



THE TROUBLED PRESENCE OF THE UNITED STATES IN ITALY'S POLITICAL CULTURE

An Overview

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the paramount values upon which the United States based its claim to establish itself as a sovereign nation as early as 1776. Since the mid-nineteenth century, such principles have been articulated mainly in terms of democracy and free market, to which the turn of the twentieth century added mass consumption. Their export and spread abroad have been the essence of America's manifest destiny and global mission (Stephanson, 1995; De Grazia, 2005). In particular, in the wake of the Cold War, the United States endeavored to use them as the foundations of a transatlantic community.

Marginalized at first because of her geographical position and unreliability as an ally during the two World Wars, Italy eventually won admission to that community by means of her 1949 acceptance among the founding members of the Atlantic Alliance (Del Pero, 2010). A component of the US-dominated, so-called Free World, Italy interacted with Washington's values that governed the Western bloc throughout the Cold War and continued that interplay after the crumbling of communism left the American model without any valuable challenger.

This article outlines Italy's response to US values since the end of World War II. Specifically, it examines their influence on the country's political culture.¹

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¹ The expression "political culture" is meant to refer to the attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and values shaping a political system and process (Pye, 2001).

In many Italians' eyes America has long stood as a model of liberty and political freedom. This image began to take shape even before the formal birth of the United States as a sovereign nation because the representation of the colony of Pennsylvania as the embodiment of people's self-government made significant inroads into the Republic of Venice at the end of the Seven Years' War (Del Negro, 1986). Such a perception, however, gained momentum in the wake of the US independence from the British empire and the abolition of slavery after the Civil War. Against the backdrop of post-Napoleonic Restoration in Italy, numerous Italian patriots contrasted the revival of European despotism with American free institutions (Rossi, 1969). Similarly, after Italy's political unification under the house of Savoy, opponents of the monarchy—including socialists (Testi, 1976)—looked to US republicanism. Most notably, once the stigma of slavery had been removed from American statutes, Giuseppe Mazzini, an outspoken critic of the Italian monarchic government, became persuaded that the United States had risen to be the ultimate example of popular democracy (Dal Lago, 2013).

Not even fascism managed to sweep away the view that US values could serve as an apt reference for Italian politics. On the one hand, despite its overtones of anti-Americanism (Nacci, 1989), Benito Mussolini's regime itself endeavored to legitimize its own notion of corporatism among democratic countries by contending that US President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal had drawn upon *il Duce's* concept of the corporative state (Vaudagna, 2013: 177–203). On the other hand, numerous anti-fascists turned to American democracy as the real alternative to *il Duce's* dictatorship. For example, the mythization of US literature, as the product of a free country, became the expression of crypto-criticism of fascism and a means of promoting Italy's civic redemption (Pontuale, 2007: 117–124).

THE AFTERMATH OF WORLD WAR II

In the early postwar years, it was a handful of former anti-Fascist exiles in the United States that took the lead in advocating

the infusion of American political values into the restructuring of the Italian institutions. For instance, Alberto Tarchiani, who served as Italy's ambassador to Washington from 1945 to 1955 after a brief stint as minister of public works, argued that the implementation of the US version of liberalism, founded on the freedom of speech and the notion of fair elections among competing parties, would pave the way for the establishment of democracy in Italy (Lanaro, 1992: 145–146). Similarly, political scientist Mario Einaudi pointed to the New Deal as a model of democratic planning and, in particular, to the Tennessee Valley Authority as an example of grassroots democracy that could aptly inspire land reform in Italy (Mariuzzo, 2013: 357–360). Priest Luigi Sturzo, the founder of the Partito Popolare Italiano that was the predecessor of the postwar Christian Democracy (DC), returned from the United States carrying a deep appreciation for the American concepts of popular sovereignty and constituent power stipulating that the law derived its force and validity from the people rather than from the state (Sturzo, “La riforma”: 203). He also held that US democracy was “one of the most grandiose phenomena in human evolution [...] in modern times” (as quoted in D’Addio, 1990: 313). Likewise, the American experience strengthened the trust that Carlo Sforza, Italy’s minister of foreign affairs between 1947 and 1951, placed in market economy and civil liberties as the foundations of a constitutional state (Teodori, 2003: 66–67).

