

The “Land of the Free”? The United States in the Eyes of Italian American Radicals

STEFANO LUCONI

This short essay examines how Italian American radicals perceived American institutions and political environment between the late nineteenth century and the mid nineteen-twenties. It argues that, after an early fascination with the United States, whose liberties seemed to offer a fitting context for the establishment of a socialist society, disillusionment eventually set in and even made some of the subversives receptive to nationalistic feelings.

To many Italians, America had been a promised land since William Penn’s successors promoted Pennsylvania as the epitome of religious tolerance and self-government to attract settlers from the Venetian Republic in the eighteenth century (Del Negro). The image of the United States as a free nation gained momentum following independence from Great Britain and, more especially, after the emancipation of the slaves in the wake of the Civil War because it had been precisely the legality of human bondage that had previously stood out as detrimental to the ideological appeal of the country (Gemme 31-32). As Gianfausto Rosoli has remarked, a long tradition rooted in the enlightenment and the Risorgimento in Italy made America seem “an absolute model of liberty” in the eyes of the Italians (223).

The identification of the United States with freedom was so entrenched that it also lured a few Italian anarchists and socialists into making their way across the Atlantic and pursuing an American dream of their own at the turn of the twentieth century. In the decades of mass immigration from Italy, between the

early eighteen-eighties and the outbreak of World War I, most newcomers arrived for economic reasons. Nonetheless, the United States stood out as a land of opportunity not only for the unskilled laborers endeavoring to improve their standard of living in a thriving industrial society, but also for the political radicals who intended to propound the demise of capitalism and to establish a workers' paradise on Earth. American Republicanism, as opposed to Italy's monarchic institutions, seemed ideally suited to make the United States a more attractive setting than their native land (Testi).

Karl Marx warned in the late eighteen-sixties that the United States had undergone such a fast centralization of capitalistic power after the Civil War that the era of the "Great Republic" as "the Promised Land for emigrant laborers" had seen its own demise (847). Yet, his words fell on deaf ears among many of his supporters in Italy. Consequently, few agreed with Socialist leader Napoleone Colajanni, when he maintained that "the times of Washington and Franklin, of Madison, Jefferson, etc. have faded away" and that, therefore, the United States was far from being a workers' potential paradise in the early twentieth century (323).

On the contrary, the radical press in Italy continued to cherish the myth of the United States as a place where the class struggle was still viable and potentially effective. In this perspective, according to the Milan-based Socialist fortnightly newspaper *Critica Sociale*, the land that represented the most advanced "stage of organized capitalism" was also the milieu in which a Socialist revolution was most likely to succeed (Massimo 109). As a result, Giacinto Menotti Serrati, after moving to the United States in 1902 to become the editor of *Il Proletario*, the most authoritative mouthpiece of Italian American revolutionary socialism, contended that "in no other country than this should the Socialist Party thrive and reach great achievements" (qtd. in Rosada 149). It was not a matter of chance, therefore, that just two years later, the Socialist-turned-Anarchist Carlo Tresca, when facing the alternative between exile in Switzerland or in the United States, chose the latter on the assumption that America was still "the land of the free" (*The Autobiography* 64). Again in 1904, after spending some time in Canada, another political émigré, Arturo Giovannitti, settled in the United States, because it seemed to him a more suitable environment for propounding his own ideals of humanitarian socialism among workers (Vecoli, "Arturo Giovannitti" 63). Referring to the attraction that the American institutions had exerted on him, he argued that he had "learnt upon the knees of my father and mother to worship the name of a republic with tears in my eyes since I was a child" and, therefore, upon settling in the United States, he "really thought" that he had reached "a better and freer land than my country" (Giovannitti 331). Italian socialists, including leaders such as Filippo Turati, even envisaged the establishment of rural colonies in North America as a viable means of diffusing their propaganda in a receptive milieu such as the countryside and, thereby, preventing militancy from being confined to industrial urban centers only (Dore 183-85).

