



“THINGS CHANGE BUT THE AMERECANO IS HERE TO STAY”

America in Italian Popular Movies of the 1980s

One of the most controversial events of the 1980s in Italy was the infamous Sigonella affair. A small locality in eastern Sicily, Sigonella has been home to a NATO base since 1959. On the night between October 10 and October 11, 1985, however, Sigonella came to national prominence as its small airport was turned into the site of a potentially dangerous diplomatic confrontation between Italy and the United States. Two US fighter jets had forced an Egyptian Lines Boeing to land on the base airstrip. Inside, there were four Palestinian terrorists who, a few days before, had hijacked an Italian cruise ship, the Achille Lauro, and killed one disabled Jewish-American passenger. The Americans wanted to take the Palestinians into custody and prosecute them in the US.

On board the Egyptian plane there was also Abu Abbas, an emissary of the Palestine Liberation Organization who had been sent by the organization's leader himself, Yasser Arafat, to negotiate with the hijackers. The Americans, however, had reason to believe that Abbas was in fact the mastermind behind the terrorist attack itself.

When the Boeing landed it was immediately surrounded by the airport security force, which was Italian, thus spoiling the plans of the Americans, who had sent units of their Delta Force to take possession of the plane. For the Americans, there was nothing left to do but surround the airport security, but they soon found themselves surrounded by a contingent of Italian Carabinieri.

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As soon as this awkward stalemate was reached, a series of phone calls was exchanged between Washington and Rome, with US President Reagan asking Prime Minister Bettino Craxi to give up the prisoners. The latter denied the request, arguing that Rome had jurisdiction over the terrorists since the Achille Lauro was an Italian ship. Reagan gave in, the Delta Force left the airstrip, and the Boeing flew to Rome, where the four hijackers were taken into custody while Abbas was left free to board another plane, ignoring US requests for extradition.

Although a minority voiced criticism toward Craxi's lack of cooperation with its major international ally, threatening to bring down the government, the Prime Minister was able to present Italy's rigid stance as a sign of new diplomatic assertiveness and unwillingness to tolerate external interference in its own international policy—gaining the favor of opposition MPs from post-fascist MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano) as well as the Communist Party. From the great historical perspective of the decade, this minor instance of diplomatic “muscle-flexing” can be seen as the effect of a new mood of confidence and national pride that would find its crowning moment when, in 1987, Italy overtook the UK in gross domestic product, making the Mediterranean country—at least according to figures—the fourth economic power in the world after the USA, Japan, Germany, and France (Ginsborg, 1998: 12).

The minor struggle at Sigonella was part of a wider repositioning of Italy in its relationship to the superpower of the Atlantic bloc and, consequently, in the international arena. The virtual end of radical terrorism and union agitation, the spectacular economic growth, and, most of all, the growing international recognition of the “Made in Italy” brand as signifier of quality and style in the fashion, food and furniture sectors were the drivers of a new mood of confidence that found expressions in many areas of Italian society and culture. “Made in Italy,” in particular, “redefined a shattered national identity away from political engagement towards rampant consumerism” (Ferrero-Regis, 2008), putting a symbolic end to the postwar era of economic reconstruction.

This paper focuses on the articulations and expressions of this “new” relationship between Italy and America as found in popular movies of that decade. Far from being conscious investigations

into this particular theme, these movies—conceived as mere entertainment—were manifestly made to appeal to the widest possible audience and gain huge profits at the box office. They belong in the category of lowbrow products which, at a time when “serious” Italian moviemakers increasingly distanced themselves from social issues, represent an important access point to understand the mood of the times. According to Gian Piero Brunetta, one of the leading historians of Italian cinema, the comedies of the 1980s (in particular those made by the Vanzina brothers) “construct a sort of uninterrupted narration that, in hindsight, helps us understand the transformation of a country that wants to forget the [violence and gloom of the] Lead Years and is experiencing a sort of economic euphoria which translates into new forms of getting rich and new types of consumption” (Brunetta, 2007: 610). Taken together, the movies investigated in this paper testify to the new sentiment of confidence and a collateral “debunking” of the superpower: Americans could be beaten at sports, they could be outspent in conspicuous consumption, and their country could be imagined and depicted as provincial and backward.

