

The Reception of American Literature in Fascist Italy Based on the Example of John Steinbeck's Novels

Dominika Lipszyc, University of Warsaw, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0001-8208-4890

Abstract: This paper explores the reception of American literature in Fascist Italy, focusing on the interaction between censorship, translation, and the *mito americano* – the cultural myth of the United States as an object of desire and a symbol of anti-fascism. While the regime exercised strict control over mass media, literature remained comparatively less regulated, enabling a flourishing of Anglo-American works. Among these, John Steinbeck's novels occupied a unique position: despite censorship and selective omissions, *Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* resonated strongly with Italian readers, who interpreted his depictions of poverty, struggle, and dignity as indirect critiques of their own society. In contrast, Jack London, already established as a literary classic, inspired Italians through adventure and survival narratives less threatening to the regime. At the same time, Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse offered escapist entertainment and was even tolerated by Mussolini until wartime hostilities demanded its Italianization. Steinbeck, unlike London and Disney, evoked complex emotions – admiration for his moral vision and empathy for the oppressed, combined with unease from authorities wary of his social critique. His popularity illustrates how American culture, mediated through translation, became a subtle but powerful form of literary resistance under Fascism.

This article, by analyzing correspondence, regime directives, and translation techniques, demonstrates that the reception of Steinbeck was shaped not only by ideological pressure but also by translators and publishers operating within Fascist policy. The Italian editions reveal an interesting negotiation between compliance and subversion, where omissions and lexical adjustments served as protective strategies that made publication possible. Ultimately, the case of Steinbeck confirms that translated literature could open a limited yet meaningful sphere of intellectual exchange allowing alternative visions to circulate within an authoritarian system.

Keywords: Fascist Italy, *mito americano*, censorship, translation, American literature, cultural reception

American culture has always enjoyed significant importance in Italy, especially during fascism. For many Italians, being pro-American then meant manifesting their anti-fascist attitude. As Cesare Pavese wrote,

without fascism to oppose, that is, without a historically progressive mindset to embody, even America, no matter how many skyscrapers and cars and soldiers it produces, will no longer be at the forefront of any culture. Without a mindset and without a progressive struggle, it will indeed risk giving itself to allure, even if in the name of its best traditions. (Pavese 1951, 196)

The idea of American culture as a form of literary anti-fascism became especially noticeable in the case of publishing the *Americana* anthology. The whole episode of fighting against censorship soon became a real legend.

At this point, it seems necessary to explain the concept of *mito americano*. I have opted to retain the original term *mito americano* to preserve its rich, specific connotations in Italian literary studies and its numerous meanings. First of all, and generally speaking, *mito americano* is understood as “the idea of America as an object of desire” (Dunnett 2015, 40). However, in literary studies, it refers to the twenty years of Fascism during which the Italian intellectuals presented a particular interest in the United States. And *Americana* anthology became the embodiment of *mito americano*, as far as the role of American literature in Italian society is concerned.

The present paper analyzes the role of American culture in Italy under Fascism, with a particular emphasis on literature. Furthermore, the objective is to determine whether the dictatorship affected its reception, and if so, to what extent. What I am especially interested in are the translations of American writers and the role of censorship in preparing their final versions for publication in Italy.

While conducting the research, I worked mainly with historical, literary, and cultural sources in English and Italian, such as the essays by the Italian writers like Pavese and Vittorini, as well as two editions of the *Americana* anthology. Due to the unavailability of the Italian printed resources, all translations from Italian, unless otherwise noted, are my own. In many cases, I tried to retain the flamboyance of the Italian language, especially when it referred to the translation of correspondence, or in order to reflect the atmosphere of the statements.

The article will focus on the Fascist approach towards censoring books and the publishing industry at the time. In the 1930s, Anglo-American fiction became highly popular amongst Italians, which resulted in a genuine boom in translation. Consequently, during the Fascist years, three important publishing companies were established by private individuals, which have played a vital role in the Italian publishing market to this day. Furthermore, some examples of the Italian State's attempts to regulate the publishing market will be presented. To illustrate how censorship or self-censorship worked, examples of translations of three Steinbeck novels will be given. The article ends with two curious cases of great popularity among Italian readers at the time, namely Jack London's prose and the character of Mickey Mouse.

