USA: Identities, Cultures, and Politics in National, Transnational and Global Perspectives

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Foreword

Hosted by the University of Macerata on October 4-6, 2007, the nineteenth AISNA biennial International Conference USA: Identities, Cultures, and Politics in National, Transnational, and Global Perspectives was animated by approximately two hundred scholars involved in a debate rich in methodological and critical approaches and fertile in interdisciplinary crossings. The issue of identity for a nation like the United States, a multiethnic society rooted in a variety of traditions, languages, and histories, and also interwoven in a complex network of associative as well as antagonistic relationships, has never been a simple one. Though the national narrative, until the 1960s had tended to underrate or under-represent the richness of the contributions of the so-called minorities, and had underplayed the relevance of social and cultural hybridity, such is no longer the case, and has not been for a number of years now. Through the 2007 Conference AISNA associates, however, also sought to engage the international critical debate over American identities in relation to the role the USA plays in a globalized world. 2007 was a critical year and it should not be surprising to discover that a distancing response to American ‘unilateralism’ and ‘superpower nationalism’ is a common thread that runs through many of the papers presented at the Conference and published in this volume.

The three key-note lectures highlight the role a transnational critical ‘perspective’ can play in re-locating the relative space American language, literature and culture should occupy in a globalized world (Paul Giles); in keeping American universalizing practices of national values well separated and distinct from present-day ‘rooted’ cosmopolitanism (Maurizio Vaudagna); and in reconstructing the transcontinental roots of cultural genres like Film Noir, usually considered typically, and representatively, American (William Luhr). The entire volume bears witness of the number of issues that were brought under scrutiny, and read through national, transnational and global lenses, in and across the 14 workshops of the conference. It also bears witness to the will in Italian and European scholars to debate the key issues of the conference both as Americanists wanting to investigate their object of study in dialogue with international scholars, and as active participants in the construction of a common European identity in dialogue with individual and national historical and linguistic differences.
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Marco Mariano

Mid-19th Century Italian Views of America: The Case of Piedmont, 1815-1861

This paper presents results of a study conducted on the consular and diplomatic network of the Kingdom of Sardinia in North America. These archival sources have received scant attention from historians. We have many important studies on the diplomatic history of the Risorgimento, on the relations between Piedmont and the major European powers (Romeo 1963; Nada, 1980), and on the international—including American—perception of Italian unification. However, historical studies have by and large ignored the fact that the Kingdom of Sardinia, arguably like many small European states in the nineteenth century, was embedded in a network of political, commercial, and cultural relations which extended not only throughout continental Europe and across the Mediterranean, but also through the Americas and across the Atlantic.

This material sheds light on several aspects of the domestic and international dimensions of nineteenth century Italian history. At the domestic level, it provides a new perspective on the issue of the “continuity” between the Kingdom of Sardinia and Italy, which is part of the larger issue of the persistence of elites in the Risorgimento. In fact, the consular and diplomatic network in North America provided the backbone of the Italian consular and diplomatic service after 1861. For example Giuseppe Bertinatti, the last Chargé d'Affaires of the Kingdom of Sardinia, was also the first Chargé of the Kingdom of Italy in the United States (his tenure in Washington, DC, lasted from 1855 to 1867).

On the international and transnational level, the correspondence between the Piedmontese consuls and diplomats and the Foreign Ministry offers a detailed picture of the scale of exchanges and the variety of players involved in the transatlantic circulation of people, goods, and ideas across the Atlantic in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Finally, this material provides an abundant and vivid repository of images of American society and culture, as well as of American domestic politics and
by the Congress of Vienna, the United States was relevant both as a threat—a hotbed of republican, subversive ideas—and as a successful experiment, characterized by a booming economy—the effects of the Jacksonian "market revolution"—which fuelled expansionist ambitions over the continent and eventually in the whole hemisphere.

