

TRANSATLANTIC SYMPOSIUM 2021
Special edition

**A Lasting Bond.
Revisiting & Reinvigorating Italy-US
Relations 160 Years since their Inception**

Remarks by Stanislao G. Pugliese

**CONFERENCE ROOM: SALA ALDO MORO
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION
ROME, 13 DECEMBER 2021**

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Remarks by Stanislao G. Pugliese, Professor of Modern European History, Hofstra University, Hempstead (NY)

Distinguished guests: Ambassador Feroci, Lucio DeMichele, Minister Sereni, and Chargé d'Affaires Thomas Smith, and Dr. Andrea Dessì

My sincere thanks to Riccardo Alcaro inviting me to participate and Anna Gaone for taking impeccable care of the logistics.

I'm honored and very pleased to be in back Rome, where in the 1950s, my father played for the Bersaglieri band. This presentation is dedicated to two dear recently-deceased friends who greatly influenced my thinking about the relationship between Italy and America: the writer, poet, and scholar Robert Viscusi, author of *Astoria* and the epic poem *Ellis Island*, and the Neapolitan journalist and academic Francesco Durante, author of *Italoamericana: Storia e letteratura degli italiani negli Stati Uniti*, the second volume translated as *Italoamericano: The Literature of the Great Migration, 1880-1943*. For Francesco, Italian America was "an unforeseeable new universe." It is not hyperbole to argue that Viscusi changed how American scholars viewed Italy and that Durante changed how Italian scholars came to a new understanding of Italian Americans. Trained as an Italianist, with a specialization in fascism/anti-fascism, it was from Viscusi and Durante that I realized that Italian history since unification could not be understood divorced from the story of emigration. And that Italian American history and Italian American studies could not be understood outside the framework of Italian Studies.

For those interested in the formal early diplomatic relations between Italy and the USA, I recommend a new book by Barbara Faedda, Director of the Italian Academy at Columbia University, *Elite. Cultura italiana e statunitense tra Settecento e Novecento*.

Today, I am more interested with how Italians and Italian Americans have viewed each other across an ocean for more than a century. Sometimes that ocean was merely physical; oftentimes though, that ocean was one of false perceptions and mutual misunderstanding.

Before I do though, I'd like to point out a few lesser-known instances of Italy-US relations during the period of WWII. Many people don't know that Italian Americans were the largest ethnic minority serving in the American armed forces but even fewer people know of the role Italian Americans played in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the CIA. Salvatore LaGumina, one of the founders of the American Italian Historical Association has uncovered this history in one of his last books. These Italian Americans – working in Washington DC and behind enemy lines in both the European and Japanese theaters of war – made a significant contribution to the Allied victory. A newspaper publisher (Max Corvo) who advised high ranking generals; another (Ernesto Cuneo) designated by FDR as a liaison between US and British intelligence; an Italian immigrant from the Notre Dame University football team (Joe Savoldi) infiltrating German lines; another (Alfonso Thiele) married the 18-year-old partigiana Walkiria Terradura and worked behind German lines; and the Italian American, William Magistretti, fluent in Japanese, fought in the Pacific. These Italian Americans printed and distributed thousands of propaganda pamphlets, aided the Resistenza, saved priceless works of art, and even navigated the surrender of the Gestapo in Milan to Allied forces (OSS agent Emilio Daddario who was not, though, successful in his mission to prevent the execution of Mussolini.)

We should remember here the massacre of 15 Italian American OSS officers on March 26, 1944, (two days after the massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine in Rome), in the Ligurian town of Ameglia, which later led to a trial which first articulated an important legal precedent later used as the framework for the Nuremberg trials. German General Anton Dostler was tried and convicted of war crimes (killing of military prisoners) in violation of the Geneva Conventions and that one may not be exonerated for atrocities committed on the grounds that he was simply “following orders. This defense does not relieve commanding officers from responsibility of carrying out illegal orders nor does it mitigate their liability to face punishment.”

