

# Soli al Mondo: The Recourse to “Sovereignism” in Contemporary Italian Populism

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The Italian President, Sergio Mattarella, opening a 2018 conference dedicated to the condition of the European Union, spoke of the need to avoid the “temptation of a sovereigntist narrative” (Magliocco 2018). The same day, Paolo Becchi, a philosopher close to the populist *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement), defined the formation of the Five Star coalition government in 2018 as “the first victory, with European significance, of ‘sovereignism’” (Becchi 2018). In Italian, “sovranismo” is a neologism combining the word “sovrano” (“sovereign”) and the French “souverainisme” (“sovereignty”). The term has clearly entered into Italian political language.

Hostility to immigration, globalization, and the European Union across Europe is increasingly framed in terms of reclaiming a “lost” sovereignty that has slipped into the hands of foreign capital, transnational institutions, and global cultural elites (Feltri 2018; Zuquete 2018). The use of the term “sovranismo” is thus shorthand for a set of claims from a range of political positions that call for reinstating a national government’s control over economic and cultural policies and restricting the regulatory and cultural scope of external agencies of all sorts (Feltri 2018). It has become the go-to word to contrast those who advocate “taking back control” and nationalism against the globalists, who are the *bête noire* of populism. The Italian press, for example, is full of stories with titles such as “Il contratto sovranista del nuovo governo” (“The sovereigntist contract of the new government” [Fabbrini 2018]); “I fatti dell’anno: Macerata burning, le radici dell’odio sovranista” (“The facts of the year: burning Macerata, the roots of sovereigntist hatred” [Tizian 2018]); and “Sovranisti e identitari, ecco la sintesi” (“Sovereigntists and identitarians, here is the synthesis” [Fratùs 2018]).

Italy is an interesting case for considering sovereigntism because it is widely thought to be an example of a state that has always had a weak sense of nationhood (Bodei 2006; Berezin 2018). The state originated more from conquest than from popular national revolt and was unified relatively late compared to many other European states. Multiple factors—cultural differences between regions, the developmental gap between north and south, the lack of a national vernacular language until the late nineteenth century, and the weakness of state authority relative to social institutions such as families and the Catholic Church—have conspired to produce a weak national identity. The one major attempt to impose a strong sense of state sovereignty, under Fascism, from 1922 until 1943, ended in dramatic failure. Thus, the appearance of a discourse of sovereigntism in contemporary Italy is initially surprising.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, I provide a survey of the origins and uses of contemporary claims in Italy about reinstating a “full” national sovereignty. These arguments have developed at a time in which many people find themselves looking back nostalgically on an ostensibly autonomous period when they thought that they and their country were less dependent on foreigners. I then turn to the three major arguments made on behalf of sovereigntism by both supporters of contemporary populist movements as well as those typically associated with the historic left, two groups who argue in similar ways. Their shared concerns include the sacrifice of the national “people” to the benefit of a globalizing elite; the European Union’s crisis of

legitimacy in the face of multiple dilemmas relating to the Euro and immigration; and the perceived threat to Italy's national identity from immigrants themselves and from the cultural norms of other places. In the face of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 there was much talk of "il sovranismo sanitario" ("health sovereignty") in which a foreign virus was declared to have wrought so much damage on Italy largely out of fear of upsetting foreigners and without sufficient support from foreigners, particularly neighboring countries (Dentico 2020). Finally, using my own recent writing on the contingency of sovereignty (e.g. Agnew 2018), I point out that the push to take back control (as with Brexit, for example) or act on behalf of a newly sovereign Italy is based on a misreading of the actual history of sovereignty in the country. This misreading involves a romanticized view of the specifics of Italian nation-statehood before the inroads of globalization, the European Union, and the boats of migrants crossing the Mediterranean in the hope of reaching Italian shores. I pay especially close attention to why Italy is not a particularly propitious setting for fulfilling any of the various claims for sovereignty.

