
Introduction

On January 11, 1912, mill workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, began a three-month strike to protest a cut in their already thin wages. This “crusade for bread and roses,” as the strike was soon called, became one of the most celebrated working-class protests in American history. For the first time, unskilled immigrants of many different nationalities overcame ethnic differences and scored a significant victory against American industrial manufacturers.

The Lawrence strike had an enormous impact on the American public consciousness, bringing attention to the atrocious living conditions of unskilled workers and the social divisions that plagued American industrial society. Overnight, the strike also catapulted Italian immigrant workers into national prominence. Italians constituted the largest single ethnic group of Lawrence’s polyglot population, and they played a decisive role in the strike. Providing both leadership and mass militancy, they introduced the American labor movement to new tactics of direct action that reflected their native traditions of struggle and resistance. As local reporters of the strike noted, “angry” Italians “rushed the gates, broke open the doors, damaged the escalators, pulled girls from their work, cut off the electric drive, stopped the machines throughout the mill, and threatened to kill any person daring to put the machinery in motion.”¹

Historians have by now written detailed accounts of the Lawrence strike and other labor conflicts of the period, recognizing the crucial contributions of Italian workers and leaders.² Scholars of Italian American history have also increasingly documented how these struggles were part of a larger transnational radical movement and subculture that constituted a significant presence in the Italian immigrant community and the American Left until World War II.³

Thanks to these pioneering works, we know that Italian Americans possess a vibrant if “lost” radical past. As early as 1882, Italian immigrants founded a socialist club in Brooklyn, New York. Radical organizations then

multiplied and spread across the United States, from large urban cities to smaller industrial and mining areas. By 1900 there were thirty official Italian sections of the Socialist Party along the East Coast and countless independent anarchist and revolutionary groups throughout the nation, replete with alternative newspapers, social clubs, and schools. The heart of this movement was a transnational generation of social rebels or *sovversivi*—as they were collectively called in Italian—that included anarchists, socialists, syndicalists, and, after World War I, anti-fascist and communist refugees.

During the past decade, there has been a surge of interest in the *sovversivi*'s radical world. Scholars, however, have directed their attention almost exclusively to the organizational and political aspects of the Italian immigrant Left, analyzing the movement principally through its labor constituency and its official documents. This book, in contrast, focuses on the movement's cultural and literary dimension—the way traditions, institutions, literature, and art fused with and sustained political work. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines immigration, radical, and cultural history, it documents the wide spectrum of Italian immigrant radical culture in the United States and examines the many forms it took.

I use the term “radical” to encompass the whole range of class-based ideologies associated with the European political Left: anarchism, socialism, syndicalism, and communism. These political ideologies had significant doctrinal differences but had the same goals: to overthrow capitalism, emancipate the workers, and establish social and economic equality. “Radical” in this sense has a strictly political, ideological meaning. My definition of “culture,” on the other hand, has a broad and contextual connotation, embracing both a literary and an anthropological meaning. It refers to the general process of intellectual and artistic developments, but it also describes a particular way of life, a worldview, or *mentalité*.⁴

This study basically re-imagines the *sovversivi*'s cultural world—their milieu, beliefs, and artistic expressions. On one level, it tells the history of their movement and their activities. On another, it analyzes the institutions and cultural forms they developed: the press, literature, poetry, theater, and iconography.

Italian immigrant radicals came to America with values, beliefs, and mores that influenced their activities in the United States. Besides creating political parties, groups, and unions, they engaged in a wide range of cultural and recreational activities that shaped and defined their political culture. They formed evening and Sunday schools that drew on the Italian socialist experience of *Università Popolari* (people's universities). They cre-

ated countless educational circles and self-organized radical bookstores that made hundreds of books and pamphlets (both nonfiction and fiction) available to workers. They had their own orchestras and dramatic societies that sponsored weekly performances in local bars, circles, or hired halls. They arranged special dances, concerts, picnics, and annual festivals such as the *festa della frutta*, a peasant custom held each autumn to celebrate the fall harvest. In place of traditional national and religious holidays, they established their own revolutionary celebrations, such as May Day, the international workers' day. They sponsored conferences and lectures; published newspapers; and produced hundreds of pamphlets, poems, social dramas, drawings, and cartoons.

