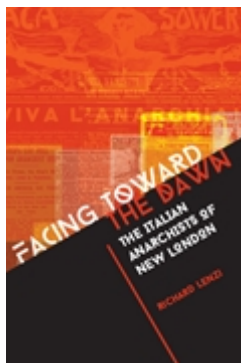
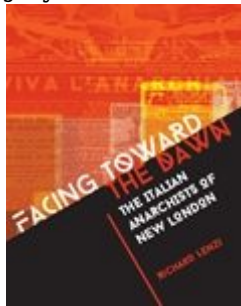


Anarchists of Connecticut

July 7, 2019



The complex history of working-class anarchism and syndicalism in the United States has been understudied. A good part of the problem is language. German, Spanish, Finnish, and Yiddish sources have been utilized by a handful of scholars, but mostly decades ago. The scholars of Russian, Hungarian, and other immigrant groups with such tendencies have not yet appeared.

The Italian immigrants, whose fondness for these ideologies and whose actual participation in giant strike movements in the first two decades or so of the twentieth century perhaps outnumbered all others, have perhaps finally found their scholars. This work casts a wider understanding of ethnic radicalism at large.

For instance, Kenyon Zimmer's *Immigrants Against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America* (2015) was a major contribution to the field. Andrew Cornell's *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century* (2016), based largely if not entirely on English-language sources and treating mostly non-immigrant anarchists, has added to our knowledge of the field generally.

Clearly, we need further work. Intimacy is important in the study of radicalism that was often based in scattered communities, unlikely to belong to any cohesive national movement. Located in a small geographic area little known for its radical activity, *Facing Toward the Dawn* has a large thematic scope. Who were the too-soon forgotten Italian-American anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists, an explosive section of working-class population mostly during the 1910s and an enduring radical influence here and there within the American labor movement into the 1940s? How did they understand themselves and their activities, far from ethnic political centers like New York and Chicago, where great figures like Carlo Tresca and Arturo Giovannitti could be seen on the dais, but closer to dramatic events like the Sacco and Vanzetti trial and subsequent execution?

In a fascinating passage, the author of this book recalls the memories of Trotskyists of the 1940s going door to door in blue-collar neighborhoods around the New London region of Connecticut. They came across dozens of aged militants eager to spill their hearts out to any young person who would listen to their stories. This is an all too common saga. The U.S. left has been historically

discontinuous, for many reasons, from repression to cultural assimilation and geographical mobility. Old rank-and-filers are left behind, sympathetic toward the next phases of activity but feeling disconnected and alone.

The radical story here demands a little social-economic background that Lenzi, himself a retired industrial worker in Connecticut, provides with lucidity. In boom years between recessions, the sea-going commerce of late nineteenth-century New London was shifting toward modern industrialism, reckless of the immigrant public. Whole sections of the Fort Trumbull neighborhood were flattened under misguided development plans, but much remained. Here, new immigrants swarmed, relocated from a hotbed of nineteenth-century Italian radicalism, the Marche on the Adriatic coast east of Tuscany. They would be joined by fellow Italian immigrants from particular districts of southern Italy, close to Naples and Sicily. Deeply impoverished, provided poor sewage treatment or other public services, these new Americans brought visionary ideals with them to combat the evils experienced by the newer communities.

They also brought techniques of organizing among people largely illiterate or barely literate. Folklore, ceremony, and theater were joined to the use of radical newspapers read aloud by leading community figures.

The Italian Socialist Federation, among ethnic socialist groups uniquely aligned with the Industrial Workers of the World rather than the Socialist Party, offered a rallying point and orator-organizers famous in the population. Luigi Galleani, with a reputation for stirring a labor riot by the sheer power of his voice, competed with other anarchist notables like Enrico Malatesta—soon to return to his homeland. These passed through town or (like Galleani) made residence for a while, one sparkling personality followed by another.

It is a marvel of Lenzi's research into the Italian-language newspapers of these groups, with their local reporting of activities, and also into the English-language papers of towns small enough to notice and care about such activities, that he is able to follow not only the high-octane stars but the local activists, male and female, who often moved from town to town seeking jobs while also spreading the word ... and avoiding repression.

Sadly, a fair share of Italian radical energy went into anarchist and quasi-anarchist groups fighting each other for ideological reasons that seem to us today arcane at best. We forget that anarchism had as many followers as Marxist-style socialism in many places, definitely including Italy, until the early twentieth century. For these immigrants, certain that a revolution could be made, the differences seemed crucial and oddly related to the realities of Italian-American life.

To take one example: The building trades of almost every kind, but definitely granite-carving, were Italian specialties. Vibrant anarchists thus easily became contractors but also members of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) building trades unions that were well known in other places to be deeply exclusionary and deeply conservative. How did the anarchist contractors, and also tavern owners, confectionary store entrepreneurs, and barber shop owners, deal with their own contradictions? They seemed to believe that their personal success made their agitational efforts possible: They could support the movement, help pay for traveling agitators (and give them a home to stay in), finance legal assistance to those pursued by the authorities, and so on.

Their relation with the U.S.-born community around them, little inclined toward radicalism and often inclined toward patriotic outbursts, was something else. In some ways, it was best to draw aside, to reinforce their insular status. On the other hand, their insularity looked from the outside like conspiracy, and as World War I reached the United States, severe repression began. They were easy to locate.

Whole sectors of the Italian-American left were effectively wiped out. The followers of Galleani were said to go underground, rumored to continue as groups formally or informally scattered across the country. Lenzi does not say so, but a sufficient number in Chicago existed to publish a Communist daily newspaper during the 1920s, then dissolving amid sectarian infighting and confusion. They had another great defect, as old-timers told me: The activists were already middle-aged men by the 1920s, their wives and children remained unconverted, and the children would largely assimilate, abandoning even the idea of being on the left. Still other erstwhile Italian-American unionists, bitterly anti-Communist, became part of a conservative bloc within the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. The last editor of *Giustizia*, the ILGWU newspaper, bragged to me about being an eager collaborator with CIA projects to send large chunks of cash to the Christian Democratic anti-Communists of Italy in the late 1940s.

This was never the whole story. Italian-American communities rallied for the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti. Carlo Tresca led an anti-fascist movement that touched many of the aging comrades. And the social clubs initiated by the anarchists continued, generation by generation, perhaps keeping alive the idea of “free thought” among frequently conservative, that is to say, priest-dominated, social and political circles. The world of Vito Marcantonio, Popular Front U.S. representative with a wide following in East Harlem, could not survive the shifting ethnic base of his community, but he inspired many Italian-Americans and, by bringing Puerto Ricans into his movement, created a bridge that did not survive the Cold War but remained a vivid memory afterward. Artist Ralph Fasanella, one of the followers of Marcantonio, will perhaps stand in memory for others forgotten.

Facing Toward the Dawn is an important book, an act of recovered memory, that says much about regional life at the dawn of the twentieth century, when the future seemed more open than it does now.