

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Buffalo Bill's Wild West, cowboys, and the fate of the western in Italy

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Abstract

This article examines the first tour of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* in Italy and the so-called '*sfida dei butteri*' (the challenge of the Italian cowboys of the Pontine marshes), which took place in Rome in March 1890. Analysing nineteenth-century Italian newspapers and photographs, I demonstrate that populist, anti-capitalist, and anti-American sentiments marked the Italian media's responses to the American show. In the historical context of Italy's socioeconomic crisis and of the first phase of colonial expansion in Africa (1870–1922), the mixed reception of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, amplified by the media event of the *sfida*, shaped the fate of the western genre in Italy.

Keywords: *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*; cowboys; western genre; colonialism; Americanism

When *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* toured Italy in 1890, local and American newspapers reported that Italians were amazed by the exhilarating performances of bronco riders and sharpshooters, and by the display of indigenous American peoples. For some, the success of Colonel William F. Cody (aka Buffalo Bill) had been especially 'unprecedented' in Rome, where Pope Leo XIII 'appeared delighted to see [him]', and where the American cowboys raced against their Italian counterparts, the so-called *butteri* (*Galignani Messenger* 1890). Extant scholarship on the tour in Italy supports this argument, agreeing that the arrival of the show marked a turning point in the development of the Italian western and the philosophy that grounds it (Pollone 2020, 7; Cottini 2019, 90). A combination of circus acts and dramatisations of life on the American frontier, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* fascinated Italian audiences by showcasing 'industrial civilisation' while also representing savage life (Rydell and Kroes 2005, 113). A massive advertisement campaign anticipated the arrival of the 18 railroad cars in six Italian cities (Naples, Rome, Florence, Bologna, Milan and Verona), transporting the troupe, animals and equipment. The Americans unloaded with impressive speed prefabricated grandstands to build an arena and props that ranged from fireweapons to the Deadwood stagecoach from Nebraska. The arena featured a painted backdrop to create the illusion of the American western prairie, while an adjacent camp included a massive kitchen and dining hall for the hundreds of troupe members. The camp offered to ticket holders an exhibit of Lakhóta chiefs and their families attending to daily activities, in what was by then already a tradition of ethically questionable

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'village spectacles' of exotic and primitive tribes from the American West, as well as from Africa (Abbattista 2013, 270–271). The cowboys, Anglo-American and Mexican American workers of the range, lived in this camp side by side with indigenous people, and appeared to European visitors as in-between figures of savagery and civilisation, censured for their proclivity to violence and scarce hygiene, but admired for their endurance of hardships and, of course, their riding skills (Westermeier 1975, 289).¹ The American circus, described in US publicity as an educational event, celebrated imperialist politics and technological advancement, branding the Winchester rifle as 'the agent of civilisation' and Buffalo Bill (the cowboy, the buffalo hunter and the scout in the American Indian Wars) as the Hero of the Far West.² At the time of Italy's first attempts of colonial expansion in East Africa, the rhetoric of the American West sustained the superiority of the Western world and of the 'White man's civilising mission', and thus found resonance in colonial discourse (Rydell and Kroes 2005, 111; Cottini 2019, 93). Moreover, according to Luca Cottini, the show succeeded in its project to legitimate American culture in Europe: 'Cody's tour (of only five cities [sic]) contributed to create positive attitudes towards the USA,' he writes, at a time of widespread criticism of the same country's political economy (Cottini 2019, 92).

A careful reading of media coverage of the show reveals a more complex picture, one that says something about the unique appropriation of the American western genre in Italy and, more broadly, about the relationship between Italian and American modernities. My research demonstrates that populist, anti-American and anticolonial sentiments marked the Italian media's responses to the American show and especially to its Roman tour. Cody's success in Italy depended on incorporated strategies of advertising, public relations and marketing rehearsed by his manager John M. Burke for more than 30 years (Berger 2002, 236–239). Against this well-oiled machine of modern mass entertainment, and in the context of widespread socioeconomic crisis, the Italian press waged its battle. In popular newspapers, Buffalo Bill was disparaged for his fakeness by reporters who were suspicious of his show, considered an epitome of American consumerism. By 'popular', I refer to publications that targeted lower middle- and working-class readers. In the case of the Roman daily *Il Messaggero*, I also refer to the remarkable sales of about 45,000 copies per day by the time of the tour, and to the practice of hiring non-professional informants who received 50 cents for any detail regarding events reported in the news. In the so-called newspaper of the 'maids and the horsemen' (*delle serve e dei cocchieri*), the noun *americanata* was used to describe bombastic, exaggerated and/or tacky behaviour and claims, which reporters attributed to Buffalo Bill and his *soci*, including the show's manager Nate Salsbury. Whereas the term had been in use since the 1870s to refer to 'an odd, spectacular event resulting from the childish ambition and graceless enthusiasm of its organizers' (Bonsaver 2023, 68), in this context, *americanata* is not really employed to refer to a bizarre curiosity; rather, it describes something of which only a swindler is capable.

While disparaging Cody, these same reports drew attention to the American cowboys, who broke wild horses and tamed buffaloes, and to the *butteri* of the Pontine marshes, a swampy area just south of Rome, in the province of Latina. In this article, I shed light on the political relevance of this focus on the workers of the ranch, rather than on the hero frontiersmen, and examine a media event that cast them as protagonists: the so-called '*sfida dei butteri*' (the contest of the Italian herdsman). Between 4 and 9 March 1890, the American cowboys faced off against the *butteri* in a series of challenges (which conflicting reports often compressed into one). The competition was used in the USA (in the show's publicity and in the press) to advertise the superior skills of the American men, while in Italy it generated a long-lasting myth that is still very much alive today on social media. For some, it was the glorious day when the American cowboys tamed the Italian *puledri* furnished by Onorato Caetani, the Duke of Sermoneta, from his

ranch (*tenuta*) in the Pontine marshes and thus symbolically conquered Rome. For others, it was the afternoon when the Italian *butteri* won against Buffalo Bill and his cowboys, taming the American horses, but they never collected their prize because the Americans refused to pay (Di Tillo 2013; Andreoli 2022). A detailed historical reconstruction of how the events unfolded can only be based on documents such as news reports or personal memoirs, which are subjective and/or biased, and which show many discrepancies.³ In fact, I am interested in the *sfida* as an instance of fakelore, whose power is due not to an enduring popular tradition of storytelling but to the skilful practices of mass media journalism.⁴ My argument is that the case of the Roman challenge (and its reverberation throughout the Italian tour and back to the USA) is key to understand anti-American sentiments in Italy, which coexisted – and still coexist – with those of amazement and fascination. These sentiments are symptoms of an already existing and growing political movement that was populist and anti-capitalist in nature, and which found in media outlets a powerful means to channel social discontent and steer public opinion.

