

Fichera, Sebastian: *Italy on the Pacific. San Francisco's Italian Americans*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011. ISBN: 978-0-230-33878-4; 239 S.

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Since the ethnic revival of the late 1960s aroused scholarly interests in U.S. immigration minorities, historians have produced three major volumes about the Italian-American experience in San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> With *Italy on the Pacific*, therefore, Sebastian Fichera has joined a crowded field. Yet his monograph intends to make original contributions to the topic. On the one hand, unlike the previous books, he brings his account into the late 1970s, covering the administration of Italian-American Mayor George Moscone (1976-1978). On the other, Fichera offers his own interpretation of the relatively fast and smooth accommodation of San Francisco's Italian immigrants as opposed to the plight of their fellow ethnics in bigger „Little Italies“ such as New York and Chicago.

Conventional historiographical wisdom dating back to Andrew Rolle's appraisal of Italian Americans in Western states has it that a large presence of industrious immigrants from Italy's northern regions, primarily Piedmont and Liguria, eased the assimilation of their national minority as a whole in San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to this thesis, Fichera shows that the initial social, economic, and financial achievements of this city's community coincided with the mass arrival of southern Italians and that the northerners' ratio in San Francisco was not conspicuously higher than in other settlements. In his view, geography played a leading role in igniting a virtuous cycle among San Francisco's Italian Americans. The remoteness from Italy curbed the influx of newcomers and prevented their number from stifling the vibrant energies as well as the social and economic structures of the local community. The distance also loosened the immigrants' ties to the native land and encouraged the Italians to invest most of their earnings in their adoptive city instead of sending remittances to the ancestral country.

This environmental approach is so perva-

sive that the conclusion of the volume becomes an evaluation of the different skills of Italy and the United States at the nationalization of the masses. Assuming that Italian migrants were initially marginalized people both at home and abroad, Fichera contends that turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States was more effective in Americanizing the newcomers than post-unification Italy in transforming her diverse population into fully-fledged Italians. Specifically, in San Francisco the Italian immigrants, who had been forced to leave their native land in the wake of the disruption in their lives following the top-down unification of the country by Piedmontese rulers, found a supporting milieu to start their bottom-up economic enterprises and process of social integration. Consequently, the outline of Italian Americans' assimilation within this city develops into a case study to sing the praises of the inclusiveness of U.S. society.

Besides such a rather uncritical extolment of the United States, other serious flaws mar Fichera's study. The volume is construed primarily as a series of life histories of outstanding Italian-American figures such as Amadeo P. Giannini in banking, the Gallos in wine-growing, or Joseph L. Alioto in politics. One, however, wonders to what an extent these single personalities were representative of their ethnic community. For instance, why did Alioto's 1967 election as mayor „inaugurate a kind of Italian American surge in the public arena“ (p. 157), whereas Angelo Rossi's 1931 rise to the same office did not? The reader would have also expected a more sophisticated interest in leadership involving, among other issues, an investigation into the turnover at the top of the community circa the U.S. entry in World War II, after the FBI relocated individuals such as Ettore Patrizi, the publisher of *L'Italia*, from California because of their pro-Fascist feelings.

Furthermore, Fichera's strict focus on San

<sup>1</sup> Deanna Paoli Gumina, *The Italians of San Francisco, 1850-1930*, New York 1978; Rose Scherini, *The Italian-American Community in San Francisco*, New York 1980; Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco. The Immigrant Experience*, Stanford 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Rolle, *The Immigrant Upraised. Italian Adventurers and Colonists in an Expanding America*, Norman 1968.

Francisco results in the loss of the broader picture. For example, the author credits Joseph Facci – the secretary of the local Italian Chamber of Commerce – with persuading the Roosevelt administration to lift the enemy alien status for unnaturalized Italians in 1942, but he neglects the more influential pressures by Luigi Antonini, the New York City-based powerful vice president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Likewise, in his analysis of the prewar pro-Fascist sympathies of many members of San Francisco's Little Italy, Fichera overlooks the appeasement of dictator Benito Mussolini by the U.S. government, which helped them reconcile the attachment to the native land with the loyalty to the adoptive country. Fichera also fails to discuss the contribution of Fascist nationalism to fostering an Italian self-perception among immigrants who had theretofore tended to identify themselves with their native region, province or village.

Even more troubling is Fichera's poor grasp of recent scholarly trends and findings. The reelaboration of a Ph.D. dissertation submitted in 1981<sup>3</sup>, *Italy on the Pacific* is imbued with the community-centered approach that was quite popular in the Academia three decades ago. While comparative interethnic research has subsequently taken roots in historiography<sup>4</sup>, Fichera examines the Italian-American experience as if it had been set in a sort of social vacuum and insulated from meaningful interactions with other immigrant minorities and racial groups. Asians, Hispanics, German Americans, and other newcomers of European ancestry receive only perfunctory attention. Similarly, although the whitening of ethnics from other-than-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds has become a paramount concern in scholarship in the last few years, the reader will search in vain for any insight about the consequences of assimilation for the racial identity of San Francisco's Italian Americans, let alone the latter's stand about the civil rights movement or affirmative action in the 1960s. Moreover, while Fichera deliberately – and, at least in his view, reasonably – ignores Dino Cinel's 1982 study of Italian immigration to San Francisco<sup>5</sup>, his bibliography also omits several subsequent and relevant works on his topic.<sup>6</sup>

What was a decent Ph.D. dissertation in the early 1980s does not necessarily make a good book thirty years later. Fichera failed to realize it. So did Palgrave Macmillan that published his manuscript.

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<sup>3</sup> Sebastian Fichera, *The Meaning of Community. A History of Italians of San Francisco*, Diss. Stanford University, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Judith E. Smith, *Family Connections. A History of Italian and Jewish Immigrant Lives in Providence, Rhode Island, 1900-1940*, Albany 1985; Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City. Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985*, Urbana 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Fichera has questioned Cinel's scholarship elsewhere, arguing that he manipulated and even made up his archival sources (*The Disturbing Case of Dino Cinel*, *History News Network*, 28.4.2003 <<http://www.hnn.us/articles/1420.html>>, (31.10.2012)).

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Bénédicte Deschamps, *Opposing Fascism in the West. The Experience of Il Corriere del Popolo in San Francisco*, in: Janet E. Worrall et al. (eds.), *Italian Immigrants Go West*, Cambridge, MA 2003, p. 109-23; Simone Cinotto, *Terra soffice, uva nera. Vitivinicoltori piemontesi in California prima e dopo il Proibizionismo*, Turin 2008; William Issel, *For Both Cross and Flag. Catholic Action, Anti-Catholicism, and National Security Policy in World War II San Francisco*, Philadelphia 2010.