### **What is Sovereignty?**

According to Treccani Online (n.d.), "sovranismo" is a "Posizione politica che propugna la difesa o la riconquista della sovranità nazionale da parte di un popolo o di uno Stato, in antitesi alle dinamiche della globalizzazione e in contrapposizione alle politiche sovranazionali di concertazione" ("A political position that advocates the defense or the reconquest of national sovereignty on the part of a people or a state, in antithesis to the dynamic of globalization and in opposition to supranational policies of agreement through consultation"). The French *Encyclopédie Larousse* indicates a more direct connection to the European Union by stating that it is the "doctrine des défenseurs de l'exercice de la souveraineté nationale en Europe" ("doctrine of the defenders of the exercise of national sovereignty in Europe") and traces its logic back to the origin of the European Community in the 1950s with both left- and right-leaning variants (Encyclopédie Larousse 2019). But as a word it is more recent, dating to 1997, when it was probably first used in relation to Quebec's movement to separate from Canada. In this case, the word obviously had a connotation of "independence."

In Italy, the neologism was first used publicly in 2016 by the new *Fronte Sovranista Italiano* (FSI) that looked to the "riconquista della sovranità nazionale in ogni sua forma, attraverso il ricollocamento della Costituzione al vertice dell'ordinamento" ("reconquest of sovereignty in all its aspects, united in the necessity of putting the [Italian] Constitution at the top of the Italian legal order" [Fronte Sovranista Italiano 2018]). The *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy) Party has since also adopted a "sovereignist" identity. English political scientist Christopher Bickerton (2007, 109) captured an important, negative element of the term when he characterizes much of the enthusiasm for international organizations and supranational initiatives as well as humanitarian interventions by powerful states in weaker ones as "replacing the politics of self-determination with bureaucratic rule that is dependent on external power for its survival."

More commonly, however, the term has come into use in a much more bottom-up way to refer to a singular alternative to the disenchantment with the financial, economic, and immigration policies that have become associated with a world in which seats of power are both more distant and more opaque. More specifically, the crisis associated with the use of the Euro following the 2007-08 global economic crisis has become an important symbol of the limits of supranational power, while the democratic deficit of European Union institutions has pointed towards the legitimation crisis facing the open-ended process of European unification. More

generally, and typifying leftist positions, multinational corporations and free trade are viewed as undermining national sovereignty as supranational organizations like the European Union underwrite their operations. Beyond this, the major difference between left- and right-leaning variants of “sovereignism” is that the right sees “nel popolo un’unità organica, intessuta di legami fortissimi, che ‘il sangue e la terra’ cementano all’interno di ‘confini’ ben definiti” (“the people as an organic unity, woven by strong identity links, that ‘blood and earth’ cements within well-defined ‘borders’” [Labocetta 2018]).

This leads right-wing populists, such as the League and its leader Matteo Salvini, to emphasize national/cultural homogeneity and concern about the cultural impact of immigration. Such insistence is more than ironic given the League’s origins in the 1980s as a political movement based on a fundamental discrimination between northern and southern Italy as distinctive cultural worlds. On the left, by contrast, the emphasis rests on the call for politics to take primacy over the market or the economy more broadly. The national territory may not necessarily define the sole regulatory or sovereign space; in fact, the European Union can do so. Thus, any space “open to progress” including the supranational could fit into this conception of regulatory authority (e.g. Labocetta 2018; Cannavò 2018). Increasingly, however, some leftist proponents of sovereignism have argued that they cannot cede ground to the right and have increasingly accepted national borders as essential, thereby redefining the term’s meaning on the left (e.g. Somma 2018).

The timing of this political debate is hardly coincidental. Ever since Italy formally adopted the Euro in 1999, it has experienced a much lower rate of economic growth than it did before. Previously, Italian governments could always devalue the Lira when faced with serious economic crises or declining competitiveness. This was no longer possible once the Euro fully replaced the Lira in 2002. Following the financial crisis of 2007-08, Italy was one of the countries that suffered most from the austerity policies that followed from the increasing spread in yields between German and Italian bonds, showing the limits of a monetary system in which the lack of European Union-wide bonds and banking imposed costs very unevenly across member states of the Eurozone. Finally, Italy’s population flow has changed substantially. Once mainly a country of emigration, over the past twenty years Italy has become the first and sometimes final stop for an increasing flow of immigrants, largely clandestine, from Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Even though many of these migrants and refugees intend to move beyond Italy, under European Union rules, Italy as the country of first arrival has been faced with the challenge of managing their presence. The fact that many of the immigrants are culturally distinctive in numerous ways combines with the absence of a significant domestic tradition of multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism to create difficult conditions for integrating immigrants.

