

The Duce and the Prominenti: Fascism and the Crisis of Italian American Leadership

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In the mid-1920s, a small coterie of anti-Fascists began waging a bitter, isolated battle against the influence of Fascism among Italian Americans*. Most anti-Fascist newspapers, including Carlo Tresca's «Il Martello» and the Belanca brothers' *Il Nuovo Mondo*, believed that widespread Fascist sympathies were the pernicious work of the conservative and powerful Italian-American leaders who dominated opinion in the ethnic community (Diggins, 1972, esp. pp. 111-44; Pernicone, 1986; Gallagher, 1988).

In 1940, the anti-Fascist exile Gaetano Salvemini issued an influential pamphlet entitled *Italian Fascist Activities in the United States*, and over the next few years wrote a lengthy manuscript on the same subject which he turned over to the FBI but never published (Salvemini, 1940, and Id., 1977). Salvemini's work, the first clearly-articulated study of Fascist propaganda and its influence among Italian Americans, argued the painful point that in the interwar period Italian Americans were generally «pro-Fascist» but he attributed the cause more astutely to a series of broad social and cultural factors that transcended the Italian-American leadership. The assumption that most Italian Americans harbored a range of sympathies for Fascism or Mussolini has become a central theme of the more recent historical literature on the subject (Diggins, 1972, pp. 77-110; Venturini, 1984, pp. 189-218; Cannistraro, 1977, pp. 51-66; Lombardi, 1978). In official circles – in the Roosevelt administration, in the FBI, and in military circles – this assumption led to placing Italian Americans on the Enemy Aliens list and to the roundup of a much smaller number in the days immediately after Pearl Harbor.

What does this thesis say about Italian-American attitudes toward the United States, and what does it suggest about the history of Italian American leadership?

I would argue that Italian-American attitudes cannot be understood, as one scholar has recently put it, by deciding whether Italian immigrants were «Italians living in America or Americans of Italian origin» (Venturini, 1984, p. 191). The answer is, I think, somewhat more complex – that is, ethnic attitudes toward Fascism were principally the result of the fact that in the 1920s and 1930s, Italian Americans were undergoing a process of transition from Italian to American identity, and that the pro-Fascist sentiments of many were the result of the stresses and difficulties of assimilation and acculturation.

For most Italian Americans, the United States – their chosen country of adoption – was a frustrating contradiction, for they found it to be at the same time a land of immense opportunity and a hostile and often frightening environment. Their adjustment was made more difficult and complicated by the fact that the period of their transition coincided with the Fascist era: Mussolini's agents, together with pro-Fascist Italian-American leaders, subjected the immigrant masses to a constant barrage of propaganda. In Salvemini's words, «Even though they know little about the nation's governmental structure, hard-working, decent, law-abiding men and women are not dangerous to the democratic institutions of the United States – if they are left alone. Those of Italian descent have not been left alone» (Salvemini, 1940, p. 4). Luigi Antonini, head of Local 89 of the ILGWU, pointed out that the immigrant susceptibility to Fascist propaganda was strengthened by the fact that they lived for the most part in ethnic ghettos that were isolated from mainstream American society and penetrated by Italian-language media in the hands of pro-Fascist leaders. Fascist propaganda deliberately played up Italian-American ethnic identity in order to maintain and reinforce cultural, nostalgic, economic, political, and emotional ties with Italy (Antonini, 1939; Lombardi, 1978, pp. 6, 11; Cannistraro, 1977, p. 52; Salvemini, 1940, p. 4).

In turn, however, it must be recognized that the relationship was a two-way street, for Italian Americans used Fascism to ease their transition to Americanization. In 1931, Giuseppe Prezzolini, then head of the Casa Italiana at Columbia University, observed the curious fact that the Italian immigrants «are not Italians, since they have never been Italians. They have assumed certain American habits but at bottom they remain southern peasants, without culture, schooling, and language [...] They left Italy before becoming Italian. They have been here but have not become true Americans» (Prezzolini, 1978, entry for February 21, 1931, p. 470). Perhaps Prezzolini, whose contact with Italian Americans could not have been very close, did not fully understand the assimilation process. More accurate were Salvemini's observations (Salvemini, 1977, p. 4):

They had never felt themselves to be Italians as long as they had been living in the old country, among people who spoke their same dialect, who had their same habits, and who were laboring under their same poverty. National consciousness awoke in them when they came in touch (which often meant blows) with groups of different national origins in America. Italy now seemed to them no longer a land from which they had been forced to leave in search of a less distressing life. Italy became in their minds a land from which they felt exiled, of whose past glories they felt proud, and for whose present fortunes or misfortunes they felt glad or miserable.