Fascist Censorship and Publishing Policy

In order to secure as much support as possible and to eliminate the voices of dissatisfaction, Fascism gave special attention to the press, to the cinema, especially the so-called newsreels, and finally to the radio. In fact, the idea was to foster friendly opinions toward the Fascist dictatorship by depicting the reality from a perspective favourable to the regime. Much less attention was paid to books, especially in the early days. It is not surprising that a country with such a high percentage of illiteracy¹ and a low level of readership treated literature with such neglect. The first regulation was a law passed in 1935, which "elevated the State Secretariat for the Press and Propaganda to a Ministry level". With this legislation, the Ministry was granted the authorization to confiscate any "offending publication" (Rundle 2000, 71). Even before the introduction of this law, books could be sequestrated after publication. That is why publishers had to self-regulate to prevent the confiscation of books already published. Even though, during the 1920s, there was no official guidance regarding what could be published and what could not, publishers tried to avoid certain topics.

1 According to some statistics, 20,9% of Italians were illiterate in 1931. However, if we consider the South separately, this number rises to over 38%. One should remember that after the unification of Italy in 1861, the concept of one Italian language was rather abstract, the population from different regions, provinces and even cities or villages spoke their own dialects. Whereas the standard Italian was almost like a foreign language that was taught at schools, or during military service, it was also the official language of the press, radio and cinema.

Among them were pacifism, abortion, incest, suicide, and rape. Other taboos were related to depicting Italians in a negative light or making comments on Italians that could be considered offensive (Dunnett 2002, 101–102). Needless to mention that such obvious matters as the criticism of Mussolini or Fascism were completely unacceptable. After the Lateran Pacts were signed in 1929, the “passages describing sex were not encouraged”. However, not only was sexual behaviour not approved, but also “depiction of emancipated women which [...] might undermine the received view of the male superiority or challenge the centrality of the family to the fascist society” was considered ‘immoral’ and unpublishable (Dunnett 2002, 103).

The Translation Boom and Foreign Literary Hegemony

As far as literature is concerned, there was no distinction between foreign and domestic works; there existed no regulations regarding translations before 1938. Even though the majority of publications in Italy were translations, the regime did not consider their propaganda potential on the same level as that of the press, radio, or films. For Italian readers, translated books played a major role in communicating any novel ideas and trends originating abroad. In fact, only a small group of well-educated readers could read works in the original, while the vast majority resorted to translations. With regard to what may be called the favourite literature among Italians after the unification, the most popular was French, British, and Russian literature. At the beginning of the twentieth century, more than half of the books sold were translations (mostly from French and English) (Forgacs 1990, 26).

Beginning in the 1920s, there was a growing interest in contemporary literature, mainly from Great Britain, the US, Austria, and Germany. The most significant change, however, was the growing popularity of American prose, which became visible especially towards the end of the 1920s (Dunnett 2015, 275–276). Italians highly appreciated Anglo-American popular fiction, leading to a real boom in translation in the 1930s, which contributed to the enormous success of publishing houses such as Mondadori and Bompiani. As odd as it may sound, and despite the limitations of Fascism “throughout the thirties, [...] Italy translated consistently more than any other country in the world” (Rundle 2000, 72).

State Preventive Activities

The growing popularity of foreign literature became an increasingly important issue for the regime. Attempts to put pressure on publishers to increase the share of domestic books did not bring any tangible results, because, firstly, there was no good contemporary Italian literature, and, secondly, by buying foreign books, readers made their choice and thus determined the demand, especially for crime, romance, and adventure novels. Deliberating on Italians and their attitude towards literature, philosopher and historian Antonio Gramsci claimed,

In Italy there is a detachment between the public and writers and the public looks for his/her literature on the outside because it feels more his/her own than the so-called national one. [...] Each nation has its own literature, but it may come to it from another nation, that is, the nation in question can be subordinated to the intellectual and moral hegemony of other nations. (Gramsci 1975, 2253)