Washington encouraged the spread of American political values in postwar Italy. Specifically, along with the production of the radio programs of the Voice of America, which began its broadcasts in 1942, the United States Information Services (USIS)—the federal agency that implemented the cultural and informational policies of the Department of State overseas—promoted two Italian-language picture magazines, *Nuovo Mondo* and *Mondo d’Oggi*, that aimed to channel the American world view, including the US perspectives on political institutions and systems, into a mass audience and readership in Italy (Rizzo, 1976; Bruti Liberati, 2004: 45–56, 60–64; Tobia, 2008: 53–99; I. Bernardi, 2013).

The 1946 referendum that abolished the monarchy and transformed Italy into a republic brought the nation closer to the United States as for its form of government. The Italian turn toward

the American model was further emphasized by the fact that—contrary to Great Britain, which had long considered the Savoy dynasty as the best guarantor of stability and social order—the United States advocated a republican solution for the country after the end of the war (Miller, 1986: 86–87, 95, 189–91). Still, the characteristics of the new state demonstrated that Washington’s efforts to Americanize Italian politics had little impact on the nation’s postwar institutional frame. While US public administration specialists actually drafted Japan’s postwar constitution and imbued it with American political ideology, including the separation between church and state as well as local autonomies (Zunz, 1998: 149, 167–69), this was not the case of its Italian counterpart. The debates at Italy’s Constituent Assembly, which prepared a new constitution for the country between June 1946 and December 1947, often referred to the multifaceted aspects of the US political system as possible examples (Volterra, 1980: 183–292). In particular, former Prime Minister Francesco Saverio Nitti maintained that, since “democracy is an American creation and America was the first truly democratic republic in the world,” Italy should look to the US Constitution as a model for her charter (Segretariato Generale, 1970: 2868–2869). However, only the small and declining group of the Action Party, inspired by ideals of social democracy, consistently called for a presidential republic as well as the strict separation between church and state along the lines of the US precedents. Instead, by establishing a parliamentary republic—with a weak and largely symbolic president—and incorporating the 1929 Lateran Pacts between the fascist regime and the Holy See into article 7 of the charter, the Constituent Assembly took a different route (Teodori, 1992: 131–180). Most notably, it dismissed a project for the creation of a semi-federal state, making decentralized government an essential feature of the new participatory republic, which closely reflected the recommendations of a 1944 report by the Postwar Planning Committee of the US Department of State (Volterra, 1980: 223–227).

THE COLD WAR ERA

Christian Democrat Premier Alcide De Gasperi came to praise the guarantee of social equality and mobility as a valuable achieve-

ment of the American model (De Gasperi, 1979: 387–388). Yet, his own party remained overall suspicious of the alleged materialism of US society and hardly curbed the traditional Catholic disdain for the supposedly unethical characteristics of a Protestant society. Divorce, women’s emancipation, sexual freedom, the logic of profit underlying capitalism, and workers’ exploitation in an unrestrained free-market economy were all corrupting germs of the American way of life that could easily spread to Italy if the latter embraced the US model (Saresella, 2001: 239–246). As late as 1959, Guido Gonella—the Christian Democratic minister of justice—could not refrain from criticizing even the symbolic meaning of American blue jeans, which he stigmatized as “a sort of moral immunizers” for hooligans (as quoted in Crainz, 2003: 76). Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the DC contributed to placing Italy within the Washington-dominated Western bloc out of expediency—namely in order to secure benefits to compete with the Communist Party (PCI) on the home front and to win concessions for their nation’s postwar economic reconstruction and reinstatement to the status of a mid-sized Mediterranean power in the international arena—rather than because the leaders of the party believed in American-style free market and liberal democracy (Del Pero, 2001).

