

**An “inferior class of white aliens”. Italians and the labour movement  
in nineteenth- and twentieth-century San Francisco\***

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This article examines the relationship between Italian immigrants and the labour movement in early twentieth-century San Francisco. It studies the Italians’ integration process through the lens of race by focusing on the racist policies adopted by labour unions, which only admitted “whites” and excluded Asian immigrants. Drawing on a wide variety of sources (the labour press, trade unions’ records, employment data), I will reveal how Italians, although discriminated against and judged as racially inferior, were nonetheless recognised as “white” and therefore assimilated into the labour movement. I argue that this was made possible by the early development of a common “Caucasian” identity among European groups, modelled against Asian immigration, which reduced the tensions that prevailed elsewhere in the United States, namely between the “old stock” and the “new immigrants”, among whom many Italians.

**Key words:** Italian migration to the United States, Whiteness, Racism, Labour history

**Are Italians white? The Pacific perspective**

In 1911, a trade unionist who was assisting grocery clerks in San Francisco made a scathing attack on Italian immigrants. Writing in the pages of the *San Francisco Call*, he accused them of introducing the lowermost living and working conditions and hence putting a burden on the trade union movement:

We are having considerable trouble in our work on account of an inferior class of white aliens, who have been coming to this country in great numbers lately, and are engaging in the grocery, fruit and candy business, underselling other stores and refusing to comply with union conditions [...] From what I have seen of them in various parts of the city, I have come to the conclusion that they are worse than the Orientals. They are uncleanly, live miserably and pay those who work for them starvation wages. In settling here they are actuated by the same motive that actuates the Chinese, that is, money gathering to send to the land of their birth. Their condition and manner of doing business will be brought to the attention of the San Francisco Labor Council with a view to obtain a remedy for the evil they are creating.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Aliens retard label movement*, “San Francisco Call”, 12 January 1911, p. 10.

The expression “inferior class of white aliens” aptly summarises the attitude of the California labour movement to Italian immigrants. Although they were considered “inferior” from a racial perspective, up to the point of being compared to the “oriental” Chinese, the Italians remained “white” and hence a group that had to be included, as demonstrated by the attempt to insert them in the Grocery Clerks’ Union of San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> This article describes what it meant for the California-based Italians to find themselves in the condition of “inferior white” people in terms of their relationship with the working class and their integration into the job market.

In recent historiography of immigration to the United States, scholars have raised questions about the racial experience of the “new immigrants”, as the Italian, Greek, Hungarian, Polish and other groups from Southern and Eastern Europe were called in contrast to earlier migrants from Northern Europe.<sup>3</sup> The problem of racism against immigrants, which previous studies have addressed,<sup>4</sup> has thus been re-examined to understand the historical process behind the formation of “whiteness”, understood both as a “category” that came to include the European migration flows and as an “identity” that the migrants discovered overseas.<sup>5</sup> The theoretical assumption is that the white race, far from being a natural entity, is a social and ideological construction. We can therefore reconstruct its genesis and evolution also with regard to the mass immigration from the Old Continent, which enabled new groups to enter the dimension of whiteness, diversifying it yet absorbing its main feature: racism against “non-whites”.<sup>6</sup>

The arrival of Southern and Eastern European immigrants in the United States between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a crucial step in the development of whiteness. Racial anthropology reached its peak when it contaminated American society with its pseudo-scientific theories and taxonomies. The “new immigrants”, even if legally “white”, were considered members of different races: Slavic, Iberian, Jewish and so on. The Italians were divided into two racial groups: the Alpine, for the small group of immigrants coming from regions not bordered by the sea; and the Mediterranean, for the bulk of

<sup>2</sup> On the union campaign, see Robert E.L. Knight, *Industrial relations in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1900-1918*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1960, p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> Desmond King, *Making Americans. Immigration, race, and the origins of the diverse democracy*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the land. Patterns of American nativism*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1955; Salvatore J. LaGumina, *Wop: a documentary history of anti-Italian discrimination in the United States*, San Francisco, Straight Arrow Books, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> David R. Roediger, *Colored white: transcending the racial past*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Kolchin, *Whiteness Studies. The new history of race in America*, “Journal of American History”, 2002, n. 1, pp. 154-173. With regard to Italian immigration: Stefano Luconi, *Whiteness and ethnicity in Italian-American historiography*, in Jerome Krase (ed.), *The status of interpretation in Italian American studies*, Stony Brook, Forum Italicum, 2011, p. 146.

flows from the other areas of the peninsula.<sup>7</sup> This distinction was taken from the Lombrosian school, which theorised the racial “otherness” of southerners. However, its teachings were received and elaborated in different ways across the Atlantic.

In Italy, the theme of “whiteness” was practically absent from the discourse on race, which was still structured around historical-deterministic terminology rather than a strictly biological one.<sup>8</sup> The inferiority of Italians from the South was demonstrated not through the colour of their skin but through their atavistic belonging to a decayed and degenerate, Mediterranean race/civilisation. In the United States, instead, skin colour was central to the discourse on race and linked to the theme of “purity”. The concept of the Mediterranean race was, in fact, used to determine the Italians’ inferiority in view of their dark complexion, which raised suspicions that they were mixed with African blood.<sup>9</sup> Through the double binary of race and colour, a hierarchy within the European peoples was established that placed the Italians among white people but at the same time also questioned the possibility of their assimilation into the superior Teutonic, Anglo-Saxon or Nordic stock that formed the nation’s roots.<sup>10</sup>

There is an ongoing debate among scholars on how to interpret the racial status of the “new immigrants” and grasp the meaning of the expression “inferior class of white aliens” that was applied to Italians in California, I will focus on two interpretations that have emerged in this debate: the concept of “inbetween people”, advanced in particular by David Roediger; and Thomas Guglielmo’s “white on arrival” thesis.<sup>11</sup> For Roediger, the “new immigrants” were only recognised as “white” over time and they learned to feel “white” by gradually developing a racist awareness of being different from the African-Americans who were marginalised along with them. From Roediger’s point of view, the “new immigrants” became “white” because they gradually emerged

<sup>7</sup> William Ripley, *The races of Europe. A sociological study*, New York, D. Appleton and Company, 1899 and Madison Grant, *The passing of the Great Race. The racial basis of European History*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916.

<sup>8</sup> See Gaia Giuliani, Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e nero. Storia dell’identità razziale degli italiani*, Florence, Le Monnier, 2013, chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> On the re-elaboration of Cesare Lombroso’s theory in the United States, see Peter R. D’Agostino, *Craniums, criminals, and the “cursed race”: Italian anthropology in U.S. racial thought*, “Comparative Studies in Society and History”, 2002, n. 2, pp. 319-343; Bénédicte Deschamps, *Le Racisme anti-italien aux États-Unis (1880-1940)*, in Michel Prum (ed.), *Exclure au nom de la race (États-Unis, Irlande, Grande-Bretagne)*, Paris, Syllepse, 2000, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew F. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a different color: European immigrants and the alchemy of race*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998; Nell I. Painter, *The history of the white people*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 2010.

<sup>11</sup> David R. Roediger, *Working toward whiteness. How America’s immigrants became white*, New York, Basic Books, 2005; James R. Barrett, David R. Roediger, *Inbetween peoples: race, nationality and the ‘New Immigrant’ working class*, “Journal of American Ethnic History”, 1997, n. 3, pp. 3-44; Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on arrival. Italians, race, color, and power in Chicago, 1890-1945*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003.

from a condition of racial ambiguity within which they understood the tragic value of whiteness in their adopted homeland. Conversely, Guglielmo argues that whiteness was not something the “new immigrants” had to achieve but a legal and social status granted to them upon arrival, of which they were well aware. In his opinion, the Italians — despite being discriminated against — were always situated within the system of privileges and advantages that distinguished the condition of “being white” from that of belonging to minorities of colour.

Although they reach opposite conclusions, Roediger and Guglielmo approach the issue of whiteness from a similar, diachronic perspective: both seek to understand when these groups can be said to have gained the position of “white” people in the American racial structure — whether immediately or gradually. However, by focusing on the temporal aspect, they offer uniform answers for the entire landscape of the United States that fail to take into account the specific way in which “whiteness” took shape on the Pacific Coast, with its unique context of “race relations” characterised by the presence of Mexican and, above all, Asian immigrants.<sup>12</sup> In the Pacific States, the most powerful racial dichotomy was not the usual white-black dichotomy, but the white-Asian one. As Erika Lee observed, in the Pacific Coast states, “immigration and whiteness were defined most clearly in opposition to Asian-ness or ‘yellowness’”.<sup>13</sup> This fundamental difference highlights the importance of the spatial aspect in explaining the racial status of the “new immigrants”, namely through a diachronic perspective that reveals where their whiteness was accepted or rejected most.

In this article, I will examine the “whiteness” of the Italians in the context of employment. The labour movement in the United States forged its identity in terms not only of class but also of race, as will become evident from its discriminatory discourses and practices. In a society marked by black slavery in the southern part of the country, workers embraced “whiteness” as a symbol of their dependent-but-free, non-slave labour, degrading “non-whiteness” to a synonym for servility and threat.<sup>14</sup> As various scholars have observed, “whiteness” in the United States took on a social and political meaning, more than a biological one. For instance, Matthew Jacobson stated that whiteness was tanta-

<sup>12</sup> Tomás Almaguer, *Racial fault lines. The historical origins of white supremacy in California*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Erika Lee, *The Chinese exclusion example: race, immigration, and American gatekeeping, 1882-1924*, “Journal of American Ethnic History”, 2002, n. 3, pp. 36-62, here p. 43, republished in the more recent monograph, *At America’s gates. Chinese immigration during the exclusion era, 1882-1943*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2004, p. 31; on the “white-Asian” dichotomy, see also Barbara Berglund, *Making San Francisco American. Cultural frontiers in the urban West, 1846-1906*, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2007, p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> David R. Roediger, *The wages of whiteness. Race and the making of the American working class*, New York, Verso, 1991.

mount to “fitness for self-government” and citizenship.<sup>15</sup> Put differently, within the working class, whiteness meant being suitable to the “American standard of living” of the (male) worker who was organised in a union against the threat of female and “non-white”, servile labour.<sup>16</sup> This is one of the meanings of “whiteness” that I will adopt in this article.

