

Williamsburg Radicale

Joey Skee (May 03, 2013)



A brief note on the lost world of Italian-American radicalism.

I walked by this sign last week in the window of a liquor store on Metropolitan Avenue in the Brooklyn area historically known as Italian Williamsburg. The sign was too easy a target for derision and dismissal: the communist hammer and sickle in a neon advertisement for Russian vodka beneath the name of the neighborhood that is ground zero for [hipsterism](#) [2]’s ironic pastiche, commoditization of style, consumption of subcultural cool, and hypergentrification. Yet for me, the



sign announced yet another example of the rewriting of social history that epitomizes gentrification practices with the established trope of bohemian colonization of the postindustrial city and the erasure of earlier histories.



May Day rally on Fifth Avenue, New York City, ca. 1930.

Banners include the Industrial Workers of the World,

the Italian Antifascist Front,

and several antifascist and anarchist newspapers.

Fort Velona Papers, [Immigration History Research Center](#) [3],

University of Minnesota.

Caption courtesy of Jennifer Guglielmo.

I was instantly reminded of Italian Williamsburg's radical past, the local struggle for workers' rights and the ending of capitalist oppression that I have come to know through the work of historians.

In her book [Militants and Migrants](#) [4]: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers (1988), [Donna Gabaccia](#) [5] (University of Minnesota) notes the presence of socialist workers' circles in the area. Founded in the early twentieth century, the Williamsburg Socialist circle (no address given) was one of them.

Another was Club Avanti at 202-204 Bushwick Avenue which Gabaccia describes in this way:

Like the Socialist circle, it supported education, sponsoring lectures on peace, religion, and sexual and family questions, on women's emancipation, nationalism, imperialism, major immigrant strikes, the Mexican revolution, the problems of political prisoners in Italy, and more generally, current events. It gave classes in Italian, the natural sciences, and "social questions." (p. 139)

The club published a small newspaper La Luce, sponsored a theatrical group, and worked together with Jewish and Spanish-speaking groups in the neighborhood.

[Jennifer Guglielmo](#) [6] (Smith College) shared with me some of her archival research while working on her book [Living the Revolution](#) [7]: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945 (2010). Guglielmo uncovered two anarchist study groups active in the neighborhood during the 1910s and 1920s: Il Circolo Studi Sociale Pietro Gori at 321 North 7th Street and Il Circolo di Studi Sociali of Greenpoint and Williamsburg at 317 and 319 North 7th Street. [Pietro Gori](#) [8] was an anarchist intellectual and activist, known for his creative works of plays, poetry, and song. One tune that entered the canon is "Stornelli d'esilio" (Song of Exile), whose chorus is:

Nostra patria è il mondo intero
e nostra legge è la libertà

ed un pensiero
ribelle in cor ci sta. Our homeland is the whole world
and our law is freedom
and in our heart are
rebel thoughts.

Not much else is known about these two groups. The buildings where they were housed were razed



in the [construction of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway](#) [9] after World War II.

On this [May Day](#) [10], as people take to the streets in support of unions, living wages, and [safe working conditions](#) [11], I evoke this [lost world of Italian-American radicalism](#) [12] from Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Source URL: <http://test.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/life-people/article/williamsburg-radicale>

Links

[1] <http://test.iitaly.org/files/35958williamsburgneonsign1367413399jpg>

[2] <http://paulmullins.wordpress.com/2012/12/08/the-death-of-authenticity-and-the-outsider-consumption-and-hipsters/>

[3] <http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/>

[4] <http://www.amazon.com/Militants-Migrants-Sicilians-American-Workers/dp/0813513561>

[5] <http://www.hist.umn.edu/people/profile.php?UID=drg>

[6] http://www.smith.edu/history/faculty_guglielmo.php

[7] http://uncpress.unc.edu/browse/book_detail?title_id=1695

[8] <http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/t76jd6>

[9] <http://southwilliamsburgproject.weebly.com/brooklyn-queens-expressway.html>

[10] <http://libcom.org/history/1886-haymarket-martyrs-mayday>

[11] <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/33578-bangladesh-to-philippines-workers-rally-for-better-conditions/>

[12] <http://monthlyreview.org/2006/01/01/lost-and-found-the-italian-american-radical-experience>