



"MARC" by A. Diamond '60

Abner Diamond teaches communications at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. He canvassed door-to-door for Marcantonio, and this woodcut was inspired by the graphic artists of Mexico.

Rebel in the House

The Life and Times of Vito Marcantonio

JOHN J. SIMON

You only live once and it is best to live one's life with one's conscience rather than to temporize or accept with silence those things one believes to be against the interests of one's people and one's nation.

—Vito Marcantonio in Congress June 27, 1950, the only Congressional voice opposed to U.S. intervention in the Korean War.

Vito Marcantonio was the most consequential radical politician in the United States in the twentieth century. Elected to Congress from New York's ethnically Italian and Puerto Rican East Harlem slums, Marcantonio, in his time, held office longer than any other third-party radical, serving seven terms from 1934 to 1950. Colorful and controversial, Marcantonio captured national prominence as a powerful orator and brilliant parliamentarian. Often allied with the U.S. Communist Party (CP), he was an advocate of civil rights, civil liberties, labor unions, and Puerto Rican independence. He supported social security and unemployment legislation for what later was called a "living wage" standard. And he annually introduced anti-lynching and anti-poll tax bills a decade before it became respectable. He also opposed the House Un-American Activities Committee, redbaiting, and antisemitism, and fought for the rights of the foreign born. He was a bold outspoken opponent of U.S. imperialism.

Empire City: Vito Marcantonio's New York

The Manhattan into which Vito Marcantonio was born on December 10, 1902, was, like today's city, a locus of great wealth and mean privation. The city's ruling class were the confident arrogant leaders of the emerging American colossus. Lower Manhattan was headquarters for U.S. finance and industrial monopolies, J. P. Morgan and Standard Oil. The city was a manufacturing center as well. The garment, printing, shipping, and rail industries all needed cheap labor. New York's population exploded with a flood of newcomers. Southern and eastern Europeans poured into dormitory neighborhoods—the Lower East Side, Little Italy, and East Harlem to name but a few—overcrowded,

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noisy, and fetid with garbage. In the first two decades of the twentieth century Manhattan's population doubled, approaching nearly two and a half million. The city was a cacophony of accents and dialects. One person in four spoke almost no English.

Vito Marcantonio was born on 112th Street and First Avenue in East Harlem, a geographic triangle that runs east from Fifth Avenue to the East River and north from 100th Street to the Harlem River. Built by speculators in the 1890s to take advantage of the Second and Third Avenue elevated railways' quick access to downtown workplaces, East Harlem succeeded the slums of Little Italy as the residence of Italian working-class immigrants. In the 1940s and '50s Puerto Ricans replaced their upwardly mobile forerunners, who moved to the suburbs. Today, with the city's highest concentration of public housing, due almost entirely to Marcantonio's legislative skill, the area's population remains almost entirely Hispanic and people of color.

Most East Harlem houses were "old law" tenements, built before the reform New York Tenement House Act of 1901. Typically a tenement was a six-story walk-up with four apartments to each floor. Only rooms facing front or back were sure to have windows. Privies were located in the backyard. With eighteen to twenty families, a building, including boarders and lodgers, might have as many as 150 inhabitants. Following passage of the act, "new law" tenements would be required to have a water closet on each floor and wider airshafts. Minimal fire proofing was required for halls and stairs, and every room was to have a window—even if it were only to face a wall some feet away.

Little actually was done to improve old law tenements until La Guardia became Mayor in 1933, when small improvements, such as a workable fire escape, a lighted hallway, a toilet for each family were required. That is how the millions who made New York the richest city in the world lived. Indeed, until the Second World War, in East Harlem as well as the other slum neighborhoods, hot water and private baths were a rarity.

Still, for its residents East Harlem was a vibrant community. Alan Schaffer, author of an early biography, *Vito Marcantonio: Radical in Congress*, notes that it was a neighborhood of many small single-owner retail shops: in the 1930s there were 685 grocers. More than 500 candy stores served as social centers, bases of operations for the small-scale illegalities of numbers and bookmaking, and places to buy ice cream and penny candy. There were 376 restaurants and 150 bars. And there were tailors, doctors, insurance agents, loan offices, churches, and

funeral parlors. For the neighborhood's impoverished working class the urge for self-betterment was paramount. Immigrant workers in the garment trades organized unions; in 1909 and 1911 more than 30,000 Italians and Jews struck for improved conditions and pay. Other industries—fur, printing trades, transit, and construction—attempted to unionize as well. The years before the First World War saw much labor violence in the city's streets. In Little Italy many anti-clerical Italian immigrants joined anarcho-syndicalist circles.

The Emergence of Vito Marcantonio

Vito Marcantonio was born into a working-class family. His father, an ill-paid skilled artisan, proudly boasted that his own father had marched with Giuseppe Garibaldi, hero of the Italian nation. Young Vito's community was as much Neapolitan as American. Shops offered the octopus, garlic, and chestnuts of the Southern Italian diet. But as colorful as the neighborhood may have seemed to outsiders, life was grim. An East Harlem block with 5,000 inhabitants was the most densely populated in the United States. The 1929 Depression had less impact on East Harlem than other areas because, as Ernest Cuneo observed in his biography *Life with Fiorello*, the community was so poor to begin with.

A good student at Public School 85, young Vito excelled in history and public speaking. By 1917, when he went to DeWitt Clinton High School at 59th Street and Tenth Avenue, Vito was caught up in the radical currents of his community. The environment at DeWitt Clinton was intense; many saw school as the only way out of the grinding poverty and monotony of the slums. Some were motivated by a vision of middle-class success, the American Dream. But a large segment of Clinton's students, Marcantonio included, were driven by trade union activism, social reform, and the vision of socialism.

