

INTRODUCTION

During the 1880s and 1890s, immigrants from the Pesaro province of the Marche region in north central Italy—and in particular from the city of Fano—began to settle the bulge of land located to the south of downtown New London, to the east of the city’s main thoroughfare and along the Thames River. The Italian community of Fort Trumbull, also called Fort Neck, gradually displaced the original working-class Irish inhabitants, and by 1920 the neighborhood was overwhelmingly Fanese or Marchegian in composition. It occupied a pronounced geographical position, nestled close to an imposing naval installation from which it derived its name, as well as being securely positioned within the city’s port and shipbuilding facilities.

Anarchism, not geographical location, however, defined the Fort Trumbull neighborhood. Between 1900 and 1910, anarchism became the dominant system of belief of its inhabitants, and would occupy that position for decades after; not a “philosophical” variety of anarchism along the lines of Henry David Thoreau, but one that adhered to the most militant wing of the movement. Fort Trumbull residents became supporters of the Italian anarchists Errico Malatesta, Luigi Galleani, and others who advocated social revolution and rejected all accommodation with the ruling powers of society.

The Italian anarchist movement at the end of the nineteenth century reflected the influence of the two figures whose writings and activities established anarchism as a worldwide revolutionary movement: Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, both scions of aristocratic families. Their doctrine of anarchism differed with preceding antistatist thought in its orientation toward the “popular” classes, the workers and peasants. Pioneering figures such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had taken

part in revolutionary events such as the upheavals that shook Europe in 1848–49, and issued programs to help guide the struggle to overturn the existing order. Proudhon's ideas would continue to influence the movement. Bakunin and Kropotkin helped to establish anarchist circles and groups across the continent. Anarchism attained mass influence in Spain and Italy, and commanded the support of workers and artisans not only in European countries like France, Germany, and Belgium, but across Latin America and Asia as well. Paris contained numerous anarchist groupings and journals, while London became the center for several thousand anarchists fleeing repression in their home countries.¹

The anarchist movement contained a variety of currents, from supporters of individual terrorism who advocated and used dynamite for bombings to those who preferred to work in mass movements. The trend that favored “propaganda of the deed,” or expropriations and individual terrorism, received a boost with the founding of the Anti-Authoritarian International, or Black International, in London in 1881. While this body succeeded in diverting much anarchist energy to the advocating of attentats, most anarchists—and even the Black International itself—kept their focus on establishing or working within trade unions. As will be seen, these factions often overlapped, with doctrinal collisions ever-present.

A few basic principles of the anarchist movement can be stated, although at heavy risk of oversimplification. At the core of revolutionary anarchist doctrine are several elements that distinguish it from the Marxism on which social democratic parties of the late nineteenth century based themselves. Anarchism places the role of the individual as crucial for revolutionary activity, and proceeds from there to engagement with the masses. The anarchist movement rejected social democratic prioritization of parliamentary activity and instead focused their efforts on building a revolution from below, involving sections of the working class outside of the existing trade unions. Anarchists stood as “anti-authoritarians,” and while some supported the forming of anarchist-led organizations, they criticized “professional” revolutionaries for attempting to gain leadership of the working class. They did not seek to replace the bourgeois state with a workers' state, as they regarded all government authority as inherently oppressive and corrupt; in the anarchist vision, a social revolution of the working masses would quickly bring about a society based on self-directing associations of the populace.² Nicola Sacco, while in prison for his alleged role in the South Braintree payroll robbery of 1920, offered the goals of anarchism as follows: “no government, no police, no judges,

no bosses, no authority; autonomous groups of people—the people own everything—work in cooperation—distribute by needs—equality, justice, comradeship—love each other.”³ Some anarchists like Kropotkin saw the need to “realize communism without delay,” and even that “existing societies . . . are inevitably impelled in the direction of communism.” Kropotkin tended to minimize the potentially fierce resistance to socialism by defenders of the old society, while Italians such as Errico Malatesta and Luigi Fabbri were quite cognizant of the possible danger ahead.⁴

