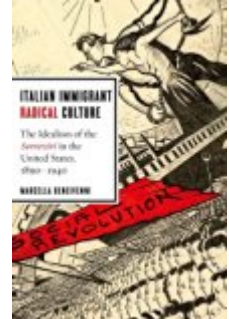


Marcella Bencivenni. *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture: The Idealism of the Sovversivi in the United States, 1890-1940.* New York: New York University Press, 2011. viii + 279 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-9103-5.



Reviewed by Mike Rosenow

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Commissioned by Julia Irwin (University of South Florida)

In 1912 the forces of industrialization, immigration, and radicalism collided in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The result was one of the most dramatic strikes in American history. Workers who spoke more than a score of different languages and hailed from a variety of countries cast aside their differences and united around a common goal. They wanted more than a life of endless toil or to work merely for bread. They wanted roses, too. Against long odds, the Lawrence workers achieved a remarkable victory. The Bread and Roses strike captured Americans' attention in 1912, just as it has historians since. Italian immigrants comprised the single largest ethnic group involved in the strike, and two Italian organizers, Carlo Tresca and Arturo Giovannitti, played key roles. Historian Marcella Bencivenni suggests that these two facts were not mere coincidence. She argues that Italian radicals (*soversivi*) in America created a dynamic oppositional subculture between 1890 and 1940 that made events like Lawrence possible.

In her book, *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture*, Bencivenni endeavors to better understand Italian immigrants' radicalism by studying their beliefs and values as expressed in the Italian radical press, literature, theater, and art. The emphasis on culture stems from her contention that social experiences alone, even strikes like Lawrence, are not enough to explain why individuals adopt radical philosophies. Bencivenni argues that Italian immigrants' politics stemmed from an amalgamation of cultural and social experiences transplanted from Italy and adapted to fit new American circumstances.

The first two chapters of the book frame the study by detailing the patterns of Italian immigration and the dynamics of their communities in the United States. According to Bencivenni, the *soversivi* hailed from both middle- and working-class origins. They numbered in the thousands in an Italian immigrant population that swelled to four million by 1920. They formed radical enclaves across the country but concentrated overwhelmingly in cities like New York and Chicago.

Bencivenni finds Italians participating in the full array of radical movements of the period. Some were drawn to anarchism, while others gravitated toward the anarcho-syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World; socialism; trade unionism; or after World War I, anti-fascism or communism.

Such an array of ideologies divided the American Left, and Italian radicals were not immune from the infighting. But, Bencivenni suggests, Italian *sovversivi* shared a set of core values that revolved around equality, solidarity, social justice, and the emancipatory possibilities of education. Clad in this cultural armor, Italian radicals presented a united front against antagonists to their goals, especially wealthy Italians (*prominenti*), Catholic priests, and fascist sympathizers. Bencivenni contends, at least implicitly, that radicals wielded the pen as their preferred weapon in the struggle to build a better world.

Bencivenni devotes the rest of the book to examining the cultural products of the Italian *sovversivi*, with individual chapters on Italian radical newspapers, theater, and literature. She concludes her study with two biographical chapters that examine the lives and art of Giovannitti, a poet, playwright, editor, and Industrial Workers of the World agitator, and anti-fascist cartoonist Fort Velona. Bencivenni treats the reader throughout the book to an engaging immersion in the Italian radical community in America and offers keen analysis of a wide variety of Italian-language sources. Themes of anti-nationalism, anti-clericalism, and gender relationships abound. Although the radicals largely failed to achieve their goal to create a more just and humane world, Bencivenni suggests that Italians' efforts in the 1920s and 1930s erected an anti-fascist foundation on which the Popular Front was built.

Bencivenni's attention to how the *sovversivi* transplanted their experiences and values from Italy to the United States represents one of the central achievements of the book. She suggests that their radicalism was tinged with a republi-

canism influenced by Italy's emergence as a modern nation-state. Their anti-clericalism and demands for economic justice had roots in their homeland and were fertilized by the conditions they encountered in the United States. Bencivenni's careful analysis of these linkages demonstrates that the immigrants may have been physically uprooted, but their adherence to a clear set of values meant they could be at home anywhere in the world. Italian immigrants represented one part of a broader radical subculture that valued internationalism, but Bencivenni shows that particular developments in Italy shaped the immigrants' worldview.

As the book progresses Bencivenni skillfully navigates some of the central tensions inherent in her research. As with any cultural history, there is a question of how readers and spectators interpreted and viewed the newspapers, plays, and literature the *sovversivi* produced. Bencivenni uses circulation data when available and combs through published reviews of plays to gain some insight into readers' and viewers' responses. Perhaps more intriguingly, she alludes to surveillance reports produced by Italian authorities, an archive known as *Casellario Politico Centrale*, which includes six thousand files on radicals in the United States. These sources suggest that the Italian government viewed the radicals as a group significant enough to monitor closely even though an ocean separated the émigrés from their homeland. Although no historian can fully recreate consumer attitudes, Bencivenni offers compelling suggestions.

While identifying a core set of values that motivated Italian radicals and interpreting an impressive array of sources, the interpretation can seem narrow at times. By privileging culture over experience, the study does not draw many connections between the two. Bencivenni mentions seminal events of the Progressive Era, such as the Lawrence and Paterson strikes, but only in passing. She does not explain how Italian radical cul-

ture motivated thousands of Italian workers--men and women--to protest their working conditions in the 1909-13 strike wave. These moments, and others like them, would have provided a good opportunity to more fully explore the links between beliefs and Italian immigrants' daily experiences.

Likewise, it might strike some readers as odd that the book continually makes a case for a unique worldview for Italian immigrants who were operating in a political milieu that privileged internationalism. There is an inherent tension in such an approach. It is clear that Italian immigrants drew on specific ideas and beliefs rooted in their homeland, but their core values seemed to have been shared by many radicals in the United States. Bencivenni rarely draws connections between Italian subversives and other immigrant and native-born radicals, which is, admittedly, beyond the scope of the book. Her work therefore raises an intriguing question. Was radicalism in the United States a force that unified immigrants from across the world, or was American radicalism an amalgamation of unique immigrant cultures as distinct as the various groups of newcomers themselves? Bencivenni's work suggests that *e pluribus unum* might be a more fitting description for American radicalism than for the United States itself. It leads the reader to conclude that many different immigrant cultures contributed to a radical movement that sought to make the United States, and the world, a better place.

Whatever limitations there may be should not discourage potential readers. Bencivenni has written an impressive book that nicely complements existing studies on Italian immigrants. It deserves a wide audience. She offers a compelling look at how Italian radicals centered their lives on a key constellation of values, which then infused their writing, art, and activism. She provides engaging discussions of individuals familiar to many scholars of the Progressive Era, such as Tresca and Giovannitti, but she introduces the reader to a colorful array of immigrants who have been over-

looked by other researchers. In so doing, Bencivenni encourages readers to consider culture and art as equally important to radical history as events like the Lawrence strike and organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World.

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