A significant event was a student assembly in 1921. Fiorello La Guardia, then president of the New York City Board of Aldermen, the guest speaker, was preceded by the eighteen-year-old Vito, who launched into an impassioned advocacy for social security and old-age pensions:

If it is true that government is of the people and for the people, then it is the duty of government to provide for those, who, through no fault of their own, have been unable to provide for themselves. It is the social responsibility of every citizen to see that these laws for our older people are enacted.

Deeply moved, La Guardia, gripped the youngster's shoulder, and used his speech as the starting point for his own.

Taking Vito under his wing, La Guardia encouraged him to go to law school. Marcantonio attended New York University Law School, while being actively involved in the adult education department of a newly-formed settlement house, Haarlem House (now La Guardia House).

At Haarlem House Marcantonio met Miriam Sanders, a member of the professional staff. She was as different from him as night from day. A New Englander with family roots in Colonial America, she was eleven years older and five inches taller than Marcantonio. But she also shared his engagement with economic and social justice. They were married at New York's Municipal Building in 1925. She remained in the background, giving him quiet support and invaluable counsel, while pursuing a long and productive career as a social worker, and, ultimately, director of Haarlem House.

By the mid-twenties, Marcantonio had joined La Guardia's law firm and began to cut his teeth in electoral politics. With the Democratic Party firmly in the corrupt hands of Tammany Hall, La Guardia operated from his own independent base. Marcantonio was instrumental in organizing the Fiorello H. La Guardia Political Association, the main mechanism for La Guardia's successful East Harlem Congressional campaigns. La Guardia was usually able to get the Republican line on the ballot. When denied that line in the 1924 election, he won as a Socialist on the ticket headed by Robert La Follette for president. During the biennial Congressional campaigns Marc (as nearly everyone now called him) also spoke almost nightly on street corners in Italian, Yiddish, and English for La Guardia. In 1930, La Guardia obtained an appointment to the United States Attorney's office for Marcantonio.

Ernest Cuneo, who was a law clerk for La Guardia at the same time as Marc, left a striking description of the young politician at work:

Marc then took over the microphone and there ensued what can only be described as a mass phenomenon. He started slowly and spoke for some time. Then abruptly he struck his heel on the [sound] truck bed; it made a loud hollow noise and the crowd stirred. The cadence of his talk increased and soon the heel struck again. Again the pace quickened....His voice rose and now the heel struck more often with the beginnings of a real tempo. It began to sound like a train leaving the station. The crowd mirrored his growing excitement. At the climax, Marc was shouting at the top of his lungs and he was stamping his foot as hard and as rapidly as a flamenco dancer. The crowd pulsed to the rhythm and at last found release in a tumultuous, prolonged roar of applause.

Because it was good theater, it was also good politics.

In 1933, with Marcantonio as campaign manager, La Guardia secured the Republican nomination for mayor and was elected to the first of three terms. In 1934, Marcantonio used the La Guardia Political Association as his base for a successful run for Congress, like his mentor, on the Republican ticket. Marc's campaign culminated in a huge rally at 116th Street and Lexington Avenue, the "lucky corner" at which La Guardia traditionally ended his campaigns. Sparked by a ringing endorsement from the mayor, to be repeated in every campaign as long as La Guardia was alive, the meeting concluded with another spirited speech from Marc in Italian and, this time, in Spanish.

Marcantonio in Congress: Minority of One

Just thirty-two years old, Vito Marcantonio must have cut a figure in startling contrast to the drawling Southern gentlemen in white linen suits who ran the House. Marc's high-pitched, nasal, machine-gun rapid delivery bespoke the accent and street smarts of East Harlem. His three-piece, off-the-rack, broad-striped suits and beige fedoras—they resembled the wardrobe of Nathan Detroit in *Guys and Dolls*—did little to soften his persona of self-righteous belligerence. An unlikely Don Quixote had arrived to tilt at the windmills of power.

In 1935 Congress met under extraordinary circumstances. It was the fifth year of the Great Depression. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal had been buoyed by relief programs passed during the celebrated "Hundred Days" of 1933 and by the president's radio rhetoric. But the economic recovery he had promised was still nowhere on the horizon. More than a quarter of the work force was still unemployed. Despair was rampant. To many, the Democrats and Republicans seemed bankrupt, a view held even by the few radicals who had been elected to the House. Marc began to stake out a political position not only far to the left of the major parties, but of the most zealous of the other radicals. Marcantonio opposed the military appropriations bill of 1935. He saw the ROTC provisions of the bill as "forcing American youth to goose step through the classroom," as stifling "liberal thought in our institutions," and as part of "a strong tendency toward government by edict...an urge for regimentation." Marcantonio attacked the FDR administration's Social Security bill as inadequate and supported a doomed alternative that provided for unemployment insurance covering all, to be administered by unions and farm organizations.

Marcantonio took up the gauntlet for a stronger National Labor

Relations Act; he called for a wealth tax; and he championed the outlawing of privately owned public utility holding companies. It was in support of this legislation—the Public Utilities Holding Company Act—that Marc took the floor and, in a speech which later became legendary in East Harlem and on the left as well, announced that he was a radical:

If it be radicalism to believe that our natural resources should be used for the benefit of all of the American people and not for the purpose of enriching just a few...then, Ladies and Gentlemen of this House I accept the charge. I plead guilty to the charge; I am a radical and I am willing to fight it out...until hell freezes over.

