Looking at Guglielmo Marconi’s image on the two-thousand-lire banknote used in Italy before the introduction of the euro in 2002, with his serious expression and his eyes projected to a distant horizon, has always evoked a mixed sense of melancholy, distance, and loneliness. His temperament and background as “half-English” and “half-Italian” strongly influenced his career, during which Marconi felt the isolation from his family and from a normal life, crossing the Atlantic Ocean constantly or traveling to the most distant places in the world. In the collective imagination of Italian culture, Marconi is regarded only as the inventor of the radio in a somewhat superficial way without the realization that the technical reach of his inventions has been much broader. Improving communication through Hertzian waves had been his main goal throughout his lifetime, but the advent of broadcasting was of only secondary importance for Marconi.

Through his monumental work dedicated to the figure of Marconi, Marc Raboy gives an extraordinarily complete picture of the Italian inventor and of all the individuals and historical circumstances that characterized his life. The book, consisting of nearly seven hundred pages, is based on many unpublished documents, such as Marconi’s private correspondence with his relatives, the many women who accompanied him throughout his life, and his professional collaborators. Raboy’s great merit is to analyze and expose with an incredible wealth of detail not only the life of Marconi but also that of all the people who were significant in his life. Another advantage of this book is its explanation of the technological developments that emerged from Marconi’s experiments, giving even a reader with little technical knowledge the ability to understand Marconi’s historical context and scientific achievements.

The figure of Marconi derived from reading the book is characterized by a multiplicity of positions, each focusing on a particular period in his life. The early Marconi, seen as the “prodigy” in the first part of the book, is comparable to a modern entrepreneur who, despite initial difficulties, financial problems, and bureaucratic slowness, is
able to find a group of investors and create their first company. Marconi, born to an Irish mother, moved to England shortly after discovering the Italian government’s indifference to his invention of wireless telegraphy.

The second part—“The Player”—shows how Marconi became one of the world’s most famous people, establishing relationships with important people, such as the king of Italy and US president Woodrow Wilson, who led his country into World War I and developed the famous Fourteen Points. In this phase of his career, Marconi was able to draw public attention to his reputation rather than to the invention. Marconi’s name became the root of such neologisms as “marconist” (the wireless operator) or “marconigram” (the radio message). For this reason, as Raboy suggests, Marconi can be compared with Bill Gates or Steve Jobs later in the century. And just like these two major innovators in technology, Marconi had to go through a challenging series of attacks on his patents, through which he was forced to become an adept legal defender of his business interests. The second part ends with Marconi winning the much-coveted Nobel Prize, in 1909, affirming a worldwide reputation that does justice to his great technological and professional accomplishment. As Raboy states, “The Nobel Prize was important in providing Marconi with the academic legitimacy that had thus far eluded him” (p. 309).

In the third part—“The Patriot”—an unusual profile of Marconi emerges, no longer tied solely to his research and the development of an increasingly powerful wireless system but beginning to take an interest in Italian foreign policy. For example, Marconi was appointed kingdom senator at age forty. He began to develop a feeling of belonging to his country before the outbreak of the First World War, although he was forced to leave it in the early years of his career to seek his fortune in England. Nevertheless, while Giovanni Giolitti’s liberal Italy proved insensitive to Marconi’s brilliance in the official narrative, in truth, Marconi and the Italian government developed important relationships. It is also true that the generosity shown by Marconi toward his country—the free granting of his own patents—was motivated not only by pure patriotism but also, as is evident from Raboy’s book, by the desire to create a monopoly in the field of radio telegraphy and by the need to find a strong ally to support him at the 1906 conference on wireless regulation.

During this very intense period of his life, Marconi grew from a genius scientist into a transnational hero who succeeded in turning wireless telegraphy into an instrument for bringing the peoples of the earth together, both to create a network of solidarity and to provide assistance during natural disasters. The sinking of the Titanic in 1912 was the event that made Marconi the “eroe magico” (the magic hero), as poet and writer Gabriele D’Annunzio described him. The presence on board of a Marconi wireless apparatus was crucial to the rescue of over seven hundred people after a distress message was received by the Carpathia, another liner sailing nearby that picked up survivors. From that moment on, Marconi became one of the most important people in the world and his company benefited from it, becoming object of a financial speculation that also involved many members of the English Parliament, giving rise to the “Marconi scandal.”

