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American Studies in Italy

Historical Legacies, Public Contexts and Scholarly Trends

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Maurizio Vaudagna, insigne storico degli Stati Uniti scomparso nell'aprile del 2023, ha dedicato un numero significativo di articoli e riflessioni all'emergere e alle vicende della disciplina degli American Studies in Italia e in Europa. Ringraziamo la Fabrizio Serra Editore per l'autorizzazione a riprodurre questa porzione di un suo lungo saggio uscito per Storia della Storiografia *51 (2007, 17-63), che si distingue come lucido contributo alla storiografia americanista in Italia. La sezione riportata di seguito è la 3, alle pagine 36-41. {NdR}*

III. The Second Generation: The Critical Eye on the United States

When the student protests of 1968-1969 broke out in Italy in all their intensity, the second generation of Italian Americanists had already reached junior positions in academia and had already been significantly shaped in its scholarly and public profile by the earlier part of the decade. Many of them had followed in the footsteps of prominent members of the earlier generation. Anna Maria Martellone, who became a professor of American

history at the University of Florence, had been influenced by Giorgio Spini. Tiziano Bonazzi, later a professor of American history at the University of Bologna, had been a student of Nicola Matteucci. Valeria Gennaro Lerda's cooperation with Raimondo Luraghi is yet another example of the many cultural associations between established and younger Americanists.

The second generation can be examined from both a public and a scholarly point of view. As far as the former is concerned, in contrast with the earlier generation where a group of centrist public intellectuals had held center stage, these younger Americanists were mainly oriented toward the Left. As with the former generation, Marxist (especially Communist) and Catholic fellow-travelers were few in number and the majority were pluralist radicals or socialists. They shared with the former generation the traditional Italian notion that history writing was an educational and civic duty more than an exercise in an 'objective' experimental method, as preached by the positivistic tradition so prevalent in the United States. However, the way in which the American experience and its relationship with Europe and Italy came to be framed by these scholars was quite different from that of their liberal predecessors. Whereas the latter had looked at American history and culture as a model and an ideal with which to try and mend the historical and contemporary ills of Italy and Europe, the critical eye of new scholars moved the other way around, and the shortcomings of American society, history, and foreign policy came to the fore as much as those of Europe.

It was the public climate in both the United States and Europe/Italy that contributed to the change. The United States that surfaced from the Eisenhower years was no longer the triumphant country of the New Deal and the victorious war for democracy; it showed instead a domestic and foreign image of conformity and stagnation, which the new, young President Kennedy tried to remedy, raising new hopes for the young, critical Italian Americanists. The beginning of détente had attenuated the image of Communism as the archenemy that had been so central to the previous generation. The Kruscev years saw the golden age of the 'convergence thesis', expounded for example by the distinguished Soviet dissident Andrej Sacharov, and this was echoed positively by the European Left. The hope was that the Soviet system would become more liberal and the West more social minded. The Italian communist milieu had

translated this longing into the popular slogan of the 'three men of peace', in reference to Kennedy, Kruscev, and Pope John XXIII. With the onset of the 1960s, the Cold War theatre had moved to the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America and an increasing awareness of the tragedy of underdevelopment had penetrated the European Left.

In the meantime, Europe had been successfully reconstructed; it also seemed on the verge of being restored as an actor of the first magnitude in the international arena. This was thanks to, among other things, a successful process of European unification, which was primarily economic but was aiming to become political in the near future. Charles De Gaulle's challenge to the bipolar alignment also elicited sympathies in political quarters very distant from his French nationalism and his conservative outlook. Italy was at the peak of its 'economic miracle' with rates of economic growth at more than 5% a year, the fastest in Europe alongside Germany, and lifestyles and mentalities were changing quickly. The onset of the new centre-left governments, based on a new alliance between the predominant Christian Democrats and the progressive, working-class-based Socialist Party, bore the promise of enlarging the popular foundations of government. It also promised to clear up the major ambiguity of a new, triumphant urban-industrial society that was politically led by the doctrine of social Catholicism, which had deep reservations about modernizing lifestyles and mental landscapes and spoke of slowing down the social consequences of economic growth, putting the 'Christian reconquest of society' up against the immorality of modern life, and matching a modern economy with traditional rural values.