Operating at the political and diplomatic level were the fuorusciti with luminaries such as Alberto Tarchiani, (later Ambassador of Italy to the US), Carlo Sforza (Foreign Minister of Italy 1947-1951), Don Luigi Sturzo, and historian Gaetano Salvemini. Many of these were colleagues in the Mazzini Society. A subset of this group—known to few, but the subject of Gianna Pontecorboli’s beautiful book *Americordo* -- were approximately 2000 Italian Jewish exiles such as Max Ascoli, Bruno and Tullia Zevi, Enrico Fermi’s wife, Laura Capon, and the mother and wives of the Fratelli Rosselli, Amelia Picherle, Maria Todesco, and Marion Cave Rosselli. It was a disparate group. In addition to architects, musicians, artists, journalists, designers, mathematicians, and no less than three later Nobel Prize winners, there was a seamstress and a door-to-door salesman.

Vivian Treves has told me the story of her father, Paolo Treves, originally from Torino, who worked for the Federal Board for Economic Warfare of the US War Department, helping to select military and bombing targets in Italy that would not kill or injure civilians and – with postwar recovery already in mind -- do the least amount of damage to the country’s infrastructure. During World War II he worked for the Federal Board of Economic Warfare as a senior analyst, assessing Italy’s economy as ill-equipped to fight a lengthy war. During the Allied occupation, he went to Rome to advise authorities on reconstruction and relief efforts. Others whom I knew were Victor Tesoro, founder and publisher of the Italian Journal, and journalist Gastone Orefice, whose oral interview about his personal experiences can be found on the University of Southern California Survivors of the Shoah Foundation website. And finally, the close friend of Giaime Pintor, Ugo Stille, (born Mikhail Kamenetsky in Russia), correspondent for and later editor of *Il Corriere della Sera* and father of contemporary journalist/author Alexander Stille, San Paolo Professor of Journalism at Columbia University. Giuseppe Prezzolini, in his strangely titled book *America in pantofole: un impero senza imperialisti* one of the prominenti in his role as Director of the Casa Italiana at Columbia University, wryly observed that “These Italian Jews were . . . entirely different. They constituted a special emigration. Once arrived they never set about asking for assistance; instead, they actually gave assistance, each helping the others. They didn’t mingle with New York Jews or even with Italian-Americans. . . As far as Jews were concerned, they were Italians, and Italian-Americans considered them Jews. For Americans they were the subject of wonder and awe.”

But what was the relationship between Italians and Italian Americans? What did it mean that within a generation of the supposedly much-longed-for unification of the country, millions of Italians from the Mezzogiorno left Italy for distant shores? What is the significance of the fact that, as soon as it was physically possible (via steamship, travel agents, the telegram), millions of Italians left the new nation-state? The departure of its citizen-subjects is perhaps the greatest indictment of the failures of modern Italy. For much of the last century, these emigrants were seen as the dregs of Italian society: poor, often illiterate, bound to a semi-feudal society defined by patriarchy and superstition, scorned by Italians and ignored by Italian historians. Robert Viscusi wrote how “A whole nation walked out of the middle ages, slept in the ocean and awakened in New York in the twentieth century.” Yet these very emigrants—for the most part and not without failures—somehow managed not just to abide but to succeed. In the common phrase, *Aggiu fatta 'Merica*; yes, they had “made America,” but at what price? What was it in Italian peasant society that endowed these folk with the tools for material, social and political success? What resources remained in the case of failure?

What historical, cultural and psychological attributes permitted the various levels of attachment or divorce from Italy? Only the latest generation of Italian scholars have taken up a serious study of Italian Americans. In addition to Durante, there is Stefano Luconi, Martino Marazzi, Margerita Ganeri, Madalena Tirabbasi and others.

Today, there are as many Italians outside the country as within and emigration continues apace. Pier Luigi Celli's open letter to his son published in *La Repubblica* 30 November 2009 admonished: "Figlio mio, lascia questo paese." This was no desperate landless peasant beseeching an illiterate son but the General Director of RAI, writing to his university-educated son. What does it mean for Italian Americans when such a person says to his own progeny "This country, your country, is no longer a place where you can remain with pride." Scholar and writer Fred Gardaphé often speaks of the "irony-deficiency" of Italian Americans; our the lack of historical consciousness and has provocatively and ironically argued that to save Italian America we must "leave Little Italy." In the same vein, perhaps it may be necessary that Italians leave Italy to save it.