Nevertheless, white identity also had a more properly biological meaning in California, namely as a synonym for “Caucasian race”, a second concept I will investigate here. In the local working-class context, the whiteness-Caucasian nexus evolved in a dynamic of opposition to Asian immigration, which was unique to the Pacific Coast.<sup>17</sup> Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, African Americans were limited in number, as were the Mexicans, who resided in the agricultural areas of the south. At the methodological level, this means that Asian immigrants were the “non-white” benchmark against which the racial status of the “new” Italian immigrants was assessed. In other words, this article seeks to answer the question of Italian whiteness by comparing their condition to that of the Asians, contrary to existing literature (including the aforementioned studies by Roediger and Guglielmo) that compares the Italians with African Americans.<sup>18</sup> For this purpose, I will analyse press sources in which Italians were defined, and defined themselves, in racial terms. Drawing on archival documentation and statistical data, I will furthermore examine the Italian immigrants’ positioning in the labour market and level of integration into trade unions. This will enable me to consider both components that, by intersecting with each other, determine the phenomenon of race: its “cultural representation” and “social structure”.<sup>19</sup>

## San Francisco, a union town

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the labour movement of San Francisco went through a period of intense and uncommon development.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> M. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a different color*, cit., p. 7. On the “social” meaning of whiteness, see T. Guglielmo, *White on arrival*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Glickman, *Inventing the “American standard of living”: gender, race, and working class identity, 1880-1925*, “Labor History”, 1993, n. 2-3, pp. 221-235.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Saxton, *The indispensable enemy. Labor and the anti-Chinese movement in California*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Most studies centre around the industrial North and the Southern states, focusing on a comparison between Italians and African Americans. See the volume edited by Jennifer Guglielmo, Salvatore Salerno (eds.), *Gli italiani sono bianchi? Come l’America ha costruito la razza*, Milan, il Saggiatore, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Omi, Howard Winant, *Racial formation in the United States. From the 1960s to the 1990s*, New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> Lucile Eaves, *A history of California labor legislation*, Berkeley, The University Press, 1910; Ira B. Cross, *A history of the labor movement in California*, Berkeley, University of



Contrary to the precariousness of workers' organisations in other cities, the outbreak of a "union fever" — as a contemporary observer called it — boosted the number of unions in the Californian city, which jumped from a few to nearly a hundred units.<sup>21</sup> Not only the classic sectors of skilled labour — like the construction industry, controlled by the powerful Building Trades Council — were involved, but also categories that were not unionised elsewhere: shop assistants, grooms, butchers, bakers, waiters. Unionisation continued under the leadership of the Labor Council, the largest coordinating body of trade unions, which was affiliated with the national platform of the American Federation of Labor (hereafter AFL). Although the Labor Council shared the AFL's idea of "pure and simple unionism", which focused exclusively on labour and wage demands, it disagreed with the AFL's openness only to the unions of skilled workers so as to preserve their economic and social privileges through a strict selection of potential competitors. The Labor Council's new unionism was directed at all workers, including the unskilled labourers who were excluded from trade-unionist unions that were sceptical about their organisational possibilities.<sup>22</sup> Trade unions went through phases of advancement and standstill depending on the ability of their business counterpart to impose free bargaining of the workforce. The labour movement's tactic consisted in boycotting companies that resisted the closed shop system, which prescribed that only workers with union cards should be hired and the products had to be branded with the union label of the relevant category. This is how San Francisco gained a reputation as a closed-shop city.<sup>23</sup>

The causes behind the extraordinary development of the labour movement in San Francisco have been discussed elsewhere; historiography has identified various factors starting with the city's production system, which was centred on small and medium-sized companies. San Francisco's failure to develop into an industrial centre on a par with the major cities of the East and the Midwest meant that the unions were faced with a fragmented group of employers that was easier to isolate. For the purpose of this article, it is worth discussing the ethnic factors that scholarship has advanced. The first relates to the reduced influx of "new" immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe into the Pacific Coast, which would have protected the homogeneity of the local working class (of American and Northern European origin) and strengthened its internal cohesion. In other words, working-class structures in San Francisco — controlled by the northern "old stock", as elsewhere — would

California Press, 1935; Frederick L. Ryan, *Industrial relations in the San Francisco Building Trades*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1936; R. Knight, *Industrial relations*, cit.; Michael Kazin, *Barons of labor. The San Francisco Building Trades and union power in the Progressive Era*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1989.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas W. Page, *The San Francisco labor movement in 1901*, "Political Science Quarterly", December 1902, n. 4, pp. 664-668, here p. 666.

<sup>22</sup> I. Cross, *A history of the labor movement in California*, cit., pp. 230-231.

<sup>23</sup> R. Knight, *Industrial relations*, cit., p. 97.

have remained more protected from the destabilising element of the “new immigrants”, who were mostly of peasant origin and without union experiences, than in the East and the Midwest.<sup>24</sup> There is no doubt that the impact of the “new immigration” was not equal on both sides of the continent. In 1910, San Francisco’s European immigrants were divided between 60 per cent of “old immigrants” — especially Irish and Germans — and 24 per cent of “new” ones. By contrast, in the cities on the East Coast (the landing place for ships from the Old Continent), the proportion was more balanced or even in favour of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.<sup>25</sup> Still, we must not underestimate the fact that even in San Francisco, between 1900 and 1910, the number of Italians dramatically increased from 7,000 to 17,000. Although lagging behind the eastern centres, San Francisco became the city with the largest ethnic group of Italians, with over 24,000 immigrants in just two decades.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore not possible to explain the cohesion of San Francisco’s working class by relegating the “new immigrants” to an insignificant minority. Rather, we must ask ourselves how this cohesion was maintained despite the arrival of a large minority group composed of “new immigrants”, namely the Italians. This is where a second ethnic factor may offer some explanations, and which — according to other scholars — contributed to the unusual strength of the labour movement in San Francisco: the mobilisation against Asian immigration, identified as a common enemy of all categories of wage earners, skilled and unskilled workers alike.<sup>27</sup> For the Californian working class, “anti-orientalism” was as much a component of its identity as it was an organisational tool. Suffice to think of the Workingmen’s Party of California, which arose in San Francisco after the riot against Chinatown in 1877, with the aim of banning Chinese immigration.<sup>28</sup> The Chinese presence distanced San Francisco from the industrial centres on the Atlantic side in terms of the encounter with “non-whiteness”. In 1880, the Chinese represented 10 per cent of the population in the Californian city, whereas in Philadelphia, African Americans amounted to less than four per cent; this was less than two per cent in New York.<sup>29</sup> However, the racism of the Californian working class was not merely a consequence of the strong presence of Chinese immigrants and their “downward” competition in the labour market. Even more important than economic factors

<sup>24</sup> L. Eaves, *A history of California labor legislation*, cit., pp. 3-4; R. Knight, *Industrial relations*, cit., p. 41; M. Kazin, *Barons of labor*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. 1910 Census, *Population*, vol. 1, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1913, p. 825.

<sup>26</sup> Rose D. Scherini, *The Italian American community of San Francisco. A descriptive study*, New York, Arno Press, 1980, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> L. Eaves, *A history of California labor legislation*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Neil L. Shumsky, *The evolution of political protest and the Workingmen’s Party of California*, Columbus, Ohio State University, 1991, pp. 13-18.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. 1880 Census, *Population of the United States*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1882, p. 382, p. 402, p. 406.

were ideological factors, linked to a racist mentality forged in opposition to “black slave labour”, which American workers had brought to the Pacific Coast from other areas of the United States.<sup>30</sup>

In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which blocked Chinese immigration. However, this did not end the obsessions of the Californian working class as the measure was only valid for ten years. Moreover, from the 1890s onwards, Japanese immigration began to flow to the West Coast and was immediately identified as a new target. The result was a permanent state of unrest that benefited the “new” European immigrants who, albeit as “inferior” people, were integrated as “white” workers into the local labour movement’s eternal struggle against “oriental” immigration.

### “New immigrants” and Asian workers in the *Labor Clarion*

In 1911, the *Labor Clarion* (the Labor Council’s weekly magazine) declared a print run of 10,000 copies per edition.<sup>31</sup> The *Clarion* commented on political news, promoted the organisation of campaigns and published resolutions of individual trade unions and the wider California State Federation of Labor. At the end of 1905, it published a front-page article on the “immigration problem” that is useful to quote as it demonstrates how, on the Pacific Coast, the labour movement described racial differences. Within the hierarchy of priorities, the “new” European immigration was of secondary importance in comparison to the objective of an “absolute and irrevocable” exclusion of Asian immigration:

in this estimate of the immigration problem, the Asiatic phase of that problem occupies first place among the demands for action. Whatever steps may be regarded as sufficient to deal with the exigencies of European immigration, nothing less than exclusion, absolute and irrevocable, will suffice to guard against the danger, not only to the American Government, but to the Western Civilization, arising from the invasion of the Mongol hordes.<sup>32</sup>

This remained the *Clarion*’s stance for the whole first decade of the twentieth century. Between 1911 and 1912, priority was still given to the exclusion “of all races not now entitled to the right of naturalization under existing laws” (i.e. Asian immigrants), whereas it supported the need to control the migration flows from the Old Continent, albeit without pronouncing any explicit criticism of the “new immigration”: “[W]e do not attempt to draw any distinction between the peoples of Europe, North or South, east or west.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> A. Saxton, *The indispensable enemy*, cit., p. 19 and pp. 22-25.

