

Gli stati italiani prima dell'Unità, by Marco Meriggi, Bologna, il Mulino, 2011, 216 pp., €13.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-15-14668-7

Despite its title, this small and dense study by Marco Meriggi is not the history of the events that brought the old states on the Italian peninsula to the great crisis of 1859–1860 and to their ultimate demise in the face of the Italian national movement. Meriggi is not interested in teleological history, even the ‘untouchable’ teleology of the Risorgimento. This is not to suggest that Meriggi has written an anti-Risorgimento work, merely that he is interested in studying the decades preceding unification on their own terms, not in the light of what came after. It is no accident that Meriggi devotes more than 170 pages to the period between 1796 and the 1840s but less than 20 pages to the years 1848–1860. This is not, then, a history of the events leading up to the Risorgimento but a book concerned with the ‘long goodbye’ of the *ancien régime* on the Italian peninsula. It is the history of the victory of the state over group interests, of the affirmation of individual and universal rights over feudal privileges and obligations, and of the spread of central bureaucracy at the expense of local power and autonomy.

There is nothing palingenetic or teleological about this history, though. On the contrary, it appears articulated, compromissory, sometimes contradictory. The story starts in the most radical way possible, with the invasion of the peninsula in 1796 by a revolutionary foreign army, but strong ambiguities are present even here, as is often the case at great historical moments. Let us take, for example, the complex social and political processes triggered by the so-called ‘sister republics’. All over the peninsula between 1796 and 1799, the French constitution of 1795 triggered the creation of elective chambers, electoral bodies and organs of collegial government. Legislative, executive and judicial functions were separated. Equality before the law was established, denying the clergy and aristocracy some of their privileges, and all individuals were subject to the State’s administrative structure. This was a great anti-despotic movement based on the principle of popular sovereignty. Nevertheless, as Meriggi warns his readers, it would be wrong to see the changes to civil society and politics under the ‘sister republics’ as marking the definitive passage from absolutism to freedom, from conservatism to revolution, from the old orders of the *ancien régime* to new social groupings. Things were far more complicated. On the one hand, people often appeared hostile to the new institutional novelties that challenged traditional cultural and religious attitudes (for instance, the southern Sanfedista movement). On the other hand, the most enthusiastic supporters of revolutionary republicanism were the traditional noble elites, which saw the chance to strike a blow against their old enemy: royal power. According to Meriggi, opposition to despotism ‘was the minimum common denominator that allowed the strange confluence of support for the new, ephemeral order, between, on the one side, the most progressive sectors of the aristocracy . . . and on the other side, the “patriots”, for the most part from professional and intellectual backgrounds, who had been on the side of revolution even before the arrival of the French army’ (p. 24). It was not surprising, then, that the King of Naples struck hard against the pro-French nobility when he regained power in 1799. This demonstrates how the ancient opposition between noble particularism and royal absolutism influenced the republican period and indicates that the French revolutionary wave, while certainly forceful, nonetheless had to deal with the socio-political dynamics of a territory where the *ancien régime* and impulses towards fragmentation were still strong.

History repeated itself, in some ways, during the Napoleonic period in Italy (1800–1815). During these years, French rule produced profound institutional and legislative changes in Italy according to a model that strengthened the executive power at the expense of popular sovereignty and legislative institutions. From Naples to Milan, we see the implementation of a

vertical command structure, feeding down from the king to ministries, prefects, district authorities and finally to town councils. It was the victory of the state over the periphery, with all that signified in a peninsula historically characterised in the north by a strong municipal tradition and in the south by a state incapable of controlling its territory and obliged to cohabit with powerful feudal interests. The 'French' affirmed the universality of the state, its administrative network and its legal system, as well as the universality of citizens' rights – and duties (such as military service), abolishing the feudal powers of the nobility in the process. At the same time, the Napoleonic regimes created new corps of professionalised career bureaucrats, recruited on merit, and the expression of the most dynamic sectors of society. The new civil and military functionaries were often young and enthusiastic, aware that they were part of an ambitious project of transformation. The new institutions changed both society and its ruling class, offering previously unknown opportunities for social and career mobility by substituting competence for inherited privilege. The old elites appeared unhappy and on the margins of the new kingdoms.

However, as Meriggi reminds us, the *ancien régime* still had some cards to play. The restoration of the traditional monarchies after the definitive defeat of Napoleon in 1815 saw the Italian nobilities quickly regain control of the top positions in the civil service, military and government. This did not mean a return *tout court* to the old pre-Napoleonic model: the abolition of the barony was confirmed and noble titles became merely honorific; the French administrative structure was also maintained and bureaucrats continued to be chosen by competitive examination. However, we cannot talk of continuity between the Napoleonic and restoration periods. With the end of the Napoleonic centralising experiment, restoration governments settled with the old elites and therefore with the particularisms that characterised the peninsula. During this period, local notables – both noble and bourgeois – resisted centralisation in favour of municipal autonomy. In fact, the notability easily controlled – for good and ill – municipal institutions. The strength of corporate interests in restoration Italy revealed how far the peninsula remained from the individualistic dimension of European liberalism.

The game between the state and particular interests, played out across the peninsula in the decades preceding unification, defined the epoch. Those interests did not give in easily. On the contrary, at first they sought to profit from the blows struck against the ruling dynasties by France and then, after the restoration, they came to terms with what remained of the French reforms, recognising that while the crisis of feudalism could be alleviated with time (and by compromises), the feudal world itself could never be recovered.

These dynamics lie at the heart of Meriggi's interpretation and explanation of the period. Even towards the end of the book, when he deals directly with the events of the Risorgimento, Meriggi underlines again the tension between unitary ideas and projects and the 'profound municipalism of local Italian society' that not even the statist push of the Napoleonic era and the subversion of the feudal model had managed to change decisively. Italian municipalism not only survived the French, if anything changing the sociological character of the ruling classes, but it also had the capacity after 1861 to shape the behaviour and political games of the new national parliamentary deputies. These became the 'representatives of traditional communal freedoms in the temple of new parliamentary freedoms' (p. 191), and the proud assembly of united Italy became a 'municipal parliament', that is, 'the privileged seat of a daily process of negotiation between the centre and the peripheries' (p. 196).

This was hardly an auspicious beginning for the newly unified country. Meriggi recognises that his analysis and conclusions do not lend themselves to a facile celebration of national unity: the dense and often recriminatory relationship between centre and periphery, and the dynamics between central state and local realities, were destined to shape in problematic ways the history of Italy over the next 150 years.

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.

Translated by Nick Carter and Cristina Massaccesi

Paolo Macry

University of Naples Federico II

pmacry@unina.it

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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-