



Roger Cohen: Nationalists in Italy and US? I Believe in the Power of Democracy

C. B. (February 05, 2019)



The New York Times columnist can be both passionate and rational when he talks about two countries that he loves, Italy and the US. Although in these nations “things can sometimes go to hell,” he firmly believes in the strengths of democratic institutions and therefore in a better future: “America is an idea or it is nothing.”

In a speech of about ten minutes during a luncheon at Il Gattopardo restaurant, Roger Cohen, who received the “GEI Friendship Award,” was able to express his admiration for the beauty of Italy “con tutte quelle chiese” (with all those churches) as well as giving a diplomatic but also firm analysis about the political situation in Italy, Europe and in the US to then close with a juicy, personal episode about himself and the late Avvocato Gianni Agnelli.

As a tribute to his hosts, the GEI - Gruppo Esponenti Italiani (Italian Esponents Group), but also as a genuine homage to the country where he lived as a correspondent in the 1980s, Cohen praised Italy



where, “when people look at you, they actually look at you,” and where relationships are not reduced to a transactional function based on the question “what can you do for me and preferably what can you do for me in a hurry.”

Sure, Italy is also the country where bureaucracy is a nightmare, he recognizes, “but there is something unchanging in Italy that I noticed when I went back many years later. I went to some restaurants that I used to frequent and they were cheering at me with ‘ah buongiorno, signor Cohen come va?’ Like time has never passed.”

There, at the restaurant called after Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s only novel (The Leopard, 1958), he mentions one of the book’s most memorable quotes: “Sometimes everything has to change for everything to stay the same, and that’s sometimes true, but sometimes everything goes to hell.” Cohen, who lived in fifteen different countries during his career as a correspondent, refers to the nationalist and xenophobic waves that are forming across the world, from Europe to America.

“In the 1990s, we thought that our liberal western democracies would have continued to prosper; well they haven’t but we have to recognize that these waves don’t come from nowhere,” he says, “they are in fact generated by feelings of inequality and of globalization seen as a club for the privileged that are experienced by people whose votes have produced these changes.”

“As a naturalized American, I do believe in American values but we elected a narcissist that is more drawn to an autocratic like Kim Jong Un than a democratic leader like Angela Merkel, how did we ever come to this?” Cohen says before launching one of the central concepts of his short but impactful speech: “America is an idea or it is nothing. The United States is a nation of immigrants and no wall can change this fact. It is an idea associated to those values that I have mentioned and the absence of values that our president has been projecting constitutes an aberration. Nonetheless, I continue to have faith in our constitution and in my own profession, in a free press. And it is harmful that the president continues to call us the enemies of the people, a pure totalitarian phrase. But I do believe in the strength of our institutions and that a better America will emerge again.”

However, talking about Italy, the Five-Star Movement, the Lega with Matteo Salvini “and his often xenophobic views,” Cohen believes that it is very important to recognize that the Italian democracy was respected and that the president asked the winner of the election to form a government. “I believe that the vote must always be respected and now this Italian government has been put to a test.”

He then closes his speech with an anecdote regarding Fiat patron Gianni Agnelli, also known as l’Avvocato (The Lawyer), who asked Cohen to become his biographer. During their meetings, while the Avvocato was stuck at home with a broken leg, the journalist became more and more revered by Agnelli’s entourage as his relationship with the powerful businessman was getting closer. Cohen could measure this increasing respect for him by the different titles that were conferred to him, from a common “signore” (mister), to “dottore” (doctor), and up to “professore” (professor) and “avvocato” until the very high level of “ingegnere” (engineer). “I will always be grateful to Italy for that!”



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