Marcantonio's Congressional accomplishments were notable for a lawmaker outside the two-party machinery that superintended the Congress. In part his success was due to his diligence. Throughout his fourteen-year tenure, his attendance record was outstanding. He never missed a debate on important legislation and, whether a nominal Republican or, as he was after 1938, the sole representative of the American Labor Party (ALP), he was often the informal floor leader for liberal Democrats and others on crucial bills—organizing Congressional and public support, planning and directing parliamentary strategy.

Marc was practical. Despite his view of administration funding requests for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and other relief agencies as inadequate, he would fight for them as better than nothing at all. In 1939, an FDR request for \$150 million was bottled up in committee by conservative Southern Democrats. Marc forced the bill to the floor (and to a vote) by daily tacking an obstructing amendment on every piece of minor legislation to come up. When one congressman asked for \$400,000 to fight the pink bollworm in his state, Marcantonio retorted, "One week from today 400,000 pink slips will be delivered to WPA workers. How about the \$150-million for the unemployed?"

Marcantonio's greatest legislative crusades were on behalf of two civil rights bills: the Anti-Poll Tax Act and the Fair Employment Practices Commission Act (FEPC). Marc introduced the first Anti-Poll Tax bill in 1942. When the bill was pigeonholed in the Judiciary Committee Marc began a slow campaign to obtain 218 signatures on a petition to force the bill to the House floor. He ensured that each signature, as well as the impassioned floor debate received maximum press coverage. Arguing that the abolition of the poll tax would extend

“democracy to disenfranchised Negroes and whites,” he connected the bill’s passage to the war effort, saying, “The continuance of the poll tax is discrimination and makes for disunity... Abolition of the poll tax abolishes this form of discrimination and makes for unity that is vital to victory.”

The bill passed the House, only to die in the Senate. Marcantonio succeeded in having it passed in the next session, using the same tactics, but it suffered the same fate.

Marcantonio used similar tactics to garner support for legislation with strong enforcement provisions outlawing employment discrimination. Marc also clamored for a federally supervised absentee ballot for soldiers (to ensure that black GI’s would be able to vote in the 1944 presidential election). The opposition to both measures was led by the racist Mississippi Representative John Rankin who said “the Gentleman from New York... is harassing the white people of the Southern States.”

Because the Democrats’ margin in the House grew smaller with each election, it made sense for the Democrats to court Marc. By 1942, Marcantonio had become the leader of the New York County American Labor Party. ALP endorsement, which Marc was in a position to determine, often was the margin of victory for Democratic candidates. Moreover Marcantonio had become nationally recognized. Civil rights, effective price controls, the rights of organized labor, and preserving the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union were all topics he addressed on nationwide radio broadcasts. In 1944 *Harper’s* magazine ratified Marcantonio’s growing status:

At forty-two Marcantonio is well on his way to becoming a first-class national figure, though one of the most unorthodox sort. Heretofore, his influence in the Congress has been that of a gadfly, not a leader... Lately, however, he has shown real genius in turning his liabilities into assets, in playing the political interstices for all they are worth.

But by 1946 FDR was dead, and his successor, Harry S. Truman, pursued an anti-Soviet Cold War foreign policy. Running on the slogan “Had Enough?” Republicans won both the House and the Senate for the first time since 1928. The New Deal coalition was dead. Despite this, Marcantonio was still able to weave his political magic. In April 1945 he had called on Secretary of Commerce Henry A. Wallace to investigate discrimination against African Americans in professional baseball, set-

ting off a campaign that was to break the color line in the national pastime. In 1947 he supported an amendment offered by Adam Clayton Powell to desegregate public facilities in the District of Columbia. When Southern opponents of the legislation charged that the Bill would provoke race riots, Marc replied,

Now we hear the same cry...in respect to a simple request that this Congress rise up to the dignity of the nation—the dignity the world expects us to rise up to, of practicing the fundamental precepts of Democracy for which men died, both black and white...This is Washington which many would make the Capital of the world. Are we going to hesitate to remove from the Capital of the United States the blot of discrimination and segregation?

Unfortunately, Congress responded, yes.

1946 found most workers with sharply reduced real wages, a result of inflation during and especially after the war. Unions in auto, steel, electrical, coal, and oil industries struck, causing the loss of more working days in 1946 than in any year since. With increasing frequency, Marcantonio rose to oppose attempts to repeal the gains that had been made by organized labor. Marc told the House,

Men do not strike for the fun of it. [They are] provoked by the scheming, uncompromising, unreasoning tactics of profit-bloated, tax-benefited corporations...beating the drums against American workers in order to intimidate Congress to pass anti-labor legislation.

Marcantonio's last leadership role in the House was his fight against the Taft-Hartley Act, the turning point in a formidable anti-union campaign that has lasted to this day and has reduced the U.S. labor movement to its current pitiable state. He spoke against the bill on the floor, asking, "What is your justification for this legislation?" A labor union, he explained, is a worker's "only defense against exploitation,"

You are making him "free"—and impotent to defend himself against any attempt by industry to subject him to the same working conditions that existed in the United States 75 years ago. You are giving him the freedom to become enslaved to a system that has been repudiated in the past not only by Democrats but also by outstanding progressive-minded Republicans...Under the guise of fighting communism you are, with this legislation, advancing fascism on American labor.

Marcantonio's greatest contribution in the fight against the bill was tactical. Convinced that public opinion could sway the Congress, he tried to hold up a vote to give citizens time to write, wire, or phone

their Representatives. Employing a rarely-used procedural rule, Marc demanded a reading of all sixty-nine pages of the act, plus the lengthy report on it from the House Labor Committee. The national media, almost without exception supporting the bill, attacked him bitterly as a left-wing obstructionist.

