

Election Madness: Obamarama

Pasquale Verdicchio (November 10, 2008)



Italian response to US elections brings forth interesting debates and views on race.

I am in Rome, where the election was followed with interest in many locations...piazze, bars and the American Embassy. Di Caprio led an Obama chorus in some restaurant in the city and most television stations dropped their usual programming of laughable entertainment to cover the elections...I was able to stay up until 3 am to follow most of it...seemed that exit polls contradicted the initial counts...Ohio was still McCain's...but I woke up to cheering at around 6 am when it seemed that it had all gone Obama's way...



first thing I did was to walk into Piazza Farnese to purchase left to right newspapers...Il manifesto, La repubblica and Libero...the announcements and headlines represented the political spectrum well and all seem to agree that while most of the changes will take place at the national level, that internationally US interests will remain US interests and that's that! ... from the left there is at least a sense that this election will bring more of an opening in international relations and end the unilateralism that has reigned for the last 8 years...whatever the spectrum of interest and interpretation of this election...and this had definitely been a very closely followed campaign (aside from Berlusconi, who declared that he needed to get up early in the morning and so was going straight to bed)...the headlines and representations of Obama speak volumes to Italians' own relationship to race issues...while many celebrate this move and declare "the end of racism in America" others quickly point out and admit that it will take a long time for this to happen in Italy...I have included a photo of two headlines that demonstrate the struggle of Italians in dealing with race except within some very well defined limits that are those of film and a very generally understood American culture, as well as an inability to go beyond the usual, old and racist representations of "neri" as a threat and a danger to "white" civilization...

Il manifesto plays with the film title to present Obama's victory, which is innocent enough but not innocent enough because its use admits too much ignorance of race relations in the US...rather of Guess Who's Coming to Dinner for many white americans this may be more the Xian declaration of "the chickens have come home to roost"...the right wing Libero paper plays on this fear of black (especially black men) with its full page illustration of a dark, angry, shouting and threatening Obama...quite the opposite of what we have witnessed from this now president but the image recalls some of the WWII posters of African American servicemen who, with much the same facial and physical expressions represented in this illustration, were shown pillaging churches, monuments and cities and threatening Italian women with rape...

so, just a few quick observations before my time on this computer runs out...but have a look at this illustration and go back to have a glance at those posters from WWII...images that are not altogether gone from Italian culture if one looks for them on coffee cups, sugar packets and candy covers...the thick-lipped threatening mumbling sex-starved black is still apparent and living in the imagination of many Italians even as they support this "change" in American and world politics...

ciao

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