

# The Last of the Anarchists

A working-class hero passes away.

By Paul Berman



There used to be many thousands of Italian-speaking anarchists in America--people from Sicily or southern Italy who came to America, worked in blue-collar trades, and read newspapers with names like *Subversive Chronicle*, *The Call of the Refractory Ones*, and *The Hammer* (except the names were in Italian). The Italian anarchists played a notably impassioned role in the American labor movement in the 1910s, and in the 1920s, two of them, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, became still more notable as victims of American injustice. That was pretty much the high point for Italian-speaking anarchism in America.

Yet, in the decades after Sacco and Vanzetti, the old-fashioned Italian-American anarchists never entirely disappeared. Even after the last of the newspapers folded, in 1972, there was always someone who could stand up in front of a room full of people and explicate the old ideas--until now. For in June of this year, a fine old man named Valerio Isca--a friend of mine, I am honored to say--died at the age of 95, and Italian-American anarchism lost its last public voice. Advertisement

What did the Italian anarchists offer to America? The classic explanation was given by John Dos Passos in *U.S.A.* and a couple of his other novels. In Dos Passos' picture of America, Big Business was getting bigger, working people were getting more desperate, and the prospect of a left-wing revolution was getting likelier. Which might have been good news--except that America's left-wing movement was likewise going to hell. The cynical Communist champions of dictatorship were getting ever stronger within the left, and the immigrant anarchists and Wobblies (the trade-union anarchists) with their idealistic zeal for freedom were fading into the shadows.

But at least--this was America's saving grace, in the imagination of John Dos Passos--the anarchists and Wobblies never gave up their principles. At least there were always people who refused to be exploited--or to exploit anyone else, who didn't want to be ruled--or to rule over anyone else. The anarchist version of clinging to those high-minded notions was a little unworldly, in Dos Passos' portrait. Yet, he felt for those people. And to anyone who has turned the pages of *U.S.A.* and has

marveled at Dos Passos' lonely anarchist champion of a doomed working-class ideal, Valerio Isca would have been an entirely familiar figure.

Parkinson's disease made him vibrate almost violently (though it didn't impede his labors as a machinist). His hair was white and wild, his Sicilian accent wobbled in a wide tremolo, and when he stood up to speak, it was impossible to take your eyes off him. He would explain that he was of the working class, and for the working class, that he wanted a society of solidarity and freedom--and every word radiated emotion. For he was convinced that, as an anarchist, he represented a powerful revolutionary force: that he scattered radical thoughts in the air, and the bourgeoisie reeled in terror; that he spoke, and others gasped.

He served in the Italian army during World War I. Afterward, he came to New York and New Jersey, and joined the International Group, the Road to Freedom circle, and a couple of other anarchist groups--working-class organizations with hardly any intellectuals or people with middle-class educations. Those old-time anarchist groups never did acquire a vast influence. It was because of a chink in their reasoning: They could never identify a plausible strategy for getting from the world as it existed to the world of their hopes. The faction around *The Call of the Refractory Ones* leaned in a terrorist direction (and, in fact, one of that newspaper's readers from the Bronx, Mike Schirru, went to Italy and tried to assassinate Mussolini--and was caught and executed). But Valerio Isca was not a partisan of violence. The faction around *The Hammer* favored trade unionism. Isca approved. But unionism in America did not point in a revolutionary direction.

Still other people favored community-building. Isca participated in two such colonies. One of them, in Stelton, N.J., contained a famous school run on nonauthoritarian principles and was celebrated for its artistic spirit. The other, in Mohegan, N.Y., was more modest. Both the colonies were pleasant enough, if considered as working-class suburbs for people with an imaginative sense of how to live; but neither colony was in the slightest bit subversive. Then came World War II, and Isca and the anarchists had to choose between upholding their revolutionary intransigence or supporting the United States in the war--and he and probably a good half of the anarchist movement, the people around the anarcho-syndicalist theoretician Rudolf Rocker, came out for the war, which was sensible of them. But in that way the anarchists demoted their tiny revolutionary movement to a philosophical current, even if they stoutly denied doing anything of the sort.

In 1945, Isca helped found the Libertarian Book Club, which for the last half-century has been the most stable of the anarchist organizations in New York. (The word "libertarian" began as a left-wing synonym for "anarchist," and was taken over by the right-wing free-marketers of the Libertarian Party only in recent decades.) The club held lectures in the hall of a Jewish social-democratic fraternal order, the Workmen's Circle, and in the 1970s, when I was a student, I used to attend. Sometimes I was invited to speak. The room was full of elderly Wobblies and their wives (or "companions," to use the anarchist term), retired sailors, machinists, typographers, veterans of the Russian Revolution of 1917, and heroes of the Spanish anarchist revolution of the 1930s. I had never addressed a more wonderful audience. And of those people, no one was more attentive or interested than Valerio Isca.

I visited him at his home--he lived in a cooperative put up by the garment workers' union in Manhattan--and I was astonished by his book collection. Isca was a champion of the libertarian socialist ethics of Peter Kropotkin, but his fondest possession turned out to be a shelf full of books by Henry D. Thoreau. From those two thinkers, Kropotkin and Thoreau, he drew his approach to life: dignified, independent, a little truculent maybe, full of animus against bosses and priests, but also full of love for learning, for his fellow workers--and for the woods.

Paul Avrich, the great historian of American anarchism, has written a fascinating and invaluable book called *Anarchist Voices*, which contains interviews with 180 of the old-fashioned anarchists, Italian-speaking and otherwise--most of them gone now. Leafing through that book, I come across virtually the entire audience that used to hear my lectures at the Libertarian Book Club. And in Avrich's pages I come across my old friend who loved Thoreau.

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TECHNOLOGY

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