Italy received the bulk of Washington’s initial help in the form of her share of the European Recovery Program, or Marshall Plan, i.e., more than 1.3 billion dollars between 1948 and 1951 (Fauri, 2010: 80). Yet, as Pietro Quaroni—the Italian ambassador to France—cynically remarked, “the main point of our policies regarding the Marshall Plan has to be to get on with the Americans, not on general principles, but exclusively in our interests” (as quoted in Mistry, 2014: 169). Indeed, De Gasperi did not use US funds to enhance the *laissez faire* model of American capitalism. Rather, he channeled them into state-owned companies, such as Finsider in the steel industry, or quasi-monopolistic corporations, such as automobile producer Fiat (Hoffman, 1949). While Washington encouraged private-oriented businesses, the entrenched anti-capitalistic sentiments of Italian Catholicism induced the DC to consolidate state entrepreneurialism. This approach found its paramount expression in the 1953 establishment of the Ente

Nazionale Idrocarburi, an oil and gas holding that developed from a pre-existing fascist state company. Its charismatic and shrewd CEO, Enrico Mattei, turned it into a major challenger to the international oligopoly of the primarily American, so-called “Seven Sisters” in the petroleum industry (Perrone, 2001).

The United States offered a model of progressive modernization as a formula that could curb communism, too, as Walt W. Rostow suggested, because social and economic reforms also aimed at undermining consensus for the PCI (Rostow, 1960). Inspired by the New Deal, entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti devised a blueprint for decentralized democracy and amicable industrial relations, binding management and workers by means of a productivity covenant and common interests in social progress, which he endeavored to enforce by his *Comunità* movement before his untimely death in 1960 (Cadeddu, 2012). Yet, Italy’s Christian Democratic governments, especially during Mario Scelba’s terms as minister of the interior (1947–1953, 1954–1955, 1960–1962), sided with the industrialists and landowners in labor disputes instead of performing the New-Deal-style role of a broker between entrepreneurs and unions (Marino, 1995: 137–151). They also chose to resort to force in order to stifle the following of communism among workers and failed to enhance the spread of mass consumption, declining to play on the increase in the availability of goods as a means to counterweigh the Soviet attraction to laborers (Ellwood, 2012: 364–365). Indeed, the DC opted for a conservative modernization that was partially resistant to the American stimuli. In particular, it advocated the retention of a strong function of the state in the economy, which conflicted with US *laissez faire* philosophy. It also emphasized domestic savings over consumerism. This approach especially shaped the measures that Minister of the Budget Ezio Vanoni devised in 1955, but eventually failed to implement, to promote the industrial growth and the economic development of the southern regions in the following ten years (Castagnoli, 2015: 45–48). As US ambassador Clare Boothe Luce complained in 1955, “when we created the Italian Republic, we merely clapped Thomas Jefferson’s political wig on Mussolini’s economic skull” (as quoted in Del Pero, 2004: 436).

When the DC proved to be progressive, it outdid the American model based on the protection of property rights. For instance, after the police killed three peasants who had participated in the occupation of a local estate in Melissa, in the province of Crotone, in 1949, Washington urged the Italian government to speed up the passing of an agrarian reform. However, the measures that the United States had in mind were land reclamation and mechanization to increase agricultural productivity. Conversely, in 1950, stressing the social function of land ownership, Italy implemented a much more ambitious program that—despite many exceptions, restrictions, and shortcomings—provided for a limited breakup of large estates, partial expropriation of the uncultivated or ill-plowed latifundia, and the sale of the farming areas preferably to landless peasants at low cost and on long mortgages (E. Bernardi, 2006).

Washington's economic and financial assistance provided a remarkable leverage to consolidate Italy's allegiance to the Western alliance. For example, on the occasion of Italy's 1948 parliamentary elections, the Truman administration dangled the Marshall Plan aid before the Italian people in a successful effort to woo voters away from the left-wing coalition and to prevent the PCI-dominated Popular Democratic Front from winning a majority and possibly leading the country into the Soviet bloc (Miller, 1983). But the US largesse did not necessarily assure the absorption of American principles despite Washington's efforts. For instance, the Department of State extended the Fulbright-Hays program for educational exchanges to Italy in 1949 and reached out to this country's politicians, journalists, and opinion makers by means of a Foreign Leaders Program that, between 1949 and 1965, funded journeys to the United States to create a network of disseminators of American values under the pretext of promoting mutual understanding between the two nations. For this purpose, since 1954 the US embassy in Rome had also offered grants to sponsor the establishment of chairs in American history, literature, government, and economy at Italian universities so as to improve the knowledge and the perception of the United States and its political culture (Bruti Liberati, 2004: 210–215; Scott-Smith, 2008: 39–40, 50, 84; Tobia, 2008: 251–268).