1. ITALIAN CINEMA AT THE TURN OF THE 1980S

The latter half of the 1970s marked the start of a huge crisis in Italian cinema as the decade witnessed the start of a process whereby the national market would be increasingly dominated by products made in Hollywood. In the early 1970s, 250 movies were produced in Italy on average every year; in 1980 the number fell to 163, and the following year the number dropped to 103 (Brunetta, 2007: 435). Productions from the US managed to attract an increasingly larger share of total income: if Italian movies got 52 percent of total income in 1977, leaving 33 percent to American movies, in 1988 the situation had reversed, with Italian movies getting 28.5 percent of total income and US products getting 57.2 percent (Brunetta, 2007: 506).

There are a number of reasons behind this shift. The late 1970s saw the beginning of a new Hollywood strategy, embodied by the works of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, that aimed to win back the international audience with high-budget, premium-quality products that competitors from other countries could

not match. Shifting its marketing strategies to highlight the cost of special effects and equating expenses with quality, Hollywood directed viewers toward higher-standard products that national industries across Europe couldn't afford to produce.

This imbalance in spending power was coupled with the passing away or emigration of the big Italian movie tycoons like Carlo Ponti and Dino De Laurentiis. Raising the money to make movies was increasingly difficult, resulting in a fragmentation of the system. If the 87 films of the 1980–1981 season were made by 67 different producers, the situation worsened in the following years: the 112 films from 1982 to 1983 involved 84 producers, while the 97 movies of the 1989–1990 season were made by 90 producers. This meant that the majority had the resources to produce only one movie (Brunetta, 2007: 491).

In order to find financing, Italian producers had to rely on the help of American distributors. According to Emanuela Martini, the increasing involvement of American distributors in the Italian movie industry meant “the slavish adaption of Italian production to the stylistic and plot directives imposed by the dominant capital” (Martini, 1978: 187). With the number of movie theaters dramatically shrinking throughout the decade—from about 8,000 to a little over 3,000—the preference would be given to products “offering a polished and superficial super-show suitable to every kind of audience” (Martini, 1978: 187).

Another blow to Italian cinema was the end of the state monopoly on TV. On the one hand, the private networks that went on the air in the latter part of the 1970s multiplied the choice of entertainment available at home, resulting in a decline in the number of moviegoers. On the other hand, TV increasingly became the site where celebrity personalities made their reputations. Therefore, in fighting for viewers, producers would increasingly rely on projects constructed around the established reputation of TV personalities and around the clichés that had brought them to fame.

Thus, it is quite ironic that movies questioning the cultural supremacy of America were made at a time when the Italian marketplace was very much influenced and shaped by American capital. Italy went from being an important player in the inter-

national market, punching above its economic weight with both auteur movies and low-budget genre films, to a cinematic wasteland colonized by American products and commercial TV. Two decades earlier the international role of Italian cinema had been recognized by French journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, which devoted an issue to the “swords-and-sandals” movies produced in Cinecittà; at the same time spaghetti westerns revived a genre that Hollywood had almost given up, winning viewers in the US and around the world. From the 1980s onward, instead, periodical debates about the renaissance of Italian cinema would remind of a golden age that had inexorably passed.

2. AMERICANS ARE THE BAD GUYS

Lo chiamavano Bulldozer (*They Call Him Bulldozer*, 1978) and *Bomber* (*Bomber*, 1982) anticipate the confrontation at Sigonella. Both feature a main sequence in which Italian underdogs manage to beat the odds and overcome more powerful and experienced American opponents in the context of a sporting event. In the West, especially after the end of World War II, sports at the international level have provided the arena where nations play at war against each other in time of peace; in these two movies, sport is taken as a more or less “peaceful” means to settle scores between rival camps identified along national lines.

These movies are also later instances of the international drive of Italian cinema based on low-budget genre films. Producer Elio Scardamaglia and director Michele Lupo, who were involved in both productions, had played an important role in the international strategy of Italian cinema. They had already worked together on both swords-and-sandals movies and westerns, and this time their focus was on action comedies for families.

