

# Early Representations of Organized Crime and Issues of Identity in the Italian American Press (1890–1910)

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The image of the Mafia that has become commonplace in U.S. popular culture is the one popularized by *The Godfather*, in which, according to Thomas Ferraro, “blood and marketplace,” family and economy, Italian ethnicity, and American capitalism combine in a domesticated, roman-ticized, and Americanized version of organized crime in which “ethnic tribalism” is moderated by the “all-American pursuit of wealth and power” (Ferraro 1989, 177). This idea is a recent invention, a product of the recognition of just how successfully Italians have integrated within American society. As “Italian Americans no longer differ in education or socioeconomic status from other urban Americans of European descent” (Gabaccia 2010, 33), Italian American culture has become embedded firmly within the American mainstream culture to the point that many of its elements (food, film, music, etc.) are indistinguishable from American culture in general. “Italianness” in the contemporary moment is increasingly symbolic (Gans 1979), rooted in invented traditions (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Sollors 1989), a subjective and volitional process of self-affiliation (Waters 1990) based on a “feeling” of ethnic identity (Ferraro 2005).

However, it was not always so easy to take this “fit” for granted. In fact, much early discourse on Italian immigration insists on the impossibility of such integration due to certain “inherent” racial and/or cultural qualities that rendered them incompatible with American values and practices. The heaviest shadow hanging over Italian immigrants was certainly their widely alleged “natural” tendency to crime, which came to dominate early representations of Italian immigrants in the American mainstream press. This study argues that, while from the 1890s Italian immigrants were systematically (and almost exclusively) represented in relation to the Italian Mafias by the American mainstream press, a counternarrative was put forward by Italian-language newspapers. Indeed, the Americanness of Italian Americans that is taken for granted today was the product of a long discursive struggle carried out, in this early stage, primarily in the Italian American press as it sought to construct counterdiscourses of identity to combat the sinister, racialized representations of the mainstream press of the day.

Little attention has been given to these early representations in which Mafia and racial issues are heavily intertwined and still less to the Italian

American press of the period. Whether this is ascribable to what Edvige Giunta and Kathleen McCormick have termed “historical amnesia” about the real situation of Italian Americans in the early period, scarce access to source materials in archives, or language issues, a substantial and important part of Italian American culture—one that shows a “clear picture of the entanglement of Italian Americans in American racial issues”—has remained understudied (Giunta and McCormick 2010, 17). The fact that a rough beginning marked by discrimination on the basis of race does not fit with the traditional model of straight-line assimilation or with the notion of the inclusivity of the American nation that dominated conventional history may have delayed the recognition of the role of race in Italian American history.

In the wake of scholarly debate over how Europeans became racialized in the United States (see, for example, Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White*, 1995), contemporary historians such as Matthew Frye Jacobson (1998), David R. Roediger (2005), David A. J. Richards (1999), Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (2003), Thomas Guglielmo (2003), and Peter Vellon (2014) have directly addressed the question of whiteness in their discussions of European and Italian ethnicity, acknowledging that, during the period of mass immigration, European immigrants became diversified and mapped onto a hierarchy of “white” races according to their sociopolitical status as well as their perceived proximity to whiteness. Whereas documentary histories of Italian American discrimination since the 1970s, for example, Richard Gambino (1996, 1998), Salvatore J. LaGumina (1999), and, more recently, Joseph P. Cosco (2003), have focused on the American perception of Italians and have looked at external representations and stereotyping (including the association of Italian Americans with the Mafia and organized crime) in the mainstream American press, official government documents (such as the *Congressional Record*), and literature (Cosco 2003), the relentless work of self-representation that characterized early Italian American cultural production has been mostly neglected. While scholars such as Francesco Durante (2001, 2005) and, to some extent, Martino Marazzi (2004) have unearthed and made available from archives a wealth of literary and cultural texts (often using the Italian American press as sources) from the early phase of the Italian American experience, these texts have not been explored in depth in relation to Italian American self-representation.

Previous work (Cacioppo 2005) analyzed Italian American autobiographies and popular detective fiction as sites in which a self-conscious ethnic identity is constructed and negotiated. In particular, it focused on phenomena such as the myth of the Italian American detective (e.g., Joseph

Petrosino and Michael Fiaschetti of the New York Police Department's "Italian Squad") as constituting counternarratives to mainstream representation of Italians as criminals. The present work maintains a similar emphasis on the internal perspective of the Italian American community and continues to focus on issues of self-representation, but it shifts the objective of its analysis from works of fiction and autobiography to the news and the Italian American press, which played a vital role as a site of dialog with mainstream representations. While the importance of the Italian American press has always been acknowledged, from Robert E. Park (1922) to Rudolph Vecoli (1998), the first in-depth study came in 2014 with Vellon's broad work on representation of race, class, and identity in the early Italian-language press. The present article adds to the existing literature on the Italian-language press, representations of Mafia, and the construction of Italian American identity by looking at the Mafia stereotype as a manifestation of the "precarious racial position" (Vellon 2014, 2) of Italians in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, with the press functioning as a crucial point of intersection between discourses of racialization and identity construction.