The fourth part—“The Outsider”—shows how Marconi managed to stay on the crest of a wave with the introduction of the beam system and with the use of short waves, after already conquering the world with wireless telegraphy based on the spark system. But soon he began to be detached from the invention of wireless communication in the public mind because his name was associated with the development of point-to-point transmission, rather than radio broadcasting, which he, as Raboy claims, considered “just another application of wireless, not a new technology” (p. 486).
The development of broadcasting was made possible by the introduction of the “thermionic valve” (invented by J. A. Fleming, Marconi’s scientific advisor); the triode of Lee De Forest (which allowed sound amplification); and the technological innovations brought about by Reginald Fessenden (the amplitude modulation), which was also the first to conduct a wireless sound transmission in 1906. The advent of broadcasting using technology developed by others forever discouraged Marconi’s dream of creating a monopoly on wireless, an objective that he had pursued from the beginning of his experiments.

In the United States, Marconi was forced to sell his company as part of the creation of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), while in England the government grouped all the radio companies to form the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), excluding the possibility of a monopoly operated by Marconi’s company. Furthermore, the merger with the cable telegraphy sector marked the start of Marconi’s physical and mental alienation from his company and England. The event, which marked him strongly, made him understand that the time had come for him to turn his life and his activity back to where it all began, Italy.

The last part of the book—“The Conformist”—tells how Marconi approached fascism in a very interesting way and how Benito Mussolini made him one of the regime’s most influential people. In his analysis of Marconi in the context of Italian fascism, Raboy clarifies a period of the Italian inventor’s life that has created much embarrassment in Italy since the war. Although Marconi admired and expressed fascist thought he was always viewed with suspicion by the fascist regime, and his activities were monitored by the OVRA (the regime’s political police) after 1927.

Several troubling aspects of Marconi’s life appear in the latter part of the book, concerned above all with his support for the racial policies of the government. The primary example is the discovery of a list of names of Italian teachers and academics in the archives of the Royal Academy, founded by Mussolini to support the Italian intellectual movement, which includes personal information and which labelled Jewish people with an “E.” The list, discovered by researcher Annalisa Capristo, demonstrates how Marconi participated in the discrimination of the time as these scholars, despite their acclaimed academic qualities, were never elected as members of the Royal Academy. Raboy does not issue any judgment on Marconi, unlike many newspapers (both Italian and foreign) immediately after the publication of Capristo’s research in 2001, but wonders if Marconi was truly a convinced anti-Semite or whether he was forced to comply with the anti-Semitism and racial laws enforced at the time.

A strength of Raboy’s work is his detailed personal and psychological picture of Marconi, something not always found in biographies of the inventor that are much more focused on his scientific discoveries. Marconi emerges as a man very appreciated by women who loved living comfortably, sometimes beyond his means. His numerous love adventures, evidenced by dense correspondence, have characterized all the various periods of his life. During his life, Marconi had two marriages, both in church. He managed to get the first marriage annulled by the Vatican, which suggests that members of the upper class obtained favored treatment from the church.

Raboy also highlights Marconi’s innate talent and intuition, which led him to discover new sensational discoveries. Marconi’s love for research and application of continuous test-based experimentation determined the success of wireless communication. He also discovered the technology that would become radar and, as Raboy writes, “foresaw the development of television and the fax machine, GPS, radar, and the portable hand-held telephone” (p. 6).

In conclusion, Raboy’s book is an excellent study of Marconi’s inventions and their role in
everyday life. It is also a valuable study in early globalization. As Raboy says, Marconi was “the first truly global figure in modern communication. Not only was he the first to communicate globally, he was the first to *think* globally about communication” (p. 4).

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