The European Union is frequently blamed *tout court* for all of these problems. Even if there is something to complain about with respect to the European Union immigration policies (though in fact, other countries have taken in far more refugees than Italy in recent years), in other respects there is some exaggeration, to say the least. Indeed, at least until 2008, the Euro provided an opportunity to cut interest rates that could have led to a small investment boom in Italy because of the then-positive impact of being in a currency union with other more productive economies. But, largely because of the Berlusconi government of 2001-06, Italy missed this opportunity by failing to encourage banking competition, clean up toxic assets from business balance sheets, invest in infrastructure, and reform tax collection to reduce evasion. Outside the Eurozone, the future possibility of currency devaluation of a revived Lira could not compensate for the failure to address these entirely domestic issues.

Nevertheless, there is a nostalgia in many quarters for a Golden Age, perhaps that of the Economic Miracle of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when median incomes increased across the board, regional economic inequalities were reduced, and Made in Italy emerged as a global brand. A recent cross-national study of popular opinions shows that most Europeans aged 18-65 are nostalgic, with a majority of those over 35 thinking the world “used to be a better place” (De Vries and Hoffmann 2018). But Italians are the most nostalgic of all. 77% of Italian respondents are reported as nostalgic as compared to 67% across all 28 European Union member states (as of 2018). Polish respondents are at the other end of the distribution of opinions, with 59% of its population nostalgic. Disproportionately, Italians identified as nostalgic define themselves politically as right or center-right and rate immigration as a major problem; however, they have fewer issues with individual immigrants (those who live near the respondents) and, perhaps surprisingly, they support remaining in the European Union, if somewhat less so than non-nostalgics (67% to 82%). All told, at least with respect to attitudes toward the European Union, sovereigntism has not yet seriously filtered down into popular opinion even among those most nostalgic for the past.

### **Three Threads of Sovereigntism**

Most contemporary populist movements share the goal of reestablishing national sovereignty in a globalizing world. Quite what this might mean is not always clear. But, according to Jacques Sapir, a French economist who specializes in Russia and an important source for those supporting the idea of sovereigntism, there are three distinctive senses to the term: the social, the political, and the identitarian (Sapir 2016). These overlap in different ways from case to case but are useful in distinguishing the various arguments for the importance of national sovereignty (Feltri 2018, 48-51).

The first argument focuses on the distributional consequences of a loss or absence of national control and authority such that there is increasing inequality between the people, on the one hand, and a small elite, on the other. In this argument the emphasis lies on how much control over the generation of wealth is in the hands of people and corporations that give no priority to the interests of the national population in question. This is very much the tenor of what could be called left-Keynesian critiques of the European Union and the Eurozone, such as that by Fazi and Mitchell (2018), which posits an essential opposition between how much the cession of powers to the European Union has undermined the possibilities of managing national economic growth, and the progressive redistribution of income that once characterized European nation states. In other words, the social argument for sovereigntism rests on the social consequences of global financialization and the burdens placed on national populations when financialization goes wrong.

From this viewpoint, control over a territorial space is absolutely vital to establishing an economic-institutional complex that can exercise the sort of power needed to reorient economic policy in a popular direction (Fazi and Mitchell 2018, 286-87). Yet the European Union is far from being a straightforward agent of neo-liberal capitalism, as certain leftwing sovereigntism advocates contend (see, e.g., Walsh 2019). In fact, in its origins and many of its practices, the European Union is an agent of geographical and social redistribution—albeit one with a tiny budget, compared to its member states’. Critics of the European Union’s regional and agricultural policies rarely regard it as a regulatory agency for global capital. If anything, the

European Union actually protects against the free rein of global capital, which proponents of neo-liberalism favor, more than most of its member national governments have.