The debate over the emergence and the nature of the Mafia in the United States became an important arena in which the struggle of Italian immigrants to define themselves and their place in American society took place. As Italians were represented almost exclusively in the context of criminality, it was in this discursive field that many immigrant writers sought to construct their own representations. An analysis that focuses specifically on representations of organized crime and law enforcement, in both the mainstream and Italian American press and the popular culture, enables us to use the discourse of Italian criminality as a lens through which to look at the wider processes of the negotiation and construction of Italian American identity. On the one hand, representations of Italian criminality in news coverage in the yellow press, feature articles on Mafia, Camorra, and Black Hand in mainstream papers and illustrated magazines, and popular detective libraries (inspired by real Black Hand crime stories) rested on underlying eugenicist assumptions that Italians were, by nature, criminally inclined and therefore incompatible with American law, unable to successfully integrate and participate in American civil society; on the other hand, counterrepresentations in Italian-language newspapers and serialized detective fiction (for example, Bernardino Ciambelli's works; see Cacioppo 2005) focused on making distinctions between the law-abiding majority and the criminal minority within the Italian community, deploying discourses of victimization in which the community was victimized not only by organized crime but also by the neglect of public institutions such as the police.

In my broad but still incomplete research on the press of this period—conducted while on a Fulbright at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (Queens College, CUNY)—I have looked at specific Mafia/criminality-related events in a “horizontal” perspective, examining various sources that describe and discuss these events contemporaneously, in order to foreground the debate among them regarding issues of race, criminality, and identity in relation to both mainstream and side-stream sources. I have identified a series of symbolic violent incidents around which there was intense and prolific discursive production as various positions strove to use the events to further particular political and/or ideological ends. This work will discuss two early nodal events around which representations of the relation between Italian immigrants and organized crime clustered: the New Orleans massacre of March 14, 1891<sup>1</sup> and the “barrel murder” in New York on April 14, 1903.<sup>2</sup> These events shocked public opinion and ignited debates over the relationship between Italianness and criminality that intersected with discourses of racial difference, immigration restriction, and the capability of Italians to assimilate. Around those dates, these issues filled the pages of both American mainstream and Italian papers, which engaged in an active dialog with each other (they actually translated, quoted, and commented on large chunks of each other’s editorials) and even entered into popular fiction.

Beginning from the early days of mass migration in the 1890s, Italian immigrants were continually and increasingly depicted in association with crime, especially organized crime, in both the mainstream and popular press of the period. The virulence and sensationalism of these representations were particularly strong in the new popular press, the so-called yellow papers (such as Bennett’s *Herald*, Hearst’s *New York Journal*, and Pulitzer’s *World*) and magazines (such as *Puck*, *Judge*, *Munsey’s*, *McClure’s*, *Collier’s*, and *Pearson’s Magazine*), which capitalized upon the wave of xenophobia that followed the mass migration from southern and eastern Europe in order to appeal to a wide readership.

Scenes like the one shown in Figure 1 became important means for including a rapidly growing public in political debate, crystallizing what became perceived as the menace of unrestricted immigration within powerful images (Conboy 2002, 57–60). In this scene, an impassive Uncle Sam observes the landing—“direct from the slums of Europe daily”—of a horde of immigrants, depicted as rats with the heads of men brandishing knives and pistols, with the words *Mafia*, *anarchist*, *Socialist*, and *assassination* written on their heads. Their southern and eastern European origins are clearly indicated by their clothing and their distinctive physical traits: dark skin and hair, snub and hooked noses. One man in particular, wearing a

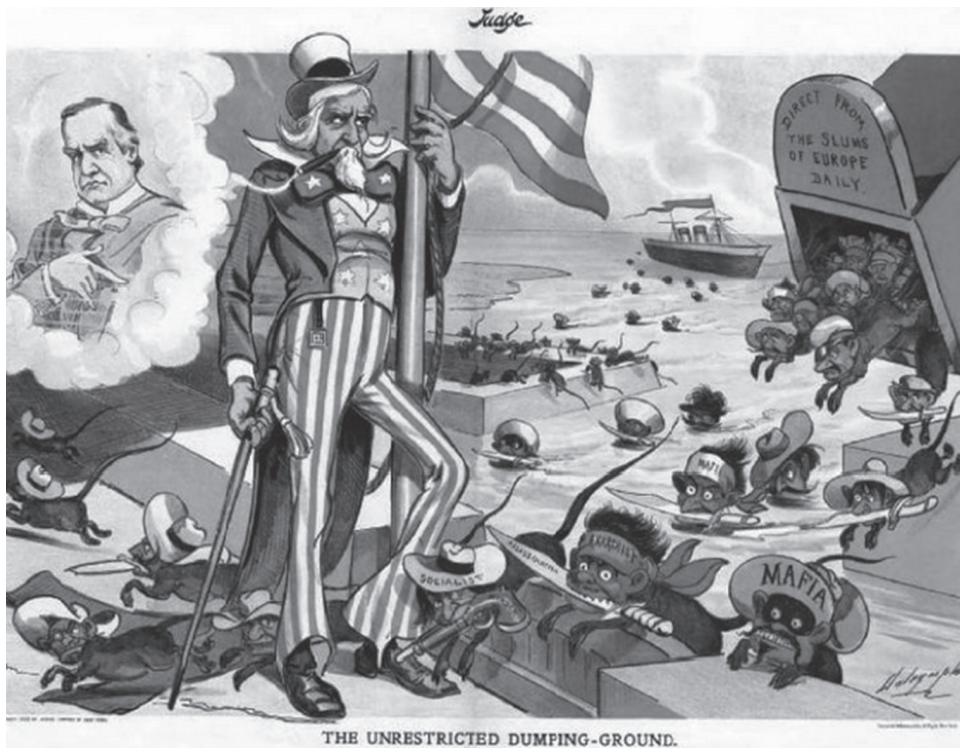


Figure 1. Cover of *Judge*, June 6, 1903: "The Unrestricted Dumping Ground."

