The United States of Italy

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The following comment was submitted to the WSWS *by a reader living in Rome.*

Returning to Rome this summer after two years of absence, I noted some glaring signs of change: a blossoming of McDonalds restaurants, the unprecedented appearance of 24-hour drugstores, malls on the outskirts of the city—smaller-scale replicas of the gigantic American sanctuaries of consumerism—the stronger presence of national and even foreign chains such as, to name one, Blockbuster Video.

How can these signs be interpreted? They are obviously and fundamentally economic changes. Big, global capital begins to penetrate the smaller crevices of the Italian economy, in the retail sector, but even in the small but formerly impregnable fortress of Italian culinary tastes, which seems threatened by the giants of the food industry with their badly fried, pre-cooked, microwavable commodities. These changes herald the demise of the "nation of shopkeepers"—that vibrant omnipresence of small, family-owned shops noted by many of Italy's famous visitors.

These are, of course, also cultural changes. McDonalds may well constitute culinary decay, but its most crucial and interesting aspect is its role as the harbinger of new rhythms, a new way of life. A country where many shops close in the afternoon for about two hours, where more than in perhaps any other nation meals are a crucial social and familial event, where life strikes one as proceeding at a markedly comfortable, human pace, is now increasingly subject to powerful economic pressures.

The political economy of "flexibility", in the name of competitiveness, accelerates the mobility of labour, concentrates its employment, widens its deployment across new shifts and working hours and generally discards the established ways of operating in the service sector. Capital, increasingly freeing itself from the economic fetters of small family ownership and from the legal restrictions of strict labour regulation, institutes what amounts to a collective economic and cultural speed-up for workers and consumers alike.

There lies the importance of McDonalds. Its workers employed outside of the old and crumbling legal labour framework are often employed part-time—and hence forced to supplement their income in other ways—and deployed in shifts that cover day and night. Its consumers, increasingly engaged in work that demands more of their time, come to get their food, fast.

Rome strains its age-old traits to present a new, distorted face: a caricature of an American city. Its citizens are more agitated. They are sent spinning from economic forces into a more hectic pace of labour, and from cultural pressures into the acceptance of a frenzied, and, most importantly, American way of life. The forces unleashed by globalization, to the extent that the United States clings to its faltering world hegemony, come to invest Italy draped in Stars and Stripes.

Are these developments accompanied by transformations in the political and institutional sphere? Fausto Bertinotti, the leader of the Stalinist Rifondazione Comunista Party, believes this to be the case. He speaks often in horror of the "Americanization" of Italian politics.

We should keep in mind that it was Antonio Gramsci—one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party and an intellectual figure of international magnitude—who warned, with reason, that there is nothing more stupid and sterile than blind anti-Americanism on the part of a European. From the standpoint of the working class, the decisive character of the political aspect of "Americanization" is not the mindless parroting of the American model—though the sudden appearance of a donkey symbol among the ranks of the centre-left and of an elephant in the centre-right induces disbelieving stupor—but the relentless

expulsion of the class question from the political sphere.

This offensive is being conducted along three main prongs: the reduction of politics to management and administration, the decline of mass parties in favour of personality contests, the narrowing of the institutional representation of a broad spectrum of political forces into two centrist forces. We may quickly sketch each of these in the Italian context.

Economic questions become a mere technical matter that lies outside the reach of democratic and political control. The brief appearance of an allegedly non-political "technical government"—one composed of bankers and administrators—in the early 1990s in Italy signalled precisely such a turn. The mythological figure of the impartial technocrat survived intact this unfortunate political parenthesis. Its incarnations now still fill the ranks of the current administration, are sent to the highest spheres of European Union in the person of the "apolitical" economist Mario Monti, and even claim the prestigious seat of President of the Republic, with Carlo Azeglio Ciampi.

Along with this technocratic turn, the presence of regional and global imperatives imposed by the European Union and the IMF have shrunk the sphere of what can be the legitimate subject of political decision-making and action. The question of the control of the means of production, for instance, is now closed. It is closed first of all by and for those "leftists" who used to, at least occasionally, pay lip service to it. The current leader of the leftist governmental coalition Massimo D'Alema, in his book *Un Paese Normale*, while proudly flaunting his recently acquired non-communist credentials, reassures the reader that if anyone in his party were to even talk of nationalisation, such a person would be immediately taken away to a mental institution. Even the most timid forms of reformism are now rejected and overturned.

The elimination of the mass party as the prominent political form also undercuts the cultural and structural grounds upon which broad, class-based political movements can develop. The rise of personality-based politics, of which media-magnate Berlusconi represents both the forerunner and most prominent example, at best impoverishes the quality of political discourse by injecting it with shallow, almost commercial subjectivism.

One-person parties such as the Patto Segni, Lista Dini and Bonino are now proliferating. At its worst, this tendency could set the stage for an even more insidious sort of strongman populism that could hijack class-based perspectives along nationalist and racist lines. The existence and behaviour of the quasi-separatist Northern League and fringe formations on the extreme right may already announce dangerous developments.

The elimination of proportional representation and the resulting "bi-polarism" also aims at the normalisation of politics. The effects of the domestication of politics, its enclosure within a narrow fence, are most evident in the American context. The Democratic and Republican parties, though by no means politically equivalent, provide little real choice.

The Donkey's and the Elephant's ass sit on a political space that is at once minute and large. It is large to the extent that the structural features of the American party system tend to exclude the representation of any political position that veers away from the centre. It is minute to the extent that the two existing parties stand in tacit agreement on a great number of fundamental and broad political questions which are left out of the proper boundaries of the "political".

These questions, of course, are precisely those that an independent working class movement could raise. While this process is well under way in Italy, it is still at best an incomplete one. The days of simple proportional representation are gone. Yet the latest referendum on the question, one that asked for the elimination of the residual proportional element in Italy's complex electoral law, was defeated in early June. Signatures will be gathered for a new referendum of the same kind in late July. This event has been officially dubbed by the Radical Party which is organising it, "Referendum Days", in English.