Marc continued to fight for labor, civil rights, and public housing. He spoke against Truman's Cold War programs and was the only member of the House who refused to join a standing ovation for the President when he called for Marshall Plan aid for Western Europe. Seeing the Marshall Plan as Cold War legislation designed to bolster anti-Soviet policies, he consistently tried to revive the war-time alliance of the major powers.

In 1948 he was the informal floor leader for the opponents of the Mundt-Nixon Bill, which effectively outlawed the Communist Party and required the listing of "Communist front" groups by the attorney general. But Marc was leader only by default; others were afraid to do more than cast a vote against it. Knowing there was no way to defeat the legislation, Marcantonio asserted, as he had done on other occasions, that history would judge the bill. He spoke not only to his colleagues but for the historical record.

I know many will succumb to hysteria and others will give us the usual flag-waving and red-baiting, but let us look back in retrospect: 1798-1948, 150 years. The men who opposed the Alien and Sedition Acts—Livingstone, Madison, Jefferson—they constitute the bright constellations in the democratic firmament of this Nation; but those who imposed on the American people those tyrannies of which this bill is a monstrous lineal descendant have been cast into oblivion, relegated where mankind always relegates puny creatures that would destroy mankind's freedom.

In his remaining years in the House, Vito Marcantonio would speak his mind and vote his conscience, but he was alone. In 1950 he lost his seat. The same year, Richard M. Nixon won election to the Senate by asserting that his opponent, Helen Gahagan Douglas, had a voting record that was similar to Marc's.

Social Justice in the Neighborhood

The Congress was only one arena in which Marcantonio represented the people who elected him. From 1935 on, Marcantonio returned to East Harlem from the Congress each weekend to the Fiorello H. La Guardia Political Association. There, Marc maintained a veritable

neighborhood social-service clinic that he had started while La Guardia still represented the district. Seven days a week, spanning three decades, Marcantonio's political organization dealt with the myriad problems of his constituents: health, citizenship, relief, workmen's compensation, immigration, tenant, legal, and family issues.

A visitor to the club in those days would climb a flight of stairs and enter a large meeting room arranged with rows of wooden folding chairs facing several desks, behind one of which sat Marc. The club would be filled with the hubbub of neighbors, staff, and local campaign aides, originally organized by Marcantonio as campaign volunteers for La Guardia. They served as poll watchers on election day, district captains, canvassers, and—from the earliest days—informal social workers. They were neighborhood Italian-Americans, and despite the sophisticated citywide political organization constructed by the American Labor Party for Marc's campaigns, Marc saw them as the backbone of his political organization—and his friends.

Constituents could discuss a problem with Marcantonio himself or with a volunteer drawn from a circle of teachers, lawyers, social workers, or a political aide who might phone a city agency to secure a relief payment, solve a problem at a local school, or find a job in a relief program.

There was nothing new about this kind of help. Machine politicians had delivered turkeys at Thanksgiving, supplied coal at Christmas, and found patronage jobs as well. But the old-line local pols were in it for the business. If you couldn't pay your rent, at the club you would find a loan shark. To get service from a city agency, you might have to buy insurance from the candidate's brother-in-law. If the district leader helped you get a job, he'd expect you to kick back part of your salary. But with Marcantonio and his colleagues, there were no strings attached. He and his staff were available to everyone. Assistants actually sought out landlord-tenant problems. In the 1948 campaign a huge billboard fronting the club read,

Don't pay rent increases. If your landlord asks for a rent increase report here and I shall help you fight the real estate trust.—Your Congressman, Vito Marcantonio.

The press tried to paint Marc as a typical big-city political boss running a spoils operation. But one reporter noticed that the Congressman required "almost fanatically that no constituent, however lowly or troublesome, get the kiss-off." In response to a query about legal fees Marc

wrote to a resident, “As your representative in Congress I am most pleased to do whatever is proper and possible in this matter without any fee.” He also held the volunteer lawyers, many of them from other ALP clubs, to the same standard.

One reporter who spent a day with Marcantonio at his district office wrote,

“What do you make of it?” The Congressman asked us. We said that a couple of days like that would drive us nuts. “Well,” said he, “it’s what I get paid ten thousand a year for. It’s their dough.” We also said that we were very grateful we were not a member of Congress. “You probably have something there,” sighed Vito Marcantonio.

Did all this add up to a political machine? Yes and no. Certainly Marc was able to draw on his neighbors, who were shop workers, small businessmen, store-keepers, and even petty hoods. Also, there was the universe of the New York left. For each campaign, the ALP and other leftist groups like the Civil Rights Congress, International Workers Order (IWO), and the Young Progressives of America, along with members of local unions like the Department Store Union, United Electrical Workers, United Public Workers, the health care union, and others would flood the district with volunteer canvassers. They would visit voters in sixth floor walkups, distribute leaflets, and do the routine office work. Marc praised them, saying, “There’s no substitute for doorbell ringing. Republicans don’t climb stairs.”

But this machine was voluntary: it was sluggish, inefficient, and inconsistent. Marc would demand that leaflets be written and printed overnight, and that sound-truck schedules and canvassing goals be met. Marcantonio’s papers, now archived at the New York Public Library, are filled with letters he wrote berating his captains for missing a meeting or union leaders who had failed to deliver on promises. If this was a machine, it often was, for him, one of frustrating ineptitude.