*tricolore* bandana with "Mafia" written on it and carrying a stiletto between his teeth, leaves no doubt as to the nationality he is supposed to represent. In the upper-left corner there is the image of President William McKinley, assassinated in 1901 by the Polish anarchist Leon Czolgosz, providing a sort of concreteness to the menace to American institutions and security—and thus to American democracy itself—posed by this influx of foreigners.

Fueled by nativist views of immigrants as a threat to American safety, character, and morality, these first images of the newcomers became increasingly popular as the new century progressed, taking shape in the minds of Americans and becoming the predominant representations of Italian immigrants. Over time, the public perception of the phenomena of the Mafia and the Black Hand that emerged in the early days of Italian immigration shaped the way America came to see Italian immigrants and resulted in the formation of long-lasting stereotypes. What was at stake was the ability of Italians to successfully become Americans: In early representations, their ability to assimilate was not taken for granted; instead, crime was linked to race and used to represent Italian immigrants as innately criminal and thus unfit for citizenship or incapable of being "true" Americans.



The New Orleans massacre marks a paradigm shift in the public perception of Italians, forever changing the way they were represented, as the rustic image of the organ grinder (LaGumina 1999, 54), with its stereotypes of pauperism, ignorance, and stupidity, gave way to representations characterized by much more violent and criminal attributes and that constructed Italians as fundamentally—and racially—Other (Webb 2008, 181).

As Jacobson (1998, 56) has put it, in New Orleans, “racial distinctness became deadly.” After the acquittal of six Italians on trial for the assassination of New Orleans Chief of Police David Hennessy, a brutal reprisal occurred, and eleven Italians were murdered in the streets by a city mob. This was not simply a murder, but rather a lynching, of a piece with other racially motivated instances of this particular brand of violence. Indeed, in the newspaper coverage of the event and its aftermath, discourses of racial difference came to the fore and became the central ground upon which the legitimacy of the massacre was debated.

In mainstream newspapers such as *The New York Times*, Italians at the time were characterized as innately criminal and therefore guilty, even though they had been acquitted by a jury (“The New Orleans Affair” 1891, 4):

sneaking and cowardly . . . the descendants of bandits and assassins, who have transported to this country the lawless passions, the cut-throat practices and the oath-bound societies of their native country. . . . Our own rattlesnakes are as good citizens as they.

The *Baltimore News* (cited in Panek 1990, 44) commented that

[t]he Italian immigrant would be no more objectionable than some others were it not for his singularly blood-thirsty disposition and frightful temper and vindictiveness.

Here the implication is that criminal tendencies are hereditary. With implicit reference to theories of eugenics of that period, the association between crime and the Italian “race” is presented as natural and inevitable. The reference to the rattlesnake, an animal that is considered aggressive by nature, clearly indicates the threat that Italians were thought to represent to American society and their incompatibility with the values and rules of American citizenship. In contrast, the *Times* (“To Hunt the Assassins” 1890, 1) presents Chief of Police Hennessy as the

victim of Sicilian vengeance, wreaked upon him as the chief representative of law and order in this community, because he was seeking by the power of our American law to break the foreign vendettas that have so often filled our streets with blood.

At the level of language, these passages can be interpreted as relying on a series of binary oppositions—American citizens/Italian immigrants, community/oath-bound societies, law and order/lawless practices, and unlawful vendetta/rightful vengeance—which show the process of racial “Othering” at work. Italians are linked to the second half of each of these oppositions, and the figure of Hennessy is positioned along the first half; thus, Hennessy becomes personified as American law, and the Italian community in New Orleans is equated with the Mafia. The proof of their guilt was in their “disposition” and the criminal qualities inherited from their ancestors, “bandits and assassins,” rather than that determined by a court of law.

The legitimacy of this racial discourse was taken for granted; even the Italian American newspapers that contested these nasty representations primarily made racialized counterclaims rather than delegitimizing the idea of a racial argument. We see this, for example, in this article titled “Un’opuscolo. Are Italians a Menace to the United States?” from the *L’Eco d’Italia* (1890, 1), one of the most popular Italian American papers in New York City,<sup>3</sup> which argues:

Una razza come la nostra . . . tra le più esemplari per sobrietà, tenacia nel lavoro e relativa moralità . . . daranno alla popolazione una razza sana vigorosa, donde usciranno buoni artigiani, perché malgrado i loro difetti un caso è certo: che il loro sangue è puro e forte come i vini che producono le loro fertili terre. . . . Non è da questi che viene il pericolo ma dai nemici del lavoro, da chi compra e vende il voto degli stranieri.

A race like ours . . . among the most exemplary for sobriety, hard work, and morality . . . give the people a healthy, vigorous stock from which come good artisans because, despite their defects, one thing is sure: that their blood is pure and strong like the vines that are produced by their fertile land. . . . The threat does not come from this but from the enemies of work, from those who buy and sell the votes of foreigners. (This and all other translations by author.)