<sup>31</sup> *Newspaper Rate Book. Season 1912-1913*, St. Louis, Nelson Chesman & Co., n.d., p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> *The immigration problem*, “Labor Clarion”, 22 December 1905, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Resolution on the immigration question*, “Labor Clarion”, 20 January 1911, p. 7; *Immigration conference*, “Labor Clarion”, 23 February 1912, p. 4.



The *Clarion's* programme was an unusual one in the national context of the labour movement, within which the “new immigrants” were not a threat of secondary importance as opposed to the Asian immigrants. Many studies have found similarities in the way the two groups were considered. Gwendolyn Mink highlighted the fact that the “old stock” of workers (i.e. Americans and Irish and German immigrants) forged its identity in opposition to the “new immigrants” through a racial discourse that extended to the latter the same accusations already made against the Chinese: accepting slave contracts, not being free by nature and living in degraded conditions.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Donna Gabaccia argued that Italian and Chinese migrants went through a similar process of “racialisation”, as demonstrated by the Italians’ nickname, “Chinese of Europe”; considered inferior races carrying servile labour, both groups became the target of campaigns for immigration restrictions in defence of “free white labour”.<sup>35</sup>

We could explain the *Clarion's* obsession with Asian immigrants and its relative tolerance to the “new” immigrants from Europe as a consequence of the East Coast’s greater exposure to Asian immigration as opposed to the flows coming from the Old Continent. However, the sources contradict this hypothesis. Without a doubt, the start of the new century on the Pacific Coast was marked by the boom of Japanese immigration: between 1900 and 1910, the number of Japanese migrants who arrived in California surged from 10,264 to 38,214. In an attempt to obstruct their entry into the trade union circles of San Francisco, in 1905 the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League — subsequently renamed the Asiatic Exclusion League — was established; its aim was to extend the restrictive measures already imposed on the Chinese to all Asian immigrants. Its founders made no distinction between Chinese, Japanese or Korean immigrants. As the *Clarion* wrote, it was not a matter of “nationality” but “race”: all were “oriental” and, as such, “foreign to the spirit of America”.<sup>36</sup> In 1907, Japanese mass immigration was halted when the Gentlemen’s Agreement between the United States and Japan, which limited family reunifications, was signed. Anti-Asian agitation nonetheless continued in an attempt to obtain the conversion of the informal agreement into an exclusion law and, additionally, to counter the emerging immigration from India: “By the hundreds the natives of India are invading these shores [...] and they are simply impossible as American citizens,” the *Clarion* wrote in 1910.<sup>37</sup> In 1912, it made the

<sup>34</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, *Old labor and new immigrants in American political development. Union, party, and state, 1875-1920*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986, pp. 97-112.

<sup>35</sup> Donna Gabaccia, *The “yellow peril” and the “Chinese of Europe”: global perspectives on race and labor, 1815 1930*, in Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen (eds.), *Migration, migration history, history: old paradigms and new perspectives*, Bern, Peter Lang, 1997, p. 177.

<sup>36</sup> *Menace of the Jap*, “Labor Clarion”, 24 February 1905, p. 9; *Question of race-not nationality*, “Labor Clarion”, 9 August 1907, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> *The Hindu invasion*, “Labor Clarion”, 29 April 1910, p. 8.

following statement: “First in importance in any discussion of that subject is the necessity for an emphatic reaffirmation of the policy of Asiatic Exclusion [...] this policy should be maintained and extended so as to apply to all Asiatics—Japanese, Koreans, Hindus, etc.”<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, though, the “new” European migration to California was no less intense than Asian immigration. Between 1900 and 1910, the number of Italians — who made up the majority of “new immigrants” — rose from 22,777 to 63,615, exceeding the Japanese in both absolute numbers and growth rates. Along with them came Greek, Portuguese, Hungarian, Russian and other Slavic groups of “new immigrants”. Asian immigration, instead, was mostly limited to Japanese people. The Chinese had been “excluded” ever since 1882, whereas the migration flows from India had only just begun. According to the 1910 census, while there were about 80,000 Asian immigrants (Japanese, Chinese, Indians) in California, the number of “new immigrants” amounted to nearly one hundred fifty thousand.<sup>39</sup> Hence, the *Clarion* based its priorities not on statistics but on racial stereotypes, mainly that which distinguished between European and Asian populations. There was no parallel between “new immigrants” and Asians, as emerges from the articles in which the two categories of immigrants were compared to highlight the “threat” posed by the latter:

Of all classes of immigrants arriving in the United States the coolies from Japan seem to be most prone to loathsome and contagious disease. No less than 1 in 73 arriving in California are thus afflicted, and the full significance of this will be appreciated when it is understood that among the arrivals at New York, many of whom are from the dirtiest rookeries of Europe, only about one in 1,300 is deported for this cause.<sup>40</sup>

Likewise, the Asiatic Exclusion League used the comparison with the “new” European immigration to reinforce the thesis of the need for a total “exclusion” of Asian immigration, with the consequent downgrading of the former to a problem of mere “regulation”:

In its racial aspects Asiatic immigration differs radically from European immigration. In respect to the admission of Caucasians it is a question of regulation; in respect to Orientals it must be one of exclusion. The blood of America and Europe can meet, harmonize and flow in the same veins [...] but an eternal law of nature has decreed that the white cannot assimilate the blood of another color without corrupting the very springs of civilization.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Immigration conference*, “Labor Clarion”, 23 February 1912, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. 1910 Census, *Population*, cit., pp. 838-839.

<sup>40</sup> *Why Japanese and Koreans should be excluded*, “Labor Clarion”, 12 May 1905, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League*, San Francisco, Allied Printing Trades Council, March 1910, pp. 10-11.

The statement that “the white cannot assimilate the blood of another color” seems to support Thomas Guglielmo’s thesis on the existence, in early twentieth-century America, of two different criteria for classifying human beings: colour and race. The former was used to subdivide racial macro groups such as “whites”, “blacks” and “yellows”, the latter for sub-races within the latter, such as “Mediterraneans” or “Latins” in the case of Italians.<sup>42</sup> According to this scheme, the words in the quotation — “Caucasians” and “Orientals” — are related to the criterion of colour, which corresponds to the “white” of Europeans and the “yellow” of Asians, respectively. The Italian “new immigrants”, albeit racially “inferior”, fell in the category of “white Caucasians” and could therefore immigrate — within certain limits — to the United States: Asians, being “yellow Orientals”, could not. This way of thinking was undoubtedly common within the labour movement in California. The point is that it was an anomaly on the national scene. As Matthew Jacobson explained, the notion of the Caucasian race fully entered American society only from the interwar period onwards, when restrictions on immigration from the Old Continent along with the increasing influx of African Americans into the cities of the industrial North cancelled the distinction between Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Mediterraneans and Slavs.<sup>43</sup> In this regard, the Pacific Coast nevertheless represents an exception. As Alexander Saxton observed, the term “Caucasian” asserted itself in the Californian labour movement as early as the second half of the nineteenth century; it came to stand for anything that wasn’t “Chinese, Oriental or Mongolian” and, vice versa, “white and assimilable”.<sup>44</sup> The firm equivalence that the Asiatic Exclusion League had constructed between the concepts of Caucasian, white and European therefore did not represent a general paradigm for understanding race; it rather reflected the emergence of an early racial identity among European groups shaped in contrast to Asian immigration, which eroded the differences between the groups themselves in other parts of the country. Being Europeans, the “new immigrants” were recognised as “Caucasians”, and this made an “immense difference”, in Ronald Takaki’s words.<sup>45</sup> In 1908, Andrea Sbarboro — an Italian American businessman from San Francisco — wrote in the *Clarion* that “California and the Pacific States” most certainly “needed” immigration, but “the right kind of immigration, composed of the Caucasian race”, while “people of the Mongolian race” were to be excluded. Sbarboro thus dismantled the distinction between the “old stock” and new immigration that had been used to deny the Italians’ whiteness by including “the Germans, French, Italians, Swiss, British, Slavs and even the

<sup>42</sup> T. Guglielmo, *White on arrival*, cit., pp. 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> M. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a different color*, cit., pp. 91-135.

<sup>44</sup> A. Saxton, *The indispensable enemy*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>45</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a different shore. A history of Asian Americans*, New York, Penguin Books, 1989, p. 15.

Turks” in the “Caucasian race”.<sup>46</sup> Similar statements reveal what David Richards has called the “Faustian pact” that Italian immigrants accepted in order to be recognised as white, that is, their conformity to the racist ideology and practices of American society.<sup>47</sup>

The recognition of the “new immigrants” as “Caucasian whites” did not translate into a complete openness towards these immigrants. Racist articles about Italians still appeared in the *Clarion*.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, its position remained clear: only the “Orientals” were precluded from assimilation. The distinction should not be made between European groups, but between the latter and the Asian immigrants against whom all efforts had to be concentrated: “If immigration must be restricted,” the *Clarion* argued, “let us commence with the undesirables, and who among all the peoples coming here are so undesirable as the Mongolians?”<sup>49</sup> Although the “new immigrants” were labelled as “inferior men”, the discriminating criterion of “whiteness” was used not against them but against the Asians, who were “impossible” to integrate because they were the absolute opposite of the “white man”, in terms of “work and wages, his living and social conditions”.<sup>50</sup> In comparison to the Asian immigrants, the “new immigrants” came across as “Americanisable” and their diffusion across the country was even desired by the *Clarion*:

[T]he races of Southern Europe, in spite of their colonies, do in part become Americanized, and if these nationalities could be scattered through the country districts more generally it would be advantageous alike to the immigrant, to the government, and to industry. There is another class of aliens pouring into this continent who do not become Americanized at all. We refer now to the yellow races of Asia.<sup>51</sup>

The Asiatic Exclusion League was even more explicit in its conviction that the new immigration from Europe, having peasant origins, should be pushed into agriculture and other seasonal sectors in California that were dominated by Asians:

Free white men and women who land in New York on their own expenses would gladly accept a proposition to obtain a home and work to support it [...] Most of European immi-

<sup>46</sup> Andrea Sbarboro, *Danger of Japanese immigration*, “Labor Clarion”, 13 November 1908, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> David A.J. Richards, *Italian American. The racializing of an ethnic identity*, New York, New York University Press, 1999, p. 187.