This rich oppositional culture was at the heart of Italian immigrant radicalism. Cultural events, institutions, and literary works came to occupy a special place in the life of Italian radicals, sustaining and spreading their values, entertaining their communities, and bolstering the movement's organization and strength. Some initiatives were extremely successful, attracting thousands of Italian immigrants and raising hundreds of dollars for radical endeavors. This book contends that it was through these cultural venues, in addition to official doctrines or party policies, that radical leaders expressed and carried their political ideology beyond the narrow confines of the workplace.

Radicalism has typically been studied and measured through traditional forms of political participation and activism such as union and party membership or voting. But to understand radical experiences fully, we need a broader definition of the "political." We must move away from the workplace as the central paradigm of working-class identity and acknowledge, as the historian Robin Kelley has urged, the "importance of the cultural terrain as a site of struggle."⁵ Scholars have produced many such cultural histories about the radical experiences of blacks or other ethnic groups such as the Jews, Germans, and Finns.⁶ But the study of culture has yet to transform—and displace—popular perceptions of the Italian American experience.

The underlying premise of this work is that class alone cannot explain the *sovversivi's* radicalism. Their politics were rooted in cultural as well as social experiences—shaped by their ethnic identity and immigrant experiences as well as by their internationalist credo and commitment to a working-class revolution. Their radicalism, in other words, embodied a complex system of traditions, institutions, and values that immigrants brought with them from Italy and adapted to new American circumstances.

For all the recent proliferation of studies on the Italian radical diaspora, there is still a need for a synthesis that brings together the various shades and

components of the movement. Historians so far have focused on five distinct components of the Italian American Left: the anarchist movement, the Italian Socialist Federation, the unions, the anti-fascist movement, and, to a lesser extent, the communist presence. Collectively their works point to the enormous richness and sectarianism of Italian American radicalism. But their emphasis on and preoccupation with the exceptional elements of each one of the Italian American leftist groups have obscured their common culture and roots. Without denying or diminishing the movement's political fragmentation, this book shows that despite their ideological differences, the *sovversivi* shared the same cultural traditions, the same ethical values, the same dreams and hopes. This common vision, I suggest, was an integral aspect of the movement. Not only did it provide the main source of aspiration, but it also encapsulated a distinct "way of life," a sensibility based on communal Italian traditions and working-class solidarity.

In recovering the *sovversivi*'s culture, this book underscores the important role of literature and art as forms of both self-expression and propaganda and, more generally, the centrality of culture and the intellectual vanguard in the formation and development of radical ideologies. The *sovversivi* are a perfect example of what Antonio Gramsci has called "organic" intellectuals. They fulfilled a crucial role as "constructors," "organizers," and "permanent persuaders" of their community. They provided crucial leadership among their co-nationals; mediated between the Old and the New World, and, above all, articulated through various cultural apparatuses the feelings, experiences, and hopes of Italian workers in America.⁷

Yet, with the exception of a few biographical studies of "great men" like Carlo Tresca, Sacco and Vanzetti, and Vito Marcantonio, the cadre of the Italian American Left remains little known.⁸ Important leaders such as the poet Arturo Giovannitti, the cartoonist Fort Velona, the playwright Alessandro Sisco, and the union organizer Antonino Crivello, or radical women like the syndicalist Bellalma Forzato-Spezia and the anarchist poet Virgilia D'Andrea, are almost completely forgotten—their memory erased by Americanization, their papers and writings consigned to a few archives. However, they were once revered within the Little Italies and the American labor movement, serving important social functions as "ethnic brokers" of the immigrant communities and producers of a lively radical subculture.⁹ One of the purposes of this book is to rescue these untold stories and forgotten voices from historical oblivion.