*L’Eco d’Italia* here appeals to the strength and purity of Italian blood, “puro e forte come i vini che producono le loro fertili terre,” and asserts the positive qualities of sobriety, hard work, and morality inherent in the Italian race, attributing any threat to America to the corruption and exploitation of immigrant workers by the political machine and the *padrone* system.

The *Cristoforo Colombo*<sup>4</sup> went even further, mobilizing an inverted rhetoric of barbarism versus civilization in which Italians are civilized Europeans who respect institutions and Americans are ruled by the impulse

to blood vengeance. In the illustration shown in Figure 2, titled “Dopo la tragedia di New Orleans” (After the tragedy in New Orleans), by G. Nasi, the victims of the lynching are not only those who had lost their lives and their families but also the very ideas of *giustizia* (justice) and *civiltà* (civility). Next to the images showing the dignified and restrained pain of the families and the children “in attesa del babbo che non tornerà mai più” (waiting for their father who will never return again) is the symbolic representation of the broken scales and the violence represented by daggers, emphasizing how the ideals of justice and civilization had been shattered (“Dopo la tragedia di New Orleans” 1891, 1).

Such an interpretation of the New Orleans massacre had already been articulated a few days earlier in an editorial titled “New Orleans, un paese di barbari” (1891), in which the “blood-thirsty” and “ferocious” population of New Orleans is depicted as behaving in a way that would be expected from savage Native Americans, “pelli rossa,” [red skins] rather than people of “European stock.” Even cannibals, it claims, would never go so far as to deprive law of its authority and “rispetterebbero chi alla giustizia è stato affidato, e non massacrerebbero chi dalla giustizia fosse stato assolto” (would respect the decisions of justice and not massacre someone found not guilty).<sup>5</sup> One thing is clear for the editorialist (probably the novelist Bernardino Ciambelli): The Italians in New Orleans were “innocenti vittime



Figure 2. Cristoforo Colombo, March 17, 1891: After the massacre, the victims are not only the families of those massacred but also “Giustizia e civiltà.”



dell'odio selvaggio di razza" (innocent victims of savage racial hatred), showing that he had understood that public debate over the lynching was going to be framed in racial terms and carefully constructed his argument to invert the anticipated framing ("New Orleans, un paese di barbari" 1891, 1).

Thus, Mafia and race were bound together, with the former presented as the "natural" expression of the latter. The association of Mafia and race lasted because it was supported by the authority of the mainstream press, which made the stereotype seem real: In article after article, their guilt was simply assumed, inferred from the fact that they were Italian and therefore criminal in nature. The newspapers produced what Patrick Champagne calls "reality effects" by "creating a media-oriented vision of reality that contributes to creating the reality it claims to describe" (Champagne 1999, 56). Once established and legitimized by the press, such racialized discourse quickly spread to other contexts as a fact that could be taken for granted.

In a fictional account of the events leading up to Hennessy's murder and the ensuing lynching titled "The New Orleans Mafia," published only a month after the event in *The New York Detective Library*, the racialized discourse of Mafia is already established and underlies the whole narrative (Police Captain Howard 1891). The descriptions of Italians are clearly marked by nonwhite racial features, "a swarthy complexion" and the "snakiest of black eyes," which gleam from the black half-masks of the Mafias (Police Captain Howard 1891, 3). The adjective *snakiest* leaves no doubt that these men are meant to be associated with evil and treachery. Moreover, Sicilians are called "the most bloody-minded and revengeful of the Mediterranean races. These traits were probably owing to their Saracen origin, murder and intrigue being natural with them" (Police Captain Howard 1891, 10). The power and reach of this racial discourse are further demonstrated by the way that, in 1911, the Dillingham Commission, appointed by the U.S. government to investigate the correlation between crime and the new immigrants, reported as a fact that "certain kinds of criminality are inherent in the Italian race" (U.S. Immigration Commission 1911, 209).

As Jacobson (1998) has noted, racialized discourse became the basis for arguments about restricting Italian immigration. The mass migration from Europe prompted new racialist revisions of whiteness that placed the new immigrants in a "racial middle ground." Since the convergence of race and "fitness for self-government" was deeply embedded in American political culture (all the way back to 1790, when citizenship was restricted to "free white persons"), racial difference became an argument used to support immigration restriction.

The tendency to form secret societies like the Mafia was presented as part of Southern Italians' innate racial qualities that therefore could be extended to the whole population (sometimes the terms *Italians* and *Mafias* were used as synonyms), thus establishing a ground for their wholesale exclusion. The danger of the Mafia lay in its inherently conspiratorial and anti-institutional character, which threatened the very fabric of American civil society. For example, according to an article in *Harper's Weekly*, what made the Hennessy assassination such an extraordinary event that justified recourse to violence was the fact that it was carried out by "a conspiracy of foreign criminals," which had "so completely overwhelmed and paralyzed society in New Orleans that the city could be saved to order and law only by a temporary resort to barbarism" ("The Mafia" 1891, 218).