To provide an accurate map of mixed reviews of the show and of the *sfida*, I examine hundreds of press clippings both in English and in Italian collected in the ‘Scrapbook of Rome’, which is accessible digitally from the McCracken Research Library of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. I also consider reports not included in the Scrapbook and published in *Il Messaggero* and another Roman newspaper, *Don Chisciote della Mancia*, during the show’s sojourn in Rome (21 February–10 March 1890).⁵ If one reads these documents comprehensively, one understands that the *mise-en-scène* of the American frontier, as the place where modern civilisation conquers savagery, is a racialised space in which Italians struggle to define themselves – against the Americans – as a people and as a nation. To Italian audiences, the history of white American men’s domination of primitive spaces and indigenous people could appear as a re-enforcement of Eurocentric politics of imperialism, from which they feared to be excluded, but also as a reminder of their own submission to the economic power of the ex-colony that is the United States of America. In the shadow of Italy’s history of foreign domination and its cultural positioning as the ‘other’ Europe (southern, exotic, backward and racially ‘in-between’), negative reception of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* and the narrative of the *sfida* projected the ambiguities of individual and collective identities.

The illusion was (not) perfect

The exceptional echo that the show created in the Italian press is noted in *The Daily Sun*, which lists names of newspapers whose clippings were sent to *The Daily Sun* and Drovers Journal Publishing by ‘Buffalo Bill’ [sic] himself: *La Tribuna*, *Il Diritto*, *Il Messaggero*, *L’Osservatore Romano* and *Don Chisciote della Mancia*. All these clippings in the ‘Scrapbook of Rome’ ‘speak of the show and its enterprising proprietor in terms of enthusiastic praise’, for ‘the Eternal City is agitated from center to circumference’ (*Daily Sun* 1890). Yet, from the very beginning, and despite the massive sales, Italian media did not shy away from expressing scepticism. Cody (or Burke on his behalf, most likely) selected only positive reviews to be sent to *The Daily Sun*. But the ‘Scrapbook’ contains numerous negative comments as well (about 40 different articles or cartoons, to be precise); and it is curious how little attention they have received in the scholarship. It is not really a matter of downplaying the uniqueness or popularity of the event, which is undeniable; rather, my point is that the show catalysed existing social and cultural conflicts, which need to be historically contextualised. I am also aware that anti-Americanism in Italy predates the arrival of Cody in Rome, and it is not unique to the reception of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*; however, scholars have not paid attention to how specifically the latter triggered critiques of American culture, politics and society; and how the show may have nurtured, rather than smoothed, arguments against consumerism and/or imperialism.

At the core of these arguments was the show's claim of 'authenticity'. According to Rydell and Kroes, Europeans fell for 'this ploy' and 'never sat back to call Buffalo Bill's bluff in that respect' (2005, 116–117). On the contrary, newspapers in Rome (*Il Messaggero*, *Don Chisciotte della Mancina*, *La Tribuna Illustrata*, *Il Popolo Romano*) and Florence (*La Lotta*, *Il Corriere Italiano*, *La Chiacchera*, *Il Vero Monello*) examined and lampooned Buffalo Bill, the cowboys and the Native Americans, as well as the buffaloes and broncos, for the staged nature of their actions. To be noted, when arguing against the show's 'truthfulness', Italian journalists were questioning not just its aesthetics but also its politics. To raise doubts as to whether cowboys, indigenous people, buffaloes and bronchos were real or not (domesticated animals or Italians hired to play the part) meant to challenge American superiority in the circus business and to profile Americans as mendacious and untrustworthy; to insist that Buffalo Bill's mannerisms and penchant for the upper classes should be taken as a sign of imposture signified a critique of both his masculinity and national identity (thus he was, like all Americans, both effeminate and disingenuous). Cody's entrepreneurial skills were also the target of satire: Teodoro Serrao writes, 'Lucky man, this fearless man, who risked his life so many times to then find a way to make money by putting his biography on stage' (Serrao 1890).

Two dailies, *Il Popolo Romano* and *Don Chisciotte della Mancina*, criticised the show from its very first performance, voicing disappointment due to its inability to 'create illusion' (*Il Popolo Romano* 1890; *Don Chisciotte della Mancina* 1890). According to 'rePorter', the performance soon becomes boring because, 'while the evidence in the arena should excite those who read about the deeds of Redskins and the fight of their destroyers, the disenchantment is annoying and it's just better to read a travel fiction' (rePorter 1890).⁶ Here, rePorter's comment addresses the ties between the quest for authenticity and the illusion on which the show's realism is based – the *mise-en-scène* made visible, one might say, the artifice of a media product that lacked the mimetic power that photography or the diorama already had attained. In another article, rePorter similarly makes fun of the cowboys because they appear to struggle when they are riding 'trained bucking horses'. The suggestion that horses are not 'really' wild and that cowboys are not 'really' breaking them was put in print often, and not only in this publication. By the end of the week, the widely read *La Tribuna Illustrata* claimed that the 'choreographed appearance' of the show has led the well-known Roman scepticism to take the upper hand over the excitement. According to the author, spectators were being fooled by the American show, which promised, without delivering, a trip to the Wild West for those sitting in the arena. Allegedly, two-thirds of the audience were heard shouting from the stands: '[T]hey are Indians from Trastevere!' (*La Tribuna Illustrata* 1890).

