

The New History of the Italian South



The Mezzogiorno Revisited

Edited by Robert Lumley
and Jonathan Morris

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This collection brings together the work of a new generation of revisionist historians who employ an interdisciplinary approach to argue that the true history of Southern Italy has been reduced to that of a 'Southern problem' viewed through a Northern prism. They undermine many of the premises of *meridionalismo*, the Italian academic tradition which grew out of the work of early commentators such as Sonnino, Franchetti and Turiello, and suggest that the South was not a 'backward' region, but a combination of regions in which different social and economic patterns had evolved in response to the prevailing conditions within the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

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THE NEW HISTORY OF
THE ITALIAN SOUTH
THE MEZZOGIORNO REVISITED

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The Nationalization of Politics and the Politicization of the Nation in Liberal Italy

FULVIO CAMMARANO

The title of this chapter is not a simple play on words, as I would like to stress how the concept of the nation itself is actually subject to full acceptance of the undisputed primacy of what is 'political'. The category of 'political' redefines the relationships among individuals, within a specific geographical area, as exclusively formal political bonds, usually governed by a constitution. Historically we could say that the process of politicization of a nation is the attempt to realize this ideal. It means, in other words, transforming the real bonds and social conflicts among the nation's actors into purely political relationships, to which all other affinities are subordinate. We must therefore evaluate the phenomenon of the nationalization of politics—that is the construction of a single political framework throughout Italy—against the process of politicization—the diffusion and enforcement of this political system. This system should be considered (as Farneti proposed) as a system that attempts to disentangle itself from the web of relationships of civil society, by creating an autonomous power network, (naturally a legitimate and efficient one), which is able to reconcile the internal conflicts of society in specifically political terms.¹

Moving from this ideal to the reality of Italian history in the Liberal period, it is evident that this process did not occur

through a constant elimination of the expressions of actual power, nor was it a chance development in the gap between modernising sectors that sought to formalize the new rules and traditional sectors determined to preserve actual power structures, with all that entailed.

Many recent studies have acknowledged the weakness of an explanatory approach based on the hypothesis of a one-sided hierarchical relationship between an 'equalizing' centre, by definition 'political' and modern, and an unyielding periphery, characterized by parochiality and backwardness. That is why an inquiry into the roles, merits and limitations of the Liberal ruling class in their attempt to nurture a national view of politics, must focus on the relationship between the consolidation of national institutions and the process of emancipation of the political system as a whole.

This problem has often been ignored by Italian historians as if the politicization of the nation were automatically a by-product of the formation of the state and the creation of a national market. In fact, as Raffaele Romanelli emphasized, the Liberal project appeared quite contradictory as early as the immediate aftermath of the Italian *Risorgimento*.² The ruling class was well aware that their task of giving the nation a collective identity had to include a rapid mass politicization of the population, especially the South. This was meant to be a project of a sort of 'education to freedom' and it was quite obvious that it would also involve a very dangerous revival of anti-system forces and encourage the legitimate demands of the clergy and the Democratic groups.

This, as Paolo Pombeni has recently written, was the reason why Liberals refused to view the party as an instrument for political intervention.³ It is also why large sections of the national bourgeoisie chose the indirect and 'situational' power represented by the occupation of the state and public administration. This was a process of 'alienation from politics' that would greatly affect political life in Italy. Moderates and progressives encountered the same difficulties in trying to adopt a national political structure.⁴ Their difficulties did not arise, as we previously thought, from cultural limitations: on the contrary these ruling classes had clearly understood the

important role that a party could play. They believed, however, that politicizing the nation would lead to an irresistible social change and to the legitimation of emerging subcultures. Badaloni, a Socialist member of the Chamber of Deputies, was aware of this contradictory situation. In his parliamentary question about the Sicilian uprisings of 1894, he said:

We see in the concept of national unity, of Italian unity, the progression of an historical process dictated by economic needs which replaced the medieval *comuni* with regional states and the latter with national entities, thus promoting the brotherhood of nations among mankind and uniting the concept of mankind with the concept of the motherland . . . You cannot charge us, Signor Crispi, with undermining the unity of our motherland. *You cannot accuse us of this.* Our party aims at setting up its structures within the boundaries of public liberty, we plan to become a majority, and you cannot deny us this right that we share with all other parties, unless you destroy all your laws.⁵

This speech points to the causes of the ending of the Liberals' delusion that, together with credit for Unification, they could claim for themselves the historical merit of having re-established a harmony between civil society and political society in the nineteenth century. They had believed that even if not all the historic problems had been resolved, at least a neutralization of the political context had taken place. The politicization of the country was therefore for late nineteenth-century Liberals the dark side of nationalization.