Italian papers understood the ideological purchase of such language and that what was at stake was their assimilability and fitness for citizenship. They developed two primary strategies to combat such discourse. The first was to ridicule it by showing up its overblown claims. One article points out the ludicrous proposition in the *Evening Sun* that one of those arrested for killing Hennessy had a detailed plan for the assassination of *every* police chief in the entire country who fought against Mafias ("L'Assassinio di New Orleans" 1890, 1). The other strategy was to create a counterdiscourse emphasizing Italian participation in the construction of American institutions. For example, in a public speech, Bernardino Ciambelli underlined how Italians came to the United States seeking to earn money and, in return, built the infrastructure that not only enriched the nation but allowed it to progress as well ("Il Mass-Meeting di New Haven" 1891, 2):

Siamo venuti in queste terre attirati dal miraggio dell'oro, ma in compenso del prezioso metallo noi diamo agli americani le opere più grandiose, essi ci danno l'oro, noi restituiamo lunghe, interminabili guide di ferro dove corre veloce la vaporiera, apportatrice di ricchezza, di progresso, di civiltà. Ci danno oro e i figli d'Italia forano i monti, riempiono i laghi . . . fabbricano palazzi monumentali . . . ci danno oro e noi diamo le nostre forze, la nostra intelligenza. Siamo pari.

We came to this land drawn by the mirage of gold, but in exchange for this precious metal we give the Americans the grandest works; they give us gold, we give them back long, endless iron railways where steam engines race, carrying wealth, progress, civilization. They give us gold and the sons of Italy tunnel under the mountains, fill their lakes . . . build monumental buildings . . . they give us gold and we give them our strength, our intelligence. We are even.

To adopt Werner Sollors's terminology, it can be said that Ciambelli, emphasizing the role of Italians in the literal "making of America," substitutes a rhetoric of "consent" for that of "descent," invoking the myth of American inclusivity to contest arguments about racial exclusivity (Sollors 1986).

After the events of New Orleans, which established the stereotype of all Italians as *mafiosi*, in 1903 a new terrifying event confirmed America's fears about Italians and that the scope of the threat was not localized to New Orleans: Indeed, there was a national conspiracy, called the Black Hand, whose tentacles reached wherever Italians had settled. A man was found dead in a barrel on the corner of Avenue D and East 11th Street in New York, and the police had no leads other than the crucifix around the victim's neck and a piece of paper that pointed to the Italians, that is, the Mafia/Black Hand. The journalist F.M. White later observed that this was "the first of the tragedies of the Black Hand to demonstrate . . . that the Medieval criminals of the Mafia . . . are able to slay with impunity in the secret places of the Italian settlements throughout the country" (White 1916, 312). The event filled the pages of national as well as local papers and made such an impression that it became a central trope, the starting point of every discussion about the Mafia for years to come.

The first articles reported in shocked tones the discovery of the body and the gruesome details of the "atrocious murder"—eighteen knife wounds to the neck that almost severed the head from the body—and established the connection between such unusual, primitive, and beastly cruelty and Italians ("Murdered Man's Body" 1903, 1); within two weeks of the murder, however, interest had shifted to the Mafia in general and its origins in Sicily and Southern Italy, often implying some kind of connection between the murder and the Mafia in Italy, as can be seen in articles such as "The Mafia in America" published in *Collier's Weekly* (Sangree 1903). Many articles followed the same format: They described the barrel murder (in all its cruelty), something the reader would be familiar with, and then went on to trace the origins of the Mafia and Camorra in Italy, and finally complained about how scores of these medieval criminals landed daily upon American shores. The image from *Judge* (Figure 1) published on June 6, 1903, shortly after the barrel murder, is perhaps the most emblematic figuration of the rising tide of fear of the Mafia peril in the wake of this event.

With a synecdochal procedure typical of stereotyping, the barrel murder became a trope used to exemplify the Mafia, and the word *Mafia* became interchangeable with the word *Italians*. Knowledge of the Mafia and its internal rules was then constructed as the key to understanding what really went on in those "secret places of the Italian settlement" (White 1916, 312). Such descriptions created fascination with "how the other half really

lived,” with knowing the secret rituals and customs, the sordid details of how “the most secret and terrible organization in the world” operated (Dash 2009, 89). The exotic and threatening representations of Italian Americans as Mafia, which emphasized their backwardness, ignorance, and clannishness (in a word, their Otherness), dovetailed with broader middle-class interest in the lives of those who were different from them—the poor, the foreign—cultivated by the work of Jacob Riis (and, later, the muckrakers), who provided an alleged insider’s perspective on those who seemed impenetrable from the outside. One investigative journalist, Broughton Brandenburg, went so far as to go to Italy, disguise himself as an immigrant, and immigrate to New York for the sake of writing a book on his “insider” experience (Brandenberg 1904).

In article after article, in newspapers as well as magazines (such as *Collier's*, which pioneered investigative journalism and had a circulation of 500,000 copies), we find more or less imaginative explanations of Mafia seen as a way of life—its origins, internal rules, secret signs and rituals, and how it arrives in America and operates there. For example, the decision of “who shall put a man to death” is made by the tossing of cards (Sangree 1903, 8):

The elect sit about a table, the cards are shuffled, and one starts to deal. Ace of diamond is the fatal card, and the man to whom it is dealt is given a certain time within which to accomplish his mission.

