

CORDA E SAPONE

(Rope and Soap)

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The bound corpses of two Italian immigrants, Castenego Ficarrotta and Angelo Albano, handcuffed together, hanging in a Florida swamp. One with a note affixed to his feet, the other with a pipe in his mouth. September 9, 1910.

In the course of my ongoing research on Italian emigrants to the Americas, in 1999 I started focusing my attention on the lynchings of Italians in the United States. I immediately discovered that the history of those episodes was basically unknown both to my Italian colleagues and by American scholars of contemporary history – with the sole exception of few experts on Italian emigration to the U.S.

That is not to say that the frequent cases of mistreatment of Italian emigrants have not been studied and analyzed. Indeed, abuses and violence against Italians in the U.S. between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries are well documented.

There was, however, a major dark hole in the history of lynchings of Italians, both in the research of Italian and American historians. This runs contrary to the notoriety of cases with a clear political connotation, such as the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, that is well known beyond the circles of experts. In the United States numerous studies have tackled the phenomenon of lynching, with analyses on its symbolic meaning, its geographical and temporal coordinates and the struggle to stamp out such abominable practice.

However, American historians who have studied this phenomenon have focused most of their attention on lynchings of African Americans, the racial aspects, the rationale and the [semiotic] meaning. They have, though, widely underestimated, both in terms of quantity and quality, the lynchings of other non-black ethnic groups and in particular of Italians.

I noticed that the image of lynching very often coincided with the narrative of the “frontier justice” in the period when the West was first invaded and colonized by white settlers—the period that was made popular by Western movies. A second narrative focused on the Deep South with the hangings of black people by the white establishment, in situations of economic and cultural backwardness and a radical attachment to old traditions. It was, however shocking to discover that even Italians could be the targets of such brutal practices. In addition, such a high number of victims was also stunning. Although the 34 Italian victims -- plus another dozen saved at the last minute -- were an infinitesimal fraction of the number of black lynchings, they also represented the first ethnic group behind blacks and Chinese.

In 2000 the *New York Historical Society* organized a courageous exhibit about lynching in the United States, with the title *Without Sanctuary*, with the display of a tragic collection of photographs and post cards depicting men, primarily African American, that had been burned, mutilated, hanged or tortured: all this, in front of crowds of “normal” people.

The collection narrated a long chapter of American history, primarily from the 1880's to the 1920's. Under the guise of a calm normality, this was the history of a wave of collective assassinations which reached the peak at the turn of the century.

The catalogue includes only two photos of a lynching of Italians in Tampa, Florida, in 1910. There are photos of episodes involving other ethnic groups and white people: quite appropriately the majority of images represents African Americans, by far the largest group of American citizens subjected to this practice. And yet, even with such limited evidence, I noticed that my colleagues were surprised to find out in that exhibit that two Italians were among the victims of lynching. Once more I realized how little the world knows about that side of emigration, full of mistreatment, abuses, discrimination and violence suffered by so many Italian emigrant, and so easily ignored in favor of the success of a few.

In my work, far from facing the theme of lynching in its complexity, I limited my analysis to the episodes that involved Italian citizens in the United States between the end of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th.

Beyond the historical and linguistic origins, the practice of lynching has distinct and peculiar properties that separates it from other forms of collective murder, including those perpetrated by secret societies like the Ku Klux Klan. Lynching came in various forms that differed greatly depending on the time and location where it was administered. Among the variables were the number of people involved in the lynching party, ranging from a few dozens to several thousands; the organizational set-up; the method of killing; the reason and the kind of crime for which the punishment was meted out. All of the episodes, however, shared certain characteristics: first was mob violence that culminated in the capture of suspects of certain crimes, followed by the observance of a ceremonial ritual in front of the mob. Usually, but not necessarily in every case, the mob forcibly removed the suspects from the jail where they were incarcerated and dragged them to a location in the open. The only exceptions were a few cases when the execution took place in the jail itself. "Taken from legal custody"

was the legal definition of the kidnapping. The formula was applied to excuse the local authorities responsible for the lack of protection of the prisoners.

One of the most striking aspects present in every case was the composition of the lynching party. This was not a mob of deviant characters beyond the boundaries of society. Quite the contrary: on an individual level they were “good and honest” citizens, perfectly integrated into society, who felt the duty to defend the value of justice and the traditions of American civilization by inflicting cruel but necessary exemplary punishments. At the end of the 19th century, an erudite Italian traveler, Giovanni De Riseis, who, incidentally, had very little sympathy for immigrants he met in Colorado (he described them as “knife-wielding drunkards” and “ugly characters,”) described the psychological mechanism at work in an individual in the moment when he surrenders his judgment to the rule of the mob. Concerning the lynching of an Italian in Denver in 1893, he reported that the lynchers were model citizens: “However, when many meek and friendly people gather together, soon they turn into mobs of violent lynchers.

When people are absolutely convinced of their own righteousness and they decide to inflict violence not for the sake of violence itself or for personal retribution, but in order to uphold a higher principle, they feel collectively absolved by the mob they are part of. This renders violence acceptable in moral and social terms when it is applied to other people who are seen as being on the outside of their system of rules. “