The truth, the myth and the cowboys

Historians tell us that Cody would have never allowed a Roman *popolano* to play the part of the indigenous warrior. At the same time, the outraged Roman spectators quoted in *La Tribuna Illustrata* are a good illustration of Louis Warren's words: 'For all its devotion to "authentic" racial types and historic blood feud, to look beneath the surface of show publicity is to realize the depths of Cody's artful deception of race' (Warren 2005, 397). As a matter of fact, whereas Cody did not allow anyone other than a Lakhóta to play the 'Indian', individuals like the Tejano Anthony (Tony) Jr. Esquivel, whom *Il Messaggero* names the winner of the Roman *sfida*, could take on the role of the 'half-breed' vaquero and of the white American cowboy, sometimes even during the same performance. The 'bluff', in this context, was the constructed nature of whiteness, as embodied by the cowboys who were, inside as outside the arena, not always white. Whereas in the mythical space of the western, crafted in the show's own publicity and in the English-speaking

press, Cody embodies the hegemonic variety of whiteness (that of English, Anglo-Saxon or North European men, only transmitted by blood), the employees that interchangeably played the American cowboy, the Mexican vaquero and the Spanish Indian gaucho showed that both whiteness and racial degeneracy were cultural constructs.

Unsurprisingly, none of the many English-language articles included in the 'Scrapbook of Rome' mentions Esquivel's name or his ethnicity when talking about the *sfida*. An article published in the *Omaha-World Herald* on 9 March 1890 significantly attributes the victory to 'the cowboys of Nebraska' (while Esquivel was from Texas): 'Nebraska has conquered Rome. It was the cowboy that did it. And it was at an exhibition.' Clearly, the author does not care about remembering Esquivel as a person; rather, he concurs in building the myth of the cowboy, and of the American hero of the West, using the herdsman to glorify the frontiersmen. Such myth aligned with the interests of the show's managers as well as with the predilections of upper- and middle-class individuals from the north-eastern states of the USA, who satisfied their craving for the Wild West through cultural consumption and travel.⁷

The goal was also to nurture Buffalo Bill's celebrity via his cowboys, and in this sense the news reports delivered the same message as the pulp fictions based on his life's adventures: whereas Cody started the 'cowboy hero' mythology, the literature that popularised his deeds 'does not reveal any particular effort on his part to do more than enhance his own ego' (Westermeier 1975, 277). Challenges were helpful publicity stunts to attain this objective. Often, it is Cody who publicly dares the locals (although he does not participate in the challenge). Allegedly, he had also dared the Spanish bullfighters, prior to arriving in Italy. The contest didn't happen, most likely because the Spanish tour was doomed by an epidemic of dengue. In the case of the Duke of Sermoneta, Salsbury had even received information about his family and his horses from the US vice-consul in Rome, who ensured that 'volumes of illustrious history might be supplied with reference to the Cajetan family and of their richly endowed estate; they have filled a spacious position in the annals of a thousand years' (Wood 1892). In this light, the challenge served to build Cody's reputation in the USA, for the European tour made a show of his acquaintance with the noblest of families in the Old World.

American reporters also refer to the Italian herdsman anonymously, however, downplaying their victory. According to the *New York Herald* (1890b), it was not much of a victory for the Italians at all.⁸ Apparently, the 'two Italian cowboys belonging to Prince Ruspoli' struggled for half an hour before they could ride one horse, but 'found it impossible to even mount the second horse, and they had to give it up'. According to Lillie De Hegermann-Lindenchrone, wife of a Danish diplomat in Rome, who was at the show and was an acquaintance of both Buffalo Bill and Caetani, 'the Italian *campagna* boys ... showed what they could *not* do; they could not keep on the horses a minute, even if they managed to get on' (De Hegermann-Lindenchrone 1913).⁹

This is all relevant to my discussion because the question of race, vis-à-vis the 'authenticity' of the cowboy, is key to understand the anglophone reception of the *sfida*. The superiority of the American cowboy-as-myth is established through comparison with the non-hegemonic whiteness of the *buttero*, whose indigency and national identity are racialised. The Italian herdsman, like the other peasants who left the country to find work in the USA, may have been white by legal definition, but they struggled to be seen as such in American society, especially if they came from southern Italy (Guglielmo and Salerno 2003, 8–9). When *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* toured Europe in 1890, Italy represented both the ultimate prize and the outcast vis-à-vis other nations such as France and England. Rome was once 'the cradle of civilisation', but in 1890 the whole country lagged in economic development and was ridden by extreme poverty, as well as by social and political unrest. In 1885, *The New York Times* published an article

on ‘Rome’s Campagna’ as ‘a source of great anxiety to Italian statesmen’: ‘the desolate and pestiferous district which surrounds Rome, which in classic times was covered with flourishing cities, inhabited by a prosperous population’ (1885). A few years later, *The New York Times* mentioned the Duke of Sermoneta of all the Roman landowners, wishing him to be able to keep loyalty among his tenants, amidst ‘the spread of Socialism through the country districts’ (1896). News circulated in the English-language press about the fact that ‘Buffalo Bill’ was offered the Colosseum, but that he had rejected the proposal after seeing that it was ‘pretty well decayed’ (Cody and Cooper 1919, 298).¹⁰ According to historian Alessandra Magrin, ‘Cody casually created a parallel between the believed ‘primitivism’ of the Native Americans, with that of the “decaying” and “regressive” Italians [of the lower classes]’ (Magrin 2017, 32). In fact, a report published in *The New York Times* on 18 May 1890 quotes Cody saying, ‘We like the Italians of the upper classes, but the lower classes are mean and not to be trusted.’ Sharpshooter Annie Oakley, who was one of the cast members most liked by Italian audiences, shared similar feelings, and declared to the press that ‘Italy was agreeable, and Milan and Florence, but Rome – oh the people were like heathens there’ (Oakley 1891).