The construction of Mafia as a system, as a centralized organization with precisely codified rules that spanned the Atlantic Ocean, strengthened the hypothesis of a grand Italian conspiracy involving all Italians. Mafia origins and habits in Italy become a template for interpreting the way of life of Italian communities in America (“Immigration from Sicily” 1903, 5):

In Sicily the women and children will work hard in the fields and the man will strut around with a gun over his shoulder. When they come here the women and children work hard in the sweatshop and the men hang around street corners or play cards in the cafes, pretty well dressed, smoking, idling and enjoying themselves. How do they do it? Blackmail is one answer, shoving the queer is another.<sup>6</sup>

The images evoked here of Italian men hanging around on street corners directly echoes the characteristics of Lombroso’s “born criminal” type, with his “strong love for gambling alcohol and complete idleness” (Lombroso 1895, 38). Lombroso’s ideas were already in circulation in the United States in this period, and they certainly influenced the criminal and Mafia stereotypes of Southern Italian immigrants. However, whereas in Italy the work



of Lombroso and other criminal anthropologists evolved within a political context open to scientific reformism to ameliorate social and economic problems, in the United States these ideas were selectively used to lend “scientific” authority to racial hierarchies and discriminatory policies (see D’Agostino 2002). The yellow press, which knew full well that “xenophobia was a popular and therefore profitable pursuit” (Conboy 2002, 57), tended to magnify the pervasiveness of the threat of these criminals, exploiting the broad popular appeal that this sense of urgency and danger implied. Headlines in the *Herald* (April 26, 1903) such as “Scores of New York Businessmen Pay Blackmail to Mafia” or “Immigration from Sicily: America’s Great Problem,” conveyed the idea that the moral corruption of the capitalistic system came from a foreign element and was not intrinsic to the system, supporting the argument that it would be enough to stop Italian immigration to restore its proper, lawful, and fair functioning.

In the article from the *Herald* in Figure 3, all of the elements come together to give the sense of an emergency caused by the danger of migration from Sicily and Southern Italy: the alarming statistics showing a threefold increase in the number of Italian immigrants over a ten-year period, and the map that cuts Europe in two, indicating Southern Italy as the source of the “worst” of European migration, are accompanied by an illustration of a sinister, scowling individual as a “typical” Southern



Figure 3. New York Herald, April 26, 1903.



Italian—the same look that can be found in the picture next to it of Italians in the waiting room of Ellis Island. The article's subtitle leaves no doubt as to the interpretation of these images and statistics:

Statistics Prove That the Scum of Southern Europe Is Dumped at the Nation's Door in Rapacious, Conscienceless, Lawbreaking Hordes.

COME TO PREY ON STRANGERS AND EACH OTHER

Corrupt Politicians Looking for Dishonest Votes Give Objectionable Newcomers Special Privileges That Make Them an Element of Great Danger to Society.

The dangers for the system were thus not the corrupt politicians but the moral degradation of Southern Italians.

Another central element of stories about the Mafia was the inherent danger for American institutions posed by the practice of *omertà*, or “the conspiracy of silence,” as it was termed by F. M. White (1907, 308). *Omertà* was described as “the Sicilian code of ethics enjoining silence concerning any knowledge of an illegal act performed,” which bound criminals and victims together and was built on abject fear, (as Broughton Brandenburg (1906, 7) wrote in the *Tribune*). It is argued that *omertà* obstructed the work of the police and the justice system, summing up their record of success for the period between September 1904 and March 1906 as “forty Black Hand crimes to one arrest and eleven arrests to one conviction.” Indeed, the barrel murder case ended with no convictions. Italians were thus a threat to the functioning of American institutions and a justice system that depended upon cooperative witnesses to achieve convictions. As the article puts it, “pursuing Italian criminal methods under an American police system is about as safe as kite-flying” (Brandenburg 1906, 7). With both Italian criminals and the community portrayed as, effectively, working hand in hand to thwart the justice system, it was easy to take the argument one step further to claim that their massive continuing influx would “lower our standards of living and civilization” (“Immigration from Sicily” 1903, 5) and eventually threaten the fabric of American democracy itself—which pointed to only one solution: immigration restriction.

Italian American papers protested such gross distortions regarding the nature, organization, and spread of the Mafia and the involvement of the whole community. They tried to expose the reasons for the pervasiveness of this debate in the American press while also providing alternative interpretations of Italian crime to reassure their Italian readers as well as the American public about their place in and contribution to America. Between the end of April and the middle of May 1903, *L'Araldo Italiano* and

*Il Telegrafo* engaged in a concerted campaign to counter the yellow press's distortions about the barrel murder and the Mafia in general.<sup>7</sup> The intent to protest against the American press is clear in the mocking tone in an article in *Il Telegrafo*<sup>8</sup> ("La Mafia e la polizia" 1903, 3):

I nostri confratelli americani dacché il mistero del barile occupa e appassiona l'opinione pubblica ne sono pieni fino alla nausea, e spropositando allegramente, urlano mattina e sera contro la tenebrosa sanguinaria associazione in cui vedono e amano vedere implicati tutti gli italiani. Contro questa convinzione diffusissima nel pubblico americano occorre protestare energicamente.

Since the barrel mystery has occupied and inflamed public opinion, our American brothers have filled their newspapers to the point of nausea and, happily spouting nonsense, scream morning and night against the shadowy, blood-thirsty association in which they see, and like to see, all Italians implicated. We must protest forcefully against this widespread belief of the American public.

