

A Great Conspiracy against Our Race: Italian Immigrant Newspapers and the Construction of Whiteness in the Early Twentieth Century.

By Peter G. Vellon.

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171 pages.

There are few topics in U.S. history as complicated as the intersection of immigration, race, color, and national identity during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1990s, historians began to consider whiteness as a racial identity and to investigate how immigrants fit in American society as either white, nonwhite, or in between. The place of Italian Americans on this continuum has provoked an especially vibrant debate. Did native-born whites embrace Italian immigrants as white as soon as they arrived or relegate them to a status somewhere between white and nonwhite? How did Italian Americans understand race relations and their position in a changing racial matrix?

In *A Great Conspiracy against Our Race: Italian Immigrant Newspapers and the Construction of Whiteness in the Early 20th Century* Peter G. Vellon engages these questions and contributes to an understanding of the formation of immigrant racial identities in the United States between 1880 and 1920. He draws on twelve Italian-language newspapers published in New York City that he categorizes as mainstream and radical. The key conclusions of the book rest on evidence from the mainstream press, owned by *prominenti*, or prominent community leaders, represented by such papers as *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* and *Il Cittadino*. Vellon argues that Italian Americans' racial consciousness evolved over time so that by 1920 the mainstream press had constructed an identity with three dominant features: Italian, American, and white.

Change over time is an important aspect of Vellon's argument and one that allows him to treat identity formation with nuance. Before 1910, Italian Americans were involved in a project of constructing a group identity as they tried to understand the dynamics of race in the United States. In chapters 1 and 2 Vellon examines two strategies the press used during this period to elevate the status of Italian Americans in Americans' eyes and more clearly define what it meant to be Italian. First, Italian-language newspapers regularly celebrated the long history of Italian civilization and the contributions Italians had made to the world. Second, these newspapers defined what it meant to be Italian by using Africans as an "other." Taken together, Vellon suggests, these tactics of representation formed a sense of Italianness, or *italianità*, among Italian immigrants and their children in the United States that may have encouraged a more cohesive identity than that which existed among Italians in Italy. He implies that the newspapers' construction of an Italian civilization provided a foundation upon which they could later add a layer of white racial consciousness.

In chapters 3 and 4 Vellon continues to probe the period between 1880 and 1910 but shifts focus from the newspapers' ideas about Italian identity to the crucible of race relations in the United States. He examines the mainstream and radical press for clues to how Italian Americans understood themselves vis-à-vis Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans. Both categories of newspapers marginalized Native Americans, viewing them as uncivilized and unlikely candidates for assimilation. When the papers discussed Asian Americans and African Americans,

differences emerged. Radical newspapers, especially *Il Proletario*, blended discussions of economics and race to emphasize the evils of capitalism and promote a broad, class-based identity that could accommodate other marginalized groups. A different dynamic developed in the pages of mainstream papers. Newspapers such as *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* demonstrated a “fluid racial worldview” (58), according to Vellon, where articles transitioned over time from expressing sympathy with Asian Americans and African Americans to reflecting dominant racial ideologies to justify racism and violence directed at the two groups. Vellon interprets this shift as Italian Americans using a key community institution to distance themselves from nonwhite groups and assert their whiteness.

In chapter 5, Vellon traces the deployment of this now racially defined Italian identity. After 1910 mainstream Italian-language newspapers left behind overt criticism of white violence and discrimination against African Americans and Asian Americans. Instead, the mainstream press asserted whiteness by conflating the Italian national heritage they helped construct with being white and distancing Italian Americans from groups of color. Vellon suggests this shift was partly in response to increasing calls for the restriction of southern and eastern European immigration and the heightened nationalism brought on by World War I. In his careful reading of the newspapers’ discussions of race, Vellon finds that Italian Americans identified as white through a discourse of civilization, abandoning public criticism of lynchings of blacks, and interpreting the race riots of 1917 and 1919 to suggest that African Americans, not Italian Americans, were the greater threat to American order. By 1920, Vellon concludes, Italian-language newspapers had helped their readers learn the contours of U.S. racial politics well enough to understand that they were best served by asserting whiteness and abandoning any solidarity with other groups marginalized by race.

Anyone interested in the history of immigrant newspapers in general, and the Italian-language press in particular, would do well to read this book. Vellon educates the reader on the variety of newspapers and offers some distinctions between mainstream and radical views, although the focus is largely on the former. While he finds, for example, that *prominenti*-owned mainstream papers used race to define an Italian American identity, radical newspapers such as *Il Proletario* more often tried to rally readers around issues of social class. The book provides an engaging glimpse into the types of stories Italian immigrants would have read in New York City between the mid-1880s and 1920. Vellon also offers some revisionist history regarding Italian American identity formation. Unlike other historians who have argued that Italian immigrants lacked a clear sense of Italian identity and racial awareness until after Mussolini’s rise in 1920, Vellon moves the marker backward, suggesting Italians in the United States had formed their sense of *italianità* well before the rise of Fascism.

On the more central question of Italian American racial identity, Vellon produces compelling evidence to support the claim that their racial consciousness evolved over time and that mainstream Italian-language newspapers had embraced whiteness by 1920. However, even a generous reading raises questions about how representative the mainstream press in New York City was for all Italians in the United States. Vellon attempts to expand his sample by lightly sprinkling evidence and analysis from the Italian-language radical press throughout the book, but these sources either contradict some of the author’s key claims about Italian racial consciousness after 1910 because

of the radicals' focus on class rather than race or nearly disappear from his narrative altogether, such as in the crucial last chapter of the book. Readers curious about other sites where racial identities were formed—such as the workplace, the theater, the law, or the church—will need to look elsewhere.

Vellon contributes to whiteness studies by rejecting the argument that Italians were “white on arrival” (per Thomas Guglielmo [2003]), either in their own minds or in the minds of native-born whites who appear in the book mainly in the form of lynch mobs. He clearly attempts to build on the work of scholars such as David Roediger, James Barrett, and Matthew Frye Jacobson who have argued Italian Americans moved from an “inbetween” to a “white” status. Tracing this journey requires an exploration of at least two perspectives: the immigrants' sense of themselves on one hand and the ideologies of native-born whites who policed the boundaries of whiteness on the other. Vellon's focus on the Italian-language press leaves one half of this interaction unexplored. What would it have meant for Italian Americans had they asserted a racial identity that others failed to recognize? How did Italian Americans respond, for example, to legislation that restricted immigration from southern and eastern Europe in the early 1920s and that seemed to represent a clear rebuttal to any claims that Italians were white? Was an Italian American assertion of whiteness before 1920 a prerequisite for inclusion at a later time? When did other groups begin to recognize Italian Americans as white? These questions are offered less in the spirit of criticism and more as reflections on the fact that Vellon has written a book that compels attention by anyone interested in immigrant identity formation and the politics of race in the United States.

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Works Cited

Guglielmo, Thomas A. 2003. *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945*. New York: Oxford University Press.