

Italian Immigrants and Working-Class Movements in the United States: A Personal Reflection on Class and Ethnicity

Rudolph J. Vecoli

Volume 4, numéro 1, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031067ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/031067ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Vecoli, R. J. (1993). Italian Immigrants and Working-Class Movements in the United States: A Personal Reflection on Class and Ethnicity. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 4(1), 293–305. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031067ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article avance que les questionnements les plus intéressants dans les domaines de l'histoire de l'immigration et de l'histoire ouvrière se situent précisément à l'intersection des problèmes de classe et d'ethnicité. Pour développer son propos, l'auteur met à profit son expérience, comme membre de la classe ouvrière et d'un group ethnique, de même que sa formation d'historien et sa lecture de littérature.

C'est au cours de recherches sur les immigrants italiens de Chicago que l'auteur a trébuché sur l'histoire de la gauche italo-américaine, un tranche du passé étouffée, pour ne pas dire supprimée. Depuis lors, l'histoire de la classe ouvrière italo-américaine occupe le centre de son attention. Ces mouvements avaient disparu de la mémoire même des italo-américains et, malgré les importantes études de quelques professeurs américains, peu d'histoire italo-américains se sont penchés sur cette dimension de l'expérience de leur groupe. Le sujet, curieusement, a reçu davantage d'attention de la part auteurs italiens. Comme les sources de cette histoire avaient souffert d'un manque d'intérêt de la part des institutions importantes, la récupération d'une riche documentation sur le radicalisme italo-américain lui a procuré une source de satisfaction particulière.

Pour l'Italie du tournant du siècle, autant que les mouvements révolutionnaires, l'émigration de masse a continué l'expression de bouleversements. En tant que participants à ces événements, les immigrants ont glissé, dans leurs bagages pour l'Amérique, des idées plus ou moins cohérentes sur les classes et sur l'ethnicité. Arrivés ici, ils ont construit des identités de classe et d'ethnie le long d'un processus par lequel ils ont reçu les messages culturels à travers le filtre de leurs propres expériences, leurs souvenirs et leurs valeurs. Les historiens du travail et de l'immigration devraient mettre à profit les sources de l'identité de classe et d'ethnie de façon plus imaginative et sensible en reconnaissant que l'identité est un tout dont ces deux dimensions constituent des aspect inséparables. L'auteur en appelle à la réhabilitation des concepts de classe et d'ethnicité comme d'utiles et d'importantes catégories d'analyse.

Italian Immigrants and Working-Class Movements in the United States: A Personal Reflection on Class and Ethnicity

RUDOLPH J. VECOLI

Résumé

The article argues that the locus of the most interesting and important work in the fields of immigration and labor history lies precisely at the intersection of class and ethnicity. In developing this thesis, particularly with respect to Italian immigrant working-class movements in the United States, the author draws on his experiences as a working-class ethnic and historian as well as his readings of the literature.

In the course of his research on Italian immigrants in Chicago, the author stumbled upon the submerged, indeed suppressed, history of the Italian American left. Italian-American working-class history has since been the focus of his work. Since mainstream institutions had neglected the records of this history, the recovery of rich documentation on Italian American radicalism has been a source of particular satisfaction. These movements had also been “forgotten” by the Italian Americans themselves. Despite important work by a handful of American scholars, relatively few Italian American historians have given attention to this dimension of the Italian American experience. Curiously the topic has received more attention from scholars in Italy.

Mass emigration as much as revolutionary movements was an expression of the social upheavals of turn-of-the-century Italy. As participants in those events, the immigrants brought more or less inchoate ideas of class and ethnicity to America with them. Here they developed class and ethnic identities as Italian-American workers. The construction of those identities has been a process in which the Italian immigrants have been protagonists, filtering cultural messages through the sieve of their own experiences, memories, and values. Historians of labor and immigration need to plumb the sources of class and ethnic identity more imaginatively and sensitively, recognizing that personal identity is a whole of which class and ethnicity are inseparable aspects. The author calls upon historians to salvage and restore the concepts of class and ethnicity as useful categories of analysis.

* * * *

Cet article avance que les questionnements les plus intéressants dans les domaines de l'histoire de l'immigration et de l'histoire ouvrière se situent précisément à l'intersection des problèmes de classe et d'ethnicité. Pour développer son propos, l'auteur met à profit

son expérience, comme membre de la classe ouvrière et d'un group ethnique, de même que sa formation d'historien et sa lecture de littérature.