<sup>48</sup> *Great influx of immigrants*, “Labor Clarion”, 17 February 1905, p. 16; *A million to the bad*, “Labor Clarion”, 14 July 1905, p. 11; *Contraband methods and men*, “Labor Clarion”, 1 September 1905, p. 40.

<sup>49</sup> *Foreign immigration*, “Labor Clarion”, 27 October 1905, p. 10; *The non-assimilable oriental*, “Labor Clarion”, 10 November 1905, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> *The real Asiatic question*, “Labor Clarion”, 6 December 1907, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> *Immigration problems*, “Labor Clarion”, 20 December 1907, p. 5.

grants are of the suburban and farming, and would take kindly to our orchards and vineyards and be welcome in all mining and smelting center. We must have labor, but will not have Asiatic people. The great stream of laboring men landing at New York tends to congest the labor market in the East. Why not set on foot a movement looking to shipping thousands of them direct to this coast and recoup the coast from their wages? No law would be violated, and a crying need be answered. European people are of Caucasian lineage and can be assimilated by people here. The Asiatic is wholly out of question.<sup>52</sup>

The idea that the “new immigrants” were welcome in California because they acted as replacements for the Asian workers testifies to the inferiority granted to groups like those of the Italians. Nevertheless, it was precisely the comparison with Asian immigration and the possibility to contrast it that guaranteed them recognition as free white men.

In the years before the First World War, the *Clarion* published a series of front-page articles against the new immigration, which on these occasions was blatantly identified:

Lithuanian, Magyar, Polish, Portuguese, Roumanian, Russian, Servian, Slovak, Slavonian, Syrian, Turkish and South Italian males [...] are unlike the old immigration [...] Organized labor does most strenuously object to permitting the landing of persons upon our shores who so live as to pauperize and degrade our workingmen.<sup>53</sup>

This belated stance against the new immigration must be read in the context of the tensions raised by the project to open the Panama Canal.<sup>54</sup> It was believed that the cutting of the isthmus would lower travel costs, thus allowing a mass transshipment of “new immigrants” to the West Coast,<sup>55</sup> but the outbreak of the First World War dispelled all fears and stopped the flow. In the meantime, the most consistent influx of “new immigrants” had come to an end, as the immigrants were now integrated into American society. In fact, the image of the “new immigrants” as second-rate yet “white” people in the pages of the *Clarion* coincided with their specific positioning in the hierarchy of organised labour. Italians were mostly excluded from “skilled” labour unions but recruited in an anti-Asian function to the lowest rung of the union organisation, that is, among the “common workers”, in line with their identity as “inferior white” people.

<sup>52</sup> Weekly newsletter of the Asiatic Exclusion League #42, n.d.; in Bancroft Library, San Francisco Labor Council Records, Cartoon n. 2, Folder “Asiatic Exclusion League”.

<sup>53</sup> *Present immigration undesirable*, “Labor Clarion”, 23 May 1913, p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> Paola A. Sensi-Isolani, Phylis C. Martinelli (eds.), *Struggle and Success. An anthology of the Italian immigrant experience in California*, New York, Center for Migration Studies, 1993, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> *Labor and immigration*, “Labor Clarion”, 25 April 1913, p. 8.



## The limits of Latinity...

The Italians encountered strong resistance to their integration in skilled manual labour, whose workforce was controlled by trade unions that only let their members work. In this regard, the most vivid testimony comes from the vice-consul of San Francisco, Giulio Ricciardi, who in 1909 wrote the following on the matter:

The “Trade Unions” [...] constitute the most powerful league of resistance ever seen against capital and against the competition of “cheap labor” [...] “Skilled labor” is entirely unionist. Bricklayers, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, metalworkers, blacksmiths, painters, etc. each form a sort of completely closed clan, an institution of feudal nature, so to speak, admission into which is a hereditary right [...] in order to turn the whole unionist organisation into a clan that is closed to our emigration, the sole condition of having even only a basic knowledge of the English language — without mentioning the other conditions for admission — would suffice. Some [...] eventually manage to penetrate it, but they are as rare as white flies and, many times, if they move from one centre to another, they suffer the injustice of not being admitted to the Union of their new residence [...] since the vast majority of our emigrants are unable to perform the trade they were charged with in Italy, they go to swell the ranks of unskilled labour.<sup>56</sup>

Many of the mentioned categories adhered to the Building Trades Council (hereafter BTC), which gathered the unions of the building sector: carpenters, bricklayers and painters. The achievements of these groups, under the leadership of the BTC, made it the most powerful body within the labour movement. The building sector was the first closed shop sector. Companies were forced to hire union workers through the mediation of the BTC, which kept an eye out on the possible presence at construction sites of workers without a working card. In return, the BTC offered unified management of the negotiations with building trade unions, which would keep demands within tolerable limits for employers. Skilled labour was not only regulated by the BTC. The metalworking categories aimed at entering the closed shop system through their own coordinating body, the Iron Trades Council, which was supported by the Labor Council.<sup>57</sup> By controlling the workforce that was available on the labour market, these bodies turned their members into a “working-class aristocracy”, on which the “old stock” had a monopoly. In 1900, the Irish accounted for 23% of construction workers and 31% of metalworkers, the Germans for 16% and 15% respectively, while the Italians made up just 2% of both categories.<sup>58</sup> For economic

<sup>56</sup> Giulio Ricciardi, *Le condizioni del lavoro e l'emigrazione italiana in California*, in Commissariato dell'Emigrazione, *Emigrazione e colonie — raccolta dei rapporti dei regi agenti diplomatici e consolari*, Rome, Tipografia dell'Unione, 1909, pp. 247-248.

<sup>57</sup> R. Knight, *Industrial relations*, cit., p. 91.

<sup>58</sup> William Issel, Robert Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932. Politics, power, and urban development*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, p. 57.

and, not least, racial reasons, these groups raised a barrier against the Italians. In 1907, an official of the Board of Emigration wrote that “it is very difficult for our workers to enter unions in San Francisco because of an ill-concealed hostility on behalf of the American unionist workers against Latin workers”.<sup>59</sup> The Italians’ “Latinity” was related to a diversity that was not only of a linguistic kind. In 1904, the *Clarion* ascribed the strength of the local labour movement to the “superior intelligence” of the groups that composed it and, vice versa, to the limited presence of the “classes of European immigrants that are most difficult of organization and assimilation”.<sup>60</sup> Discrimination against Italians occurred through informal mechanisms, like registration fees and bureaucratic practices, as emerges from the objections raised by an official of the Italian consulate in a letter to the president of the Labor Council, Andrew Gallagher, in 1911:

Several complaints have reached this office from Italian members of Trade Unions who come here from other States, claiming great difficulties is encountered in transferring and admitting [...] finding alacrity in levying fines and assessments not displayed elsewhere [...] we take the liberty of addressing yourself with the hope that you will kindly enlighten us on the query why skilled Italian workmen from the East or the Middle West find it so difficult to get employment hereabout.<sup>61</sup>

There was another system to obstruct the Italians: their organisation into separate “Latin unions” subject to the control of central bodies. A good case in point is the situation of the carpenters. San Francisco being 90 per cent wooden, the core of the BTC was made up of carpenters, who were divided into several unions, the largest of which was the Carpenters’ Union no. 22: at the start of the twentieth century, it counted some two thousand workers.<sup>62</sup> The BTC gathered the Italian carpenters into the Carpenters’ Union no. 95, also known as the Latin Union, which was open also to French and Spanish workers.<sup>63</sup> The adjective “Latin” was ambiguous in that it masked — out of linguistic necessity — the intention of the old “Nordic” stock to marginalise the growing number of Italian “new immigrants”, in particular. The creation of this separate “union” followed the example of the Carpenters’ Union no. 304, the so-called German Union, one of the oldest carpenter unions in the city. It was founded in the 1880s, when German immigration was partic-

<sup>59</sup> Guido Rossati, *Condizioni del lavoro negli Stati Uniti*, “Bollettino dell’Emigrazione”, 1907, n. 3, pp. 66-74, here p. 71.

<sup>60</sup> Lucile Eaves, *Reviews of labor literature*, “Labor Clarion”, 25 March 1904, p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Gamboni Mazzitelli to Andrew Gallagher, 19 October 1911; in Bancroft Library, San Francisco Labor Council Records, Cartoon n. 15, Folder “Royal Italian Department of Emigration”.

<sup>62</sup> M. Kazin, *Barons of labor*, cit., p. 37, p. 104.