The most important component of the Marcantonio phenomenon was Marcantonio himself. Gerald Meyer, in his definitive political biography *Vito Marcantonio: Radical Politician*, describes how Marc’s political style and “personalism” fit the traditional Italian culture of East Harlem. He was of the neighborhood and lived that way: he and his wife lived in a four-room rent controlled apartment on 116th street. His vision was a better society rather than heavenly salvation, but he felt his calling as powerfully as any priest. His life was quite austere. Although

only those close to him knew it, he was a diabetic. He lived simply. He cared little for restaurants or luxuries. He never took a vacation in all the years he served in Congress. If there was another, less political side to Marc, it was intensely private. The whole story was Marcantonio in shirt sleeves in his office, orating on a street corner, or walking down 116th Street being greeted by young and old.

El Barrio

Marcantonio's principal strength comes from the hordes of Puerto Ricans enticed here from their home island, for the value of their votes, and subjected to pitiful poverty, which Marcantonio has done nothing to alleviate—except force thousands onto city relief.

—Editorial, *New York Daily Mirror*, October 23, 1950

If today the *Daily Mirror's* logic seems preposterous, one needs to remember that a major underpinning of U.S. Cold War delirium was hatred of the “other.”

Puerto Ricans began to settle in East Harlem for the same reason others did: it was the only affordable neighborhood for the poorest immigrants. The community grew through the 1930s and in the '40s immigration accelerated aided by the availability of inexpensive airplane flights. In the postwar years New York once again needed cheap labor. Fleeing desperate economic conditions in their colonial homeland, Puerto Ricans were ideal replacements for the now-retiring generation of European immigrants. As New York's Puerto Rican population grew, they settled in other parts of the city, especially the South Bronx and Brooklyn. But El Barrio—East Harlem—remained the ethnic hub of the community.

El Barrio was crowded and impoverished. Like the Italians nearby, the Puerto Ricans constituted a vibrant and diverse culture. In the years before the Second World War there were Spanish language cinemas, cafes and nightclubs, and an abundance of political organizations, some left-wing and pro-independence.

Writing in 1950 in *The Puerto Rican Journey: New York's Newest Migrants*, C. Wright Mills described El Barrio as a distinctly hermetic community. Ill-educated, originally rural, believing that their stay on the mainland was only temporary, Puerto Ricans lived outside of New York's larger multi-ethnic culture, except for work. Few read newspapers and most of those who did read the San Juan daily *El Imparcial* (which was then in favor of Puerto Rican independence) rather than the

local Hispanic papers, *El Diario* or *La Prensa*. In the 1920s, both the Socialist and the Communist parties built up sizeable followings in East Harlem. The Communists even sponsored a Spanish language paper, *La Vida Obrera*. It was the first of several papers published by them and the Spanish-speaking branches of the IWO. In the late '30s and early '40s reports on Marcantonio's Congressional activities appeared regularly.

When Marcantonio was elected in 1934, he ran poorly in Puerto Rican election districts, primarily because the Tammany machine provided traditional clubhouse services to that community. Perhaps reflecting Italian-American insularity, the Fiorello H. La Guardia Political Association was late in adjusting to the region's changing demographics. However, Marc analyzed the voting data and immediately corrected this deficiency. Noticing that Puerto Rican voter turnout was small because most residents couldn't pass the required English language literacy test, he arranged for the La Guardia Association and Harlem House to offer classes in English literacy. But he also tried, unsuccessfully, to change the law, arguing that New York's English language literacy test denied participation to voters simply on the basis of language.

Marcantonio's Congressional identification with Puerto Rico began in 1936 when he introduced the first bill calling for independence since the United States conquest in the Spanish-American War. Citing the export from Puerto Rico of capital and resources by North Americans—over \$400-million in four decades—as the cause of Puerto Rico's extreme underdevelopment and destitution, he called for indemnification as well as independence. During his Congressional career he introduced five bills for independence, the last in 1950 during his final term.

When Pedro Albizu Campos, founder of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, was convicted of conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government, Marc immediately championed his cause. Leaving the continental United States for the only time in his life, Marcantonio flew to San Juan on July 31, 1936. Met by a group of prominent politicians, including Luis Munoz Marin, who would later become governor, Marc immediately agreed to serve as Albizu Campos' lawyer. During his stay Marcantonio also spoke to two or three Nationalist Party meetings a day. In an island-wide radio address he asserted that the liberation of Albizu Campos was the most important issue facing Puerto Rico.

His return to New York occasioned the largest mass demonstration in El Barrio's history, prefiguring Marcantonio's political relationship

with that community. This is how the *New York Times* described the event:

Ten thousand Puerto Ricans, representing a score of political and social clubs in the city, paraded for three hours through the streets of lower Harlem yesterday afternoon to protest the attitude and actions of “Imperialistic America” in making “slaves” [of the islanders].

Spurred by comments of Representative Vito Marcantonio who...denounced conditions there, the paraders shouted “Free Puerto Rico,” and “Down with Yankee Imperialism,” so loudly that thousands of other residents of the area, populated mostly by Negroes and Spaniards, leaned out of windows and over the edges of roof tops and added their protests to those of the demonstrators....

“Thirty-eight years of American imperialism has converted the island of Puerto Rico into a slave country,” he said, speaking from a sound truck parked between Fifth and Lenox on West 113th Street. “Return it to the Puerto Rican people and then it will be a real country, with no tyranny of any sort.”

