

The suspended Republic.
Italy and United States during the Cold War
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Abstract: Tra la fine della seconda guerra mondiale e il 1989 il perimetro della guerra fredda racchiude e condiziona le vicende italiane. La dialettica Est-Ovest travalica confini e appartenenze, contribuisce a definire un quadro di relazioni e un insieme di protagonisti.

Si sono spesso scontrate due letture opposte e fuorvianti della storia della cosiddetta “prima Repubblica”: da un lato, l’immagine di un paese a sovranità limitata in cui i protagonisti della vita politica avrebbero agito prevalentemente sulla base delle indicazioni provenienti da Mosca o da Washington; dall’altro un modello interpretativo basato su una presunta autonomia e indipendenza del percorso nazionale, talvolta presentato attraverso il paradigma dell’eccezionalità e dell’unicità. La storiografia più recente (anche grazie a nuove fonti) ha invece valorizzato l’interdipendenza dei percorsi, evidenziando come il caso italiano debba essere inserito, pure a partire dalle proprie caratteristiche peculiari, nel contesto generale della guerra fredda. Vincolo esterno e specificità nazionale diventano così due elementi non più contrapposti tra loro, ma utili a una lettura complessiva dei processi storici. In questo contesto sono molti gli autori che sottolineano la centralità degli anni Settanta del secolo scorso, come terreno di indagine, punto di osservazione per cercare risposte e aprire nuove piste di ricerca. In quel decennio cruciale della guerra fredda si ridefiniscono vincoli, modelli e appartenenze che contribuiranno a segnare l’inizio della fine dell’equilibrio post bellico. In quegli anni il rapporto tra l’Italia e gli Stati Uniti è segnato da una forte dialettica sugli esiti che la crisi economica e politica del Paese avrebbe potuto riversare su parte dell’occidente sviluppato. Una dialettica che vede posizioni anche molto differenziate

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sia all'interno del mondo politico italiano che tra le diverse anime dell'amministrazione americana.

Parole chiave: Dopoguerra, Italia, USA, Repubblica, Guerra fredda

Abstract: Between the end of the Second World War and 1989, the Cold War both circumscribed Italian political life and left a deep mark upon it. The stand-off between East and West cut across boundaries and natural affiliations; it determined political relationships, and created political leaders. Two opposing but equally misleading points of view of the so-called *Prima Repubblica* have often been proposed. One is that Italy had limited sovereignty and its main political actors followed decisions taken in Moscow or Washington; the other is that Italy plowed a completely independent furrow. This latter view is sometimes expressed in terms of Italian exceptionality and uniqueness, as if Italian political affairs were incomparable and quite unlike those of other countries.

More recent scholarship, which has been able to draw on new sources, has emphasized interconnectedness, arguing that for all its peculiarities, recent Italian history is best understood in the general context of the Cold War. External influences and internal factors are no longer seen as two diametrically opposed and incompatible elements but, rather, as both belonging to the one historical process. Many historians are now pointing to the central importance of the 1970s in their research, noting that the decade offers a particularly rich source of information, and provides an excellent vantage point from which to consider the preceding and subsequent years. In that crucial decade, previously solid bonds began to unravel, models began to creak and identities began to dissolve as the post-war equilibrium came to an end. It was a period that saw the twilight of the old order and the start of a new and difficult type of confrontation. In those years, the relationship between Italy and the United States was characterized by intense discussion of the potential fall-out for other western nations of an Italian economic and political crisis. The debate polarized positions both within the domestic world of Italian politics and among the different tendencies that existed inside the US Administration.

Keywords: Postwar, Italy, USA, Republic, Cold War

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The Republic of Italy came into being with the referendum of 2 June 1946. The vote on whether to retain the monarchy or establish a republic came in the wake of a global conflict, and was held in circumstances that were in many ways unprecedented, with women voting for the first time, and the referendum being held at the same time as the election of the Constituent Assembly that was to enact a new constitution, which came into effect on 1 January 1948, a century after the Albertine Statute of 1848.

Many commentators and historians, adducing different and not always mutually compatible reasons, have argued that the Second World War is absolutely central for an understanding of Italian politics in the long post-war period. The elements of continuity and discontinuity in the organization of the state and government and the choice of the men assigned to key posts for the reconstruction of the country have all been explained with reference to the variegated legacy of the Second World War. Some historians have preferred to insist on the fundamental importance of the anti-Fascist Resistance movement, its founding ideas and the motivations of those who led or supported in shaping the new state.