<sup>63</sup> *Italian carpenters*, “San Francisco Call”, 25 March 1896, p. 5.

ularly strong. The aim of these separate unions was to encourage the unionisation of those who did not speak English; for the Germans, union integration proceeded in this way. German sections within unions existed in various sectors and were known for being the most “persistent” and “successful”.<sup>64</sup> The Carpenters’ Union no. 304 did not have many members, but this was because the Germans had integrated so well.<sup>65</sup> The “Latin union” of carpenters, by contrast, did not enjoy the same effectiveness. In 1900, only a few years after its establishment, it counted no more than 33 members.<sup>66</sup> Although during the 15-year boom of Italian immigration its membership increased, it did not rise sharply. In 1902, *Organized Labor* — the BTC’s newspaper — described the fact that ten new members had been “initiated” in No. 95 as an “unparalleled case”.<sup>67</sup> A petition launched in 1909 by the newspaper *L’Italia* in support of the victims of the Messina earthquake, showed that membership had grown to at least 60 members.<sup>68</sup> With a print run of 15,125 copies per edition, *L’Italia* was the largest Italian-language newspaper on the West Coast.<sup>69</sup> Its editor, Ettore Patrizi, was a former socialist who had converted to fierce nationalism in the United States. Although Patrizi sometimes considered the trade unions’ demands excessive, he supported union membership because he considered it a symbol of integration, which replaced the traditional competition with “American or other workers of Anglo-Saxon race”.<sup>70</sup> The newspaper frequently published information concerning the Carpenters’ Union no. 95 (e.g. the appointment of managers, meetings, events), proudly claiming the “Latin” identity that the American trade union branded on South European workers with undisguised contempt. According to *L’Italia*, the “Latin union” contained “Italians, Frenchmen and Spaniards” (in this order); these groups had been trying to help each other within an English-speaking society long before mass emigration started by weaving a dense network of social relations.<sup>71</sup> We do not know who the “Spaniards” exactly were. Logically, they would have been Californian natives and Mexican immigrants, although some members of the Italian

<sup>64</sup> L. Eaves, *A history of California labor legislation*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> By 1900, the Carpenters’ Union n. 304 had less than hundred members. California Bureau of Labor statistics, *Biennial report, years 1899-1900*, Sacramento, State Printing Office, 1900, p. 93.

<sup>66</sup> California Bureau of Labor statistics, *Biennial report, years 1899-1900*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>67</sup> *Carpenters*, “Organized Labor”, 17 May 1902, p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> *Continua l’opera buona in pro’ dei nostri sventurati fratelli italiani*, “L’Italia”, 11 January 1909, p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> *Newspaper Rate Book. Season 1916-1917*, Nelson Chesman & Co. Publishers, St. Louis, p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> Ettore Patrizi, *Gl’italiani in California*, San Francisco, Stabilimento tipo-litografico del giornale L’ITALIA, 1911, p. 34.

<sup>71</sup> On this issue see Alessandro Baccari, Andrew M. Canepa, Olga Richardson, GioBatta Cerruti and G.B. Cerruti, *The Italians of San Francisco in 1865: G.B. Cerruti’s report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, “California History”, 1981/1982, n. 4, pp. 350-369.

community — aspiring to “whiteness” — already drew a clear distinction between their European “Latinity” and that of the Hispanic Americans.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, the Carpenters’ Union no. 95 was essentially Italian. Rather than being a reflection of traditional inter-Latin cooperation, it was the product of the barrier to integration that Italians had encountered in the union. At the dawn of the First World War, membership had risen to just 160 workers — a relatively low number considering that it was the only “Latin union” of the building sector.<sup>73</sup> The reasons for the failure were to be sought in the centralised management of power within the BTC: the allocation of the working cards, apprenticeships, disputes over contracts between the “unions”, their internal regulations and strikes — everything was handled by the central bodies. In the carpentry industry, a tyrannical system made the “unions” no smaller than the satellite unions of the Carpenters’ Union no. 22. Rebellious unions were expelled and their members stripped of their membership cards.<sup>74</sup> It seems unlikely that, within such a centralised structure, the “Latin” Carpenters’ Union no. 95 could have had the power, or the will, to expand its ranks at will. If the Italian carpenters increased in number, they would only have enhanced the competition within their union. Hence, the “Latin unions” actually represented an instrument of co-optation from above, aimed at burdening the Italians themselves with the task of their selection for entry into the exclusive trade categories. On the other hand, as Patrizi noted, “once they had entered” the “unions”, the Italians remained “faithful to their principles and scrupulous observers of the unions’ rules”, clearly taking equal advantage of the “trade-unionist” corporatism.<sup>75</sup>

Being excluded from the trade categories, Italians swelled the ranks of unskilled labour. A sample of 510 Italian immigrants, taken from the 1910 census, reveals that the largest category of workers was that of the ordinary manual labourers, that is, those with general or occasional tasks. Only half of these could claim skilled employment in construction or metalwork, whereas factory workers also remained excluded from skilled labour: most did not declare a specific job in the census or they declared an unskilled one, for example cannery worker.

Jobs involving Italian workers in San Francisco (1910).<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Adriana Spadoni, *Truth about the Latin Quarter*, “San Francisco Chronicle”, 16 October 1904, p. 12.

<sup>73</sup> M. Kazin, *Barons of labor*, cit., p. 24; Kazin mentions a “latin union” of “painters”, but does not give any specific information on the matter.

<sup>74</sup> R. Knight, *Industrial relations*, cit., pp. 123-124; M. Kazin, *Barons of labor*, cit., pp. 103-104; see the rules on apprenticeships in F. Ryan, *Industrial relations*, cit., p. 84.

<sup>75</sup> Patrizi, *Gl’Italiani in California*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>76</sup> The data were derived from the census sheets of the “1910 United States Federal Census”, consulted at: [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

Unskilled laborer (street work, general work, odd jobs, etc.)	124	24,31%
Skilled worker (carpenter, plasterer, painter, metal work, etc.)	60	11,76%
Merchant (proprietor/shop keeper)	41	8,03%
Farmer (gardener/truck farm)	32	6,27%
Fisherman	28	5,49%
Laborer grocery (laborer fruit store, laborer wine cellar, etc.)	21	4,11%
Janitor and porter	20	3,92%
Salesman and Clerk	20	3,92%
Waiter and bartender	18	3,53%
Laborer factory	16	3,14%
Stableman	14	2,75%
Peddler	14	2,75%
Teamster	13	2,55%
Bootblack	11	2,16%
Professional (manager, dentist, editor, etc.)	11	2,16%
Scavenger	11	2,16%
Cook	8	1,57%
Seaman	8	1,57%
Baker	7	1,37%
Window washer	6	1,18%
Laborer food (Macaroni Factory, sausage factory, etc.)	6	1,18%
Tailor	6	1,18%
Barber	5	0,98%
Butcher	5	0,98%
Musician/Artist	5	0,98%
	510	100%

Studies on the occupational structure of Italians in the United States reveal an abundance of menial jobs related to “domestic and personal services”.<sup>77</sup> In the table, the total number of servants, doormen, waiters, bartenders, boot polishers, waste collectors, window washers and barbers exceeds the percentage of skilled workers. An important escape route from marginalisation in the urban job market was commerce.<sup>78</sup> The spin-off activities of fishing and farming, which were controlled by the Italians, provided a large number of jobs: from wholesalers to pedlars, from shop assistants to grocery clerks.

<sup>77</sup> Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco. The immigration experience*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1982, p. 136.

<sup>78</sup> P. Sensi-Isolani, P. Martinelli (eds.), *Struggle and success*, cit., p. 80.



The low presence of Italians in the trade categories was not only the result of discrimination: since most of them had come to the United States with the idea of staying temporarily, it must have been unattractive for them to join a union. Moreover, many Italians did not have a trade union culture, especially if they were of peasant origin. Nevertheless, what represented a real disincentive was the trade unions' conservatism, which did not suit their status as newcomers. This is further confirmed by the case of the bread industry. Here, it was not possible to exclude the Italians because they were employed in the bakeries of their compatriots; unionising them was therefore a compulsory choice if, as the Bakers' Union no. 24 observed, there was any intention of enforcing “union rules in every baker shop [...] in the city and county of San Francisco and vicinity”.<sup>79</sup> The Bakers' Union no. 24 was born in 1900 from the fusion of the American and German bakers' “unions”, who had obtained rest on Saturday evenings.<sup>80</sup> To organise the Italians into unions, no. 24 initially created “Latin unions” but without obtaining the desired results.<sup>81</sup> Already in 1905, the first of several boycotts was launched against “Latin” ovens that were accused of not conforming to the rules.<sup>82</sup> The rhetoric used on these occasions did not spare the Italian workers, who were considered accomplices of their employers. The insults began with the statement that everything had been done to organise the workers of the “Latin Bakeries”, and then proceeded to attack the latter, accusing them of being “corrupt” and inclined to accept conditions of “slavery”.<sup>83</sup> Such media pillory testified to the presence of prejudices against “Latins”, as exemplified in this biting remark of 1908:

The French and Italian Bakers have been organized by Local No. 24, but they are difficult to control [...] they work all kinds of hours for little pay, and never have a day of rest. It might be said that they live in the bake shops, and their employers see to it that they have an abundance of “dago red” constantly on hand.<sup>84</sup>

Although such representations denounced real conditions of exploitation, they strongly criticised Italian workers, demonstrating not so much their organisational limitations but those of the Bakers' Union no. 24. Its claim to organise Italian bakers within a separate labour market (i.e. the Latin bakeries) and to subordinate it to the rules it had established at the city level was undisable, because it encouraged the Italian community's tendency to form a closed

<sup>79</sup> *Journeyman bakers. History of the organization*, “Labor Clarion”, 14 March 1902, p. 12.

<sup>80</sup> R. Knight, *Industrial relations*, cit., p. 46.

<sup>81</sup> Initially Union n. 117, and subsequently the French and Italian Bakers' Union n. 324: *Ai lavoranti panettieri*, “L'Italia”, 28 January 1901, p. 5; *French and Italian bakers*, “Labor Clarion”, 3 July 1903, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> *Non-union bakeries*, “Labor Clarion”, 11 August 1905, p. 5.

<sup>83</sup> *The Latin bakeries*, “Labor Clarion”, 24 January 1913, p. 8.