The editorialist Alfonso Arbib-Costa (1903), in his article "La leggenda del cattivo italiano" (The legend of the bad Italian), takes an even more polemical tone in predicting how the American press would exploit and manipulate the barrel murder for a long time to create a "bogey man," a supervillain from a romance by Ponson du Terrail, guilty of every imaginable crime, with the intent of feeding a "spicy dish" to their readers. This shows that Arbib-Costa clearly understood that the objective of the American press is the sensationalization of the Mafia to excite readers' passions and drive sales.

The theory of an international conspiracy with tentacles reaching as far as the Italian communities of Tunis and Algiers and involving all Italians, a theory like the one propagated in the *New York Tribune* ("Lupo the Wolf" 1912, A4), was dismissed by *Il Telegrafo* as an overblown hoax exploited by the yellow press to sell papers. Instead it offered the theory of "qualche piccola e sporadica banda di malfattori" (small, sporadic criminal bands), neither specific to the Italian community nor any more organized than other criminal gangs ("Gli Italiani giudicati" 1903, 3). Italian editorialists seemed to clearly understand the power of the press to construct Italians as the "enemy within" and the implications that this characterization would have on their acceptance as part of American society. So, they set out to demolish these stereotypes, including reaching out beyond the Italian community. An article published in the mainstream *North American Review* by the former president of the United Italian Societies, provided an

official version for the Italian community. Titled “The Black Hand Myth,” it refuted, point by point, all the misconceptions by which the American press had led the public to believe in the existence of an organization in Italy called “the Black Hand Society” that had “the purpose of plundering the United States.” Moreover, the piece argued that the press was constructing a myth that actually assisted criminals by making their threats more effective (D’Amato 1908, 543).

Italian papers interpreted the Black Hand on a much smaller scale: They are only “una lega di malfattori che minaccia e terrorizza l’intera comunità italiana” (a gang of malefactors which terrorizes the entire community) (“Gli Italiani giudicati” 1903, 3), which is the victim not only of crime but of corrupt police and neglect by American institutions. One editorial ascribes the singling out of Italians as the main source of crime to inequalities of power in the capitalist system, which makes them easy targets for scapegoating. Other ethnic groups also have criminal gangs, it argued, but their entire communities are not tarred with the brush of criminality and seen as un-American. Without greater success in business, finance, and politics, Italians would remain on the bottom rung of social groups and be subject to misrepresentation and maltreatment (“La mafia e la delinquenza italiana” 1903, 3).

Another way the Italian press countered stereotypes and misrepresentations was to provide positive images of the community and engage in a rhetoric of Americanization (“Gli Italiani giudicati” 1903, 3):

Come razza gli italiani in America sono sobri, frugali industriosi. . . . I poveri lavoratori in questa terra rammentano le sofferenze passate, constatano il miglioramento delle loro condizioni, e la loro maggiore ambizione è quella di stabilirsi in America in una casa di loro proprietà e di conseguire l’agiatezza, la prosperità e l’istruzione per i loro figli, perché la famiglia viva e si perpetui rispettabile e rispettata.

As a race, Italians in America are sober, frugal, and industrious. . . . The poor workers in this land remember the past sufferings, acknowledge the improvements of their conditions, and their greatest ambition is to settle in America in their own home, to achieve comfort, prosperity, and education for their children, to allow their family to continue to be respectable and respected.

Italians are portrayed as “sober,” “frugal,” and “industrious” in keeping with the original values of American capitalism. Their goal was to achieve prosperity, respectability, property ownership, and education for their children—in short, the “American Dream.”

Over time similar counterdiscourses spilled over from the news and editorials into serialized fiction published in these same types of newspapers, above all with the figure of Lieutenant Joe Petrosino, the head of the Italian Squad of the New York Police Department, who appeared frequently both in the news and in the pages of novels by the journalist Bernardino Ciambelli.<sup>9</sup> The positive image of a criminal-catching detective (see Figure 4), who had played such an important role in the solution of the barrel murder case, was set against the negative ones of the Mafia. The myth of the strong, honest, and upright policeman, with 700 arrests in 1904 alone, a self-made man and a representative of the law who acts on behalf of the community to eradicate crime, was lionized and held up as an emblem of how Italians shared mainstream values and wanted to achieve success through hard work. Above all, this myth showed that Italian Americans were not incompatible with American institutions and law and order (Cacioppo 2005). At times the character himself gives voice



Figure 4. Il Progresso Italoamericano, April 26, 1903.



to the counternarratives of these newspapers, in one instance proclaiming (Ciambelli 1908, chapter 48):

Questo [*sic*] non appartengono alla Mano Nera, ma alla legione degli uomini dalle mani callose, alla squadra dei martiri del lavoro. Il suo grido non sarebbe stato udito, perché si usa far clamore tutte le volte che un italiano commette un delitto, ma si tace quando centinaia e centinaia cadono vittime del dovere.

They did not belong to the Black Hand, but to the legion of men with calluses on their hands, to the squad of the martyrs of work. His cry would not be heard, as a clamor was only made every time an Italian committed a crime, while there was silence when hundreds fell victim in the line of duty.