C'est au cours de recherches sur les immigrants italiens de Chicago que l'auteur a trébuché sur l'histoire de la gauche italo-américaine, un tranche du passé étouffée, pour ne pas dire supprimée. Depuis lors, l'histoire de la classe ouvrière italo-américaine occupe le centre de son attention. Ces mouvements avaient disparu de la mémoire même des italo-américains et, malgré les importantes études de quelques professeurs américains, peu d'histoire italo-américains se sont penchés sur cette dimension de l'expérience de leur groupe. Le sujet, curieusement, a reçu davantage d'attention de la part auteurs italiens. Comme les sources de cette histoire avaient souffert d'un manque d'intérêt de la part des institutions importantes, la récupération d'une riche documentation sur le radicalisme italo-américain lui a procuré une source de satisfaction particulière.

Pour l'Italie du tournant du siècle, autant que les mouvements révolutionnaires, l'émigration de masse a constitué l'expression de bouleversements. En tant que participants à ces événements, les immigrants ont glissé, dans leurs bagages pour l'Amérique, des idées plus ou moins cohérentes sur les classes et sur l'ethnicité. Arrivés ici, ils ont construites identités de classe et d'ethnie le long d'un processus par lequel ils ont reçu les messages culturel à travers le filtre de leurs propres expériences, leurs souvenirs et leurs valeurs. Les historiens du travail et de l'immigration devraient mettre à profit les sources de l'identité de classe et d'ethnie de façon plus imaginative et sensible en reconnaissant que l'identité est un tout dont ces deux dimensions constituent des aspect inséparables. L'auteur en appelle à la réhabilitation des concepts de classe et d'ethnicité comme d'utiles et d'importantes catégories d'analyse.

Class and ethnicity have been among the most powerful sources of group solidarities and identities in twentieth century America. As is to be expected, these concepts have served as primary interpretive categories of human behavior for historians of labor and immigration. A Marxist perspective, in which class is the bedrock of social reality and ethnicity a form of false consciousness, has for the most part pervaded the work of labor historians; cultural and racial differences have been regarded as a major cause of fragmentation among American workers and thus obstacles to working-class consciousness. Meanwhile, ethnicity, "a sense of peoplehood," in Milton Gordon's simple, but useful definition, has served historians as a key concept in the interpretation of the immigrant experience. The shaping of group identities and the creation of institutional infrastructures became major themes of immigration history, largely without regard to social class. Since the sixties, the two literatures of labor and immigration history have for the most part been like ships passing in the night, moving along parallel but separate courses — despite the fact that their subjects were often one and the same: immigrant workers — or working immigrants.

This article will argue that the locus of the most interesting and important work in both fields lies precisely at the intersection of class and ethnicity. In developing this thesis,

particularly with respect to Italian immigrants and working-class movements in the United States, I will draw on my own experiences as a working-class ethnic and historian as well as my readings of the literature.

Recent developments have called into question common assumptions regarding the nature of class and ethnicity, and demand a reconsideration of the meaning, indeed validity, of these concepts. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of Communist regimes in eastern Europe has unleashed ethnic and national aspirations and rivalries reminiscent of pre-World War One years. After seventy years of Communist rule during which several generations were indoctrinated with the Marxist-Leninist ideal of *homo sovieticus* (the Soviet man) for whom class was to be the sole source of identity and solidarity, the peoples of the former USSR are literally at each other's throats over issues of religion, culture, and language. The failure of the Soviet version of the Melting Pot invites reflection; perhaps ethnicity, which has proven itself so enduring and resilient, is the bedrock of social reality.

Meanwhile, in the United States Israel Zangwill's metaphor of the Melting Pot has been viewed with increasing scepticism, since its prophetic message is contradicted by the undeniable persistence of diversity in American society. A "new pluralism" has manifested itself in cultural and political forms, and ethnicity has become a common term in popular as well as academic discourse. Since the eighties, an increasingly acrimonious debate has been taking place between exponents of multiculturalism and guardians of American national identity.¹ Multiculturalism as it has emerged in academic circles in the United States has little in common with the Canadian policy of multiculturalism. Drawing eclectically upon post-modern, post-structural, semiotic, and feminist theories, American multiculturalism in its more extreme form has as its agenda the radical transformation of the polity and curriculum of American universities — and other cultural institutions as well. Given their project of deconstructing the ideological underpinnings of patriarchy, racism, and capitalism, which are identified with

