to warm our talents.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ “John Reed,” *The Collected Poems of Arturo Giovannitti*, 126.

⁴⁸ Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 10-11.

⁴⁹ Stansell, *American Moderns*, 3.

⁵⁰ Stansell, *American Moderns*, 1, and Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*, 94.

⁵¹ Quoted in Len Giovannitti, *The Nature of the Beast*, 35.

Strains of bohemian revolt surface in much of his literary work, and are nowhere more evident than in *Il Fuoco* [The fire], the magazine of politics and art he founded with the sculptor Onorio Ruotolo just before the outbreak of the First World War. Like *The Masses*, *Il Fuoco* called for change and experiment, declaring itself irreverent, fierce, reckless, and revolutionary, if nothing else because it aimed at “transforming all rotten elements of society, and burning all which was old, traditional, conformist and expressive of the status quo.”⁵²

This tension between emotions and experience, self-expression and political commitment is one of the most defining elements of Giovannitti’s personality. But unlike the young bohemian rebels, he was first and above all a man of action; his idealism, love for art and beauty were never separated from his deeds, and, his poetry was never exclusively expressive of his personal, inner world. His political views formed not only the background but also the impetus of his poetry.

While immersing himself in the political and cultural radicalism of New York, Giovannitti fed his hunger for art by writing verses, the first of which appeared in *Il Proletario* in 1908. The best-known of these early poems are “Nenia Sannita” (Samnite Cradle Song) and “Figlio dell’abbisso” (Son of the Abyss).⁵³ Both resemble litanies of

⁵² “Che cos’è *Il Fuoco*,” *Il Fuoco*, May 31, 1915, 5. For a critical study of *Il Fuoco* see Marcella Bencivenni, “A Magazine of Art and Struggle: The Experience of *Il Fuoco*, 1914-1915,” *Italian American Review*, vol. 8, n. 1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 57-84.

⁵³ The first poem to appear was “Il vecchio del mare,” (The Old Man of the Sea), *Il Proletario*, May 1, 1908. Other poems of this period include: “Al Colubro nero,” (To the Black Snake - he referred to the priest), *Il Proletario*, March 12, 1908, 2, and “Alle due sante, a Luisa Michel, a Maria Spiridonova,” (In the Memory of Two Saints) *Il Proletario*, March 18, 1909, 2.

peasant cultural traditions, with disquieting rhythms and tones that are simultaneously desperate and heartening. The first evoked the terrible misery and hunger that people suffered in his native land, Molise. "So rendering is the new art of this poem," wrote a critic, "that one sees all the misery of the world rise up and stalk before one; everybody that has ever been bereaved, shattered, hurt unto death, is included, is remembered."⁵⁴ It was written in the form of a lullaby that a poor mother sings to her baby at the end of her long day, but unlike lullabies, Giovannitti's "Cradle Song" was meant to awaken and not put to sleep:

Hush-a-by, lullaby, listen! Don't sleep!
 Lullaby, hush-a-by, mark well my word!
 Thou shall grow big. Don't tremble. Don't fail!....
 And if thou livest with sweat and with woe,
 Grow like a man, not a saint, not a knave;
 Do not be good, but be strong and be brave,
 With the fangs of a wolf and the faith of a dog.
 Die not the death of a soldier or slave,
 Like thy grandfather who died in a bog,
 Like thy poor father who rots in the rain.
 But for this womb that has born thee in pain,
 For these dry breasts thou has tortured so long,
 For the despair of my life, my lost hope,
 And for this song of the dawn that I sing
 Die like a man by the ax or the rope
 Spit of their God and stab our good king.⁵⁵

With "The Son of the Abyss" Giovannitti shifted his attention away from the Old World to the plight of Italian immigrants in America. The poem was inspired by the coal-miners' strike of 1910-1911 in Westmoreland, Pennsylvania, which involved more than 10,000 mine-workers. After the Slavs, Italians constituted the largest contingent of the

⁵⁴ Anna Strunsky Walling, "Giovannitti's Poems," *The New Review*, 2 (May 1914), 291.

strike and were described by contemporary observers as “the staunchest and most resolute group engaged in the battle.”⁵⁶ While Giovannitti did not personally attend the strike, he was certainly aware of the conditions of the struggle thanks to the accounts of the FSI members who hurried there to help the strikers, and, above all, the stream of letters that, as director of *Il Proletario*, he received from the workers involved in the strike.

Like the “Samnite Cradle Song,” “The Son of the Abyss,” begins with a lament – in this case the plight of the miners “buried” beneath the coal – and ends with a prophecy of vengeance and redemption. The young “son of the abyss” will not “dream of life in a tomb” like his father, nor will he bow his “proud fair-haired head.” Nourished with “a bitter drink of sweat and tears” and “lit by the flames of steel,” he will join “the priests of the greater ideal” who “slowly wear down and undo the foundations of many a crumbling temple,” eliciting at last “the final avalanche that will shallow all.”⁵⁷

By 1912, when the strike was called in the Lawrence mills of Massachusetts, Giovannitti had already become a “full-fledged radical” and was certainly a part of every major political and social movement of New York’s vigorous left community.⁵⁸ Such was indeed his popularity that his room on West 28th Street had become a meeting place for intellectuals of various nationalities, who engaged in passionate discussions of religion,

⁵⁵ “Samnite Cradle Song,” in *Arrows in the Gale*, 82-87.

⁵⁶ Pernicone, “Arturo Giovannitti’s “Son of the Abyss,”” 184

⁵⁷ “Son of the Abyss,” translated by Paul Italia and published in Pernicone, “Arturo Giovannitti’s “Son of the Abyss,”” 187-190. First published in *Il Proletario*, April 27, 1911, the Italian original version is included in *Quando canta il gallo*, 157.

art, literature, and political economy.⁵⁹ But it was his leadership in the memorable “Bread and Roses” strike and his near martyrdom that threw Giovannitti into national limelight and established him as a folk hero of the radical labor movement.⁶⁰ Recalling the Haymarket anarchists’ case of 1886, his arrest became an instant cause célèbre, winning international support and widespread press coverage. The articles published during, and after, the trial leave no doubt about Giovannitti’s popularity and fame: “Of all the men in this country thrown up into public view by the seething, bubbling social discontent of the Twentieth Century, none is more interesting than Arturo Giovannitti,” wrote *Current Opinion*. He has, continued the magazine, “the soul of a great poet, the fervor of a prophet, and added to these, the courage and power of initiative that mark the man of action and the organizer of great crusades.”⁶¹

Coming at a time of labor unrest and industrial turmoil, the Lawrence strike became the most publicized and extraordinary working-class protest of the time. Not because it was numerically large or because the strikers won, but because thousands of unskilled, uneducated, immigrant workers of many different nationalities were able to

⁵⁸ Wallace Sillanpoa, “The Poetry and Politics of Arturo Giovannitti,” in *The Melting Pot and Beyond: Italian Americans in the Year 2000*, edited by Jerome Krase (Proceeding of the American Italian Historical Association, 1987).

⁵⁹ “The Social Significance of Arturo Giovannitti,” 24.

⁶⁰ Pernicone, “Arturo Giovannitti’s “Son of the Abyss” and the Westmoreland Strike of 1910-1911.”

⁶¹ “The Social Significance of Arturo Giovannitti,” 24.

transcend ethnic barriers and fight side by side against corporate America.⁶² “It was more than a union,” recalled Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “it was a crusade for Bread and Roses.”⁶³ Within a few weeks of its inception on January 11, 1912, the protest gained remarkable national publicity, acquainting the American people with the atrocious living conditions of the unskilled workers and spreading the philosophy of radical unionism. As progressive Walter Weyl put it: “The strike at Lawrence bade us to stop, look and listen.”⁶⁴

The issue of the strike was a wage cut resulting from the reduction of the working week from fifty-six to fifty-four hours, but the loss of pay was only the last straw of a situation that workers could no longer tolerate.⁶⁵ As one exasperated worker put it: “Better to starve fighting than to starve working!”⁶⁶ Led by the Italians, who constituted the largest ethnic group of Lawrence, about 14,000 workers eventually deserted their

⁶² Justus Ebert, *The Trial of a New Society* (Cleveland: IWW Publishing Bureau, 1912), 45.

⁶³ Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 134.

⁶⁴ Walter E. Weyl, “It is time to know,” in “The Lawrence Struggle from Various Angles,” *The Survey*, April 6, 1912, 65.

⁶⁵ The average weekly income was \$8-9 for men, but women and unskilled workers, which represented the overwhelming majority of the labor force, received well below the norm, making only \$6 a week and often as little as \$4. People lived amasssed in filthy, infested, and overpriced tenements; children’s mortality rate was one of the highest in the nation (17%); while tuberculosis, pneumonia, and other respiratory deceases resulting from poor ventilation in the mills ravaged adult workers. Whole families, including pregnant women and children, worked in the mills to eke out a bare existence. See Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All, A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 132-135, and Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 127-128.

machinery, and after a few days the mills were completely empty. The strike went on for nearly three months, until March 14, when mill owners and state governments finally capitulated and granted the workers' demands – an increase in wage from five to twenty percent, increased compensation for overtime, reduction of the premium period from four weeks to two weeks, and no action against the workers who had participated in the strike.⁶⁷

Advocating the abolition of wage system and social revolution, the IWW was the largest labor organization in Lawrence (counting about 1,300 members) and took on the difficult task of organizing the strikers. Arturo Giovannitti, along with another Italian, Joseph Ettor, supplied the crucial leadership that made it possible.

Born of Italian immigrant parents in Brooklyn, NY, Ettor was “a man of unlimited physical vitality, a wonderful capacity for leadership, and a pronounced Socialist.”⁶⁸ Educated by his father to radicalism, he became a Wobbly agitator and organizer by vocation. Unlike Giovannitti, he was of working-class origin and had a grammar-school education. Yet, Ettor was fluent in English, Italian, Polish and Yiddish, and distinguished himself for his personal magnetism and eloquence. He arrived in Lawrence on January 13, upon the request of Angelo Rocco, head of the IWW's Italian section in Lawrence. A contemporary writer described Ettor as “a short, stocky Italian with a well shaped head, crowned with a thick shock of hair upon which a small hat sets rather jauntily.” He used to wear “a flannel shirt and a large bow for a tie,” his clothes “typically Italian in cut.”

⁶⁶ Flynn. *The Rebel Girl*, 128.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

He had dark brown eyes and flowing black hair, a kindly, boyish face “which lights up with humor and then sobers with scorn,” and a strong, resonant voice.⁶⁹ By no means handsome, Ettor “had yet a touch of the artistic bohemian. Looking anything but a wage worker, he nevertheless magnetized laboring groups.”⁷⁰

Arturo Giovannitti instead was a tall, slender, handsome man. With straight brown hair, intense blue eyes, typically wearing Byronic collars and flowing cravats, he had the aspect of an aristocrat. As Dubofsky observed, he “played the mature intellectual to Ettor’s boyish radical; where Ettor impressed audiences with his childish enthusiasm, Giovannitti did it with a romantic, mystical intensity.”⁷¹ But for all their physical differences, Ettor and Giovannitti were bound together by a comradeship of ideals. Both strongly believed in revolutionary syndicalism and were committed to the overthrow of capitalism and the construction of a cooperative commonwealth through social revolution. They threw themselves into the conflict with great enthusiasm and ardor and, in short time, under their aggressive leadership, the unorganized revolt turned into an industrial union strike. Ettor developed the plan for a strike committee composed of fifty-six delegates representing twenty-seven different languages, urging a complete tie-up of all the mills. This committee organized mass picket squads to keep non-strikers out of the mills, and held meetings and parades with music and songs to encourage unity and

⁶⁸ Ebert, *The Trial of a New Society*, 38.

⁶⁹ Nicholas Vanderpuy, “Intimate Story of Joseph J. Ettor,” *Boston Herald*, Jan. 24, 1912. Cited in Ebert, *The Trial of a New Society*, 40.

⁷⁰ Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All, A History of the Industrial Workers of the World*, 237.

⁷¹ Ibid.

solidarity among the workers. Giovannitti, who arrived in Lawrence on January 20, 1912, at Ettor's request, assumed the work of relief for the strikers' families. Particularly useful was his connection with the Italian Socialist Federation, which by then had officially endorsed the program and objectives of the IWW. He corresponded with all Federation's secretaries, exhorting contributions and the arranging of meetings to help the strikers in every way possible.⁷² A powerful, incisive speaker, he played also a crucial role in inspiring and unifying the strikers, especially the Italians, who constituted, because of their large numbers and militancy, the backbone of the strike. On January 21, 1912, a day after his arrival to Lawrence, he gave a moving speech about the importance of class-consciousness and self-reliance, so that the workers could realize their power and strength:

Capitalism is the same in the Fatherland as it is here.... You are considered nothing but machines. Human machines in the old countries, human machines in this country.... Nobody has any interest in your conditions. If any effort is made to improve your conditions and raise you to the dignity of manhood and womanhood; that must come from yourselves alone; you can have no hope in no one but yourselves. It is only by your own power, your own determined will, your own solidarity, that you can rise to better things.⁷³

Giovannitti invested a tremendous amount of his energy to fight the *contadini's* fatalist, servile, and paternalistic culture and teach Italian immigrant workers that their salvation depended on themselves. In doing so, he gave them what they needed most: a sense of dignity, self-respect, as well as hope for a brighter future. His inspirational

⁷² Ebert, *The Trial of a New Society*, 38 and 69.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 70.

power became particularly evident when, a few days later, he delivered to thousands of workers gathered on the Lawrence Common the poem that became known as the “Sermon on the Common.”

Written during the early days of the Lawrence strike, this poem/address is a paraphrase of Christ’s “Sermon on the Mount,” “with strength substituted for meekness, rebels for peacemakers, revenge for mercy and, of course, the kingdom of earth for the kingdom of heaven.”⁷⁴ But unlike Jesus’ message of passive perseverance, Giovannitti’s sermon is a cry for revolutionary action. After listing the new “beatitudes” of the apostles and the warriors of labor, he launched a fierce attack on the dominant churches for having taught people to “be humble, resigned, patient, submissive, lowly and prone even as a beast of burden, lest ye have the gaol in this life and gehenna in the life to come.” Then, echoing the prophetic voice of Jesus, he announced to the workers that a “new evangel shall be proclaimed unto you,” that will renovate and purify their souls:

Therefore I say unto you, Banish fear from your
 hearts, dispel the mists of ignorance from
 your minds, arm your yearning with your
 strength, you vision with your will, and
 open your eyes and behold.
 Do not moan, do not submit, do not kneel, do
 not pray, do not wait.
 Think, dare, do, rebel, fight - ARISE!”⁷⁵

Progressive Walter Weyl, who was present at the meeting, was considerably struck by the effect of Giovannitti’s words on the masses of immigrant workers. Describing the thousands of men and women who gathered on the Common, he said: “I

⁷⁴ Winters, *The Soul of the Wobblies*, 97.

saw in this plain of upturned white faces that mask of infinite patient resignation, which is so tragic a mark of the peasant face in Eastern and Southern Europe. I saw also a new obscure enthusiasm, a new halting self- confidence breaking through the mists of apathy. The souls behind these white faces were beginning to stir. The minds behind these white faces were beginning to think."⁷⁶

Giovannitti's and Ettore's activity in Lawrence was cut short by their arrest on January 30, 1912. The day before, one of the largest demonstrations of the strike had taken place: following clashes between the police and the strikers, one officer was stabbed and a young Italian woman, Anna LoPizzo, was killed. Though the witnesses maintained she was shot by an agent provocateur, the following day the police charged a striker who was on the picket line, Joseph Caruso, with the murder, and arrested Ettore and Giovannitti as accessories on the ground that "they did feloniously and maliciously move, procure, aid, counsel, and command" the homicide. The government charged that the bullet was intended for Patrolman Oscar Benoit, but missed him and killed Anna LoPizzo instead.⁷⁷ The charge was ludicrous: none of the three men was near the scene of the incident, and, as it turned out, Caruso did not even know Giovannitti and Ettore. Clearly, the arrests were aimed at putting the leaders of the strike out of action, in the hope of disrupting the protest. Surprisingly, they had a decidedly contrary effect: "First, they

⁷⁵ "The Sermon on the Common," in *Arrows in the Gale*, 77.

⁷⁶ Weyl, "It is Time to Know," 65-66.

⁷⁷ "Prison Life of Ettore and Giovannitti," unsigned, *The Literary Digest*, September 14, 1912, 461.

increased the number of the strikers.... Second, the purpose was so evident, as to create sympathy for the strike.”⁷⁸

A Defense Committee, including among others Elizabeth Flynn, Bill Haywood, and Carlo Tresca, was formed to mobilize public opinion and raise money for the legal expenses. Radical and liberal newspapers across the country expressed their outrage at the American judicial system, while the entire Italian American press, even that controlled by the *prominenti*, came out strongly in support of their co-nationals. Demonstrations in support of the three prisoners were held in many parts of the world; several Italian cities even nominated Giovannitti as a candidate for parliament; and Swedish labor unions threatened to boycott American goods if the men were not released.⁷⁹

The prolonged delay of the trial added fuel to workers’ resentment against the state. “To-day the people of the United States are demanding the doors of the jail to be open,” reported *The New York World*, “or they will close the doors of every mill in the United States and nail up every railroad in the country.”⁸⁰ Despite Ettor and Giovannitti’s opposition to the idea of a general strike, 12,000 people left the Lawrence mills and marched towards the jail house demanding immediate freedom. The three prisoners, however, had been secretly moved out of the Essex County Jail at 4:00am the day before

⁷⁸ Ebert, *The Trial of a New Society*, 71.

⁷⁹ “Acquittal of the I. W. W. Leaders,” and “Haywood Arrest,” unsigned, *The Literary Digest*, September 28, 1912, 503.

⁸⁰ Cited in “Haywood Arrest,” 502.

and taken to Salem, the ancient town where the infamous witchcraft trials had taken place in 1692, resulting in the hanging of nineteen women.⁸¹

The threat of a general strike apparently worked, for the following day, after ten months of jail, the trial finally opened. After a fifty-eight day hearing, on November 26, the jury found Ettor, Giovannitti, and Caruso innocent of all charges.⁸² Near the close of the trial, instead of the counsel as usual, Giovannitti and Ettor made their own final addresses to the jury. According to James Heaton, who wrote a detailed review of the trial, their testimonies proved to be the greatest strength of the defense. Addressing the jury in a perfect English, Giovannitti spoke for twenty minutes holding all hearers spellbound.⁸³ In a voice vibrant with passion, he first apologized for his emotional state and his limited knowledge of “your wonderful language.” Showing a deep knowledge of American history, he invoked the great American traditions and ideals – the Revolution, the abolition of slavery, the Constitution -- and went on to express respect for American laws and institutions.⁸⁴ His greatest merit, however, was to glorify his cause, emphasizing the ethical reasons that prompted Ettor and him to go to Lawrence:

⁸¹ Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 147-149.

⁸² James Heaton, “The Salem Trial,” *The Survey*, December 7, 1912, 301-304.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 304, and “The Social Significance of Giovannitti,” 24.

⁸⁴ For Giuseppe Prezzolini of the Casa Italiana at Columbia University, Giovannitti’s address revealed an exceptional understanding of the psychology of the American jury and a natural inclination to the profession of law. Had he remained in Italy, wrote the critic, he would have certainly become a great lawyer. See Prezzolini, “Elogio di un trapiantato molisano, bardo della libertà negli Stati Uniti,” in *Arturo Giovannitti. Nenia Sannita*, G17- G18.

..... One side alone of our story has been told here.... Only the method and only the tactics. But what about, I say, the ethical part of this question? What about the human and humane parts of our ideas? What about the grand condition of tomorrow as we see it...., where at last there will not be any more slaves, any more masters, but just one great family of friends and brothers. It may be, gentlemen of the jury, that you don't believe in that. It might be that we are dreamers; it may be that we are fanatics, Mr. District Attorney. We are fanatics. But yet so was a fanatic Socrates.... And so was a fanatic the Saviour Jesus Christ.... And so were all the philosophers and all the dreamers and all the scholars of the middle ages who preferred to be buried alive by one of these very same churches which you reproach me now of having said that no one of our membership should belong to....

.... Gentlemen of the jury, I have finished. I don't want to pose to you as a hero. I don't want to pose as a martyr. No, life is dearer to me than it is probably to many others. But I say this, that there is something dearer and nobler and holier and grander, something I could never come to terms with, and that is my conscience, and that is my loyalty to my class and to my comrades who have come here to this room, and to the working class of the world, who have contributed with a splendid hand, penny by penny, to my defense, and who have all over the world seen that no injustice and no wrong was done to me....

A long hush followed his conclusion, broken only by the sobs of hearers. "In twenty years of reporting," commented a journalist afterwards, "I have never heard the equal of that speech."⁸⁵

Ultimately, the three men were freed because of the weakness of the case against them: the man who fired the shot was not surely identified and evidence of Ettor's and Giovannitti's incitement of violence was difficult to prove.⁸⁶ But in part, the acquittal

⁸⁵ "The Social Significance of Arturo Giovannitti," 24

⁸⁶ As evidence of Giovannitti's and Ettor's responsibility the state offered the speeches made by them, but they were unable to present any written notes of their statements. The

was also a result of the enormous solidarity that workers and radical leaders had built in support of the prisoners and, consequently, of the fear of what might have happened had they been sentenced to death.

During the long months of forced idleness and isolation in jail, Giovannitti transformed his cell into a study-room, feeding his mind with the masterpieces of great writers. Almost as soon as he was imprisoned, he expressed a desire for reading literature, philosophy, and history, and was granted access to the warden's library. He read with "insatiate eagerness" above all poetry, dipping deeply into Shakespeare, Carlyle, and Balzac and finding in Shelley and Byron "the heady wine which his rebellious nature craved."⁸⁷

The jail experience marked Giovannitti's best literary phase. Though he had already written verses for various Italian-language newspapers before his arrest, it was during his imprisonment that he produced his finest and most impassionate poems which established him as one of the most important radical poets of the time. During the trial, Bill Haywood asked Giovannitti to write something about "Sixteenth Century courts trying to solve Twentieth Century problems."

The result was "The Cage." It was written one evening, while Giovannitti was greatly motivated by the news of the protest in Lawrence and the messages of sympathy and support from his comrades. First published in 1913 by *Atlantic Monthly*, the poem

defense countered those accusations by introducing ministers who testified to the innocent intent of their speeches. See "The Salem Trial," 303.

⁸⁷ "The Poetry of Syndicalism," 854.

won immediate critical acclaim. It describes three men sitting in a green iron cage, symbolic of the injustice of capitalist society. Giovannitti powerfully recreates the coldness and deadness of the jail: "Senility, dullness and dissolution were all around the green iron cage, and nothing was new and young and alive in the great room, except the three men."

In net contrast with the mournful silence of the jail and the old judges who sit over them, the three prisoners represent the exuberant youth and hopeful future. While outside the prison, "the terrible whirl of life" moves on, the three men contemplate the injustice of the present law that keep them in prison and wonder: "what subtle and malignant power could be in the metal of this cage that is so mad to imprison us?" In response, the metallic soul of the Cage speaks to them, pleading for a return to the bygone joy of labor:

*Iron, the twin brother of fire, the first born out
of the matrix of the earth, the witness everlasting
to the glory of thy labor, am I, O Man!
*Not for this was I meant, O Man! Not to imprison
thee, but to set thee free and sustain
thee in thy strife and in thy toil.

Hadst thou not sinned against the nobility of
my nature and my destiny, hadst thou
not humiliated me, an almighty warrior, to
become the lackey of gold, I would have never
risen against thee and enslaved thee, O Man!

My curse if thy curse, O Man, and even if thou
should pass out of the wicket of this cage,
never shall thou be free until thou returnest
me to the joy of labor.

O Man, bring me back into the old smithy,
purify me again with the holy fire of the forge,
lay me again on the mother breast of the
anvil, beat me again with the old honest hammer
-- O Man, remould me with thy wonderful
hands into an instrument of thy toil.

Remake of me the sword of thy justice,
 Remake me of the tripod of thy worship,
 Remake of me the sickle for thy grain,
 Remake of me the oven for thy bread,
 And the andirons for thy peaceful hearth,
 O Man!
 And the trestles for the bed of thy love,
 O Man!
 And the frame of the joyous lyre, O Man!⁸⁸

Here, according to a contemporary critic for *The Survey*, "is Giovannitti's message of freedom at its noblest."⁸⁹ It is indeed in these triumphant invectives of great spiritual and prophetic force that Giovannitti finds himself most completely. "The Cage" is at once a powerful attack to authority, law, and tradition, and a glorification of Giovannitti's new gospel of labor. "We are not prepared to debate the question whether Syndicalism has a soul, but if it has, 'The Cage' gives a picture of it," commented *Atlantic Monthly*.⁹⁰ The review clearly did not sympathize with the content of the poem, finding it "harshly materialistic," and warning that "a rebel wrote it." Yet, it recognized its spiritual character and admitted that "to the very poor, bread, bed, and sunshine may suggest something very different than materialism."⁹¹

The jail experience was also the inspiration for "The Walker," which many consider Giovannitti's best poem. Like "The Cage," it was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, but soon appeared in all the main literary periodicals of the time and was almost

⁸⁸ For the full poem see *Arrows in the Gale*, 90-95.

⁸⁹ "Book Review: *Arrows in the Gale*," unsigned, *The Survey*, June 27, 1914, 347.

⁹⁰ "The Poetry of Syndicalism," 854.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

immediately translated into all major languages, including Chinese, Japanese, and Esperanto.⁹² In about one-hundred-and-fifty lines Giovannitti expressed, “as it has never been expressed in English” the psychological torture of the prisoner locked within the bare confines of his cell.⁹³ The poem begins as follows:

I HEAR footsteps over my head all night.
They come and they go. Again they come and
they go all night.
They come one eternity in four paces and they
go one eternity in four paces, and between the
coming and the going there is Silence and
the Night and the Infinite.
For infinite are the nine feet of a prison cell, and
endless in the march of him who walks between
the yellow brick wall and the red iron
gate, thinking things that cannot be chained
and cannot be locked, but that wonder far
away in the sunlit world, each in a wild
pilgrimage after a destined goal.⁹⁴

Many have compared Giovannitti’s poem to Wilde’s “Ballad of Reading Gaol,” not a few regarding it as more real, more subjective, and more intense than Wilde’s.⁹⁵ “It is more than a poem,” wrote *Current Opinion*, “It is a great human document.”⁹⁶ And indeed the terror, despair, and obsession of the prisoner for “a small brass key that turns just half around and throws open the red iron gate” is fully as vital and vibrant as it could

⁹² Sillampoa, “The Poetry and Politics of Arturo Giovannitti,” 180.

