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Italian Immigrant Radical Culture: The Idealism of the Sovversivi in the United States, 1890–1940.

By Marcella Bencivenni.
New York: New York University Press, 2011.
287 pages.

Thanks to the proliferation of scholarship on the Italian-American working class, Vito Marcantonio, Carlo Tresca, Bartolomeo Sacco, and Nicola Vanzetti now hold their rightful places in the narrative of U.S. history. But "great men" alone do not make a movement, nor do they create the history of a community. In *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture*, Marcella Bencivenni uses a wide-angle lens to focus her vibrant and multifaceted study about Italian radical life in the United States, exploring the many other individuals who made up the world of Italian-American radicals. In short, she argues that cultural tradition trumped the details of ideological differences and linked distinct groups, parties, and factions. In doing so, Bencivenni challenges scholarship that amplifies the divergence of the Italian immigrant Left and instead highlights the connection between what she identifies as the five strains of *sovversivi* (subversive) activism: the press, literature, poetry, theater, and iconography.

Bencivenni incorporates primary sources of literary texts and visual materials that give her cultural analysis of class the necessary heft needed to make the book's synthetic points convincing and to engage in two historiographical discussions. First, the study introduces important new findings to immigration history by unearthing the buried stories of generations of *sovversivi* in the United States. In this regard, Bencivenni adds refreshing arguments to scholarship on Italian Americans. Not only does she clarify how, when, and why waves of Italians to the United States brought together previous experiences from their homeland, she also considers the similar ways different radical groups sustained political allegiances once they arrived. Second, *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture* gives insight into the intricacies of the American Left. Bencivenni's fluency in Italian (she has done the translation work for the book herself) highlights the organicism of Italians' transnationalist and internationalist mindset and its basis in cultural, political, and religious institutions in Italy and the United States.

The seven chapters are organized thematically, and each follows a roughly similar chronological framework that spans the mid-nineteenth century through the

Great Depression. Bencivenni covers the nature and use of print culture in shaping the *sovversivi* outlook and how leisure and literary "class war" were used to bolster community identity. Her profiles of figures such as poet Arturo Giovannitti and the cartoonist Fort Velona—to whom she dedicates entire chapters—are especially remarkable for their originality. Throughout the book, Bencivenni revisits the argument that, despite the presence of different strains of radicalism during the period, the early interplay between anarchists and socialists (in Italy and in the United States) shaped the development of syndicalism and other movements. By the early twentieth century, a pattern of association among *sovversivi* was set. And, regardless of a group's particular doctrine (socialist, anarchist, trade-unionist, antifascist, communist), they shared a common critique of the world in which they lived. Their concerns appeared in the press, poetry, art, and literature and included the problem with the *padrone* system, capitalist and imperialist exploitation, and the ways that gender and racial prejudices undermined the goal of emancipation. Bencivenni argues that the *sovversivi* led their community without necessarily becoming recognized leaders such as the middle-class *prominenti*. Moreover, their leadership was based in a Western humanist tradition that helps explain the commonalities she discerns.

The connection Bencivenni makes between Enlightenment ideas and immigrant *sovversivi*'s internationalism is quite significant. The point is central to understanding transnationalism and internationalism but, by and large, has been missed by scholars focused on the entanglement of twentieth-century leftist politics. While the Old Left, in general, and the Italian immigrant *sovversivi*, in particular, were more clearly tied to the belief in progress and a specific type of educational intervention (one that stemmed from Enlightenment thought), the New Left's emergence at the same moment as poststructuralism made it more comfortable with a relativistic radicalism. Bencivenni documents how the *sovversivi*'s mindset played a part in many issues, including the establishment of the Università Populare in Italy and in the United States—the basis of which was to promote "laic, scientific, and nondogmatic education" (57)—and branches of Francisco Ferrer's Modern School, which had similar underpinnings and connections to anarchist strains of the movement. An Enlightenment base also explains the anticlericalism that *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture* covers. The sophisticated argument includes an account of the ways Italian-American radicals relied on cultural Catholicism to create leftist symbols and propaganda metaphors.

The amount of material that Bencivenni includes in this book is impressive. At times, the presentation—for example, in her discussions of the Italian-American radical press—is encyclopedic in terms of a wide breadth but a shallow depth. Overall, the originality of *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture*, both in terms of new evidence (e.g., the contribution of findings on Italian immigrant theater and the account of Arturo Giovannitti) and noteworthy perspective on familiar topics (e.g., how an inclusion of Italian immigrant proletarian fiction lengthens the chronological field of the genre), makes this a great book that will benefit well-established scholars, newly minted Ph.D.'s, and graduate students thinking about distinct avenues of research.

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