Cody’s and Oakley’s distinctions between the upper and the lower Italian classes, and between the North and the South of Italy, sustained a discourse of the ‘southern question’ that was dominant in Italian culture at the end of the nineteenth century. This discourse emphasised the split between a modern and industrialised North and a backward and rural South of Italy, and racialised the state of indigence of southern peasants, who were considered to be unable to modernise because of their naturalised lack of will and laziness.¹¹ However, in the English-language press, derogatory comments about Italians behaving against the agreed rules of modern societies did not spare the upper classes either. In other words, the reception of the show reflects a broader, European articulation of the southern question discourse, one that constructed Italy (as a whole) as the south/other of Europe.¹² A writer on the English magazine *Truth*, who commented on the challenges between American and Italian cowboys and the ‘not pretty behavior on the side of the Italians’, stated: ‘Apropos of sports and matches in general, it would appear that your modern Roman aristocrat, although duly initiated into the mysteries of ‘jokays’ and ‘book-markers’, and deeply desirous of doing all things pertaining to the field in thoroughly English fashion, finds a difficulty in mastering the apparently simple rules of fair play’ (*Truth* 1890). This critique on Italy’s arrested development culminated in a tirade on Italian media, which, ‘for reasons best not inquired into, had been from the first inimical to Cody and his show’. It was the Italian press that unjustly declared that Cody was ‘a buffalo, a cheat, and a swindler, and ran away without paying his debts of honour’. The Roman newspaper writers have ‘afforded me so much genuine amusement’, the English author concludes ironically, but their statements concerning Cody were ‘both libellous and scurrilous’.¹³ Given that American media reports are just as questionable for their biases as the Italian ones, the issue at stake here is not really that Italian journalists lacked honesty, but rather that they talked back against the Americans.

American/Italian cowboys

To Italian reporters, race mattered only when talking about indigenous people; when dealing with the cowboys and the *sfida*, the point of contention was not their whiteness but the ‘truthfulness’ of the performance on stage. The Italian press expressed curiosity towards the American cowboys and drew lines of comparison with the local herdsmen. Their everyday life, economic status and their character and demeanour are main points of comparison. According to Teodoro Serrao, the American cowboys look like ‘our *butteri*’ because they live ‘the same existence’ (*la stessa esistenza*). Both the Americans and the

Italians are excellent riders who are not afraid of isolation or danger, and both love their horses (Serrao 1890). For many commentators, however, there were also great differences between cowboys and *butteri*. For example, the former must carry and be able to use firearms to defend themselves from bandits and Native Americans, whereas the Roman peasant was legally not allowed to carry guns (only his master – and the latter would also be the only one able to hunt with them) (*Don Chisciotte della Mancia* 1890). Thus, the Italian cowboy could only challenge his American counterpart with the rope, not with the Winchester rifle – i.e. with a working tool, not with what the show's programme called 'the agent of civilisation'. In fact, according to local reporters, the Italian cowboys constantly risked their lives as well: the real enemy of the *buttero* who lived in the Pontine marshes was economic indigence. According to the author Diego de Miranda, the *buttero*'s salary was 22 lire per month, so he was unable to eat well, as opposed to the American cowboy of the Wild West Show who dined on steak and wine (Diego de Miranda 1890). Whereas the cowboys enjoyed their time on the tour, the *butteri* had to fight for survival. They were often sick with high fever because the area they inhabited was infested by malaria. According to the Milanese magazine *L'Agricoltura Illustrata*, American cowboys performing in the arena did even better than their fellows in the homeland: the latter earned \$40–45 per month (equal to 200–225 lire) but only worked five or six months per year, while the former received \$1 pay per day (according to historian Warren, they were earning even more, up to \$120 per month) (*L'Agricoltura Illustrata* 1890; Warren 2005, 398). Furthermore, the American cowboy enjoyed spending money on expensive clothing and props such as silver spurs or a bridle. And since the *butteri* and the Americans shared the same ability to use the lasso (*il laccio*), the article suggests, the former would be better off migrating to the USA, where they would not be 'the first Italian who happened to make a fortune as [a] cowboy'.

It is not hard to read these comparisons politically, in the context of Italy's economic crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, which affected for the most part the rural population, precipitating mass emigration to the USA and South America. There has never been a range in Italy, neither before nor after 1890, but the same modern civilisation that was responsible for the disappearance of a socioeconomic formation and its culture (that of the American cowboy in the USA) would eventually confine the Roman *butteri* to a glorious past. However, while the eclipse of the range at the end of the nineteenth century had turned the American cowboy into a modern consumer, the *buttero* was still struggling for survival in semi-feudal conditions.¹⁴ In fact, his life does not change appreciably until after the Second World War. As late as 1945, writes journalist Guido Ghini, the economic system of the 'agro Romano' was largely unchanged (Ghini 2012). Without a single bridge over the River Tiber outside the walls of the capital, a vast area of unclaimed soil and malaria decimating the peasantry (a large proportion of whom lived in caves or in the open), the Roman Campagna was the epitome of Italy's underdeveloped economy and society.

The country could either find a domestic solution or seek one beyond its borders, through colonial expansion, thus risking further catastrophe. The Roman *buttero*, for certain, did not benefit financially from the first phase of Italian colonialism in Africa (1870–1922), and at most could expect to move there if enlisted in the army. In fact, the Italian government's main drive to imperialism was not financial (i.e. to ease the economic crisis at home), but rather political: to boost national unity. On 1 January 1890, the colony of Eritrea had been officially claimed by Italy, with very little resistance from the local population or from the controlling authorities of Turkey, Egypt and Ethiopia; and with very few advantages in terms of work opportunities for Italians, since most of the jobs were filled by employing the local workforce or from nearby regions (Bellucci 2014). In the words of historian Stefano Bellucci, 'From the beginning of colonial rule and up to at least the first

decade of the 1900s, the authorities in the colony were committed rather to holding back the flow of Italians seeking to come to the African dependency' (Bellucci 2014, 297). These included agricultural settlers.