The argument here, supported by more recent scholarship, is that Italian immigrants adopted a new-found nationalism in the face of the hostility and scorn heaped upon them by American society. This process of building ethnic identity and forging ethnic solidarity was made possible by the Fascist seizure of power in Italy: the perception of Mussolini's «achievements» at home, his popularity among Americans, and his stature as an international figure in the 1920s, all combined to allow Italian Americans for the first time to claim their national identity with pride. The fact that Mussolini was also immensely popular in American public opinion only confirmed the Italian-American response. The image, real and imagined, of an aggressive, disciplined, modern Italy that was vindicating its rights and reclaiming its «Roman» past allowed Italian Americans to «hold up their heads» in the American environment. Ario Flamma, a convinced Italian-American Fascist, explained that «Before Fascism arose, one thought with pain and bitterness of the distant fatherland, but now that Italy has reassumed its splendor and power, it is a supreme pride to be Italian» (Lombardi, 1978, pp. 6, 21-22; Venturini, 1984, pp. 190-91; Panunzio, 1942; Sforza, 1942; quote from Diggin, p. 79; Flamma, 1936).

Italian Americans used identification with Fascism and Mussolini as survival techniques, while in fact their real interests were increasingly in becoming Americans and living in American society. Hence, their support for Mussolini was not a result of ideological fervor, or even understanding, but of wounded pride. The anti-Fascist Massimo Salvadori put it succinctly: «In Italy they had never been Italians, but in America they became Italian nationalists, and to that degree they were fascists». Don Luigi Sturzo, the exiled former head of the Italian Popular Party, agreed that the pro-Fascism of Italian-Americans was little more than «nationalism with a fascist label» (Salvemini, 1977, p. 163; Sturzo, 1945, later in Id., 1949, pp. 388-91).

Aside from sweeping generalizations, it is impossible to establish with any precision the extent or depth of support for Fascism among the majority of Italian Americans. Salvemini estimated that about 5 per cent of the 5 million Italian Americans were «out and out» Fascists, but this was probably much too

high. Certainly, rabid Fascists such as Domenico Trombetta, who published the anti-Semitic *Grido della Stirpe*, or Agostino De Biasi, who founded the first fascist in the US and edited *Il Carroccio*, were isolated exceptions.

Most observers have argued that the major source of Fascist influence among Italian Americans was to be found in the so-called *prominenti* (literally, «prominent ones»), and especially those who funnelled Fascist images into the communities through their control of the media. The *prominenti* are, in fact, the key to understanding the impact of Fascism on the Italian Americans and the immigrant view of the United States during the Fascist period. Their ties to the Fascist government and with Italian officials in the United States were intimate for almost twenty years: many received honors and awards from Rome, had interviews with Mussolini, and received instructions from him, while their newspapers and radio stations incessantly spouted the official Italian line. James Miller, in an article appropriately entitled «A Question of Loyalty», has studied the *prominenti* in the context of the post-Pearl Harbor trauma and during World War II, when they and the mass of Italian Americans were forced finally to choose between Italy and the United States. Miller argues that government pressures and fear of their pro-Fascist pasts drove them to return their medals to Mussolini, denounce Fascism and the Axis, and work for the US war effort, even alongside their former anti-Fascist enemies (Miller, 1978, pp. 49-71; Id., 1980, pp. 51-70; Cannistraro, 1976; Venturini, 1983, pp. 441-70). While they were indeed subjected to the pressures Miller discusses, the loyalty strategy of the *prominenti* was the final, if uncomfortably logical, step in a much longer process that had been underway since at least World War I.