These issues, however, are not central to this paper, which, rather, considers the apparent coincidence between the life cycle of the so-called “First Republic” of Italy and the main events of the Cold War. Particularly noteworthy is the overlap between the birth of the “First Republic” and the beginnings of the Cold War in 1947 and 1948 and, above all, between the end stages of the Cold War and the collapse of the First Republic in the period running from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1992. The overlap, surely more structural than casual, can help us reach some conclusions about the relationship between the domestic political scene in Italy in the post-war period and the surrounding international context that helped to mold it. The Italian Republic can therefore be seen as existing within the space created by the opposition of the two political blocs, and it followed a similar path to Japan, with a dominant party (the Christian Democrats) functioning as the mainstay of a national political system that left no room for change or alternatives.

While few would contest that the period between the end of the Second World War and the start of the East-West opposition marks the beginning of this period of reference, more controversial is the question of when the moment of final collapse occurred. Indeed, where one dates the moment of collapse and how

one analyzes its causes are precisely the sort of interpretative decisions that differentiate the contrasting historical models of recent scholarship.

The crisis and the termination of the Communist world was, to be sure, a turning point, but it is all too easy to draw a direct parallel between these events and the passage from the “First” to the “Second” Republic without scrutinizing the longer-term reasons for this historical shift in Italian politics. Similarly, it is unhelpful to proclaim the birth of a presumed “Third Republic” as if the political and institutional crisis that has characterized the last two decades had now come to an end and been consigned to the archives.

With the passage of time our historical understanding of key events is bound to change. The years 1989-1991 saw the collapse of the Italian political parties, the opening of corruption investigations by the judiciary and the emergence of a political culture and party that wanted to put an end to national unity. On an international scale, the period saw the disappearance of what had become a familiar frame of reference, and with it went the comforting certainties and assurances that had been replicated on a small scale on the Italian political scene, where the political attitudes and positions of the players formed part of a larger international game. This is where we should begin our new exploration of the nexus of relationships between Italian domestic politics and the broader international context.

It is neither adequate nor credible to start numbering the “republics” that are supposed to have been born and died within such a short space of time. We cannot meaningfully equate extemporaneous factors such as new electoral laws, the emergence and disappearance of political parties within a matter of weeks or the unhealthy relationships between politics, business and various branches of the state with the birth and death of republics.

If, however, we choose a more nuanced and historically minded approach, we gain a different understanding of the reasons for the collapse of the political order. The crisis of recent years, a period of long transition that has now been going on for two decades and whose end is not yet in sight, has far deeper causes than those often put forward in media circles, sometimes in connection with the public use of history for reprehensible and opportunistic ends.

Let us begin with some of the contemporary understandings that are most widely accepted, at least in the public realm.

The first historical interpretation has been an important force over the past two decades of “transition” thanks also to the need of the new right-wing parties of government to legitimize their role by denigrating the previous political and institutional model. According to this mode of interpretation, the crisis of the Italian Republic in 1989-1991 was the natural consequence of an original structural flaw that was built into the very foundations of the Republic in 1943-

1945. By the lights of this argument, by bending Italy to the will of a certain number of leading players, the Resistance was responsible for shaping, or misshaping, the Constitution and putting the entire country on the wrong path. The theory of the original flaw, as it were, has already been explored by historians of the 1960s. The argument is that the Resistance, by banding together under the same flag different political beliefs (Socialists, Communists, Catholics, members of the Action Party and Liberals) and cultural identities, was influenced by excessively diverse approaches and underlying projects, including non-democratic ways of thinking, which become a critical weakness that explains the degeneration and collapse that was to follow. In other words, the original flaw set Italy on the wrong path compared with other European nations, one that led the country astray and prevented it from evolving into a modern European and Western democracy.

The second interpretation draws on the allure of the new, and flies the flag of a «new beginning». In this case, the guiding theory, which was to remain very much theory rather than fact, was that the collapse of Communism would unleash untapped energy and resources, and restore untrammelled freedom and prosperity to those who had not been able to enjoy them to the full until now. By this reading, 1989 was akin to a Year Zero, a sudden revelatory moment in history that would enable us to march onwards leaving the baggage of history behind. Italy was to be driven forwards by the propulsive force of the new actors, be they individuals or groups, that had emerged from the ashes of the old world, or – a more common motif – new actors who had descended into the political arena, almost like visitors from a distant planet, ready to light up the way as the country embarked on a challenging and unpredictable journey.