The second argument is a classically political one to the effect that nation states are based on a direct link between citizens and a legitimacy of decisions that supranational entities, such as the European Union, lack. Not only an inheritor of familiar institutions and symbols, the nation state has historically served as a “public risk manager,” making its own decisions about tax, income, and welfare policies (Hosking 2016). From this perspective, the Euro has no people to which it corresponds. Its management is entirely technocratic and based on the needs of investors and speculators more than the interests of national populations. Many of the most well-known Italian sovereigntists, such as Paolo Savona, Alberto Bagnai, and Claudio Borghi, argue from this position, even though they are all macroeconomists rather than political theorists. The Euro is their main target, rather than the European Union more generally. In this construction, the question at hand is whether “sovereignty belongs to the people or to the spread” (the spread between German and Italian bond yields under the Euro [see, e.g. Rinaldi 2018]).

Critics of the European Union’s neoliberalism, such as Alessandro Somma (2018), share much of this argument but without making the Euro the center of the dilemma: for them, it serves instead as somewhat of a distraction from the European Union’s overall focus on market-making at the expense of political regulation. Somma sees the European Union experiment in unconstrained market-making as having gone so far that it cannot be reformed without reinstating national matching between economic policy and democratic control. There are indeed arguments for increased democratic accountability of the economy within the institutions of the European Union, but it is far from clear whether there is much more guarantee of democratic revival at the nation-state scale of governance considering the performance over the years of many national governments, include Italy’s.

Finally, perhaps the most commonly made and broadly accepted argument is an identitarian one, which extols the virtues of tradition and focuses overwhelmingly on the threat that immigration and lack of control over borders poses to national cultural homogeneity. Consequently, the identitarian argument is usually associated with right-wing proponents of sovereigntism. In France, figures such as Eric Zemmour (2014) and Alain Finkielkraut (2013) have built reputations based entirely on this logic (see, e.g., Zerofsky 2019). Islamophobia and the defense of traditional “values” are its main stocks-in-trade (Zúquete 2018). In this construction, family, nation, work, state, and school have all been dispossessed by foreign initiatives and the spread of a destructive individualism.

In Italy, this perspective is intrinsic to the Lega Nord (Northern League) and its leader, Matteo Salvini, who finds ways to argue an identitarian strategy in the public defense of things like Italian food and the wearing of Italian police and firefighter uniforms. The irony, of course, is that in identifying a bowl of spaghetti as his symbol *par excellence* of Italianness, Salvini is selecting a foodstuff that in his previous iteration as a politician for the Northern League would have been representative of the hated South, rather than the Padania for which he used to shill. Interestingly, the very values of family, work, and the patriarch-ruled home favored by European identitarians tend also to be those favored by Islamists. Only minor identitarian currents play up Europe’s historic secularism and openness to cultural change. Additionally, a strange version of this perspective claims leftist credentials while offering a critique of capitalism that romanticizes an essential Italian culture in its singular struggle with globalization (Fusaro 2015). Either way, the European Union and globalization are jointly seen as undermining the settled territories of individual nationhood to which all peoples allegedly belong.

Yet, as Sapir himself suggests, the racism and xenophobia on which much identitarianism depends also constitute its Achilles' heel. For one thing, identitarians often favor "European" rather than specifically Italian or French values, which explains something of the common cause across otherwise nationalist rightwing populist movements. Sovereignism, particularly in its political aspect, requires no such cultural specificity. Across its various threads, sovereignism is not a circle that any generalized version can square (Feltri 2018, 50). In practice, the focus on identity is typically the driving force behind much of the populism that has swept across Italy and the rest of Europe.

### **Sovereignty's Contingency**

Much of the writing cited above has been criticized on four grounds (e.g. Jackson 2003; Appadurai 2006; Abélès 2017; Agnew 2018; Feltri 2018). First, critics point to how contemporary states are increasingly redundant in a world in which capital now operates on supranational and global scales rather than on a country-by-country basis. Regulatory and democratic checks therefore need to be imagined at those scales rather than nostalgically relocated to the increasingly irrelevant national scale (e.g. Appadurai 2006; Cannovò 2018), particularly since existing states are themselves largely arbitrary, artificial entities and thus not necessarily good fits for managing many functions.