Complementing the emerging scholarship on Italian immigrant women's activism, this study also addresses gender issues, providing examples of radi-

cal women's leadership as well as radical men's ambiguous views toward the woman question.¹⁰ My goal, however, is not just to make the world of Italian immigrant radicals more visible. In keeping with broader currents in the field of radical history, I examine and interpret cultural sources that have escaped the attention of scholars, such as plays, poems, short stories, and cartoons. Not only do these cultural sources disrupt stereotypes, but they also provide unique insights into the human side, the emotions, and the worldview of the *soversivi*, as well as their conflicting views about class, gender, and ethnicity.

I am especially interested in how Italian immigrant radicals expressed their political beliefs through culture; what themes they privileged; what institutions they established; and how their cultural production informed their radical politics. Indeed, a basic question permeates this study: What can we learn about Italian immigrants' radicalism from what they produced and wrote?

The book's organization reflects the colorful and multifaceted nature of Italian immigrant cultural radicalism and generally adopts a thematic format. Building upon existing scholarship, chapter 1, "Italian American Radicalism: Old World Roots, New World Developments," offers a general overview of the Italian radical movement in the United States. It begins by mapping the social and political scene in Italy after the struggle for unification in 1861, focusing particularly on the rise of anarchism and revolutionary socialism. It then turns to the United States and the emergence of the Italian immigrant radical movement from the first anarchist and socialist clubs at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the great Italian immigration began, to the fight against fascism and the movement's eventual decline after the 1930s.

The second chapter offers a collective profile of the *soversivi*, as well as a discussion of their organizations and cultural life. It examines their role as ethnic leaders, the institutions they established, and their worldview. The subsequent chapters explore the most significant cultural forms by which the *soversivi* expressed their political ideas, each illuminating one particular dimension of the Italian immigrant radical culture.

The large number of Italian radical newspapers points to the fact that a critical portion of the *soversivi's* ideological struggle took place in the pages of the press. Chapter 3, "A Literary Class War: The Italian American Radical Press," examines this crucial institution. Surveying more than fifty radical newspapers, ranging from anarchist to socialist, communist, and anti-fascist, it provides an overview of the press and a discussion of the main themes, programs, and debates contained in its pages.

The *sovversivi* recognized the importance of leisure and built vibrant institutions that entertained the immigrant workers while educating them to revolutionary ideals. Chapter 4, “Politics and Leisure: The Italian American Radical Stage,” looks at the most popular and effective of these recreational activities: the radical stage. Focusing on several plays that have survived, it discusses the use of drama as a medium of political propaganda and, simultaneously, as a form of popular entertainment and artistic self-expression.

The next two chapters enter more specifically into the literary realm, looking at Italian American radicalism through the lenses of fiction. Chapter 5, “Italian American Literary Radicalism,” offers a reevaluation of the Left cultural tradition in Italian Americana, bringing attention to the role of literature and cultural traditions in the making of Italian immigrant radical politics. Recovering hitherto neglected radical texts, it examines two popular literary forms: the novelettes, or short stories, and poetry. Written by radical intellectuals or self-taught workers, these narratives provide—like the plays—unique insights into the emotions and values of Italian radicals.

The sixth chapter, “Arturo Giovannitti: Poet and Prophet of Labor,” delves deeper into the *sovversivi*’s poetry by discussing the figure and work of Giovannitti, one of the most charismatic figures of the Italian American Left, who achieved national prominence as the leader of the famed 1912 Lawrence strike and as one of America’s best poets.

The final chapter, “Allegories of Anti-Fascism: The Radical Cartoons of Fort Velona,” explores the visual culture of the Italian American anti-fascist movement, specifically focusing on the radical cartoons and caricatures of the artist Fort Velona.

The Conclusion discusses the significance of these cultural forms, showing the many ways in which culture informed and sustained the activities of Italian radicals. By retrieving the texts and arts of Italian immigrant revolutionaries, I hope, this study will contribute to a more rounded history of the Italian American radical experience and encourage the development of further studies that examine culture and politics in their simultaneity.