Anarchism crossed the Atlantic during the early 1880s. Immigrants, especially Germans, provided the base for the profusion of clubs, circles, and newspapers that sprouted across the American Northeast and Midwest. Anarchism as a revolutionary mass movement may have reached its height in the Chicago area, with its leaders assuming the leadership of the struggle for the eight-hour day. The Haymarket bombing and subsequent repression of the movement forced the anarchists to adapt to new conditions as thousands of immigrants arrived to fill their ranks.⁵

If anarchism in the present day brings to mind disaffected middle-class youth, counterculture, and pacifist currents in the antiwar movement, it historically had been a working-class movement; in France, for instance, it gained a foothold in the Parisian workers’ suburbs such as Belleville that had provided the base of support for the Paris Commune in 1871. Anarchism became the dominant revolutionary current among workers in the industrial metropolis of Barcelona, representing a deeply rooted movement that lasted until the triumph of Franco’s forces in 1939. The meetings, debates and social activities these anarchists organized did not differ much from those of their compatriots throughout the rest of Europe and the Americas.⁶

A significant portion of Fort Trumbull Marchegiani brought with them this anarchist doctrine that had found a welcoming home in their province’s long history of insurrection and popular revolt. Along with their carpentry, masonry, and maritime skills, seasoned militants carried to the United States the experience of having participated in one of the most important sectors of Italy’s revolutionary movement. Many more were radicalized here on the shores of the new continent. The clubs that they created, first known as Gruppo L’Avvenire, would last for over seventy years. They would anchor Italian American radicalism in southeastern Connecticut and play a considerable role in their nationwide movement. Galleani, the most prominent as well as one of the most militant of the Italian transplants on American soil, would describe his New London

comrades on more than one occasion as “among the best” of the movement. Fort Trumbull anarchists interacted with the greater New London working class community, participated in workplace protests and strikes, and tried to construct a “solidarity culture” in their neighborhood. They hosted mass meetings and carried on a relentless struggle against their many opponents on the left as well as the right.

The title of a recent collection of essays on the Italian left in the United States aptly captures the disappearance of this revolutionary movement from popular memory: *The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism*. Marcella Bencivenni ends her study of the cultural movements of the Italian American *soversivi* (subversives) with a mournful final paragraph on aging Italian radicals unable to transmit their ideas to their offspring and condemned to live in ever-smaller circles until they passed from existence.⁷ But for a considerable time the anarchists of New London played as significant a role in shaping the Italian community of their city as did the church, major political parties, and the rising *prominenti*. What follows is how they contended with these forces and developed a vision quite at odds with the values of the emerging American mainstream.

Historians have increasingly applied the concept of transnationalism to the migration process of Italian radicals. Donna Gabaccia defined this general term as “a way of life that connects family, work and consciousness in more than one national territory . . . Family discipline, economic security, reproduction, inheritance, romance, and dreams transcended national boundaries and bridged continents.” She also offered a simple definition: the immigrants lived in both worlds.⁸

Applied to Italian anarchists, historians have focused on, in the words of Travis Tomchuk, “a system of networks—a form of anarchist migration process.” These networks “laid the groundwork for a global movement.” As Davide Turcato observed, “Italian anarchism is best analyzed as a single movement stretching across the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.” This transnational perspective, according to the editors of a collection of essays on this subject, requires historians to keep anarchism’s transnational character in view when studying the movement in a particular geographical place. From this migration process, anarchism drew its strength because, again in the words of Tomchuk, it became “difficult for a state or states to destroy autonomous groups spread across wide geographical spaces.” Turcato points to the resilience of the anarchist network in his study of Malatesta’s activism between

1889 and 1900, from his refuge in London, founding of a journal in Nice, escape from Lampedusa Island to his ability to remain connected with developments whether in the Americas or in prison. His book ends with an extended discussion of the “transatlantic organizational integration (that) characterized Italian anarchism.”⁹

This book is an attempt to discuss the history of Italian anarchism in a small port city in Connecticut within this framework and hopefully contribute to the growing field of anarchist studies. Its focuses on the rank and file movement in New London: how they built their anarchist circles, how they lived their lives, and why they stayed around so long. While these anarchists may have traveled across the Atlantic as part of a migrating network while never out of touch with comrades left behind, they nevertheless fought nearly all their battles in one region of Connecticut, one city, and, in the end, one neighborhood.