-
1. Examples of these polemical exchanges are Joan Wallach Scott, "The New University: Beyond Political Correctness," *Perspectives* (American Historical Association), 30 (October 1992): 14-18; Jerry Z. Muller, "Challenging Political Correctness: A 'Paranoid Hysteric' Replies to Joan Scott," *Perspectives*, 31 (May/June 1993): 12-15. See also E. San Juan, Jr., *Racial Transformations/Cultural Transformations: Articulations of Power in Ethnic and Racial Studies in the United States* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1993); Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: the politics of race and sex on campus* (New York, 1991); Paul Berman, ed. *Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses* (New York, 1992); William J. Bennett, *The Shattered Humanities* (Washington, D.C., 1982); idem, *To Reclaim a Legacy: a report on the humanities in higher education* (Washington, D.C., 1984); Lynne V. Cheney, *American Memory: a report on the humanities in the nation's public schools* (Washington, D.C., 1987). For thoughtful efforts to transcend the smoke and heat of these polemics see David A. Hollinger, "How Wide the Circle of the 'We'?: American Intellectuals and the Problem of the Ethnos since World War II," *The American Historical Review*, 98 (April 1993): 317-37, and Patricia Aufderheide, ed. *Beyond P.C.: Towards a Politics of Understanding* (St. Paul, MN, 1992).

Euro-American domination, the multiculturalists privilege (to use one of their favorite terms) the literatures, histories, and cultures of “people of color” and of the Third World. Since Europeans and European Americans have been (and are), by definition, the oppressors, their ethnicity is suspect as an ideological cover for “white racism.”

Such a frontal attack upon the canon and other hallowed traditions has elicited outraged denunciations from neo-nationalist professors and pundits. Fulminating at the “cult of political correctness,” they have rushed to the defense of “eternal verities” and Western Civilization. Fearful of the “disuniting of America,” they decry the emphasis upon particularistic group identities; class and ethnicity, they insist, must be subordinated to national unity and harmony.² The Melting Pot must be restored both as myth and reality.

Without entering into the substance of these polemics, it is obvious that they hold significance for historians who are concerned with class and ethnicity. In all candor, I must say that I find both sides of this controversy in their extreme forms tiresome and repugnant. As one who authored an article on “Ethnicity: A Neglected Dimension of American History”³ in 1969 and whose writing and teaching have focused upon the pluralism of the United States, I oppose the neo-nationalist’s stress on unity with its nativist overtones. At the same time, I am repelled by the dogmatism and intolerance of zealous multiculturalists. Let me be clear: I am not attacking the field of cultural studies which has inspired much innovative work and even provoked me to consider new ideas. I do object, however, to a formulation of multiculturalism which relegates European Americans to the category of “white” (or persons of non-color) sans ethnicity and tends to depreciate the significance of class in human society. From the debacle of Soviet Marxist-Leninism and the cacophony of the American “culture wars,” the concepts of class and ethnicity need to be salvaged and restored as useful categories for historical analysis.

In working out my own position on these issues, I find it useful to consult my own life experience as well as scholarly texts. What follows are some reflections on my personal as well as scholarly involvement with the issues of class and ethnicity.⁴ Growing up in a factory town in Connecticut during the Great Depression, I knew about class and class struggle before I ever heard of Karl Marx. And growing up in an immigrant family, I knew about ethnicity and ethnic conflict before I read Max Weber. Wallingford had its share of strikes in the thirties, and I recall the excitement and anger I felt watching the picket lines, the scuffles, the stones and curses hurled at scabs. I had no doubt which side

-
2. For an influential expression of this position see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York, 1992).
 3. Rudolph J. Vecoli, “Ethnicity: a Neglected Dimension of American History,” in *The State of American History*, ed. Herbert J. Bass (Quadrangle, 1970), 70-88.
 4. For a more detailed autobiographical statement see “Born Italian: Color Me Red, White, and Green,” *Soundings*, 56 (Spring, 1973): 117-123, and “L’emigrazione Lucchese nel Mondo,” (unpublished paper presented to Associazione Lucchesi nel Mondo, 5 Convegno Internazionale, Chicago, September 27, 1992).

ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS AND WORKING-CLASS MOVEMENTS

I was on; we were working class. My father was a construction laborer; my mother worked in a garment factory. At the same time, I also knew we were Italian Americans. My immigrant parents had arrived decades earlier from Camaione, a small town in the province of Lucca, but our home was very Italian (or rather Lucchese): our language, our food, our ways. Wallingford had a complex ethnic mix, from Yankees in the big houses on the hill, to Irish and Germans, halfway down, to the Polacks, Hunkies, and Wops at the bottom of the valley — and of the class and ethnic pyramids.

