

A historian of institutions, but with a keen eye to the social dimension, Meriggi illustrates an early-nineteenth-century trend, largely the result of European impulses, which influenced the whole peninsula. The transformations first of the republican period, then of the Napoleonic period, and finally of the Restoration, tended towards institutional and administrative uniformity across the Italian states, and even gave the ruling classes of the old states a first glimpse of a concrete national horizon. However, the internal differences within the peninsula remained profound: not just political, dynastic and local differences, but also the divide that long before 1861 separated northern and central Italy from the south. From this point of view, the similarities or uniformity of Italian public institutions in the decades studied by Meriggi threaten to hide the structural and cultural differences between these two halves of the peninsula. Municipalism, upon which Meriggi places so much emphasis, had different characteristics and efficiencies in the centre-north than in the south – and these differences were to deepen over time: fertile, community-based and open to processes of democracy in one; sterile, torn apart by conflicts between landowners and peasants, suffocated by second-rate oligarchies of notables in the other.

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**Italia: Vita e avventure di un'idea**, by Francesco Bruni, Bologna, il Mulino, 2010, 568 pp., €35.00, 978-88-15-13955-9

In this ponderous and erudite book historian of language Francesco Bruni explores – as the title clearly announces – the history of the idea of Italy. His focus is the period before the idea materialised into a political project and then a state. One could call it a history of Italian identity formation (at the elite level) in the *longue durée* as opposed to the relatively brief life history of the Italian state. But the *longue durée* is important too if we want to evaluate the latter: by the time the state was established, Italians, in Bruni's view, had been around for quite some time, or at least an Italian 'nation-society' had been long-lived: hence the Italian state was not 'a nineteenth-century improvisation' (p. 15). Bruni takes side here with those scholars such as Adrian Hastings (1997) who have criticised the modernist position in nationalism studies for ignoring or neglecting the 'pre-history' of nations. In this regard he also sides with some historians with whom, in other respects, he disagrees such as Ruggiero Romano who a few years ago defended the idea of an Italian identity from the attacks of the Northern League by arguing that twenty centuries of history made Italy into a country before it became a state (Romano 1994). Of course, one needs to be aware of the historically changing meanings of words such as 'nation' to avoid unwarranted claims, but Bruni is generally sensitive to this issue.

Bruni reviews the various meanings that over time have attached to the 'Italian idea' and the locales and contexts in which it took shape. In its multiple dimensions as a place name, a language, a landscape, a diplomatic, military and political space, and a culture, 'Italy' pre-

existed the Italian nation-state. Bruni's story goes back to Roman times and the first appearance of the words *Italo* and *Italia* in the peninsula. He is keen to stress that Italy was originally a 'designation devoid of a precise ethnic content' (p. 73) and that the Romans developed an 'inclusive citizenship' from which he thinks the contemporaries could still learn something (p. 13). As is to be expected from a linguistic historian, the book is particularly rich regarding the history of language. While Italian as a language is Dante's invention, the language and its local variations became objects of scholarly reflection in the sixteenth century and saw the participation of scholars from northern Italy such as the *Vicentino* Gian Giorgio Trissino who published his *Dubbi grammaticali* in 1519, and the Venetian Pietro Bembo, author of the *Prose della volgar lingua* in 1525. The Tuscans themselves did not participate in this work of formalisation since they learned the language at home. Bembo believed in the necessity to go back to the 'good books' (Dante, Petrarca, Boccaccio), but others such as Castiglione and Trissino had a more inclusive idea of the Italian language and understood local variations as perfectly compatible with it.

While the term 'nation' was deployed in the Middle Ages in the world of the universities, Christian councils and the Knights of Malta, Bruni correctly underlines that the idea of Italy as a distinct political space was already in the minds of major political writers of the Renaissance such as Machiavelli and Guicciardini. Humanists busied themselves with the description of the Italian landscape, its regions and its cities. Among these were the *curiale* Flavio Biondo, author of the first *Italia illustrata* written in the mid-fifteenth century and the Dominican Leandro Alberti, author of *Descrizione d'Italia*, published in 1550 (Bruni, who is always keen to provide lots of information about his characters, strangely never mentions that the latter was also an inquisitor). At the same time, maps of Italy began to appear in the palaces of the powerful, the Vatican *in primis*. In the eighteenth century erudite clergymen collected saints' lives in order to draw a picture of *Italia sacra*. 'Italy' in sum lived in many different forms before taking up a more directly political meaning and Bruni claims that churchmen and the scholars in their service contributed to this life in important ways – a claim that would have certainly pleased the neo-Guelphs.