For that reason, namely the lack of reference to domestic literature, the gap was filled by foreign literature in the form of translation. What was the reason for the change in the literature censorship caused by the introduction of new bodies and centralization? As mentioned above, censorship activities were sporadic and relied heavily on publishers' actions. Publishers preferred to avoid certain topics rather than take the risk of the regime confiscating inappropriate content and, consequently, of losing invested funds and the potential profit. This had been the case until 1938, when anti-Semitic legislation was introduced after the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis. Even earlier (in the 1930s), a publication permit was required. This procedure included sending to the Ministry a list of items that a publishing house intended to publish and waiting for permission or, in brief, a word that there were no objections.

In 1938, a special commission was set up to check all the translated books back from 1914 and to determine whether their authors were or were not Jews. The following years brought a total ban on publishing books by Jewish authors, except the so-called classics, which, according to the Commission for the Purifying of Books (*Commissione di Bonifica del Libro*), "are by now part of our universal cultural heritage" (Rundle 2000, 76). The Commission also prepared a register

of banned authors, known as the List of Unwelcome Authors in Italy (*Elenco di autori non graditi in Italia*). This register listed writers of Jewish origin, as well as anti-fascist authors.

Key Players: Mondadori, Bompiani, and Einaudi

The popularity of imported fiction contributed to the development and success of some editors. Among them, it is necessary to mention the Mondadori publishing house, which was established in Milan in 1919 by Arnaldo Mondadori. It had been publishing such authors as Gabriele D'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, and Francis Scott Fitzgerald. Another important company, as far as American fiction is concerned, has been Bompiani, founded also in Milan by Valentino Bompiani in 1929. The firm acquired the rights to publish John Steinbeck. When his novels appeared on the Italian market, they were followed by a successful advertising campaign and became highly popular. For instance, *The Grapes of Wrath* was translated as *Furore* and was promoted as "the book at the top of all the charts" (Dunnett 2015, 279). The third one, a little less eminent, was Einaudi, founded in Turin by Giulio Einaudi in 1933. Its series *Narratori stranieri tradotti* (Translated Foreign Storytellers) contributed to the presence of translated fiction in Italy with the publications of the works by such American authors as Henry James, Herman Melville, and Gertrude Stein. During Fascism, publishing companies remained in private hands and, especially at the beginning, they were required to regulate themselves in order to survive in the market, competing for a rather small readership.

Censorship and Self-Censorship: Analysis of Steinbeck's Translations

The idea of self-censorship of the publishing industry holds considerable appeal as a research topic. In this case, it enables me to examine the changes made in the translation of Steinbeck's novels. One should note right away, however, that it is not entirely clear whether and to what extent the changes were a result of external censorship and to what extent they were due to intentional self-regulation. Sometimes it was the change of the title; for example, *God's Little Acre* by Erskine Caldwell was transformed into *Il piccolo campo* (literally: *The Small Field*). Despite this alteration, the already published novel was confiscated due to its licentious content (Dunnett 2002, 103).

As far as Steinbeck is concerned, *Tortilla Flat* was his first novel translated into Italian in 1939 by Elio Vittorini as *Pian della Tortilla*. Earlier, Vittorini wrote to Bompiani recommending the book and offering himself as a translator. Given the novel's subject matter, it may be surprising that the editor chose to publish it in Fascist Italy. Topics such as the freedom of an individual and the freedom from all constraints and restrictions might have been considered offensive to the regime; however, because the novel is set in the United States, it was most likely read as having anarchist properties. Nevertheless, had it been written by an Italian author, the novel would likely not have been accepted by the authorities, which issued guidelines emphasizing the need for a cautious approach to anti-fascist sentiments. For instance, measures were taken by the Ministry of Popular Culture to prevent "any further circulation in Italy, both in the original and Italian translation, of those foreign books whose content does not appear to be consonant with the principles of Fascism, either politically or morally speaking" (Dunnett 2002, 106).