Ours was not a politically radical family. My father associated with a small socialist group of *paesani* whose meeting place was known as “*Il Piccolo Kremlino*” (The Little Kremlin), but he read the pro-Fascist *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. My mother, a religiously pious woman, had a keen sense of justice and a fighting spirit. They did belong to the *Società Libero Pensiero* (The Free Thought Society); among my earliest memories are the picnics, dances, and plays at the Italian hall. I have no recollection of speeches or literature of an anti-clerical or radical nature; but there was a portrait of Giordano Bruno in the hall. At the time I had no idea who he was. Years later, I visited the Campo dei Fiori in Rome where a statue of Bruno was erected by the Free Thinkers on the spot of his auto-da-fé for heresy. In our politics, we were New Deal Democrats and philo-Fascists, reflecting our class and ethnic duality. We listened to FDR’s fireside chats, but also to Il Duce’s speeches in the Piazza Venezia. My sisters and I experienced the agony of second generation marginality: we were *both* Italian and American. My favorite radio program was “Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy” (at the time I did not know Jack’s voice was that of Don Ameche, like myself an Italian American). Like most working-class immigrant children, I went through a phase of seeking to escape from those shameful foreign and class origins, but I could not do so. Through service in the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Department of State, university and graduate school education, and forty years of teaching and writing history, I was and remain at heart a working-class Italian American.

This excursion into autobiography is inspired by an effort to understand (and to communicate) the formative influences which have informed my work as an historian, and particularly my approach to class and ethnic identity. Thanks to Eric Hobsbawm, Stuart Hall, and others, we have learned to think about identity as something, not primordial or essentialist, but as invented, constructed, and contested.⁵ Such an historicized concept of identity is, I believe, heuristically valuable for our study of class or ethnicity. However, I part company with those post-modernists who conceive of such identities as sheer fabrications, as myths concocted by ideologues which win the hearts and minds of the masses through the power of words, symbols, and rituals. In my view, consciousness, class or ethnic, is grounded in personal and group memories, traditions

5. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge/New York, 1983); Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” in T.S. Bennett, et al. eds., *Culture, Ideology and Social Process* (London, 1981); James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetry and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986).

and experiences. Marx and Weber gave me vocabularies and theories with which to interpret and articulate my experiences, but *they were my experiences and they were real*. Reflecting upon the multiple sources of my identity, I also know that class and ethnicity are not compartmentalized or stratified in my psyche, but in a constant state of interplay, sometimes merging, other times reinforcing each other, often conflicting. Simultaneously Italian and American, working and upper middle class, historian and activist, I have been busily seeking to mediate among and reconcile these multiple facets of my identity all my life.

Allow me to continue for a while longer in this retrospective vein. Graduate school in the fifties was not a congenial environment for someone of my persuasion. Having fled a Washington ravaged by McCarthyism, bereft of my naive ideals of Americanism, I found an oasis at the University of Wisconsin and a mentor in Merle Curti (perhaps subconsciously I chose to study with Professor Curti because he was one of the few historians at the time whose name ended with a vowel). While the ghosts of Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard still hovered over Bascom Hall, the consensus view of American history was inescapable even in Wisconsin. Curti, whose *The Growth of American Thought* (1943)⁶ had portrayed ideas as instrumental in social struggles, by the fifties was engaged in efforts to define the American national character. During the years I served as his research assistant, he was writing a history of American philanthropy — funded by a handsome grant from the Ford Foundation.

Immigration and labor history were not “in” during the Eisenhower years when the emphasis was upon what Americans had in common, not how they differed or fought. Class and ethnicity were not discussed in polite academic company. I recall the stir it caused at the University of Wisconsin when Howard K. Beale, a gentleman scholar of the old school and staunch civil libertarian, in an act of uncommon courage, invited Herbert Aptheker, the Marxist historian, to give a lecture on slave revolts. Yet historians trained in the fifties, mostly students of Oscar Handlin and Merle Curti, were to become the influential scholars in those fields (among them, John Higham, Herbert Gutman, Moses Rischin, David Brody, Charlotte Erickson, Rowland Berthoff, Arthur Mann, David Montgomery, and A. William Hoglund). Something was definitely “blowin’ in the wind.”

Catching a whiff of that breeze, my latent identities asserted themselves in choosing a dissertation topic. Eschewing a fellowship in the history of philanthropy, I elected a topic in labor history which I had studied with Selig Perlman. Perlman, then in the final years of his career, was a disciple of John R. Commons and heir to the Wisconsin School of labor history. A Russian Jew, Perlman participated in the Revolution of 1905 and subsequently fled to Italy where he was discovered by William English Walling, the American socialist. Walling sent him to study with Commons at Wisconsin, where Selig taught his mentor about Marxism. Yet it was Perlman who was converted to Commons’

6. Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York/London, 1943).

interpretation of the labor history of the United States. In this interpretation, trade unionism or business unionism “fit” the environment because American workers were job conscious, not class conscious. In *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (1928),⁷ Perlman elaborated on the causes of American exceptionalism: the frontier, immigration, white manhood suffrage, and the power of capitalism. In his lectures, delivered with a still distinct accent, Perlman always referred to the typical workers as “Tom, Dick, and Harry,” which in retrospect struck me as peculiar since Isadore, Giuseppe, and Katerina were more common names in the American labor force. This, however, provides a clue to the Commons-Perlman view of workers as economic men (women did not figure in their history) without culture or community, i.e., without ethnicity, but also without class solidarity. Perlman also shared Samuel Gompers’ antipathy to intellectuals as misleaders of labor. The failures of American labor movements, such as the Socialist Labor Party or the Industrial Workers of the World, were attributed to radical intellectuals who induced the workers to follow their crackbrained, utopian schemes. What I had learned in Wallingford about class and ethnicity made me resistant to Selig Perlman’s labor theory.