Washington's endeavors found an interested group of recipients in a circle of liberal jurists and political scientists who trusted that American institutions provided Italy with the one feasible alternative to dispel the allure of communism. Clustered around the journal *il Mulino* and the eponymous publishing house, they exploited USIS subsidies between 1959 and 1967 to issue a seventeen-volume series made up by Italian-language translations of renowned books about American history. *Il Mulino* also published twenty anthological collections of writings by classic thinkers of democracy that included a few US figures such as Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson (Iurlano, 1983; Codignola, 2006: 121-122, 131).

The influence of these publishing enterprises, however, hardly went beyond a relatively narrow circle of intellectuals. Indeed, in the face of the deep polarization of the Italian society along the lines of allegiance toward either Washington or Moscow, the consolidation of the most ideological phase of the Cold War, from 1947 to 1963, helped freeze the spread of US political values in the country. While the PCI and its partners opposed the American philosophy as a matter of principle, the domestic repercussions of the growing international tension added to the Catholics' mental reservations in discouraging the DC and its allies from implementing a few US political paradigms. For instance, Sturzo contended in 1957 that the principle of the "alternation in power" between the two major parties that characterized the American system could not be applied to Italy because the latter nation would risk falling "under Bolshevik dominance" on the grounds of the large following of the PCI among voters (Sturzo, "Polemizzando": 232-233).

Italy's party system itself was the epitome of the nation's recalcitrance toward the exposure to the US model. Its four-bloc, multi-party structure (the DC, its laic allies, the PCI, and the neo-fascists), which confined the extreme left and the radical right to permanent opposition, was a travesty of the American vision of electoral democracy based on two major parties only, and reduced competition at the polls more or less to a farce, with the leading Catholic-inspired party apparently destined to govern the nation perpetually. A US embassy official in Rome remarked in 1948 that Italy was not even "an approximation of what an American

considers a parliamentary democracy to be” (as quoted in Mistry, 2014: 153). Nor would it be for years to come. Although Nitti urged the Constituent Assembly to take inspiration from the US example and adopt the majority system at least for the election of the Senate (Segretariato Generale, 1970: 2999–3000), proportional representation was the rule for the vote for Parliament. The call for the “blunt American-style first-past-the-post” method did not surface again until the mid-1980s; its advocacy was then confined almost exclusively to the minuscule Radical Party, which had embraced a *laissez faire* economy and the promotion of civil rights, taking a leaf from the US book, even before entering the Parliament in 1976 (Teodori, 1996: 28–35). Proportional representation also caused partisan factionalism. This outcome was overtly at odds with the American consensual interpretation of politics, namely different strategies to pursue a common goal, as outlined by Richard Hofstadter’s seminal study of the Progressive Era, which—not unsurprisingly—was one of the volumes translated in the Mulino’s series (Hofstadter, 1960).

AFTER THE COLD WAR

It was the US victory in the Cold War and the consequent demise of communism as a viable alternative to an American order based on free market, mass consumption, and liberal democracy that gave Washington’s values an additional chance in Italian political culture. At the domestic level, the collapse of the party system that had theretofore been rooted in the West-versus-East ideological conflict resulted in the dissolution of the DC and the transformation of the PCI, first into the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), then into the Democrats of the Left (DS), and eventually into the Democratic Party (PD). Media mogul Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of a new center-right coalition, pointed to US *laissez faire* as a source of inspiration in his ineffective attempts at terminating the surviving forms of Italy’s economic statism. Ronald Reagan’s philosophy of minimum government, deregulation, balanced budget, simplification of bureaucracy, and managerialism in public administration, along with the US president’s appeal to emotional anticommunism, had been Berlusconi’s reference since he established his own party, Forza Italia (Go Italy!), in 1994