⁹³ Sumner, “Arturo Giovannitti,” 165.

⁹⁴ *Arrows in the Gale*, 21.

⁹⁵ See for example, Untermeyer, *Modern American Poetry*, 287.

⁹⁶ “The Social Significance of Arturo Giovannitti,” 25.

be. But "The Walker" goes even beyond that. As Louis Untermeyer commented, "it is a poetic epitome of a creed, a movement that is both political and religious."⁹⁷

"The Walker" transcends the inner emotions of Giovannitti, the prisoner, and gives voice to the thoughts of Giovannitti, the revolutionary prophet. The result, a synthesis of lyrical beauty and political purpose. The psychological torment is in fact fused with the indictment of society -- "the monstrous cabala that can make the apostle and the murderer, the poet and the procurer, think of the same gate, the same key and the same exit on the different sunlit highways of life -- and with the supreme faith in a common humanity. And it is this thought that finally gives the prisoner comfort and rescues him from total despair:

Stop, rest, sleep, my brother, for the dawn is well
nigh and it is not the key alone that can throw
open the gate.⁹⁸

"The Cage" and "The Walker" were republished in 1914 along with other twenty-two poems in the volume entitled *Arrows in the Gale*, which remains the best of Giovannitti's collections of poetry. Among others, "The Thinker," "The Republic," and "The Praise of Spring" stand out. "The Thinker," which was inspired by Rodin's statue is the exemplification of Giovannitti's vision of commonweal.⁹⁹ "The Republic" describes the rise and fall of the French Revolution. Giovannitti's faith in direct, revolutionary

⁹⁷ Untermeyer, *American Poetry Since 1900*, 279.

⁹⁸ *Arrows in the Gale*, 27.

⁹⁹ Walling, "Giovannitti's Poems. A Review," 288

action as the only means to change the status quo is particularly evident in the following lines:

The Mob, the mightiest judge of all.
To hear the rights of man came out.
And every word became a shout,
And every shout a musket ball.¹⁰⁰

“The Praise of Spring” is a love-poem, but, like other love poems in the book, the love Giovannitti is talking about is only another aspect of his revolutionism. The beloved is inevitably also the comrade, who feels, struggles and aspires to the revolution.

At times Giovannitti used formal verse and end rhyme, but his best poems were written in blank free verses with a predominance of pentameters. As many critics have pointed out, his style comes especially close to the free rhythmic mode of Whitman. Not only did Giovannitti resemble Whitman in form, but also in his vigor, energy, and exuberance. However, Joseph Tusiani, a poet and literary critic, suggests that it was the lesser known American poet Edward Markham, author of “The Man with the Hoe,” more than Whitman who influenced the young Italian. Characterized by traditional metrics, Markham’s poetry, explains Tusiani, helped Giovannitti to combine the classical and humanistic formation of the ‘Mario Pagano’ with the new revolutionary verve of the early twentieth-century.¹⁰¹

Regardless of the style, however, the dominant note of all poems is that of class-conflict and attack on the status quo. As *The Survey* put it: “In the poems of Giovannitti we are forced to recognize the first American poems in a world-wide outpouring of the

¹⁰⁰ *Arrows in the Gale*, 66

working class verse that is giving literary expression to that revolt against our present day institutions, industrial and political, which has expressed itself in action in the last three years in the mass strikes all over Europe."¹⁰² Similarly, in her introduction to *Arrows in the Gale*, Helen Keller presented Giovannitti as "a poet of revolt against the cruelty, the poverty, which too many of us accept in blind content." Giovannitti, continued Keller, provides the reader with a poetry that is "the spiritualization of a lofty dream that he seeks to realize – the establishment of love and brotherhood and social justice for every man and woman upon the earth."¹⁰³ This sublime conception of the world never deserted him: it is at the center of all his poems: his battle-cries, his invectives against organized religions, as well as his more lyrical and dispassionate verses.

Because of its revolutionary content, Giovannitti's poetry has raised the question of the relation between art and propaganda. Is his poetry – asked Untermeyer – cramped and distorted by the message? Does politically inspired art affect the quality of the art? Apparently to most non-left literary critics, the answer is yes. Giovannitti's inability to detach himself from the labor cause represented, according to them, his main limitation as a poet. For example, Florence Converse, a contemporary critic for *The Survey* argued that, with a few exceptions, Giovannitti remains the poet of emotion rather than of thought, a lyrist rather than a dramatist or a narrative poet. In most of his poems, continues the critic, he fails because of his irresistible tendency to declaim and to accuse.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Tusiani, "La poesia inglese di Arturo Giovannitti," 94.

¹⁰² "Arturo Giovannitti," unsigned, *The Survey*, November 2, 1912, 163.

¹⁰³ Helen Keller, Introduction to *Arrows in the Gale*, 9.

Significantly, this seems also to be the focus of the critical objections of two Italian American poets, and friends of Giovannitti: Giuseppe Zappulla and the already mentioned Tusiani. According to Tusiani, the reputation of “poet of the workers” that Giovannitti gained through the Lawrence Strike and the publication of *Arrows in the Gale*, marked the limitation and the death of his poetic talent. Tusiani believes that because of the responsibility he felt to remain faithful to his role of spokesman of the laborer, he suppressed any other sentiment and produced monotonous lyrics that found in labor both their point of departure and their point of arrival.

Tusiani recognizes Giovannitti’s poetic talent: his fervor, eloquence, and sensitivity, he explains, can be sensed even in his most mediocre verses. Yet, concludes Tusiani, his poetic message is often too explicit, too manifest, too often characterized by rhetorical expressions and demagoguery.¹⁰⁵

Zappulla seems to concur with Tusiani. Writing a review of *Quando canta il gallo*, Zappulla separates Giovannitti, the poet/apostle, from the lyrical poet -- singer of the nature, spectator of the world’s beauty, forgetful at last of the social struggles, tyrannies, injustices and human evil. His preference and praise are unmistakably for the latter. He admits that it is difficult to separate what is “pure poetry” from the propagandistic poetry (a poetry of commitment, a poetry with an educational message), for love, charity, piety, enthusiasm, vehemence, and desire of good inevitably merge. He also understands that Giovannitti was essentially born as a social poet, from and for the struggle. Yet, he concludes that “the best of Giovannitti – what, to those who love and

¹⁰⁴ Florence Converse, “Arrows in the Gale. A Review,” *The Survey*, June 27, 1914, 347.

understands poetry, makes him a poet in the modern sense of the word, without adjectives that indicate his tendencies – can be found in his idyllic poems.¹⁰⁶

Such criticism has two major limits: first of all it is based on a vague, preconceived notion of “authenticity” or “pure art” that is never clearly defined. Second and more importantly, it fails to grasp the most significant and compelling part of Giovannitti’s poetry: its spirit. As Charles Ashleigh wrote for the *Little Review*, “There is something that flames through these poems that abashes one who would content himself with a sterile commentary on the versification.”¹⁰⁷ That spirit – the utopian vision of the world – which is the spark of all of Giovannitti’s poetry, is what makes it true poetry. Class-struggle, social injustice, economic inequality, bourgeois hypocrisy and self-interest; all these are matters of great concern for Giovannitti, inspiring him to write something meaningful.¹⁰⁸ This however, is not to say that Giovannitti’s poetry should be reduced to political propaganda. What I am suggesting is that there exist perhaps an inherent tension within radical culture between art and politics, and that one cannot be judged apart from the other. The idealism and rhetorical tones that characterize, and, according to some, undermine Giovannitti’s poetry cannot be separated from the vision burning within him.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Tusiani, “La poesia inglese di Arturo Giovannitti, 97.

¹⁰⁶ Zappulla, “Un poeta che scompare,” 4-5. Among the idyllic poems Zappulla lists: “Madre Terra,” “Inno all’Uomo Nuovo,” “Beethoven,” “La Saggezza del Mare,” “Il cenacolo” “Un poeta che scompare,” “A Mia Madre,” and “La Cisterna,” all of them published in *Quando Canta il Gallo*.

¹⁰⁷ Charles Ashley, “The Poetry of Revolt,” *The Little Review*, September 1914, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Untermeyer, *American Poetry Since 1900*, 277.

If Giovannitti's later art became poorer, as Tusiani lamented, it was not because of his inability to detach himself from the cause of labor, but exactly for the opposite reason, because he lost his revolutionary enthusiasm. The disillusionment with the Russian Revolution, the rise of Fascism in Italy, the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti were terrible blows to Giovannitti's political ideas. To believe in the triumph of justice and equality became harder and harder, if not impossible. As a result, his inspiration ran dry once he became disaffected with the revolutionary vanguard.

Indeed, Giovannitti's poetry was always the direct expression of his political experiences and aspirations, and not of some literary caprice. As Carmelo Zito commented in his preface to *Quando canta il gallo*, his poems were written "with the disclosure of the street in mind, and not the hush of the drawing room."¹⁰⁹ Like other contemporary IWW and radical poets (notably Joe Hill, Ralph Chaplin, and Charles Ashleigh), he rejected the art-for-art's-sake function of literature and used poetry as a means to advocate political and social change. Giovannitti removed himself from the 'ivory towers' of intellect and "took on another role: the poet as prophetic rebel."¹¹⁰ In doing that, he accomplished a tremendous task, and that is the awakening of the workers to a realization of their power and their dignity.

What made Giovannitti exceptional among the poets of the IWW was not simply his poetic talent but his great eloquence and proficiency in his acquired language. An expert eye could probably notice occasional shortcomings in Giovannitti's English

¹⁰⁹ Carmelo Zito, *Quando canta il gallo*, xi. The translation is by Sillampoa, "The Poetry and Politics of Arturo Giovannitti," 183.

poems, but his command of English is generally impressive. This raises another issue. There is no doubt that Giovannitti's intended audience were the workers. Yet, whether in English or Italian, his poems do not speak the tongue of the laborer. In a way, this was a natural result of Giovannitti's formal education -- the study of the classics at the lyceum of Campobasso, the study of the Bible in the theological schools, and the self-study of nineteenth-century American literature. But it also reflected the difficult struggle of his generation of radicals to forge a truly 'revolutionary' means of expression to suit the 'revolutionary' inspiration of his content.

We will never know how many workers read or understood Giovannitti's verses, but Giovannitti's great reputation among them suggests that they were nonetheless greatly moved by his poetry. This tendency to glorification was in part "a spontaneous expression of the pride which the workers felt for the incipient literature of their own class."¹¹¹ But it also reflected the inspirational character that Giovannitti so proudly possessed.¹¹² Giovannitti saw himself as the apostle of the poor, as the spokesman of the oppressed, and the workers could spontaneously identify with him and his poems, for he spoke of their hopes, their struggles, and their dreams. As he wrote in the preface of *Parole e Sangue*, "the author does not possess anything of his own, not even his scarce talent, if it wasn't for the working people."¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Winters, *The Soul of the Wobblies*, 84.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹² Paul Buhle, "Italian-American Radicals and Labor in Rhode Island, 1905-1930," *Radical History Review*, 17, Spring 1978, 126.

After Lawrence, Giovannitti, acclaimed by many critics as one of the best living poets, went on to seize his moment of literary attention. Leaving the direction of *Il Proletario*, in 1914, together with Onorio Ruotolo, an Italian-American sculptor and artist, he founded a popular review of politics and arts called *Il Fuoco*, in which he published new poems and his first plays. One of them, *Come era nel principio* (As It Was in the Beginning) was translated into English and presented repeatedly with great success (see Chapter 5).

An anti-militarist, he fought fiercely first Italy's and then America's entry into the First World War, speaking incessantly to anti-war meetings and writing for anti-military newspapers (including his own *Vita*, which he founded in 1916 after leaving *Il Fuoco*, which had shifted to an interventionist stance). As a result of his anti-war activity, on September 29, 1917 he was arrested on charges of seditious conspiracy. However, Giovannitti, along with Carlo Tresca, Joseph Ettor, and Elisabeth Flynn, won a severance motion and they were never tried.¹¹⁴

The outbreak of the Russian Revolution revived his revolutionary hopes (significantly he named his son born in 1920 Len-in). Although he never entered the Communist Party, he associated for a while with the members of the communist-led Federation of Italian Workers of America (1921) – notably Nino Capraro, Ignazio

¹¹³ Front-page of *Parole and Sangue*. The original was in Italian: "L'autore che non possiede nulla di suo, nemmeno il suo scarso ingegno, se non per grazia del popolo lavoratore, rinuncia ad ogni proprietà letteraria."

¹¹⁴ Cf. Elizabeth Garley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, (New York: International Publishers, 1955), 236.

Camarda, and Flavio Venanzi. – writing prolifically for their organs: *Alba Nuova*, *Il Lavoratore*, and *Il Lavoro*. Unlike many other radicals of his generation, even after his disillusionment with Communism, Giovannitti did not become an anti-Soviet.

He was also among the very first to raise his voice against Mussolini and the rise of Fascism in Italy. As early as 1923 the Anti-Fascist Alliance of North America was formed and Giovannitti was its secretary. He wrote for the anti-Fascist *Il Nuovo Mondo* and later founded his own anti-Fascist newspaper, *Il Veltro* (1924-1925), which represented also his last editorial effort. Throughout the twenties he fought passionately on behalf of his countrymen Sacco and Vanzetti and along with Ettor traveled all over the country giving passionate speeches in the hope of stopping the execution.

Sometime in the late 1920s, he moved to Hollywood, where he was apparently offered a job as a film writer. Disgusted with the superficiality and commercialism of Hollywood life, he returned penniless to New York in 1931 or 1932.¹¹⁵ To help him out financially, the ACWA created the “Italian Labor Education Bureau,” and made Giovannitti its secretary, a post he held until 1940, although he never had a real function there. At this point, his political activities and social life receded into the organized labor establishment and its leaders –Antonini, Hillman, Bellanca, and Dubinsky.¹¹⁶

Giovannitti’s private life remains somewhat a mystery. At the time of the

¹¹⁵ There are several references to Giovannitti’s life in Hollywood but precise information are lacking. Cf. Rosario Dramis, “Il poeta dei diseredati,” in *Omaggio ad Arturo Giovannitti*, 6.

¹¹⁶ For Giovannitti’s political activities after the First World War, see: De Ciampis, “Arturo Massimo Giovannitti, poeta, giornalista, drammaturgo,” and D’Attilio, “Arturo Giovannitti.”

Lawrence strike it seems he was married to a German woman who died sometime thereafter, leaving him a daughter, Vera. He soon remarried to a Russian Jewish woman, Carrie Zaikaner, with whom he had a son, Len(in), and another daughter, Roma. The life with Carrie was not easy, they were poor and struggled to support their children. In 1939, after years of bitter quarrels due especially to Giovannitti's increasing problems with alcohol, Carrie finally left him. He then lived for a short period with a certain Margherita Di Maggio, while in the last years of his life he was assisted by an old friend by the name of Florence.¹¹⁷ However, as he jokingly confessed to his friend Vincenzo De Lalla, the women in his life were at least a dozen.¹¹⁸

The glamorous public image of Giovannitti – compassionate, sensitive, unselfish, completely devoted to the cause of the oppressed and poor – is in strident contrast with the spiteful image that emerges from the private memories of his son Len, who followed his father's footsteps and became a writer. Here we find an abusive (although not physically) and chauvinist husband, a distant and intimidating father, and a hopeless alcoholic besmirched by his own drinking. A complex, contradictory, and multifaceted personality -- it is not easy to come to grips with Giovannitti the man. He was warm and generous by heart, and yet he could also be cruel and arrogant. He seems to have grown more and more intolerable by the early 1930s, when, as he lamented to his friends, he began to suffer from rheumatism, and to drink heavenly.¹¹⁹ By then he was clearly

¹¹⁷ Cf. de Ciampis, "Arturo Massimo Giovannitti," G-10.

¹¹⁸ Letter of Giovannitti to De Lalla, August 21, 1948, in Vincenzo De Lalla Papers, IHRC, Minneapolis.

disillusioned with the revolution and considered himself a failure as a poet. As Carrie explained to Len, “ your father’s a tortured soul.”¹²⁰

He lived the last ten years of his life in great poverty and solitude in New Jersey, assisted by Florence and supported by a handful friends of the ILGWU and AWCA. His health began to decline rapidly and by the early 1950s rheumatism deteriorated into paralysis of the legs. His frustration and bitterness emerge with particular vividness in this letter to his friend Vincenzo De Lalla: “Physically, I am not well; spiritually I live in mortal anguish; and for all the rest I stagger blindly on the edge of the abyss. My “influential” friends of the wealthy and fat labor movement, which I have served with devotion, sorrow, and anxiety, have completely abandoned me, to the point that only with \$15-20 a week they could save the little dignity that I have left.”¹²¹

Even though he continued to play an important role in the history of the Italian American Left as an orator of the Italian American labor and as an anti-Fascist, Giovannitti left the best of his political energy and art behind the revolutionary syndicalism of Lawrence. The myth of Giovannitti was sustained by the workers as long as he lived, but after the First World War he had become merely a shadow of what he had once been. The 1910s were the grandest years of Giovannitti’s life. Sadly, he never

¹¹⁹ In a letter dated February, 2, 1927, he explained to De Lalla that an attack of rheumatism forced him into bed for two weeks. Vincenzo De Lalla Papers, IHRC, Minneapolis.

¹²⁰ Len Giovannitti, *The Nature of the Beast*, 136.

¹²¹ Letter of Giovannitti to De Lalla, March 23, 1951, De Lalla Papers, IHRC, Minneapolis.

approached them again. As his son sadly commented, somewhere, somehow, along the line of his life, the fire in him rapidly burned down.¹²²

¹²² Len Giovannitti, *The Nature of the Beast*, 157.

CHAPTER V

POLITICS AND LEISURE: THE ITALIAN AMERICAN RADICAL STAGE

In 1895, the anarchist poet Pietro Gori, who had just arrived in the United States, published in Philadelphia a short drama entitled *Primo Maggio* (May Day), which he had written a few years before in an Italian prison.¹ This one-act skit dramatized the tremendous disillusionment of thousands of Italian immigrants who had left family and home behind in search of a better life in America and found instead great privation and hardship. The play began and ended with Verdi's famous opera's chorus "*Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate...*" which most Italians knew by heart. But Gori reset Verdi's lyric, written originally as a lament of the Hebrews for a home of their own, to new words honoring May Day.² As exemplified by the last four stanzas of the song, *Primo Maggio* was a call to action, a cry meant to stir and inspire the workers:

O phalanxes of slaves, run away from
The worksites, the parched workshops,
Flee from the fields, from the
 swelling seas
Put aside never-ending toil

¹ Born in the Sicilian town of Messina, Pietro Gori (1865-1911) finished classical studies and studied law at the University of Pisa. As a student there he joined the anarchist movement, becoming soon one of its most important leaders. Between 1894 and 1902 he lived in exile and spent one year in the United States. In addition to booklets of propaganda, he published many literary works, including three volumes of poetry and five social dramas. His writings were collected in twelve volumes after his death. See Pietro Gori, *Opere*, edited by P. Binazzi, 12 Vols. (Spezia, Italy: Cromo-tipo La Sociale, 1911-1912). *Primo Maggio* is included in vol. XIII, *Bozzetti Sociali*, which is available at the Tamiment Library at New York University and at the Boston Public Library. For further biographical information see "Gori Pietro," in Franco Andreucci and Tommaso Detti, eds, *Il movimento operaio italiano. Dizionario biografico, 1853-1943*, 6 Vols. (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1979), II, 522-531.

² Robert D'Attilio, "Primo Maggio: Haymarket as seen by Italian Anarchists in America," in David Roediger ed., *Haymarket Scrapbook*, (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986), 229. On the history and meaning of May Day for Italian Americans see Rudolph Vecoli, "Primo Maggio," *Labor's Heritage* (Spring 1996), 28-41.

Let us raise our calloused hands
 Let us join together in a growing force
 We want to redeem our world
 Tyrannized by both sloth and gold

Youth, griefs, yearnings
 Springtimes of secret fascinations
 Green May of humankind
 Give your courage and your faith
 To our hearts

Give flowers to the rebels who failed
 Their sight fixed upon the break of dawn
 To the bold rebel who fights and works
 To the far-seeing poet who sings
 and dies.³

Compelling music and rhetorical sentimentalism made Gori's *Primo Maggio* an instant classic both in Italy and the United States, which contributed significantly in the popularization of May Day among Italian workers.

Other plays written by Gori also enjoyed tremendous success in the Little Italies, where they were performed time and time again with Gori himself often acting in them during his temporary sojourn in the United States. Their popularity derived largely from their inspirational nature and their emphasis on themes that dramatized the experience of immigration. For example, *Senza Patria* (Without a Country) told the story of an impoverished *contadino* who had fought the Italian war for unification but had become increasingly disillusioned with the Italian State and decided therefore to emigrate. While articulating the pain of abandoning one's country, the play also questioned the meaning of patriotism, disclaiming the relevance of any particular state and celebrating instead internationalism. "Without bread and without love," commented one of the characters,

“there is no homeland. A country should be like a good mother who does not only deliver her children but also raises them with love.”⁴

Gori's plays were the earliest examples of a rich theatrical culture that was spawned and sustained by the radical world of the *sovversivi*. *Filodrammatiche rosse*, amateur dramatic societies affiliated with Italian socialist and anarchist clubs, sprang up throughout the United States with the goal of “spreading the modern ideals of social justice and brotherhood through the theatre.”⁵ The first of them, “*La Cosmopolita Operaia*” (Working-class Cosmopolite) was formed in Paterson, New Jersey as early as 1895. In New York City the most important dramatic groups were the *Filodrammatica dell'Unione Socialista* (Dramatic society of the socialist union, 1905), the dramatic club “*L'avvenire*” (The future, 1907) of Brooklyn, the circle “Enrico Ibsen,” (1907), the *Filodrammatica sovversiva* (Subversive dramatic society, 1914-1918), the *Compagnia Drammatica Sociale* (Social dramatic company, 1918), the theatrical company Peppino Capraro (1921), and the dramatic group “*Germinal*,” (1924).⁶

³ Bartolomeo Vanzetti translated the poem into English shortly before his own execution. Published in D'Attilio, “Primo Maggio: Haymarket as seen by Italian Anarchists in America,” 230.

⁴ “Senza Patria,” in Pietro Gori, *Scritti Scelti*, 2 vols. (Cesena: Edizioni L'Antistato, 1968), II, 343-344. A copy is available at the Tamiment Library at NYU. Other popular plays by Gori were *Gente Onesta* (Honest People), *Proximus tuus* and *Verso l'ideale* (Towards the Ideal). The first two are included in vol. XIII, *Bozzetti Sociali*, the latter in vol. XII, *Canti D'Esilio*, of *Opere*. These plays were performed over and over again, especially in occasion of radical holidays, such as May Day or November 11, the anniversary of the Haymarket anarchists' execution.

⁵ *La Follia*, February 3, 1907, 7.

⁶ Theatrical groups, as well as cultural and political clubs, were usually listed in the last page of radical newspapers. The dates provided in parenthesis refer to the years in which they were listed in the newspapers, not necessarily when they were founded. For this

These groups came to occupy a special place in the world of the *sovversivi*, sustaining their communities, entertaining the workers, and spurring a myriad of political and cultural activities. Next to the press, the stage was the most powerful vehicle of propaganda and education, and represented the primary source of income for radical papers and other political activities.⁷

While cultural historians of other ethnic groups, such as the Jews and the Finnish, have fully documented the theatrical activities sponsored by these nationalities' labor unions and socialist federations in the United States, the radical component of the Italian American stage has been completely ignored.⁸ The specialists in the field, Emelise Aleandri and Maxine Schwartz Seller, in their study of the Italian American theatre in New York and San Francisco, do not even acknowledge the *sovversivi*'s theatrical productions. In fact Aleandri writes: "The many Italian political refugees who emigrated from Italy as a result of the turmoil during the attempts at unification of the Italian principalities concerned themselves more with politics than theatre in this country."⁹

reason it is also impossible to establish how long they lasted. The large number of groups and plays advertised in the newspapers suggests however a very rich theatrical activity within the radical communities throughout the United States.

⁷ The importance of dramatic groups in the culture of the Italian anarchists is noted by Avrich in *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 55.

⁸ See Maxine Schwartz Seller, *Ethnic Theatre in the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), especially the articles by Timo R. Riippa and Michael G. Karni, "Finnish-American Theatre," 119-138, Alfreds Straumanis "Latvian-American Theatre," 277-318, and David S. Lifson, "Yiddish Theatre," 549-587. On the Yiddish theatre see also Edna Nahshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre: The Art and Politics of the Artef, 1925-1940* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998) and Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1976). Chapter 14.

While this statement may be true for the decades of 1860s and 1870s when Italian immigrant radicals in the United States, as well as Italian immigrants at large, were scanty, it is definitely inaccurate for the later periods. Moreover, it dismisses from the beginning any form of literary contributions that came from the Left, assuming a priori that radicals did not have any interest in arts and letters.

But as this study has documented, the *sovversivi* engaged in a wide range of cultural activities and generated a wealth of literary and artistic works that were also more sophisticated and better written than mainstream productions. Among the playwrights of the Italian American Left were many prolific and well-known figures, most notably Riccardo Cordiferro, Arturo Giovannitti, Vincenzo Vacirca, and Ludovico Caminita. With the exception of Cordiferro who was a full-time writer and professional playwright, these people wrote in their spare time, in addition to organizing the workers, lecturing, and publishing and editing radical papers. That despite their limited time and financial resources, they managed to also compose plays and dramas make their achievements all the more remarkable.

Dramatic performances were presented in the *sovversivi*'s social clubs, cafés, picnics, or, when held on weekends and special holidays, in hired halls of the city, such as the Manhattan Lyceum, the Thalia Theatre, Webster Hall, or the People's House. Performances were typically very long, lasting at least until midnight. Plays in fact were

⁹ Emelise Aleandri and Maxine Schwartz Seller, "Italian American Theatre," in *Ethnic Theatre in the United States*, 239. By Aleandri see also *Images of America: The Italian American Immigrant Theatre in New York* (Charleston, U.K.: Arcadia, 1999) and her dissertation "The Italian American Theatre, 1900-1905," The City University of New York, 1983. Her research is based exclusively on mainstream newspapers of the Italian American community, which did not advertise radical plays.

never staged alone, but included a wide variety of pastimes such as songs, poems, games (a favorite was *tombola*, bingo), and concerts. A grand ball usually finished the evening.