Immediately after Unification Parliament had been seen as the only legitimate political expression of the nation. To quote Cavour: 'I believe that the only representation of the people resides in this Chamber of Parliament . . . I believe it would be a great mistake today if the nation's true opinion is not faithfully represented here.'⁶ Yet, especially after the impact of the extension of voting rights and the introduction of list voting in 1882, Parliament appeared to Liberals to be a particularistic body and a source of disintegration. Sonnino, too, believed that Parliament would be deprived of its dignity if its usefulness resided only in fulfilling the chronic need for reconciling conflicting local and individual interests, or if it was believed that the 'public administration' could only

operate in a conflictual and combative environment.⁷ During this period a whole generation of politicians, intellectuals and jurists began wondering about the best way to neutralize the process of politicization of the nation without slowing down the process of mass-nationalization.

From this perspective a symbolic event was the failure of Crispi's project, the last attempt to revive a self-confident Liberalism in the Jacobin-*Risorgimento* tradition. Crispi often made reference to the modernizing and anti-feudal features of the *Risorgimento*, and this enabled him to supply a disorientated Liberal bourgeoisie with some sort of identity based on a leading role for this social class in the completion of the process of modernization that had not been finished immediately after Unification due to the overwhelming obstacles it had encountered.⁸ In 1891 Crispi wrote:

The lower classes must remember that everything that has happened in Italy during this century was the work of the bourgeoisie; national unification, the independence of our motherland from the foreigner, the freedom of citizens, are all due to it. The lower classes must therefore be grateful to the bourgeoisie and must be content that they were given a place at life's banquet. The duties of the bourgeoisie have not yet been discharged, of course, and it is the duty of the bourgeoisie to pursue the social reorganization that will ensure for the working class the well-being that is due.⁹

Crispi aimed at achieving a 'positive' political identity, able to compete with those of the Catholics and Socialists. His commitment was not rewarded, however, because of the complexities of ongoing economic and social change, and because the bourgeoisie was historically denied the established channels of 'religion' and 'motherland' (the latter of which was also claimed by the spiritual heirs of Mazzini). During the late 1880s and early 1890s the gap between the national bourgeoisie and the ruling class became apparent. The only project of the ruling class for a political unification of the bourgeoisie was transformism, yet it had proved weak as a source of cultural legitimation and was unable to produce a bureaucratic set of rules that could provide a reliable frame of reference for

the relationships among the social classes.¹⁰ The overall failure of transformism did not result in any feasible alternative to political and parliamentary opportunism, nor an alternative to that bureaucratic discretionary power that was still a component of Giolitti's control of the nation's political mobilization. From the end of the century several members of the Italian Liberal intelligentsia began to seek a reshaping of politics. This was articulated as the need for a strengthening of the state as a reaction to the failure of the operation of elective institutions (Mosca, Turiello) or, by contrast, a confidence that a more coherent Liberalism would achieve the intent of integrating the popular masses (Pantaleoni, de Viti de Marco).

Both these projects required a renewed initiative and the construction of a high-profile ethical model. This way it would be possible to deal with the continuous, creeping process of politicization of the nation brought about day by day by Socialists and Catholics in municipal environments. In 1889 there had been a reform of local administration. Some political subcultures contained a strong ideological identification, and this enabled them to transform the *comuni* into headquarters for political projects, whereas previously they had been seen as dominated by notables, clientele and restricted interest groups. It was a self-sustaining process that transformed local administrations into an inescapable component of national politics, and created a circuit closely binding together party organization, the local élite and the national Parliament.

The reforms of 1889 therefore definitively established that the administrative issue was a political question.¹¹ A new and dangerous area of conflict was opening up for the Liberal bourgeoisie in which any initiative resulted in the reflection of an ideological concept or a presumed political division. The fact that such a division was likely to be the result of a conflict between local interest groups, dating back to centuries before, was irrelevant. Behind the expressions of fatigue with politics and the eulogy of sound administration, typical of these years, there was no relaunch of particularism, but rather the desire to be a part of modernity, exploiting a strong municipal identification that would lead to better power relations with the centre.

The municipal arena thus took on the role of workshop where a new and wider political class was forged, the real core of political mediation that nationalist thinkers, not by accident, came to identify with the substance of Giolitti's approach.¹² The growth of the municipal dimension during Giolitti's rule embodied the institutionalization of social conflict and the acceptance of a principle for the redistribution of resources in favour of better organized forces. And this was exactly what detonated the nationalist reaction. Nationalism clearly perceived that the politicization of the nation would no longer come about through a conversion of the majority to 'public' reason or through a gradual automatic acceptance of the superiority of 'Liberal' institutions, along the lines of the old Jacobin model.