Apart from Miller's study of the wartime *prominenti*, the phenomenon has not been studied closely. Even the origin of the word *prominenti* is obscure. As a noun rather than an adjective, the word is an Italian-Americanism, which seems to have appeared in the written language shortly before or during World War I, but did not have wide circulation before the mid-1920s. The term came to describe wealthy, influential businessmen, and professionals, and political leaders. Among the anti-Fascists, it was used scornfully as a term for the pro-Fascist *pezzi grossi* of the ethnic community (Mangano, 1917, p. 123; and Cannistraro, 1984).

I think the concept behind the word derived from the *padroni* system of employment agents that dominated the early immigration of the 1880s and 1890s. Functionally, on a broad level, the *padroni* and the *prominenti* played much the same role, the former having served as virtually the only point of contact between the newly arrived immigrants and American society, at least in terms of the work place. However, whereas the *padroni* tended to remain an integral part of Italian culture and lived almost exclusively within

the ethnic community, the *prominenti* developed important economic and political associations in American society while maintaining their contact with the ethnic community, becoming influential in both worlds. One of the most important centers of *prominentismo* in the early days was the Italian Chamber of Commerce of New York, which in 1906 published a wonderful photograph of its annual dinner-dance showing hundreds of men and women in tuxedos and lavish gowns at a fancy Manhattan hotel. Chief among the early *prominenti* were Luigi Fugazzi, who made his money in immigrant banking, and Carlo Barsotti, who started out running immigrant boarding houses before going into newspaper publishing – many of New York's public monuments to Italians were the work of Barsotti. As the padroni disappeared after the First World War, the *prominenti* emerged in their place.

The social origins and characteristics of the *prominenti* have been described, in Salvemini's words, as «parasites of one sort or another – most of whom belong to those intellectual lower middle classes that are the curse of Italy; people without the will or the power to work, who have always lived off the poor, and who call themselves intellectuals because they have been educated above their intelligence». Even a convinced Fascist like Agostino De Biasi was critical of the *prominenti*, «whose sole excuse for having prominence is the fact that they came here many years ago, made a great deal of money, are catered to by consular authorities and have a certain false prestige among their own people». Tresca had been waging war against the *prominenti* since his days as editor of *Il Proletario* in the early 1900s, and his «Il Martello», which continued the war after 1916, defined them as products of the «survival of the fittest», whose economic fortunes had «dark, shadowy, often terribly tragic origins» (Salvemini, 1977, pp. 7-8; De Biasi as quoted in «Alien Consciousness in the United States», *The American Review of Reviews*, October 1924, pp. 426-27; Valentini, 1927).

Salvemini's analysis was simplistic, for it failed to make important distinctions within the *prominenti* class, especially as education and material success led over time to the development of higher strata of the Italian-American middle class. In 1931, «Il Progresso Italo-Americano» of New York published the results of a survey that revealed some 60,000 Italian-American professionals in the following categories: 24,000 lawyers, 17,000 pharmacists, 14,500 physicians, 2,000 engineers, and a mixture of businessmen, educators, writers, and artists. The real *prominenti*, however, were a much more restricted number. In 1936, when Flamma published his Italian-American who's who, *Italiani di America*, he included only about 1,000 names, and many of these were people without influence or recognition outside their immediate professional fields («Il Progresso Italo-Americano», April 23, 1931; «Il Martello», May 2, 1931; Flamma, 1936).

The historian Grazia Dore pointed out years ago that the end of virtually unrestricted mass immigration was an important stimulus to the *prominenti*, for the ethnic community now became permanent in the sense that it no longer had a constant influx of new arrivals. As a result, immigrants could now begin the process of becoming Italian Americans. The *prominenti* were important agents in this process, especially in the development of Italian-American political life, and assumed the self-appointed roles of defender and advocate of immigrant interests. The defining characteristic of the *prominenti* was, to use the term employed by the Italian anthropologist Gabriella Gribaudi, that they acted as «intermediaries», or power-brokers, using their political influence with fellow Italian Americans to service political machines in the hands of other ethnic groups, and using their wealth and political contacts with the machines to deliver patronage to the community. They were, in Tresca's words, the «nouveau riche cafoni» of the Italian-American community, but they had real wealth and real power. One anti-Fascist who studied the phenomenon estimated that 98 per cent of those *prominenti* who «played with the Fascists» were American citizens (Dore, 1964, p. 319; Gribaudi, 1980; Cannistraro, 1984; Venturini, 1983; Tresca, 1931; Morgante, 1928).