Against this backdrop, Italian radicals also conceived the United States as either a temporary or a lasting haven from the repression of the post-unification governments of Italy. Indeed, the first significant exodus of anarchists and socialists to America followed on the heels of Prime Minister Francesco Crispi's 1894 quelling of the Sicilian *fasci* as well as the reactionary policies of his successor, Antonio Starabba di Rudinì, who dissolved the Chamber of Deputies in 1897 and declared a state of siege in most large cities the following year (Cartosio).

Furthermore, in the eyes of some radicals the United States was, to all intents and purposes, an effective school of political extremism for Left-wingers. While Benito Mussolini was still a socialist activist, he distrusted Tresca's credentials as a fully-fledged radical. But, upon learning that Tresca was moving to the United States, Mussolini expressed his conviction that "America, powerful America, will make you [Tresca] a true revolutionary comrade" (Tresca, *The Autobiography* 68). Ettore Ciccotti, a translator of Karl Marx's works and a Socialist member of the Italian Parliament in the early twentieth century, even made a point of encouraging workers to move to the United States. In 1912 he published an article in *Avanti!*, the Milan-based Socialist daily organ, in which he contended that the Italian labor movement would benefit from the temporary resettlement of workers in the United States. Contrary to his comrades who held that expatriation to America was tantamount to a denial of class consciousness, a rejection of militancy, and an apolitical stand in general, Ciccotti advocated emigration especially to the United States. He was confident that returning workers would import American ideas that would enrich the class struggle in Italy thanks to the strategies in fighting capitalism they had learned in the United States. In his opinion, as late as 1912, America was still a source of progressivism in the field of politics and labor (Degl'Innocenti 206).

It was, in fact, in 1912, that the Socialist Party of America reached the apex of its electoral strength when its presidential candidate, Eugene V. Debs, gained six percent of the popular vote in the race for the White House (Kipnis 420). It is not surprising, therefore, that when the Socialist Party registered a decline in votes in the subsequent elections, the Italian radicals' enthusiasm for the United States waned.

Ciccotti was an emigrant himself. He had spent some time in Switzerland between 1898 and 1899 in the wake of di Rudinì's crackdown on radicals, while he was on the run from the Italian police, but he never set foot on American soil (Manganaro Favaretto). His concept of the United States resulted from hearsay and did not tie in with the ensuing vision of his comrades who had firsthand knowledge of America. As a matter of fact, by the time *Avanti!* had published Ciccotti's article in 1912 few Italian anarchists and socialists who had settled in the United States shared his optimism about the political opportunities of the American environment. The actual experience of life and work in the United States usually led to a feeling of disenchantment. Many radicals disembarked from Europe to breathe American freedom, but they ended up being stifled by what they perceived as the American police state. They also witnessed the daily, grinding,

exploitation of workers within a capitalistic regime that was uncompromising in the claims made by wage earners.

If Ciccotti urged Italian workers to leave for the United States in 1912, this was not the case of anarcho-syndicalist Edmondo Rossoni. In the same year, writing from San Francisco, he warned the readers of *L'Internazionale*—the organ of the Chamber of Labor in Parma—that the United States was a “free country” merely in theory. As he put it, “Slavery was abolished on paper . . . ! Only for Blacks, however, not for the wretched ‘company of the dead’ of white emigrants” (qtd. in Tinchino 45). Similarly, *Il Proletario* contended in 1920 that white industrial workers were the present-day American slaves (“Un appello”).

Other radicals shared Rossoni’s feelings. In 1908, the Chicago-based and Socialist-oriented weekly *La Parola dei Socialisti* reiterated that curbs on the access of radical newspapers to the postal service and a number of anti-union rulings by federal and state courts had turned the United States into a travesty of the land of freedom (“A proposito di libertà americana”; “Libertà americana”; “Le nostre libertà”). In the same year, anarchist Michele—alias Ludovico—Caminita published a pamphlet that he ironically entitled *Free Country!* The booklet stressed the “bitter disillusionment” awaiting those who disembarked in front of the Statue of Liberty and expected to enjoy the benefits of Republicanism and “equality” among men as spelled out in the United States Declaration of Independence (qtd. in Marazzi 179). Another fellow anarchist Nicola Sacco acknowledged that his own direct experience of the American “republic in operation” had made him “recover from his juvenile and unconscious fondness for the republic in the abstract” (10). His comrade Bartolomeo Vanzetti argued that he had arrived in the United States “at the age of twenty . . . and something of a dreamer,” but by living in this country he had eventually realized “all the brutalities of life, all the injustices, and all the corruption in which humanity struggles, tragically” (18). Vanzetti’s words echoed what an anonymous Italian immigrant from Buffalo had written in the Socialist newspaper *La Fiaccola* in 1909: “What disillusionment . . . Everywhere I see injustice and inequality. . . . this country is worse than Europe” (qtd. in Yans-McLaughlin 89). In the same year, Armando Pellizzari, an organizer for the United Mine Workers of America, similarly argued in *Il Proletario* that “our enchanted dreams from across the ocean become disillusionments as soon as we set foot upon this land” (qtd. in Guglielmo 142).

