American Studies in Italy
Part 2 : U.S. History in Italy at the beginning of the 21st Century

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In the early 1990s, introducing the *Journal of American History*'s internationalization project, Maurizio Vaudagna urged his Italian colleagues and all “non-English-speaking American historians in Europe […] to abandon the melancholic but somewhat comfortable situation of being marginal in both worlds.” More than a decade later, now that studying American history has been enormously complicated by the seismic changes connected with the end of the Cold War, the tragedy of 9/11, and the attendant reshaping of Atlantic relations, the questions posed by Vaudagna’s remarks still defy unambiguous answers. Yet it seems safe to say that some limited, but unmistakable results in terms of research and scientific work have been achieved along lines of interaction and exchange probably not so remote from those Vaudagna wished to see. For all the difficulties encountered by the humanities in Italy and elsewhere in this current recession, the very small group of Italian historians of the U.S.—in all 26 people with official tenured appointments plus another dozen scholars dealing in various ways with U.S. history but not officially classified as such, some of them still waiting for their chance to break into the academic system—have taken advantage of the opportunities for conversation and joint projects available both at a European and American level.2

This line of development clearly emerges if we look at the practitioners still raising the flag for the now long waning sub-fields of colonial, Revolutionary and Civil War studies. Old Guard scholars such as Raimondo Luraghi and Tiziano Bonazzi, Americanists of the so-called “third generation” who came of age in the 1970s such as Luca Codignola, Susanna Delfino, and Ellen Migliorino Ginzburg, and their younger colleague Marco Sioli—all participate actively in international research networks and educational programs connected with their specific areas of inquiry. The pursuit of a transnational and comparative approach is even more evident if we glance at the three main lines of research that, with remarkable continuity, have emerged as predominant in the past fifteen years. Such is the case with migration studies, which make up one third of the monographs published during this period, a development reflecting the interplay between a current domestic concern (the emerging condition of Italy as an immigrant country) and an over-long-neglected story of Italian emigration and the “Italian workers of the world,” to quote the title of the most important research joint-venture of scholars
of Italian descent on both sides of the Atlantic. Increasingly shrinking financial resources at our universities may have also played a part in prompting students to turn to migration studies, given the recent availability of more easily affordable sources in such national repositories located in Rome as the National Archives, the State Department and the Vatican Archives, as well as in local repositories. Matteo Sanfilippo has provided an exhaustive review of the substantial body of work covering the most diverse areas of the migratory experience. Carried out largely under the tutorship of Anna Maria Martellone, this work includes the enquiries conducted by Bruno Cartosio, Elisabetta Vezzosi, Susanna Garroni, and Ferdinando Fasce on immigrant labor, Maddalena Tirabassi’s study of Italian women and the complex process of “Americanization” they engaged in at the turn of the century, Nadia Venturini on the relations between Italians and AfroAmericans in the interwar years, Matteo Sanfilippo on religiosity, Stefano Luconi on Italians in U.S. politics, and Simone Cinotto on Italian-American cuisine as a vehicle for negotiating a hybrid cultural identity within American society.

Some of the aforementioned archives have also been instrumental in shaping the studies of international relations, which make up one quarter of the monographs published since the early 1990s. Inspired by the dramatic reconfiguration of the Italian and European role in the age of globalization and international terrorism, such studies have been nurtured by constant exchanges at several institutions including the European University Institute, the London School of Economics, the Cold War History Project at NYU, and the Charles Warren Center at Harvard. Placing Italian-U.S. relations against a larger European and transnational background, they range in scope from Wilsonianism to cultural diplomacy in the interwar age, from the Marshall Plan to the question of Americanization. They include Federico Romero’s pioneering research on the role played by the unions on both sides of the Atlantic in bringing about European Reconstruction, his student Mario Del Pero’s insightful scrutiny of the relations between the U.S. and the Christian Democrats, Italy’s leading party and the main partner of the U.S. administrations in the post-World War II era, Daniela Rossini’s analysis of the “Wilsonian myth” in Italy in the aftermath of World War I, and Antonio Donno’s work on American Cold War policy in the Middle East.

Besides filling important gaps in historical knowledge, these studies have also contributed to reinvigorating the larger field of the history of international relations, a discipline that lately in Italy has witnessed a sharp drop in the number of publications.