Perhaps it was the anti-intellectualism of the Commons-Perlman school (strangely reminiscent of McCarthyism) which piqued my interest in the role of intellectuals in the labor movement and first led me to Brookwood Labor College (BLC). A.J. Muste, Dutch-born Reformed Church minister and World War I pacifist, who had become a Marxist, was the dominant personality behind this institution which was established in the twenties to train rank-and-file workers to be leaders. I was to encounter Muste again when I came to write about the Lawrence Strike of 1919 of which he was a major protagonist. After a good deal of initial research, I discovered that the BLC archives were in the basement of Mark Starr, onetime teacher at BLC and then educational director of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Fearful that information could be used against former BLC students now prominent in the labor movement (the witchhunt for Communists was still underway), Starr refused to allow me to consult the materials. That put an end to my first dissertation topic.

Thereupon another facet of my identity asserted itself; I decided to pursue research on Italian immigration, specifically on the Italians in Chicago. Since no historical literature on the subject existed at the time, I experienced the excitement of discovering many things in the course of my research. One, which did not surprise me, was that the great majority of Italian immigrants had been wage earners, often in lowly occupations. Another, which did surprise me, was their degree of involvement in labor activities. Already during the Columbian Exhibition of 1893, Italian stucco workers had organized a union, *Società degli Stuccatori e Decoratori Italiani di Chicago*, and successfully struck for a wage increase. Italian unions were not only formed among mosaic workers and other skilled trades, but also among building laborers and sewer diggers. Italian anarchists and socialists had appeared in Chicago by the early 1900s. Among them,

7. Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York, 1928).

Giuseppe Ciancabilla, one of the most ferocious anarchists, published *La Protesta Umana* in which he celebrated the assassinations of King Umberto of Italy and President William McKinley. The *Federazione Socialista Italiana*, affiliated with the American Socialist Party, was also headquartered in Chicago where its leading figure, Giuseppe Bertelli, had published since 1908 *La Parola dei Socialisti*. (I rescued the only surviving file of this newspaper from a garage). When a massive strike in the garment industry occurred in 1910, a strike which resulted eventually in the organization of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Bertelli, a former cavalry officer and journalist from Tuscany, and Emilio Grandinetti, a socialist and journalist from Calabria, emerged as leaders of the Italian workers. I had the good fortune to interview Grandinetti who described how in the process of translating the speech of an IWW organizer to the Italian tailors, he “edited” it to conform to his own political predilections.

In the course of my Chicago researches, I had stumbled upon the submerged, indeed suppressed, history of the Italian American left. I had found a subject which tapped into the two prime sources of my identity: Italian American working-class history — which for the next thirty years, on and off, was to keep me busy.⁸ I soon learned that sources for researching the immigrant left were hard to come by. The extensive radical press had not been preserved in mainstream institutions; occasional issues had survived by luck in American and Italian libraries. I received the only extant file of the syndicalist-IWW newspaper, *Il Proletario*, from one of its last editors, Mario DeCiampis. Thanks to the historian of anarchism, Max Nettlau, the Italian anarchist press was systematically collected and deposited in the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. Microfilms of these publications as well as of most other extant Italian labor newspapers are now available at the University of Minnesota’s Immigration History Research Center (IHRC). Recurring Red Scares, inspiring fears of deportation and imprisonment, had