A second critique is that most of the world's states, including Italy, have never been very good at the democratic accountability assumed by proponents of the first two arguments for sovereignism (e.g. Schiavone 2013). The economic history of the world (including Putin's Russia, which Sapir seems to admire) is largely one of extractive or despotic elites extorting rents from populations rather than benevolently guiding economic development in the collective interest (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

The third critique is that many of the institutions of the European Union that are demonized by sovereignism, such as the European Central Bank, are in fact of the same species of independent organizations that are found on the national scale. The independence of central banks from governmental influence has become widely accepted the world over (e.g. Cassese 2006; 2018). Finally, many of the world's states have never been fully sovereign in almost any sense of the term. Controlling borders, resisting foreign intervention, serving national populations equally across national territories, and generating national feeling have never been exercised in the ways that sovereignists contend. Indeed, the entire exercise is based on a dangerous illusion: the recuperation of a sovereignty that never actually existed anywhere (Feltri 2018).

It is this last critique that I want to develop here because it is the most important one in challenging the entire approach that lies behind the sovereignism of contemporary populist movements (see Agnew 2018). In European political theory, the earliest and most widespread discussions about states, statehood, and their grounding in sovereignty date from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Skinner 2010, 27). Much debated in political theory, the definition of sovereignty might best be captured by a typology that Stephen Krasner has recently (1999; 2010) articulated. He identifies two basic principles and one assumption of political practice associated with the term (Krasner 2010, 96): 1. International legal sovereignty (juridical equality among states, membership in international organizations), based on mutual recognition among states; 2. Westphalian sovereignty, based on the absence of submission to external rule as expressed in the formula from the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648: *Cuius*

*regio, eius religio* (“Whoever possesses the region [or territory], his is the religion”); 3. Domestic sovereignty, or the effective control over the state’s territory, including cross-border flows.

Krasner argues that these do not constitute an organic whole so much as contradict one another. Most of the world’s self-declared states today have international legal sovereignty but cannot readily resist the intervention of external powers or exercise particularly effective domestic sovereignty. In practice, deviations from the rules of absolute state sovereignty are almost the norm. In Krasner’s (1999) memorable phrase, the typical reality of state sovereignty is “organized hypocrisy.”

The entire logic of state sovereignty, therefore, is based in the timeless spaces of sovereign territorial statehood that, once established, are taken as permanent givens (Jackson 2003). To the extent that there has been much debate about state sovereignty, it has until recently been based on the idea of “the persistence vs. the disappearance of the territorial state as the principal form of political organization in the Westphalian system” (Gazit 2018, 223). There has been little or no attention to the longstanding failure of claims to absolute state territorial sovereignty when subjected to rigorous empirical examination (except, e.g., Adler-Nissen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2008; Howland and White 2009; Agnew 2018).

The Westphalian system so ritually invoked as the inaugural form of modern state sovereignty was never imagined as “a system of mutually recognized sovereign territorial states” (Howland and White 2009, 3). Howland and White explain that, “The Westphalian model also imagined that the international system would maintain itself through a coordinated system of international law, treaties, and diplomatic exchanges” (2009, 3). In other words, the myth is that sovereignty was ever something other than a coordinated system: that it was instead a world of equal states with equivalent sovereignties existing independently in the world, without any reliance on other polities except for mutual recognition.

The origins of this powerful myth lie in the desire to restrict the rule of the papacy and other overlapping authorities across Western Europe. This desire also provided the groundwork for the explosion of competitive colonialism inside and outside of Europe on the part of newly minted states. European statehood was born with and into a world that was made more by colonialism and commercial expansion than by mutual delimitation of territorial borders with quiescent neighbors. Territorial exclusivity, for example, was based on the importation, back home in Europe, of mapping and partition strategies developed abroad in colonial expansion (Branch 2010). With the decline of the European colonial empires as a by-product of world wars and nationalist-democratic struggles, “a people could only become sovereign as a state form” even when “[p]opulations were diverse and often divided, and territories had indistinct borders” (Howland and White 2009, 10). It was not popular sovereignty that defined borders, but the imposition of borders between “peoples” that decided who was on one side and who was on the other, thus “exercising” the principle of popular sovereignty in different territories (Yack 2012, 151).