(Stille, 2007: 11-12, 116, 331). When it came to the repeated calls to cut taxes, the Laffer Curve was Berlusconi's model (Marro, 2004). For the retreat from the welfare state, the formula was George W. Bush's compassionate conservatism (Revelli, 2011: 96). In an apparent homage to the US notion of people's sovereignty, in his successful bid for prime minister in the 2001 elections, Berlusconi took another leaf from his own interpretation of Washington's democracy and, live on television, signed his "*Contratto con gli italiani*," a five-point pledge with voters in the way of Republican Newt Gingrich's 1994 "Contract with America" (Stille, 2007: 11, 262, 281).

Paradoxically, many former communists rushed to embrace US political values in the wake of the termination of the Cold War. Massimo D'Alema, an ex-secretary of the PCI's Youth Federation who became the country's first premier of communist background in 1998, regarded "a market economy open to competition" as the main feature that would turn Italy into "a normal country" (D'Alema, 1995: 63). As Berlusconi drew upon Reagan's America, in the late 1990s D'Alema briefly cherished the milder version of neoliberalism that US Democratic President Bill Clinton elaborated to enhance economic globalization and to reappraise the welfare state stressing the beneficiaries' responsibilities (La Spina, 1999). It was only the defeat of Clinton's vice president, Al Gore, in the 2000 race for the White House, namely the loss of its point of reference in Washington, that caused Italy's left to drop such a blueprint (Felice and Mattoscio, 2005: 111-113). Walter Veltroni—D'Alema's main rival for the leadership of the DS and an ex-editor of the PCI's daily mouthpiece, *L'Unità*—was an admirer of Robert F. Kennedy. He considered the late US Democratic senator's political philosophy, especially his invitation to assess a nation's real progress and well-being on the basis of what makes life worthwhile beyond the mere figures of the gross domestic product, a "limitless heritage upon which to draw" (Veltroni, 1993: 25).

Remarkably, in 2007, in the latest refurbishment of its own name, the former PCI became the Democratic Party in the effort to place itself within a tradition of non-ideological and pragmatic progressivism that Veltroni, its first secretary, attributed to the agenda of its US counterpart of the same name. In Veltroni's view, the "harmony between the radicalism of values and the realism

of solutions” was the quintessence of the American dream from which Europe could benefit as well (Veltroni, “Introduzione”: 7). Like De Gasperi in the early postwar years, Veltroni, too, extolled US upward social mobility as a source of inspiration for Italy (Veltroni, “La nuova”: 126–27). When he ran for prime minister in 2008, Veltroni even adopted the slogan “*Si può fare*,” a blatant echo of then Democratic candidate for the White House Barack Obama’s “Yes we can” (Alessandri, 2010: 182).

In further deference to American principles, Veltroni was not appointed secretary of the PD but chosen by the direct vote of the members as well as the sympathizers of the party in a sort of US-style primary race that also nominated him as candidate for premier in the following election (Lazar, 2008). Actually, the by-laws of the PD stipulated that all candidates for elective offices be selected by means of primaries by eligible voters (Florida, 2009: 195–199). The founders deliberately thought of an ‘American’ model to make the PD into a pluralistic party that aimed at inclusiveness and would focus on citizens’ claims, regardless of their political affiliation, rather than broad ideologies (Fasano, 2009: 159).