The *prominenti* encouraged naturalization in order to create an ethnic voting bloc, but it was also in their interests to keep their constituencies tied sentimentally and culturally to Italy, for total integration could spell the end of Italian identity and therefore of their electoral compactness. «Il Martello», Tresca's newspaper, predicted that the function and very existence of the *prominenti* would cease once the ethnic ghetto disappeared (Valentini, 1927), although we now know that this was not the case. The fact that Fascism was consolidated in Italy at the very time that the *prominenti* were emerging in the United States was crucial to how the process unfolded – for both the *prominenti* and the Fascist regime shared these same common goals and reinforced each other.

The behavior patterns of the *prominenti* were often scornfully ridiculed by the anti-Fascists, for *prominentismo* took the form of endless dinners, banquets, and receptions at which the Italian consul general, the ambassador, and visiting Fascist dignitaries were usually photographed sitting on a dias flanked by judges, businessmen, political bosses, mayors, and congressmen. The same group of names reappeared on the honorary committees of countless ethnic organizations, for it was important that the *prominenti* be seen in public, in the presence of important Italian and American figures.

These banquets and receptions also played a vital symbolic role in forging a sense of collective solidarity. In 1930, the consul general of Chicago explained to his superiors in Rome that he had been invited to speak before an Italian-American banquet: «It involved», he said, «the “new Italian generation”, born

in America, which has never been to Italy, which hardly speaks any Italian, but which is reborn and feels itself Italian, and wants the Italian consul at their parties. This important result is due in great part to the image of Fascist Italy, a civil, honest, open image that commands respect» (G. Castruccio to Giacomo De Martino, May 8, 1930, ASMAE (Rome), Affari Politici, 1919-30, Stati Uniti, 1930, Pacco 1610, f. «Rapporti Politici»; Venturini, 1984, p. 208).

Even Tresca's anarchist followers admitted that the fact that the *prominenti* played up to the Fascist authorities did not mean that they were themselves Fascists – they allowed themselves to be used, and in turn they used Fascism for their own purposes. As «Il Martello» observed with its usual dose of scorn, «It is their destiny to always shine the shoes of all [Italian] governments» («è il loro destino quello di lustrare le scarpe a tutti i governi») (Morgante, 1928).

The best illustration of my argument is provided by the career of Generoso Pope, the archetypal *prominente*. He was the best-known and most powerful of them all, and the best connected both in the ethnic community and in American society. A few details about his life will serve to make the point.

Arriving in the US in 1906 as a poor teenager with the name Generoso Papa, within fifteen years he had become the owner of the largest building materials firms in America, the Colonial Sand and Gravel Company, and by the mid-1930s had become fabulously wealthy. His office occupied an entire floor in New York's Rockefeller Center. Much of his business success lay in the fact that in 1925, Pope organized the first Italian-American political clubs in New York, and forged an «Italian vote» for Jimmy Walker's mayoralty campaign. That same year, Pope was made a member of the board of directors of the Federation Bank and Trust of New York, whose members included the following men: Bill McCormack, the tsar of New York's port and owner of a large transportation company whose chairman was Al Smith; Joseph Ryan, head of the corrupt International Longshoremen's Union; Matthew Woll, the conservative vice president of the American Federation of Labor; and Jeremiah Mahoney, close friend of Walker and a member of Tammany's executive committee – when Mahoney ran for mayor against the anti-Tammany La Guardia in 1937, Pope set up the Italian Finance Committee for the campaign. Pope remained intimately tied to Tammany Hall as a principal player in the city's machine politics. No better evidence of Pope's Americanization can be found.

In 1927, Pope bought the largest Italian-language daily, «Il Progresso Italo-Americano», and then – with Mussolini's support and encouragement – several other papers. He later received a secret free cable allowance from Rome paid by the Fascist government, although I should point out that his predecessor, Carlo Barsotti, had a similar service on a more limited scale. He was generally regarded by anti-Fascists as the most important source of Fascist propaganda in the United States. By the opening of the next decade, Pope's «beef-

steak dinners» at the Biltmore Hotel, each attended by hundreds of New York's most influential politicians and business leaders, were becoming legendary.