Although the novel was published after all, some changes concerning anti-Italian remarks had been made. In the original version, we read,

Race antipathy overcame Danny's good sense. He menaced the fishermen. "Sicilian bastards," he called them, and "Scum from the prison island," and "Dogs of dogs of dogs." He cried "Chinga tu madre, Piojo." He thumbed his nose and made obscene gestures below his waist. The fishermen only grinned and shifted their oars and said. "Hello Danny. When'd you get home? Come around tonight. We got new wine." Danny was outraged. He screamed, "Pon un condo a la cabeza." They called, "Good-by, Danny. See you tonight." (Steinbeck 1995, 6)

The translator had to resort to using certain translation techniques, such as the omission of an entire passage that may have been offensive for Italian readers: "Ohi," egli gridò vedendoli. Quelli gli risposero: "Ciao, Danny. Passa stasera" (Steinbeck 1939, 14) ["Hi", he called out when he saw them. They replied: "Hello, Danny. Come by tonight"]. On the other hand, all the anti-Semitic references are present in Vittorini's translation. We can only wonder what would have happened before 1938 (when anti-Semitic legislation was introduced): whether Vittorini would have translated or omitted them.

Another novel, *In Dubious Battle*, was translated by Eugenio Montale as *La Battaglia* and published in 1940. Because of its subject, Bompiani had certain doubts about obtaining the censors' approval, which he expressed in a letter to Emilio Cecchi, a literary critic. In response, Cecchi expressed his approval, adding that the novel would bring the image of the American worker closer to the Italian reader. What is more, "the author's attitude is impartial, and he ends with a condemnation of the 'Reds'; an intelligent censor would support publishing the book in Italian" (Dunnett 2002, 108). As is well-known, Bompiani felt reassured by Cecchi and decided to complete the project. Another letter, this time written by Montale and addressed to the editor, reveals to us the translator's workshop. More precisely, he reveals some difficulties he encountered while translating American slang, as well as his approach towards some unfavourable observations regarding Italians:

The book is full of slang and so far removed from our own world that I was unable to attempt a complete transfusion that might make an Italian book out of it. I have trodden a line between a literal translation and re-creation. I have rendered the slang (not always, however) using coarse colloquialism and even some anacolutha – so as not to create too great a gap between the dialogue and the narrative. I removed two disagreeable references to Italy, and all allusions to Communism, given that Steinbeck talks mostly about the "radical party," which is the expression that I employed. But apart from this, the translation is unabridged. I'll make some slight amendments to the proofs but these won't incur expenses or cause any difficulty. (Dunnett 2002, 109–110)

Those "disagreeable references to Italy" were omitted in Montale's translation. The first one reads, "They've got this valley organized like Italy. Food supply's cut off now" (Steinbeck 1974, 156), while the translation: "La valle è troppo organizzata. E ci hanno tagliato i viveri" (Steinbeck 1940, 232) [The valley is too organized]. In the second reference to Italy, we read,

Doc Burton was snatched last night. I think he was. Doc was not a man to run out on us, but he is gone. This valley is organized like Italy. The vigilantes are raising hell. [...] if we don't get some

outside help I am afraid we are sunk. I never ran into a place that was so God-damn organized. About three men control the situation" (Steinbeck 1974, 227).

Here the key sentence was translated as follows, "La valle è troppo organizzata. I vigili fanno un putiferio"² [The valley is too organized].

There is also a third remark regarding Italians, which was left untouched: "With Dakin in the tent sat Burke, a lowering, sullen Irishman, and two short Italian men, who looked very much alike" (Steinbeck 1974, 110). The translation into Italian is practically literal: "Erano con Dakin, Burke, un basso e tetro irlandese e due italiani di bassa statura e molto somiglianti tra loro" (Steinbeck 1940, 164). Most likely, Montale felt that this kind of racial discrimination or stereotyping would not lead to the censors rejecting the book.