Nationalism turned the question around, and its response was substantially tautological: the masses were the nation, and the nation was the masses. The definition included the very bourgeoisie that Liberals saw as composed of individuals. Now the political system was not legitimized by its defence of individual right, but by social right. The twentieth-century aimed to be represented as part of the community. This was because Socialists, and to some degree Catholics, had shown that by being part of a strong community one could become a citizen. Community identification had nothing to do with the principles of Liberalism or the state of law. The nationalists' post-Liberalism had to find a common identity that could, at least by demagogic standards, be defined as 'different'.¹³ The old idea of 'nation' was therefore resurrected, but it was no longer a historical premise, rather the identity of individuals formed through war who were by now part of the masses. Thus the epitome of classical democracy, the ancient Greek *agora* ('market place') conquered by the Socialists who had brought back to it the art of politics, was now to be recovered as a symbolic place for the middle classes, and, at the same time, retained as the symbolic site of political supremacy. In 1914 Alfredo Rocco, the Nationalist leader who began his political life as a radical, recalled the power of this symbolic dimension:

'If the *piazza* [the town square] is an instrument for governing, it is a state apparatus: it is necessary for nationalists to use it in

order to pursue the vital interests of the nation, instead of leaving it—as the other constitutional parties do—in the hands of the enemies of the state and the nation.

In this way, while the subversives use crowds and uprisings to overpower the state, we use the crowds and uprisings to support the state.¹⁴

Shortly afterwards, however, historical circumstances gave life to an unexpected national *agora* that put an end to all dichotomies between national and local patterns. Italy took part in a war that the Nationalists had desired as a means to create a compact hierarchical society. This would clearly demonstrate that foreign policy counted far more than domestic policy in finding a solution to the problem of limited bourgeois hegemony. War was a new experience, in which the nation would be, by and large, involved as a productive unit. This allowed the use of that *piazza* or *agora* of the *polis* ('city'), the mythical place for equalization and the legitimization of identity, that had been sought without success in previous years. The nation had now become a concrete experience for all citizens. Yet, once again, there had been no nationalization of politics, since the war also demonstrated how limited the opportunities for access to decision-making were.

After the war the political unity of the nation became a truly shared heritage. Male universal suffrage, freedom of political organization and proportional representation were established. Italian Liberalism was entitled to claim that it had solved the historical problem of the nationalization of politics. This, however, was done without taking into account the problem of the politicization of the nation. Liberal Italy was shaping a common language and a political tradition that was also conflictual. The ruling class did not acknowledge this process as a basic component of the political system, however, and therefore did not accept the need to institutionalize it as a legitimate political resource, which could be used to reconcile the divisions in civil society.

NOTES

1. P. Farneti, *Sistema politico e società civile* (Turin, 1971); F. Cammarano, 'Nazionalizzazione della politica e politicizzazione della nazione. I

- dilemmi della classe dirigente nell'Italia liberale', *Dalla città alla nazione. Borghesie ottocentesche in Italia e Germania*, eds, M. Merrigi and P. Schiera (Bologna, 1993), 139-63.
2. R. Romanelli, *Il comando impossibile. Stato e società nell'Italia liberale (Bologna, 1988)*.
 3. P. Pombeni, Partiti e sistemi politici nella storia contemporanea (Bologna, 1994) 106-15.
 4. F. Cammarano, 'La costruzione dello stato e la classe dirigente' *Storia d'Italia II: Il nuovo stato e la società civile*, eds, G. Sabbatucci and V. Vidotto (Bari-Rome, 1995), 3-112.
 5. Quoted in O. Barie, ed. *Le origini dell'Italia contemporanea* (Bologna, 1966), 56.
 6. C. Benso di Cavour, *Discorsi parlamentari*, 15 (Florence) speech of 21 April 1858.
 7. 'Un deputato', 'Torniamo allo statuto', *Nuova Antologia*, 151 (1897), 24.
 8. See A. Capone, *Destra e Sinistra da Cavour a Crispi* (Turin, 1981).
 9. F. Crispi, *Carteggi politici inediti (1860-1900)*, ed., T. Palamenghi-Crispi (Rome, undated), 457.
 10. See F. Cammarano, *Il progresso moderato. Un'opposizione liberale nella svolta dell'Italia crispina (1887-1892)* (Bologna, 1990), 30-35; G. Carocci, *Agostino Depretis e la politica interna italiana dal 1876 al 1887* (Turin, 1956); ed., G. Carocci *Il trasformismo dall'Unità ad oggi* (Milan, 1992).
 11. On these see ISAP. *Le riforme crispine*, 4 vols., (Milan, 1990).
 12. See G. Carocci, *Giolitti e l'età giolittiana* (Turin, 1961); G. Candeloro, *Storia dell'Italia moderna III. La crisi di fine secolo e l'età giolittiana*. (Milan, 1974); A. Aquarone, *L'Italia giolittiana*, (Bologna, 1988); E. Gentile, *Il mito dello stato nuovo dall'antigiolittismo al fascismo* (Bari-Rome, 1982).
 13. See F. Gaeta, *Il nazionalismo italiano* (Bari, 1981).
 14. Quoted in A. d'Orsi, ed., *I nazionalisti* (Milan, 1991).