Marcantonio also took an interest in the economic life of the island. In 1935 he laid before the Congress a petition calling for an increase in the island’s sugar quota and successfully fought the sugar companies’ effort to eliminate the twenty-five cent minimum hourly wage. In 1939 he won extension of the Social Security Act to Puerto Rico. In 1940, opposing a 50 percent cut in a relief appropriation, he said,

If you want to get an idea of how we have expropriated Puerto Rico, go to a street on one of the hillsides in one of the small towns and what do you find there? The only thing you find that is native is a bunch of bananas. All else on the shelves come from New York and the various other cities of the United States...Whenever Puerto Ricans make an attempt at establishing an industry it is destroyed by dumping from the States. Our ruthless imperialism has strangled the economic life of that country, and yet we here refuse to provide for the victims of a system imposed by us, which causes slow starvation to hundreds of thousands of people in Puerto Rico. We have no right to call ourselves an enlightened people until we at least give adequate relief to the people of Puerto Rico. History will condemn us for this cruel and inhuman treatment of a good people.

In 1940 he called for a bill that would have made Puerto Ricans who worked on the mainland during the First World War eligible for veterans’ benefits. In 1944 he prevented a Treasury Department raid on rum tax revenues held by the Puerto Rican Treasury. But perhaps his greatest concern was the sad condition of education for Puerto Ricans. He

noted that only 6.5 percent of their children attended high school in 1940, compared with 72 percent on the mainland. In 1946 he introduced legislation restoring Spanish, the tongue of nearly the entire population of the island, as the language of instruction in its schools. Personally lobbying President Truman to sign the bill he said that the U.S. imposition of English tampered with “the fundamental pedagogical principle that instruction should be transmitted in the vernacular language of the students.” He asked Truman to sign the bill, “in the name of the children of Puerto Rico who are being tortured by the prevailing system... to fight cultural chauvinism and to correct past errors.” Truman signed it.

His frustration, especially in securing federal aid to Puerto Rican education, reaffirmed Marc’s commitment to independence. He said,

Only independence will give these people the control of their own destiny, and through independence, with hard work and common effort, they can raise their standard of living, achieve greater security, and resolve their problems in their own way and in their best interest.

Marcantonio’s positive reception in El Barrio was initially due to his strong positions on island issues, especially independence. His Puerto Rican constituents also approved of his support for labor and welfare legislation, which benefited them, as it did the rest of East Harlem. But his defense of El Barrio residents against discrimination won him his greatest support.

In 1939 he objected to a psychological profile of Puerto Rican children based on a dubious analysis of IQ test scores. He said,

Mr. Speaker, a most slanderous attack has recently been made on Puerto Rican children living in New York City. It has been made under the guise of a psychological report. It proves that there is such a thing as racketeering even in the field of psychology. This report is evidence of it. I have had this report investigated, and I hereby submit the findings which constitute the exposé of another fraud at the expense of a racial minority in our country.

Marcantonio’s consistent engagement with the Puerto Rican independence movement contributed, in the end, to his defeat in 1950. The major parties ganged up on him with their “coalition” candidate identifying “Moscow-echo-Marc[’s]” support for independence with subversion. Then, just six days before the election, on November 1, 1950, two Nationalist Party members, Griselio Torresola and Oscar Collazo attempted to assassinate President Truman. Torresola was killed by

Secret Service agents, but Collazo survived. Marc helped find a lawyer for Collazo who once had been Marc's campaign aide. The newspapers and old-line politicians had a field day. In a last minute appeal to voters Marc wrote,

Now is the hour for the true friends of Puerto Rico to gather to its side. Now is the hour for those who believe in democracy, liberty, and the self-determination of all peoples, to rise in the struggle for the liberation of Puerto Rico.

As for me, I must say that I have been fighting for its liberty and defended the Puerto Rican people during the fourteen years I have been in Congress and in this hour of sorrow, when the cause of Puerto Rico needs more than ever its defenders, I am willing to intensify my efforts for its liberty and to dedicate all of my energies for the defense of Puerto Rico, regardless of what my enemies say about me. Puerto Ricans: I was with you yesterday, I am with you today, and I will be there tomorrow and all the days of my life.

Insurgent Marcantonio: The American Labor Party

Third-party politics had a long history in East Harlem by the time Marc first ran for La Guardia's old seat in Congress in 1934. New York's election laws made it relatively easy to get a party onto the ballot and permitted cross-endorsement. When Marc first ran for La Guardia's Congressional seat, he had the Republican and City Fusion parties' nominations. The City Fusion Party was created by Marcantonio and others the year before as a vehicle for voters wishing to support La Guardia for mayor, but unwilling to vote Republican. It provided the margin of victory.

In 1936 Marcantonio was defeated in the Roosevelt landslide despite the backing of a local left-wing grouping, the All Peoples Party, a coalition of black, Puerto Rican, Jewish, and Italian workers, many of them Socialists and Communists, that supplied him with a second line on the ballot. Marc lost narrowly, collecting nearly a third of his votes on the All Peoples line. Characteristically, he did not brood over his defeat. He continued to serve East Harlem residents, pursued a labor law practice, and served as president of International Labor Defense. But he did appreciate the reasons for his loss. Despite broad nonpartisan support in the 1936 campaign, Marcantonio needed the local Republican Party for their line on the ballot. That had meant that he could not support FDR for reelection and that proved fatal in East Harlem.

While campaigning for reelection in 1936, he watched with interest as the leadership of the needle trades unions formed the American

Labor Party to secure the votes of left-wing, predominantly Jewish workers for Roosevelt and the liberal Democratic gubernatorial candidate, Herbert H. Lehman. That year Roosevelt and Lehman were the only ALP candidates. But Marcantonio immediately saw that the new party could hold the balance of power in local elections, giving leftists and liberals unparalleled political leverage.