American cultural messages were also fundamental in shaping the second generation's frame of mind. In contrast with the 'tranquillized fifties', Michael Harrington had published his denunciation of poverty in America, Betty Friedan had exposed the traps of American femininity, and the civil rights movement in particular had cancelled the image of a cohesive America with liberty and abundance for all, revealing American marginalization and discrimination instead (see Harrington; Friedan).

In American history writing, while the great revolution of the new, radical social history that would change the method and narrative of the American experience was still to come, critical voices had nonetheless come to the fore: William Appleman Williams had redesigned the premises of

American expansionism; Eugene Genovese had reinterpreted slavery; David Montgomery had rediscovered American working-class militancy on the shop floor; and Herbert Gutman had narrated the independent cultural ways of the lower classes. In turn, Barton J. Bernstein and the review *Studies on the Left* were denouncing the fact that American liberalism, which the former generation had considered the central, modernizing ideology of American public life, had really only shown a limited commitment to change and democracy. While it was not yet the paradigm shift of the following decade, the American-history-writing scene had become pluralistic, diverse, and controversial (see Zinn; Williams; Kolko; Weinstein; Gardner; Bernstein).

The second generation of Italian historians of the United States merged a sense of public commitment with new themes of scholarly research. Their progressive frame of mind was no less critical of Europe than it was of the United States, for they basically saw the West in general as being afflicted by a lack of individual liberty, socio-economic democracy, and an equitable foreign policy due to the overwhelming weight of concentrated power. Furthermore, the focus on constitutional and intellectual history, and the history of political thought, that had characterized the core of the former generation lost its preeminence, and the landscape of Italian American-history-writing became more pluralistic. The history-of-political-thought approach was, however, far from disappearing. As a branch of historical studies that is much stronger in Italy than in the United States, and one that is deeply rooted in Italian departments of politics, it has continued unabated to the present day. It responded to conditions that were specific to life in Italy, long a highly politicized and polarized country where scholars have been requested, and have felt the need, to feed arguments for or against contrasting ideas in the public arena. Not only have they been persistently concerned about the stability and solidity of liberal institutions in a country that has long experimented with dictatorship and authoritarianism, but theirs has also been primarily a shared, non-positivistic, non-experimental notion of the historian as civic educator and public mentor. To this day, Tiziano Bonazzi is the Americanist who has best represented the continuity of this approach and has gained a prominent standing with his contemporaries as well as later generations of Americanists. His early focus on issues of church-and-state relations in colonial America soon developed into an all-encompassing approach that

moved freely through time and dealt with such issues as American public values, national identity, and state development, all of which, in time, have shown an increasingly comparative approach.

On the whole, however, works on the history of emigration, foreign policy, and political and comparative history became more frequent. In publications extending from the late sixties to the mid-seventies, the historical focus moved forward in time and the attention formerly given to the colonial and revolutionary periods was now often directed to the twentieth century. Gian Giacomo Migone, professor of American history at the University of Turin, for example, studied Italian-American foreign relations in the interwar years and showed that, in contrast with the established opinion of an early opposition between Fascism and American democracy, the two countries had maintained friendly relations until late into the thirties, and the Roosevelt government had long subscribed to the idea of Mussolini as the 'good fascist' in opposition to Hitler. In the meantime, Migone was elected to the Italian Parliament with the post-communist party; he also worked with unions, wrote for leading newspapers, and was the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Italian Senate for a legislature. Massimo Teodori at the University of Perugia published extensively on the origins and the intellectual foundations of the American New Left, was also elected to Parliament with the Radical Party (a small political formation that focused on issues of civil rights and political liberties), wrote in national newspapers, and, some fifteen years ago, experienced a political conversion and is now a noted columnist for one of Italy's leading neoconservative dailies (see Migone, *Le origini dell'egemonia americana*; Migone, *Gli Stati Uniti e il fascismo*; Migone, "Stati Uniti, Fiat e repressione"; Teodori, *America radicale*; Teodori, *The New Left*; Teodori, *Note*; Teodori, *La fine del mito americano*).