<sup>84</sup> *History of Bakers' Union*, “Labor Clarion”, 4 September 1908, p. 36. The expression “dago red” was used to disparage Italian immigrants' home-made wine.

economic entity, difficult to penetrate by trade union activities. The aims and negotiating skills of the Italian bakers were necessarily proportionate to the context in which they operated; they were not passive. They organised themselves periodically, even autonomously from the Bakers' Union no. 24, which stopped organising them for a while after the failure of the "Latin unions", relying on boycotts instead.<sup>85</sup> They then formed the Italian Bakers' Union. Towards the end of 1907, community pressure forced the latter to accept a "gesture of solidarity" concerning the employment crisis that the financial "panic" of the autumn had generated.<sup>86</sup> An agreement with the bakery owners established that union members would give up four working days per month to unemployed Italians. However, the employers used the "labour exchange" mechanism to reopen the doors of the sector to "non-union" labour, complaining that the unemployed recruited via the Union lacked the skills to do the job.<sup>87</sup> A strike was declared, which reaffirmed the willingness to meet the needs of the inactive compatriots but without accepting the fact that they were used as a "phalanx" to the detriment of the category: "[T]he truth is that our Union only accepts real bakers who know the trade [...] before the Union was organised [...] the workers were paid starvation wages, slept on the floor and ate food worthy of pigs."<sup>88</sup> There was no lack of a "unionist" spirit, but it was toned down to respond to the need for work in Little Italy, a problem that would be exploited by an alliance of employers who were hostile to the union and capable of putting pressure on the bakers, branding them as the cause of rising bread prices.<sup>89</sup> *L'Italia*, in keeping a neutral attitude, did not help.<sup>90</sup> The newspaper presented itself as a defender not of class interests, but of the Italian group. It supported the Italians' entry into the trade unions, but only the American ones, whereas its attitude in the community was more moderate. It is clear, then, why the Italian bakeries did not succeed in imposing "free Saturdays" but only shifts that — although providing for a day of rest — left the seven-day-a-week routine intact. The Bakers' Union no. 24 was angry because it was a downward mediation.<sup>91</sup> Where it failed, though, was in its trade union approach: instead of pushing Italian workers out of social marginalisation, it first locked them into an ethnic and occupational niche and then denigrated them owing to organisational failures.

While the trade categories used "Latinity" to exclude the Italians, the Industrial Workers of the World (hereafter IWW) turned it into a method of revolutionary agitation. The IWW were an anarcho-syndicalist movement, opposed

<sup>85</sup> *Contro i fornai italiani e francesi*, "L'Italia", 23 September 1908, p. 4.

<sup>86</sup> *L'Unione dei panettieri e i padroni panettieri*, "L'Italia", 24 January 1908, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> *Avviso al pubblico*, "L'Italia", 23 January 1908, p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> *L'Unione dei panettieri e i padroni panettieri*, "L'Italia", 24 January 1908, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> *Il prezzo del pane*, "L'Italia", 3 December 1903, p. 5.

<sup>90</sup> *Ancora il rincaro del pane*, "L'Italia", 9 August 1906, p. 4.

<sup>91</sup> *The Latin bakeries*, "Labor Clarion", 24 January 1913, p. 8.

to the trade-unionist type of union. The doors were open to all workers, especially unskilled workers, and no distinctions of “race” were made. The organisation was decentralised and horizontal, and it aimed at achieving not contractual but political objectives: to overthrow the capitalist system through the direct action of one big union.<sup>92</sup> In 1910, a group of Italian and French workers founded a “Latin branch” of the IWW in San Francisco’s Little Italy.<sup>93</sup> This organisation along ethnic lines was an exception that served, in this case, to implement a specific strategy of action: to mobilise those “Latin” workers who were discriminated against by the trade categories. Socialist newspapers such as *Il Proletario*, which also had inserts in French, or anarchist newspapers such as the Spanish-language *El Rebelde*, were used as propaganda tools. The echo of the Mexican Revolution that reached the city from the southern border encouraged the creation, for political purposes, of a Latin identity shared more explicitly between Southern Europeans and Hispanic Americans. The initial objectives of the Latin Branch’s propaganda were the Italian and French bakers whom the Bakers’ Union no. 24 considered “unorganisable”. The Latin Branch launched an agitation campaign aimed at exposing the problem of their exploitation and the contradictions of a skilled trade unionism. Members were recruited during public rallies. Viewed with suspicion both inside and outside the Italian community, police started to ban the rallies until, in August 1911, an attempt to arrest the speakers led to a riot that had a similar outcome as the various “Free Speech Fights” triggered by the IWW in California.<sup>94</sup> Such protests gave the migrant workers visibility, forcing those involved in their marginalisation to take a stand. Together with conservative sectors of public opinion, the Labor Council urged police repression of the rallies.<sup>95</sup> Thus, the ambiguous attitude of the “unions” was revealed, prompting even *L’Italia* to side with the Wobblies:

Who, among the unionists, lifted even a finger to give them help and comfort? The Unions watched the events unfold with the most stoic indifference, closed within the narrow boundaries of selfish interests that turn them into just as many churches, disdainful of extending a hand to workers in whose veins no Anglo-Saxon blood flows.<sup>96</sup>

In the long run, the Latin Branch failed to keep its membership growing. Italian bakeries remained impervious to stable trade union gains. Moreover, the IWW faced increasing repression, which culminated in arrests and depor-

<sup>92</sup> Philip S. Foner, *History of the labor movement in the United States*, vol. IV, *The Industrial Workers of the World*, New York, International Publishers, 1965.

<sup>93</sup> Paola A. Sensi-Isolani, *Italian radicals and union activism in San Francisco, 1900-1920*, in Philip V. Cannistraro, Gerald Meyer (eds.), *The lost world of Italian-American radicalism*, Westport, Praeger Publishers, 2003, p. 189; Kenyon Zimmer, *Immigrants against the State: Yiddish and Italian anarchism in America*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2015, pp. 95-102.

<sup>94</sup> P. Sensi-Isolani, *Italian radicals and union activists in San Francisco*, cit., pp. 195-197.

<sup>95</sup> *The menace of the IWW*, “Labor Clarion”, 16 February 1912, p. 5.

<sup>96</sup> *Unionismo, socialismo, fratellanza*, “L’Italia”, 25 August 1911, p. 1.

tations during the First World War. The IWW's legacy resided less in their organisational imprint than it did in the agitations aroused among those categories of workers who were considered "unorganisable" and, therefore, neglected by the "trade-unionist" type of union for reasons of class, race and — as we will see in the last section — gender.

### ... privileges of whiteness (and masculinity)

Although the Italians were discriminated against as "Latins", their position in the job market remained distinct from that of the Asian immigrants. First of all, the marginality of the Italian labourers was softened by the possibility of employment in the public sector. The manual labourers of San Francisco had established the Laborers' Protective Union, which was affiliated with the BTC. It had opened its doors to the Italians at least in a first instance, encouraging them to join.<sup>97</sup> On the occasion of a strike in 1903, the leaders praised "the Italian day labourers for the splendid example of solidarity they gave, responding with impetus and unanimity to the Union's orders".<sup>98</sup> For some years, *L'Italia* published information on the Laborers' Protective Union, hence considering that it would be of interest to its readership.<sup>99</sup> However, this moment of bliss waned, probably as a result of the increase in the number of Italians. The Laborers' Protective Union was under the control of the Irish, who did not intend to give up their right of first refusal on public works. Lobbying began to enact ordinances that forced local employers to give preference to workers with citizenship.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, there were cases in which the Irish were preferred to the Italians even if both candidates lacked citizenship.<sup>101</sup> Yet, many Italians — especially those who had arrived more recently — found employment with or without the trade unions' support, for example in the resurfacing of municipal roads. In a sample drawn from the 1910 census of 550 Italian residents who had immigrated to San Francisco in the first decade of the twentieth century, no less than nine per cent was represented by the "street work labourer" category.<sup>102</sup> It may well be that the Italians' massive presence in this category was favoured by the Italian community's political connections, which enabled it to act as a buffer against discrimination. The municipal coun-

<sup>97</sup> *Una riunione di laborers. Oltre 400 braccianti italiani sono presenti*, "L'Italia", 29 April 1903, p. 5.

<sup>98</sup> *La vittoria completa dei braccianti*, "L'Italia", 6 May 1903, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> See, for example, *Laborers' Protective Union No. 8944*, "L'Italia", 2 December 1904, p. 5.

<sup>100</sup> Joseph Giovinco, *Success in the sun? California's Italians during the Progressive Era*, in P. Sensi-Isolani, P. Martinelli (eds.), *Struggle and success*, cit., p. 28.

<sup>101</sup> *Operai italiani state in guardia!*, "L'Italia", 31 August 1911, p. 3.

<sup>102</sup> The data were derived from the census sheets of the "1910 United States Federal Census", consulted at: [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

cillor Attilio H. Giannini, brother of the banker Amadeo, chaired the Public Services Commission in 1908, at the start of a series of municipal works for which the citizenship clause was not applied.<sup>103</sup> The “anti-orientalism” clause was, instead, taken for granted.