In this context, the press acquired an important political role: to steer public opinion in favour of or against further military expansion in Africa. As Paolo Murialdi explains in his history of Italian journalism, Italian newspapers in Rome functioned as a fourth power (Murialdi 2014, 72). In the opposition were dailies such as *Don Chisciotte della Mancìa*, which inherited the long-lasting Roman tradition of grassroots satire and epigrams, and which would finally be given free rein when the Papal State lost power in the capital in 1870 (until then, the only newspaper in existence was the official publication of the Vatican, *L'Osservatore Romano*). Anticlerical and antiestablishment, *Don Chisciotte della Mancìa* criticised the national government's imperial ambitions, at the very same time as other articles in the newspaper satirised Buffalo Bill and his promotion of the American civilising mission. For example, on 8 March 1890, Belcredi wrote in 'A Man Who Was There' ('Uno che c'è stato') a lengthy explanation of why rural colonies in the region occupied by the Italian government were a bad idea (Belcredi 1890). In the same issue, Esse Pi Qu Erre blamed Buffalo Bill in 'Buffalonate' (a variation of 'americanate') for cheating and refusing to pay what was owed to the Italians. Further, Belcredi explained that Italian peasants would face a life of struggles in a foreign land that was not fertile and where they would be living under the constant threat of raids by bandits and indigenous people – a predicament not unlike that faced by the American cowboys out West!

Another Roman newspaper that was vocally against colonial expansion was *Il Messaggero*.¹⁵ On its pages, we find criticism of the Italian intervention in Tunisia in 1880 and defence of Egypt, against French and British occupation, motivated both by economic concerns and antimilitarist sentiments (the newspaper declares itself to be against armed colonisation and will welcome in 1896 the defeat of the Italians in Adua, calling Crispi a dictator). Around the time of the *sfida*, *Il Messaggero* began to report on the ongoing discussions in the House of Representatives about further expansion in East Africa. At that time, Prime Minister Francesco Crispi was blamed in the newspaper's pages for wasting money in Africa while forgetting about Italian patriots on the eastern front: '[H]e cannot make Italy,' wrote one reporter in an article titled 'The African Question', 'but he wants to look so great that he can make the Ethiopian extra-state!' (*Il Messaggero* 1890e). In fact, *Il Messaggero* was, at the same time, anti-colonialist and irredentist, and the two political standpoints were connected by its populist approach to both national and foreign politics. 'That's enough,' echoes another in the article 'Italy in Africa' (*Il Messaggero* 1890b). 'We don't have millions to waste nor people to get killed for some ambitions to colonise.' Comments elsewhere but in the same issues about Cody's and Salsbury's own ambitions, their desire to please the powerful (including the pope), and their disregard for the common folk draw a line between the *butteri* on one side and, on the other, the Americans, the Roman upper classes and the Italian government. A caricature published in another daily, *Il Cicerone*, spells out this connection by drawing Crispi in Cody's clothes and calling him 'Buffalo Bill Politico', who, according to the caption, may be a flop just like the American showman (*Il Girovago* 1890).¹⁶ 'Crispi and the German emperor strive to lasso the buffalo by surprise,' reads the caption, 'but the latter knows too well the game and it may be that the political Buffalo Bill will be a fiasco like the American' (Figure 1).

In its pages, *Il Messaggero* claimed to maintain privileged relationships with Cody, Salsbury and other American 'gentlemen'. Reporters knew the *butteri* who took part in the *sfida* by name and provided the most detailed reportage of the tour in Rome. From 21 February to 9 March 1890, *Il Messaggero* published an advertisement for *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* on page 4 (e.g. *Il Messaggero* 1890a). Almost every issue during this period included at least one short article about the show or other relevant events: for example,

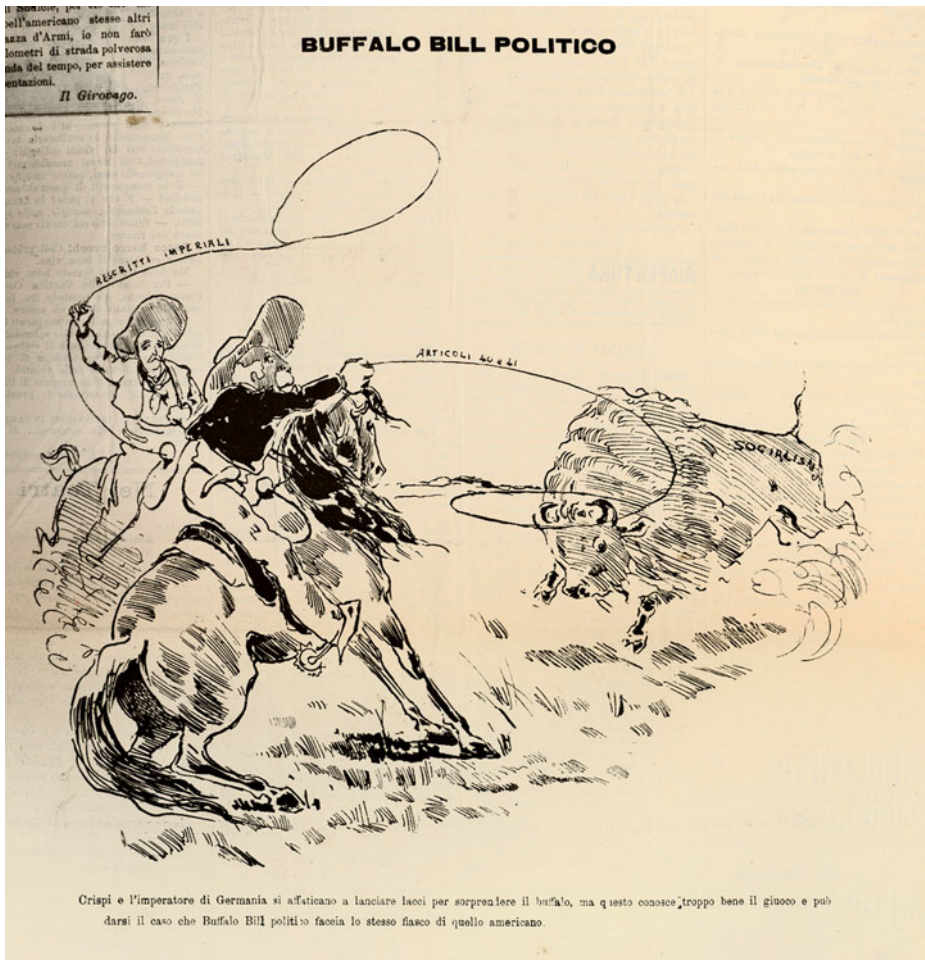


Figure 1. *Il Cicerone*, Rome, 23 February 1890. Courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming; McCracken Research Library; MS006 William F Cody Collection; MS6.3777.17b