A glance at the reports of Italian American radical papers indicates that performances sponsored by socialist and anarchist groups were very successful, collecting between fifty and one hundred dollars. Admission varied from five to ten cents in the early period and increased to a maximum of fifty cents after the First World War, although it usually remained free to children and women. By dividing the earning figures by the ticket price, we can estimate that radical performances had typically an attendance of at least 500 people and sometimes as many as 2,000.

The collected amount was generally used to benefit radical groups, newspapers, or political prisoners. Hence, many of the actors involved in the staging were volunteers from the radical community. For example, Nicola Sacco proudly reported that his wife Rosina recited in many plays staged by the dramatic society of Milford, Massachusetts, and that the two of them used to arrange for theatrical performances and raise money for all sorts of causes.¹⁰ It was also common for the playwrights themselves to act in their own plays, a fact that took the audience by storm.

The Italian American radical theatre did not differ much from other theatres' goals and functions. Its major role was to provide a meeting place for Italian American workers, where they could satisfy their social needs and escape the hardship of their daily life.¹¹ But, as in the case of the other radical theatres, the stage was also seen as an

¹⁰ Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 55.

¹¹ Cf. Seller, "Introduction" to *Ethnic Theatre in the United States*, 3-17.

important shaper of public opinion and a crucial catalyst in the making of social consciousness.¹²

It was in this spirit that on January 1918 Arturo Giovannitti launched the *Teatro del Popolo* (People's Theatre), a non-profit dramatic society with its office located at 112 East 19th Street in New York City. This new theatre intended to provide Italian Americans with an alternative to the banal and frivolous commercial stage, "serving the cause of freedom and justice through the means of arts, and inducing to think those who want to have just fun."¹³ Its mission, as Vincenzo Vacirca explained, was to create an authentically "popular" theatre, made by the people for the people, which combined art and politics, education and entertainment, thought and action.¹⁴

The *Teatro del Popolo* presented performances on Saturdays at the Auditorium of the socialist People's House for the whole winter season of 1918. The first show took place on Saturday, January 26 at 8:00pm. Its program included three short performances: a one-act drama entitled *Liberazione* (Liberation) by Rachilde, Oscar Wilde's dramatic story "The Happy Prince" narrated by Vincenzo Vacirca, and Robespierre's historic speech at the National Assembly interpreted by Arturo Giovannitti. As in most other Italian American theatrical events, a choir and piano concert closed the evening.¹⁵ Since it was not a public theatre, people had to become members of the society and buy two or more tickets in advance. The cost of the subscription was \$1.00, which included two

¹² See Nahshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre*.

¹³ "Teatro del Popolo," *Il Lavoro*, January 12, 1918, 4

¹⁴ Vincenzo Vacirca, "Il Teatro del Popolo," *Il Lavoro*, January 19, 1918, 5.

theatrical evenings; additional performances could be purchased at 50 cents each at the *Teatro*'s office.¹⁶

Radical dramatic societies presented to their audiences mostly Italian and European classics, but their repertoire included also original plays.¹⁷ Italian American radical publications contain in fact dozens of titles of unknown plays that were presented at workers' halls throughout the country – *La leva militare* (The conscription) by Pier Luigi Grazioli (1903), *L'idea che cammina* (The walking idea) by Ludovico Caminita (1905), *Tripoli* by Matteo Siragusa (1914), *Ali tarpate* (Clipped wings) by Ulisse Barberi (1917), *I misteri dell'Inquisizione di Spagna* (The msysteries of Spanish Inquisition, 1918), *Povera gente* (Poor people) by Franco Liberati (1921), and *Nemmeno in cielo* (Not even in heaven) by Federico Polidori (1924) are some examples.

Newspapers rarely offered critical reviews of these plays but sometime they presented synopses to stimulate the curiosity of the reader. *Il Proletario*, for example devoted a whole page to *Luce e Tenebre* (Light and Darkness), a play written in 1907 by Arturo Caroti and Gioacchino Artoni, two of the most important figures of the Italian American socialist movement.¹⁸ *Il Proletario* presented the play as “absolutely new”

¹⁵ “Il Teatro del Popolo: Prima rappresentazione,” *Il Lavoro*, January 26, 1918, 6.

¹⁶ “Teatro del Popolo,” *Il Lavoro*, January 12, 1918, 4.

¹⁷ Among the favorite Italian authors were Paolo Giacometti, Giovanni Verga, Felice Cavallotti and Silvio Pellico. Among international plays were those by Dumas, Hugo, Sardou, Zola, and Ibsen.

¹⁸ *Il Proletario*, December 25, 1907. For biographical information on Arturo Caroti see Andreucci and Detti, eds., *Movimento operaio italiano: dizionario biografico*, I, 505-509 and Caroti Arturo, Casellario Politico Centrale (CPC), busta 1105, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Rome. On Giacchino Artoni see Giacomo Battistoni, “Ricordando i settant'anni di Gioacchino Artoni,” and Arturo Meunier, “Omaggio a Gioacchino

because, instead of focusing on sentimental plots, such as the passionate love of a woman or the misfortunes of the poor, it staged the workers' struggle for social change. More specifically, the play presented a *contraddittorio* (political debate) between a priest and a socialist in view of political elections in a small town in Italy. The competition ended (of course) with the triumph of the socialist speaker, who, with "remarkable arguments," persuaded the audience, an honest priest, and even some policemen (!) to join the cause of the oppressed and sing the "Hymn of the Workers" along with him.

The play was eventually performed on February 19, 1908 at the Turn Hall of Paterson, New Jersey. *Il Proletario* reported that the public filled the Hall and applauded enthusiastically at the end of each of the three acts. In addition to the play's general idea, minor scenes were also commended for their rousing effect – for example, the newsboy selling copies of the anticlerical newspaper *L'Asino*, the begging woman who was driven out by the priest, and the old man in the last scene who distributed free red flags to all the spectators.¹⁹

Regrettably, most other scripts have been entirely lost and there are scant, if any, records of most of the authors. However, a few important plays can still be found in the Italian collections of the Immigration History Research Center, the New York Public Library, and in the pages of radical papers, which frequently published entire one-act

Artoni,"both published in *La Parola del Popolo* and included in Giacchino Artoni Papers, Miscellaneous Italian Manuscript Collection, Box 1, Immigration History Research Center (IHRC), Minneapolis. See also Giacchino Artoni, CPC, busta 203, ACS. For a discussion of their political role in the Italian American radical movement see Elisabetta Vezzosi, *Il socialismo indifferente* (Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 1991), 40-44.

¹⁹ "Rappresentazione di *Luci e Tenebre*," *Il Proletario*, February 25, 1908, 3.

plays or installments of social dramas. For example the literary magazine *Il Fuoco*, featured a dramatic skit in almost every issue.²⁰

Like other radical productions, Italian American radical plays dealt essentially with themes of social awareness. They were “problem” plays, which focused on social issues and usually contained a strong indictment of capitalist society. But the subject matter was drawn from distinct Italian events or problems peculiar to the Italian American community. For example, Fascism or the *padrone*-system were distinctive themes of the Italian American radical stage.²¹

The *sorversivi*’s plays reflected also the importance of Italian ancestral values centered on the cult of familism, women’s virtue, and honor, as well as the influence of traditional forms of popular theatre in Italy, in particular the *commedia dell’arte* and the melodrama. On the one hand, the *sorversivi* may have utilized these traditional aspects of the Italian identity in order to reach their audiences. On the other, they might have been unable to escape their own conventional views on such matters, even though they were rather critical of them. Women for example were invariably depicted as the more

²⁰ In *Il Fuoco* one can read Silvio Picchianti, “Tribunali domestici,” November 15, 1914, 12-14; F. Simeotti “L’alcova ardente,” December 1, 1914, 14-16; G. Sterni “Convegno,” December 13, 1914, 20-21; “La morte in agguato,” January 1, 1915, 14-16, “La guerra,” February 1, 1915, 13-15, and “Don Luca Sperante,” October 15, 1914, 12-13 all by Ario Flamma. *Il Fuoco* also published several plays by Arturo Giovannitti. *Il Fuoco* is available in microfilm at the New York Public Library. For a discussion of these plays see Marcella Bencivenni, “A Magazine of Art and Politics: The Experience of *Il Fuoco*, 1914-15,” *The Italian American Review* (Spring/Summer 2001), 57-84. A few original plays can be found in *Il Proletario*. See for example “Le vittime del capitalismo,” author unknown, June 12, 1920 and Angelo Ciccarelli, “Orgoglio Funesto,” published in installments from June 17 to November 6, 1937. This play was performed on February 20, 1938 at Arlington Hall in New York City.

gentle and virtuous sex, who needed to be protected by the strong, virile revolutionary hero. Honor, revenge, and strong feelings of passion dominate radical plays as well as commercial plays. Clearly, they were values to which the authors, consciously or not, attached much importance as markers of the Italian ethnic identity.²²

A case in point is the dramatic work of Riccardo Cordiferno, without doubt the most popular and prolific playwright of the Italian American community at the beginning of the twentieth century. Cordiferno, whose real name was Alessandro Sisca, was, as we saw in Chapter Three, also a poet, journalist, lecturer, and activist.²³ Born at San Pietro in Guarano, in the province of Cosenza, southern Italy, at five he moved to a small village near Potenza, where his father, Francesco Sisca, who was also a poet in Calabrian dialect, had received a position as a city-secretary.²⁴ Having completed elementary school in 1886, he was sent to attend the religious college of San Raffaele in Naples. The father in

²¹ Italians dealt with Fascism since 1922, whereas Americans and other ethnic groups did not concern with Fascism until the Popular Front.

²² On this issue see Anna Maria Martellone, "The Formation of an Italian American Identity through Popular Theater," in Werner Sollors, ed., *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 240-245.

²³ Despite his enormous literary production and his immense popularity within the Italian American community, Cordiferno has received little or no attention by scholars of Italian Americana. Eloise Aleandri is the only scholar who has written on Cordiferno, but her work is essentially a list of his theatrical productions and does not go behind the informative level. Aleandri, "Riccardo Cordiferno," in Richard N. Juliani and Philip V. Cannistraro, eds., *Italian Americans: The Search for a Usable Past* (Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association, 1986), 165-180. Cordiferno is also briefly discussed in Martino Marazzi, *Misteri di Little Italy. Storie e testi della letteratura italoamericana* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001), 85-86.

²⁴ Francesco Sisca wrote a very popular social satirical poem entitled "Lu Ciucciu," which was eventually published in New York City (1913) with an introduction and notes by Cordiferno.

fact wanted him to become a monk, but the boy remained in the college only a year because he soon expressed ideas contrary to religion and, arousing the indignation of his religious teachers, was expelled. He then continued to study on his own in Naples, revealing a precocious talent for poetry and letters. Some of his early poems were published in literary weeklies and monthlies of the city under the pseudonym of Riccardo Cordiferro (Iron-heart), which he derived from the novel *Ivanhoe* by Walter Scott and eventually supplanted his real name.

During these years, influenced by Neapolitan radical figures like Giovanni Bovio, Arturo Labriola, and Matteo Imbriani he began his conversion to socialism.²⁵ Above all, Cordiferro embraced the libertarian tradition of the post-Risorgimento, its antistatism, anticlericalism, and intolerance of all forms of authority. Because of his strong belief in individual freedom, he was especially attracted to anarchist ideas. In his preface to a collection of poems published posthumously in 1967, he described himself as a bohemian, an incurable Don Juan, a free spirit and eccentric personality.²⁶ On another occasion, he explained that: "I have a rebellious mind and soul. I don't know the meaning of discipline, order, obedience... I have no master, I don't serve anybody. I don't recognize the authority of any boss."²⁷

²⁵ "Riccardo Cordiferro's Biography," Alessandro Sisca Papers, Box 1, folder 1, IHRC.

²⁶ Riccardo Cordiferro, *Poesie Scelte* (Campobasso, Italy: Edizioni Pungolo verde, 1967), 6.

²⁷ "Io ho un cervello pensante ed un'anima ribelle. Io non conosco che cosa sia la disciplina, l'ordine, l'ubbidienza... Io non ho padroni; non servo nessuno. Non riconosco l'autorità di nessun capo." Cit. in Joseph Pantaleone, "Riccardo Cordiferro: Anima Libera – Cuore Sincero – Poeta e Scrittore Geniale," *La Sentinella*, March 15, 1930, in Sisca Papers, Box 12, folder 112, IHRC.

Cordiferro migrated to the United States in 1892, apparently to avoid military service. He first went to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and then settled permanently in New York City, where he founded the humorous weekly *La Follia*. Even though he never officially joined any political group, like the most committed *sovversivi*, Cordiferro opposed capitalism with its ethic of profit, accumulation, and self-interest, and strongly sustained class solidarity, economic equality, and social justice. His radical views won him the admiration and respect of the Italian immigrant workers but, at the same time, earned him many enemies among the prominent men of the Little Italies. Threats and persecutions against *La Follia* by the *prominenti* eventually forced Cordiferro in 1909 to resign from the editorial board, although he continued to publish his pungent pieces.²⁸

Because of his popularity and knowledge, he was invited, frequently out of town, to give lectures to educational circles and political speeches to labor organizations and working-class demonstrations. He wrote as many as twenty-five lectures and six speeches, on subjects ranging from literature, history, humor and working-class issues.²⁹ One of his most popular lectures, "Capitalist Tyranny and Proletarian Solidarity," was read for the first time on October 5, 1907 at Palmer's Hall in Brooklyn in occasion of a strike of Italian barbers and then reread for the next twenty years almost thirty times,

²⁸ "Riccardo Cordiferro's Biography," Sisca Papers, Box 1, folder 1, IHRC.

²⁹ Most of them were of literary nature and discussed important Italian figures such as Dante, Giosuè Carducci, Edmondo De Amicis, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Mario Rapisardi, or topics like "The Mission of Journalism," "The Conquest of the Book," and "On Defense of Dialectal Literature." Others dealt instead with historical subjects such as September 20, Christopher Columbus, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Italian immigration, and the history of Calabria.

including at a rally during the Lawrence Strike in defense of Ettor and Giovannitti in 1912, and at a demonstration for Sacco and Vanzetti on June 12, 1927.³⁰

As we saw, Cordiferro also wrote countless poems, romances, and Neapolitan songs, but it was in the field of theatre that his reputation had no match. He wrote plays, social monologues, comic skits, and dramas. Most of them were written between the turn of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century but continued to be performed in New York and other American cities until the 1930s. Of the earliest ones – *Il genio incompreso* (The Misunderstood Genius, 1894), *Per la patria e per l'onore* (For the Fatherland and for Honor, 1896) *Dio Dollaro* (God Dollar, 1896) and *Il matrimonio in trappola* (The Marriage into a Trap, 1897) – we know only the dates of production, but for many others a script remains.

Cordiferro's theatrical production, which included a total of twenty-three plays, consisted mostly of melodramas and *commedie dell'arte* -- dramatic sketches of typical figures of the Italian American community with which the audience could easily identify.³¹ *L'Onore perduto* (Lost Honor) was the most popular of his dramas, produced more than any other play in his repertory. It was presented for the first time on February 20, 1901 at the Majestic Hall in Harlem, New York, and, since then, staged hundreds of times by many other companies in and out of the city.³²

³⁰ Riccardo Cordiferro's Bibliography, "Conferenze," Sisca Papers, Box 1, folder 1, IHRC.

³¹ For a full list of his plays see the section of his bibliography entitled "Teatro." Sisca Papers, Box 1, folder 1, IHRC.

The plot was that typical of revenge melodramas: full of passion, dark plotting, suspense, and strong emotionalism. Alberto had married a young woman in Naples, Sofia, who loves and adores him. The two, lured by the American Dream, emigrated to New York, bringing along with them their daughter and Sofia's mother. Here thanks to a *compaesano*, Giuseppe Esposito – a trivial and ignorant man who works as a boss – Alberto finds a job in the office of a rich Italian banker on Mulberry Street. Soon, however, he is discharged on the alleged ground of stealing \$100. But Alberto is a good man and is innocent. His false friend Giuseppe has set up the terrible charge: he is in love with Sofia and is ready to do anything to get her. Alberto is arrested and in prison falls seriously ill, leaving Sofia alone to fight poverty and growing debts. Giuseppe visits Sofia and promises to free her husband if she consents to give herself to him. Terrified at the thought of losing her honor, she rejects him at first, but the fear of losing her beloved is stronger than her pride and she finally surrenders. As promised, ten days later Alberto is set free and returns home. But Sofia can't live with her sin and decides to poison herself. Remorseful, she confesses to her husband and mother the deed she was forced to do for love of him and dies. Beside himself with pain and anger, Alberto swears revenge over her dead body and when Giuseppe arrives to congratulate him for his release, he kills him with a knife. He is then about to kill himself too when his little girl rushes on the scene and implores him to live for her.³³

The premiere of *L'Onore Perduto* was a great success: Antonio Maiori, the great

³² The last performance took place on October 26, 1933 at the Park Palace in New York. Cf., *L'onore Perduto* in "Cordiferro's Bibliography," Sisca Papers, Box 1, folder 1, IHRC.

tragic actor of the Italian community in New York, played Alberto and Mrs. Renata Brunorini played the heroine. Before the play, a little girl of about twelve recited several of Cordiferro's poems while Cordiferro himself took occasion to state his philosophical faith – that of a social anarchist.³⁴ This pattern of including other works during a play – monologues, poems, songs, or speeches, – sometime recited by the authors themselves, was a common practice of Italian American theatrical productions. Often, shows were modified on stage to meet the demands of the audience, which like other working-class audiences was typically very talkative and gregarious. Depending on what was unfolding on stage they sang, wept, laughed, cheered the hero and hissed the villain. Another act was easily added to prolong a show that the audience applauded enthusiastically, begging for more entertainment. Or, when a play was poorly received by the audience, then the director or the producer would hastily fix the story, improvising new scenes and events.³⁵

Cordiferro, for example, sent the little girl back on stage to recite a religious hymn when he saw that the audience did not take kindly to the anti-clerical overtones of his speech. As someone in the audience complained, "the crowd in the theatre were from the country and attached to the old, worn-out sentiments of humanity." The girl explained that the poem she was about to recite did not express the ideas of Cordiferro but was written to please his wife, Lucia Fazio, who was very religious.³⁶ On the one hand, this

³³ *L'onore perduto. Dramma in quattro atti* by Riccardo Cordiferro, Sisca Papers, Box 6, folder 48, IHRC.

³⁴ "An Italian Play," Newspaper clippings, Sisca Papers, Box 12, folder 100, IHRC.

³⁵ Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 309.

³⁶ "An Italian Play," newspaper unknown, in Sisca Papers, "Newspapers Clippings," Box 12, folder 100, IHRC. English in the original.

incident illustrates the powerful role that Catholicism played as a deterrent against radicalism. On the other, it reveals the efforts of Cordiferro to use the stage as a social force to mold the opinion of the audience and promote anti-clericalism. It should also be noted that while the displeasure of the audience for the anti-religious remarks was somewhat natural at the beginning of the century, when radicalism among the immigrants was still limited, it would have been very unlikely in radical performances of later periods. By the mid-1910s, the audiences of the plays sponsored by the *sorversivi* were completely sympathetic politically and would have cheered Cordiferro's speech.³⁷

In 1905, Cordiferro wrote a sequel to *L'onore perduto*. The result was another four-act social drama entitled *Giuseppina Terranova ovvero l'onore vendicato* (Giuseppina Terranova or the revenged honor). The play opened on May 15, 1906 at the Villa Tempa in New York and, though not as successful as *L'onore*, was staged by the author another fourteen times (the play was also performed dozens of times by other companies). The script was published by Nicoletti and Bros in 1906 and eventually translated into Sicilian dialect by Filippo Catalfo and into English by Anne Leitch.³⁸

Like *L'onore*, *Giuseppina Terranova* is essentially a revenge melodrama, a story of sexual abuse and vengeance. Both reflected the techniques and themes of sensational melodramas, including "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of

³⁷ I am thankful to Prof. Nunzio Pernicone for this remark.

³⁸ *Giuseppina Terranova*, Cordiferro's Bibliography, Sisca Papers, Box 1, folder 1. IHRC.

the good, and final reward of virtue.”³⁹ Cordiferro favored melodramatic themes and modes probably because their high passion and sentimentalism made the performance more effective and appealing, permitting the audience to respond more quickly. Yet, if on the one hand Cordiferro’s plays resorted to dramatization and high emotionalism, on the other, they talked of the “real” lives and problems of the Italian American community. As one reviewer of *L'onore* noted, “the greatest merit of the play is to expose, free from exaggerations, the relation of immigrants to American society as it really is.”⁴⁰

Cordiferro, wrote another paper, “has created a new form of drama which, from the sources of the myth, enters the scenes of real life with all its vices, baseness, and all the injustices of modern society.”⁴¹ It was, echoed *La Questione Sociale*, “a study of social truth on immigrant life.” Cordiferro’s great popularity can be attributed exactly to the strong familiarity that his audience derived from his plays. He satirized society as it was found in the Italian quarter of New York, vilified the oppressors of the immigrant – the boss, the priest, the capitalist, – and made the Italian American worker the hero of his dramatic creations.

Among his favorite targets were of course the Italian *prominenti*, the affluent and pretentious men who dominated the Little Italies and exploited the immigrants.

Cordiferro seized every opportunity to ridicule them. On stage he represented them with

³⁹ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 12.

⁴⁰ “*L'Onore perduto* alla Verdi Hall,” *Voce del Popolo* of Philadelphia, date unknown, Sisca Papers, “Newspapers clippings,” Box 12, folder 100, IHRC.

⁴¹ *L'Operaio di New York*, Anno III, 15, Sisca Papers, “Newspapers clippings,” Box 12, folder 100, IHRC.

all their eccentricities, foibles, and mannerisms, exposing their ignorance, corruption, and arrogance. In the Neapolitan comedy *Il paese dei cavalieri e dei commendatori* (The country of cavaliers and commanders), for example, he mocked the Italian practice of conferring honorific titles on prominent men whose cultural interests seldom went beyond banquets and patriotic parades.⁴² A Neapolitan immigrant, Antonio Coccozza, who has become rich by contracting unskilled labor in New York, is informed that the Italian government has given him the *commenda*. Flattered by the award, he begins to act as if he were an important person, advancing absurd claims over his maid and family. He explains to the maid that from now on she must call him not *Signor* but *Commendatore*. When the maid ironically asks him what she should then call his wife, he proudly answers: *Commendatoressa*! “And your daughter?” inquires the maid. “*Commendatoressina*!,” he convincingly replies, ignoring the jarring phonetics.⁴³

Especially funny is the scene when he reads to his family the speech he has written on the occasion of a banquet that will be given in his honor. “I want to say” – he pompously proclaims – “that if you wanted to give me a proof of your esteem it means that I deserve it; and if the Italian government has given me the *commenda* it means that I deserve it, and if the newspapers have published my picture with even an article it means that I deserve it.” At the end of the speech, his friend, a poor artist of radical views, ironically tells him: “Le mie condoglianze! (My condolences)” Mister Coccozza, without

⁴² *Il paese dei cavalieri e commendatori. Commedia napoletana in tre atti*. Sisca Papers, Box 10, folder 80, IHRC. The titles of *cavaliere* and *commendatore* were awards given to prominent figures of the Italian immigrant communities by the Italian government. These awards were meant to spur patriotic sentiments among Italian immigrants, and combat criticism and propaganda against the Italian government.

even noticing the difference between *condoglianze* and *congratulazioni* (congratulations), warmly thanks the friend.⁴⁴

The boss's clumsiness, ingenuity, and ignorance is heightened by the sarcastic comments of the other characters, especially his wife, an intelligent and educated woman who seizes every opportunity to laugh at her husband's stupidity. Eventually, pressured by his wife and his radical friend he decides to give up the title of *commendatore* for the sake of the family's peace. Finally, they are all are happy and proud of him. As the fiancé of his daughter emphatically tells the audience: "I will marry the daughter of a man who renounced the *commenda* to be proud, from now on, of his working-class background." Everybody answers: "Down with the knights, down with the commanders!"⁴⁵ By ridiculing the figure of the boss, Cordiferro defied the influence and power of the class of *prominenti* and offered Italian immigrants – isolated, despised and exploited – a sense of working-class pride and dignity. His implicit message to the audience was that only through a sense of themselves as a group apart, as members of an oppressed class, could the workers deliver themselves from the slavery of the *padrone*-system.

Il pezzente (The beggar) was Cordiferro's most famous social monologue. It was performed for the first time in 1895 at the Adler Theatre of New York by the actor Salvatore Melchiorri and was later performed hundreds of times by famous artists like Antonio Maiori and Giovanni De Rosalia in many American cities, as well as in Italy,

⁴³ Ibid., Act. I, 14.

⁴⁴ Ibid., Act I, 34-35.

⁴⁵ Ibid., Act III, 28.

France, and South America.⁴⁶ Published in 1896 by *La Follia*, it counted twenty editions and allegedly sold 60,000 copies.⁴⁷ The scene is laid in an empty and sad prison cell, where the prisoner – pale, poorly dressed and sorrowful – takes the audience through the stages of his terrible crime: being poor and hungry. His monologue begins with a plea of mercy and ends with a powerful invective against social inequality and industrial capitalism. The beggar juxtaposes his misery with the luxurious life-style of the rich, and against disillusion and resignation, he invokes revolt and struggle. Despite its oversimplification, Cordiferro's polarization of haves and have-nots, worked well in pointing out to the audience the need to recognize and confront social inequality, to combat and change the social order. The subject, explained the anarchist Libero Tancredi for *Il Novatore*, was not new, but Cordiferro expressed very well the despair of victims of the most squalid and sordid misery.⁴⁸

Cordiferro's descriptions of the various degradations of Italian immigrant life concealed a sharp critique of American society and values in defense of Italian traditional culture. This is particularly evident in one of his later dramas, *Mater dolorosa*, presented for the first time at the Fordham Palace of New York on December 30, 1928.

The play dramatizes the pain of an Italian American mother whose daughter, lured by the material promises of the American city, has become a prostitute.⁴⁹ In accordance

⁴⁶ *Il pezzente* (New York: La Follia, 1896), in Sisca Papers, Box 7, folder 50, IHRC.

⁴⁷ "Il pezzente," *La Follia*, July 29, 1923. In Sisca Papers, "Tagliandi," folder 115, IHRC.

