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Review of: Axel Körner, America in Italy: The United States in the Political Thought and Imagination of the Risorgimento, 1763–1865

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Axel Körner,

*AMERICA IN ITALY: THE UNITED STATES IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT
AND IMAGINATION OF THE RISORGIMENTO, 1763–1865,*

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017, xix + 351 pp.

Recently, historians who are not Italian have taken an interest in the Italian Risorgimento for reasons related, among others, to the global aspects of a lengthy process involving people, state interests and ideas of various non-Italian origin.

Inevitably, research has focused, among other fields, on the political origins of the Risorgimento, in other words, the political ideas and the institutions that were used as a model or starting point in the long-lasting course during which the theories for the Italian struggle for national independence took shape.

In this field there are already several “certainties” that historians have to face. The historiography of the Risorgimento, especially the most recent, has detected the beginning of the procedures that would lead to Italian national independence in the dissemination and subsequent implementation of the ideas of the French Revolution in the Italian peninsula during the 20-year period between 1796 and 1815 known as the Napoleonic Wars. The grouping of many Italian satellites in a few large states obtained by Napoleon was very significant in strengthening this belief, which proved to the Italians that it was possible to break the old political and economic barriers and create an independent nation-

state. With the introduction of military conscription, the French trained the Italians, who had experienced centuries of military decadence, to use weapons and demonstrate their value. Thanks to all these achievements, a good part of the Italians would certainly agree with what Carducci wrote in 1884 for the French: “They armed us, disciplined us and permit us to look in the eyes of our old masters.”

This does not signify that after the end of the Napoleonic period the Italians – the few intellectuals, university students, bourgeoisie and other actors in full awareness of the stakes – had agreed on a defined course regarding the national issue. After the failure of the liberal movements in 1820–21 and 1830–31, as well as of those organised by Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italians who had adopted liberal ideas agreed with him on one point only: the need to remove foreign rulers.

There were several suggestions on how to achieve this goal, and they did not always converge. During the relatively long-lasting dialogue in which notable Italian thinkers and actors participated (Vincenzo Gioberti, Giuseppe Mazzini, Carlo Cattaneo, Cesare Balbo, etc.), the prospect of a federation on the Italian peninsula coexisted with that of na-

tional unification, though with different proposals as to the means of achieving those ends (revolutionary methodology, moderate-diplomatic approach), the preferred form of government (monarchy, republic) and the people who would play the key roles in leadership (Savoy, popes), etc.

In the discussion on the developmental course of Italian political thought during the long phase leading to Italian unification, Axel Körner's book has come to enrich the literature with a new proposal: the examination of the influence of America's political formation during the American Revolution and the US constitution on modern Italian political thought from 1763 to 1865.

The extreme time limits of the book already arouses interest. The starting point is pinpointed on a date six whole years before the birth of Napoleon Bonaparte, yet coinciding with the end of the Seven Years' War and the beginning of the struggle for American independence and the preparations for the American constitution. The conflict between the American colonial settlers and the British also captured the attention of Italian thinkers and artists, who reflected the events in their own works in their own way. Körner dedicates the first chapter to one of them, Carlo Botta, the most famous Italian historian of the time, who wrote one of the first histories of the American War of Independence,¹ divided into four volumes and fourteen books.

The endpoint of the book is defined by the death of Abraham Lincoln (1865). This event, coinciding with Italian unification, had a decisive influence on the political culture of unified Italy. At that time, the US – marked by a violent civil war, slavery and resistance to it, and the murder of its president – was presented in Italy as an example that was incompatible with European political and social structures. Negative attitudes towards the American example would grow in the late nineteenth century under the weight of mass Italian emigration to the US, with resentment felt in the new country because of the way in which it was organised. Nevertheless, as emphasised characteristically, Lincoln's funeral would be used as the blueprint for the funeral of the national hero of Italy, Giuseppe Mazzini (1872).

The above points already reveal the main working hypothesis of the author – how developments prior to the French Revolution also contributed to the shaping of Italian political thought – with a focus on the American example. For this, Körner examines how political and social developments in North America were understood by Italian intellectual, political and artistic circles – both the ones considered as positive (American independence, the constitution) as well as the less flattering ones such as slavery, the civil war, Lincoln's assassination, etc. In these terms, the American experience was not to be emulated unilaterally. It functioned as a mirror through which societies such as the Italian one, with their own particular historical features, experimented on how they wanted to see themselves in the future.

The author bases his synthesis on a large number of primary and second-

¹ *Storia della Guerra dell'indipendenza degli Stati Uniti d'America*, Paris: D. Colas, 1809.

ary sources from a variety of fields, such as historiography, newspapers, musical theatre, painting and any other cultural product reflecting developments overseas – well-known sources but basically revisited through the appropriate questions required by intellectual and cultural history.

The transnational perspective has a central role in the work of Körner, professor of modern history at UCL and Director of its Centre for Transnational Studies. As he notes: “transnationalizing US history involves understanding events in American history through their perception and their impact abroad, which informs the ways in which the world reacts to the United States”.

The final result rewards the effort, as the main questions are answered quite fully. In addition, this well-written book, which has the added advantage of being an enjoyable read, acquaints the English-speaking audience with some of the most significant Italian thinkers who played a defining role in the transformation of the Italian peninsula from a group of autonomous states into a unified political entity.

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