What both these modes of interpretation have in common is their deprecation of the historical method and reluctance to accept that a critical analysis of the past serves to illuminate the present. The fortunes of the two approaches have see-sawed over the years, but both still have their adherents today.

Yet if we set aside these shortcuts to understanding and resist the temptations of simplistic reasoning, we find that the long-term historical approach remains valid. The more serious efforts to understand the past are those that eschew ready-made explanations cooked up to serve the interests of the moment, and repudiate reassuring theories that can be trotted out to the advantage or detriment of this or that political contender. The history of the Republic of Italy is complex, and single-cause explanations can occupy the place of proper historical enquiry for only a fleeting period before they are swept away by more thoughtful and better documented hypotheses.

One hypothesis that has grown in strength thanks to continuous and serious historical research relates to the interplay between Italian domestic politics and the international context. It examines the overlap between the perimeters of the Italian Republic and the conditioning influence of the Cold War. In some senses, the hypothesis is not a new one, for it has always been clear that the Cold War left a deep impression on Italian politics. It is a sensitive area of enquiry, and one that has frequently given rise to many doubts and queries, but is also an excellent vantage point from which to explore and understand the past and develop a long-term historical perspective.

Seen in this way, the relationship between Italy and the United States provides a yardstick that allows us to divide the period into its constituent parts and consider how it evolved. Ever since the summer of 1943, the destiny of Italy had been intricately bound up with the unfolding of events on the far side of the Atlantic. The landing in Sicily, the Allied bombing campaign, the fall of Mussolini and the armistice were certainly not a casual chain of neutral events. In the years of the Italian civil war, that is to say in the critical two-year period of 1943-1945, a strategy for liberation from Nazi-fascism took shape. It was based on two major factors: the Italian Resistance and the Allied counteroffensive on the European continent. The superficial and politically motivated interpretations to which I referred above have tended not only to draw a dividing line between these two factors, but also to treat them as if they were in opposition to one another. So, on the one hand, we see a tendency to exalt the liberation movement as if it had sprung from a purely domestic source (the myth of the self-sufficient Resistance) and, on the other, we see the opposite tendency to play down the importance of the Resistance, which is treated not only as if it had been useless, but as if it had had positively harmful effects on the later development of Italian democracy.

It is from here we need to make a fresh start. We need to look anew at those models of development in the post-war period that were shaped by the interplay of domestic and external forces and the pressure that the Cold War exerted on Europe. The stand-off between the two sides in the Cold War was played out also in Italy by the two main political parties, which often adopted the language of ideological conflict.

The central claim of this paper, however, is that the entire apparatus had begun to creak and show signs of wear and tear well before the fateful year of 1989. During the 1970s, a critical period in the Cold War, the political bonds began to unravel as ideological models, loyalties and alignments started to shift. The post-war world was changing as new challenges arose, and all sides discovered they were no longer able to contain the events unfolding within the two opposing blocs. During that decade, the old world began to fade and something new, but still hard to make out, began to emerge on the horizon. A fear of the unknown

became pervasive among observers and participants in the political process, and the fate of the Republic of Italy became an issue that raised high feelings and captured the attention of successive US administrations. Once again, Washington made an oversimplified reckoning of what was happening and, most importantly, what it felt was likely to be the future relationship with its allies.

The repercussions were many and varied, and this complexity is reflected also in historical studies of the period. The point is that the far-reaching effects cannot be ascribed to a single factor, still less to a single political figure.

The web of relationships between Italy and the United States therefore needs to be examined from a non-ideological point of view, without politically motivated oversimplification and with a view to understanding how the international context impinged upon Italian domestic politics. To take this approach implies renouncing the easy option of segregating the history of Italian political parties from the history of Italian diplomacy and international relations. For the past 15 years at least, a good deal of international scholarship, including that taking place in other countries, has focused on the decade of the 1970s which is recognized as key period that offers considerable scope for new historical investigation. This form of international history examines the past by looking for the point of intersection between areas that have hitherto often been treated as separate.

We can draw from an extraordinary amount of documentation held in a various archives (the State Department, the CIA, the White House, and the libraries and collections of Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter). Using these sources, we can build up a picture of the relations between the two countries.

