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Foreword to the English Edition

This book was conceived and written during the 1998-1999 academic year, and was published in Italian in 2001. After the completion of its English translation (which included the re-writing of several chapters and the re-thinking of the entire work), in 2009-10, I felt the need to add this short preface to the original introduction.

We live in an age in which nine years can be regarded as a very long lapse of time. I wrote this book during the last period of President Bill Clinton's second term. The USA was extremely cautious in its foreign policy and 9/11 could not have been fathomed in America's future.

It was also a time of prosperity, although the major crisis which affected the stock market and thus the whole American and international economy was lurking, and there were signs of its coming.

The U.S., in books, exhibits, cultural events, and other manifestations of its identity and civilization (as they are described and commented in this book) was calmly reconsidering its past and its place in the world, especially after the collapse of Soviet Communism.

9/11 and the events that followed, including the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the ongoing war on terrorism, and the shift from a Democratic to a Republican administration, offered Americans a renewed desire to reshape their sense of identity, as well as a more immediate urge to act as a primary agent in global policies.

The value of this book consists in depicting a world on the verge of a profound change.

On a personal note, many things changed in my life after I spent that wonderful year at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where I wrote these twenty-six cultural essays.

After moving around the world to study and teach for a few years, I finally settled down as director of the Center for Italian and European Studies of Boston University in Padova, Italy. Eventually, I left that position for a chair in European History at the University of Insubria in Como, Italy, a newly created state college, with a great potential for growth, being as it is placed in one of the richest and most beautiful parts of Northern Italy.

While directing the Boston University Center in Padova, I taught American students and I witnessed their astonishment when I informed them of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. This forced me to reconsider my “classical liberal” views of politics and society, and to endorse the “minimal state” concept, embracing the libertarian ideas of thinkers such as Mises and Rothbard. In March 2005, a couple of months before I wrote this preface, I had the honor of visiting the Ludwig von Mises Institute in Auburn, Alabama. I was admitted as a member of the adjunct faculty, for which I deeply thank Lew Rockwell Jr, its president.

My political ideas substantially changed, since I published the Italian edition of this book. I did not change, however, the contents of the book for this American edition, almost a decade later.

While re-reading and revising these essays for publication in English, I realized, *ex post*, how they convey a pleasant, tranquil, rather unproblematic image of the USA. It seems to be a country – in reading these essays – that came to terms with its troubled past, and was able to confront the most problematic, unhappy pages of its history. Nothing around the year 2000 warned us of the economic catastrophes that occurred after 2001, and the political upheaval caused by 9/11 – two wars of invasion were certainly not looming on the horizon when I wrote these essays. Thus, I tend to see this work as a picture of peace through a wide angle lens: America’s, and mankind’s, last happy days before a major, epoch-making crisis.

These essays show, first and foremost, the destiny of peoples and individuals as they evolved on the major background of a mighty nation and a stormy history. If America is the place where great individuals might emerge and fulfill the “American dream”, or rather, the “American prophecy” (be yourself, be honest, and prosper), that case is definitely made in this book. The opposite

case, however, is made as well: the case of the dialectics between individual(s) and society, a struggle which often ends up with the latter's victory. While writing these essays, I also realized that a book meant for the Italian public could also be of interest to the English-speaking public, including the American reader, who would see familiar history from the perspective of a foreign observer.

The title of the book, in its original Italian edition, is *A Sphinx without a Secret***, adapted from a well-known short story by Oscar Wilde. The story describes a beautiful lady who apparently hides some secrets. But, actually, those secrets do not exist. The United States can be seen as such a sphinx, in many respects. The present title, however, does more justice to the topics discussed, and is more eloquent to an American public.

Como, Italy, December 2009

*Originally, *Una sfinge senza enigmi. Aspetti figure e momenti di vita, cultura e civiltà dagli Stati Uniti contemporanei*, prefazione di Sergio Romano (Firenze: Le Lettere 2001) pp. 164. I wish to thank Stephanie Bucci, Yvonne Robinson, Hannah Lubin, Lauren Skrabala, and Ashley Pony, who in different stages helped me translate this book from its original Italian, and edited it quite substantially for this English edition.