The hero in both movies is played by the imposing Bud Spencer, stage name of Neapolitan Carlo Pedersoli, a figure whose notoriety crossed national borders due to his appearance in several adventure movies for children in partnership with Venetian Mario Girotti, known on the big screen as Terence Hill. Although Spencer was alone in these ventures, the movies replicate many of the clichés made popular by his works with Hill: long sequences of brawls, unwilling involvement in a confrontation against

powerful and arrogant bad guys, Spenser's obsession with food, his strength and his grumpiness, and the use of musical themes to accompany the comical sequences (Carra, 2010: 43–45, 146).

In the first movie Spenser plays Bud Graziano, nicknamed “Bulldozer,” a retired football player who left sports because he was disgusted by widespread game-fixing. He is unwillingly involved in an ongoing confrontation between a group of Italian kids who regularly end up in brawls and fights with a group of US soldiers stationed in Italy and led by the arrogant and rancorous Sergeant Kempfer. To avoid further scandals, it is decided to settle the issue once and for all in a match of American football, where a patched-up team of Italian amateurs is challenged to score just one touchdown against the superior US Army team. The Italians ask Graziano for help. The match, introduced by the performance of the Italian and American national anthems, reaches a crucial point when Kempfer notices how the Italians, in spite of their being amateurs and little training, have succeed in fostering a team spirit and have the potential to score the winning touchdown. To avoid defeat, Kempfer orders his team to stop playing fairly and injure the opponents on purpose. Disgusted by the foul play, Graziano enters the game, and, after getting the ball, starts running towards the goal line. Like a bulldozer, Graziano sweeps away all the American players that try to stop him and, after having brushed off Kempfer himself, scores the winning point.

Four years later, Scardamaglia hired Lupo for a copycat project filmed in the same location and based on a similar plot line. This resulted in the production of *Bomber*, where Spenser plays a retired boxer nicknamed “Bomber,” who had left the sport because he was disgusted by match-fixing. Bomber helps an Italian gym manager train a young, promising amateur, Giorgione, who can take on the boxers of the US Army team and build up the reputation of the gym itself. The US trainer, Rosco Dunn, was a former boxer who some years before had beaten Bomber in a controversial match. Giorgione wins the first fight, but the Americans, with the help of the local mafia, retaliate by burning down the Italian gym and by persuading the Italian fighter to give up sports and take on the more lucrative activity of collecting bribes for a local gangster.

Bomber persuades Giorgione to change his mind and return to train for a fight against Rosco. Introduced by national anthems, the match seems at first unbalanced towards the American Rosco, who has the upper hand. However, Bomber discovers that Giorgione's left hand has been broken, and so he decides to jump in the ring and quickly overwhelms the opponent.

Of course, as products conceived for mere entertainment, these movies don't need to be overburdened with cultural meaning. However, it is interesting to notice how the scripts cast Americans in the role of "bad guys," not just as individual characters, but as an institution—a position which, in post-World War II Italy would more traditionally be associated with the German army. In doing so, these movies are uneasy reminders of the presence of American soldiers on Italian soil after the war, and highlight the strained relationship between US troops and local populations, with Italians complaining about a sort of diplomatic immunity enjoyed by American soldiers.

The identification of Americans as villains is also achieved by exploiting a cliché commonly found in American popular narratives, i.e., the underdog overcoming a more powerful opponent against the odds. As a cultural construction, the underdog narrative appeals to Americans because it reinforces the ideal of a classless society where everyone can achieve success if he/she has the necessary qualities and determination. In these movies, instead, the model underlines Italian resourcefulness and astuteness (*l'arte di arrangiarsi*)—two of the main features on which Italian identity has been constructed after the disastrous experience in World War II (Galli Della Loggia, 2010: 25). The glorification of Italian *arrangiarsi* is all the more evident in *Bulldozer*, which shows Italians who are able to master a game invented in the United States and that was just in its infancy in the Mediterranean country at the time (Rizza, 2011).

3. WE SPEND LIKE AMERICANS

In his comments on the 1974 referendum that validated a recently introduced law allowing for divorce, the intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini remarked that it would have been a gross mistake to consider the vote as a victory of progressivism. While leaders

of the Italian Communist Party celebrated a political statement that showed an unexpected open-mindedness among Italian citizens, Pasolini saw an historical cultural change marked by the middle classes' transition from conservative, religious values to a new hedonistic ideology of consumption. Therefore, the vote signaled the passing of peasant and paleoindustrial civilization in Italy and the advance of a new modernist, falsely tolerant, Americanized bourgeois culture (Pasolini, 1975: 39–40).