⁴⁸ *Il Novatore*, January 1911.

to the sanctioned cultural values of the traditional Italian family, the daughter's sin is described as a terrible, unforgivable insult to the honor and good name of her family. To lose honor, in fact, was practically tantamount to losing respectability in the community. Yet, the daughter is also pictured in the words of one of the characters as "an innocent victim of the corrupted American environment."⁵⁰ It was the luxury and the pleasures of the American city that had seduced and corrupted the young woman. When the daughter decides finally to pay a visit to her mother, her Americanized appearance – her sumptuous dresses and jewelry, her make-up and perfume – is put in stark contrast with the cherished image of the Italian woman. "You must be good," the mother tells her, "you must be humble, pious, as you were once. You must be worthy of me, your brother, and your poor dead father."⁵¹

But the young woman's repentance is not enough for her brother; she has dishonored him and he cannot forgive her. When he sees that she had even the nerve of bringing her lover, he becomes furious and puts her out the door. This is too much for the poor mother, who collapses on the floor and dies. The dramatic death of the mother becomes symbolic of the profound dislocation of the Italian American family (expressed especially in the form of generational conflict) and the corruption of moral values under American materialism and consumer culture.

⁴⁹ *Mater Dolorosa. Dramma in un atto* (Brooklyn, NY: Union Press Co., 1936), in Sisca Papers: Box 6, folder 46, IHRC. The drama was originally written for the opera and represented at the Academy of Music of Brooklyn, on January 16, 1926.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

Like the rest of the *sorversivi*, Cordiferro in his plays also attacked religion, which he considered an ideological construct to keep the ignorant masses docile and submissive. In a dramatic scene of *L'onore perduto*, Sofia kneels to a picture of the Madonna and begins to pray. But suddenly she stops and with a gesture of defiance, she cries: "No, no, I don't want to pray to the Madonna any more; I don't want to invoke her because I am convinced that she is deaf to the cries of the suffering, that faith is deception, and that virtue is a lie."⁵² Similarly, the protagonist of *Il Pezzente*, at one point cries: "God! What an empty word! Oh what a folly! What a sad irony! What a lie! For he who dies of hunger and suffers the insult of the rich there can be no God."⁵³ What is interesting here is that instead of openly attacking religion, Cordiferro chose to present to the audience the religious disillusionment of people who are victims of oppression or social inequality. Like in the case of melodrama, this was a conscious strategy to allow a fundamentally religious audience to respond to anti-religious propaganda. Using heightened dramatic utterances, Cordiferro enabled the spectators to sympathize with the characters and perhaps even share their doubts and feelings.

As it emerges from this brief discussion, despite his legendary popularity among Italian American workers, Cordiferro's productions could hardly be described as typical proletarian plays. It is not the unions, strikes, and revolutions that are at the center of his plays but the Italian immigrant experience. Only one play, *La Rivale* (The Rival, represented for the first time on June 10, 1912 at the Star Casino of New York City), made explicit propaganda, glamorizing the figure of the subversive and the cause of the

⁵² *L'onore perduto*, Act IV, 31.

working class.⁵⁴ Yet, it would be a mistake to ignore Cordiferro's radicalism, for his art was essentially politically motivated. His texts grew out of a specific political struggle in which Cordiferro was seriously engaged, a struggle for the moral and political education of Italian American workers and their emancipation from capitalist oppression.

Cordiferro's remarkable success lay in the way he brought together popular themes of working-class romance with social criticism and political satire. His art represented a compromise between the interests of the audiences which sought romantic, emotional, and spirited performances and the aesthetic of the *sovversivi* which was inextricably bound to promoting social and political engagement. The result was a unique fusion of ethnicity, class, and radical politics: on the one hand he interpreted the world through Italian traditional structures, which valorized family, honor, conjugal fidelity; on the other, he filtered these themes through the lenses of class and immigration to promote class and ethnic interests.

Arturo Giovannitti's theatrical production also has a complex relation to the *sovversivi*'s radical culture. Giovannitti, as we saw, was one of the most important leaders of the Italian American labor movement and a revered working-class hero. Although he typically wrote poetry, in 1914 he also began writing short dramatic skits for his literary review, *Il Fuoco*.⁵⁵ Among his longer plays *Come era nel principio* or

⁵³ *Il Pezzente*, 7.

⁵⁴ Set against the background of the Italian war against Tripoli, *La rivale* recreated the world-view of a libertarian writer, probably modeled after Cordiferro himself, who has consecrated his life entirely to socialism after his wife has left him. Sisca Papers, Box 7, folder 58, IHRC.

Tenebre Rosse (As it Was in the Beginning or Red Darkness, 1916), *The Alfa and the Omega* (1917), and *Il rivale di Dio* (The Rival of God, 1924) were the most popular.

The first became an instant success and a year after its premiere on October 10, 1916 at the People's House was also performed in English on Broadway.

Like the one-act plays published in *Il Fuoco*, *Come era nel principio* was inspired by the events of the First World War and was meant to stir opposition to the war. Set in an imaginary town of contemporary France, *Come era nel principio* illustrated the collective social drama of the war and the dehumanizing effect it had on people. The first act described the German invasion of a small French village. This is probably the best, most convincing part of the play: one can feel the growing terror, anger and pain of the French people forced to capitulate. Giovannitti's major strength is in fact to give a human face to the war, depicting its horror and devastation. The real drama, however, does not regard the war itself but the collapse of the worldview of the protagonist, Maurizio, a famous poet who believes in socialism, internationalism, and non-violence. When he is informed that the Germans have occupied the town, he begs his fellow-citizens not to resist and not to respond to their violence. But ironically, during his absence his house is invaded and his wife, Bianca, and his maid are raped by two soldiers. We then learn that this incident has transformed the pacifist poet into a madman, and that, thirsty for blood and revenge, he has enrolled in the army. After four months, he loses his sight in a fight and finally returns home. But he is not the same man anymore, the war has awakened his primitive instinct, his manly force, the brutal side of his personality.

⁵⁵ See the one-act plays *La lanterna verde* (The green lantern) and *Il disertore* (The deserter), *Il Fuoco*, November 1, 1914, 14-16, and May 31, 1915, 7-11. See also *La sedia vuota* (The Empty Chair, 1917), published in the May issue of *La Guardia Rossa*.

With growing tragic catharsis, the third and final act dramatizes the intense emotions and turbulent passions of Maurizio and his wife as they confront each other for the first time about what happened. Maurizio considers himself responsible for the raping of his wife in that he failed to protect her. His masculinity and pride have been compromised and he needs to prove that he is still a man. He demands from Bianca unconditional devotion and submission, only in this way will he be able to forget and heal. Convinced that love will eventually transcend all the pain and horror, Bianca complies to his wants, and Maurizio, moved by her self-abnegation, slowly surrenders to her and ask forgiveness. But when he finds out that she is pregnant with the baby of the German soldier, his tribal instincts again takes the upper hand and, beside himself with rage, he tries to kill her. They fight violently and finally Bianca takes a gun and shoots him.⁵⁶

Giovannitti here echoed contemporary psychological and philosophical arguments that the war laid bare “the gregarious instinct,” the “herd impulse” and the “blind tribal instincts” of men. These views were especially influenced by Freud’s theories on the power of instinct, desire, will, and dream, and had great resonance among radical intellectuals in America.⁵⁷ The figure of Maurizio clearly symbolized the human struggle between instinct and reason, while his tussle with Bianca stood for the eternal struggle of sexes.

⁵⁶ *Come era nel principio ovvero tenebre rosse. Dramma in tre atti* (Brooklyn, NY: I.W.W. Italian Publishing Bureau, 1918).

⁵⁷ See for example Randolph Bourne, *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915-1919* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) and Max Eastman, “The Religion of Patriotism,”

Giovannitti's theatrical production went beyond the scope of most Italian American radical plays. In contrast to typical Italian immigrant dramatic productions which were confined to themes and problems of the ethnic community, his work reflected the influence of American and European experimental art (especially Brecht, Ibsen, and Strindberg), which tried to overcome the formulaic conventions of the commercial theatre and create new forms of art. Giovannitti indeed was one of the few *sorversivi* who truly crossed ethnic boundaries, distinguishing himself not only within the Little Italies but also in the larger spectrum of American politics and art. Instead of melodramatic plots, whose ending was highly predictable, Giovannitti's plays were essentially explorations of the multiple and contradictory aspects of human nature. Instead of one-dimensional heroes, described purely in terms of good versus evil, his characters had both negative and positive traits. At the core of his art lay in fact the question of human existence itself.

One striking feature is the combination of psychological expressionism and social realism. *Il Rivale di Dio* for example tells the story of a young doctor of extraordinary intelligence and generosity who is against his will forced to commit a crime in order to continue his research and fulfill his dream of using science to help the poor.⁵⁸ At first sight, the central theme seems to be the moral condemnation of modern society, but here, too, the real drama takes place in the mind of the doctor, who is haunted by the thought of his sin, wondering whether it is ever right to use immoral means to achieve moral ends.

The Masses, 9 (July 1917), 8-12. Giovannitti was a close friend of Eastman, Bourne and other American radicals of the time.

⁵⁸ *Il Rivale di Dio* was published in installments in *Il Velcro* starting from November 15, 1924.

In a similar way, *The Alfa and the Omega*, a bold experimental text in the form of a imaginary conversation between a burglar and John D. Rockefeller, reveals the psychological depth of Giovannitti's dramatic art.⁵⁹

A play that was closer to the so-called proletarian or revolutionary theatre was Alberico Molinari's *I Martiri di Chicago* (The Chicago's Martyrs). The son of a well-to-do, landowning family in Cremona, near Milan, Alberico Molinari (1876-1948) became one of the most important figures of reformist socialism in the United States.⁶⁰ His political activism began in Italy, during his course of study at the University of Modena, from which he received a degree in medicine in 1902. By the age of twenty-four, he was an active and influential member of the Italian Socialist Party. A powerful orator, he carried on subversive propaganda among agricultural and industrial workers in his native region. As a result, in February 1902 he was arrested and eventually sentenced to pay sixty *Lire* and spend three months in prison for "incitement to class hatred."⁶¹ The arrest, however, never took place because Molinari, guessing a likely conviction, managed to leave Italy before the warrant was issued. Like other *sovversivi*, he left his family behind and went to the United States in search of bread and freedom.

⁵⁹ *The Alpha and the Omega*, Giovannitti Papers, Italian Miscellaneous Manuscript Collection, Folder 5, IHRC. It was represented together with *La sedia vuota* on December 3, 1917 at Prospect Hall in Brooklyn. The script of *La sedia vuota* can be found in the May 1918 issue of *La Guardia Rossa*.

⁶⁰ Biographical information on Molinari can be found in "Cenni biografici," Alberico Molinari, CPC, busta 3335. ACS, Rome; Tommaso Toselli, "Omaggio ad Alberico Molinari," *La Parola del Popolo* (December 1958-January 1959), 51; and Rudolph Vecoli, "Molinari Alberico," in *Movimento operaio italiano*, 507-509. See also Vezzosi, *Il socialismo indifferente*, 149-151.

He first settled in New York City where he began contributing to *Il Proletario*, but in 1905, following the arrival of his wife and daughter, he moved to Pennsylvania, establishing a medical practice in Philadelphia and the mining communities of Wilkes-Barre and Scranton. Because of his generosity and kindness, he soon won the respect and affection of local Italian immigrants and became known as “il medico dei poveri,” the doctor of the poor.⁶²

Besides the practice of medicine, Molinari devoted much of his time and energy to political activism, conducting conferences, contributing to socialist publications, and helping organize Italian workers. In 1907, for example, he founded *L'Ascesa del Proletariato* (The Rise of the Proletariat), an important socialist publication which lasted until 1910.⁶³ According to the Italian Consul in Philadelphia, his socialist campaign was very influential and won many converts among the Italian immigrants in Pennsylvania. Worried and irritated, the Consul wrote to the Ministry of the Interior in Rome: “It is because of his propaganda that many hard-working and good young men, who before his arrival did not care about anything but work, are today rebellious to all that is justice and law. At Wilkes-Barre, Old Forge, Plainsville and all places where Molinari goes there are

⁶¹ Alberico Molinari, “Cenni biografici,” CPC , busta 3335, ACS, Rome, and Vecoli, “Molinari Alberico,” 507-509.

⁶² Toselli, “Omaggio ad Alberico Molinari,” 51.

⁶³ In its fifteen pages, Molinari discussed political theory, informed readers of upcoming political events, and covered contemporary news. He also dedicated much attention to the social problems of industrial capitalism and the conditions of the immigrants, elucidating in a simple language subjects such as the American corporate trusts, the American political system, new scientific discoveries, and the theories of Marx, Darwin, and Lombroso. An entire page, “*la pagina del medico*” (the doctor’s page), was devoted to the sanitary education of the workers, while his wife edited a column devoted to women’s and family’s issues

anarchists and socialists – there, where, only a few years ago, there were only people full of reverence and love of the motherland.”⁶⁴

From 1911 to 1921, Molinari was an active member of the reformist Italian Socialist Federation founded by Giuseppe Bertelli, and the editor of its official organ *La Parola del Popolo*. Compelled by family reasons (his wife was homesick), in 1921 he left the United States and returned to Italy. After Mussolini came to power, he became involved in clandestine activities and in 1930 was arrested and sentenced to five years of confinement at Nuoro, on the island of Sardinia.⁶⁵

In addition to editing and contributing to radical publications, during his residence in America, Molinari published various books and two plays: a one act-drama entitled *La bandierina di Karl Marx* (Karl Marx’s Little Flag) and the aforementioned *I Martiri di Chicago*.⁶⁶ Written in 1909, this play is essentially a reconstruction of the famous incident in Chicago’s Haymarket Square, where, on May 4, 1886 a bomb exploded causing the injury of sixty-eight policemen and the arrest of eight German immigrant

⁶⁴ Letter of the Prefettura di Torino, April 20, 1930. Alberico Molinari. CPC, ACS.

⁶⁵ Vecoli, “Molinari Alberico,” 507-509 and Dick Hoerder, ed., *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America*, Vol. III (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

⁶⁶ *Discorsi Brevi* (1919) was a book of aphorisms devoted to the moral education of the workers, *Le teorie di Cesare Lombroso spiegate agli operai* (1920) was a scientific tract of the theories of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso; *I Martiri di Chicago. Episodio storico ai primi arbori del movimento rivoluzionario presente* (1916) was an historical account of the Haymarket affair. Of the play *La bandierina di Karl Marx* there are no further information, a script of *I Martiri di Chicago* instead can be found in Alberico Molinari Papers, Miscellaneous Italian Manuscript Collection, IHRC, Minneapolis.

anarchists. Despite the lack of specific evidence against them, four were hanged, while a fifth killed himself in his cell.⁶⁷

In its dramatization of the case, the play used factual biographical material and followed closely the historical developments of the case. Its message, however, was not only historical. The martyrdom of the Haymarket anarchists was in fact highly symbolic of the workers' struggle everywhere and at all times. The generating force behind the story was the belief in class solidarity and internationalism; its primary goal was to encourage unionization by linking the heroic struggle of the Haymarket anarchists with the present working class struggle. The tone is sometimes too celebratory but the general effect is rousing and moving.

The first act describes the tragic events that led to the arrests of the five German anarchists, August Spies, Michael Schwab, Adolph Fisher, Samuel Fielden, and George Engel. The scene takes place at the editorial office of the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, a German anarchist publication. A careful setting tries to recreate a distinctively revolutionary milieu. Some pictures of international heroes of the working-class movement, a red flag, and a banner with the slogan "Long live eight hours" hang on the walls. The act ends with the police breaking into the office of the *Arbeiter* and arresting all those present.

The second and third acts focus on the two other victims of the Haymarket affair, Louis Lingg and Albert Parson. A carpenter of anarchist ideas, Lingg chose to kill

⁶⁷ The other three were later pardoned. For further information of the Haymarket case see Dave Roediger, "Haymarket Incident," in Mary Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 295-297. See also Roediger and Rosemont, eds., *Haymarket Scrapbook* and Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

himself in his cell by exploding a cartridge of dynamite in his mouth, rather than die by the hand of the authorities. Parson instead had successfully escaped the arrest but decided to turn himself in during the trial, in solidarity with his comrades. Their actions are glorified, represented by Molinari as ultimate acts of pure heroism. Through their examples, Molinari gave his audience a powerful lesson on the importance of class unity and self-respect.

When in the play a friend of Parsons tried to dissuade him from giving himself up to the authorities, this is how he responded: “You think I could live even one second after my comrades will be hanged without me moving a finger on their behalf? You think I could still look at my children, the workers, or simply raise my eyes towards the sky, when I, to save this miserable skin of mine, hide myself, while generous souls undergo capital punishment for having preached what I have always preached with a voice even higher than theirs?”⁶⁸

The fourth and final act jumps to November 10, 1887, the day before the execution. The scene takes place at the penitentiary of Chicago, where the eight anarchists are held. The play ends with the condemned men going to the scaffold and shouting: “Long live Socialism! Long live Anarchy!” This declamatory device, which became very popular in the agit-prop productions of the thirties (notably Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*), was clearly meant to involve and arouse the spectators.

⁶⁸ *I Martiri Di Chicago, dramma storico in 4 atti*. Alberico Molinari Papers, Miscellaneous Manuscript, IHRC, Act III, 5-6.

One might wonder what motivated Molinari to write this play. In contrast to the anarchists and syndicalists, he believed that social transformation could be achieved through gradual reforms and education, not violent revolution.

One possible explanation is that Molinari wanted to tell Italian immigrants the truth about the Haymarket case. Like other radicals, he was outraged at the unfairness of the proceedings and believed that the men were killed not for the sake of justice but to disrupt the American revolutionary movement. Much like the later case of Sacco and Vanzetti, he saw the trial of the Haymarket anarchists as a travesty of justice and used it to expose the myth of America as a land of liberty. "Taken as a whole, the American people – wrote Molinari – believe what the mainstream press wants them to believe. There is no country in the whole world like the United States, where the press has the power to plagiarize the sentiments of public opinion. In no other country is the press so completely in the hands of the capitalist class as in the United States."⁶⁹

Molinari wanted essentially to vindicate the Haymarket anarchists and give the audience a sense of the great ideals and dreams that moved them. In a concluding speech that captured the true meaning of the play, the lawyer of the defendants explained to the audience:

They presented them to the world as blood-thirsty men and instead they were of mild and generous character, loved by all those who got to know their pure and altruistic spirit. It seemed natural to them to live for a sublime ideal and now it seems natural to them to die for it. With rage they labeled them anarchists, but for anarchy they meant an ideal society where order and justice are possible without abuses.

⁶⁹ Molinari, *I I Martiri di Chicago, Episodio Storico ai primi albori del movimento rivoluzionario presente* (Chicago: Italian Labor Publishing Co., 1916), 74.

The play offered many moments like this that called for high lyricism and passionate acting. The major strength lay exactly in the ardent dialogues of the characters; their words in fact powerfully resonated with the idealism, courage, and fervor of the time. With its historical setting and characters, *I Martiri di Chicago* was basically realistic in form and highly predictable, but it fulfilled the idea of a good revolutionary play, strong, moving, and propagandistic. Like Gori's *Primo Maggio*, Molinari's play certainly contributed to make the Haymarket anarchists so popular among Italian immigrants. The observance of November 11, the date of their execution, took in fact an almost religious quality among Italian radicals in the United States with the martyrs of Chicago portrayed as Christlike figures.⁷⁰

Two other amateur playwrights belonging to the world of the *sovversivi* were Ludovico Caminita and Vincenzo Vacirca. Little is known about Caminita (1878-1945?): a native of Palermo, Sicily, he came to the United States in 1902. Initially he stayed in Pennsylvania, but after hearing a lecture by Pedro Esteve, he converted to anarchism and went to Paterson to assist him with *La Questione Sociale*. In 1907 he took over the publication, and when a year later the American government banned it from the mails, he edited *L'Era Nuova*, which in 1917 was also suppressed by federal authorities.

From 1908 to the First World War, he also worked at the office of *Mother Earth*, the anarchist publication of Emma Goldman. Governmental authorities believed that the group of *L'Era Nuova* was involved in the 1919 bombings and considered Caminita, who had launched another anarchist paper, *La Jacquerie*, one of the main leaders. He was

arrested on February 14, 1920 and consequently interned at Ellis Island, an experience which was recollected in the book *L'isola delle lacrime* (The Island of Tears). Threatened with deportation and questioned by Hoover, he chose to collaborate with the Federals, providing crucial information on anarchist groups. In 1922, he publicly recanted his anarchist beliefs in *New York World*, for which he had begun to work.⁷¹

A draftsman of trade, Caminita was highly educated. He wrote and published many books that ranged from sociology to literature and also composed cartoons and drawings. Notably, he drew the cover for the *Blast* on February 5, 1916.⁷²

Sonata Elegiaca is unfortunately the only play that is available. It was first represented at the Olympic Theatre of New York on May 16, 1921 by the dramatic company of the famous actress Mimi Auguglia, while Caminita awaited the decision of the American government on whether he be deported to Italy. Despite the fact that the impresario and the actors had done a terrible job, the play was a huge success.⁷³

Organized in four acts, the plot revolved around the lives of Errico Parson, an artist of working-class origins who had become rich writing commercial novels, and

⁷⁰ See Rudolph Vecoli, "The American Republic Viewed by the Italian Left," in Marianne Debouzy, ed., *In the Shadow of the Statue of Liberty* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 25.

⁷¹ For information on Caminita I am thankful to Prof. Paul Avrich who has generously shared his research with me. On Caminita's arrests and cooperation with the FBI see Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, 181.

⁷² Among Caminita's social studies are: *Che cos'è la religione* (1906), *Free Country* (1910?), *I delinquenti* (1910) *Nell'isola delle lacrime: Ellis Island* (1924). His literary works include a novel entitled *Augusto Crovelli* (1927), a biography of Orrigo Obici and two plays: *L'idea che cammina* (1905) and *Sonata Elegiaca* (1921).

⁷³ See the critical reviews at the end of the published copy of *Sonata Elegiaca* (Paterson, NJ: A. Fontanella, 1921) "Alcuni Giudizi della Critica," I-XV.

Lillian Owen, his daughter's piano teacher, who was active in the working-class movement. Errico is a cynical, disillusioned man, tired of the superficiality and frivolity of his environment and is slowly overcome by the vitality and revolutionary fervor of Lillian. Pressured by her, he agrees to give a speech on behalf of the workers and soon finds himself immersed in her revolutionary struggle. He soon learns that the police wants to arrest Lillian and tries, in vain, to convince her to leave the city. Eventually, some policemen break into her apartment, where they find some dynamite in the closet and arrest her. We learn, however, that Lillian is innocent, the dynamite had been placed there by order of the police's captain, who in turn had been convinced to do so by Errico's wife. Worried that her husband's involvement with the workers could endanger their social reputation, she had promised the captain, who was in love with her, to give herself to him if he helped her. When Errico finds out the truth it is too late: Lillian had already died in prison.⁷⁴

Contemporary critics and friends characterized *Sonata Elegiaca* above all as a moral exposé of the hypocrisy and conventionalism of bourgeois society. With pungent sarcasm, Caminita juxtaposed Errico's sophisticated but immoral world of manners and wit with Lillian's poor but sincere environment. Because of the time and circumstances of its creation, *Sonata Elegiaca* is in many ways also a reflection of the author's consciousness in the aftermath of the Red Scare. The figure of Errico Parson is in many ways autobiographical: Errico's political cynicism represents Caminita's own repudiation

⁷⁴ *Sonata Elegiaca* (Paterson, NJ.: A. Fontanella, 1921). A copy is available at the New York Public Library.

of anarchism while his torment echoes Caminita's own inner struggle between his revolutionary past and his adjustment to bourgeois society.

Vincenzo Vacirca (1886-1956) was "one of the most genuine and interesting figures of Italian socialism."⁷⁵ Born in Sicily, at thirteen he joined the local section of the Socialist Party and at sixteen was arrested and sentenced to twenty-six days in prison for organizing and leading a revolt of Sicilian peasants.

Between 1902 and 1907 he conducted an intense campaign of propaganda, covering important positions for the Italian Socialist Party and directing important socialist newspapers such as *L'Azione Socialista* of Bari, *Parola Socialista* of Ravenna and *Secolo Nuovo* of Venice.

In 1908, in order to escape imprisonment, he began his long journey as a political émigré, which brought him first to Brazil (1908), then Argentina (1908-1911), and finally the United States where he lived from 1913 to 1919 and then again from 1925 to 1946. His first six years in America were spent between New York and Chicago, organizing Italian American workers and editing socialist newspapers such as *Lotta di Classe*, *La Parola dei Socialisti*, and *Notizia Quotidiana* which he founded in Boston.

An anti-militarist, he strongly opposed Italy's entry into the Great War, and during one of his anti-war speeches in New Orleans (1915) was shot and hurt by Italian nationalists. In 1919, after twelve years of exile, he returned to Italy where he was elected member of the Chamber of Deputies. Sent to Russia as a representative of the Italian Socialist Party, he interviewed Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenieff and wrote as a correspondent

⁷⁵ "Personalità dei nostri tempi: Vincenzo Vacirca," *La Parola del Popolo*, 50 Anniversary, 1908-1958, 279.

for *Avanti!* (Forward!, the official organ of the Italian Socialist Party) various articles on the state of socialism in Russia, which he later published in the form of a book, *Ciò che ho visto nella Russia Sovietica* (What I have Seen in Soviet Russia).

Instead of the long-awaited socialist victory, in Italy he witnessed the rise of Fascism. His opposition to Mussolini was so intense that the Black Shirts tried to kill him in several occasions, often at the cost of other workers' lives. In 1925, after being sentenced to five years in prison for his campaign against the Fascist government, he returned to the United States, where he emerged as one the most active anti-Fascist organizers and orators. He conducted propaganda tours, directed the anti-Fascist daily *Il Nuovo Mondo*, and founded his own newspapers: *L'Internazionale* (The International), *Il Solco* (The Furrow), and *La Strada* (The Street).⁷⁶

Local Fascists in America threatened his life many times and in 1927 tried to kill him in a subway station of New York with an iron pipe. Luckily, he got away and suffered only several stitches at the head. In the meantime, the Italian Fascist government passed a law against the so-called *fuorusciti* (anti-Fascist émigrés), which deprived them of Italian citizenship and confiscated all their properties. The first of these decrees was issued against Vacirca, Carlo Tresca, and Pietro Allegra.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ See Hoerder, *The Labor Press in North America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), vol. 3.

