



Overseas

US lifestyle through the lens of a foreigner

by Gabriella Dellino

There is much we can learn about ourselves from the opinions of others.

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I believe you can learn a lot from reading the local news about your country when living abroad. Similarly, you can also compare how the news about a foreign country is presented by your own.

Besides the facts, their interpretation often comes with a biased, stereotype-ridden view. Americans are often depicted as proud and arrogant, perhaps because they rarely fail to mention their political, technological, and commercial hegemony. Italians are often associated with “pasta, pizza e mandolino”: while not a stereotype at all when it comes to pasta and pizza, the mandolino image reflects the idea of a carefree life, not so keen to commitment and favoring free time and entertainment, instead—which explains why videos of Italian people singing and dancing on their balconies during the lockdown became viral around the world.

Surprisingly, the picture has recently changed when the pandemic has called all countries across the world to face this unprecedented time.

Lessons learned from COVID-19

When the pandemic hit, no country was prepared. The only strategy available was some sort of “trial-and-error”, taking measures and adjusting them along the way. Governments were called to take decisive action and do it quickly.

Italy was one of the first countries to order a very severe lockdown to slow down the virus’ spread. While such a strict measure surprised many in the US, very few believed Italians would be able to respect it.

As time passed by with the lockdown in place, the economy soon began suffering worldwide. Governments had to choose what to put ahead: health or the economy.

The US press agrees that “Italian officials decided to put lives ahead of the economy”, being wary of reopening “until cases were relatively few”. From the other side of the ocean, most of the Italian press criticized these prolonged restrictions, judging them as overly cautious.

I identify two common trends in the press: Italians report foreign news to prove that they are no worse than others, with a surfacing tendency to complain about our own country. US news about other countries (including Italy) brings it all back to one point: «How can we outperform them?». Either way, they both try to go beyond the facts to comment on how they compare to the foreign country. In fact, the US acknowledgment did not come as a pure sign of appreciation. Their crucial question was: “How can America be doing so much worse than Italy?”

Such a perspective fosters an overly competitive environment, which hinders an open-minded attitude and, ultimately, a collaborative development.

This is not an individual fight; we are all in this together, and we either win together, or we lose it all. There’s nothing wrong with learning from others, provided that we apply critical thinking to specially tailor these solutions to the appropriate context.