

On Finding Hope in Italian History

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Thank you for inviting me to comment on Paul Ginsborg's striking essay and the remarkable symposium that followed. I am grateful not from confidence that I have much to add but with delight at finding myself in such a conversation. Those who follow discussions of modern Italy will recognize what an unusual discussion it is, marked from the first by the courage of Ginsborg's statement and the responses of truly historically informed participants. Even scholars who love Italy—and there are a great many—tend in print to show their sophistication by lamenting Italy's regional division, corruption, inefficiency, and stalemate as an ineluctable result of its history. Instead a newly naturalized historian is able to begin from avowed affection to present a case for modest hope built on a different reading of the past.

And I agree with the majority of discussants who would start their reassessment with the Risorgimento, for Italian political discourse has come to be dominated by an interpretation of Italian unification as a kind of historical error, imposed by a combination of luck and force, bringing neither the institutions nor values on which a healthy society could build. This reading of the Risorgimento as the original sin of the new Italian state predicts failure, justifies cynicism, and discourages efforts at reform. Selectively using valid insights, that mythic account needs to be challenged in order to break the hold on Italian public life of historical hopelessness.

When all deficiencies could be ascribed to the effects of foreign rule, Risorgimento patriots could easily offer hope in the promise of national unification. Yet for all its pride in Italy's past achievements, Risorgimento rhetoric tended not to wrestle very deeply with history. Eager to note the civic virtues of city states but embarrassed at their internecine conflicts, proud of Renaissance culture but not of the despots, costly courts, and aristocratic intrigue that went with it, Italian writers preferred to view history in terms of the "natural" evolution that had not occurred. Ironically, that penchant for pointing to an unexpectedly deficient past would find new life in subsequent talk of a *rivoluzione mancata*, Piedmontese centralism, or liberal narrowness. There is, therefore, something of a fresh start in asking what in the experience of national unification contemporary Italy could build upon.

We might start with the impressive intellectual tradition of political engagement. The names are in every schoolbook account, but it is worthwhile contemplating the historical significance for any society of its capacity to keep producing thinkers and critics engaged in (and necessarily limited by) the conditions of their times. An impressive combination of moral philosophy, social statistics, law and economics, and high culture runs through the work of the Verri brothers, Romagnosi, the Neapolitan legal schools, along with dozens of others and was widely disseminated for the time through publications, clubs, cafes, and reading rooms like the Gabinetto Vieusseux. This tradition underlies the remarkable production in each generation of engaged, admired, influential intellectuals critics somewhat outside the major political formations: Cattaneo, to be sure, but also figures like Salvemini, the Rossellis, Calamandrei, Bobbio. A radical tradition from Mazzini through Gramsci culminated in the PCI's becoming for a time the world's most politically and culturally creative Communist movement. Can such examples, which shine through the dark smog of the Berlusconi years, be built upon now? Paul Ginsborg, it seems to me, suggests they can. In addition, Italy's leaders in the final stages of the

Risorgimento merit a second look. Denis Mack Smith, whose criticisms of Cavour ricocheted through the Italian press as well as historical circles, once said to me that he considered Cavour second only to Lincoln among the greatest of nineteenth-century political leaders. He had in mind, I think, Cavour's commitment to parliamentary government, constitutional legality, free expression, and economic growth as well as his pragmatism and manipulative skills. For all their narrow rigidities, figures like Ricasoli and Minghetti compare quite well to their contemporaries in the governments of France and England. The Risorgimento, in short, was not so fatally flawed a beginning. It is indeed true that newly united Italy did not enjoy a strong state (although that can mean many different things), but it is worth noting, too, that when at the end of the nineteenth century many European nations faced major political crises, Italy ultimately opted for a more representative government rather than a more repressive one. Two generations later, amidst the chaos and anguish of the Moro kidnapping, Italian society produced expressions of civic spirit that justified patriotic references to the Risorgimento. Despite the understandably heavy burden of cynicism, Italian citizens often display a capacity for moral indignation. That, too, has roots in the Risorgimento, not simply in the belief that the past can be surpassed, but in the values expressed and the efforts at political mobilization across regions, class, and gender.