As such statements demonstrate, downright reality dispelled any rosy scenario Italian radicals may have conceived before moving to the United States. The passing of legislation impairing the freedom of speech and expression during World War I to quell dissent against the country’s participation in the military conflict further undermined the socialists’ and anarchists’ American dream (Vezzosi 170-71). One can reasonably suggest that the Red Scare—namely the crusade of the Wilson administration against the extreme Left in 1919 and 1920, to which both Vanzetti and Sacco were to fall victim a few years later—marked a point of no return for the Italian radicals’ disillusionment with the United States. In

1920, sixteen years after landing at Ellis Island, Tresca gave expression to his disenchantment. In an article published in *Guardia Rossa*, he stated that “the land of Jefferson and Lincoln has but chains, prisons, and torture for whosoever thinks, feels, aspires for a tomorrow of justice, fraternity, liberty” (Tresca, “Il terrore”). In the same year, *Il Proletario* pointed out that “capitalistic America is a real Calvary for the immigrant masses that are forced to seek unthankful hospitality here under the talons of brutal entrepreneurs who are thirsty for gold and violence” (“Al pubblico italiano”). Similarly, in 1924, commenting on the conviction of Sacco and Vanzetti, Socialist and labor leader Gioacchino Artoni observed that, after living in the United States for three decades, he had learned that “this great Republic, too, encapsulates the germ of a tyranny that is as heinous and murderous as a monarchy” (180).

In the face of the federal repression of radicalism in the early postwar years, other nations replaced the United States as models in the eyes of Italian American subversives. In 1920, for instance, *Il Proletario*, looked to the struggle of the German working class and Soviet Russia as sources of inspiration (“Carlo Liebknecht”; “La bandiera rossa”). Tresca, too, briefly fell under the spell of Bolshevism before turning into a staunch anti-Communist at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (Fedele 47, 89, 144; Di Berardo 271-80). *Il Proletario* even urged the United States to get inspiration from Italy, where railroad workers on strike secured a seven-hour workday and higher salaries in 1920 (“Per il 1° Maggio 1920”).

Previous studies have pointed to the radicals’ personal plight in their adoptive country as a major contribution to the smashing of their American dream (Vecoli, “Free Country”). Indeed, besides being subjected to repeated police harassment and brutality, Caminita and Tresca were arrested and threatened with deportation several times, while both Sacco and Vanzetti were tried and sentenced to the death penalty following an extremely controversial trial and highly arguable judicial process (Bencivenni 123; Di Berardo 42, 114, 135, 195-99; Tibaldo). Such harsh forms of mistreatment in the case of the former and grave miscarriage of justice in the case of the latter were obviously inconsistent with the notion of political liberty and democratic principles. As a result, they helped dispel the perception of the United States as the “land of the free” in the eyes of the Italian radical newcomers. Referring to the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, a cartoon on the front page of *Il Martello*, Tresca’s newspaper, epitomized that mood graphically when it depicted an electric chair with a vulture perched on the seatback above a caption reading “the Statue of Liberty in Massachusetts” (“La tragedia è terminata”). On the same occasion, another anarchist weekly, *L’Adunata dei Refrattari*, contended that America’s allegedly free republican institutions had revealed “a heart as hard as anthracite” and “hands covered in blood” (“L’Anarchia”).