An analysis of this documentation shows that attempting to sum up the dialectics of transatlantic relationships with reference to the «USA» and «Italy» or to the «Government of the United States» and the «Government of Italy» is an impossible and misguided enterprise. The documents point to a far more complex and multifaceted reality based on a nexus of relationships among diverse US administrations, each one of which was made up of a variety of departments and offices staffed by numerous people with different outlooks operating inside complex organisms deeply imbued with Cold War logic.

The first important consequence of the growing recognition of the complexities involved has been a gradual but inexorable erosion of two Manichaeian ideologies, one committed to the idea that the US interfered in Italian affairs and that Italy was therefore a country with limited sovereignty; the other committed to the idea that the governing classes of Italy continued to enjoy unimpeded freedom of decision as they defended the supposed uniqueness and

peculiarity of Italy in post-war Europe – as if Italy could be neither compared with other countries, nor reformed.

This Manichaeic model – deployed in the past, also by the media, for reasons of political opportunism – takes no account of documentary evidence, and cannot bear close historical scrutiny.

The 1970s offer us an excellent vantage point from which to consider how the old model broke down, interrupting a consolidated relationship and opening an irreversible crisis. Once we accept this, we are practically forced to look for alternative avenues of understanding and pinpoint new landmarks in what remains a largely untraveled path to historical knowledge.

The second consequence relates to historical research. Enriched by access to these new sources, more recent scholarship has emphasized how these different historical threads are intertwined, and how the Italian situation, while undeniably possessing its own peculiarities, needs to be understood through the prism of the Cold War. External constraints and national peculiarities are therefore no longer to be seen as two countervailing forces, but as complementary elements useful for an overarching understanding of the historical process. In those years, the relationship between Italy and the United States was characterized by intense discussion of the potential fall-out for other western nations of an Italian economic and political crisis. The debate polarized positions both within the domestic world of Italian politics and among the different tendencies that existed inside the US Administration.

Threaded through the wealth of sources and documentation produced by the different branches of the US Administration are many recurring themes and issues that epitomized the decade. I shall summarize what I believe are the four most significant of these.

1. The end of the reassuring model in which Italy was seen as a trustworthy and safe partner, and the ascendancy of a state of «suspended judgment» in regard to Italy, now seen as capable of generating scenarios not compatible with US interests. At this phase, the future of the relationship had become difficult to foresee, and the certainties of the past were but a distant memory. Italy had entered into a state of suspension; it was a country with an uncertain future buffeted by harsh economic, political and social winds. A section of Italian public opinion was critical of the United States for its actions in various theaters of war and for its conduct in international crises: Vietnam, the events in Chile in 1973, the Middle East. Opinion polls and regular political demonstrations revealed an increasing anti-Americanism that several leaders of the Italian opposition and, in some cases, some members of the governing parties, tapped into in their political discourse. It is significant that at the same time, the other side of the political

divide became highly critical of the Soviet model, undermined and embarrassed first by the Prague Spring and later by other events in the Eastern Bloc. The two mirror-image ideological models were both struggling: neither could continue to serve as an external propulsive and cohesive force as before.

2. Different departments and structures inside the US Administration had divergent views on Italy, and the confusion was exacerbated also by the difficulty of fully comprehending the Italian political situation and the various subtle divisions within it. Many who failed to understand the situation preferred oversimplification. Paolo Emilio Taviani summed up the situation well in his memoirs in which he recalls how CIA operatives were, with rare exceptions, single-mindedly and unreflectively committed to the anti-Communist cause, and unable to grasp the nuances and true meaning of the changing political reality. It is interesting to peruse the many pages written over the space of a few months, to look through the work of the Italian Desk of the State Department and consider the theses and hypotheses put forward, which were often quite lacking in any analytical foundations or support – hence the imprecisions in the thoughts on the divorce referendum of 1974, in the opinions on the relationship between church and politics, in the speculation on the origins of the Red Brigades and in the grim predictions about the possible «historic compromise» between the Christian Democrats and the Communists. All too often, the reports were distorted by the desire for a scoop, or by the allure of being able to explain and elucidate secret activities in terms that were more suited to spy fiction than serious historical reconstruction.