What emerges clearly from the analysis of the coverage of these events is the important function of the press in the processes of the formation of Italian American ethnic identity. Newspapers and magazines were the site in which identity was negotiated and in which discourses on immigration, xenophobia, race, criminality, and the possibility of assimilation intersected and conflicted. On the one side, there was the power of the American press, precisely at the moment in which it was becoming a mass phenomenon, to construct enduring images that crystallized into stereotypes; on the other there was the awareness of these processes, as well as of the consequences that they could have on the status of Italians in America, that the Italian American community expressed through its press. The Italian American press became the primary space in which to rectify the image of Italians in the American press and thus provide a new and diverse internal perspective on the processes of adaptation and assimilation that the Italians were undergoing in America.

Rather than interpret the counterrepresentations of the Italian American press as a misguided defense of Italian criminality, as Marazzi (2000, 283) has suggested, we can instead read them as some of the earliest examples of self-representation and of an emerging Italian American identity that was forming in opposition to prevailing racial stereotypes. What needs to be emphasized in looking at this early period is the fact that the status of Italians in America could not be taken for granted given that the assimilation process in this early phase was not smooth and linear, but rather difficult and tentative, obstructed by their “precarious racial position” (Vellon 2014, 2). As we reconstruct the history of Italian American identity from a historical moment in which they are one of the, if not the, most successful ethnic immigrant groups, the underlying uncertainty must not be overlooked. Remembering these origins is especially vital from an



Italian perspective as, in the current moment, we find ourselves in the role of being an immigrant destination, and this same kind of Othering process is happening to new groups of immigrants in our public discourse and popular culture.

## Notes

1. A group of Sicilians were believed to be responsible for the murder of the New Orleans chief of police on October 15, 1890. However, they were acquitted at trial, provoking the anger of the local community, which took to the streets calling for the deaths of the suspects. On March 14, 1891, an enraged crowd of 20,000 people forcibly removed eleven Sicilians from the jail and lynched them.
2. The horribly disfigured body of Benedetto Madonia was found sealed in a barrel abandoned in the street. Lieutenant Joe Petrosino, head of the Italian Squad, a special detail of the New York Police Department that focused on Italian crime, solved the case. Petrosino recognized a mixture of sugar, sawdust of the sort used on tavern floors, and Toscano cigar butts at the bottom of the barrel. The barrel was stamped W&T 233, which led the investigators to the Wallace & Thompson grocery store, where it was discovered that they had only one Italian client, Pietro Inzerillo, owner of a café at 226 Elizabeth Street. Petrosino determined that this restaurant was a front for a band of counterfeiters and extortionists headed by Giuseppe Morello (called "the Clutch Hand" due to a deformity) and that the man in the barrel had been murdered in the back of the store. He was able to give a name to the body, Benedetto Madonia, a businessman from Buffalo who had come to New York to do a favor for his brother-in-law Giuseppe Di Primo, a counterfeiter incarcerated at Sing Sing Prison. Madonia was sent to ask his brother-in-law's ex-gang associates for a share of the take in order to pay for his defense. In the end, notwithstanding the numerous arrests among those associated with Morello's gang, no one confessed, and the case was closed without any convictions (see Dash 2009).
3. *L'Eco d'Italia* was the first Italian-language newspaper in New York City. Founded as a weekly in 1848 by Giovanni Francesco Secchi de Casali, a Mazzinian exile, and Felice Tocci, a banker, it became a daily in March 1881 (Vecoli 1998, 20; Durante 2005, 82). Although in the early days it devoted little space to events and news from the local Italian communities, with its focus being mainly Italian affairs, at the time of the New Orleans massacre the events and ensuing debates were covered in detail, and its editor-in-chief, Edoardo Michelangeli, was the promoter of the famous mass meeting that took place at Cooper Union on March 20.
4. *Cristoforo Colombo* started in 1887 and was run by Vincenzo Polidori. The writer and journalist Bernardino Ciambelli was the editor at the time of the New Orleans massacre. He was "one of the most popular colonial journalists" (Bosi 1921, 408) and had been defined by the *New York Herald* as "one of the most rabid writers of the local Italian press during the Mafia excitement" ("And He Denounced Americans" 1891, 5). From November 1897, *Cristoforo Colombo* merged with the more successful *Progresso Italoamericano*.
5. A similar rhetoric of barbarism versus civilization can also be found in an editorial in *Progresso Italoamericano* titled "Altre Considerazioni sulla strage degli XI Siciliani di New Orleans" (1891), where the fashionable, civilized white citizens of New Orleans are said to be worse than Indians for the savagery of their acts.
6. "Shoving the queer" is a slang expression for "distributing counterfeit money."
7. See "La Mafia e la polizia" 1903, "Gli Italiani giudicati" 1903, "La mafia e la delinquenza italiana" 1903, Arbib-Costa 1903, and Casabona 1903, to mention only the most significant.

8. *Il Telegrafo* started in 1900 as the evening edition of *L'Araldo Italiano*, established by Vincenzo Polidori and Giovanni Vicario in 1889. Directed by Agostino De Biasi with his brother Pasquale as editor-in-chief, the paper enjoyed the frequent collaboration of the by-then very popular writer Bernardino Ciambelli.
9. Lieutenant Joe Petrosino appears as a character in several novels by Bernardino Ciambelli: *I misteri di Bleecker Street, romanzo contemporaneo* (1899) and *Il delitto di Coney Island ovvero la vendetta della zingara* and *I misteri di Harlem, ovvero la bella di Elizabeth Street*, serialized in *La Follia di New York* in 1906–1908 and 1910–1911, respectively (see Cacioppo 2005).

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