8. Among my writings on Italian immigrants and labor movements see: “Italian American Workers, 1880-1920,” in *Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity*, ed. S. M. Tomasi (New York, 1977), 25-49; “Pane e Giustizia: breve storia del movimento operaio italiano in America,” *La Parola del Popolo* (Chicago), 24 (July-August 1974): 82-89; “The Italian Immigrants in the Labor Movement of the United States From 1880 to 1929,” in *Gli Italiani Fuori d’Italia*, ed. Bruno Bezza (Milan, 1983), 257-306; “Italians on Minnesota’s Iron Ranges,” in Vecoli, ed., *Italian Immigrants in Rural and Small Town America* (Staten Island, N.Y., 1987), 179-87; “Anthony Capraro and the Lawrence Strike of 1919,” in *Pane e Lavoro: the Italian American Working-Class*, ed. George Pozzetta (Toronto, 1980), 3-27; “‘Free Country’: the American Republic Viewed by the Italian Left, 1880-1920,” in *In the Shadow of the Statue of Liberty*, ed. Marianne Debouzy (Saint-Denis, France, 1988), 35-56; “Primo Maggio in the United States: an Invented Tradition of the Italian Anarchists,” in *May Day Celebration*, ed. Andrea Panaccione (Venice, 1988), 55-83; “Primo Maggio: teoria e pratica fra gli immigrati italiani negli Stati Uniti,” in Gianni Donno, ed., *Storie e immagini del I Maggio* (Manduria-Bari-Rome, 1990), 449-61. See also my essay, “Ethnicity, Internationalism, and Worker Protection: Italian Immigrants and Labor Movements in the USA, 1880-1950,” to be published in the proceedings of *Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Lavoratori e Sindacato nell’emigrazione italiana in America Latina, 1870-1970*, Brescia, November 25-27, 1992.

resulted in the destruction of organizational archives and personal papers. Carlo Tresca advised his comrades to burn correspondence; consequently only a few of his letters have survived. But there are some touching love letters to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in her papers at the Tamiment Institute Library of New York University.

Nonetheless, important collections have surfaced in recent years. The IHRC, for example, holds the papers of Nino Capraro, who never discarded a piece of paper, which document his radical career as anarchist, labor leader, and Communist, as well as the materials of other socialists, labor organizers, and anti-Fascists.⁹ Rare letters of anarchists such as Luigi Galleani can be found in the Amsterdam Institute, which also holds the extensive papers of Erasmus Abate (aka Hugo Roland), a protagonist in the Italian American anarchist movement from 1910 to 1980. Among the richest sources of documentation on Italian American working-class movements, however, are the national archives of Italy and the United States. First the Secret Service and then the Bureau of Investigation (later the FBI) maintained surveillance over anarchists and “Reds.” These records include intercepted correspondence, copies of publications, and reports of informers (the latter of questionable reliability). Meanwhile, the Italian government through its consulates was also keeping its eyes on these “*sovversivi pericolosi*” (dangerous subversives). The *Cassellario Politico Centrale* (Central Political Files) contains dossiers on thousands of Italians in the United States; for some it may consist of one piece of paper, for others such as Carlo Tresca the file may be three feet thick. Other materials, intercepted letters, publications, etc., are to be found in the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* (Central Archive of the State) and the *Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri* (Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In sum, despite neglect and suppression, an extraordinarily rich documentation on Italian workingclass movements in the United States had survived.

The search for and discovery of this documentation over the course of several decades has been a source of particular satisfaction for me. I have felt like an archeologist whose digs uncover buried civilizations and bring them to light. In this case, however, Italian American radicalism was deliberately “buried” by mainstream institutions which through actual destruction or neglect of records sought to obliterate this chapter of class and ethnic struggle from American history. Moreover, the story of these immigrant working-class movements was also “forgotten” by the Italian Americans themselves — an example of “historical amnesia” which illustrates Freud’s observation that forgetting is “the avoidance of the pain of remembering.” Subjected to the pressures of One Hundred Per Cent Americanism and red-baiting (we have not yet taken the full measure of the impact of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti on the collective Italian American psyche: one person told me that when they were electrocuted the lights dimmed in Wallingford, Connecticut), Italian Americans conspired in the purging of radicalism from their history.

9. For descriptions of these and other holdings see *Immigration History Research Center: A Guide to Collections*, comps. Anna Moody and Joel Wurl (Westport, CT, 1991).

To cite an example: in the first decade of the twentieth century, Barre, Vermont had been the scene of vigorous Italian socialist and anarchist movements — and of bloody encounters between them. Luigi Galleani, an international leader of the anti-organizational anarchists, published his *Cronaca Sovversiva* there from 1903-1910.¹⁰ Yet when I visited Barre in 1989 on the tracks of Galleani, no one whom I interviewed (including octogenarians) remembered Galleani; and few wished to talk about Barre's radical past.¹¹ Only one issue of *Cronaca Sovversiva* out of the more than four hundred published had found its way into the Aldrich Public Library. In Barre and elsewhere, I have encountered persons who either denied that their fathers were anarchists or socialists or who absolutely refused to talk with me about them. The psychic costs imposed on children whose families were reputed to be "Red" must have been particularly high.

