

*Freedom's Orator: Mario Savio and the Radical Legacy of the 1960s.*

by Robert Cohen.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

544 pages.

Best known as the fiery leader of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s, Mario Savio (1942–1996) is the subject of a long-overdue biography, *Freedom's Orator: Mario Savio and the Radical Legacy of the 1960s*, by Robert Cohen. Drawing upon previously unavailable Savio papers, along with oral histories from family, friends, and fellow activists, Cohen sheds new light on Savio's upbringing, philosophical development, and the full arc of his political activism.

Cohen builds a strong case that Savio, who practiced an egalitarian leadership style, shunned dogma, and lived by an unshakable moral code, qualifies as the most transcendent white leader of the New Left in the United States.

With a restrained and balanced tone, Cohen gives us a masterly analysis of the complex forces that led up to and comprised the Free Speech Movement, which was a catalyst for the explosive growth of the New Left in the United States and throughout the world. He breaks new ground by exploring the harsh personal challenges Savio faced throughout his life, including sexual abuse as a child, incarceration, academic expulsion, mental illness, a developmentally impaired child, and divorce. Striking a blow against the *Big Chill* (1983) stereotype that maintains that New Left activists eventually made their peace with the political establishment, Cohen's book shows us that as Savio recovered from personal crises, he struggled against U.S. military intervention in Central America, anti-immigrant legislation, tuition hikes, and attacks against affirmative action. By using a generous selection of Savio's speeches and writings, Cohen offers a critique of the ultra-left sectarian politics that contributed to the demise of the New Left. Savio's own words also challenge conservative commentators who belittle the democratic idealism of the 1960s by defining the decade only by its excesses. Although Cohen could have explored the ethnic dimension of Savio's life more rigorously, *Freedom's Orator* reveals the profound ways in which Savio's Italian-American background shaped his political development.

Savio's father was born in Sicily in 1928; however, we aren't told where, and it is unclear whether his mother was an immigrant. Cohen recounts that Savio's first language was Italian, without specifying whether he spoke any kind of regional dialect. While his father served in the U.S. Army during World War II, his maternal grandfather, an avowed Fascist (neither his family name or birthplace are mentioned), ruled the family roost. When Savio's father returned after the war, he demanded that only English be spoken in the household, in order to accelerate his son's assimilation into American culture. Later, in grade school, Savio's teacher taunted him by singing his name in rhyme. To spare his son any further humiliation, his father legally substituted his middle name for his first name, and Mario became Bob until he reclaimed his original name while attending the University of California at Berkeley.

Savio's family was devoutly Catholic—two of his aunts were nuns—and he identifies his Catholicism as a wellspring of his radicalism. As an altar boy, he believed he would one day become a priest. He was influenced by the dramatic

changes emanating from the Second Vatican Council. While highly critical of institutional Catholicism, Savio summed up the positive moral aspects of his religious education as: “Do good and resist evil” (37). What he observed and experienced in the summer of 1964 in Mississippi, while registering African Americans to vote, sealed his commitment to radical politics. There he was so outraged by the violent Jim Crow system that he felt compelled—even to the point of risking death at the hands of segregationists—to fight it. In a 1995 interview, he described the perspective he brought to the Free Speech Movement after his stay in Mississippi as a kind of secularized liberation theology.

Toward the end of his book, Cohen states: “In the 1980s Mario experienced an ethnic self-awakening seeing that his identity was not the bland middle class of white America but working-class Italian.” Cohen provides a few sentences about Mario’s visit to Italy, where he joined a parade in honor of the Italian antifascist resistance, gave speeches in front of radical audiences as a guest of the Italian Communist Party, and “began to reclaim a pride in his Italian heritage” (285).

Unfortunately, Cohen does not adequately address Savio’s identity crisis or his psychological issues. Savio suffered bouts of depression throughout his life, spent extensive periods as an inpatient in a Los Angeles psychiatric hospital, and made a suicide attempt after his mother died. Given what we learn about Savio’s identity crisis and its connection to his ethnicity, this period of reconciliation with his Italian background certainly merits a deeper exploration than is offered here.

Savio experienced a form of ethnic alienation very common to Italian Americans who have been involved in progressive politics. Right-wing politicians inside and outside the Italian-American community have directed Italian-American resentment toward falling wages, failing services, and deteriorating neighborhoods, toward people of color, immigrants, gays, and others at the margins of society—a place many Italian Americans have just left. In league with the mass media, conservative ethnic leaders perpetuate an image of the Italian-American community as being universally conservative and not one that reflects the diversity that exists among Italian Americans.

In 1984, I heard Savio speak at Columbia University. I was surprised to hear him open with, “I’m Mario Savio, and I’m a Sicilian American.” He paused for a moment, looked at the crowd, and added, “You know, I probably wouldn’t have said that in the old days.” Those words echoed in my mind after his death. They gave me a sense that Savio did indeed value his ethnic identity, and they served to refute those who insisted he had none and was merely a homegrown American product.

Despite some shortcomings, Cohen’s book is a significant work that examines a critical period in U.S. history, the victories and defeats of left-wing radicalism, and the relationship of Italian Americans to politics. Savio’s morally based, nondogmatic, democratic leadership—in short, his enduring legacy—speaks with a special relevance to a new generation of activists seeking to build a countervailing force capable of checking a resurgent Right that seems hell-bent on rolling back workers’ rights, civil rights, and the reforms of the New Deal.

—GIL FAGIANI

*Italian American Writers Association*