

Foreign Anarchists as Boogymon

Monsters Under the Bed

Steve Izma

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a review of

Transnational Radicals: Italian Anarchists in Canada and the U.S., 1915–1940 by Travis Tomchuk. University of Manitoba Press, 2015, 260 pp.

An illustration early in Travis Tomchuk's *Transnational Radicals* demonstrates the popular press's view of anarchists immediately following the 1886 Haymarket Square Police Riot in Chicago: Johann Most, a radical anarchist, is presented by *Harper's Weekly* as a maniacal figure waving a sword and a flag, threatening the reader with "Socialistic War," while several other well-armed anarchists dive under beds in fear.

The anarchists have enough foreign characteristics to feed the xenophobia of the comfortable classes of the era, and Tomchuk suggests that societal unrest had thrust anarchists into the important boogeyman role: "the monsters under the bed."

But the authorities failed to build a wall and the anarchists kept arriving. Tomchuk pieces together a multi-dimensional picture of the lives of those who got through—Italian anarchist men and women active in Canada and the United States during the first half of the 20th century.

Although the book has a typical scholarly structure—historical context, summaries of published studies, data from archives, and lots of footnotes (many of which make for very interesting tangential reading)—Tomchuk has restructured what was originally a thesis and fleshed out a number of narratives and interviews into an engaging story.

His straightforward, jargon-free survey of the related literature, demonstrating his broad knowledge of anarchism is one of the book's delights.

Fear of the surveillance state be damned, Tomchuk's main source of information is the Italian fascist government archives, now accessible online. Of course, one of the last things that anarchists want is for the state to write their history, but Tomchuk turns this material on its head, likely causing Mussolini's cops to similarly turn in their graves.

Starting with an online search of 39 Italian anarchists in Canada and over five thousand in the U.S., Tomchuk chose to examine the actual physical files in Rome of 36 of the Canadians and 45 of the Americans. While he managed to uncover the stories of several women through other means, he noted that the police seemed interested almost exclusively in men.

Much of the information in Rome clearly came from Canadian and U.S. authorities, demonstrating how keen our home-grown cops were to collaborate with their fascist equivalents, especially in deporting migrant anarchists to brutal and fatal jails in Italy.

Tomchuk visited other archives and interviewed numerous people familiar with Italian migrant anarchism, including friends of the *Fifth Estate* such as Federico Arcos of Windsor and Libera Martignolo Bortolotti. Many

anarchists in southern Ontario and the Detroit area knew Bortolotti's husband, Attilio (often known as Art Bartell), a generous supporter of anarchist projects and a prominent figure in many of the book's stories.

Tomchuk also read through many issues of two prominent Italian-language anarchist newspapers, *Il Martello* (The Hammer) and *L'adunata dei Refrattori* (Call of the Disobedient), both published in the New York City area, but circulated and highly influential among the communities discussed. These newspapers also represented an ideological split among Italian anarchists, which Tomchuk characterizes as a tension between "organizationalists" (essentially an anarcho-syndicalist tendency) and "anti-organizationalists."

Among the consequences, as the author shows, were the negative effects on attempts of the larger community to organize support for anarchists in need, especially those arrested and in danger of deportation.

The shape of immigrant anarchist life that Tomchuk constructs out of these materials has both social and political dimensions, exemplified in the anarchist circles commonly formed by the migrant radicals. Their meeting places became centers for fundraising, education, and cultural events such as dances and theatrical performances.

Tomchuk found evidence of such circles in the U.S. at East Boston, Needham, Newark, Paterson, Brooklyn, Pittston (Pennsylvania), Detroit, Chicago, Gary (Indiana), San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Toronto, Sault Ste. Marie (Ontario), and Windsor had the most active circles in Canada.

Migrant Italian anarchists tended to live in communities that shared their language and dialect and this cemented the strong sense of solidarity among them. This also compensated for the loss of extended family support systems, something capitalism has always consciously undermined in order to gain control over its pool of labor, a pool increasingly characterized by atomized, transient workers, rather than those rooted in community.

The author frequently comments on gender issues in these anarchist communities. Although he discusses the difficulty in finding historical materials describing the role of women, one tendency became clear: "not all of the Italian movement's men saw female comrades as equals. In fact, at least a few felt women had no place at all in the anarchist movement." Nonetheless, "it did provide a space for [women] to resist gender oppression, address specific issues of concern, and, in a few cases, become well known for their abilities."

The flourishing of the Catholic Church and its conservative power in North American immigrant communities made it a regular target of anarchist criticism. Yet despite the strong anti-religious position of virtually everyone Tomchuk mentions, the movement in some distressing ways reflected the doctrinal tendencies of the Church.

For example, Tomchuk quotes from an ad that appeared in *Il Martello* in 1931: "Bring your kids...[Carlo] Tresca will speak in English...to make them know the faith that animates their parents."

Fortunately, some commentators saw the danger in perpetuating catechisms, both Catholic and anarchistic. So, while one newspaper commentator argued that it was the "mission" of mothers to understand their role as educators and liberators of their sons (no mention of daughters in this case), another criticized, as Tomchuk puts it, "the ways in which male comrades trained their sons to memorize revolutionary poems and songs, but without providing sufficient context with respect to their meaning and import."

However, passing anarchist ideas on to their children became problematic in other ways as well: "As the 1940s wore on, the Italian Anarchists...grew older and their children, who had assimilated into Canadian and American culture, did not replenish the movement's ranks."

Tomchuk points to the first generation's strongly ethnic mode of being anarchists as one of the problems. One has to ask: At what point does ethnicity cease to be community and begin to be claustrophobic?

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