The contingency of sovereignty also has deep roots in the hierarchical nature of the state system dating to the nineteenth century. Two aspects of this hierarchical system merit attention. One is the way in which certain powerful states (and interest groups therein, such as businesses) defined international law in terms of legal norms and practices that privileged private property rights worldwide, irrespective of the nominal jurisdiction where such rights might be located. The conversion of land to useful purpose through labor was the usual justification for defining and imposing property rights in colonial territories where such rights had previously been either

collective or absent altogether (Koskenniemi 2017, 362). The domestic territory was just too limited to facilitate the accumulation of resources and capital that colonial expansion could provide for European political and business elites. When property disputes arose, they would inevitably be settled in favor of the more powerful party with the investments and lawyers to enforce their claims. Sovereignty and property have thus always operated together to limit the sovereignty of some and expand it for others (e.g. Fitzmaurice 2014; Ince 2014). Turning a blind eye to the connection between these two concepts has long been a way of maintaining the fiction of equality between states. With the intensifying globalization of production and financial services since the 1970s, cities such as New York and London have become centers for the enforcement of global property rights worldwide (e.g. Filippi 2019). Corporations and trade associations exercise powers that are akin to those of states but often even greater in geographical scope and influence (Garrett 2008). Some actors, including some states as well as global businesses, are always more sovereign than others.

Sovereignty's other root system lies in the military-political dominance of some states over others. States are neither born equal nor can a dominant position relative to others be equally available to all (Agnew and Corbridge 1995). These inequalities are particularly important in relation to domestic sovereignty, as defined by Krasner, and to the capacity to resist external interference (as in Westphalian sovereignty). The long trajectory of invasions and interventions by the so-called Great Powers, from Britain and France to the United States and Russia, suggests how fictive it is to limit the exercise of sovereign powers to the borders of the colored blocks of space on the world map. Sovereign powers can be projected over space politically, economically and militarily through alliances, sanction regimes, and base networks that usually involve the extraterritorial jurisdiction of the distant power trumping the local one. Sovereignty thereby travels over space for some but not for others.

Yet there are continuing, powerful normative and administrative arguments for locking some degree of sovereignty into territorial units with which people have familiarity (e.g. Koskenniemi 2011; Rodrik 2013). These need not be nation-states as such but a collective mosaic of more local communities, city-regions, and networks (Filippi 2019). The recent "backlash against globalization," is as much about the existence of mass immigration and the challenge that immigration poses to a presumed national cultural homogeneity as it is to immigration's direct impact on employment and incomes. This example suggests a substantial cultural-political basis for what can be called "nation-statehood" (the combination of a social group with a national identity and a state apparatus), where the two terms on either side of the hyphen actually coincide, where states are supposed to do things for their populations—provide public goods, record civic histories, etc. They also theoretically provide a degree of security from domestic and foreign threats. Populist movements appeal to national populations' anxieties about demographic changes, particularly the idea that immigrants will "replace" the "people" or *volk* with foreigners. As Koskenniemi says (2011, 70):

Sovereignty articulates the hope of experiencing the thrill of having one's life in one's own hands. This is what sovereignty meant for those who struggled against theocratic rule in early modern Europe or invoked it to fight for decolonization in the twentieth century. Today, it stands as an obscure representative of an ideal against disillusionment with global power and expert rule. In the context of war, economic collapse, and environmental destruction, in spite of all the managerial technologies, sovereignty points to the possibility, however limited or idealistic,

that whatever comes to pass, one is not just a pawn in other people's games but, for better or for worse, the master of one's life.

Sovereignty has also frequently been called upon to frustrate rather than realize anything approaching democracy (Morefield 2005). We are all increasingly aware of emergent threats and challenges, from climate change to human rights, that cannot be addressed adequately solely on the scale of the nation-state. Political systems both democratic and non-democratic, suffer from difficulties in dealing with such issues because of time horizons involving elections or dynastic succession, questions of responsibility to mass publics who may be massively ill-informed, and the low salience of many global issues in relation to the urgent problems of everyday life (Latour 2016). Undoubtedly, the territorial framing of sovereignty—its outline on a map—matters in making it legible to populations at large. Increasingly, however, the best approach to making it legible in a more accurate way may be to examine issues in terms of the logics of spatial integration and disintegration rather than in terms of fixed territories of sovereign space (e.g. Abélès 2017). In other words, problems of different geographic scope require different applications of or shares of sovereign space. One size does not fit all. The memory of total territorial control associated with contemporary sovereigntism and its obsession with the idealized territorial state is a false one with potentially devastating consequences.