The second point is connected to Solaro's observations and concerns: the ways in which American policy regarding Sardinia was an outgrowth of the Restoration. In fact, in 1815 Turin had decided to establish consulates in the U.S., and it was clear from the outset that this network had a political as well as a commercial dimension. In Europe, the Holy Alliance was determined to stop potential republican epidemics from the Americas; events in Latin America, with the collapse of the Spanish Empire and the wave of independence that followed, only made the spectre of republicanism more frightening. At the same time, the prospect of the end of the Spanish empire in Latin America whetted the appetites of European traders eager to fill the vacuum and reap huge profits from the transition in the Atlantic economy. On the other hand, from the US viewpoint the same events in South America reinforced deep rooted fears of political interference by, and economic dependency from, European powers. The "Western question" was therefore a crucial element in international politics and economy in the first half of the nineteenth century (Blaufarb 2007); in fact, it was so pervasive that no: even a second-rank European state like Piedmont could afford to ignore it.

Piedmontese visions of America are better understood when they are put in this larger framework. In 1819 the first Piedmontese general consul in Philadelphia, Gaspare Deabbate, was instructed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs San Marzano to work on commercial reciprocity with the U.S. and, at the same time, to monitor carefully the attitude of the U.S. toward Latin America:

Gli occhi dei politici sono quasi tuti rivolti verso le Colonie Spagnole e le contese che la dividono dalla loro Metropoli. Per le grandi e frequenti relazioni tra i negozi degli Stati Uniti colle Colonie insorgenti è facile accorgersi che la causa di queste non è loro indifferente. Benché la mozione fatta da M. Clay oratore della Camera dei rappresentanti, acciòché i governi delle nuove repubbliche venissero riconosciuti, sia stata rigettata, perché accettandola si sarebbe dato un troppo grave scandalo all’Europa, pure si sa che dei commissari degli Stati uniti sono stati inviati per spire quale sia il loro stato reale, e sì sa che in sostanza ad esse si accordano quasi tutti i vantaggi di un’unalenza positiva. (Consolati nazionali: San Marzano to Deabbate, October 10, 1819, b. 2)

What we have here is an early indication of recurrent motives in the exchanges between Turin and its representatives in North America. First, the focus on inter-American developments, which were part and parcel of the "Atlantic system": Latin America was crucial in the competition between the

Nos relations avec l’Amérique septentrionale paraitraient au premier coup d’œil ne devoir être que des relations purement commerciales, vue la distance qui nous sépare, mais les distances se rapprochent aujourd’hui par la multiplication des voies de communication et les rapports sans nombre qui se sont établis entre l’ancien et le nouveau monde ont créé entre eux un telle complication d’intérêt que toute commotion politique qui se prépare où qui surgit dans l’un des deux continents doit avoir, nécessairement un grand retentissement dans l’autre. Les traités de commerce cachent souvent des vues politiques. (Consolati nazionali: Solaro della Margarita to Avogadro di Collobiano, July 12, 1838, b. 9)

It is useful to stress two points here with regard to this quote. The first concerns Atlantic interdependence. The quote is an example of how very clear it was to Piedmontese diplomats and foreign-policy makers that what happened across the Atlantic was relevant to a small and relatively marginal state like Piedmont, which, at the geopolitical level belonged to the Concert of Europe, and therefore had some stake in the changing relations between the Old World and the New World. At the economic level, with the acquisition of the port of Genoa, Piedmont was involved in the Atlantic commercial routes, connecting the Mediterranean and the Americas. In the instructions to, and especially in the dispatches from the Sardinian representatives in North America, the vision of the New World as fundamentally different from the Old is often complemented by the vision of the United States as part of an “Atlantic system” made up of trade, migrations, and circulation of ideas. It was part of a trans-continental region where kingdoms and republics, ports and goods, merchants and workers, exiles and books were part of a whole; actions on one side of the Atlantic often triggered reactions on the other.

It is not surprising, indeed it makes perfect sense, that a legitimist like Solaro was so sensitive to the impact of events on the American continent. In the mental map of Solaro and of the statesmen of the Concert of Europe created in the Congress of Vienna, the United States was relevant both as a threat—a hotbed of republican, subversive ideas—and as a successful experiment, characterized by a booming economy—the effects of the Jacksonian “market revolution”—which fuelled expansionist ambitions over the continent and eventually in the whole hemisphere.
U.S. and the European powers both in terms of markets and resources and in terms of ideology and politics.