⁷⁷ Biographical information on Vincenzo Vacirca can be found in: "Personalità dei nostri tempi: Vincenzo Vacirca," *La Parola del Popolo* (December 1958-January 1959), 279-281, G. Micciché, "Vacirca Vincenzo," in *Movimento operaio italiano*, 160-163.

In addition to an intense journalistic and anti-Fascist activity, Vacirca also wrote many political books, three social novels, and five plays.⁷⁸ *Madre* is, unfortunately, the only play that has survived. Written in 1931, it was published in Chicago by the Italian Labor Publishing Bureau and presented for the first time on April 19, 1931 at the Civic Repertory Theatre in New York. The premiere had an almost full house and was received with great enthusiasm. As Arturo Di Pietro wrote for *Nuovo Mondo*, "The audience, which included the modest worker as well as the professional and the artist, did justice to this work that we had predestined to an inevitable success both for its subject and its literary and artistic value. Since the first dialogs, the drama got the attention of the audience, which followed it with intense agitation, bursting into warm and spontaneous applause, and calling enthusiastically author and actors at the end of each act."⁷⁹

Madre is the dramatic story of a family torn apart by the historical developments of Fascism. Giorgio Vanelli, the firstborn, is a good lawyer and, in the republican tradition of his father who fought along with Garibaldi for the unification of Italy, is a convinced anti-Fascist. But his brother Leonardo, who is younger, impetuous, and arrogant, has been seduced by the rhetoric of Fascism and joined the local Black Shirts.

⁷⁸ His historical works include: *Gli Italiani nella provincia di Mendoza* (Italians in the province of Mendoza, 1911) which discussed the conditions of Italian immigrants in Argentina, *L'Italia e la guerra* (Italy and the war, 1915), *La Russia in fiamme* (Russia in flames, 1919), *Cio' che ho visto nella Russia Sovietica* (What I have seen in Soviet Russia, 1921), *La monarchia e il fascismo* (Monarchy and fascism, 1925), *La crisi americana* (The American crisis, 1940) and *La storia di un cadavere: biografia di Mussolini* (Biography of Mussolini, 1942). His novels were *L'apostata* (1906), *Disertore* (Deserter, 1908), and *Il Rogo* (The Pyre, 1928). Among his plays we find *Madre* (Mother, 1931), *La Ragnatela* (The cobweb, ?), *Tra le nuvole* (Among the clouds, ?), *Reginetta* (?) and *La scala del diavolo* (The Devil's staircase, ?).

For him Fascism represents modernity, vitality, Italy's redemption and future. Disgusted, Giorgio tries to dissuade him: "Don't you see Italy hurling into an abyss? Don't you see the torrents of hatred that you have stirred up? Don't you see your superiors, yesterday's thieves, getting rapidly rich at the expense of the country? And to all these abject things you gave your youth away!"⁸⁰

To the despair of their poor mother, who cannot comprehend how political ideology can be stronger than blood, they grow more and more apart, each in the certainty of being right. In the meantime, Fascist repression against dissenters becomes more and more intense and Giorgio is forced to flee. He returns home after three years of exile in Paris, to organize a revolt against the regime. For the first time, he finds his brother changed, he seems quieter, humbler, and more mature.

After a short and moving reunion with his mother and fiancée, he again leaves the house to join other anti-Fascists. When he comes back, terrible news awaits him: Leonardo had killed himself! In a note addressed to his mother he explained: "Dear Mother, forgive me. I did wrong. Too late to make up. I kill myself."⁸¹

The play's obvious purpose was to illustrate the negative impact of Fascism on all aspects of Italian life. As Ernesto Valentini put it, *Madre* was "a pure revolutionary act of useful and effective propaganda." Di Pietro for *Il Nuovo Mondo* convened: "it was Vacirca's most important contribution to the anti-Fascist cause. It by itself could usefully

⁷⁹ Arturo Di Pietro, "La prima di *Madre*," in the published edition of *Madre* (Chicago: Italian Labor Publishing Co., 1931).

⁸⁰ *Madre*, 33-34

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

substitute fifty speeches.”⁸² *Madre* exposed the brutal repression of freedom, the corruption of the regime, the violence used to dominate the people and the suffering of many, like Giorgio, forced to hide or live in exile. More importantly, it explored the disruption of human relationships in the face of terror, coercion, and strength: the disintegration of the family, the repression of emotions, the loss of humanity itself. The dramatic suicide of Leonardo was the most poignant allegory of this loss of human feeling and self-respect. But as the title suggests, it was the figure of the mother with her sorrow, her love, and abnegation that dominated the whole drama, awakening in the spectator a desire of justice and redemption.

Clearly, the play drew its vitality and strength from the author’s own personal experience of Fascism and his vision of a more humane and just society. But like other plays discussed here, it also relied on ancestral values of Italian culture that could evoke immediate emotional involvement. Like Cordiferro, who used honor to denounce the exploitation of Italian immigrants at the hand of the boss, Vacirca resorted to family drama to redress the profound injustice caused by Fascism.

Fascism was also the source of inspiration of Carlo Tresca’s one-act play *L’Attentato a Mussolini ovvero Il segreto di Pulcinella* (The Attempt on Mussolini’s Life or Pulcinella’s Secret).⁸³ The play was originally scheduled for 7:00pm on Sunday, December 13, 1925 at the Central Opera House. The actors were ready to go on stage when local authorities broke in the theatre and stopped the performance for violating the

⁸² Ernesto Valentini, “Preface to *Madre*,” and Di Pietro “La prima di *Madre*.”

⁸³ The play was published by Tresca’s house “Il Martello,” and sold at 25 cents. I am thankful to Prof. Pernicone who has lent me the booklet.

“blue laws,” which forbade entertainment on Sundays.⁸⁴ The blue laws, however, were just a pretext. The real reason behind the closing of the show was the attempt of Italian Fascists authorities to snare and silence Tresca, whom Mussolini’s regime considered the “*deus ex machina* of anti-Fascism” in America.⁸⁵ Having learned of his play, Italian consular officers had promptly informed the Department of Justice of Tresca’s violation of the blue laws, compelling local authorities to intervene and close the performance.⁸⁶

The subject of Tresca’s play was indeed cause of embarrassment, if not worry, for Fascist propaganda in the United States. Set in Fascist Italy, Tresca used the play to expose the illegal means used by the Fascist regime to crush the opposition. The story focused on a plan conceived by Mussolini’s foremost followers, Roberto Farinacci and the renegade syndicalist Edmondo Rossoni, to infiltrate anti-Fascist opponents and convince them to organize an attempt on Mussolini’s life. The attack would be promptly stopped and the attempt on Mussolini’s life would offer the pretext to carry on a powerful repression.

L’Attentato a Mussolini did not possess the poetic elegance and sophistication of the authors discussed so far but excelled at satire and inventiveness. Using a plain language, at times characterized by coarse dialogue, he brought alive the bleakness and gross materialism of Fascists. The play was presented with overwhelming success a week

⁸⁴ See *Il Nuovo Mondo*, December 14, 1925, 3.

⁸⁵ Nunzio Pernicone, “Carlo Tresca’s *Il Martello*,” *Italian American Review* (Spring/Summer 2001), 27.

⁸⁶ This information was given to me by Nunzio Pernicone. His father acted in the play.

after the original date. Taking place on a Saturday, this time the police could do nothing to stop it.

Like other revolutionary theatres, the Italian American radical stage was born as a social and cultural force intended to mold the opinions of the audience.⁸⁷ Its primary function was to awake the political and social consciousness of the spectators. Hence most of the plays were designed as morality plays with dialogs and situations which Italian American workers could easily understand and characters with whom they could easily identify. Part of the vitality of these works was their clarity and directness, which made them accessible to a broad audience.

But the Italian American radical stage was not *just* a weapon in the class struggle, it also reflected the artistic needs of the *sovversivi*. In this sense, it tried to satisfy the demands of *both* art and politics.⁸⁸ Until the late 1920s, the theatre provided a major creative outlet for the intellectual *sovversivi* as well as an important recreational escape for the immigrant workers. It also acquainted Italian Americans, many of whom had little formal schooling, with literary classics and important social and political issues.

But the Italian American radical theatre remained primarily a first generation phenomenon. Unlike the Yiddish or the Finnish ethnic theatres which were important agents of Americanization, the Italian American radical stage kept a strong bond to the

⁸⁷ For a theoretical discussion of radical theatre see Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), Malcolm Goldstein, *Political Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) and Eugene Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

homeland and to Italian culture and events. The cessation of large scale immigration with the new quota laws of 1924 shrank their audiences and influence. The *sovversivi*'s dramatic societies also lacked a stable or permanent support. Like the radical press, their survival depended on erratic subsidies from friends, parties, and subscriptions, and whatever profit came from the box office was always used to fund other radical activities.

These factors combined with the advent of movies and radio made the decline of the *sovversivi*'s theatre inevitable. But as the examples in this chapter reveal, Italian immigrant radicals produced an admirable stream of plays that included a great variety of genres, themes, and meanings that demand reassessment and a more important role in both ethnic and radical cultural history.

⁸⁸For a discussion of the relation of radical politics and literature see Alan Wald, *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (London: Verso, 1994).

CHAPTER VI ALLEGORIES OF ANTI-FASCISM : THE RADICAL CARTOONS OF FORT VELONA

A cartoon appeared on the front page of one of the first issues of the Italian American leftist daily *Il Nuovo Mondo*, on November 22, 1925 (Fig. 1). It caricatured Mussolini in his typical pose: standing erect with arms by his side, his lips sticking out in a serious, almost frowning, expression, and a defiant, threatening-looking gaze. His hat, which looked like a natural extension of his head, displayed a list of the most terrible features of the Fascist regime: persecution, suppression, destruction, working-class slavery, *squadristo* (Blackshirts violence) militia, unemployment, and debt. Next to *il Duce* stood a figure with a megaphone which clearly represented the Italian-language mainstream press -- the most important vehicle of Fascist propaganda in the United States. The cartoon's title, "The pro-Fascist press in support of the cudgel," commented on the ignominious connection between influential Italian Americans and Fascism, while the caption below, "Every cent given for the Italian debt is an aid to Mussolini's dictatorship!" averted readers that any money donated to the Fascist regime would be turned into weapons against them.

The artist, Fortunato Velona, was an Italian immigrant socialist, labor organizer, and anti-Fascist of working-class origins who, like many other Italians in the United States, gave the best of himself to extinguishing Fascism. His cartoons became the most common anti-Fascist imagery found in Italian American radical papers from the early 1920s until the fall of Fascism in 1945. While the American response to Fascism was almost nonexistent until the formation of the Popular Front in 1935, Italian American radicals reacted against Fascism as soon as the news of Mussolini's March on Rome

(1922) reached the United States. For the next two decades, they established political organizations through which they organized innumerable anti-Fascist activities such as demonstrations, parades, lectures, and fund-raising. To unveil the menace of Fascism, they used a variety of cultural institutions such as the press, radio, theatre, literature, and art. By lampooning Mussolini and the Fascist movement, Velona's cartoons added new strength to the anti-Fascist politics of the *sorversivi* and became one of the most powerful cultural weapons to combat Mussolini's propaganda in the Little Italies. Because of their immediacy, dynamism, and directness, cartoons allowed for a broader audience and a more effective communication than other artistic or cultural forms. As Randall Harrison put it: "The cartoon is "communication to the quick." It is fast; it grabs the reader on the run. And it is penetrating; it can tickle the funny bone or "hurt to the quick."¹ It is impossible to assess how many people saw the cartoons and how they responded. The fact that they appeared in anti-Fascist radical papers certainly limited their circulation. Yet, the cartoons reinforced the commitment of anti-Fascists and added a touch of humor to an intensely tragic aspect of Italian and Italian American History.

Mussolini's coming to power dramatically changed the course of Italian as well as Italian American history. His promise of restoring Italy's greatness and his call to cultivate *italianità* (italianess) seduced many nostalgic immigrants. The popularity of Fascism among Italians in the United States was to a large extent the result of pervasive and careful propaganda promoted by Fascist emissaries through the schools, clubs, radios, and Italian language mainstream papers of the Little Italies. Immigrants were told

¹ Randall P. Harrison, *The Cartoon: Communication to the Quick* (London: Sage

day after day that Mussolini had transformed the poor, backward nation they had left behind into a country “where there was no unemployment, where everybody had baths in their home, and the trains ran on time.” Italy, thanks to Fascism, had become “rich, prosperous, respected, and feared.”²

But if Fascist propaganda “provided the fertilizer,” it was American society that “planted the seed.”³ The peculiar conditions of Italians as recent immigrants in America predisposed them to embrace Fascism.⁴ The prejudices and discrimination they encountered in all strata of American society, combined with pressures to adjust, isolated Italian Americans, burning them with a profound inferiority complex, and rendering them hostile toward American society.⁵ The wave of nativist hysteria and the Red Scare of 1919 that culminated in the arrest of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1920 and the discriminatory immigration laws of 1921-1924 bore heavily on the Italian Americans, intensifying their resentment against America.⁶

Publications, 1981), 11.

² Gaetano Salvemini, *Italian Fascist Activities in the United States*, edited by Philip V. Cannistraro (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1977), xx and li.

³ John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 78.

⁴ Comparative studies show that Fascism did not lure Italian immigrants everywhere in the world. In countries where Italians felt less discriminated and isolated they became anti-Fascists. See above all, Donna Gabaccia and Fraser Ottanelli, *Italian Workers in the World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002)

⁵ Cannistraro, Introduction to Salvemini's *Italian Fascist Activities in the United States*, xxvii.

⁶ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 78.

In an alien environment that looked down upon Italian immigrants, Fascism answered the Italian Americans' need for personal redemption and national identity. Its apparent success in revitalizing Italy compensated for the Italian immigrant inferiority complex by enhancing Italian status and image in the eyes of the American community. As Mussolini began gaining international reputation, "Italian Americans could not help but look on with a new sense of pride and self-respect."⁷ At the same time, Fascist emphasis on "Old World" traditional values, "La religione, la patria e la famiglia" (religion, fatherland, and family), easily played upon Italian Americans' cultural heritage and their fears of family and community disintegration resulting from Americanization. Hence, they identified with Fascism not so much on ideological grounds but because it provided them with a much-needed sense of national identity and belonging amidst a pluralist society that estranged and denigrated them.⁸

⁷ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 78-79.

⁸ Interestingly, most Italians in America had little sense of national identity prior to the advent of Fascism. Italy had reached unification only in 1861 and for many years family kinship and village solidarity (a phenomenon known as *campanilismo* and reflected in the regional and provincial character of Little Italies) represented the only real points of self-identification for the *contadini*, who constituted the bulk of Italian immigration. Moreover, the diffusion of socialism, syndicalism, and especially anarchism, combined with southerners' resentment toward the policies of the newly formed Italian state, had given migrant political identity an anti-national, internationalist, and sometime even anti-statist character. Philip V. Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italy: Italian Americans and Fascism, 1922-1929* (West Lafayette, IN: Bordighera, 1999), 4-7. On the reasons of the Fascist appeal among Italian Americans see also the studies produced by anti-Fascist émigrés: Massimo Salvadori, *Resistenza e azione. Ricordi di un liberale* (Bari: 1951), Carlo Sforza, "The Italians and America," in his *The Real Italians* (New York, 1942), Constantine Panunzio, "Italian Americans, Fascism and the War," *Yale Review*, 31, Summer 1942, Luigi Sturzo, *La mia battaglia da New York* (Milan: 1949), and Salvemini, *Fascist Activities in the United States*.

But not all Italian Americans succumbed to “Mussonianism.”⁹ Ironically, *il Duce*’s rise to power also galvanized a moribund Italian American radical movement, decimated by governmental suppression, deportations, and internal divisions. The struggle against Fascism offered disillusioned radicals a new *raison d’être*: it compelled them to reorganize their forces in the name of democracy and freedom. A small but vigorous opposition, coming from the whole spectrum of the Italian American left and representing, according to one estimate, about ten percent of the five million Italians living in the United States, arose as soon as Mussolini came to power.¹⁰

In addition to the existing *sovversivi*, the Italian American anti-Fascist resistance greatly benefited from the arrival of Italian political exiles, or *fuorusciti*, as they were commonly called in Italian. Starting from 1922, Fascist violence against, and persecution of, leftist parties and individuals resulted in political emigration, which brought a number of distinguished scholars, journalists, and politicians, representing all shades of political ideology, to the United States. From their ranks came much of the leadership of the Italian American Left in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. Vincenzo Vacirca, Serafino

⁹ Mussolonialism referred to the cult of Mussolini the man, rather than Fascism. Diggins, *Mussolini and America*, 68.

¹⁰ Salvemini, *Italian Fascist Activities in the United States*, 244. Besides the anti-Fascist 10%, Salvemini estimated that only 5% of all Italian Americans were out-out Fascists, 35% could become Fascists, while the remaining 50% were indifferent to politics. No history of Italian American anti-Fascism has been written. General information on the Italian American anti-Fascist movement can be found in the memoirs of anti-Fascist exiles, especially Vanni B. Montana, *Amarostico. Testimonianze euro-americane* (Livorno, Italy: U. Bastogi, 1975), and the anti-Fascist press. For critical studies see John P. Diggins, “The Italo-American Anti-Fascist Opposition,” *Journal of American History*, December 1967, 579-98 and Chapter 6 of his *Mussolini and Fascism*. See also Nunzio Pernicone, “Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York City,” in Philip V. Cannistraro ed., *The Italians of New York* (New York Historical Society, 2000), 85-88

Romualdi, Vanni Montana, and Giuseppe Lupis were among the first to arrive and to generate support for both socialism and anti-Fascism. Anarchists Armando Borghi and Virgilia d'Andrea, who arrived in 1928, joined the small but forceful cadre of *galleanisti* of *L'Adunata dei Refrattari*, helping keep alive the flame of anarchism. Communists Vittorio Vidali, Ambrogio Donini, and Giuseppe Berti became the dominant personalities of the Italian Federation of the Workers Party of America (later renamed the American Communist Party).¹¹

Finally, a wave of liberal intellectuals, including Gaetano Salvemini, Max Ascoli, Count Carlo Sforza, Giuseppe Borgese, and Luigi Sturzo, began to arrive in the 1930s, especially following the outbreak of the Second World War. Such exiles represented the cream of Italian culture. Salvemini, for example, enjoyed international reputation as an historian and was offered the chair of Italian Civilization at Harvard University in 1933, a post he held until his return to Italy in 1947. Ascoli too was an eminent scholar. A professor at the University of Rome, he had come to New York on a Rockefeller grant in 1931 and, after his fellowship expired, obtained a permanent position at the New School for Social Research. Sforza and Sturzo were esteemed statesmen who combined anti-Fascist sentiments with democratic sympathies. Together, these *fuorusciti* played a crucial role in generating American support for anti-Fascism. They brought greater respectability and visibility to the resistance, and, thanks to their access to American academic and intellectual circles, they were able to forge crucial alliances with American intellectuals.

But the most significant contributions to anti-Fascism came probably from the labor unions, especially from Frank Bellanca's Local 63 of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), Salvatore Ninfo's Local 48, and Luigi Antonini's Local 89 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). Counting 200,000 Italian American members by 1936, these labor unions were the only working-class organization in a position to finance anti-Fascist activities and counter the influence of the *prominenti* in the Little Italies.¹²

As early as April 1923, Italian American labor unions and anti-Fascist groups claiming a total of 150,000 members, gave life to the Anti-Fascist Alliance of North America (AFANA) with headquarters in the Italian Chamber of Labor. The organization elected Frank Bellanca as chair, Arturo Giovannitti as general secretary, and Salvatore Ninfo of the Local 48 of the ILGWU as treasurer.¹³

Although the organization soon disintegrated under the weight of ideological and tactical divisions, the escalation of Fascist violence and terror eventually forced the anti-Fascists to intensify their efforts. The murder of Italian socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti by Fascist agents in June 1924 spurred great indignation and horror throughout Italy as well as abroad, threatening to bring down Mussolini. The Italian American radical press dedicated large attention to the case, fiercely denouncing Mussolini's

¹¹ Rudolph Vecoli, "The Italian Immigrants in the United States: Labor Movement from 1880 to 1829," in Bruno Bezza, ed., *Gli italiani fuori d'Italia* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1983), 304 and Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York City."

¹² For a history of the Italian American section of the ILGWU, Local 89, see Serafino Romualdi, "Storia della Locale 89," *Pane e Rose* (1934?) in Antonino Crivello Papers, Box 1. IHRC.

presumed involvement in the murder as well as the regime's oppressive and terrorist methods. In a powerful and moving article, the poet Arturo Giovannitti placed Matteotti along other historic martyrs of the left and exploited his death to ignite anti-Fascist sentiments. Matteotti is dead, he wrote, but

His soul remains. The idea remains. The word that was spoken, the goal that was divined, the will that was corroborated with blood, the denial of one's own individual entity for the rise and integration of a common entity, all these remain. The unknown god of heroism, of altruism, of abnegation, of brotherhood remains. And so remains Tomorrow, that belongs to the crowds as today belongs to the few and yesterday belonged to the only; the Tomorrow that is of the meek, of the just, of the workers.¹⁴

Matteotti became a symbol of the anti-Fascist resistance. Demonstrations to commemorate him were organized by leading *sorversivi* in New York, Boston, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Detroit, while the whole affair continued to be the subject of numerous articles and lectures.¹⁵ Italian American anti-Fascists used every opportunity to keep the name alive. As we will see, Matteotti's crime was constantly evoked in Velona's cartoons. Tresca, in his anti-Fascist play, *L'Attentato a Mussolini*, repeatedly alluded to the murder of the socialist deputy. Italian American poets wrote passionate lyrics in his memory, and sculptor Onorio Ruotolo did an impressive bust of him. But in the end Matteotti's murder did not undermine the power of Fascism in Italy, nor in America. On January 3, 1925, in the most important and difficult speech of his

¹³ Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York," 86, and Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 112-113.

¹⁴ Arturo Giovannitti, editorial of *Il Veltro*, August 15, 1924, 3.

¹⁵ See *Il Nuovo Mondo*, November 21, and December 10, 1925. For the reactions to the Matteotti case in the United States, see Pellegrino Nazzaro, "Fascist and Anti-Fascist Reaction in the United States to the Matteotti Murder," in Francesco Cordasco, ed.,

career, Mussolini assumed moral responsibility for Matteotti's murder and, unleashing Fascist violence in a "second wave," declared the dictatorship.¹⁶

As Mussolini consolidated his regime, the *sovversivi* exhibited greater combativeness. For the second time, they sought to put their differences aside and forge a united front against Fascism. Thanks mainly to the efforts of Carlo Tresca and Vittorio Vidali, an organizational meeting was held in New York on October 1925 in which AFANA was resurrected and relocated to the Rand School, at 7 East 15th Street.¹⁷ Despite the regime's constant efforts to crush the opposition and the *sovversivi*'s own divisions, the anti-Fascist resistance continued to grow. In addition to rallies and demonstrations, AFANA sponsored tours and conferences, exposed the connection of Mussolini and the *prominenti*, and organized all-out campaigns against the visits of Fascist diplomats in the United States.

The anti-Fascist struggle was not just a war of words -- on several occasions, the *sovversivi* waged guerrilla warfare against local Blackshirts, disrupting Fascist parades, attacking their headquarters, and often fighting them hand-to-hand in the streets. Italian American Fascist had begun organizing in the spring of 1921 and by 1924 there were about seventy *fasci* (Fascist clubs) throughout the United States with perhaps as many as 7,000 members. As illustrated in the program of the *Fascio Centrale* (Fascist Central Organization), the major role of these Fascist branches was that of recruiting loyal Italian

Studies in Italian American Social History (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1975), 50-65.

¹⁶ For an account of the Matteotti affair see Christopher Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, 1870-1925* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967).

¹⁷ Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York," 86.

Americans in the ranks of Fascism, promoting nationalist and patriotic sentiments, defending the name and interests of Italy, and exalting Italian culture and art. But another, perhaps more important mission of the Blackshirts was that of fighting all radicals and Bolsheviks, conveniently labeled anti-Italian and therefore number one enemies of the state.¹⁸

Clashes between the *sorversivi* and the Blackshirts escalated after 1925, claiming altogether dozen lives and culminating in two famous legal battles: the Greco-Carillo trial and the Terzani affair.¹⁹ The first case regarded the murder of two Italian American Fascists during the Memorial Day parade of 1927 and the consequent arrest, on July 26, of two anarchists from Brooklyn, Calogero Greco and Donato Carillo. After months of prison and weeks of trials, the defense (led by famous criminal lawyer Clarence Darrow) successfully proved that the two men had been framed, and, finally, on December 23, 1927 the jury returned a verdict of not guilty.²⁰

The Terzani case was another anti-Fascist *cause célèbre* that ended in acquittal. On July 14, 1933, an American Fascist organization, the Khaki Shirts, announced a meeting at the Columbus Hall in Astoria, Queens, to launch their movement. Fearing a possible rise of Fascism among Americans, the *sorversivi* published a last-minute appeal in their press. "ANTIFASCIST MOBILIZATION: This evening all at the Columbus Hall

¹⁸ See Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italy*, 15 and 30, and Domenico Fabiano, "I fasci italiani all'estero," in Bezza Bruno ed., *Gli italiani fuori d'Italia* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1983), 223.

¹⁹ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 127-134.

at Astoria against the Khaki Shirts.” The plea was a call to arms. Anti-Fascists of various tendencies showed up at Astoria, from Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, Staten Island, and New Jersey. Clashes between the two factions erupted after *il Duce* of the Khaki Shirts, Art J. Smith, ordered the Fascist salute; amidst the fights a young anti-Fascist, Antonio Fierro, was shot and killed.²¹ When the police arrived, they arrested another Italian anti-Fascist, Athos Terzani, despite the fact that he had identified the real killer, Frank Moffler, and even showed them where he had hidden the gun. The *sorversivi*’s prompt response was a crucial factor in saving Terzani. Once again they moved quickly, mobilizing public opinion, raising money for the defense, and recruiting the best lawyers available. In April 1934, thanks to the testimony of several repentant Khaki Shirts, Terzani was acquitted, while Moffler, who eventually admitted the crime, was sentenced to a term of five to ten years.²²

As in the case of previous struggles fought by the *sorversivi*, the press became the cornerstone of the anti-Fascist crusade. All Italian American radical newspapers in New York waged in their pages virulent attacks against Mussolini, and produced an enormous amount of theoretical articles and information on Fascism. When, in the mid-twenties, it became clear that Fascism was gaining more and more consensus among Italian

²⁰ For a thorough account of the Greco-Carillo case see Nunzio Pernicone, “Murder under the “El”: The Greco-Carillo Case,” *The Italian American Review*, 6, 2 (Autumn 1997/Winter 1998), 20-44.