Yet it can be reasonably argued that another factor played a major influence on the Italian radicals’ disenchantment with the United States notwithstanding their initial dreams. As a multi-ethnic and multi-racial society, America eventually turned out to be a living proof of the limits of class solidarity. With very few

exceptions, notably the successful walkout of multi-ethnic textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912 (Topp 92-134), Italian immigrants witnessed in the course of many other strikes an ethnic split in the proletariat that pitted the United States-born cohort of Anglo-Saxon extraction against the newcomers from southern and eastern Europe.

The experience of Tresca, one of the leading labor agitators of Italian origin in the United States, is a case in point. The first walkout he organized, a strike against the John B. Stetson Company in Philadelphia in 1905, was unsuccessful because the native skilled hatters of Anglo-Saxon origin, who belonged to the conservative American Federation of Labor, refused to join forces with their unskilled Italian and Jewish coworkers and did not leave the plant (Pernicone 28; Di Berardo 40-41). Likewise, Tresca's efforts to stimulate a replica of the Lawrence textile-workers' strike in 1912 resulted in failure there seven years later after the United States-born employees of the wool industries broke ranks with the immigrant labor force and returned to work, encouraging Portuguese, Greek and Turkish scabs to follow them, while all the other nationality groups endeavored in vain to continue the walkout (Vecoli, "Anthony Capraro"). Not even was Paterson, New Jersey, an exception. This town enjoyed a reputation as "the holy city (the Mecca) of anarchism" (Mombello 7) because it was home to numerous radicals including Gaetano Bresci, who enhanced the fame of the place by going back to Italy and killing King Humbert I in 1900 (Shone 200-01). Yet, in July 1913, a seven-month walkout by the silk workers came to a disastrous end when the United States-born and English-speaking ribbon weavers' representatives left the strike committee controlled by recent immigrants and negotiated a separate agreement with the mill owners (Golin). Tresca was so shocked by such an action that he concluded that class solidarity was almost non-existent in the United States and that the native workers' contempt for their foreign-born comrades seriously undermined the strength and moral fabric of the American labor movement (Di Berardo 91-92).

To Italian wage earners, disrespect was synonymous with ethnic bigotry. Caminita resented being called a "damned dago" (qtd. in Marazzi 186), a derogatory term for Italian Americans. Rossoni observed that "Impoverished Italians are the garbage . . . of American social life and are victims of two-sided exploitation: the more common one by capitalism and the one particular to the fact that they are Italians" ("Per una più grande vita").

Discrimination affected Italian immigrants not only in the workplace but within the labor movement as well. Marginalization in the unions was another aspect of the lack of interethnic class solidarity that newcomers from Italy endured in the United States. As Rossoni argued, when an Italian worker joined a local of an American union, "he was more tolerated than anything else and in every class considered as the last spoke in the wheel" ("Per una Camera del Lavoro").

While Tresca and Giovannitti stuck to radicalism, other Italian immigrant subversives yielded to nationalism and, in some cases, to the appeal of fascism

after they endured ethnic prejudice on the part of their own comrades who were not of Italian extraction in the United States. Rossoni went back to Italy and rose to the position of Mussolini's minister of Agriculture and a member of the Grand Council of Fascism (Cordova). Others—as in Caminita's case—stayed in the United States, but they became enthusiastic supporters of the *Duce* (Royal Consul General). As a result, their actual experience in America not only shattered many radicals' belief in the United States as the “land of the free,” it also impinged negatively on their radicalism and faith in class solidarity.

There were obviously exceptions to this trend. For instance, in the coal fields of southern Colorado the United Mine Workers of America welcomed Italian immigrants, who joined forces with fellow strikers of different ethnic extraction, including African Americans, in the walkout that took place between 1903 and 1904 (Notarianni; Brier and Fasce). Sharing labor militancy with members of other national minorities sometimes also encouraged the Americanization of Italian newcomers (Barrett). Italian American workers even adopted the patriotic rhetoric of liberty that had underlain the United States entry into World War I to call for better wages and to condemn violence against strikers in the early postwar years (Fasce 130-31). Yet, scholarly emphasis on the latter dynamics (Cannistraro and Meyer) should not distract attention from the other—albeit non idealistic—outcome of the radicals' pursuit of the American dream.

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