when a group of five Lakhótas went to buy furs, clothes and fabrics in the city centre; or when the tax collectors summoned the agents of Buffalo Bill to make sure they didn't 'cook the books'. Paid informants were most likely responsible for the detailed chronicle of those days; in the words of journalist Aldo Chierici, nobody in Rome could fall, steal a handkerchief or ride the bus without a ticket 'being noted in *Il Messaggero*' (Chierici 1905, 105). After the first two days of the performance, the newspaper stopped talking about Buffalo Bill and his show until 5 March, when in the same issue they printed a full report on the visit of Cody and his troupe to the Vatican for the commemoration of the crowning of Pope Leone XIII (on page 2) and a short note about the American cowboys' victory (on page 4). From then on, daily reports resume to chronicle the events that led to the victory of the Italian *butteri*, with three separate 'acts' in the play of manhood and national pride: 'The Victory of the Americans' (*Il Messaggero* 1890c); 'The Victory of the Horseman of the Mariani Company' (*Il Messaggero* 1890d); and 'The Victory of the Roman *Butteri*' (*Il Messaggero* 1890f).

In the next and final section of this article, I go in depth into these three acts of the play to draw some conclusions on the political significance of the Roman challenges. The

reportage on the *sfida* in *Il Messaggero* is not only the most detailed in providing an account of the popular reception of the show; it is also a lens through which to view and understand the role played by the media in shaping the future of the western genre in Italy.

La sfida according to Il Messaggero

Describing the events of 4 March 1890, ‘The Victory of the Americans’, *Il Messaggero* made sure to attribute to Tony Esquivel and another man named ‘Fex Que’ the ‘sublimely beautiful’ spectacle when they roped, bridled, saddled and mounted two wild horses furnished by the Duke of Sermoneta. Apart from this detail (albeit important, insofar as it demonstrates an interest in the working men), the report is as enthusiastic about the American cowboys as *The New York Herald* (Westermeier 1975, 292; *New York Herald* 1890a). It is no less interested in the presence of the Roman aristocracy at the show, who were all invited to attend for free and offered the expensive (5 lire) front row seats. Even though *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* can be seen as the very first product of mass entertainment from the USA to arrive in Italy, Cody did not primarily target a popular audience; rather, in laying claim to cultural respectability, he craved the attention of aristocrats, while gaining economic profit from the masses who bought tickets for 1, 2 or 3 lire (still very expensive at the time, when an average daily pay for a factory worker was between 1 and 4 lire, and peasants earned about 1 lira). Importantly, the audience included ‘countless ladies’ who witnessed under the pouring rain the ‘resounding victory’ of the American cowboys (*Il Messaggero* 1890c). It should be noted that a female audience was also key to the show’s publicity, as it showed to the American public that the model of masculinity and the myth of the nation delivered to national and foreign audiences alike were built on a domesticated image of the Wild West that was palatable not only to men but also to women.

In sum, until 4 March, *Il Messaggero* appeared to wholeheartedly support Cody and the ‘American gentlemen’, among them a Mr Crawford who had allegedly bet \$100 that no Italian cowboys could ‘sit [a buckler] for five minutes and ride it away from the ground’. Five days after ‘The Sublime Victory of the Americans’ was published, after extended negotiations with the local police (worried about possible accidents), on 9 March 1890 amateur photographer Count Giuseppe Primoli, ‘with his snap-shot camera’, immortalised Augusto Imperiali, the Italian *buttero* who won the bet against the Americans. Imperiali looks at the camera without a smile right after he had allegedly conquered the arena and its rowdy spectators, in ‘thunderous applause’.¹⁷

The following day, *Il Messaggero* reports that Imperiali is in the service of Signor Bernardo Tarlongo; he is not the Duke of Sermoneta’s employee, but he was nonetheless congratulated by the Duke’s wife and his children, who were sitting in the front row; his fellow *butteri* were out of their mind with happiness: they jumped, they danced, and they threw their hats in the air, *just like the Americans did*; Imperiali said that ‘[he] didn’t sleep all night from the jitters’; and another *buttero* had tried to ride a horse before him (Alfonso Ferrazza of Signor Franceschetti) and another one after, but ‘for so long and without success’ that Buffalo Bill rushed to stop him and anyone else who wanted to try. At this point, the Roman reporter writes, both the *butteri* and the spectators were so upset that they kept booing for the rest of the show. The performance, in any case, ‘doesn’t interest anyone anymore’. This is a first-hand account, according to the author, who, after the show, even tried to speak to Buffalo Bill on behalf of the *butteri* (although in what language is unclear), because the American didn’t want to pay and had sent all the other young men away.¹⁸ To be blamed are the American gentlemen (‘*signori*’ Salsbury and Crawford) and their witnesses (one of them Teodoro Serrao, a journalist who wrote

favourable reviews in *Carro di Tespi*); they had all gone to the office at *Il Messaggero* to advertise that they would give 500 lire to the winner. These gentlemen should beware, ends the reporter, before asking again to print their ‘americanate’.