In the 1936 election, the ALP exceeded expectations. It drew a larger percentage of votes than the Socialist Party previously had and achieved permanent ballot status. Much to the chagrin of the Tammany bosses, the leadership of New York trade unions, with the tacit support of FDR—and the open encouragement of Eleanor Roosevelt—continued to sponsor and finance the ALP as a permanent third party. Marcantonio began to work with the ALP almost immediately, enrolling as a member just two weeks after his defeat. Later in 1936, Marc's All Peoples Party became the ALP affiliate in East Harlem. In 1937, the ALP became the linchpin of La Guardia's strategy for reelection as mayor.

When, in 1938, Marcantonio once again won the Republican nomination, running as an insurgent in the primary, the focus of his campaign had moved to the ALP. Following his return to Congress he listed himself not as a Republican but as the House's only member from the American Labor Party, a designation he held throughout the remainder of his Congressional career.

By the early forties, Marcantonio was the acknowledged leader of the ALP in Manhattan. In those years, at the height of its political power, the ALP—and Marcantonio through it—controlled much city and state, and federal patronage, influencing administrative and legislative policy. In East Harlem it meant ever increasing electoral majorities—and often reelection without opposition—for Marc. But the ALP was not merely an electoral vehicle. In 1937 it published a Declaration of Principles supporting a conception of a welfare state far more radical than the New Deal. What distinguished the ALP from the major parties, though, was its direct appeal to class interests. Its name said "Labor" and an early slogan implored, "Don't scab at the ballot box."

Another major factor, unforeseen by the anticommunist founding organizers of the ALP, was the support of the CP for coalitions with liberals and others. The CP encouraged its membership to work within the ALP almost from the beginning. In the late thirties Communist candidates continued to run for major statewide offices. But by 1941 nearly all of their electoral efforts were concentrated in the ALP, resulting

in the formation of a powerful leftist grouping in which Communists played a major role. This grouping, which included many non-Communists as well, almost immediately found Marcantonio as its leader. Bitter fratricidal conflict broke out between them and the old Socialist-influenced garment union leadership of the ALP. There were numerous primary election battles for control of the ALP, with Marcantonio's group winning control of its Manhattan organization in 1941. By 1944, his faction had won across the state and David Dubinsky, leader of the Ladies Garment Workers Union, and Alex Rose of the Hatter's Union, withdrew and formed the anticommunist Liberal Party. Although never in control of the ALP, by 1948 Communists were a dominant force, leading every district organization in Manhattan, save those in Marc's own district.

It would be easy to dismiss the ALP, especially in its later years, as a Communist-dominated political movement and, thus, a victim of all of the disasters (both external and internal) that befell the Communists. In fact, despite the major role of Communists, the ALP included a wide range of liberals and other leftists. True, Communists constituted a strong and essential phalanx of experienced campaign workers, as Marcantonio recognized. But the Communists also needed the ALP as one of the few legitimate outlets for their organizational activity.

In fact, support for the ALP was relatively broad. In the forties New York had what can only be described as a universe of the left, a culture of radicalism. The Communist Party, its newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, and other groups allied with them like the ethnically organized fraternal organization, the IWO, were important components of this culture. But there were not-quite-so-affiliated individuals who, for instance, read left-of-center newspapers like the experimental, advertising-free *PM*, its successor, the *Daily Compass*, and the moderate *New York Post*.

What characterized this community was its interest in issues, personal as well as political. Intellectually curious and socially active, they believed passionately in the struggle against white supremacy, fascism, and antisemitism. With equal ardor they supported the rights of labor and equality for African Americans. But their political commitment lay with the ALP, which they saw as a vibrant, principled and democratic organization, not with the CP, whose secretiveness, hierarchical structure, dreary meetings, and catechized political positions they found alien.

In Manhattan in the early 1940s Marcantonio's—and the ALP's—

vote-getting strength made possible mutually beneficial electoral alliances with the Democrats. With La Guardia and FDR denying Tammany access to patronage, the old machine had nothing to lose in collaborating with Marc. ALP support for judges, State Assembly, and Senate candidates led to coalitions that elected not only liberal Democrats, but some ALPers as well. But if the ALP held the political balance of power in New York, it was not strong enough to win a city-wide election on its own. Of necessity committed to a variety of alliances, in 1945 Marc and the ALP made a controversial decision to support the Democrat William O'Dwyer for mayor in return for endorsement for some ALP candidates and support for ALP policies on housing, transit, and education. But the political climate was changing and shortly after the election, O'Dwyer reneged on his pledges to the ALP. In particular, he broke his promise to Marc to retain the five-cent transit fare. In 1947 the State Legislature passed a law preventing candidates from running in the primaries of parties in which they were not enrolled. The bill was widely acknowledged to have Marc as its target. The press called it the "Anti-Marcantonio Act."

In 1948, the American Labor party and Marcantonio supported the anti-Cold War third-party presidential candidacy of Henry A. Wallace. The campaign was marked by a crescendo of redbaiting hysteria. That year Marcantonio was denied both the Republican and the Democratic nomination. Even so, running for the first time on the ALP ticket alone, Marcantonio was reelected to his seventh Congressional term.

The ALP had its last hurrah in 1949. Marcantonio sought the office of his mentor, La Guardia, running for mayor in an emotionally charged, viciously fought campaign. Redbaited from the start, Marcantonio waged a principled campaign: he supported a return to the five-cent fare, equal housing opportunity, and improved health and welfare services. As he did in all his campaigns, he connected small issues with large ones, explaining that the growing anticommunist hysteria and increased military expenditures directly affected deteriorating municipal services and the ever-mounting cost of living.