²¹ For a reconstruction of the events see Montana, *Amarostico*, 124-127.

²² On the Terzani case see Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 131-133, and John Herling and Morris Shapiro, *The Terzani Case* (pamphlet, New York, 1934).

Americans, new publications sprang up to help prevent a total “fascistization” of the Little Italies.²³

The first Italian language paper devoted to combating Fascism was launched in New York on May 1924 by the Italian Chamber of Labor. Called *Il Veltro* (The Greyhound), it was a bimonthly “newspaper of the working class, immutably devoted to the solidarity of all exploited and all militants, alien to the little quarrels of the sect and the party, and promoter of what we [the editors] like to call pan-subversivism instead of the discredited name of *fronte unico* (united front).”²⁴

Edited by the Chamber’s secretary, Arturo Giovannitti, *Il Veltro* intended to reconcile the divisions of the various radical groups and focus its energy strictly to the anti-Fascist campaign. The paper was successful in bringing together different voices of the broad political spectrum of Italian American anti-Fascism. Besides Giovannitti (director), Ettore Frisina (manager), and Salvarore Ninfo (treasurer), its contributors included socialists Carmelo Zito, Girolamo Valenti, and Frank Bellanca, communists Antonino Capraro and Raimondo Fazio, and intellectuals of the caliber of Amedeo Bordiga, a principal figure and theorist of the Italian Communism, and Don Luigi Sturzo, the founder of the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (Italian Popular Party). The paper featured highly sophisticated articles on the political nature of Fascism that combated Fascist propaganda and educated readers about the actual condition of Italy under Mussolini’s regime. It is not clear why such an ambitious paper stopped publishing in 1925, but it

²³ For a list of Italian American anti-Fascist papers cf. Dick Hoerder, ed., *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America*, vol. 3 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

may be that the highly theoretical nature of its articles disaffected the Italian American workers.

Following the resurrection of AFANA, on November 16, 1925, a group of socialists and union leaders – including among others Frank Bellanca, Vincenzo Vacirca, Matteo Siracusa, Salvatore Ninfo, Giuseppe Lupis, and Giovanni Sala – founded *Il Nuovo Mondo* (The New World), the first anti-Fascist daily to appear abroad.²⁵ “It was realized,” explained the editors in the first issue, “that only a daily newspaper, made in such a manner as everybody could and would want to read, was a suitable weapon with which to fight the old guard. And so counsel was taken and plans were made to have a daily newspaper to educate and to defend our working population.”

The timing of *Il Nuovo Mondo* reflected of course the *sovversivi*’s growing concerns with Italian events: “Today in Italy – blasted the opening editorial – even the Mutual Aid Society is a crime, freedom of thought and of press, other than that blindly associated with absolutism and murder, is a crime; the working-class cooperative is a crime, just as it has become a crime to belong to any political party that oppose Fascism, even the liberal or democratic ones.” *Il Nuovo Mondo*, promised the editors, intended to stand up against this wanton tyranny and fight with inflexible determination on behalf of the civil rights of the Italian people and for the liberation of the working class. It was going to be to Italian working immigrants what the *Jewish Daily Forward* was to Jewish

²⁴ *Il Veltro*, May 1924. Although incomplete, *Il Veltro* is available on microfilm at the IHRC.

²⁵ Hoerder, *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America*, 90.

workers: "an instrument of justice and education, of freedom and emancipation, of responsibility and guidance."²⁶

Located at 81 East 10th Street, between Third and Fourth Avenue, a block notoriously known as "the citadel of Italian American anti-Fascism," *Il Nuovo Mondo* quickly grew into the most important organ of anti-Fascism in the United States, reaching an average circulation of 30,000 copies per day by 1928.²⁷ Its success rested in part upon the support provided by the unions' subsidies and private advertisement, but especially upon the editors' intention of creating a paper for a general audience, rather than for the members of a specific party only.

To appeal to a large readership *Il Nuovo Mondo* adopted the style of mass-market metropolitan dailies with a tabloid format and a wide range of general features. In addition to articles about political ideology it presented international political news with a strong emphasis on Italian developments, labor news, and union bulletins. A whole page was devoted to crime news and current events of the city of New York, while in the last page were published serials of popular literature. Also, in stark contrast to the typical Italian American radical paper, *Il Nuovo Mondo* accepted private advertisements.

Transcending the extraordinary array of political ideologies and personalities of the Italian American Left proved, however, much more difficult than the editors had

²⁶ "I nostri propositi," unsigned, and John Di Gregorio, "To all Labor: Greetings," (English in the original) *Il Nuovo Mondo*, November 16, 1925, 1 and 3. See also Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 113.

²⁷ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 113 and Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York City," 83. The expression "citadel of anti-Fascism" is used by Montana in his *Amarostico*, 98-100. Besides *Il Nuovo Mondo*, East 10th Street housed the offices of *Il Lavoratore* and *Il Martello*

anticipated. Mutual suspicions and quarrels between the communists and union leaders increased throughout the year of 1926, eventually resulting in a decisive split. The communists, weary of compromise and moderation, accused labor union organizers of being too accommodating and conservative. According to labor unionists, instead, the communists were seeking to gain control of the AFANA by spreading false rumors against other members.²⁸ On January 1926, the communists founded two separate organizations to combat Fascism: the *Circolo di Cultura Operaia* (Circle of working-class culture) at Harlem and the *Federazione Marxista* (Marxist Federation) on Tenth Street, in lower Manhattan.²⁹ Later that year, at the AFANA congress on September 4-6, 1926 the Amalgamated, under the auspices of the socialists, walked out of the Alliance, and formed along with other unions the Anti-Fascist Federation of North America for the Liberty of Italy.³⁰

Besides internecine divisions, *Il Nuovo Mondo* had to face another formidable obstacle: the Italian government itself. As early as December 1925, the editors denounced the attempts of the Italian ambassador in the United States to suppress the publication and have its editors prosecuted for their hostile writings against Mussolini's regime. "The struggle against us" – they explained to the readers – "is growing more and more intense, reaching levels of savage intolerance. Fascism is railing against this modest paper with

²⁸ Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York City," 86.

²⁹ *Il Nuovo Mondo*, January 5, 1926.

³⁰ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 113-114. See also Benedicte Deschamps, "Il Lavoro: The Italian Voice of the Amalgamated" *The Italian American Review*, 8,1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 109.

fierceness and spite.”³¹ Retailers were threatened, packages containing the copies of the newspaper confiscated, and banks and retailers forced to discontinue their advertising. As if this were not enough, in July 1927 the Fascists plundered the paper’s printing office, forcing the police to break in and arrest the editors.³² This persistent boycott campaign eventually produced the desired effect: torn by dissention and bereft of funds, in 1931 the paper passed into the hands of the leaders of the Sons of Italy – a mutual-aid organization established originally in 1905 to protect the interests and rights of Italians in the United States, which in the 1920s helped Mussolini promote ultra-nationalist and patriotic sentiments.³³

Anti-Fascists however, did not surrender. While *Il Nuovo Mondo* was now published by a moderate group led by Philip Bongiorno, the socialists went on to found a new daily called *La Stampa Libera* (The Free Press). Edited by Girolamo Valenti (1892-1958), a Sicilian born socialist who arrived in the United States in 1912, *La Stampa Libera* kept alive the opposition to Fascism until 1938, an extraordinary result considering the economic hardship of the Great Depression and the continual harassment of the Fascist regime. In the years preceding the First World War, Valenti closely identified himself with the labor movement, serving as an organizer for the Clothing and Shoe Workers in Rochester, Philadelphia, and New York. An excellent writer and lecturer, he also gained widest recognition as editor of various Italian language

³¹ *Nuovo Mondo*’s editorial, December 2, 1925, 1.

³² Hoerder, *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America*, 90.

³³ On the relation of the Order of Sons of Italy to Fascism see Salvamini, *Fascist Activities in the United States*, 91-105.

newspapers and, in the 1940s, as commentator for the Italian radio station WHAY.³⁴ But Valenti's most important contribution rested in his incessant opposition to Fascism and Fascists. A timid yet forceful man, he was "the most convinced, the most tenacious, and most determined" foe of Fascism among all Italian American socialists.³⁵ With aggressive articles in *La Stampa Libera* and the American press, he carried on systematic attacks against Mussolini's propaganda in the United States, unmasking the Fascist infiltration of Italian American cultural institutions such as the *Casa Italiana* and the Order of Sons of Italy and the key-role played by the *prominenti* in disseminating Fascism through their press.³⁶ Despite threats against his person, in 1938, Valenti testified before the House Committee on un-American Activities about pro-Fascist activities in the Little Italies by consuls and other prominent men sympathetic to Mussolini.³⁷

³⁴ Before *La Stampa Libera* Valenti edited also *La Domenica* (1912) in Rochester, *La Parola Proletaria* (which became *La Fiaccola* and then *Avanti!*) between 1917 and 1923. After *La Stampa Libera* he published *La Parola del Popolo* in New York from 1939 to 1946. He also wrote articles on Italian politics for the *New York Times*.

³⁵ "Appunti di orientamento per la comprensione della figura di Girolamo Valenti," unpublished article, written probably by Tommaso Toselli, Girolamo Valenti Papers, Box 2, folder "Notes on Valenti," Tamiment Library, New York University (NYU).

³⁶ See for example "Italian Fascist Propaganda in the United States," *Look Magazine*, December 17, 1940; "Generoso Pope's Fascist Record," *La Parola*, May 24, 1941; and "Mussolini's Anti-Semitism Shall not Divide Us," *Jewish People Voice*, October 1938, 1-2.

³⁷ There exist rich material on Girolamo Valenti. For general biographical information see Rudolph Vecoli, "Valenti Girolamo," in Franco Andreucci and Tommaso Detti, eds., *Il movimento operaio italiano. Dizionario biografico*, vol. 6 (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1975-1979), 171-174; Fort Velona, "Girolamo Valenti," *La Parola del Popolo*, April/May 1958, 5-6; "Giorolamo Valenti Is Dead," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 22, 1958; and "Valenti, 65, Dies: Foe of Fascism," *New York Times*, February 22, 1958.

Il Nuovo Mondo and *La Stampa Libera* were the most enduring and effective organs of anti-Fascism, but by no means the only ones. One of the most interesting and original papers that sprang out in response to Fascism was *La Scopa* (The Broom, 1925-1928), a satirical weekly published at Paterson by the anti-Fascist League of New Jersey and edited by the dilettante poet Francesco Pitea (see Chapter III).³⁸ While the tone of most anti-Fascist publications was intensely dramatic and polemical, *La Scopa* utilized satire and humor to expose the dangers posed by Fascism and its nationalist rhetoric. Its masthead, for example, depicted a worker with a broom in the act of sweeping away all Fascist dirt, symbolized by animalistic images of *il Duce* and his emissaries (Fig. 2).

Other regular features included poetic invectives against Mussolini and the *prominenti*, comic cartoons, and a column called “eventi del giorno” (today’s events) which mocked new Fascist measures and policies. In one of these ironic accounts, the author (using the pseudonym “Pinotta”) informed Italian immigrants of the latest decision of *il Duce* to revitalize Italian economy: eat fish, of which Italy had plenty, to reduce the costs of meat imports! The edict, explained the author, was more or less as follows: “It is strictly and fascistically forbidden to all Italian citizens to eat meat. Instead of meat, fish must be introduced.”³⁹

Valenti is one of the 23 Italians included in the *American Labor Who's Who* (1925). For insights on his personality and political formation see Tommaso Toselli, “Girolamo Valenti: una vita per la libert ,” and “Appunti di orientamento per la comprensione della figura di Girolamo Valenti,” unpublished articles, Girolamo Valenti Papers, Box 2, folder “Notes on Valenti,” Tamiment Library, NYU. On Valenti’s political activism see his files in the collection of the Casellario Politico Centrale, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome.

³⁸ *La Scopa* is available on microfilms at the IHRC. Incomplete holdings.

Jokes like this one filled the pages of radical newspapers, suggesting the important function of humor in exposing the absurdity of Fascism. Not only was *La Scopa* extremely entertaining and funny, it also became an important link between New York's and New Jersey's anti-Fascists, offering information on anti-Fascist organizations, conferences, and meetings.

Another important journalistic contribution came from Italian socialist émigré Vincenzo Vacirca. An experienced editor and gifted writer, on January 1927 he launched a monthly magazine of popular culture called *Il Solco* (The Furrow). As other literary reviews published by the *sorversivi*, this voluminous paper (forty-eight pages) contained a wealth of cultural material, ranging from political and theoretical articles to anti-Fascist cartoons, drawings, and short stories. Like other leftists publications, it also (forty-eight pages) exhibited great intellectual and literary nuance. It featured articles by eminent Italian intellectuals such as Francesco Nitti, Alceste De Ambris, and Aurelio Natoli, and devoted wide attention to the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Apparently, it published a serialized novel by Vincenzo Vacirca entitled *Il Rogo* (The Fire) and several other fictional stories. Regrettably, the collection is incomplete; the only story that has survived is "Il Miracolo" (The Miracle) by Vacirca's wife, Clara Palumbo, who had also wrote an anti-Fascist novel entitled *Cupido tra le camice nere* (see Chapter III).⁴⁰ Despite its initial

³⁹ Pinotta, "Eventi del giorno," *La Scopa*, January 28, 1928, 3. Most anti-Fascists wrote using pseudonyms to avoid persecution by Italian Fascist government.

⁴⁰ Regrettably, the collection is incomplete. The survived issues are available on microfilm at the IHRC.

success, *Il Solco* was forced to suspend publication after less than a year due to a deportation order issued against Vacirca.⁴¹

The purpose of these intense journalistic efforts was twofold: to expose the tyrannical nature of Fascism and the falsehood of Mussolini's propaganda, and to halt the spread of Fascism among Italians in the United States. Internal and external pressures, however, seriously impeded the *sovversivi*'s struggle. Ideological conflicts proved once again a major limitation of the Italian American Left, but the determination of conservative forces to silence the anti-Fascists played perhaps an even more important role in its demise. As Charles Fama lamented: "Immediately, we anti-Fascists were confronted by a most cunning, malicious, insidious group, which, in its defense of Mussolini and Fascism had everything in its power, including millions of dollars to destroy the antagonists of Fascism."⁴²

While the press served as the main arena to conceptualize the anti-Fascist struggle, the *sovversivi* also opted for other strategies that could address the growing threat of Fascism in Italy and the United States. Anti-Fascist politics informed many poems of the *sovversivi*, for example Giovannitti's "To Mussolini," "Italia Speaks," or "Battle Hymn of the New Italy," Antonino Crivello "Ad Antonio Fierro" (a poem written

⁴¹ The deportation however did not take place. Vacirca was first able to obtain an extension, and then prevent the deportation altogether. The legal defense put together by the *sovversivi* claimed that Vacirca qualified as a political refugee who would certainly face execution if returned to Italy. Whether because of or in spite of anti-Fascist efforts, Vacirca's case got lost in a labyrinth of litigation and was never deported. Cf. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 120.

⁴² Charles Fama, "Fascist Propaganda in the United States," Valenti Papers, Box 2, folder "Miscellaneous," Tamiment Library, NYU. A shorter version appeared in *La Parola del Popolo*, December 1958/January 1959, 91-92.

in memory of the young Italian killed by the Khaki Shirts in 1933), and “Giustizia” (Justice), and Pitea’s poetic invectives.⁴³ Anti-Fascism was also an important theme of plays, as in the case of Vacirca’s *Madre* and Tresca’s *L’Attentato a Mussolini*. But, with the rapid ascendancy of Mussolini, the privileged cultural form to express anti-Fascist politics became the cartoon.

Political cartoons had a long tradition of humorous dissent in Europe, and had been commonly used in Italy to satirize society and politicize the masses. The term cartoon itself came from the Italian and French words for paper and referred to a preliminary sketch of a work of art which was done on paper.⁴⁴ Italy boasted a particularly rich tradition in the art of caricature, which was invented by two Italian brothers, Annibale and Agostino Carracci in the late sixteen century. In fact the term caricature derives from their *ritrattini carichi* (loaded portraits) which satirized famous personages and ordinary individuals of their era.

For a long time, the art of caricature remained the almost exclusive preserve of the Italians. However, by the eighteenth century, the term and the practice of caricature

⁴³ Giovannitti’s mentioned poems are in *The Collected Poems of Arturo Giovannitti* (Chiacago: Clemente & Sons, 1962). Crivello’s “Ad Antonio Fierro,” is in the CPC files, busta 1540, ACS. “Giustizia” is included in Crivello Papers. Box 2, Folder “Poesie II,” IHRC. Pitea’s poems appeared in *La Scopa* under the pseudonym of Libero Arsenio. For example “*Il Duce* si lagna al conte Thaon Di Revel” (*Il Duce* Complaints with Count Thaon Di Revel), July 24, 1926, 4; “Giordano e le truffe” (Giordano and His Lies), October 16, 1925, 4; “A tutti i prominenti fascisti d’America” (To All Prominent Fascists in America), May 14, 1927, 4; “La battaglia continua” (The Struggle Goes On), July 16, 1927, 4; “Sempre con lui” (Always With Him), and “E’ nato il futuro imperatore” (The future Emperor is Born), October 8, 1927, 4. For a discussion of Pitea’s poems see Chapter III.

had extended to all Europe, evolving into what would later be called cartoon: “a form no longer devoted simply to cataloguing external human idiosyncrasies, but one with an enlarged field of vision encompassing the whole political, social and cultural scene – indeed the human condition itself.”⁴⁵ The subject of the cartoonists was now life in its entirety and particularly those aspects or events of society that they felt compelled to represent. Thus, in the course of the nineteenth century, the cartoon became a powerful weapon of social protest and one of the most effective visual arts of political persuasion. Humor and illustrated magazines flourished all over Europe and America, reaching, by the beginning of the twentieth century, an extraordinary surge in their number, quality, and popularity.⁴⁶ In Italy, the most impressive political cartoons in early twentieth-century appeared in the pages of the anti-clerical newspaper *L'Asino* (The Donkey, 1892-1918) and the socialist daily *Avanti!* (Forward!, 1896-1926). Among the most talented cartoonists of the time were Gabriele Galantara (art name Rata Langa, 1865-1937), and Giuseppe Scalarini (1873-1948), both uncompromising critics of capitalism, socialism, and later Fascism.⁴⁷

In America the medium of cartoons was firmly established in the eighteenth century (carried on most effectively by Benjamin Franklin), but it became a mass medium only in the late nineteenth century with the publication of illustrated magazines

⁴⁴ Harrison, *The Cartoon*, 16.

⁴⁵ Maurice Horn, ed., *The World Encyclopedia of Cartoons*, vol. 1 (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1980), 15-16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁷ For biographical information on Galantara and Scalarini see Andreucci and Detti, *Il movimento operaio italiano*. See also Chapter II.

such as *Puck*, *Judge* and *Life*. The phenomenal growth of cartooning in the late nineteenth and then twentieth century can be traced in large measure to the explosive growth of the publishing industry and its increasing emphasis on entertainment to attract the mass audiences. Meanwhile, newer printing techniques, which came into use in the late nineteenth century, reduced dramatically the costs of graphic reproduction, making illustrations simpler, faster, and of a better quality.⁴⁸ As society became more modern, more urban, and more dominated by mass-consumption, cartoons, and visual images in general, began to serve another purpose aside of a cultural and political one: to attract readership.⁴⁹

Many Italian American radical newspapers inserted in their pages illustrations to complement and embellish their articles. Some magazines, like *Il Fuoco* (1914-1915) or *Il Solco* (1927-1928), also featured color illustrated covers with crayon drawings or satirical cartoons. Their immediate use, however, was not only graphic but also, and especially, didactic. Sometime the drawings or captions were funny but they always tried to make a social, political, or moral point, reflecting the editors' commitment to educating or converting the readers. Many of these cartoons were taken from Italian and American radical publications, such as *Avanti!*, *L'Asino*, *The Masses*, *The Liberator*, or the *New York World*. The artists' names were often omitted and the English captions, if any, were substituted with Italian translations. However, the bulk of anti-Fascist cartoons,

⁴⁸ For a brief discussion of printing techniques see: Richard Fitzgerald, *Art and Politics: Cartoonists of the Masses and Liberator* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 6-9, and Charles Press, *The Political Cartoon* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1981), chapter 2.

which appeared regularly in Italian American radical papers from the mid-1920s to the Second World War, came mostly from the pencil of one Italian immigrant, Fortunato (or Fort as he became known in America) Velona.⁵⁰

The second of four children, Fort Velona (1893-1965) was born and raised at Bova Superiore, a small town on the Ionian coast of Calabria, Southern Italy. His father, Domenico Velona, owned a little farm where, helped by his wife, Severina Marino, he cultivated vineyards, olives, and silkworms; this land represented the source of income for the entire family. In 1912, at the age of nineteen, Velona embarked for America. It is unclear why he decided to leave Italy. Perhaps he consented to accompany a distant relative, encouraged by hopes of a better life than he had in his native land.⁵¹ In the early 1910s, in fact, a terrible cholera epidemic and a severe economic depression struck the Italian southern regions, leading to further impoverishment and unemployment. For many there remained only one way out: emigration.

⁴⁹ See Warren Susman, *Culture as History. The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

⁵⁰ The CPC file indicates that Velona's last name had a final accent (Velonà), a detail that was confirmed to me by his son Walter. However, in America he signed his art without the accent, nor did other sources use it. He probably dropped the accent to anglicize his name, just like he changed Fortunato into Fort.

⁵¹ A biographical sketch of Velona can be found in his files of the Casellario Politico Centrale (CPC), busta 5346, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Rome. The CPC file however contains a few mistakes, notably his date of birth (August 3, 1886 instead of January 18, 1893), his mother's name which was Severina not Domenica, and his political affiliation which was socialism and not anarchism. More accurate biographical information can be found in the articles "Fort Velona" and "E' morto Fort Velona," both published in *La Parola del Popolo*, on (December 1958/January 1959), 283-284 and (June/July 1965), 47, respectively. Information on his family were provided to me by his son, Walter Velona.

At first he settled in Rochester, New York, working as a dressmaker for the Stein Block Clothing Company. There he joined the local branch of the Italian Socialist Federation and with Girolamo Valenti, Gioacchino Artoni, and Giacomo Battistoni strove to spread socialism and organize his co-national workers. About three years later, in 1916, he married Angelina Patemi, also originally from Calabria, and moved to New York City, where he joined the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and became one of its most important organizers.⁵²

The basis for Velona's radicalism can be tied to the social-economic depression and the resultant wave of social protests and labor struggles that repeatedly hit Italy from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Of humble birth, Velona experienced first hand the financial straits of rural life, the exploitation of the peasants by the local *signori*, and the widespread corruption of governmental authorities. Like many of his generation, he embraced socialism principally out of a desire for social justice and economic equality. Inspired by the propaganda of local socialist leaders, when he was a little more than a boy, he joined the Socialist section and the Chamber of Labor of the city of Reggio Calabria. An especially important influence was the reading of *La Luce*, the organ of the Socialist Federation of Calabria founded by Luigi Crucoli and directed by Guglielmo Calarco. "I recall," he later wrote, "the struggles carried on by this paper, which was quite widespread and feared by the dominant classes, especially the clergy who seized every opportunity to admonish the faithful not to read it."⁵³ Another influential newspaper was *Germinal*, published in the nearby Sicilian city of Messina,

⁵² See "Fort Velona" and "E' morto Fort Velona."

which conducted a violent campaign against the local bosses and the conservative government of Giovanni Giolitti. Out of this Calabrian radical milieu emerged many who would later play an important role in the Italian American radical movement: for example the lawyer Carmelo Zito, who became the editor of the *Corriere del Popolo* of San Francisco, Emilio Grandinetti (1882-1964), a major leader of the garment workers in Chicago, and the poet Francesco Greco (1898-1966).⁵⁴

In December 1921 Velona returned to Italy with his wife and two children. However, what was supposed to be a permanent homecoming became only a temporary visit. A few months after his arrival, the postmaster of the town informed Velona's father that a warrant for arrest had been issued against his son. The cause of the arrest is unknown, but one can speculate that his labor activism in America had been monitored by Italian authorities, as in the case of other *sovversivi*. Hastily, Velona decided to leave his children in Italy, thinking perhaps of returning soon, and with his wife, who had refused to stay behind, embarked once again for the United States. The rise of Fascism however must have changed his plans and he remained in America for the rest of his life.⁵⁵

Back in New York he began working as a tailor, a trade which he had probably learned from an uncle in Calabria. At the same time, he immersed himself in the anti-

⁵³ "For Velona," 283

⁵⁴ "Fort Velona," 283. *La Luce* would later acknowledge Velona's activism in America and reward his contributions to the socialist cause by publishing his photograph on the paper's front page and thanking him for sustain the good name of Calabria with his actions. *La Luce*, October 5, 1947, 1. In Girolamo Valenti Papers, Box 2, folder "Fort Velona," Tamiment Library, NYU.

Fascist struggle, becoming one of the most outspoken opponents of Mussolini's regime in America. On April 15, 1933 together with his best friend Girolamo Valenti, he spoke in front of 30,000 people who had gathered in Union Square to protest international Fascism.⁵⁶ Valenti spoke in English, exposing the crimes of Fascists, and warning about the rise of Nazism. Velona instead addressed the crowd in Italian, speaking of the resistance of workers in Italy and calling for a united front.⁵⁷ In the same year, on July 14 he took part in the Italian American anti-Fascist expedition against the Khaki Shirts in Astoria, during which Antonio Fierro lost his life. According to police reports, Velona was one of the leaders of the protest. Along with Fierro and Terzani he had infiltrated the meeting, and when Art Smith ordered the Fascist salute, he was said to have cried: "Down with Mussolini!," provoking the violent reaction of the Khaki Shirts.⁵⁸ Velona was severely wounded by several black-jack blows on the head and was taken to the hospital.⁵⁹

Like the rest of the *sovversivi*, Velona tied Fascism to capitalism, seeing it as the most reactionary and potent expression of bourgeois culture. But his socialist politics combined anti-Fascism with a relentless anti-communism. As he explained in "La piovra

⁵⁵ Phone interview with Walter Velona, January 30, 2003. See also "Biographical Sketch," Fortunato Velona, CPC, busta 5346, ACS, Rome.

⁵⁶ Other speakers included Norman Thomas, Jacob Panken, Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky. See police record dated May 18, 1933, Fortunato Velona, CPC, busta 5346, ACS.