In many ways, Bruni is a sensitive and perceptive reader of texts, selecting passages that show how even a champion of '*suo particolare*' such as Guicciardini could feel for Italy, the '*patria comune*' (p. 218). Following Amedeo Quondam, Bruni distances himself from the ahistorical devaluation of the baroque that took place in the nineteenth century (thanks to Francesco De Sanctis in particular) which generated a 'strong national inferiority complex' towards France and England among generations of commentators. He finds this complex 'very dangerous' and complains that the Christian component of Italian culture has been constantly distorted or ignored (p. 18), giving rise to a variety of false myths about the past. One can agree with the author that Italians need to look at the past without either self-celebration or the 'systematic self-denigration' (p. 22) that one often finds among the literati. However, he goes too far in the opposite direction and ends up producing an equally ideological representation, claiming the existence of an Italian 'tradition' that is in fact a construction and not a natural occurrence.

Even though Bruni knows that 'identity' is not a thing, he is not immune from claims about cultural distinction that sound essentialist and are really too far-fetched, for example when he finds that the 'essential component of the idea of Italy as a cultural community' resides in a cultural tradition where *studi sacri* and *studi profani* coexisted harmoniously, preserving Italians 'from any kind of religious fundamentalism' (p. 12). Aside from the unclear meaning of the term fundamentalism, this evaluation is hard to reconcile with certain features of the Counter-

reformation that left a heavy legacy in Italian culture and society. Bruni is too keen to liquidate that history as a 'black legend' and the product of the 'much more efficient propaganda machine of the Protestants' (p. 326). One would have liked to hear the opinion of the Italian heretics burned at the stake (or obliged to dissimulate and recant) on this – but this Italy and the idea of Italy that these types of experience produced are not present in the text. Instead of offering a balanced interpretation, Bruni attributes to Catholicism only virtues, and offers – among others – a very simplistic interpretation of the influence of the cult of the Virgin on mores (p. 259).

Paralleling this overly positive reading of anything that has to do with the Catholic Church is Bruni's account of the 'Jacobins' that ends the volume, where he exhibits the same judgemental and ahistorical attitudes that he attributes to the critics of the Church. This heavily pro-Catholic bias and the unwieldy and convoluted treatments of certain topics and authors spoil what is, in other respects, a valuable contribution to the history of the formation of the idea of Italy. The volume would have also benefited from some editing to rein in the author's tendency to include any piece of information he's got his hands on, with the result that among so many trees one often loses sight of the forest.

### References

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**Gli esuli del Risorgimento**, by Agostino Bistarelli, Bologna, il Mulino, 2011, 370 pp., €30.00, ISBN 978-88-15-23353-0

The 150th anniversary of Italian unification saw the publication of many new works on the Risorgimento process. Exile was an aspect of this, and at the height of the nineteenth-century national struggle it was already seen as a valid theme for interpreting contemporary political culture. The political project of national unification, largely modelled on the revolutionary experience in France, had emerged in the late eighteenth century. From then until 1860 the Risorgimento movement, as conventionally defined by historians, was marked by waves of conspiracy, uprising and war, followed each time by suppression, sentencing and banishment. Martyrological writing was one of the tools for nation-building, as well as serving as useful international political propaganda: it presented examples of those who had sacrificed themselves for freedom, paying with their lives or losing their possessions, family or homeland. From 1799, the Italian exiles seemed like a wandering warrior nation, a nation outside its own country, and a citizenry without a homeland (Rao 1992, 2006, 2011).

It is therefore not surprising that two books on the relationship between exile and the Risorgimento have come out at much the same time: one by Maurizio Isabella (2009, 2011), the