Pasolini would soon be proved right. Paul Ginsborg, one of the major historians on contemporary Italy, has sketched a portrait of the new entrepreneurial class that recklessly pursued business success and totally lacked any civic conscience. Its social sphere was defined by hard work and conspicuous consumption (Ginsborg, 1998: 89).

Comedians were quick to pick up on these new social trends and satirize the new bourgeois class. As discussed, in its struggle to secure the largest possible share of a shrinking number of moviegoers, Italian cinema from the late 1970s increasingly came to rely on the popularity of TV personalities, comedians in particular. As Gian Piero Brunetta brilliantly summarized, the new generation of comedians was the “Trojan horse” that helped TV to enter (and contaminate, we can add) the body of Italian cinema (Brunetta, 2007: 600). TV boards had the final say on productions and screenplays and were responsible for the “artistic regression” of the system and its marginalization in international markets (Brunetta, 2007: 600). In fact, whereas Bud Spencer movies used a visual type of comedy that could be enjoyed beyond language barriers, the material of new comedians was so deeply embedded in the Italian TV context that only well-versed TV viewers could understand and enjoy their routines, jokes, and wordplay.

In particular, the show *Drive In*, produced by the new private TV channel owned by future Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, was specifically constructed as collection of images and characters associated with America, with a background set featuring hamburger stands, Cadillacs from the 1950s, and big-breasted pin ups. Comedians in the show enacted parodies of US TV shows and satirized the superficial Americanness of new Italian social types. In fact, according to Antonio Ricci, its creator, “*Drive In* was

born out of my fear of America and of its influence on us, on people who mostly lacked the [necessary] cultural filters” (Oliva, 2014). The same private channels devoted a large part of their air time to soap operas, sitcoms and other US shows, which introduced Italian viewers to social attitudes and styles of consumption alien to their culture.

The huge success enjoyed by *Drive In* convinced producers to finance movie projects using its actors and their impersonations. Examples of these products are *Yuppies—I giovani di successo* (1986), and its unofficial sequel *Yuppies 2* (1986), movies meant to ridicule a new elite of city professionals who had embraced a vulgar, ostentatious attitudes and a petit-bourgeois ethos.

In the transition from small to big screen, however, this offspring of *Drive In* lost all the innovative features (the focus on rhythm and the use of nonsense) that had contributed to its success. In fact, the need to insert the antics of comedians into a plot line forced directors and screenwriters to look back at the situational comedy of the Italian tradition, the *commedia all'italiana*, thus producing a “messy hybrid” of old and new (E., 1981: 63). The plot of both movies revolves around one of the most abused clichés in Italian comedic culture, the efforts by males to seduce women, usually implying acts of adultery. The four protagonists are all engaged in their own pursuit, and their stories intertwine. However, more important than the plot line is the constant reference to a context where conspicuous consumption and materialistic attitudes predominate.

In the opening sequence, for instance, the four main characters are shown in succession as they get ready for another day of work: Giacomo, the copywriter, opens a cupboard containing dozens of pairs of Tods loafers; Lorenzo, the solicitor, is served breakfast by a black butler; and Sandro, the dentist, wears a gold Rolex watch on the cuff of his shirt, a style signifier made popular by Giovanni Agnelli, owner and CEO of Fiat at the time and one of the authorities in matters of elegance and taste. Two magazines aimed at the new business elite, the *Class* and the *Capital*, also figure prominently.

Advertising informs the language of the movie, both on the level of images and on the level of language. In the sequel, *Yuppies 2*,

which was released a few months after the first movie, the narrative is often interpolated with sequences (skiers speeding down white slopes, polo players riding in front of an elegantly dressed audience, waterskiing in the bay of Montecarlo) that resemble TV commercials. As to actors' lines, characters routinely employ advertising lingo, adapting slogans from popular commercials to situations within scenes. For instance, one character uses the expression "guaranteed second-hand"—usually employed in connection with cars—when speaking about an attractive mature woman he is about to spend the night with, while the black butler's master calls him "Tartufon," the name of a chocolate cake. Other examples include expressions such as "They call me Black & Decker," the name of an electric drill which is a not-too-elegant metaphor for sexual power, or the immensely popular "try it to believe it," which was the signature slogan of Aiazzone, a furniture company. Finally, one of the plot lines involves Giacomo, an advertising professional who struggles to create a slogan for a pantyhose company. At the end the character finds the perfect line, and his story is crowned by the showing of the commercial to the client, with a sexually charged close-up on the legs and body of Margherita, the woman Giacomo has pursued since the beginning.