The history of Italy as a unified state is instructive insofar as it draws attention to the absence of the total territorial sovereignty long before membership in the European Union or the onset of contemporary economic globalization that contemporary sovereigntism turns into a resource. That absence must now be addressed, it says. That much of the inspiration for contemporary sovereigntism comes from French writers matters. France's shrinking global profile lies behind much of their travail (Zerofsky 2019); Italy is a different story altogether (Bodei 2006; Berezin 2018).

In the first place, Italy is a congeries of regions and localities with distinctive resource bases, interests, and identities. North and South, for example, are arguably more distant today in terms of economic prospects than was the case in the 1980s (Tortuga 2019). The different regions also tend to elect very different parties and politicians. Religion and secularism are variably distributed across the country. It was exactly this lack of much cultural and political unification that has resulted in movements such as Fascism and the Northern League. In the case of Fascism, it came from the lack of a strong "sense of the state" because of Italy's late unification, an idea that could only be forced from the top down. Carlo Levi's great memoir *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945) draws attention to the challenge and ultimately the failure of this effort. In the case of the Northern League, the claim was that the North deserved its own government rather than to serve as a source for funds poured into a backward and undeserving South. In fact, the support for the Northern League (until it mutated into The League between 2013 and 2016) was very much based on local identities and the need to protect them in the face of nationalization as well as globalization (Agnew 2013).

In the second place, Italy has always been entangled in interdependencies that have invariably limited and directed its options (e.g. Zamagni 2018; Bricco 2019). Dependence on foreign markets was central to the Economic Miracle of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Foreigners have long supplied credit to Italian businesses. Ultimately, managing flows of people and goods across the Mediterranean requires more and better collaboration with others, not a retreat into a national shell. Any country on its own has limited possibilities for economic development. Even large countries such as the former Soviet Union never successfully fulfilled

the goal of complete economic autarky. Yet sovereigntism rests, in some cases more obviously than in others, on the idea of either capitalism or socialism working their respective marvels entirely within the confines of one country. The likelihood of this working in a territory such as that occupied by Italy is impractical if not simply impossible.

Finally, Italy occupies a middling slot in the global state hierarchy (Brighi 2018). It cannot avoid committing itself to alliances and dalliances that have consequences domestically. Think of longstanding NATO commitments, and the recent flirting with Putin and other despots for advantages in accessing Russian natural gas. Irrespective of the other merits of membership in the European Union or of globalization more broadly, the idea that Italy can ever be an equivalent sovereign to the United States, China, or Russia is not realistic. It will always have to adjust and limit its own positions to please these larger powers. Better perhaps to own up to this and to enlarge its influence by pursuing a share of a broader sovereignty with its neighbors.

## Conclusion

Building walls to mark the borders of states and closing ports or restricting access to migrants, refugees, and other external influences (although rarely restricting capital or trade in goods as such) has become the order of the day in Europe and elsewhere. Notwithstanding the empirical fact that a majority of border-crossers who stay actually arrive legally at airports and then overstay their visas, nor the fact that the actual intensity of migration overall into Italy and the United States (for example) is significantly less than it was twenty years ago, invasion panics characterize politics across the western world as of 2020. The roots of this anxiety are obviously complex and related to issues such as stagnating incomes, the cultural identity of migrants compared to current natives, and so on. But they also connect profoundly to understanding sovereignty as singularly centralized and national-territorial.

The sovereigntism that has become the leitmotif of contemporary populism in Italy is based on this assumption. Yet, as I have tried to show, this sovereigntism is a hopelessly simple-minded take on sovereignty. At the same time, of course, advocates of globalization deride the concerns of the discontented peasants as passé and not worthy of examination (Filippi 2019). It is precisely this either/or view of sovereignty within a world once divided up into secure units of territorial space, a world now challenged by population and capital flows that know no boundaries, that I have opened to challenge. Even as we need to think beyond the state, we must also attend to the fact that states, particularly the forty or so worldwide that have some degree of effective domestic sovereignty, are still with us for good or ill, whether we like it or not. That they are singularly well equipped to do what sovereigntists claim for them is another matter entirely. If there is one lesson from the entire Brexit imbroglio, it is that placing one's faith singularly in the managerial capacity of national governments is not the cure-all that sovereigntism envisages (see, e.g., Fabbrini 2019).

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