

Remembering “Marc”

George De Stefano (November 06, 2013)



The Vito Marcantonio Forum champions the legacy of the radical politician from East Harlem

What does a leading light of the “Old Left” have to say to 21st century progressives?

Plenty, according to the New York activists who have founded the Vito Marcantonio Forum. The fledgling organization held a fundraising event on November 3 at Gaetana’s, an Italian American restaurant in Greenwich Village. At the fundraiser, the Forum’s organizers spoke about the



continuing relevance of Marcantonio to today's activists.

Marcantonio, who has been called "the most consequential radical politician in the United States in the twentieth century" by no less an authority than the venerable left-wing journal [normal">Monthly Review](#) [2], served seven terms in the U.S. Congress, from 1934 to 1950, representing his East Harlem district, a community comprising largely working class and poor Italian Americans and, beginning in the late 1940s, Puerto Ricans.

Beloved in his district – his constituents called him "the bread of the poor" -- he achieved national prominence as a fiery orator and skillful parliamentarian. He was an early advocate of African American civil rights, denouncing lynching and the poll tax that Southern segregationists used to disenfranchise black voters. In his iconoclastic study, *A Renegade History of the United States*, Thaddeus Russell called Marcantonio "one of the greatest champions of black civil rights during the 1930s and 1940s."

He repeatedly introduced legislation to prohibit the poll tax and make lynching a federal crime while also fighting for labor unions, civil liberties, immigrants and the independence of Puerto Rico. He supported the Social Security Act, while faulting it for not going far enough – he favored "living wage" policies. In Congress, Marcantonio opposed McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee and was an outspoken critic of U.S. foreign policy, particularly towards the developing world.

Although he was close to the Communist Party, he was not a member. In the late 1930s, he joined the left-wing American Labor Party and remained a member until his death. He ran for mayor of New York City in 1949 on the ALP ticket but lost; the following year he lost his seat in Congress after a concerted, and often vicious campaign waged against him by the political establishment and the right-wing tabloid press. When he died of a massive heart attack, he was only 51 years old. Francis Cardinal Spellman, the ultraconservative head of the New York Archdiocese, denied Marcantonio a Catholic burial.

This ally of the poor and disenfranchised who so discomfited the powerful was an exemplar of a type of politics that remains relevant today, according to historian Gerry Meyer, one of the founders of the Vito Marcantonio Forum.

Speaking at the November 3 fundraiser, Meyer noted that Marcantonio, despite his Italian origins and proud Italianità, has been "written out of the Italian American experience." (But not entirely out of American culture. The central character of Tony Kushner's 2009 play, "[The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures](#) [3]," was a fictional cousin of Marcantonio, and the stage set was dominated by a large framed photograph of the former Congressman.) "He simply disappeared from [accounts of] the Italian American experience, and even from books about civil rights, even though was a major civil rights leader."

"I wanted to do something about that," Meyer said, and he did. In 1989, he published [Vito Marcantonio: Radical Politician, 1902-1954](#) [4], the first political biography of the East Harlem radical. The book, which is now in its fourth printing, remains the best source for understanding how



Marcantonio achieved what might seem impossible – having an impact as a radical in a system designed to thwart radicalism.

Looking Back to Look Forward

In 1991, Meyer and other longtime activists who admired “Marc” formed the first Vito Marcantonio Forum. (Other founders include Gil Fagiani and Maria Lisella of the Italian American Writers Association, performance artist LuLu LoLo, whose father, Pete Pascale, was an associate of Marcantonio, and culture activist Roberto Ragone. At the fundraiser, Ragone delivered Marcantonio’s anti-poll tax speech, dressed, like the Congressman, in a rumpled suit and fedora.) The group disbanded after several years’ activity but was reconstituted in October 2011.

According to its [mission statement](#) [5], the Forum promotes awareness of Marcantonio’s life and work and of the American Labor Party. The Forum also aims to inform about “the radical political tradition of East Harlem, the cultural backdrop of Italian Harlem and El Barrio that explain the emergence of the ‘Vito Marcantonio Phenomenon,’ that is, a successful progressive politician who never compromised his principles.”

“But we are not just looking back,” the statement continues. “We are looking forward to inserting Marcantonio’s legacy” in today’s discussions about immigration, civil liberties and civil rights, foreign policy and military interventions, as well as offering Marcantonio as a model for “younger and new politicians.”

Meyer said that Marcantonio personified “a style of politics, a certain political practice no longer present, what we used to call base-building. It occurs in specific sites, in community, in unions, and leadership stayed in those sites and developed over time. It was a model of community service, of helping people with their basic needs.” Meyer stressed that Marcantonio not only emerged from East Harlem’s Italian community – his father was a first-generation Italian American and his mother an immigrant from the Basilicata region-- he was immersed in it and never distanced himself from his origins. When he died, he had been living in a house just blocks away from his childhood home.

“He kept his childhood friends, marched in the religious processions, and didn’t contradict the basic culture of the community but was part of it,” Meyer noted. “This is why people didn’t give a damn about what the press said about him. The more the press attacked him, the more they felt they and their community were being attacked.”

“This is how the Left can win,” Meyer maintained. “If somebody knows you and sees who you are on a daily basis, the media can say anything they want to say and it will have no effect.”

Today’s political landscape, however, is far different from Marcantonio’s time. The Left is weak and disorganized. There are no mass organizations like the American Labor Party or the Communist Party that can speak for and mobilize large and diverse constituencies. Progressives and radicals tend to work in sectional movements focused on war and militarism, immigration reform, civil liberties and civil rights, environmentalism, women’s and LGBT rights. Organized labor, historically the Left’s main institutional base, has been relentlessly battered by big business and its political allies. Union leaders



too often are compromised by their ties to Democratic politicians, including Barack Obama and New York governor Andrew Cuomo, who have been indifferent and even hostile to unionized workers.

Re-building the American Left in an age of Democratic Party neoliberalism and "Tea Party" hyper-conservatism will require new strategies. Marcantonio-style urban coalition building – independent of the Democratic Party -- is a good place to start. Restoring class – and economic inequality -- to the center of the Left's agenda is another. That doesn't mean minimizing the importance of social categories like race, gender and sexuality, but instead focusing on how they are articulated to class. Otherwise, there's just identity politics. The Human Rights Campaign, the leading LGBT organization in the U.S., has demonstrated the pitfalls of an identity politics detached from class and economic concerns. In advocating for marriage equality, [the HRC has allied itself with wealthy, "socially liberal" corporate and political figures](#) [6], including Republican donors, whose economic agenda is inimical to the interests of working and middle-class Americans, straight and gay.

The Vito Marcantonio Forum currently comprises some 14 activists but welcomes new members who support its aims and want to build the organization. (The Forum plans to obtain nonprofit tax status, enabling it to apply for grants and receive tax-deductible contributions, but not to engage in partisan political activity.) Contact the Vito Marcantonio Forum at vitomarcantonioforum@gmail.com

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