Yuppies watchers are transformed into the consumers of those goods that are repeatedly shown in the film and identified as signifiers of status. This shift becomes more extreme considering the fact that, being distributed by Penta Film, a company owned by Berlusconi, *Yuppies* and similar movies were also meant to be broadcasted on Berlusconi's TV channels a couple of years after the release, with some interruptions for commercials. This way, it is possible to view *Yuppies* and comedies of the same type as belonging in a project that goes beyond mere entertainment but aims to flood viewers with incentives to buy expensive goods.

There are very few direct references to American popular culture in *Yuppies*, but one of these is quite illuminating. In one scene a woman, while having sex in a bathroom during a party, exclaims, "This makes me feel like we're in *Dynasty*," the ABC drama about a wealthy Colorado family, the Carringtons, which enjoyed a significant success in Italy. *Dynasty* focuses on "business, wealth, conspicuous consumption and individualized power

struggles” (Grisprud, 2005: 88), a world that, in their own clumsy way, Italian TV and film industries tried to reproduce.

However, the effort proved to be successful with consumers. The higher disposable income in the 1980s fed a wave of consumerism that targeted individual enjoyment and care for personal appearance (Ginsborg, 1998: 163–164). This emphasis on “look” was branded “Reaganian hedonism,” an expression that highlighted how Italians had finally achieved levels of consumption akin to American ones.

4. THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

The final stage of this brief investigation into the development of Italian-American relationships in the field of Italian cinema of the early 1980s ends with a comedy focused on how Italian characters discover and appropriate the American space. For a long time, the United States has been one of the destinations of choice for Italian immigrants. Between 1890 and 1930, more than 4.5 million Italians immigrated to America (Mangione and Morreale, 1993: 131). The introduction of immigration quotas in 1924 significantly reduced the numbers, but a steady flow of Italians continued to cross the Atlantic in search of jobs and opportunity. In the collective mind, therefore, the Italian who went to America was almost exclusively identified with the immigrant. It is only after the post-World War II economic boom, which made disposable income available to a larger number of Italians, that people began to travel to the United States for leisure, professional advancement, and study rather than for the purpose of immigration.

Interestingly, while the epic of immigration to the United States has been largely ignored by Italian cinema, more recent types of crossing made it quite easily to the big screen, an example being *Vacanze in America* (*Holiday in America*, 1984). Written and directed by the Vanzina brothers, it belongs in the category of comedies conceived for reaping maximum profits during the winter holidays by casting popular TV personalities.

The school trip winds through some of the most iconic places of the country—New York, Nashville, Death Valley, Las Vegas, and California—but as the group progresses in its voyage of discov-

ery, a feeling of disappointment slowly creeps through and ends in the realization that the Golden Land isn't that golden after all.

At the beginning of the story, some students express a sense of anticipation about the things they are going to see and experience: visions of strolls down Fifth Avenue, concerts at Madison Square Garden, parties in Manhattan lofts and, following the clichés of Italian comedies, the women they would meet and possibly seduce. However, as the plot unfolds, the characters are continuously disappointed as the America they had envisioned not only failed to materialize but, more strikingly, they find to be provincial and backward.

During their stay in New York, a group of three students, led by Peo Colombo, engages in pursuing their vision of glamorous American woman. They meet two bargirls in a night club who turn out to be of Italian ancestry. The women lead the students to their suburban home in New Jersey, an immigrant household where people speak Neapolitan dialect, wear undershirts, and worship the memory of folk singer Aurelio Fierro. Peo comments that the place “looks like a low-budget hotel in Caserta,” a Southern Italian town.

The depiction of the United States as a provincial version of Italy is reinforced by another storyline, this one involving Alessio, who is attracted to Antonella, an Italian woman he meets on the plane and initially mistakes for an American. Alessio keeps bumping into Antonella during the trip. On their second accidental encounter, Alessio comments “They say America is so big. To me it looks smaller than Sabaudia [a small beach town near Rome], every time I turn the corner, I bump into you.”