The same article mentions Guglielmo Bedini of *Circo Reale* and how Salsbury did not pay him either when he first won the bet a day earlier. None of the English-speaking press ever talked about this man and his victory, and it is hard to say whether *Il Messaggero* is fully accurate in this respect. However, whether Bedini really challenged Buffalo Bill, or whether he won, does not really matter here, for my goal is not to tell the ‘truth’ about what happened, but to shed light on the rhetoric deployed on the pages of the newspaper. The story of Guglielmo Bedini – as narrated in *Il Messaggero* – paints the reception of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* with bright Italian nationalist colours. On 7 March, when the show ‘looked old’, something extraordinary happened: ‘a young man dressed like a civilian, of medium height, pale in his face but strong in his body’ left the front row to address Buffalo Bill. It was Bedini, a 23-year-old ex-soldier and horse rider from the Mariani circus’s equestrian company, who talked to Cody in English and said that he had read on *Il Messaggero* about the bet. In sum, Bedini wanted to pick up the challenge to ride one of the American horses and indeed he succeeded, after a couple of tries. What made his victory especially impressive, according to the reporter, was the fact that it was completely unexpected: ‘[T]here was no doubt that it was not done for advertisement, and that there was no catch.’ And yet, the director of the circus, Signor Mariani, happened to be sitting right in the front row with his family when Bedini entered the arena. It was he who shouted, bursting with joy, ‘This is how Italians answer to the americanate!’¹⁹ Whether Bedini’s performance was staged or not, the most important fact is that *Il Messaggero* used the occasion to praise the Italians and blame the Americans, and especially Buffalo Bill, who found an excuse not to pay the Italian rider. It was also a turning point in the relationship between the show’s managers and the Italian newspaper, as the reporters publicly distanced themselves from the former: ‘Those enthusiasts, bidders, connoisseurs and what-not: they know where the circus of Buffalo Bill is; why don’t they go talk to him, so that we can keep writing fair accounts of what will happen.’

What does the story of Bedini say about *Il Messaggero*’s change of heart, from passionate supporter of the ‘sublime victory of the Americans’ to a sardonic commentator on the ‘bullshit’ (*cialtronerie*) of ‘Buffalo Bill and company’? One can speculate that Salsbury and Burke had initially sought the help of the Roman newspaper and that their relationship eventually went sour at the time when Cody had established closer ties with the Roman elites and the pope. According to a cable collected at the Caetani Foundation archive in Rome, Salsbury wrote to the Duke of Sermoneta on 30 September 1896: ‘Sincerest thanks for your kind telegram no harm whatever was done.’ What was the reason for this message? Had Caetani telegraphed Salsbury earlier to apologise, and for what? Could the message have anything to do with the fact that he had challenged Buffalo Bill’s cowboys with his horses, perhaps to show off in front of a mass audience of nobility, middle-class bureaucrats and working-class spectators? Onorato was the son of Michelangelo Caetani, head of one of the most powerful noble families in the city. Given that he was about to announce his candidacy for mayor of Rome, the stunt of the *puledri* from his ranch had been, to say the least, serendipitous. Certainly, and since the very beginning, *Il Messaggero* had not paid attention to the American cowboy as a mythical figure but rather glorified the labourers of the range and hailed the show as a form of popular entertainment, like the circus. Notably, the victory of the American cowboys had been an occasion to complain about city officials, considered unable to provide satisfactory services to the masses hoping to see the show, and about the failed project to build the Ripetta bridge. In that context, the Wild West show (but not Cody *per se*) is praised for finally bringing to public attention the neighbourhood of Prati di

Castello, until then ‘so much abandoned’, and for benefiting local restaurant and bar owners who could take advantage of the crowds gathering around the arena.

The narrative of the victory of the *butteri* is in line with the same populist rhetoric aimed against the Roman aristocracy and the politicians who may have helped Cody to gain popularity. Consider, for example, how Bedini’s improvised bravado refocused the attention on the audience and its power to change the show; the audience proved capable of producing, rather than simply witnessing, the media event. Consider how carefully the names of all contestants are reported, especially the Italians. For readers across the Atlantic, they are just cowboys or *butteri* – vanishing mediators between modernity and primitiveness, between civilisation and savagery, between the human and the animal world. For Italian readers, Esquivel, Imperiali and the others are the herdsmen who all delivered a ‘sublime victory’. When answering to the *americanate*, Bedini does not challenge the American cowboys but rather Salsbury, Burke and Cody for making entertainment products that profit from fooling consumers, and for embodying the elites who exploit the very same cowboys. To put it another way, the newspaper made use of the show to support different items on its political agenda: 1) the American cowboys, at whom the Italian *butteri* once looked ‘*trasognati*’, demonstrated the backwardness of the Roman ruling class (the landowners); and 2) the Italian *butteri*, whose honesty clashed with the falseness of Cody and the American gentlemen, proved the moral superiority of Italian rural society and the degeneracy of the modern/capitalist American one, whose members’ only interest was profit.

Beyond Buffalo Bill

The mixed reception of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, amplified by the media event of the *sfida*, shaped the fate of the western genre in Italy. The Italian press focused on socioeconomic issues that were rather absent in the US narrative of the show. Then not only called the bluff of authenticity, but also attempted to steer public opinion about American culture at a pivotal moment in the history of the western genre in Europe and in the unique geopolitical context of American–European relations at the time of colonial expansion in Africa. Magrin’s contention that Cody’s ‘merits, authority, and reputation were rarely questioned in Italy’ (Magrin 2017, 28) does not give an accurate picture of how Italian media responded to the show. Moreover, if *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* is seminal in establishing the mythology of the western in Italy, then it is also responsible for the contradictory politics of the genre in its appropriation. It is fair to say that the American myth of the western permeates the Italian imagery by blurring social, economic and cultural differences between the workers of the range and the adventurers of the Gold Rush, between the soldiers of the American Indian Wars from the east to the west and the herders of grazing cattle travelling from the south to the north. In this sense, I agree with Magrin that the show served the need of an Italian society that was dealing with colonialism, for its images of white supremacy found an echo in Italian imperialist rhetoric (Magrin 2022, 165). At the same time, certain popular and populist press in Rome used the show as a means to advance their own anticolonial politics, thus rejecting precisely its representation of historical progress and of the USA’s civilising mission. Deconstructing the ‘manifest destiny’ optimistically embraced ‘in the name of race (breeding, heterosexual reproduction)’ (Dyer 2013, 33), the Italian critique of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* prepared the ground on which Italian ‘spaghetti westerns’ will release, many years later, its anarchic antiheroes. Here, I specifically refer to the violent and male-centred movies produced between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s and directed, among others, by Sergio Leone, Sergio Corbucci and Sergio Sollima. These films portrayed, in Giovanna Trento’s words, ‘the fury of class resentment’ (Trento 2015, 53), in contrast with other Italian