International contacts and collaboration also underlie the third stream of research, which might be called “new dimensions of political history,” in the broadest possible sense, in the twentieth century. Comprising one third of the most recent monographs and reflecting current widespread concerns about democracy at a time of deep economic and cultural disruption, this composite cluster of enquiries has branched out into the study of political and public culture (Raffaella Baritonio, Oliviero Bergamini, Daniele Fiorentino, Daria Frezza, Marco Mariano, and Arnaldo Testi), race and gender issues (Alessandra Lorini, Vezzosi, and Baritonio), and mass society and the politics of consumption (Cartosio, Fasce, Cristina Scatamacchia). In the process its practitioners have addressed the interplay between “Private and Public”, to borrow the formula from the most important recent national collective enterprise of research, which has brought together Italian historians and literati of the U.S.

The brainchild of Vaudagna, this project is the culmination of a series of research and educational initiatives, open to European and international collaboration, as well as in close cooperation with Italian modern and contemporary historians, that Vaudagna has
been developing since the early 1990s around the Bairati Centre in Turin. Drawing on both private and public financial resources, the Bairati Centre has knitted together research, public initiatives aimed at a wider audience than the academic one, and educational activities. In its wake other centres have sprung up, such as the Centro di Ricerca in Studi Canadesi e Colombiani and the Centro Studi Euro-Atlantici (CSEA), founded and directed by Luca Codignola (with Massimo Rubboli) and Valeria Gennaro Lerda, respectively, both at the University of Genoa. They have recently been joined by the Centro interuniversitario di storia e politica euro-americana (CISPEA), a broader and more ambitious consortium comprising Bologna (Bonazzi and Raffaella Baritono), Florence (Romero and Alessandra Lorini), Piemonte Orientale (Vaudagna), and Trieste (Vezzosi and Ellen Migliorino Ginzburg). Addressing “The Atlantic Connection” to “unravel the complexities of political, social, cultural, economic, and international history”, in July 2005 the CISPEA held its first summer school, entitled “The U.S. and the European Nations: The Issue of American Exceptionalism.”

It remains to be seen whether and to what extent U.S. history in Italy will be able to confront its long-standing challenge of combining cultural authority and institutionalization in a changing academic environment. Over the past decade this environment has undergone a complex process of reform, whose impact is difficult to gauge, given its still largely unfinished nature. Predicated on the autonomy of the individual universities and on a drastic reconfiguration of the structure of degree courses, with a curriculum overhaul beginning in 2001, the reform has yielded a demand for shorter and more basic courses, at least as far as the B.A. degree is concerned, a demand that will probably tend to increase the importance of the more important and more established topics and disciplines such as modern and contemporary history. Increasingly dark financial prospects, especially for the humanities and the historical disciplines, may reinforce this selective tendency, making it harder to carry out research in extra-European area studies. Yet the active presence of Italian Americanists at an international level, as well as their efforts at heeding any sign of “cosmopolitan” curiosity that may arise from the larger historical community in the country, bode well for the survival and growth of U.S. history in Italy.

NOTES

1. U.S. History is used here in the strictest sense of the term, leaving aside American literary studies, on which see above, Maria Anita Stefanelli, “State of the Art of American Literary Studies in Italy”. The relationship of fruitful cooperation and exchange between the two fields goes well beyond the confines of the present article. On this relationship, see the websites of the Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani (AISNA) and of Acoma (edited by Bruno Cartosio, Giorgio Mariani, and Alessandro Portelli), the main periodical based on a collaboration between historians and literary scholars.


7. Anna Maria Martellone, “Italian Historians and the History of the United States: A Difficult Journey”, forthcoming in Massimo Bacigalupo and Gabriella Ferrugia, eds., Ambassadors. To strengthen her argument Martellone also points to the rolls of the Organization of American Historians foreign-language book and article prizes, featuring several Italian scholars among the winners in both categories.

Gennaro Lerda has been teaching both U.S. and Canadian history for over thirty years now. See Valeria Gennaro Lerda and Tjebbe Westendorf, eds., *The United States South: Regionalism and Identity* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991).


10. The Vatican Archives were first used by Luca Codignola as a vantage point from which to look at Canadian and early North American history. See Tiziano Bonazzi, “American History: The View from Italy,” *Reviews in American History* 14 (December 1986), 532.


19. See cispea@spbo.unibo.it.


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