

The passing of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has occasioned articles about his role as a liberal historian. We should not forget, however, that his influence was not limited to the United States. His crucial intervention in changing American policy to favor the postwar evolution of Italian democracy serves as an example when the means by which the United States fosters democracy abroad is being debated.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. got interested in Italy as a youth. His father, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., chair of the Harvard history department, invited anti-Fascist exile professor and champion of Italian democracy, Gaetano Salvemini, to teach at Harvard for a year in 1929. At that time many Americans admired Benito Mussolini and Schlesinger Sr.'s invitation caused an uproar in the U.S. and in Italy. Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell asked him to rescind the offer. Schlesinger's father refused and, in addition, advised Salvemini on how to respond to charges that he had hatched an assassination plot against Il Duce. After 1933, with a new president at Harvard, Salvemini became a regular member of the department and, according to Schlesinger, Jr., "He was a familiar figure in our household when I was growing up. George La Piana [another Italian exile teaching at Harvard] was another friend of my father's, and I heard much talk when young of the hopes La Piana and Salvemini shared for a democratic Italy." Both Italians established the Boston area as a center of Italian-American anti-Fascist activity.

Schlesinger spent time in the OSS during World War II and after that conflict frequently visited Italy, invited by Tullia Zevi whom he had met in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1940. He wrote in an essay for me: "On my visits to Rome in later years, Tullia Zevi would often arrange meetings with leading journalists and politicians. It was at her salon that I first talked with Pietro Nenni and Giuseppe Saragat, and I owe

much to her charm, wisdom, and generosity.”¹ Schlesinger assiduously followed Italian affairs, approving when the CIA intervened with funds to help prevent a Communist victory in the 1948 elections. The USSR had been the first to pour an enormous amount of money into the country before the elections to help the Communists and the U.S. responded.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. keenly felt Salvemini’s influence. After World War II, the Italian Socialists were allied with the Communists and as such frozen out of power by what was called the “American veto.” However, the old Socialist firebrand leader Pietro Nenni realized his error and worked to free his party from the Communist embrace and proposed a center-left government. This was a crucial step for Italian democracy, but the State Department and the Rome Embassy did not trust Nenni and worked with its Italian allies to block the proposal. This was dangerous because the right of center governments had run out of steam and on April 3, 1960 the cabinet of Fernando Tambroni accepted neo-Fascist votes to remain in power. This development caused widespread riots that threatened the country’s democracy.

Schlesinger disapproved of Nenni’s support of the Communists but he and his circle saw already in 1950 that Nenni was trying to break away from the Communists. Schlesinger tells an interesting story of how Dick Crossman, British Labour politician and writer, and Arthur Koestler (editor of The God that Failed) fought over Nenni at a cocktail party in London in September 1950. An enraged Koestler walked out of the house when Crossman insisted that the British Labour Party should resume relations with the PSI, even though he and his wife were supposed to stay with the Crossmans for the night. This incident is an indication of how closely Schlesinger followed Italian affairs

¹ Spencer M. Di Scala, Italian Socialism Between Politics and History (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 184.

even before he joined the Kennedy administration and how he kept in touch with Italians close to the Socialist Party. Schlesinger writes: “In 1952 Nenni began to favor independent PSI electoral slates, and in the spring of 1953 he indicated to the journalist Leo Wollembourg, from whose discerning and exceptionally well-informed dispatches and conversation I learned much in these years, that he was drawing away from the PCI.”²

In 1961 John F. Kennedy replaced Eisenhower and Schlesinger joined Kennedy’s administration as presidential advisor. Schlesinger strongly supported the center-left idea, but the Embassy in Rome, the Italian desk of the State Department, and the CIA’s operations branch—supported by former Ambassador Claire Boothe Luce—shrewdly maneuvered to block the apertura a sinistra. George Lister, who arrived in Rome as First Secretary in 1957 had begun conversations with the Socialists with the approval of Ambassador James D. Zellerbach. He brought in William Colby, CIA Station Chief and later Director of the agency, into the conversation. However, with the arrival in 1959 of Outerbridge Horsey as Deputy Chief of Mission, the Embassy reverted to the hard line imposed by Mrs. Luce. Horsey tried to get Lister fired, and Schlesinger had to intervene to save him. Among Horsey’s Italian allies was Liberal Party leader Giovanni Malagodi, but the Communists also opposed Nenni’s ideas on the center-left.

John F. Kennedy supported a center-left coalition, believing that it could help Italian democracy and become a model for post-Adenauer Germany and post-De Gaulle France. Because he had so much on his plate (the Bay of Pigs, Berlin, the meeting with Khrushchev, problems in Laos), he commissioned Schlesinger to “agitate,” i.e., lead the campaign in changing American policy toward Italy. Schlesinger put together a group of New Frontiersmen (who he called “White House characters”) and an epic battle began within the American establishment on the question. Schlesinger put together a team that

² Ibidem, p. 185.

included administration officials Robert Kennedy, McGeorge Bundy, Roger Hilsman, Averell Harriman, George Ball, Richard Gardner, Arthur Goldberg, and Robert Komer. Outside the administration, labor leaders Victor and Walter Reuther supported the push for American support for the apertura. Schlesinger and the President agreed that Kennedy would signal American support to Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani when he visited Washington, D.C. in June 1961. Schlesinger wrote: “The apertura was not on the State Department’s agenda for the talks, but Kennedy told Fanfani privately that, if the Italian Prime Minister thought the center-left a good idea, we would watch developments with sympathy.”³ However, the entrenched State Department bureaucrats were so successful in obstructing the new policy that in January 1963, Schlesinger and a colleague wrote a memorandum to Kennedy saying that: “Lest you think you run the United States Government, the matter is still under debate.”

In the end, with the support of Americans such as Hubert Humphrey and Italians such as his good friend, FIAT’s Gianni Agnelli, Schlesinger’s campaign succeeded. In July 1963, when Kennedy visited Rome he sent a powerful signal to all that he supported the center-left: “he took Nenni aside at a garden party at the Quirinale Palace and engaged him in a conspicuously long conversation.” Opposition to the center-left now vanished, at least in Washington. In a memo to McGeorge Bundy dated November 22, 1963, Schlesinger detailed the last obstructionist tactics the American Ambassador was employing to block the center-left. On the same day, news of Kennedy’s assassination reached the last left wing Socialist holdouts against the apertura. Shocked by the news, they agreed to proceed with the experiment that proved a breakthrough for Italian democracy.

³ Ibidem, p. 188-189.

But while opposition to the apertura disappeared in Washington, the same did not happen in Italy. The center-left was caught in a crossfire between the conservatives and Communists—who put their own political fortunes and their support of the USSR—before Schlesinger’s hope: “...to regenerate Italian politics, to purify the administration of government, to produce economic and social reforms...”

“As a lover of Italy,’ he said in 1993, “I am still waiting—and hoping.”⁴

Spencer Di Scala

⁴ Ibidem, p. 191.