As with the first generation, the second too obeyed the unwritten rule that, considering the small number of its practitioners, American Studies was the cradle for a surprising percentage of public figures. But even those Americanists who were not directly involved in public life had a political frame of mind that led them to embrace new subjects: at the University of Genoa Valeria Gennaro Lerda studied American agrarian populism; in Florence Anna Maria Martellone worked on emigration history (Italian emigration to the United States in particular), a subject

which, in the 1960s and 1970s, still sounded rather populist vis-à-vis the elitist traditions of Italian historiography; and Loretta Valtz Mannucci, an American-born Italian who taught at the University of Milan, studied American radicalism, the New Left, and African-Americans (see Lerda, *Il populismo americano*; Lerda, *Città e campagna*; Martellone, *Una Little Italy*; Martellone, *La questione*; Valtz Mannucci, *I nuovi americani*; Valtz Mannucci, *I negri americani*).

What appeared in the research subjects of the second generation of Italian Americanists was a feature that has persisted to this day, one they also share with most of their European colleagues: the preference for relational issues, connecting the United States and Europe, which has come to be considered a field of history writing that elicits more scholarly interest than others. This is mainly because it makes sources easier to find in Europe and it allows European scholars to feel that they can make original contributions to the larger community of Americanists. In 1976, on the occasion of the bicentennial of the American revolution, a two volume collection of essays on American-Italian relations from the eighteenth century to the present, under the joint editorship of Giorgio Spini and two leading Americanists of the second generation, Gian Giacomo Migone and Massimo Teodori, amounted to a sort of shop display window filled with the subjects and approaches of the second generation, together with a significant selection from the third wave of historical Americanists in the making (see Spini, Migone and Teodori, *Italia e America dal Settecento*; Spini, Migone and Teodori, *Italia e America dalla grande Guerra*).

The second generation also developed in a changing institutional setting: they were the first generation of Italian scholars that were full-time Americanists. Their chairs were no longer in modern history or history of political thought, but in the history of Northern America or the United States. The newer subjects required more of an experimental approach based on notions of evidence and archival research. The founding of AISNA and CISNA represented steps toward the professionalization of historical work, even if primarily directed toward the domestic academic market.

To summarize, the second generation of Italian historians of the United States was now made up of full-time Americanists who shared a public-oriented definition of historical work with their predecessors, even if the

history of foreign policy, emigration, and radicalism caused the use of the experimental method of history writing to be on the rise. Even those who were not personally involved in public life thought it as their primary duty as intellectuals and scholars to contribute ideas and information about the United States, to make the public conversation of the country more mature, as Tiziano Bonazzi has stressed. As a consequence, like the former generation, they continued to think of themselves as Italian scholars, despite having spent significant amounts of time in leading American universities at the time of their Americanist education, and the fact that they maintained personal contacts with American colleagues and visited American campuses fairly often. Still, there was basically no effort to systematize scholarly relations with the United States and make them more comprehensive, because Americans were not the public they were addressing. Even if they probably spoke English better than the former generation and lived in a cultural climate where the importance of English as a *lingua franca* was rapidly growing, they still wrote in Italian and their books and articles were rarely translated into English because, among other reasons, they made little or no effort to that effect. They were Italian experts on the United States speaking to a variety of Italian publics.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Maurizio Vaudagna (1945-2023) was professor of Contemporary History at the University of East Piedmont, as well as founder and director of the Piero Bairati Center for Transatlantic American Studies. His many publications include *The New Deal and the American Welfare State: Essays from a Transatlantic Perspective (1933-1935)* (Otto 2014); *Shifting Notions of Social Citizenship: The Two Wests* (Columbia UP 2017, with Alice Kessler-Harris); *The American Century in Europe* (Cornell UP 2003, with R. Laurence Moore); *Corporativismo e New Deal* (Rosenberg & Sellier 1981).

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