The continuous act of inclusion/exclusion by trade unions could suggest a “racial transience” of Italian immigrants, never permanently placed on one or the other side of the “colour line”.<sup>104</sup> In reality, the Italians had a solid position within the “white” labourer dimension. In fact, while continuing to discriminate against them, the unskilled labour organisations granted the Italians the most significant privilege of whiteness: that of taking advantage of the contrast to Asian labour. As Alexander Saxton explained, trade unions on the Pacific Coast applied a policy of “total exclusion” of Asian immigrants without parallel even in the discriminatory practices against African American workers on the Atlantic side. The reason for this is that the Asians were not just “non-whites”, but “non-white” immigrants, hence excluded by law from citizenship and therefore deprived of even the very limited rights accorded to African Americans after the Civil War.<sup>105</sup> The “total exclusion” of Asians went hand in hand with the Italians’ inclusion in the ranks of “white labour”, as some incidents involving the janitors’ union demonstrate. The outbreak of the economic crisis in the autumn of 1907 created unemployment in the Italian community, which a Pro-Unemployed Committee — made up of several prominent figures, including the editor of *L’Italia*, Patrizi — sought to tackle. With the aim of helping a group of unemployed Italians, Patrizi wrote to the Board of Public Works specifying — perhaps in an attempt to make his proposal more attractive — that they would have been “willing to work for less than the average wage, that is, for \$1.50 or \$1.25 a day”.<sup>106</sup> The same request for help was extended to the Labor Council after Secretary Gallagher learned of the offer of low-cost Italian labourers.<sup>107</sup> Despite some irritation, the Labor Council took up the issue of the unemployed Italians:

Secretary Gallagher is to have a conference with the representatives of the saloon men’s association. He will endeavor to induce saloon men to secure men furnished by the janitors’ union

<sup>103</sup> *Grandi lavori in vista per le opere municipali. Un’intervista col Dr. Giannini — Non meno di cinquemila operai saranno occupati fra due mesi per i lavori del Municipio. A detti lavori potranno prender parte anche coloro che non sono cittadini americani*, “*L’Italia*”, 26 September 1908, p. 4.

<sup>104</sup> On the concept of “racial transiency” see Jessica Barbata Jackson, *Dixie’s Italians. Sicilians, race, and citizenship in the Jim Crow Gulf South*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2020, pp. 22-23.

<sup>105</sup> Alexander Saxton, *The rise and fall of the white republic: class, politics, and mass culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, Verso, New York, 2003, pp. 302-303.

<sup>106</sup> Letter from Ettore Patrizi to the Board of Public Works, 21 December 1907; in Bancroft Library, San Francisco Labor Council Records, Cartoon n. 10, Folder “*L’Italia*”.

<sup>107</sup> Letter from Ettore Patrizi to Andrew Gallagher, 26 December 1907; in Bancroft Library, San Francisco Labor Council Records, Cartoon n. 10, Folder “*L’Italia*”.



to do the work now performed by Orientals [...] a communication of the editor of *L'Italia*, asking employment for Italian laborers [...] was read [...] one of the delegates suggested that the best thing that could be done with these laborers was to unionize them and find them work in places now filled by Japanese and other Orientals.<sup>108</sup>

Thanks to Patrizi's intermediation, the unemployed Italians were involved in a city-wide mobilisation to replace the Asian saloon and restaurant janitors with "white labour". *L'Italia* reported the following:

The Director is negotiating with the Labor Council, which [...] is trying to induce all owners of Restaurants, Cafés and Saloons in the city to employ white workers as janitors instead of Mongolians. There are more than a thousand Japanese and Chinese workers employed as janitors in the city and there is no reason that they should not be replaced by whites, be they Americans, Italians, French, etc. [...] of the thousand something places available, some two or three hundred will be reserved for Italians.<sup>109</sup>

To achieve this goal, the Labor Council organised a conference involving the Janitors' Union and the saloon owners' association.<sup>110</sup> A representative of *L'Italia* recorded the words of the Labor Council's secretary:

"[W]e have here", Gallagher added, "a representative of the Italian colony who says that many of his compatriots are now unemployed. We all know what "desirable citizens" the Italians are; we know their honesty, sobriety and the fondness they bear for their adopted country [...] and we are meant to let so many of these strong and willing workers suffer misery, all the while yellow people, useless if not harmful to our citizenship, continue to be employed and paid?"<sup>111</sup>

Even if the saloon owners' association rejected the proposal to "discharge Asiatic janitors and replace them by white men" because "the association felt that it had no power to take the action asked",<sup>112</sup> the replacement plan was partly put into effect. The *San Francisco Call* reported the following statement by a saloon: "I discharged my Japanese two days ago, and took an Italian. The work that this man does makes me feel sorry that I did not make the change long ago".<sup>113</sup>

The logic of the "total exclusion" of Asians was an incentive for the Italians to join the union movement, as the case of the butchers' shops of Little Italy demonstrates. The Butchers' Union was one of the most active organisations to have emerged outside the traditional working-class universe. It tried to impose the closed shop system, engaging in battles with

<sup>108</sup> *To ask saloon men to discharge Orientals*, "San Francisco Call", 28 December 1907, p. 7.

<sup>109</sup> *Per i nostri disoccupati*, "L'Italia", 8 January 1908, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> *Per dar lavoro ai disoccupati nei saloons*, "L'Italia", 22 January 1908, p. 4.

<sup>111</sup> *Il Labor Council per i disoccupati*, "L'Italia", 25 January 1908, p. 4.

<sup>112</sup> *Liquor dealers reply regarding Asiatic help submitted to Janitors' Union*, "San Francisco Call", 20 February 1908, p. 9.

<sup>113</sup> *Liquor dealers let Japanese go*, "San Francisco Call", 23 January 1908, p. 7.

meat retailers to force them to accept its standards, in particular, that of closing on Sundays.<sup>114</sup> The butchers of Little Italy were initially reluctant to conform and consequently boycotted.<sup>115</sup> Their reluctance was the result of the same anti-union culture that we have seen with the Italian bakery owners. Compared to the latter, though, the butchers’ resistance had an additional excuse: competition from butchers in the adjacent Chinese district. In 1903, the Butchers’ Union wrote to *L’Italia* to protest against a butcher in the Italian neighbourhood who had decided to stay open on Sundays. In the rhetorical strategy, “whiteness” served as a symbolic weapon of pressure to promote “unionisation”:

Dear Sirs,

Mr E. Delvecchio, owner of the Butcher Shop at 328 Broadway, has sent a letter to the Labor Council, informing them that as of 10 June, he will keep his shop open on Sundays [...] Mr Delvecchio says that the Chinese also keep their shops open on Sundays. It is disgraceful that a white man wants to stoop to the level of the Chinese, and it is to be hoped that Mr Delvecchio will desist from his idea and follow the example of the 300 butchers in the city. The Chinese butchers sell meat from old bulls and old, unhealthy milk cows. Bringing this to the attention of the public (and *ITALIA* has done this several times in recent years, warning its compatriots of the danger of buying meat slaughtered in the Chinese district) should suffice to ensure that no white person buys meat in the Chinese butcher shops.<sup>116</sup>

According to the Butchers’ Union, the Italian butchers should not have bowed to Chinese competition. Rather, they should have “taught” their fellow countrymen to behave like “white people”. In the end, it was *L’Italia* that came to the rescue of the Little Italy shopkeepers, by publishing articles that stigmatised Chinatown using the typical stereotypes of a “filthy” and “unhealthy” place, in an attempt to dissuade Italians from shopping there.<sup>117</sup> The Italian newspaper lent itself to this pedagogy of whiteness towards Italian immigrants in that it implied the recognition of the longed-for racial equality with Americans. Unlike Italian bakeries, the butchers were eventually “unionised”. In 1918, the *Clarion* declared that “the Italian butchers of North Beach are now 100 per cent organized and that the meat markets of that section of the city are now being conducted according to the prescribed rules of the Butchers’ Union”.<sup>118</sup> However, this success did not reflect the development of a union culture in Little Italy: where there was no threat of competition from Chinatown traders, the unionisation

<sup>114</sup> L. Eaves, *A history of California labor legislation*, cit., p. 62; R. Knight, *Industrial relations*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>115</sup> *Butchers*, “Labor Clarion”, 7 August 1903, p. 6.

<sup>116</sup> *S.F. Butcher Union W.P. Union No 115*, “L’Italia”, 16 May 1903, p. 5. Original emphasis.

<sup>117</sup> *Comperate nei negozi italiani*, “L’Italia”, 4 September 1908, p. 4.

<sup>118</sup> *Butchers organize Italians*, “Labor Clarion”, 29 March 1918, p. 1; *Organizing Italians*, “Labor Clarion”, 15 March 1918, p. 4.

campaigns failed.<sup>119</sup> Rather, the adherence of butchers to the Butchers' Union revealed the emergence in Little Italy of a white and racist version of Italian identity, shaped in opposition to its Chinese neighbours. In sum, Italians were included in the unions in only two cases: either when they served to exclude Asians or when they did not bother the "old stock", hence in low-level occupations. This was the case of the unions representing grooms; to facilitate their integration, the unions removed the clauses relating to citizenship from the registration requirements and printed the statutes in Italian.<sup>120</sup> Being included — albeit only partially — in the labour movement did have its advantages. In an attempt to defend their interests, the Italian boot polishers launched the Bootblacks Union no. 10175, which was affiliated with the Labor Council with which they negotiated licences and taxes to be paid to the municipality.<sup>121</sup> In a "unionist" city like San Francisco, all these possibilities were out of reach for Asian labourers.

"Being white" became even more useful to Italians outside of "organised labour". In sectors where trade unions were absent, Italians ended up competing with the Chinese, as happened in two profitable market niches: fishing and agriculture. Here, the Italians became the dominant group thanks to their technical and organisational skills, combined with their efficient use of the cooperative instrument, furthermore reinforced by parochial unity. However, no less decisive for their success was the racist climate that affected their Chinese competitors, which the Italians took advantage of to oust them, even with the use of force.<sup>122</sup> Having the quality of "whiteness" was also the basis of the "good fortune" of Italians employed in menial but lucrative jobs, such as scavenging.<sup>123</sup> To understand what kind of work this entailed it is enough to cite these words by a former scavenger, who thus summarised what "the average person in San Francisco thought of the men employed in the service": "Anyone can be a garbage man, that is, have a strong back, a weak mind, and (an added caveat) do the work of an Italian."<sup>124</sup> Yet, "whiteness" was

<sup>119</sup> In addition to the grocery clerks (see the opening quote), the many Italians employed as waiters were also excluded from the "unions": *Grave questione tra ristoratori, cuochi e camerieri*, "L'Italia", 7 December 1903, p. 5.

