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The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism: Labor, Politics, and Culture

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The history of Italian-American radicals in the United States is contradictory, even improbable. Other ethnic groups—Germans, Jews, and Finns, for example—gave widespread support to radicals and their organizations. Italian-American communities, characterized by conservatism, deference, and a strong focus on family as the primary social unit, seem a less hospitable location for radical activity. Yet, Italian-Americans from Sacco and Vanzetti to Vito Marcantonio are notable in the annals of American radicalism. These radicals, their relationships with their communities, and their role in American politics and culture have been poorly understood.

"The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism," held on May 14 and 15, 1997, in New York City, was a welcome effort to change this amnesia. The conference was organized by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of Queens College, City University of New York (CUNY) and the CUNY Graduate School. Over 350 historians, sociologists, and other scholars of Italian-American politics, culture, and the arts from the United States, Canada, and Italy participated. They explored the importance of Italian-American radicals in labor and politics and their influence on working-class culture, film, and literature.

Rudolph Vecoli (University of Minnesota) confronted some of the paradoxes of Italian-American politics in his keynote address. Although Italian immigrants played a decisive role in the early trade union movement, their notions of working-class solidarity were "eroded and fragmented by the action of internal and external forces" that turned them toward a more conservative politics. In particular, the Italian-American Left confronted substantial sympathy among Italian Americans for Mussolini and fascism during the 1920s and 1930s. This, and not just a traditional, family-oriented culture, thwarted radical efforts to sink deeper roots

into these communities. Vecoli appealed for a rebirth of radicalism to counter a lingering undemocratic political culture in Italian-American communities. It is necessary to link the radical traditions of Italian workers to broader Italian-American identities, he contended, in order to get beyond the “brain-dead ethnicity” of conservatism.

Fifteen panels explored the varieties of Italian-American radicalism: its organizations, its regional variations, and its heterogeneous culture. Several panels focused on relations between radical leaders and the rank and file. Gender, sexuality, and the family also served as points of entry for many of the discussions. A few panels examined multiple themes in the context of specific workplaces and communities. The panel on “Workers, Unions, and Syndicalists,” for example, focused on the activity of Italian-American dockworkers in Brooklyn. Calvin Winslow (Center for Worker Education, CUNY) examined the rebellious nature of Italian-American longshoremen there during the first two decades of the twentieth century, focusing on a major wildcat strike in 1907. William Mello (New School for Social Research) explored the career of rank-and-file leader Pete Panto, who organized opposition to the gangster-dominated waterfront unions in Brooklyn in the 1930s before being assassinated by Murder, Incorporated (a notorious band of contract killers) in 1939. Mello argued that Panto’s resistance reflected a growing culture of informal organization among Brooklyn’s Italian-American dockworkers.

The differing impacts of communist, socialist, and anarchist organizing on Italian-American workers received much attention. In a panel on “Varieties of Communist Experience,” Roger Keeran (Empire State College, State University of New York) presented work on the Italian section of the Communist-led International Workers Order (IWO). While the large Jewish and eastern European sections of the IWO developed from preexisting left-wing fraternal societies in major cities, the Garibaldi section was organized by the IWO after its founding, when it hired a traveling Italian-American organizer during the early 1930s. The Garibaldi section developed its strongest support among Italian-American workers in the smaller cities of the Northeast and Midwest—not in the Little Italies of New York, Boston, or Chicago. The result was perhaps the largest Italian-American radical institution, even if an earlier generation of anarchist organizations was more romantic.

A panel on Sacco and Vanzetti “seventy years after the tragedy” challenged some of that romanticism. Paul Avrich (Queens College, CUNY) moved beyond the usual debate over their guilt or innocence to focus on the transformation of these two committed Italian-American anarchists into saintly victims of ethnic and political persecution. Their real politics were more complicated, he argued. Vanzetti, for example, kept a list of people he blamed for his arrest and conviction and wanted his comrades to take revenge on them should he be executed. Indeed, after the execution

there were a number of bombings of the homes of people involved in the case, including the home of Judge Webster Thayer. None of the bombers was ever arrested.

Panels also explored the more recent history of Italian-American radicals, particularly through biography. These included a paper by Jackie DiSalvo (Baruch College, CUNY) on the career of Father James Groppi, a radical housing desegregation activist in Milwaukee during the 1960s, and a memorial panel devoted to the memory of Mario Savio, leader of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Participants sought the origins of Savio's activism in the moral values of the Catholic church he attended regularly while growing up, and in his family and ethnic roots. Perhaps for the first time, Savio was claimed as an Italian-American radical, not simply an American one.

Another panel weighed the radical politics of Vito Marcantonio, the cofounder of New York City's American Labor party and its lone member of Congress during the 1930s and 1940s. Gerald Meyer (Hostos Community College, CUNY) placed Marcantonio's political origins squarely in the Italian-American radical experience but argued that his success owed in large part to his ability to transcend the confines of ethnic politics without abandoning his strong ties to the Italian-American community. Meyer noted Marcantonio's substantial electoral base among Puerto Ricans and argued that his success at representing both ethnic communities shows that at least part of the "lost world" was in fact incorporated into American radical politics. Following the session, Ralph Fasanella, an artist, Spanish Civil War veteran, and political activist, was presented with the Vito Marcantonio Award by the Italian Americans for a Multicultural United States, an organization dedicated to rebuilding a radical voice among Italian-Americans. Fasanella spoke of his continued radical convictions and appealed to the audience to learn from Marcantonio—a model, Fasanella believed, for more successful radical politics in the United States today.

The concluding session featured a paper by Donna Gabaccia (University of North Carolina) on "Italian-American Radicalism in Global Perspective." As historians advance their investigations into the Italian-American experience, Gabaccia argued, it is important to examine the immigration of Italian workers at the beginning of the twentieth century as a global experience—of which the world of Italian-American radicalism was only a part, although a fundamental one.

The conference was both scholarly and unabashedly celebratory. Few participants were reluctant to find inspiration in the "lost world" for present-day radical activism. The connections and resource-sharing provided by the event seem likely to encourage further investigation of the diverse and contradictory histories in which Italian-Americans built communities, shaped the labor movement, and defined not one but many radical traditions.