Prior to publication, it was required by the Ministry of Popular Culture to prepare an introductory note that "emphasizes that the novel contains interesting passages on the social struggles and the economic conflicts of American democracy" (Dunnett, 2002, 111). The writing was prepared by Montale, however, in the book it appeared as an anonymous editorial note (on Montale's explicit request). As recommended by the Ministry, there is a reference to the context of the novel: "This is a novel about labor, and about strikes and, as such, it reflects the social and economic distress of North America today". Writing as required by the Ministry, Montale further mentioned that various situations described in the novel may seem "unfamiliar" to the Italian reader, since they live in "a country where class struggle, as understood by Steinbeck, no longer exists" (Steinbeck 1940, v). By saying so, Montale emphasized that the novel could not be considered a threat to Fascist ideology because the action takes place on a different continent and the Italian reader cannot identify with it. Cunningly, he suggests that the publication

2 In this case, I cannot personally agree with the translation of 'vigilantes' to Italian 'vigili'. They are not equivalents, as 'vigilantes' should be translated as 'vigilanti' or 'giustizieri', and not 'vigile', which adequately would have to be translated as 'traffic policeman' or 'traffic warden'. On the other hand, the choice seems intentional because this term is translated in that way throughout the entire novel. What is more, in one passage the term 'vigilante' is explained: "who in hell are these vigilantes? Why, they the dirties guys in any town. [...] The owners use 'em, tell 'em: 'We have to protect people against reds.' Y see that let 'em burn houses and torture and beat people with no danger. And that's all they want to do, anyway. They've got no guts; they'll only shoot from cover, or gang a man when they ten to one. I guess they're about the worst scum in the world" (Steinbeck 1974, 133-134).

of the novel would highlight the tolerant approach of the regime: "Perhaps Steinbeck, who sees the reactionary forces at work everywhere, will be astounded to see his book translated into our language" (Steinbeck 1940, vi).

The last of Steinbeck's novels to be presented here is *The Grapes of Wrath*, translated by Carlo Coardi as *Furore* (Fury) in January 1940. By November 1941, there had been six reprints, and they all sold out. As John Diggins, a professor of history, has stated,

Fascist authorities deliberately published John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, assuming its depressing agrarian scenes would demonstrate the virtues of Corporate State to Italian intellectuals. But the strategy backfired; instead, Italians came to admire a country which allowed authors like Steinbeck and Lillian Smith to write such caustic social criticism. (Diggins 1972, 251)

In the case of this novel, there are no evident signs of intervention in the translated text, only a refusal of another reprint in 1942 with the following explanation: "the Ministry does not consider it opportune, at least for the time being, for the volume in question to be reprinted, since the content of the novel is incompatible with our ideas and our customs" (Dunnett 2002, 114).

As argued earlier, American culture played an important role in Italian society. Italians loved American films, music, and books; moreover, the regime did not restrict access to them, even though Fascism appeared anti-American. The situation changed in December 1941, when the United States became Italy's official war enemy. For this reason, the Ministry announced that the timing of publication was inadequate. Afterwards it was also impossible to reprint novels already in circulation, such as *La battaglia*, which the Ministry turned down with the following justification: "Given that the content and the spirit of the book *In Dubious Battle* by John Steinbeck do not appear generally speaking to be in conformity with the principles of our age, we believe it is opportune for your publishing house not to undertake any further reprints of this volume" (Dunnett, 2002, 115).

Alternative American Cultural Products: London and Disney

In order to acquaint oneself more specifically with the regime's approach towards America and its cultural products, I wish to present two interesting cases.

The first one is the relentless popularity of Jack London's books, which were translated in the 1920s and, amazingly, "have never been out of print in Italy" (Dunnett 2015, 310). His novels and short stories were published as regular collections, and some of them appeared in episodes in magazines and newspapers. Of course, this was not only the case in Italy, as London's writing was much adored in most European countries.

The second one is the cartoon character Mickey Mouse. For the first time, it appeared in *Illustrazione del Popolo* in 1930, a supplement to *Gazzetta del Popolo* (Fossati 1980, 77). Topolino (the Italian translation of Mickey Mouse) gained immediate popularity. Among its fans was the youngest son of Mussolini, Romano, who had been subscribing to comics since 1936. According to a legend, Mussolini, being a great fan of Disney's cartoons, "gave the comic book series a reprieve" (Dunnett 2015, 348). Equally important is Walt Disney's visit to Italy in 1935, when he was officially received by Mussolini and then hosted at the Duce's house, Villa Torlonia.

