

BOOK REVIEW

America in Italian Culture: The Rise of a New Model of Modernity, 1861–1943

by Guido Bonsaver, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, xx + 554 pp., £120 (hardback), ISBN 9780198849469

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The cultural relationship between Italy and the United States – or America, as Bonsaver calls it to emphasise the cultural focus of the book – is essential to understand the historical development of Italian culture in the twentieth century and has already been the object of several scholarly texts. Unlike most of these studies, which focus on the period following the Second World War, *America in Italian Culture* concentrates on the period 1861–1943, when America gradually became, in the eyes of the Italian population and cultural elites alike, not only a provider of *americanate* (p. 68) – spectacular and eccentric events and acts – but also a ‘political, economic and cultural power to be reckoned with’ (p. 490).

The book is divided into two main chronological parts, which feature five chapters each. Part One focuses on the period from Italy’s unification to the end of the First World War. Part Two explores the Fascist *ventennio*, with particular attention to the period 1922–38. Chapter 10, the fifth and final chapter of the second part, focuses instead on the final years of Fascism and the Second World War. The chapters thoroughly analyse the reception of American culture in Italian high and popular culture, particularly in periodicals, films, literature, music, radio and comics. Throughout the book, the presence of more than 100 illustrations provides an extremely enjoyable tool for the reader to visualise the topics discussed.

In terms of content, *America in Italian Culture* examines in detail the shifting approach to American culture in Italy, from a transfer of culture pre-First World War, to a replica in the 1920s, to a creative endeavour in the 1930s and beyond. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, America was celebrated as the country of architectural modernity and entrepreneurialism, but it was also described in patronising overtones for being a young country without a history. The parallel between youth and America helps us understand the shift to the celebration of America as the land of *giovinezza*, modernity and revolution, by Mussolini and most Italian commentators, in the early stages of the Fascist *ventennio*. In the 1920s and early 1930s, including American culture in Italian media was possible because popular media were not seen as vehicles for propaganda by the Fascists. The mid-1930s, however, saw the beginning of the use of popular culture for propaganda reasons and the slow process towards Fascism’s anti-American, racist and protectionist policies in effect

from 1938. The ban of English-language and foreign-imported cultural products was not immediate, nor totally effective, as it was only fully implemented well into the war. Moreover, it facilitated the production of new, American-inspired Italian literature, cinema, comics, architecture and music.

Three aspects emerge as particularly strong threads throughout the book. First, the book successfully depicts a mosaic of personalities either contributing to or obstructing the reception of American culture in Italy, including literary authors (Pavese and Vittorini as translators of American literature, pp. 273–280), critics, commentators, politicians (during the Fascist *ventennio*, young pro-American Fascist cultural leaders such as Pavolini, Bottai and Ciano versus anti-Americanists like Cecchi and Freddi) and people in the industry (Mirador, a music impresario importing jazz music to Italy, pp. 311–312; Vittorio Mussolini, cinema critic and producer, pp. 359–370).

Second, the book puts the reception of American culture into dialogue with the long-term influence of French culture in Italy. Since the cultural connections between France and Italy have been overlooked by scholarly research, Bonsaver's contribution to the topic is essential. Although the increasing influence of America coincided with the decreasing impact of France, French culture continued to act as a mediator for the reception of American culture. For instance, for decades American literature was first accessed by the Italian educated audience in its French translation.

Third, *America in Italian Culture* explores the (non-)representation of Italian emigrants and Italian Americans in Italy, as 'Italian Americans interfered with the [modern] image of America that readers wanted to hear about' (p. 497). Accounts of Italian Americans' contribution to American culture were absent: for instance, no mention was made in Italy of Sicilian migrants' role in the development of jazz music (pp. 168–169). Any reference to the popular image of the Italian American gangster was also erased or domesticated, for instance in Matarazzo's film *Joe il Rosso* (1936, pp. 414–415). Interestingly, Italian Americans started to be represented in popular literature and film after 1938, as they acted as heroes within the corrupt and multicultural American society: two examples are the comic character Dick Fulmine (pp. 454–455) and Gallone's film *Harlem* (1943, p. 484).

In the Conclusion, Bonsaver questions the unavoidability of the 'Americanisation' of Italy – a term that he deliberately does not use in the book, to offer a more articulate understanding of cultural change. Cultural contacts with the United States, he claims, were inescapable, because they mirrored the development of Italy into a mass society. Indeed, while the devotion to French culture of the previous century was a model of modernity of the elites, the twentieth century needed a model of modernity for everyone – and this was embodied by the many ideas of America circulating in Italian culture in this period.

This book is a timely addition to scholarship, as it provides a fundamental starting point for understanding the influence of American culture in Italy in later periods. The detailed discussion of the development of popular media such as illustrated magazines, comics and radio in Italy is a useful aid for historians and students of Italian popular culture. Moreover, given its thorough explanation of the many networks through which culture is imported, accessed and incorporated, *America in Italian Culture* is an essential read for any scholar working on Italian transnational cultural connections, with the United States and beyond.