New Yorkers saw Marc at his best. His campaign became a veritable classroom. Marc spoke all over the city—often a dozen or more times a day. On the Friday before election-day, in Greenwich Village, thousands gathered at Sixth Avenue and Bleecker Street to hear the dark-eyed, now-hoarse-voiced candidate ask his fellow New Yorkers to take control of their municipal destiny. Marc won great applause and the ALP scored its second-largest vote for a citywide office ever—more than

350,000. But O'Dwyer, seeking a second term, swamped Marc. It was the end of the ALP as a political force in the city.

In 1950, Democrats, Republicans, and Liberals joined behind one candidate in Marcantonio's district. Despite the largest vote Marc ever received in East Harlem, he was easily beaten.

In the forties, in ALP factional disputes and primary battles Marcantonio and the Communists usually found themselves on the same side. Both committed themselves to the election of black candidates at a time when few had ever been elected. For Marcantonio the undertaking to secure black electoral representation was not, as the press maintained, another instance of subservience to the CP, but a matter of principle. Marcantonio and the ALP consistently supported Democrats and Republicans on the rare occasions they had nominated candidates of color.

Marc, although he had clear political sympathies that would otherwise have drawn him close to the Communists, treated the party as he did other potential political allies. His fundamental commitment was to left political organization independent of the two-party system. So when, in response to Cold War attacks—and their own reassessment of political realities—Communist policy turned “back to the mainstream,” away from independent politics to an effort to influence the Democratic Party, Marc took exception. While never attacking the CP publicly, he vigorously defended the ALP and the idea of a third party. The issue came to a head during the 1953 mayoral campaign when Communists urged ALPers to abandon their ticket and support the Democratic candidate. Following a dismal ALP electoral performance, Marcantonio attacked Communist policy and resigned as state chairman of the ALP. In 1956 the ALP itself dissolved.

Vito Marcantonio: Prophetic Politician

I have stood by the fundamental principles which I have always advocated. I have not trimmed. I have not retreated. I do not apologize, and I am not compromising.

—Vito Marcantonio, in his last speech to Congress

Marcantonio accepted defeat defiantly, even with optimism. He returned to an active but penurious civil liberties legal practice. Noteworthy was his successful defense of W. E. B. Du Bois in 1951. Like Marcantonio, Du Bois had refused to trim his sails. In his eighties, Du Bois was accused of running a Soviet-controlled peace advocacy organization. Despite the anticommunist and racist climate, Marcantonio

won dismissal of all charges. Marcantonio also successfully defended the African-American leftist leader William F. Patterson, executive secretary of the Civil Rights Congress, charged with contempt by a red-hunting Congressional committee.

Despite his political isolation, Marcantonio continued to serve his constituents as if he still held public office. Without political power, with no access to patronage, Marcantonio had to rely on old friends still in city agencies to solve problems. Nearly every day he would spend time, at what was now called the Vito Marcantonio Political Association, assisting his neighbors. At the same time he met with old campaign workers—former ALP, Democratic, and Republican precinct workers—to plan a 1954 comeback bid for Congress. The three-party coalition that had defeated him in 1950 had disintegrated. Moreover, the Cold War climate of fear was receding a bit. Senator McCarthy was in disgrace and the Korean War had ended. Marcantonio planned to run on an ad hoc independent ticket. Old allies and campaign workers gathered to raise money and stump the district for him. Seasoned politicians thought he might just make it.

On the morning of August 9, 1954, Vito Marcantonio, only fifty-one-years-old, dropped dead of a heart attack in the rain on lower Broadway near City Hall. He had just been to the printer to pick up nominating petitions for his Congressional race.

Even in death he was controversial. Although the ultra-reactionary Francis Cardinal Spellman overruled East Harlem clergy and denied Marc a Catholic funeral, twenty thousand neighbors paid their respects at a local funeral home, many placing religious medals in his coffin. At his funeral he was eulogized by W. E. B. Du Bois and his long-time friend, the neighborhood barber, Luigi Albarelli, among others. On August 12, thousands jammed the streets, fire escapes, and roofs to watch the funeral procession as Marcantonio left East Harlem for the last time. He was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, not far from Fiorello La Guardia's grave. His red tombstone reads "*Vito Marcantonio: Defender of Human Rights.*"

Songs from Marcantonio's 1949 campaign for mayor of New York City, performed by Pete Seeger and The Weavers, among others, can be found at the MRzine Web site, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org>.

A Note on Sources

In recent years there has been renewed interest in Marcantonio, his career, and his impact on his times. Historian Gerald Meyer has written an important political biography, *Vito Marcantonio: Radical Politician 1902-1954* (Albany:

State University of New York Press, 1989). The biography by Alan L. Shaffer cited above is *Vito Marcantonio, Radical in Congress* (Syracuse University Press, 1966). Recently back in print is *I Vote My Conscience: Debates, Speeches, and Writings of Vito Marcantonio*, edited by Annette T. Rubinstein and first published in 1956. It was reissued in 2002 by the Calandra Institute at Queens College of the City University of New York, and is available from it at 25 West 43rd Street, 18th Floor, New York, NY 10036. The institute can be contacted by phone, (212) 642-2094, or by email, calandra@qc.edu. The new edition contains a bibliography of works about Marcantonio and a biography of Annette T. Rubinstein by Gerald Meyer. Annette Rubinstein is a radical activist, literary critic, educator, and was a political aide and campaign manager for Vito Marcantonio for much of his career. Both books have been indispensable sources for this article; this writer owes a considerable debt to Meyer and to Rubinstein.

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