⁵⁷ See "La grandiosa protesta operaia contro il terrorismo Fascista," *La Stampa Libera*, April 16, 1933, 1.

⁵⁸ Police record dated August, 23, 1933, Fortunato Velona, CPC, busta 5346, ACS.

bolscevica" (The Bolshevik Octopus), "the communist system applied to the ethical, political, economic, and social field, is in obvious contrast with the real, pure, and sane democracy." Democracy, for Velona, rested on freedom, and freedom was irreconcilable with the austerity and absolutism of the Bolshevik state. Like other socialists, he had initially hailed the Russian Revolution as indication of the rise of a new world founded upon working-class unity and brotherhood. But the USSR, which had promised to free the Russian proletariat completely from oppression, had itself become an oppressive regime: "from the economic slavery of capitalism," commented Velona, "Russian workers had passed to the political slavery of the communist dictatorship."⁶⁰

But Velona's most important contribution to the anti-Fascist cause was without doubt his cartoons. Even the Fascist regime took their influence seriously. Because of his "disrespectful" caricatures of *Il Duce* and the Fascist hierarchy, he secured himself a file in the Central Political Records Office of the Italian Interior Ministry and was barred from entering Italy.⁶¹ It is unclear where and when Velona learned to draw. He might have briefly frequented an art school in Rome before going to America, but in all likelihood his art was a natural gift. His son recalled him drawing on the living-room

⁵⁹ For a detailed account of the events see "Il compagno Antonio Fierro assassinato dai fascisti," *La Stampa Libera*, July 16, 1933, 1.

⁶⁰ "La piovra bolscevica," (1939?), unpublished article, Fortunato Velona Papers, Box 1, IHRC.

⁶¹ The Casellario Politico Centrale was established in June 1896 with the purpose of providing information on subversive individuals or activities considered dangerous to public order and security. See Velona Fortunato, CPC, busta 5346. ACS.

table of their house on 230 Second Avenue whenever he had some free time. If the cartoons were too large to fit on the dining table, he would then work on the floor.⁶²

Whether he drew cartoons before the 1920s also remains unknown, for virtually all his art dates after the rise of Fascism. Most of the illustrations appeared in the pages of *Il Nuovo Mondo*, *La Stampa Libera*, *Il Martello*, and *Il Proletario* and were occasionally reproduced into gigantic posters for anti-Fascist protests and rallies. Despite the quantity and quality of his illustrations, his work remains completely unknown to American and Italian American audiences.⁶³ Cécile Whiting in her study of anti-Fascism art in America doesn't mention Velona at all, let alone Italian American contributions to the subject. In fact she says that: "Extensive and widespread illustrations poking fun at the glamorous Mussolini image did not appear in the popular American press until after 1935."⁶⁴ The analysis that follows is an attempt to correct this view. Velona's cartoons should be considered in the vanguard of "American" anti-Fascist visual representations as they predated them by over a decade, anticipating the contours of an American anti-Fascist culture. The themes and style of Velona's cartoons were the same attributes that Whiting found in the anti-Fascist illustrations of *The New Masses* or *Leftward* in the mid-1930s and 1940s. This resemblance suggests that artistic responses to anti-Fascism developed along with political activism and political consciousness. Art and politics mutually

⁶² Phone interview with Walter Velona, January 30, 2003.

⁶³ Two important, although incomplete, collections of his cartoons are now available at the Immigration History Research Center at Minneapolis and the Tamiment Library at New York University.

⁶⁴ Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 59.

reinforced each other: growing awareness of the threat of Fascism stimulated artistic expressions, while art served as the means through which ideological strategies against Fascism were expressed.

The purpose of Velona's cartoons is self-evident: like other radical artists he used his pencil as a tool to inform and reform, to communicate an idea in a direct and simple way that even the least sophisticated audiences could get. In this respect most of his cartoons speak for themselves.⁶⁵ Stylistically, they are also remarkably consistent: they are in black and white, characterized by heavy lines, and usually do not have captions or a narrative text, although they did employ titles or inscriptions. Yet, while the message of Velona cartoons might be obvious, their content reveals a broad range of meanings and themes, providing us with a unique insight into the anti-Fascist politics of the *sovversivi*.

Throughout the 1920s most mainstream newspapers, including the American ones, presented glorifying images and celebratory photographs of Mussolini, the "redeemer" of Italy, to their readers.⁶⁶ For twenty years Italians lived surrounded by Mussolini's image, his portraits hanging in every classroom, every public building, and many private homes. Official images of Mussolini were reproduced everywhere: in statues, films, illustrated newspapers (most notably the *Domenica del Corriere* and *Illustrazione Italiana*), postcards, and stamps. Most of the pictures showed him in static and solitary poses wearing the Fascist black shirt or a military uniform, surrounded by

⁶⁵ On the function of radical cartoons see for example Rebecca Zurier, *Art for the Masses, A Radical Magazine and Its Graphics, 1911-1917* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 121-123.

nationalist, Fascist, or sacred symbols. Often, he would also be portrayed as a great commandant of the ancient past, such as Julius Caesar or Napoleon, a comparison that Mussolini himself initiated and encouraged. The image of a Roman *condottiero* was substantiated by the use of Latin inscriptions such as DVX (leader) and REX (King). (Figures 3, 4)

This characterization was, however, softened by other depictions of him as the “average man,” fond of children and nature, sympathetic to the poor, and interested in music, sports, and arts. These images were clearly construed to manufacture a celebrity, to make of Mussolini a popular hero of muscle, mind, and heart, a living symbol of the regeneration, vigor, and greatness of Fascist Italy. They powerfully enforced dominant views of Mussolini as a forceful leader – courageous, resolute, and modern – and strongly contributed to the creation of the Mussolini’s cult.⁶⁷

Velona’s cartoons presented, of course, a far more sinister, darker, and brutal side of *il Duce*. By desecrating the image of Mussolini-the-redeemer, Velona showed Italian immigrants Mussolini-the-tyrant, the betrayer, the liar (Figures 5 and 6). In official images Mussolini’s physical characteristics – his massive jaw, his baldness, his prominent forehead – were used to emphasize his virility, youth, and intellect. Velona instead exploited Mussolini’s typical grimaces to assert his menacing disposition. His squared jaw becomes even more firm, his prominent forehead grows deliberately

⁶⁶ For a study of Mussolini’s dominant views in America see Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, especially chapter 4 “Mussolini as American Hero.”

⁶⁷ See Enrico Sturani, *Otto milioni di cartoline per il Duce* (Turin: Centro Scientifico Editore, 1995), xii-viv and Italo Calvino, “*Il Duce’s Portraits*,” *The New Yorker*, January 6, 2003, 34-39.

disproportionate with respect to the rest of the face, his body instead greatly diminished. Particular emphasis is also given to facial features, the eyes, mouth, and eyebrows.

Sometimes, the physical distortion is such that Mussolini assumes even monstrous forms, as in the cartoons depicting him as a gorilla and a wild pig (Figures 7 and 8). But like all great caricatures, no matter how deformed, Velona's cartoons always capture the personality of *il Duce* -- his boldness, his egocentrism, and his masculinity. It is almost as if the reader is watching him through a magnifying glass where the image is distorted and yet can still be clearly recognized.

Velona especially enjoyed ridiculing Mussolini's foibles and megalomania. He largely exploited Mussolini's own comparisons to Napoleon and Caesar, depicting him in pompous poses and militaristic clothes. Whips, swords, cudgels, and slogans such as "Obey without arguing," "Only one brain, that of *il Duce*," or "*Il Duce* is always right," served to additionally emphasize his authoritarianism and absolutism.

Velona's, and the *sovversivi*'s, disgust for Mussolini was all the more intense because he had once been one of them. He had started his political career as a socialist by speaking for the workers, and ended as a hero of reaction. He had once despised the church, capitalism, and the king, and now banqueted with them. For the *sovversivi*, who held ideological coherence and moral integrity as the highest of all qualities, he was a renegade and traitor, driven by thirst of power and success. Hence, they constantly pointed in denunciatory articles and even more through satire Mussolini's opportunistic change of attitude toward his past enemies -- the church, the king and big business.

Particularly, his religious "conversion" was the object of many jokes and ironical commentary. One unsigned cartoon entitled "*il Duce*'s metamorphosis" presented two

scenes: in the first, "when Mussolini was red," *il Duce* is contemptuously spitting on Jesus' cross, in the second he is respectfully praying (Fig. 9).⁶⁸ Italian cartoonist Albano Corneli (art name Caponeo, 1890-1965) frequently exploited this theme. A socialist of syndicalist orientation, Corneli played an important role in organizing the workers in his native town Ancona, in the region of Marche, and after World War I helped found the

Italian Communist Party. Elected communist deputy for the province of Ancona-Pesaro in 1921, after the rise of Fascism Corneli was forced to emigrate to Argentina.⁶⁹ A talented drawer, he continued to attack the Fascist regime through his pungent cartoons, which were often reprinted in the Italian American radical papers. In one of them, a perplexed Mussolini is contemplating a religious picture at an exhibition (Fig. 10). His companion tells him: "That man behind Jesus is Judas, your Excellency." And Mussolini's replies: "How weird! He has a strange resemblance to me!"⁷⁰

Mussolini's decision to settle relations with the Vatican became emblematic of another important theme of Velona's cartoons: the collusion between the Fascist regime, the church, and the monarchy. As Carlo Fama explained, Mussolini's rise to power was "made possible first by the opportunism of the Monarchy, but most important by an agreement between Mussolini and the Roman Catholic Church," which eventually culminated in the Lateran Accords of 1929.⁷¹ With this agreement Mussolini put an end to the dispute with the Papacy which resulted from the annexation of the Papal States

⁶⁸ *La Scopa*, July 24, 1926, 1.

⁶⁹ "Corneli Albano," in Andreucci and Detti, *Il movimento operaio italiano*, vol. 1, 90.

⁷⁰ *Il Nuovo Mondo*, February 7, 1926, 1.

during the Risorgimento. He created the independent state of Vatican City in Rome, paid the church a large sum for the loss of the annexed territories, and regulated the religious affairs of the country. The concordat represented a major setback from the lay character that the Italian State had inherited from the Risorgimento but for Mussolini it meant a crucial step in cementing his regime. The thankful church in fact pledged her support to Fascism domestically and abroad, at least until the anti-Semitic laws of 1938.⁷²

The triple alliance of Fascism, Papacy and Monarchy is powerfully attacked in Velona's cartoon of Mussolini, the Pope, and King Vittorio Emanuele III standing next to each other (Fig. 11). Its concise title, "The curses of Italy are three: the pope, *il Duce*, and the king," could not have been more fitting. It sarcastically captured the vignette while simultaneously exposing the important role of the church and the king in securing the Fascist regime. A wavering and weak man, King Vittorio Emanuele III was a frequent object of scorn by Velona as well as other political cartoonists of the time. Although constitutionally he remained the head of the state throughout the Fascist dictatorship, he did nothing to oppose Mussolini's regime and therefore was often described as just a puppet of *il Duce*. Velona conveyed his passivity and subordination by accentuating his notorious short stature in comparison to Mussolini (Figures 11 and 12).

Velona depictions of Fascism, often represented by allegories of death or grotesque monsters, intended to recreate the terror and destruction wrought by the Fascist regime and its militant soldiers, the Blackshirts. One cartoon conveyed this climate

⁷¹ Fama, "Fascist Propaganda in the United States," 1.

⁷² Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, 141.

particularly well (Fig. 13). It showed a crowd of cheerful Fascists, the principal followers at the forefront, hoisting *il Duce* on a pedestal formed with their swords.

As in most of his caricatures of Mussolini, Velona emphasized the dictator's fierce look and menacing expression. The medals on his chest bear the names of anti-Fascist martyrs, which are also printed on the daggers of the Blackshirts. The sense of terror is also captured by other details – for example, the placard with the Fascist motto: “*Il Duce* is always right,” the gallows reserved for the anti-Fascists that appear in the background, or, more vividly, the bent woman chained to the wrist of Mussolini symbolizing the defeat of democratic Italy. Everything in the vignette pointed out the obvious: that Mussolini held power through violence and terror.

Often, in his representation of Fascism Velona used the typical insignias of the Blackshirts, the skull and the crossbones. But while the Fascists used them as a glorification of combat, Velona reversed their symbolism to express horror and doom for the future of Italy and the world at large. Others cartoons depicted Fascism as a terrible monster whipping the resigned masses, or as a hideous force crushing Italian freedom and democracy (Fig. 14). It is interesting to note that when the masses are in relation to Fascism they appear as an anonymous and demoralized crowd, the passive victims of wrongs that will be vindicated by others. But when the masses are described in relation to the Left or labor, then, they become fully alive and determined (Figures 15 and 16). This sharp contrast served to stress the class-consciousness of the leftist workers in opposition to the brainwashed Fascist crowds. But it also betrayed the bias of the *sovversivi*, and radicals in general, towards the people who did not align with the Left, dismissing them as puppets with no will of their own.

The grim mood of Velona's imagery of Fascism was not unjustified. The early Blackshirts were violent and nationalist fanatics -- former war veterans, military officers, revolutionary interventionists, and exuberant students. They organized Fascist cells (*fasci di combattimento*) which terrorized Italy throughout the 1920s, raiding houses, destroying properties, and beating, and often killing, socialists and their sympathizers.⁷³ In the United States too they were a source of concern. Their violence and especially the insubordination of some of the leaders preoccupied even Mussolini's diplomats who cautioned *il Duce* that Fascist activities in the United States might disrupt diplomatic relations with the United States. Fearing growing American criticism, resulting from the publication of Marcus Duffield's controversial article on Fascist activities in the United States, Mussolini eventually dissolved the *fasci* in America altogether in 1929.⁷⁴ This, however, did not mean the end of Fascism in the United States, but rather a new beginning of Mussolini's policy. Instead of the militant *fasci*, he turned now to cultural institutions, such as *La Casa Italiana*, *La Camera del Commercio*, and the Sons of Italy.⁷⁵ With threats or with money he bought Italian American clubs, literary societies, schools, and above all the mainstream Italian-language press, which became the principal vehicle of Fascist propaganda in the United States.⁷⁶

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Marcus Duffield, "Mussolini's American Empire," *Harper's Magazine*, 159 (November 1929), 661-672.

⁷⁵ On the Fascist activities of one of these institutions see Daria Bicocchi Frezza, "Propaganda fascista e comunità italiane in USA: la Casa Italiana della Columbia University," *Studi Storici* (October/December 1970), 661-697.

Mussolini found an especially powerful ally in the class of Italian American *prominenti*, the influential bankers, businessmen, and politicians who controlled the Italian language mainstream press and the major cultural and social organizations of the Little Italies. Fascism served well their economic interests and even though they did not necessarily believe in Fascism as a political ideology, they did not hesitate to side with Mussolini. Fascism was in their eyes the party of patriotism and nationalism against the “anti-Italian” forces of socialism, communism, and anarchism.⁷⁷ Working in unison with the American political world on the one hand, and Mussolini’s emissaries on the other, they used Fascism to advance their own self-interests and to promote sentiments and values among Italian Americans designed to create consensus and marginalize their radical adversaries. As we have seen, the *sovversivi* had long attacked the *prominenti* but after the March on Rome their accusations and insults became even fiercer and more frequent.

In addition to verbal reproach, Italian America anti-Fascists made great use of cartoons and caricatures to unveil the opportunism, selfishness, and self-importance of these immigrants’ exploiters. For example, an unsigned cartoon published in *La Scopa* maligned two Italian American Fascists, Agostino De Biasi, a journalist who wrote for the commercial press, and a certain Letizia, who competed to get Mussolini’s attention.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Fama, “Fascist Propaganda in the United States,” 1, and Salvemini, *Fascist Activities in the United States*.

⁷⁷ Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italies*, 14.

⁷⁸ De Biasi journalistic career began in *Il Progresso Italo-americano*; then he became the director of the New York daily *L’Araldo Italiano* and in 1915 founded the monthly *Il Carroccio* (1915-1935) which became one of the principal organs of Fascist propaganda in the United States.

The first caption under the portrait of De Biasi said: "The Fascist, thief, and incestuous "*commendatore*" has been seen by Mussolini. God makes them and then pair them off." Below, the other *prominente* was pictured in a bold pose saying: "And now that Mussolini has seen De Biasi it is up to "I" to be received by *il Duce*." The grammatical error (in Italian it should have been *me* instead of *io*) served to ridicule the *prominenti*'s literary conceit and thereby emasculate their authority.⁷⁹

The *sovversivi*'s contempt of the *prominenti* emerged with particular vigor in Velona's cartoons. Velona unequivocally pictured them as political opportunists with no integrity, turncoats ready to sell themselves to whoever would offer them something. Luigi Barzini, director of the conservative *Corriere d'America*, was one of his favorite targets. In one of Velona's best caricatures, he is drawn drumming up support for Fascism through his newspaper (Fig. 17). The question: "Why do boorish (*cafoni*) Italian newspapers vie to prostitute themselves to Fascism?" accompanied the cartoon.⁸⁰ The reader did not need much time to figure out the answer: the little bag of dollars tendered by the Fascist hand was the obvious recompense for their propaganda.⁸¹

In another biting caricature, Velona pictured Barzini pushing an unwilling donkey toward a big bowl from which an ugly animal, resembling a dog or a pig, is already avidly munching (Fig. 18). The donkey represented the readership of the Fascist *Il*

⁷⁹ *La Scopa*. September 24, 1927, 4.

⁸⁰ The Italian word *cafone* has no equivalent in English. In Italian it was often used to describe the cultural status of the *contadini* who had little education and no manners. Carlo Tresca seems to have been the first to use this term for *prominenti* to expose their ignorance and vulgarity.

⁸¹ Published in *Il Proletario*, June 25, 1927, 1.

Corriere d'America while the other animal symbolized Fascism.⁸² The platform on which the dog is standing carried the title “Il grido della trippa” (the cry of the tripe), clearly a satirical paraphrase of Domenico Trombetta’s Fascist newspaper *Il Grido della Stirpe* (The Cry of the Race).⁸³ Velona powerfully exposed the central role that prominent men like Barzini exerted over the Italian immigrant masses through their mainstream newspapers. At the same time, by comparing them to ugly animals, he unveiled the base and wicked nature of Fascism.

The collusion of Mussolini’s regime with the consulate and the Italian embassy was another typical theme of Velona’s visual exposé of Fascist coercion and corruption (Fig. 19) The consulate became perhaps the most important institution of the regime’s campaign in the United States. Consular officials had long served as informants for Italian authorities on subversive activities, labor organizations, radical leaders, and rank-and-file activists abroad. In the mid-twenties, after Mussolini issued a series of “exceptional decrees” that established the basis of the Fascist dictatorship, the definition of subversive was broadened to include all opponents of the regime. Consequently, everyone who was identified as anti-Fascist underwent regular harassment, intimidation, and persecution. Mussolini expanded the role of the consuls and provided them with greater financial resources to disseminate Fascist sentiments and to trace, watch, and suppress all opponents of the regime. Italian radicals who illegally entered the United States were promptly reported at the immigration offices for deportation, and anti-Fascist leaders were constantly denounced to the local authorities on libel charges or on the

⁸² Fort Velona Papers, Box 1, Folder “Prints and cartoons.” IHRC.

ground of radical activities.⁸⁴ When legal actions proved inefficient, Mussolini turned to other measures. For example, he annulled the Degree in Medicine and Surgery of Dr. Charles Fama, obtained with highest marks from the University of Palermo in 1923.⁸⁵

An interesting variation in Velona's cartoons was the use of humor to show the disastrous effects of Fascism on the Italian nation and thereby counteract Mussolini's propaganda that he had saved Italy and restored order. In one image entitled "In the regime of Mussoland," Italy is transformed into a nation of small prison cells, from which come a variety of complaints and S.O.S.s – such as "I am hungry!," "Help!," "I want air!," "Poor Italy!," "We want jobs!," or "Enough is enough!" (Fig. 20).⁸⁶ Mussolini here seems to have lost his usual confidence and sternness, and for the first time seems to pay attention to what the King has to say. A similar cartoon entitled "Italian prosperity" shows a clueless Mussolini confronting a mountain of rock-hard problems, including inflation, war debt, unemployment, and the opposition (Fig. 21). Here again Velona made a powerful use of satire to defy Mussolini's rhetoric that all was well in Fascist Italy and show that Fascism had created more problems than it had solved.

Like the rest of the *sovversivi*, Velona considered Fascism a generic malady of capitalism and imperialism, and his cartoons frequently alluded to the economic connections between Fascism and American corporate interests. Mussolini's initial

⁸³ For information on Trombetta and *Il Grido* see Cannistaro, *Blackshirts in Little Italies*.

⁸⁴ Fraser Ottanelli, "Fascist Informant and Italian-American Labor Leader: The paradox of Vanni Buscemi Montana," *Italian American Review*, 7,1 (Spring/Summer 1999), 104-106.

⁸⁵ Charles Fama, "Fascist Propaganda in the United States," *La Parola del Popolo*, 1908-1958, 91.

success in stabilizing the Italian economy and in removing the specter of communism and bolshevism, indeed favored economic relations with the United States. As early as May 1923, for example, a private American company named "The Italian Power Company" was formed which invested in Italy a capital of two million dollars. Similarly, many other important banks and big corporations, such as the Hallgarten Bank, the National City Bank, or the Blair and Rollins companies made conspicuous investments in Italy throughout the twenties. And more significantly, in 1925 J.P. Morgan granted Italy a loan of more than fifty million dollars.⁸⁷

One of the most powerful and explicit statements of American economic interest in Fascism appeared on the cover page of *Il Solco*, on July 1927. Using traditional anti-capitalist images of super-fat industrialists with money bags, the author, Albano Corneli, depicted a huge man, J. P. Morgan, and an unusually tiny, submissive Mussolini offering his favors to the big magnate. "Master – read the caption – what can I do for you today?"⁸⁸

In Velona's cartoons the connection between Fascism and capitalism is expressed with particular vigor in his illustrations of Sacco and Vanzetti and his attack on the American Federation of Labor. The *sovversivi* saw significant parallels between the execution of the two Italian anarchists and the persecutions of anti-Fascists: both were victims of the capitalist system. Even though Velona recognized that there were obvious

⁸⁶ Published in *Il Proletario*, June 27, 1927.

⁸⁷ See Gian Giacomo Migone, "La stabilizzazione della lira. La finanza americana e Mussolini," *Rivista di Storia Contemporanea*, 2 (April 1973), 145-85.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of visual critiques of capitalism see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 121-128

differences between the American government and the Fascist regime, his cartoons seemed to suggest that little varied in the way Italy and the United States handled the opponents of capitalism. The hand that is about to grind Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927 resembles strongly the hideous force of Fascism devouring Italy (Fig. 22). Similarly, the cartoon depicting the crucifixion of Sacco and Vanzetti symbolizes the death of freedom, a recurrent theme in Velona's imagery of Fascism (Figures 23 and 24). As in the case of the anti-Fascist struggle, Velona cartoons of Sacco and Vanzetti also suggested that only the massive mobilization of the workers could crush the capitalist forces that have made possible the incarceration of two innocent anarchists and the triumph of Mussolini (Fig. 25).

Alarmed by the Fascist repression of organized unions in Italy, Velona warned about the risks of Fascist infiltration in the American labor and urged workers to stay away from conservative unions like the American Federation of Labor. As one of his cartoons exposed, this organization was controlled by American capitalists and was meant to keep the workers enslaved (Fig. 26).

The link between Fascism, capitalism, and imperialism materialized on October 3, 1935 when Mussolini decided to invade Ethiopia, at the time the only African nation still independent from colonial rule. For many Italian immigrants the conquest of Ethiopia represented the coronation of Mussolini's promise of a "Greater Italy" and the proving ground for the Italian race. Thousands of them participated to pro-war rallies in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston, where gold and monies were collected to fund the military enterprise. But Mussolini's ruthless aggression of Ethiopia also made more

and more people aware of the “ugly side” of Fascism that the *sovversivi* had forcefully exposed for thirteen years.⁸⁹

Once again, cartoons represented a powerful commentary. A few months before Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, *Il Martello* published a cartoon by Velona entitled “Fascist civilization” that anticipated the events to come (Fig. 27). It showed Mussolini ordering a soldier of the militia to get ready for war. “The moment of trial is close,” blasted *il Duce*, “LOOK OUT! For the glory of the EMPIRE you must bring to my feet another slave: ETHIOPIA!”⁹⁰ (The other slave was of course Italy, here represented as a chained corpse devoid of life.) By using words such as slave and empire, Velona made the connection between Fascism and imperialism crystal: Italy’s thrust into Africa was the culmination of Fascist primary impulse toward conquest. The “rape of Ethiopia” was Mussolini’s first step toward the creation of an international Fascist empire.

As the war progressed the portrayal of Mussolini as a conqueror became more forceful. In a later cartoon, *il Duce*’s face is transformed into a military ship, an unmistakable symbol of Mussolini’s expansionist designs (Fig. 28). The image not only captured the imperialist drive of Mussolini, but also emphasized the serious threat that Fascism posed to world peace and security, a point that was emphasized by the minuscule League of the Nations, incapable of stopping him.

⁸⁹ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, Chapter 12 “The Ethiopian War,” 287-312. See also Nadia Venturini, *Neri e italiani ad Harlem. Gli anni trenta e la guerra d’Etiopia* (Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 1990), and Gian Giacomo Migone, *Gli Stati Uniti e il fascismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980), 350-357.

⁹⁰ *Il Martello*, August 17, 1935.1.

Meanwhile, diplomatic relations between Italy and the United States began to deteriorate and Mussolini's popularity in American opinion irreparably dropped. American journalists were now publishing strong anti-Fascist editorials, and unflattering cartoons of *il Duce* appeared more frequently in the American press. At last, the *sovversivi* were no longer alone in the fight against Fascism. It must have been with this sense of satisfaction that Velona composed the cartoon that appeared in *Il Proletario* a few days before the end of the Ethiopian War (Fig. 27).⁹¹ It showed Mussolini "the quack" at the pillory, his tongue brutally nailed to the stand as a punishment for his lies. His cudgel bore the label imperialism, while the nail represented world opinion. His tongue displayed the label "war speeches," but its clear phallic resemblance also lampooned Mussolini's vaunted virility. The whole image was construed to suggest that Mussolini was finally near the end of his rope.

Indeed, by the time *il Duce* signed the anti-Semitic laws in 1938 the fall of his reputation in America had become complete. Once awakened the American press would respond with a visual and political rhetoric already mapped by the *sovversivi*.