Once again, the method for the leaders’ choice and the candidates’ selection in post-Cold War Italy was the litmus test for the penetration of the American principles into Italian politics. In this field, the former communists took the lead again. In 1993, the PDS jumped on the bandwagon of a referendum—initially proposed by an ex-Christian Democrat, Mario Segni—to abolish proportional representation for the elections of the senators, which subsequently led to the adoption of the majority system for the selection of three quarters of the members of Parliament (Corbetta and Parisi, 1994: 145–146; Massari, 1996: 139–140). As Segni stated, the very purpose of the changes to the electoral law was to “introduce the great American democracy to Italy” (Segni, 1994: 244). In 1999 and 2000, the DS also endorsed two eventually unsuccessful referenda for the implementation of the first-past-the-post method for all the seats in the House and the Senate (Donovan, 2000: 80; Pasquino, 2001: 55–56). Similarly, in 2005, the DS agreed to hold the first primary elections in Italian history to designate Romano Prodi as the candidate for premier of the *Unione*—a center-left alliance it had promoted

against Berlusconi—in the elections of the following year. The choice by voters and sympathizers aimed at the legitimization of Prodi, who was not a member of any of the parties of the coalition. But a few commentators hailed the procedure as “an instance of the Americanization of Italian politics” (Pasquino, 2011: 682) or even an *americanata*, namely a US extravaganza (Anastasi et al., 2013: 210). Prodi himself, a Catholic economist, had the United States in mind when he founded a short-lived political movement of his own in 1999 in the fruitless effort to ease Italy’s transition from multipartism to a two-party system. Prodi’s creature, which dissolved three years later, was called Democrats; a donkey, the same symbol of the US Democratic Party, bulked large in its logo (Salvadori, 2001: 158).

A few progressive intellectuals had long called for the introduction of primary elections as the most appropriate means to reform Italian politics (Pasquino, 1997; Redazione, 1999). Yet, the US-style democratization of party life did not stick to its American model to the hilt. As for the PD, despite claims of openness in the selection process, a board of trustees could bar prospective candidates. It actually excluded Marco Pannella, the leader of the Radical Party, and former anti-corruption prosecutor Antonio Di Pietro, from the field of Veltroni’s 2007 challengers (Italia, 2009: 20). Conversely, the US parties would “never dream of preventing anybody from throwing their hat into the ring” in the primaries (Ostellino, 2009: 204). On the other hand, as of early 2016, only two out of Veltroni’s four successors as secretary of the PD were chosen by the people’s direct vote (Seddone and Venturino, 2015: 474–475, 478).

The PD resorted to primary elections mainly to show off that it intended to reach out to the civil society and that its own decision-making process was not influenced by its leadership. Since the PD was the only party to hold primaries for the nomination of its candidate to the premiership in Italy, this procedure became its hallmark and a propaganda stunt to expose the assumed authoritarianism of all its rivals, especially in the case of Berlusconi’s center-right coalition (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2013: 120–122). Likewise, the US antitrust tradition was repeatedly exploited to delegitimize Berlusconi after he took office in 1994

on the grounds that American legislation would have prevented a media tycoon from running the country (Perlingieri, 1994). Berlusconi, too, made a point of extolling “American democracy” for its “checks and balances” doctrine to complain that the latter had barely shaped Italian political institutions (Berlusconi, 2001: 55). His stand, however, was instrumental to his criticism of the supposed politicization of Italy’s judges and ensuing endeavors to dodge indictment for his shady business deals by implementing a strict governmental control over the judiciary (Partridge, 1998: 155–157). Likewise, Berlusconi’s emphasis on US liberalism was often a means to attack the PCI for its alleged statism, but generally concealed an attempt at revitalizing the conservative policies of the former DC (Orsina, 2013: 179–182).

CONCLUSION

A few commentators have contended that the Italian Republic was “made in the USA” (Caretto and Marolo, 1996), and, during the Cold War, progressives mocked Italy as “the Bulgaria of the NATO” (Ginsborg, 1990: 158). Yet, the solid alignment of the country with Washington in the Western bloc did not result in the nation’s pervasive reception of US political values. The PCI rejected them and the ruling DC referred to them mainly to discredit its opponents and to jockey for position in the eyes of the electorate.

The end of the West-versus-East ideological conflict did not significantly transform the impact of the United States on Italy’s political culture. While the American model stood tall and unrivaled as the only set of principles in the aftermath of the collapse of communism, the two main confronting coalitions continued primarily to pay lip service to American values and to turn them into means of partisan warfare in domestic politicking.

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