Notwithstanding, in 1942, when the United States became a potential enemy of Italy and fascist authorities banned everything 'made in the USA', Topolino was converted into a boy called Tuffolino and Minnie into a girl called Mimma. Due to the enormous popularity of the comics, the regime decided to Italianize its main characters, instead of banning them entirely. The comics with the new characters were published until the end of 1943. Finally, the real Topolino returned in December 1945.

Undoubtedly, Italian children, who loved reading comics with their favorite characters, succumbed to the charm of Mickey Mouse. Similarly, yet in a quite different fashion, Mickey Mouse appeared appealing to Fascist authorities. A positive approach to life, widely promoted in the youth and children's organizations, could be easily found in Topolino's personality.

Conclusion

The article has examined the reception of American culture in Fascist Italy, focusing on the translation and censorship of American literature. While Mussolini's regime tightly controlled mass media like cinema, radio, and the press, books initially received less scrutiny, which allowed Anglo-American literature, especially contemporary fiction, to flourish in translation throughout the 1930s. Italy became one of the most active translators in the world, largely due to the popularity of American authors.

American literature became tied to the concept of *mito americano* – an idea of the United States as a land of freedom, modernity, and anti-fascist aspiration. Publishing houses such as Mondadori, Bompiani, and Einaudi thrived by translating American works, with Steinbeck becoming a central figure. His novels, though censored or slightly altered to omit offensive references to Italians or to downplay communism, resonated strongly with readers. *The Grapes of Wrath* in particular gained immense popularity, despite Fascist hopes that it would showcase the failures of American democracy. Instead, Italians admired a society that tolerated such critical voices.

By contrast, Jack London's works had been consistently popular since the 1920s, admired for their adventurous spirit and socialist undertones. Disney's Mickey Mouse (Topolino) represented another facet of America's cultural allure – an apolitical, cheerful icon embraced by both children and even Mussolini's own family, until wartime hostilities forced an Italianized version.

Steinbeck's impact lay in the immediacy and realism of his themes. Unlike London's allegorical adventure or Disney's comic optimism, Steinbeck's novels (*Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle*, *The Grapes of Wrath*) addressed class struggle, migration, hunger, and dignity. Italians under Fascism recognized parallels with their own hardships. Steinbeck's empathy for the marginalized resonated as both a literary and moral force. Reading his works meant not only enjoying a foreign novel but also encountering a vision of justice and human solidarity absent in Fascist rhetoric.

Thus, Steinbeck embodied the *mito americano* in its most political sense: America as a land where dissent was possible, where literature could speak truth to power, and where the oppressed had a voice.

Bibliography

- Diggins, John. 1972. *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dunnett, Jane. 2002. "Foreign Literature in Fascist Italy: Circulation and Censorship." *TTR*, Volume 15, Number 2.
- Dunnett, Jane. 2015. *The 'mito americano' and Italian Literary Culture under Fascism*. Studi e testi di Palazzo Serra. Roma: Aracne Editrice.
- Forgacs, David. 1990. *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880-1980: Cultural Industries, Politics and the Public*. Manchester: MUP.

- Fossati, Franco. 1980. *Topolino. Storia del topo più famoso del mondo*. Milano: Gammalibri.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1975 "Critica letteraria". Quaderno 23, Vol. 3. Torino: Einaudi.
- Pavese, Cesare. 1951. *La letteratura americana e altri saggi*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Rundle, Christopher. 2000. "The Censorship of Translation in Fascist Italy." *The Translator* 6 (1).
- Steinbeck, John. 1974. *In Dubious Battle*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Steinbeck, John. 1940. *La battaglia*. Translated by Eugenio Montale. Milano: Bompiani.
- Steinbeck, John. 1939. *Pian della Tortilla*. Translated by Elio Vittorini. Milano: Bompiani.
- Steinbeck, John. 1995. "Tortilla Flat." In *The Short Novels*. London: Minerva.



© by the author, licensee *Polish Journal of English Studies*. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Received: 2025-10-24; reviewed 2025-11-05; accepted 2025-11-30

DOI 10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.0820