In 1931, one third of the 300 ethnic political clubs in the city were Italian, and controlled by Pope. In return, his company received a virtual monopoly of all municipal contracts for sand, cement, and other building supplies. A few years later, he did the same throughout New York State, building the crucial Italian vote for FDR's New Deal coalition. His crowning moment came in 1936, when a grateful Roosevelt appointed him head of the Italian division of the Democratic National Committee (Cannistraro, 1985, pp. 264-88).

Pope returned to Italy in triumph twice, both times having been granted private interviews with Mussolini, once with the king and the real pope. He received Italy's highest civilian decorations, and gave the Fascist salute at the tomb of the unknown soldier.

The weak point in the Fascist regime's relationship with the *prominenti* was that they had such crucial economic, political, and social ties with American society that, when the crisis came in 1941, the *prominenti* could not do otherwise than sever their connections with Fascism. Pope, regarded as the «most Fascist» of the *prominenti*, was the first to abandon ship, distancing himself from Mussolini as early as 1938 over the Fascist anti-Semitic laws (after all, one of his closest political allies was New York Congressman Sam Dickstein, who had long fought a campaign against Nazi racism in the United States). When advisors in the administration questioned FDR's willingness to forgive Pope his Fascist sins, the president had no hesitation in observing, with his customary political savvy, «It is perfectly true that he was friends with Mussolini and his clique when they were in power in Italy. So were the great majority of Americans of Italian birth who had to maintain relations with Italy and its de facto government. I don't think it is true that Pope had Fascist tendencies. He simply hunted with the hounds» (Memorandum for Roosevelt, April 4, 1944, FDRL, PPF, 4617).

Conclusion

One other initiative undertaken by Gene Pope is worthy of consideration here: in 1931, he launched a campaign to combat the growing identification of Italian Americans with portrayals of gangster figures in Hollywood films. This was in fact the beginning of the *prominenti's* constant preoccupation with the Mafia issue.

What is most interesting about this campaign is that after seventy years of protests Italian Americans have never been more widely or more pervasively vilified by that image than they are today.

Why has this effort to defend the ethnic community failed so completely? The answer lies in the nature and history of the ruling elite of the ethnic community.

Throughout the Italian American experience, the *prominenti* have consistently endorsed a closely-linked agenda of «patriotism» and Americanization, which has essentially meant supporting the coercive efforts of American society designed to strip Italian immigrants and their descendants of their history, culture, and their identity. The dual focus of *prominentismo* has always been to promote the separate, self-agrandizing interests of their own particular elite rather than of the community as a whole, and to stress what Italian Americans are not. In the end, their one effort to encourage identification with the *patria*, namely by supporting Mussolini's Fascist regime, resulted during World War II in one of the most serious episodes of defamation the Italian community ever experienced – the placing of Italian Americans on the Enemy Aliens list and the resulting consequences of that experience. Americanization, the anti-Mafia campaign, and support for Fascist Italy constituted the core of the project advanced by Generoso Pope, the archetypical *prominente*, from as far back as the late 1920s. Recent discussions about recreating an «Italy lobby» among Italian Americans have, ironically, deliberately looked back to Pope, who invented the pro-Mussolini lobby on the basis of presumed obligations owed by immigrants to their mother country.

While radical activism was essentially class-based, its goals were aimed at benefiting the social and economic interests of the vast majority of Italian immigrants in America. Moreover, the radical leadership politicized Italian ethnicity and made it an integral part of their militancy, so that the *sovversivi* historically stood squarely against Americanization and in defense of the cultural rights of the entire community. It was the old-time radicals like Tresca, not the *prominenti*, who understood the link between the material and the cultural aspects of Italian American identity, and it is their example that may yet serve the interests of the Italian American community.

Note

- * Paper presented at the «Conference on Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and the Italian American Community», John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, City University of New York, February 19, 2001. The text has not been revised by the Author.

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