Despite this wall of silence, the subject of Italian American working-class movements, which several decades ago was unknown — indeed appeared to be unknowable — has become eminently researchable. Yet few American scholars have responded to this opportunity and challenge. Although the bibliography on Italian American studies has grown enormously in the past twenty years, its favored genre has been the community study, which tends to focus on settlement patterns, establishment of institutions, and social mobility, with little or no attention to class-based movements or struggles. That Italian American historians have given so little attention to this dimension of the Italian American experience raises interesting questions. Curiously the topic has received more attention from Italian scholars, and this is not simply because of the availability of sources in Italy.¹² They have, for example, utilized the resources of the IHRC more intensively than their Italian American colleagues. Why this anomaly? Several explanations occur to me: as members of an ethnic group which has only recently "made it," Italian Americans have remained fixated on the idea of assimilation and social mobility; and I believe that at a certain level they fear the stigma of radical sympathies which is so deeply imbedded in the American psyche. Italian historians, on the other

-
10. Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Luigi Galleani," in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, eds. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (New York, 1990), 251-53.
 11. Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Finding, and Losing, The Gems of Barre's Italian Immigrant Past," *Times Argus* (Barre, VT), October 26, 1989. In response to my appeal to readers to share their memories and documents with me, the only reply I received was from a Scottish American professor who had grown up in Barre.
 12. Among other writings, the following are particularly noteworthy: Bruno Cartosio, "Gli emigranti italiani e l'Industrial Workers of the World," in Brezza, ed., *Gli italiani fuori d'Italia*, 359-95; idem, "Sicilian Radicals in Two Worlds," in Debouzy, *In the Shadow of the Statue of Liberty*, 127-38; Ernesto Ragionieri, "Italiani al estero ed emigrazione di lavoratori italiani. Un tema di storia del movimento operaio," *Belfagor*, 17 (1962): 639-69; Elisabetta Vezzosi, *Il socialismo indifferente. Immigrati italiani e Socialist Party negli Stati Uniti del primo Novecento* (Rome, 1991); Anna Rosada, *Serrati nell'emigrazione, 1899-1911* (Rome, 1972); Anna Maria Martellone, "Per una storia della sinistra italiana negli Stati Uniti; riformismo e sindacalismo, 1880-1911," in Franca Assante, ed., *Il movimento migratorio italiano dall'unita nazionale ai giorni nostri*, vol. 1 (Geneve, 1978): 181-95.

hand, not only have been influenced by the prevailing leftist ideologies of recent decades as well as by a strong trend towards doing history “from the bottom up,” but are free from these particular inhibitions.

I do not mean to belittle the important work regarding Italian American labor history accomplished by those relatively few American (including Italian American) scholars who have addressed the subject. While a bibliographic review of the literature is not feasible here, the contributions of Edwin Fenton, Paul Buhle, Donna Gabaccia, Paul Avrich, Nunzio Pernicone, and Bruno Ramirez should be particularly noted.¹³ To my mind, Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta's, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (1987)¹⁴ is a model for the study of the interplay of class and ethnicity in shaping the identities of immigrant workers. Mormino and Pozzetta describe how Cuban, Spanish, and Sicilian cigar workers in Tampa fused into a “Latin” working-class culture. Bringing with them variants of socialist movements from their home countries (the Sicilians had been influenced by the *fasci* of the early 1890s), suffering exploitation and hostility from “Anglos,” they forged a larger solidarity based on common grievances and aspirations. An important influence was *el lector*, who read novels by Zola, Hugo, and Cervantes, works of Marx, Bakunin, and Kropotkin, and the current radical press to the cigar workers, thus providing verbal articulation and ideological content for their working-class consciousness. But the ideological messages rang true because they confirmed the realities of class struggle; Mormino and Pozzetta identify the recurring strikes as “the major crucible of cultural formation in Ybor City.” *The World of Ybor City* also serves as a model for studying how conflicts and affinities among workers of various nationalities, cultures, and races affected the construction of ethnic and class identities. Given the fact that the American labor force at most times and places was multi-ethnic, additional studies of this kind are crying to be done. Countervailing tendencies toward worker solidarity on the one hand and ethnic fragmentation on the other remains one of the compelling themes of American labor and

-
13. Edwin Fenton, *Immigrants and Labor, A Case Study: Italians and American Labor* (New York, 1975); Paul Buhle, “Italian-American Radicals and Labor in Rhode Island, 1905-1930,” *Radical History Review*, 17 (Spring 1978): 121-51; Donna R. Gabaccia, *Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1988); idem, “International Approaches to Italian Labor Migration,” in *The Italian Diaspora Migration Across the Globe*, eds., George E. Pozzetta and Bruno Ramirez (Toronto, 1992), 21-36; Bruno Ramirez, “Immigration, Ethnicity, and Political Militance: Patterns of Radicalism in the Italian-American Left, 1880-1930,” in *From ‘Melting Pot’ to Multiculturalism: The Evolution of Ethnic Relations in the United States and Canada*, ed. Valeria Gennaro Lerda (Rome, 1990), 115-42; Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton, N.J., 1991); Nunzio Pernicone, “Luigi Galleani and the Italian Anarchist Terrorism in the United States,” *Studi Emigrazione*, N. 111 (September 1993): 469-89. See also entries for Italian American subjects in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (New York, 1990).
 14. Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Champaign, IL, 1987).