3. Some sections of the US Administration expressed fears of a possible «leap in the dark» by Italy, a dreaded «bridge into the unknown» (as a State Department report from the mid-1970s describes the prospect for Italy). For a Western nation, Italy had embarked on a particularly uncertain and risky journey: it was a NATO member, in which an ascendant Communist Party had gathered an alarmingly high percentage of the electoral vote. The American reports cover key moments in modern Italian history such as the local elections of 1975 and the general election of 1976 in which the Communist Party was contending for control of Parliament. It was felt to be intolerable that a NATO member state should allow a party with such a name, such symbols and such a history of political opposition to come into government. The leaders of the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party of Italy, Aldo Moro and Enrico Berlinguer respectively, were the primary movers of a political accommodation that would also have created a united front against the terrorism and bombing campaigns that had been causing bloodshed throughout the country since the end of the previous decade. In October 1975, at a Conference for Security and Cooperation in Helsinki, President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger tried to get Prime Minister

Moro to explain his reasons for opening up to the Communists. With composure, the Christian Democrat leader explained that the Communists of Italy were unlike Communists elsewhere, and had effectively become a social-democratic force; further, they represented one third of the electorate and could help overcome the current emergency of democracy. No common ground was found at this bilateral meeting because, in the eyes of the USA, the risks outweighed the possible benefits. A narrow channel of communication was left open, while free rein was given to alarming predictions about the fate of Italy, now seen to be crossing into unknown territory. As for Aldo Moro, so derided and contested at the time, he was to be lamented after his kidnapping and murder by the Red Brigades. His death removed from the Italian political scene a man of balance for whom the highest goods were the unity of the party, and the party as bulwark of democracy.

Meanwhile, Berlinguer's every move was closely monitored, especially in intelligence reports, and his efforts were met with suspicion and resistance. The possibility of a «historic compromise» between ideological adversaries ended up with the jettisoning of all hopes of dialogue and mutual understanding.

4. The Americans were now looking for new interlocutors with which to build a new relationship. This is where the files disclose the great sense of uncertainty that prevailed. The archives of the main Italian political parties and the papers of politicians who were involved in international affairs contain records of the bilateral dialogue with the US administrations. A good title for a paper dealing with this aspect of the period could be "The Search for the new De Gasperi", in reference to the Christian Democrat leader who set up the transatlantic relationship and made his party, the DC, and its choice in favor of the western European model pivotal to that relationship. Strong and secure in his position, De Gasperi was the sort of leader to ride roughshod over nuanced political differences, misgivings and complexities. The search for another politician of this type led the USA to back a possible up-and-coming strong man, the Socialist leader Bettino Craxi. As it turned out, Craxi was not able to relieve the US authorities of their sense of disenchantment and disappointment at not being able to find a satisfactory and reliable interlocutor.

In conclusion, through this deeper form of analysis, we can see how this decade was to make a deep and lasting impression on the future history of Italy. Above all, the political instability of the country compromised and curtailed its potential to play a leading part in international affairs and, particularly, in the geopolitics of the Mediterranean. Indeed, such was the chronic instability of Italy that new terms had to be coined to capture the contingent nature of its political arrangements. Hence the period saw the invention of terms such as *governo balneare* («silly season» or «summer-holiday» government), *governo a scadenza*

(time-limited caretaker government), *governo senza mandato* or *senza portafolio* (government without mandate or mission).

Secondly, the in-fighting among the parties in the government coalition and the internecine strife inside the parties was observed. The American reports contain, untranslated, the Italian term «partitocrazia» to capture the peculiar nature of Italian party politics. They also define, with some accuracy, the Italian weakness of failing to distinguish between institutions and political parties, and of confounding the roles and functions of the two. The failure to modernize the political system, the Americans observed, was acting as a deadweight on the country, dragging it down as it tried to climb out of the hole it has dug for itself. The weight of the economic crisis and its potential repercussions are also analyzed. The reports consider the end of the golden age, which was accompanied by a reduction in consumption, the emergence of new forms of poverty and the waning of the economic momentum that had been a feature of the post-war Italy.

If we look at Italy from the vantage point of the United States, we can better see the connections between Italian national politics and international affairs. This is the most palpable and enduring insight for the historian, and is indispensable for the purpose of proper historical reconstruction, now that the previous model of historical interpretation has at last run its course. Finally Italy, as a historical case study, can shed its connotations of exceptionality, and can now be regarded simply as part of the modern history of post-war Europe and transatlantic relations. Starting in the 1970s, the parlous balance of political power in Italy was subsumed into the larger discourse for the creation of a new international order.