Second, the focus on international trade and its political implications: trade as a vehicle for the expansion of American influence. Again from the instructions of San Marzano to Debbate:

non solo alle cose d’America sono rivolte le mire degli Stati Uniti. Seguendo le tracce della Madre Patria essi tentano di formare nei punti più importanti per il commercio e per il dominio dei mari alcuni Stabilimenti capaci a giovare a simile intento.

Dispatches from the general consul in Philadelphia in the early 1820s reflected these concerns. In fact, they covered Latin American and inter-American affairs much more extensively than they did domestic US affairs.

Finally, the systemic view of an Atlantic world coexisted with the competitive view of New World vs. Old World as parts of a zero-sum game in which European crisis generated American growth. Consul Debbate wrote in 1820:

Agli sconvolgimenti dell’Europa gli Stati Uniti di America devono il sorprendente grado di prosperità a cui si videro giunti nel 1815; ed alla pace generale dell’Europa attribuiscono il rapido decadimento a cui trovarsi assoggettati da 4 o 5 anni a questa parte. Non è adunque difficile lo inferire qual sia il loro modo di vedere sul terribile vulcano delle rivoluzioni europee. Non credo che essi desiderino ai popoli transatlantici afflizioni onde sulle medesime ridificare la loro prosperità: ma per contro si può tener per certo che essi non considerano virtù e saggezza, ma bensi stupidità e pazzia il non prenderli in ben venuta considerazione. (Consolati nazionali: Debbate to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 5, 1820, b. 1)

In essence, America was seen in both systemic terms as part of an Atlantic whole and in oppositional terms: what is good for America is not good for Europe, and vice versa.

In the following decades, the Piedmontese image of, and attitude towards, the United States evolved as a consequence of domestic developments, first and foremost Charles Albert’s cautious transition to liberalism since the mid-1830s. However, it must be stressed that, at a time when information about the United States was scant at best, Sardinian diplomats and consuls in the United States were able to provide not only a massive flow of data, but also an original—at times unorthodox—view of American politics and society. Decision-making in Turin relied not only on European sources, but also on first-hand information made available by Piedmontese consuls and diplomats overseas.

Consuls have been remarkably neglected by scholars of nineteenth century international history. The “Cinderella Service” was a blend of officials and merchants, national “subjects” and foreigners, bourgeois and aristocrats (Plat 1971). The first Sardinian consul in New Orleans from 1822 to 1830—Monsieur DuBourg—was a French merchant born in Haiti, whose family had fled the island after the revolution of Toussaint L’Ouverture. Unlike diplomats, they were often involved in economic and social relations with local elites and acted as transnational brokers in connection with the interests of the country they served, the demands of the immigrant communities from that country, and their own self-interest and respectability.

Finally, consuls played a critical role as a transatlantic trait d’union at a time when the United States was fully integrated in the world economy but was not admitted into the legitimist and Euro-centric concert of nations by the Congress of Vienna. In the 1820s and 1830s relations between European powers and the American republics were usually conducted at the consular/commercial level through the signing of treaties of “friendship commerce and navigation” which enabled the former to maintain their anti-republican posture and the latter to conform to their “ideology of trade” (Carmagnani 2003).

What these rather peculiar observers produced was a somewhat syncrète perspective on the United States, in which the original reactionary, anti-republican impulse gradually merged with an ambivalence about American politics and society typical of European liberalism à la Tocqueville and, finally, with a genuine admiration for the achievements of American economy and technology.

On the one hand, these observers regularly dismissed republican institutions as a chaotic, dysfunctional experiment marred by the “tyranny of the majority” and the inevitable corruption of party politics and unable to restrain the rampant materialism and individualism associated with the American character and the spoils system—that typical degenerative disease of democracy.

Luigi Mossi, a lawyer from Turin who had moved to New York in the 1830s and became consul and later Charge d’Affaires in the United States, commented that the presidential election of 1844 was a demonstration of the harm done by “universal suffrage”:

L’immensità e elevazione dell’oscur looked signor Polk alla maggioranza suprema, e l’antipatia popolare verso del signor Clay chiarissimo per talenti e per eminenti servizi resi ad ingrata repubblica dimostrano vieppiù la falsità della cotanto vantata infallibilità del suffragio universale, e prova... che le maggiorità popolari hanno né intelligenza né moti propri e che esse non sono che un instrumento cieco nelle mani di pochi uomini ambiziosi, i quali poi elevati al potere devono mostrarsi compiacenti servi, e cedere ogni qualvolta si ha motivo di dover urtate colle passioni e cogli interessi apparenti di una strenata multitudine. (Consolati nazionali: Mossi to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 26, 1844, b. 1)