immigration history, one for which the Mormino-Pozzetta inter-ethnic perspective is essential.¹⁵

I close with a final anecdote. My maternal grandfather, Luigi Palermini, a game warden on the estate of one of the *signori*, was shot and killed. We do not know the murderer nor the circumstances, but one can surmise that a poor *contadino* had been caught poaching by “*Gigi la Guardia*,” as he was nicknamed. In a sense, my grandfather could be regarded as a casualty in a continuing class war. My grandmother died shortly thereafter leaving my mother, Settima, and her seven siblings orphans in the care of an elderly relative. The support of the family was assumed by her oldest brother, Michele, who was a sawyer. On May 20, 1903, while Michele was attending the feast of Sant’ Eustachio in Pieve di Camaioire, a drunken couple began to fight. When two carabinieri forcibly intervened, the crowd turned on them, whereupon one of them began to shoot into the throng. Three bystanders were killed, including my uncle. Michele was another casualty of the class war. That evening the socialists assaulted the barracks of the carabinieri in Camaioire. An uncle, who was appointed guardian, sold the family land holdings and absconded with the money to Canada, leaving the children paupers. My mother who was then ten years old entered service to a landed family where she remained until 1917, when— her fiancé having been killed in the war — she came to the United States to marry my father who had emigrated some years earlier.

So much for family oral tradition. In 1973 when I was in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, I came across a reference to a number of riots in Italy in the early 1900s which had been brutally suppressed and had contributed to heighten class tensions. Among them was the incident at Pieve di Camaioire. A light went on. I turned to the newspapers of the period, and in *La Nazione* of Florence of May 22, 1903, found an article, headlined “*Sanguinosa rivolta a Pieve di Camaioire*” (Bloody Revolt at the Pieve di Camaioire).¹⁶ The account confirmed in every detail my mother’s story. My purpose in sharing this bit of family lore is to suggest how we, ourselves, are willy-nilly implicated in the history we study, how private history inevitably merges with public history.

Mass emigration as much as revolutionary movements was an expression of the social upheavals of turn-of-the-century Italy. As participants in those events, the immigrants, including my parents, brought more or less inchoate ideas of class and

15. The relationship between ethnicity and class has been the focus of attention of recent work by immigration and labor historians; for examples of these writings see Robert Asher and Charles Stephenson, eds. *Labor Divided: Race and Ethnicity in United States Labor Struggles, 1840-1970* (Albany, N.Y., 1990); Dirk Hoerder, ed. *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920* (1982); Hoerder, ed. “*Struggle a Hard Battle*”: *Essays on Working-Class Immigrants* (DeKalb, Il, 1986); and Hoerder, ed. *Labor Migration in the Atlantic Economies* (New York, 1985). See also my essay, “An Inter-ethnic Perspective on American Immigration History,” *MID-AMERICA*, 75 (April-July 1993): 223-35.

16. *La Nazione* (Florence): May 22, 1903; see also *Il Fulmine* (Lucca): May 24, 1903; and *La Difesa* (Florence, organ of the *Federazione Provinciale Socialista Fiorentina* May 31, 1903).

ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS AND WORKING-CLASS MOVEMENTS

ethnicity to America with them. Here these developed into class and ethnic identities as Italians confronted the realities of industrial exploitation and racism — and the ideals of democracy and opportunity. The construction of those identities has been a continuing process taking place over the course of several generations. It has been a process in which the Italian immigrants were not simply passive recipients of cultural messages, but one in which they were protagonists, filtering those messages through the sieve of their own experiences, memories, and values.

Historians of labor and immigration need to plumb the sources of class and ethnic identity more imaginatively and sensitively. They also need to recognize that personal identity is a whole of which class and ethnicity are inseparable, if sometimes conflicting, aspects, and that they must take both into account in their studies. Unfortunately neither American-style multiculturalism nor American neo-nationalism can assist us in this task since they are both committed to political agendas which deny the right of each person to self-determination in defining his or her identity. Both, for example, would deny me the dignity of my identity as a working-class Italian American. It remains for those of us who abjure such orthodoxies to salvage and restore the concepts of class and ethnicity as useful categories of historical analysis.