America in the Italian Imagination


There has recently been a growing interest among historians of modern Italy in the study of the mid-nineteenth century process of unification known as the Risorgimento. Reasons for this revival are to be traced both in developments within the Italian public scene and in the impact of new historiographical approaches on what had been for years a relatively dormant subfield. On the one hand, the 150th anniversary of Italian unification in 2011 has elicited a widespread, if not always consequential, public conversation on the nineteenth-century origins and frayed contours of Italian national identity. On the other, and more importantly, transnational history and new understandings of cultural history have undermined the virtual monopoly of political and institutional approaches. Maurizio Isabella’s *Risorgimento in Exile*, which focuses on the contribution of Italian exiles to the unification process, has brought to the fore the transnational dimension of the Risorgimento and showed how it took shape in interaction with, rather than in opposition to, political cultures located beyond the nation.1 In Alberto Banti’s *La nazione del Risorgimento*, a study emphasizing the literary and discursive dimension of nation building, bonds of kinship, honor, and sanctity play a major role in forging the nation beyond elite circles.2

*America in Italy* stands at the crossroads of these new directions. Axel Körner, a London-based German historian of nineteenth-century Europe, tackles the complex issue of America’s place in the intellectual and cultural landscape of the Risorgimento from the end of the Seven Years’ War to the end of the Civil War, two events that led respectively to an increase in Italians’ awareness of American events and to a widespread use of those events by Italian political thinkers and circulation in the general public. The outcome is an important, extremely sophisticated, and somewhat uneven book.

The two-fold structure of *America in Italy* is informed by Körner’s focus on both intellectual and cultural history. The first part deals with political thought and opens with a discussion of Italian histories of the American War of Independence and their subsequent impact and appropriations. Indebted to John


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Pocock, the author reads the influential works by Carlo Bottia, Carlo Giuseppe Londonio, and Giuseppe Compagnoni, published between 1809 and 1823, as a form of political thought, and traces with impressive subtlety their transnational inception and domestic reception. These early Italian works on American history hardly saw the War of Independence as a model to be replicated elsewhere. In fact, frequent references to the brutality of war beyond the Atlantic implied distance and alterity. However, in the final stages of the Risorgimento political writers and patriots relied on these widely read accounts to read their ideas back into specific segments of U.S. history. The United States, then, came to be used teleologically and very selectively as a repository of ideas and practices, and sometimes as a positive model, for different visions of Italian independence. The second chapter moves from independence to other major themes in state building: constitutional government, political representation, and federalism. Again, the focus is on the way in which key figures of the Risorgimento—democratic leader Giuseppe Mazzini, moderate statesman Cesare Balbo, Catholic thinkers like Antonio Rosmini and Vincenzo Gioberti, federalists like Carlo Cattaneo—“domesticated” American ideas, much like Americans were appropriating the Risorgimento. The book effectively reveals unexpected aspects of this process. Balbo, a leading figure in the Piedmontese constitutional monarchy, lavishly praised the United States as an example of separation of powers and cautious moderation, to which he contrasted the extremism of European republicans, while Mazzini and other radicals were much more inclined to denounce what they saw as dangerous features of the American model, like individualism and federalism. As for Cattaneo, his references to American federalism were rather sparse and superficial; in his view, Switzerland mattered more than the United States. In sum, America was often appropriated by mid-nineteenth century political thinkers to the extent that some of its aspects fit into their own pre-existing agendas, but was seldom embraced as a comprehensive blueprint for either reform or revolution. A similar picture emerges in chapter three, which discusses the revolutions of 1848 in several Italian states. Again, in somewhat counterintuitive fashion, engagement with American political institutions turns out to be more relevant in Sicily, where the revolutionaries chose a monarchical constitution, than in Lombardy or Tuscany.

In the second part the focus shifts toward the United States in the Italian cultural imagination, which America in Italy investigates through the analysis of a very different kind of cultural artifact: opera and ballet, namely Giuseppe Verdi’s Un ballo in maschera (1859), set in seventeenth-century New England, and Giuseppe Rota’s Bianchi e neri (1853), based on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The close reading of these 1850s stage works reflects a stimulating methodological choice: exploring the vast territory between political thought and culture through the study of fictional narratives that were immensely popular in mid-nineteenth century Italy. Again, the author displays an almost virtuosic

3. On the American appropriation of Italian events, see Paola Gemme, Domesticating Foreign Struggles: The Italian Risorgimento and Antebellum American Identity (Athens, GA, 2005).
ability to engage his sources and explore the rich texture surrounding the production and reception of these popular forms of art. However, what this impressive effort tells us about socially relevant images of the New World is not entirely clear. On the hand, we are informed of the “new quality of debate on the United States in the Italian press” and that, similarly “Italians’ awareness of slavery as a distinctive feature of life in the New World changed dramatically” in the late 1850s (40, 204). On the other, however, Körner shows that references to the United States in these stage works are mostly abstract and de-historicized, as they seem not to reflect any informed and critical engagement with American realities or ideas. Verdi set his opera across the Atlantic “exactly because for most Italians the New World constituted a white canvass, an unknown other” (180). In the years of Italian unification and the American Civil War the United States often emerges mostly as an exotic setting, an empty space evoking a remote past, or an unappealing backwater plagued by the brutality of slavery. Only at the end of the long nineteenth century did Italian attitudes toward American experiences change dramatically, due to mass migration. Such a conclusion reveals several unresolved tensions in this book and raises several questions: what, if anything, had changed from late eighteenth-century notions of America as a savage, uncivilized outpost? Was the United States seen as a laboratory of modern political practices or a peripheral latecomer of modern civilization that several well-travelled Italian observers, treated with some condescension?

One of the central arguments of America in Italy is that “Italian ideas of the United States during the period of the Risorgimento cannot be reduced to blind admiration for America’s political experiments” (7). This hardly seems a path-breaking conclusion. However, by showing how references to the United States could serve very different, if not opposing, ideological purposes across the Atlantic, the author makes a significant and lasting contribution to the study of the transnational circulation of political ideas in the nineteenth century.

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ADAM EWING

Third World Dreaming


On September 13, 1970, Eldridge Cleaver, Kathleen Cleaver, and the small contingent of Black Panther Party members stationed in Algiers,