As enthusiasm for the trip wanes, the members of the group feel homesick, and some signifiers of Italian identity take center stage. In one of these scenes, the students are sitting disgusted in front of hamburgers; viewers are told that the group had eaten nothing but hamburgers throughout the trip. Alessio comes to rescue, telling the others that he has brought some bucatini from Italy. A lunch party is immediately organized in one hotel room, with the students relishing the taste of the familiar dish—a scene reminiscent of a classic moment in Italian cinema from Alberto Sordi's *Un americano a Roma* (1954). Later in the movie, the stu-

dents meet a group of tourists from Torino, and the encounter turns into a rematch of the soccer championship game between Juventus, one of Torino's teams, and Roma. Reinforcing the idea of the Italian obsession with the national sport, another character in the movie makes an international phone call to listen to the radio commentary of a game in session.

The narrative of the United States as a backward country juxtaposed with Italy as progressive and modern is highlighted in a short scene dealing with racism. In this scene, two Italian students argue with a white American male in a cowboy hat. The latter objects because the students are trying to enter the hotel bar in the company of two black girls. Don Buro, the priest who acts as team leader, enters the scene and settles the argument by knocking out the cowboy. The scene is consistent with one of the most central elements in the constitution of a post-World War II national identity, the myth of the "good Italian" (*italiani brava gente*). The myth affirmed that racism was alien to Italian culture. Soon after the end of the war, international as well as Italian scholars, drawing on research that would later be disputed, consolidated the idea that Italians "ignored or sabotaged the anti-Semitic policies of the Fascist regime after 1938 or lived in open contradiction to an Italian form of apartheid in the African colonies" (Levy, 2015: 49). The myth became "fully rooted in public opinion, thanks to their aspect of acquittal and reassurance" (Guzzi, 2012: 262), with the marginalization of the role played by Italy in the Holocaust. This myth has proved durable because Italy started to become a destination for migrants from Southern Europe and elsewhere only toward the end of the 1970s, and racism didn't emerge as an everyday social issue until later.

Thus, the Italians portrayed in the movie not only discover the superiority of pasta over hamburgers, they also find themselves to more modern and progressive than the Americans in dealing with racial diversity. The movie reinforces this fact by making use of one of the main structural tools of travel narrative, the reincorporation of the travelers into their society of origin. In the last sequences of the movie the main characters are shown reaffirming their belonging in the Italian society and culture. This return sequence underlies how, after the encounter with America and its culture,

the characters still prefer Italy. The frustrated womanizer Peo Colombo manages to eventually meet an American girl who is on a school trip to Italy. Alessio starts to date an “ordinary” Italian woman from Rome, who has nothing of the cosmopolitan flair that had made Antonella attractive to him. The latter suggests going out together, but Alessio turns her down. Finally, we see Don Buro surrounded by some old men in the countryside, and while he recounts some of the wonderful things he has seen in America, he concludes by saying that nothing there could beat the fresh air of the Lazio countryside.

CONCLUSION: “THE AMERECANO IS HERE TO STAY”

“Things change, but the ‘amerecano’ is here to stay,” said Enrico Vanzina with regard to *Un americano a Roma* (*An American in Rome*, 1954), a movie written and directed by his father Steno that satirizes the post-World War II Italian fascination with all things American. Thirty years later, he would follow in his father’s footsteps parodying a new wave of that same idolization of the United States. However, this time Italy was not the humble “beggar” of the 1950s showered with the dollars of the Marshall Plan. In the mid-1980s, Italy’s relationship with America was recalibrated according to a new economic, political, and cultural confidence. A disillusionment of the mythical limitless possibilities of America emerged alongside the realization that, in order to embrace the American way of life, one didn’t have to cross the Atlantic. This narrative of a new Italian self-awareness and belief in the possibility of treating the United States on an equal footing developed during a period when Italian cinema was losing international market share while the Italian domestic market saw a significant increase in the presence of American films and distributors. The standoff at Sigonella wouldn’t change the inexorable truth that the Italian film and TV industries were in fatal decline; the hold American products had on TV airtime and movie theatres would only increase from that point and go unchallenged for years. The “amerecano” was in Italy to stay.

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