westerns that embraced the American myth of modern and white civilisation (among the latter was Mario Costa's 1964 *Buffalo Bill, Hero of the Far West*).²⁰ While it will be the task of further scholarship to draw a genealogy of the 'spaghetti westerns', this article draws attention to the ambiguities in the ways in which Italian culture has engaged since the late nineteenth century with the myth of the American frontier. Following the tour in 1890, Italian media began to reimagine the American West, either by turning away from American history so as to enjoy race wars as pure entertainment in the atemporal space of the frontier, or through criticism, in a populist vein, shifting away from the heroic gestures of frontiersmen and pioneers.

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Notes

1 See also *Don Chisciotte della Manica* (1890).

2 It did so in the same year in which the census bureau announced the closure of the frontier, and a few months before the Wounded Knee massacre ended the American Indian Wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on 29 December 1890.

3 Despite their subjectiveness and biases, news articles and personal recollections are used uncritically in the historical accounts of the few scholars who discuss the Roman challenges (Bussoni 2011, 82–87; Leagreid 2017, 203).

4 For a discussion of this term in reference to the American tall tale of Pecos Bill, see Claverie (2019).

5 To my knowledge, the digital collection titled 'Buffalo Bill's Wild West Scrapbook of Rome, Italy' contains 382 numbered items, including newspaper articles, cartoons and a few magazine articles. Some of these items consist of different clippings of the same article. There are 195 different documents in Italian, 45 in French and 43 in English, while 38 articles or cartoons in Italian are negative reviews of the show or of Cody.

6 'rePorter' is the pseudonymous of an unidentified journalist. The name is a play on word, since 're' means 'king' in Italian.

7 In the words of Jonathan Martin, the goal of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* was that of 'legitimizing a progressive and imperialist understanding of what American meant' (Martin 1996, 96). The American press's coverage of the show aided this project. In the words of the reporter of the *Omaha-World Herald*, 'the cowboys of Nebraska know more about the way to ride than all the armies of England and Germany together' (1890).

8 The report is quoted and taken for granted in Westermeier (1975, 292).

9 De Hegermann-Lindencrone's memoir is available online: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13955/13955-h/13955-h.htm>. The text does not have page numbers.

10 According to an American journalist, when the Wild West Show performed in the ancient Roman arena of Verona in May, it was a shock to see the head of Buffalo Bill posted on the wall where one would expect to see the marble busts of Roman senators or generals: 'What a colossal joke on history, Roman Emperors, and on the flight of time in general!' (*New York Times* 1890).

11 While there are many works about Italy's southern question, I am specifically referring here to Nelson Moe's argument (Moe 2006).

12 On Italy's otherness vis-à-vis northern Europe, see Dainotto (2008).

13 To give another example: on the one hand, an American journalist wrote about the Neapolitan 'wily kind of people' who forged tickets with the connivance of an Italian magistrate; on the other, a reporter of *Il Vero Monello* claimed that Cody received personal favours from the local authorities, not paying for the use of public land and the right amount of taxes, as opposed to the 'honest' people of Florence (*Il Vero Monello* 1890).

14 For an account of the figure of the cowboy and its symbolic and economic significance in the USA, see Rollins (1924).

15 It was founded (and directed, in 1890) by Luigi Cesana, who moved to Rome from Turin in 1878, with the goal of publishing a 'free, lay and progressive' daily. At the same time, since the late 1870s, many entrepreneurs in the newspaper industry moved to the city from the North: among others, Raffaele Sonzogno from Milan (brother of Edoardo and co-owner of *Gazzetta di Milano*), who opened on 21 September 1870 the first leftist newspaper, *La Capitale*.

16 This cartoon can be found at <http://library.centerofthewest.org/digital/collection/p17097coll65/id/518>

17 This photograph and other images of the show and its protagonists take by Primoli can be found online on the website of the Archivio Fondazione Primoli: <https://archivio.fondazioneprimoli.it/archivio/fotografico/IT-PR1-FT0001-011154?ssid=fotografico>

18 A full list of names follows that report: Filippo Valentini, Achille Fasciani, Achille Laurenti, Francesco Costanzi, Angelo Petecchi, Augusto Imperiali, Bernardino Quinti, Cesare Fabbri and Alfonso Ferrazza.

19 According to another reporter, Buffalo Bill confided later that a stunt like that would have been paid for profusely by an American company.

20 A fury, to be noted, that American popular culture for the most part projected outward onto Native Americans, effectively making race wars (rather than class ones) its major concern.

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Italian summary

Questo saggio studia la ricezione del primo tour in Italia dello spettacolo *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* nel 1890 ed esamina, in particolare, l'importanza della cosiddetta 'sfida dei butteri,' quest'ultima vista come lente attraverso cui osservare la presenza di sentimenti e posizioni populiste, anticapitaliste, e antiamericane nel processo di appropriazione del genere western. Svoltasi a Roma nel mese di marzo del 1890, la sfida viene descritta in maniera contraddittoria dalla stampa americana e da quella italiana come il giorno in cui i cowboy americani domarono fieramente i puledri della tenuta del duca Onorato Caetani da Sermoneta, nella provincia di Latina; oppure, come la gloriosa mattina in cui Augusto Imperiali, un buttero dell'Agro Pontino, domò un puledro americano e sconfisse

Buffalo Bill. Attraverso l'analisi di giornali e fotografie di fine Ottocento, nel contesto storico della prima fase di espansione coloniale in Africa (1870–1922), l'obiettivo di questo saggio è dimostrare che gli eventi della sfida hanno segnato in maniera indelebile la ricezione dei media italiani dello spettacolo americano così come, a lungo termine, la storia stessa del genere western in Italia.