⁹¹ *Il Proletario*, May 1, 1936, 1.

Epilogue

In many ways, one could say, practically nothing has remained of the *sovversivi*'s political tradition in America. Along with much of the American Left, Italian American radicalism vanished after the Second World War. Two anarchists papers -- Aldino Felicani's *Controcorrente* and the *galleanisti*'s *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* -- actually survived until 1967 and 1971 respectively, while the socialist *La Parola del Popolo* lasted into the 1980s. But all other radical papers ceased publication between 1940 and 1950. Italian American unions, once the core of radical activities, became a mere appendage to the mainstream American labor movement. In the meantime, the whole generation of the *sovversivi* began to die out: Carlo Tresca was mysteriously murdered in 1943, Arturo Giovannitti died in 1959, Fort Velona in 1965. Others like Girolamo Valenti, Vittorio Vidali, Alberico Molinari left the United States altogether and returned to Italy.

Traces of radicalism can still be found in the participation of Italian Americans in the civil rights and women's liberation movement, and, more recently, in the movements for gay and lesbian rights. But this brand of radicalism belongs more to the liberal currents emerging in the United States, than the anti-capitalist politics of the old Italian immigrant Left.

The reasons of the demise of Italian American radicalism are complex and in many ways are linked to a larger question that German sociologist Werner Sombart raised almost a century ago: why is there no socialism in the United States?¹ How come that the most capitalist nation of all has failed to produce a socialist tradition or

¹ Werner Sombart's article *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States*, was first published in 1908 but translated into English in its entirety in 1976.

communist party as in modern Europe? Eric Foner in a article published in 1984 pointed out that what must be explained is not so much why there is no socialism in America (because, as many have documented, there was in fact socialism), but why it once rose and fell. Posed this way, the question, suggests Foner, requires that we “historicize” the problem of American socialism.²

This dissertation began with a similar goal. As an Italian student in New York I was struck by the discrepancy between Italian American and Italian politics. I was surprised to find out that the Left, which has always played, and still does, an important role in Italian politics, occupies a marginal place in Italian American political culture. I soon discovered that Italian Americans are perceived as a basically conservative ethnic group, whose only ties to Italy appear to be the Mafia and food. I began to wonder why the majority of Italian Americans ended up identifying themselves, and being identified, with such conservative and reactionary cultures, and why their political consciousness had diverged so markedly from that of their Italian counterparts.

As in the case of most historical developments, there is not a mono-causal explanation for the end of political radicalism among Italian Americans; rather we should speak of specific conditions and circumstances. One factor was certainly the enormous diversity and sectarian orientation of the movement. As we saw, the Italian American Left covered the entire-spectrum of class-based radicalism -- anarchism, socialism, syndicalism, and communism. Not only was the movement as a whole sharply divided but the members of each group were constantly arguing with each other. Although a few like Giovannitti or Tresca managed to partially transcend ideological divisions and forge

broader alliances, the *sorversivi* were never able to achieve unity. Instead of channeling their militancy towards political purposes they wasted energy and time fighting endlessly over theoretical issues and the “correct” methods of struggle. In doing so, they succumbed to the kind of ideological rigidity that sabotaged other leftist movements, hindering them from countering effectively capitalist culture.³

An even deeper wound inflicted on the Italian immigrant Left was what Philip Cannistraro and Rudolph Vecoli documented as the “fascistization” of the Little Italies. Despite the fierce opposition of radicals, Fascism gained considerable support among the Italian Americans in the United States. Mussolini was able to establish a strong power base through the support of the Catholic clergy, the Italian Consulate, and, especially, the local business and political elite, who controlled the Italian language media and the major institutions of the immigrant community. Fascist rhetoric of restoring Italy’s greatness and splendor fueled the patriotic sentiments of Italian Americans. Although perhaps only five percent of them were true Fascists, thousands of them looked at Mussolini as a source of ethnic pride.⁴ This emergent ethnic nationalism powerfully undermined the

² Eric Foner, “Why is there no Socialism in the United States,” *History Workshop*, 17 (Spring 1984), 57-80.

³ See Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) and James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America* (New York: Knopf, 1967)

⁴ Refugee historian Gaetano Salvemini estimated that 5% were true Fascist, 35% were somewhat sympathetic to Fascism and 10% were anti-Fascists. The other 50% were considered apolitical. See his *Fascist Activities in the United States*, edited by Philip V. Cannistraro (Staten Island: Center for Immigration Studies, 1977). On Italian Americans and Fascism see John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), and Philip V. Cannistraro, “Per una storia dei fasci negli Stati Uniti,” *Storia Contemporanea*, 6 (December 1995): 1061-1145, “Fascism and Italian Americans,” in Silvio M. Tomasi, ed., *Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1977) and *Blackshirts in Little Italy* (West Lafayette: Bordighera, 2000).

class internationalism and radical militancy of the early period and insinuated racial and ethnic prejudices in the minds of many Italian Americans.⁵

But Italian American radicalism was eroded by external forces as well. In his famous speech of March 1947, President Truman insisted that freedom was threatened by communism and that the United States had a "duty" to defend the world from the Soviet influence. Nine days after, he issued an executive order for interrogations to verify the patriotism and loyalty of federal employees, while the House Committee on Un-American Activities began its investigations of communist influence on the entertainment industry. More pervasive than the Red Scare that followed the Great War, the repression of the 1950s stretched out for many years, destroying the infrastructure of radical organizations and causing another infamous execution -- that of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in 1953.⁶ Many Italian radicals in the United States were deported. Anarchist Armando Borghi was repatriated in 1945, and so was communist Michele (Mike) Salerno, editor of *L'Unità Operaia* and *L'Unità del Popolo*, in 1950.⁷ The radical seed that the *sorversivi* had planted at the beginning of the twentieth century and kept alive for four decades was finally completely eradicated, with disastrous consequences for the future of Italian American, and American, politics.

⁵Prior to Fascism, Italian Americans had strongly condemned racial bigotry and lynching. Mussolini's war on Ethiopia deeply influenced the racial attitudes of Italian Americans. Similarly the anti-Semitic laws enacted by the Fascist regime in 1938 had implications for Italian American relations with Jews.

⁶ For an overview of the Cold War era see Howard Zinn, *Post-War America: 1945-1971* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973) and Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, The Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

⁷See Eric Salerno, *Rossi a Manhattan* (Rome: Quiritta, 2001).

Cold War policies and the rhetoric of patriotism were especially successful in equating Americanism with anti-communism and promoting political moderation and general consensus. Implying the superiority of American culture, the Truman Doctrine encouraged children of old immigrants to Americanize as quick as possible. As a result of these pressures, Italian Americans saw their parents' ways as shameful and began to erase the radical past, fearing the stigma that marked those who displayed radical sympathies. The psychological impact of the Red Scares on the minds of Italian Americans and other immigrants has yet to be established. There is no doubt however that it drove many to bury aspects of their radical past. About a year ago, during my research I found among the pages of *Il Proletario* the text of a famous communist song, *Bandiera Rossa* (Red Flag). As I was sharing the discovery with my advisor, a guest of his, an Italian American woman in her seventies, who was present when I improvised the tune of the song, told me that the music reminded her of a song her mother used to sing. But when I told her what the song was about, horrified she exclaimed: "Oh No, then I made a mistake.... There are no Commies in my family!" Unfortunately, this anecdote could be reproduced with countless variations.

Economic advancement was another important factor in distancing Italian Americans from the radical past. New occupational opportunities created by the Second World War favored social mobility, expanding the Italian American middle class and leading growing numbers of them to identify their interests with the status quo. In the post war period Italian Americans began to move out of the old working class

neighborhoods into gentrified suburbs; the *contadini* had finally fulfilled their American dream.⁸

The transformation of Italian American radicalism is suggestive of the ways in which class politics are informed by ethnic identity, as well as social and economic contingences. Italian immigrants brought with them political ideas and social experiences which helped shape their response to labor conditions in America. At the same time, the American environment redefined those ideas, transforming, and eventually destroying, Italian immigrant radicalism.

The Italian American case also reveals that the definition of radicalism in Italy, and generally Europe, differs dramatically from that in the United States. While in Italy the term radicalism continues to be used to identify people and movements committed to a transformation of capitalism, in the United States the term is much more fluid, linked to personal identity politics rather than class politics. As Donna Gabaccia has noted, this connection of personal and political also distinguishes American studies of radicalism from their counterparts in other nations.⁹

But even though Italian American political radicalism has disappeared, it still has much to offer. The *sovversivi* put forward a distinctive world-view centered on universalism, generosity, social justice, and a fierce critique of capitalism. Communist Luigi Nardella, talking about ultra-anarchist Luigi Galleani, commented: "He told people

⁸ See Richard Alba, *Italian Americans into the Twilight of Ethnicity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1985).

⁹ Donna Gabaccia, "Lost and Found: Italian American Radicalism in Global Perspective," in Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer, eds. *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*, forthcoming.

how to live and that was important.”¹⁰ What Nardella meant is that even though he did not approve of the theoretical tenets of Galleani’s “propaganda of the deed,” he shared Galleani’s ethical views. Those views can still be a source of inspiration for people committed to bring forth social change. Illuminating the meanings, strategies, and limitations of their struggle, we might better understand the potentials for transforming our own society. Indeed, the issues that the *sorversivi*, and radicals in general, were sorting out in the first half of the twentieth century – capitalism, class, ethnic and racial prejudice, economic exploitation – have hardly been settled. Italian Americans in particular, as Rudolph Vecoli has suggested, need to learn from this revolutionary legacy to free themselves “from an apologetic ethnicity that is too much dominated by a reactionary, chauvinist, and racist ideology.”¹¹

¹⁰ Cited in Paul Buhle, “Anarchism and American Labor,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, 23 (Spring 1983), 21-34.

¹¹ Vecoli, “The Making and Un-making of the Italian American Working Class,” in Cannistraro and Meyer, *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*.

ILLUSTRATIONS

All cartoons are by Fortunato Velona, unless noticed.

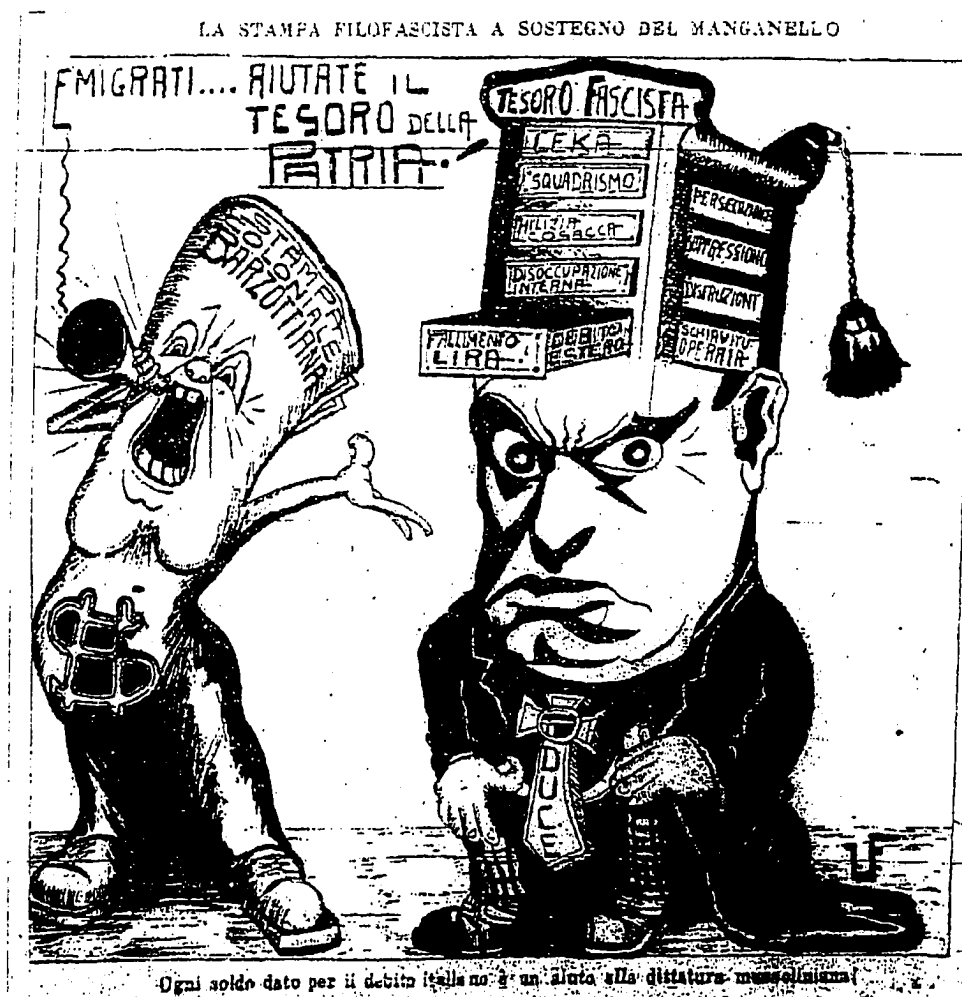


Figure 1. *Il Nuovo Mondo*, Nov. 22, 1925



Figure 2. Masthead of *La Scopa*, 1925-1929



Figures 3. and 4. Mussolini (Ed. Fotostampa, Milano, 1935)



Figure 5. *Il Proletario*, April 1, 1930



Fig. 6 - Il Martello, February 28, 1925



Fig. 7 - Il Solco, September 1927, 15



Fig. 8 - Il Proletario, August 2, 1924



Fig. 10 – “Famous Pictures” by Capaneo. *Il Nuovo Mondo*, February 7, 1926

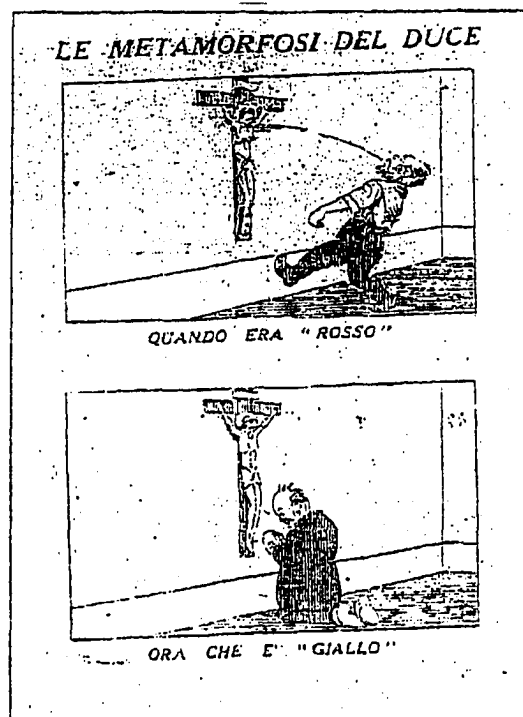


Fig. 3 – “The metamorphosis of Il Duce.” Anonymous. *La Scopa*, July 24, 1926



Fig. 11 - Velona Collection. IHRC, Minneapolis

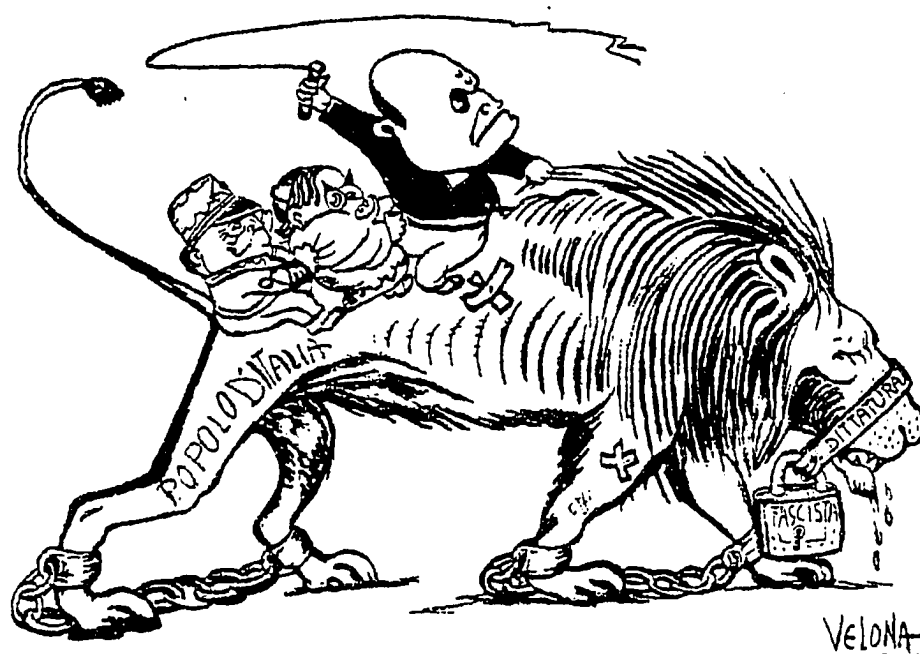


Fig. 12 - Velona Collection. IHRC, Minneapolis



Fig. 13 – Velona Collection. IHRC, Minneapolis



Fig. 14 – *Il Martello*, May 1, 1925



Figures 15 and 16 – Velona Collection. IHRC, Minneapolis

PERCHE'
I GIORNALI
ITALO-CAFONI
FANNO A GARA
PER PROSTITUIRSI
AL FASCISMO?



Fig. 17 - *Il Proletario*. June 25, 1927

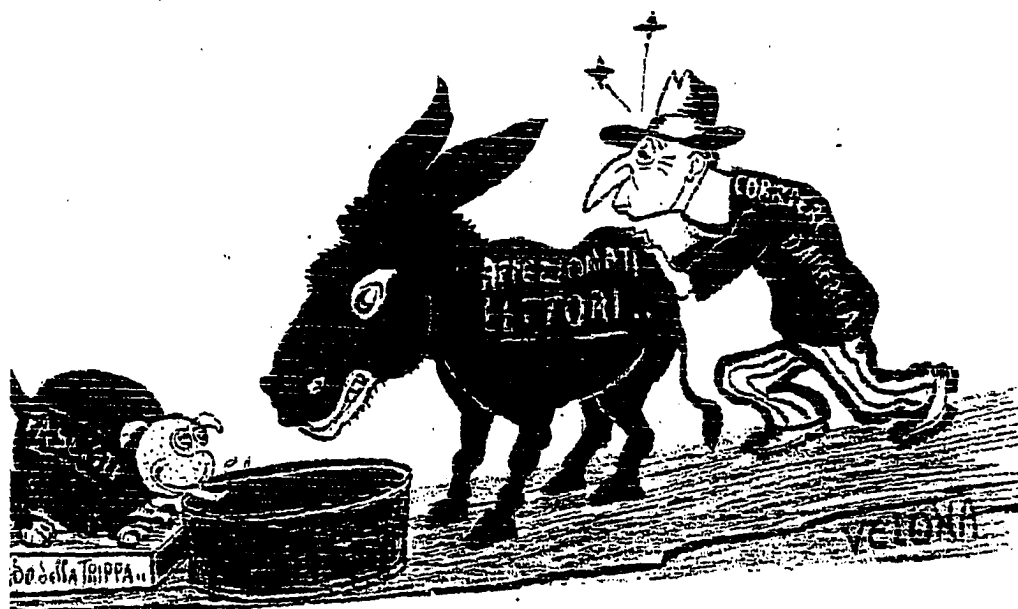


Fig. 18 - Veroni Collection. IHRC, Minneapolis



Fig. 22 - Il Proletario, April 30, 1927

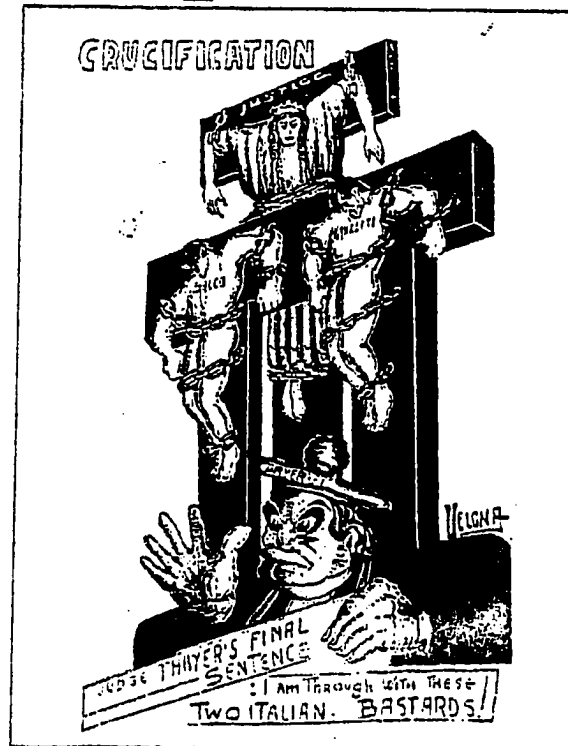


Fig. 23. Velona Collection. IHRC, Minneapolis



Fig. 24 – "The Calvary." *Libertas*, August 21, 1927



Fig. 25 – *Il Martello*, June 19, 1926

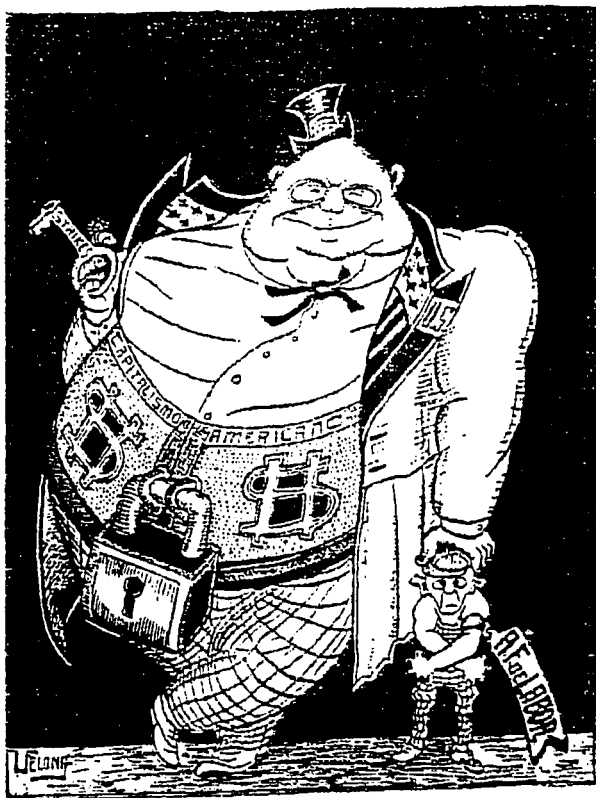


Fig. 26 – *Il Proletario*, May 22, 1926



EMILIO PASCHETTI



Fig. 28 – Velona Collection. IHRC, Minneapolis

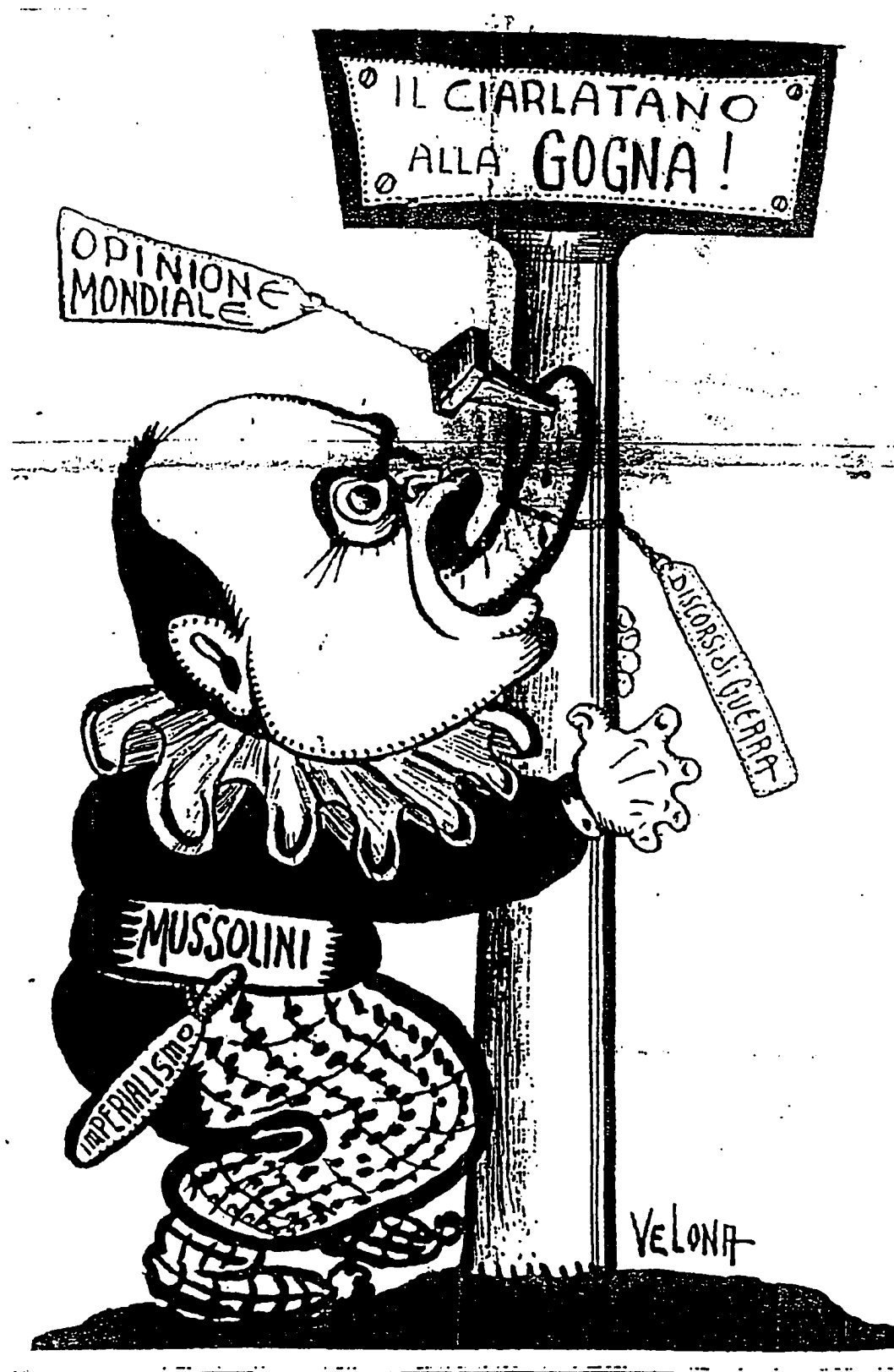


Fig. 29 - *Il Proletario*, May 1, 1936

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