<sup>120</sup> Paul Chatom, *Industrial relations in the brewery, metal and teaming trades*. Thesis for the degree of Master of Science, University of California Berkeley, 1915, p. 102.

<sup>121</sup> Letter from Frank Morrison to John O'Connell, 26 March 1914; in Bancroft Library, San Francisco Labor Council Records, Cartoon n. 3, Folder "Boot Blacks' Protective Union, San Francisco, No. 10175". In this letter from the secretary of the American Federation of Labor to that of the San Francisco Labor Council, the former claims that 90 per cent of the city's boot polishers were Italian and Greek immigrants.

<sup>122</sup> Simone Cinotto, *Soft soil, black grapes*. The birth of Italian wine making in California, New York, New York University Press, 2012, p. 199; Sucheng Chan, *This bitter-sweet soil. The Chinese in California agriculture*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, pp. 114-115.

<sup>123</sup> Stewart E. Perry, *San Francisco Scavengers. Dirty work and the pride of ownership*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978, pp. 15-30.

<sup>124</sup> Leonard Stefanelli, *Everything you wanted to know about 'garbage' and were afraid to ask: a personal San Francisco perspective*, "The Argonaut", 2014, n.1, pp. 4-19, here p. 8.

a necessary prerequisite for this kind of employment. Although not paid by the municipality, scavengers provided a public service that required a negotiating power with the city’s administration, which was unthinkable for Asian immigrants. Through the Scavengers’ Protective Union, the Italians monopolised the collection, recycling and disposal of waste, and even managed to make a decent living out of it.<sup>125</sup>

The experience of “whiteness” was more contradictory for Italian female workers. Their integration into the job market was conditioned not only by racial factors but also by gender differences. Their relationship with unions was marked by modest successes. Being employed in jobs of little interest to the “white male” worker, Italian immigrant women were considered less of a threat than their male counterparts. Thus, at the start of the twentieth century, the majority of the Cracker Packers’ Union — which represented female biscuit factory workers engaged in canning tasks — was composed of Italian women workers.<sup>126</sup> Another positive example of unionisation is that of female bookbinders.<sup>127</sup> The case of Italian women workers in the garment industry reveals how, even within women’s unions, the organisation and acquisition of “whiteness” were interconnected. The United Garment Workers had two tasks: it organised the Italian “new workers”, exerting an “educative influence” to teach them the American “standards of work and living”, and it pursued the battle for the “the protection of its members from the rivalry of the Chinese”.<sup>128</sup>

Nevertheless, involvement in trade unions concerned only a minority of Italian women. In terms of employment, most of them remained confined to the Italian community.<sup>129</sup> For instance, thousands of Italian female workers were employed in the fruit preservation factories owned by the tycoon Marco Fontana. To understand what it meant for them to be cut out of the unionist movement, we need only consider that they worked on a piecework basis, for more than ten hours a day and with an average wage of well under a dollar; their fellow countrywomen in the above-mentioned biscuit factories worked up to nine hours and, depending on the job, earned between \$1.25 and \$1.75 a day.<sup>130</sup> The unions ignored the Italian “new immigrant women” of the canneries, even if their degrading working conditions frequently made the

<sup>125</sup> E. Patrizi, *Gl’Italiani in California*, cit., p. 44.

<sup>126</sup> Lillian R. Matthews, *Women in trade unions San Francisco*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1913, pp. 70-71.

<sup>127</sup> Louise M. Ploeger, *Trade unionism among the women of San Francisco, 1920*. Thesis for Master of Arts in Economics. University of California Berkeley, 1920, p. 53.

<sup>128</sup> L. Matthews, *Women in trade Union in San Francisco*, cit., pp. 57-64.

<sup>129</sup> P. Sensi-Isolani, P. Martinelli (eds.), *Struggle and Success*, cit., p. 80.

<sup>130</sup> Amy A. Bernardy, *Sulla condizione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani negli Stati del Centro e dell’Ovest della Confederazione del Nord-America*, “Bollettino dell’Emigrazione”, 1911, n. 1, pp. 1-171, here p. 44; L. Matthews, *Women in trade unions San Francisco*, cit., p. 68.

news in the city's newspapers.<sup>131</sup> The seasonal and "ethnic" nature of this type of employment, combined with traditional racial and — not least — gender prejudices, can explain this indifference. The AFL only noticed the presence of these women in 1917, when the IWW started unionising the industry. That year, a series of strikes broke out in canning factories across the San Francisco Bay Area, halting production that was crucial to war preparations.<sup>132</sup> Following the strikes, the Californian state allegedly investigated women's work and promoted protective legislation. Italian women were therefore not "unorganisable", as the AFL had claimed.<sup>133</sup> On the other hand, it is true that cultural resistance to union membership was not exclusive to the male counterpart of the Italian community. Carol McKibben's study on Italian female sardine cannery workers employed in a Monterey factory demonstrates that, in the interwar period, by the time the cannery sector was becoming unionised, the women remained reluctant to join the "unions" and exploited the "public space" of the work context to pursue familiar strategies of social ascendancy.<sup>134</sup>

Being relegated to sectors that the unions neglected, Italian women workers found themselves on the edge of "whiteness". In 1891, a female journalist from the *San Francisco Chronicle* was shocked to discover that "white women" were employed in a Chinese-owned cannery:

The women are all Italians or of Italian parentage. About half of them were questioned before one was found who would talk. She was apparently born in this country [...] "I have only been here for three weeks," she said, "but much of the women are old hands [...] "would I rather work for a Chinese than an American? What a silly question! Of course not, but what is one to do? [...] They treat us well. The foremen is a Chinaman, but he never says anything to us as long as we do our work well."<sup>135</sup>

For the journalist, the Italian women were unmistakably "white"; the article was, in fact, titled "White girls working for the Mongols". However, their subordination to a Chinese "boss" turned the dominant racial hierarchies upside down, bringing to light the limits that "masculinity" placed on the privileges of "whiteness".

<sup>131</sup> *Violate the laws of sanitation*, "San Francisco Call", 21 August 1898, p. 15.

<sup>132</sup> Elizabeth Reis, *Cannery row: The AFL, the IWW and Bay Area cannery workers*, "California History", 1985, n. 3, pp. 174-190.

<sup>133</sup> R. Knight, *Industrial relations*, cit., p. 276. On other female workers' strikes during the First World War, see *Ancora uno sciopero alla fabbrica Ghirardelli*, "Il Corriere del Popolo", 26 March 1918.

<sup>134</sup> Carol L. McKibben, *Beyond cannery row. Sicilian women, immigration, and community in Monterey, California (1915-99)*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2006, pp. 35-56.

<sup>135</sup> *A Chinese cannery. Located in the hearth of San Francisco*, "San Francisco Chronicle", 10 July 1891, p. 10.



## Conclusion

The Italians' attempts at integrating into the San Francisco labour movement highlights the importance of the regional context of race relations when trying to understand the more general question of the “whiteness” of Italian immigrants in the United States between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since race is a “social construction”, its meaning is always contextual to the dimension of relations in which it emerges and is used to discriminate against other human beings. From this point of view, the Italians' racial identity on the Pacific Coast was “constructed” differently from that on the Atlantic side precisely because the Californian working class defined the meaning of “whiteness”, and its boundaries concerning the very specific issue of Asian immigration, in a different way. I have argued that Italians in San Francisco fit more into the paradigm of “white on arrival” than that of “inbetween people”, but this is not a general rule for all of the United States. In the big cities of the East and Midwest, Italian immigrant workers were marginalised along with African Americans. The two groups were also verbally lumped together through denigrating epithets that served to emphasise the racial otherness of the new European immigrants as opposed to that of the “old stock”, under the discriminating profile of “whiteness”.<sup>136</sup> In such contexts, then, the concept of “inbetween people” — whose purpose was to focus the attention on the Italians' initial social proximity with the African-American minority — seems an appropriate one.<sup>137</sup> By contrast, the paradigm of “racial inbetweenness” is clearly not applicable to the case of the Italians in San Francisco: no contiguity was created between them and the local “non-white” minority, the Asians. The opposition to Asian immigration stimulated the early recognition — by the “old stock” — of the “whiteness” of the “new immigrants” in the name of a common “Caucasian” identity, which had not yet emerged among European groups in other parts of the United States. It was therefore the racial dynamics of the Pacific Coast — centred on the “total exclusion” of Asians — that determined the Italians' “white on arrival” identity in the Californian city. Their involvement in the anti-Asian labour movement, in particular, dispels any doubts about their racial status as well as the meaning of “whiteness”; according to Eric Arnesen's stinging critique of Whiteness Studies, its definition would be too

<sup>136</sup> J. Higham, *Strangers in the land*, cit., p. 173. Donald Tricarico, *Labels and Stereotypes*, in Salvatore J. LaGumina, Frank J. Cavaoli, Salvatore Primeggia, Joseph A. Varacalli (eds.), *The Italian American experience: an encyclopedia*, New York, Garland Publishing, 2000, p. 319.

<sup>137</sup> Robert Orsi, *The religious boundaries of an in-between people: street Feste and the problem of the dark-skinned other in Italian Harlem, 1920-1990*, “American Quarterly”, 1992, n. 3, pp. 313-347.

“vague” within historical research.<sup>138</sup> For the Italians of San Francisco, “being white” meant the possibility to exercise, from the very moment of arrival, a very concrete privilege: that of participating in the oppression of “non-whites” and enjoying the consequent material and symbolic advantages.

<sup>138</sup> Eric Arnesen, *Whiteness and the historians' imagination*, “International Labor and Working-Class History”, October 2001, pp. 3-32, here p. 6.