What does it mean for Italian Americans when the face of Italy is rapidly changing with new waves of immigrants? Will we still look back with nostalgia and look forward with hope, historically aware that Italy has always been a country of constant new "Italians"?

While Italy has usually been seen as a stalworth ally of the US, relations between the two countries have had a number of problematic points: Italy had the largest and most potent postwar communist party in Western Europe and therefore became one focal point of the Cold War. Nothing explains this better than the tragic disintegration of the Parri government, so beautifully and poetically invoked in Carlo Levi's *L'orologio*. While supportive of the creation of the State of Israel, Italy also had a long-standing pro-Arab foreign policy; Reagan's insistence on installing Pershing missiles on Lampedusa also created tensions. And of course, the Gladio case exposed a serious and egregious political scandal involving Italy and the US.

Contacts between Italians and Italian Americans reflect an ambiguous relationship. I would like to dissect the travel industry image crafted of Italy for Italian Americans. If you've seen these commercials, you know how they appeal to nostalgia for an Italy which never existed. My own parents, born in 1931 and 1942, never spoke with nostalgia for the Italy they left behind. In the last essay before his death last year, Robert Viscusi argued that Italians and Italian Americans viewed each other through distorted lenses. Italian Americans could not understand why their relatives stayed behind; they could not understand the popularity and strength of the PCI; they felt the scorn of Italians. For Italians, Italian Americans were the *cugini cafoni* often embodied in the satirical figure of *lo zio d'America*, a figure I assume many of you know well.

It's a strange and disturbing phenomenon that I have witnessed in over thirty years of travel between the USA and Italy. This is the tendency of some Italian Americans, always from the Mezzogiorno, *tutti che hanno fatto l'America*, that is, they have achieved some measure of economic success. Returning to their small hometowns, not only do they revel in conspicuous consumption and opulent displays of their newfound wealth, but they also often openly and publicly heap scorn on their native towns, villages, neighbors, and even their own relatives. The critique goes something like this: "Italy is no place for ambitious, hardworking people like us. For anyone who has any moral worth, it was necessary to migrate. America is truly the 'land of opportunity' and we could not have achieved such economic success if we had remained in Calabria, or Campania, or Sicily." From a culture marked by war and *la miseria*, some found unimagined *abbondanza* in New York, Toronto, or Sidney. Emanuele Crialesi lovingly mocks this obsession with *abbondanza* in his 2006 film *Nuovo Mondo*, but it was a reality I witnessed first-hand. In one generation, southern Italians transcended what were almost feudal conditions to the bourgeois comforts of middle-class American suburbs. I often wonder at how these Italian Americans unwittingly or subconsciously equate material success with moral superiority. I call them "the Italian Puritans." I'm not a

psychiatrist or psychologist, but wonder if this scornful attitude – again, hopefully a minority view—is not in some way related to the trauma of having left Italy.

The irony has often been noted that some Napoletani, Calabrese, Siciliani who never considered themselves Italians while in Italy suddenly embraced their Italianness while on foreign shores. Others quickly abandoned their Italianness in a desire to assimilate as quickly as possible, even changing their names. Last week, a student engaged me in conversation after class. This student, on the first day of class when I read out the roster, corrected my pronunciation of his last name: “Riccardi” he said, even though the last name is spelled “Ricciardi” which one day may very well turn into “Richards” as it did with NYU Law professor David A. J. Richards, author of *Italian American: The Racializing of an Ethnic Identity*.

Permit me to conclude with a family anecdote because it might serve as a metaphor to better understand this mismatch between Italians and Italian Americans. An uncle of my wife, having left Calabria, achieved some success in America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. On his first return to his native paese, he brought with him on the Michelangelo, a brand-new shiny black Cadillac, complete with red leather seats and tail fins, only to discover that the car was too big to navigate most of the streets of the town. Thus, it was usually parked in the piazza in front of the church, so that as many people as possible would see it. Qui, c’è qualcosa non funziona; c’è qualcosa che non vá (e non soltanto la macchina!)

It’s my hope and fervent wish that projects such as this transatlantic symposium will help in getting that car to run and to bring about a better and stronger understanding between 60 million Italians in Italy and another 60 million Italians around the world.