Several speakers commented on the need for a broader, more comparative perspective in discussions of Italian politics, and they are surely right. A frustrating parochialism underlies much Italian criticism of public life and assumes the obdurate uniqueness of Italy's political problems. Appealing, even boastful, discussions of local cuisine and local dialects quickly lead to comments, offered with a sigh, about the lasting barriers to a united and efficiently functioning Italian polity. It has never been clear to me in what sense local loyalty or identity is stronger in Italy than in Spain, France, or Great Britain, with their impressive histories of strong regional resistance to a central state. In any case it is not as if human beings contain a limited quantity of social loyalty such that any attachment at one level reduces the sense of connection at any other. Of course local leaders seek to mobilize local resistance to policies they fear, but that is not proof of eternal antipathy to the nation. In practice, an international soccer match (or a Nobel prize) provokes expressions of national identity across the peninsula. The habit of considering Italian affairs (i.e. Italy's problems) in isolation runs deep, so that frequent complaints in the press and parliamentary speeches beginning "In a normal society . . ." discourage any search for effective policies by assuming that Italy's problems are deeply embedded and unique, that there is little to be learned from others, and that not much can be accomplished.

Building a movement of civic engagement requires much more, of course, than putting Italian affairs in a broader context or establishing a more balanced and generous view of the Risorgimento. Although Ginsborg emphasizes the challenge of a strong Church in a weak state as a significant historical problem, the discussions that follow have largely avoided the issue. The Church plays so many parts in Italian society that it is difficult to locate its strength in one of its roles, and perhaps historians are daunted by the evidence that in the past not much social or political benefit has followed from attacks on, or even formal negotiation with, the institutional church. There remains, however, a possibility of important Catholic contributions to civic engagement through social programs, the Church's stance toward immigrants, and Christian democracy's involvement with European unification. After all, Italy's place in global politics rests almost exclusively with the European Union, where Italy's size and geography offer opportunities that Italian governments have neglected despite the prominence within the E.U. of individual Italians. (Here, too, the Risorgimento is a useful reminder of how much Italy once benefited from ties to liberal Belgium, Britain, and France.) The possibility of Catholic

engagement provides one set of reasons that any new civic movement should not present itself as simply a modern extension of the secular left. And there is another: At least since the time of the French Revolution, a semi-hidden, deep cultural-ideological-political-familial division has run through Italian society. There were immediate winners but especially many losers in those risings, riots, executions, and massacres that preceded, accompanied, and followed the arrival and departure of organized armies. The divisive process continued, somewhat more mildly but generally along established fault lines, through the Risorgimento. Clientelism since has thrived in part as a personal defense system against the threat of change in the power structure. Following Fascism, the Resistance, and continuing debates about where patriotism lies, this division extended into the Republic, as party patronage infiltrated professions and business. There is thus a neuralgic memory of threat that Berlusconi has skillfully invoked and that a successful civic movement must not inflame. At the same time, silence is not sufficient. Several participants in this discussion have criticized Italy's failure to come to grips with its Fascist past. That absence is deeply troubling, and more thought needs to be given as to how locally-based civic politics might find ways to accomplish reconciliation and candor.

Any project to *salvare l'Italia* must surely include restoring a substantive Italian culture to an important place in public life. An essential element of Italian national identity, art, music, and literature form a vibrant part of the mental musculature of every important Italian thinker. Historically, formal culture has been a major means through which Italian governments reached their citizens. Publications like *Il Mondo*, the intellectual activities of progressives and radicals, literature, and cinema contributed enormously to the health of the young republic in the 1950s. Today, weaving new links between high culture, popular culture, and contemporary concerns will be one of the challenges for an effective civic movement. There may even be some advantage in starting from the wasteland the recent situation leaves behind. Furthermore, a thriving public culture should be greatly invigorated by rising public attention to the environment. In Italy, ecological issues extend to matters of national patrimony—natural, archeological, and artistic; and they offer a rallying point for immediate local mobilization connected to national policies.

No term in Italian political life is more overworked than crisis but clearly Italy is in one now, and that opens new possibilities. Berlusconi is out of power, and his marketing strategies (multiple new parties with new young leaders) seem unlikely to bring him back. Hence the *cri de coeur* that led to these discussions might be written somewhat differently today. The disarray of the Italian left looks different in light of the difficulties of engulfing progressive parties throughout the developed world in face of a global economy. Calls within the European Union for a new direction open fresh possibilities. And one of the most hopeful signs in contemporary Italy is the frequent reference to “new Italians.” Demographically and geopolitically realistic, the phrase conveys an openness to immigrants that, although seriously contested, could facilitate a reconceived Italian identity and a patriotism built around universal values. If, as noted in these discussions, states of exception make solutions seem temporary and therefore acceptable, then opportunity may beckon. From the not always admirable flexibility of Italian institutions and politics to the endearing *mitezza* in much of Italian life, there is in fact a lot to build upon. Historians will not create the changes that Ginsborg envisions, but by thawing out preconceptions that declare those changes impossible, historians can assist in bringing them about.