Similar comments on American democracy were frequent in consular reports and echoed Tocqueville’s indictment of the tyranny of the majority, which the author of Democracy in America related to the widespread American notion that “there is more intelligence and wisdom in a number of men united than in a single individual, and that the number of legislators is more important than their quality” (Tocqueville, 1990: 255).
On the other hand, diplomats and consuls, as they observed the rise of American trade across the Atlantic and influence in the Americas, were perfectly positioned to observe the American empire in the making. Especially in the late 1840s and early 1850s, with the acceleration of American expansion in the South West and in the Pacific, they were impressed by, and struggling to come to terms with, the thriving economic and technological progress in the U.S.. In essence their reaction is reminiscent of the admiring astonishment of Lincoln Steffens travelling in the Soviet Union in 1919: "I have seen the future, and it works."

How such a political system—unleashing the selfish instincts of individuals, unable to rule by force, and eventually paving the way to anarchy—could possibly lead to such a triumph of progress was indeed a troubling question for them. In the words of Chargé d’Affaires Avogadro di Collobiano in 1839:

Il faut convenir qu’il n’est pas facile d’expliquer comment avec un tel gouvernement, si peu doué d’efficacité, ce pays ait pu ainsi direction, sans guide attendre ces merveilleux degrés de perfection dans les principales branches de l’industrie et de la spéculation, et s’ouvrir un avenir qui étonne l’esprit et éblouit la pensée. (Lettere Ministri: Avogadro di Collobiano to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 10, 1839, b. 1)

This dilemma was even more troubling in the light of the territorial and commercial expansion of the United States. We have several prescient reports of the impact of this expansion on inter-American relations and consequently on transatlantic relations.

In 1849 American plans to build railroads and canals across Central America to facilitate access to the Pacific regions led the Piedmontese consul in New York, Luigi Mossi, to celebrate the universal benefits of the American commitment to free trade, as opposed to Britain’s pursuit of its “exclusive interests” (Consolati nazionali: Mossi to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 20, 1849, b. 1). But one year later, in a long report on California, Mossi again dealt with the global impact of US continental expansion and projection in the Pacific, which he understood in terms of the old antagonistic framework: the rise of the New World implied the decline of the Old:

Vapori metteranno tra breve tempo il porto di San Francisco in comunicazione regolare colla Cina, e sotto colore di un semplice deposito per carbonce, a ogni costo si vorrà mettere piede sulle coste del sud del Giappone, soli venticinque giorni dalla California, e soli cinque giorni dalla Cina distante. Una volta padroni di un punto nel Giappone, ed una volta aperte le comunicazioni tra il Pacifico e l’Atlantico sia per mezzo d’un cammino di ferro a traverso degli Stati Uniti, che dei canali sulli due Istmi di Panama e Nicaragua, l’impiolo sarà irresistibile, e lo spirito intraprendente di questa razza la farà celermente camminare alla preponderanza definitiva della marina americana nel Pacifico, e sarà allora verificata la profezia di Humboldt che l’attività del commercio sarebbe progressivamente e fra non molto passata dal Levante all’Occidente, profezia profonda, mirabile e di cui nulla può più impedirne il compimento. (Consolati nazionali: Mossi to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 13, 1850, b. 1)

To summarize, America owed its triumph—again Mossi writing in 1849—to its extraordinary natural resources, to nature and geography, rather than to its deeply flawed political institutions (Consolati nazionali: Mossi to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 186/1849, b. 1).

Notes
1 This is part of a larger project coordinated by Marcello Carmagnani on “Piedmont and the Americas” based on documentary sources available at the Torino branch of the Archivio di Stato as well as at the Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome (A preliminary result of this work, which I am conducting with Latin Americanist Duccio Sacchi, has been published in Annali della Fondazione Einaudi, XL, (2006).
2 Piedmontese chargé d’affaires Giuseppe Bertinari was personally acquainted with Tocqueville and his work.

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