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Un Volgo Disperso. Contadini d'Italia nell'Ottocento, by ADRIANO PROSPERI, Turin, Einaudi, 2019, 324 pp., €32.00, ISBN 978-88-06-24009-7

The title of this ambitious and erudite tome pays homage to the chorus of Manzoni's tragedy, *Adelchi*. There the 'dispersed people' was the Italic one in the early Middle Ages; here it is the Italian peasantry in the 'long nineteenth century'. In Manzoni's tragedy the Longobards and the Franks (themselves allegories for the Austrians and French of Manzoni's own time) battle it out to then jointly oppress the nameless Italian masses. In Prosperi's book it is the seemingly divergent factions of the Italian upper classes, across the divide between conservatives and progressives, that create something of a Gramscian bloc to perpetuate the oppression of the rural masses, even in the face of the national resurgence that led to Italy's political unification. But perhaps more than dispersed, the book depicts the rural masses of the Italian peninsula as submerged in an ever-rising flood of numbers and words meant to study, and more broadly speak for, them. In the process, Prosperi documents how Italian peasants became objects of concern, derision, and romantic idealisation, even as some of them tried to organise themselves into historical subjects throughout the century, with halting success.

It is perhaps fitting that a historian of the Inquisition in the early modern era (among many other matters) would turn his attention to the 'spoken for' masses of the Italian countryside at the cusp of modernity, an era that would ultimately erase Italy's peasantries from the face of history. In this study Prosperi acknowledges, but does not systematically address, the paradoxes of mediation on which our knowledge of the subaltern classes is founded. The subalterns cannot speak, we learned from Spivak some time ago, but in this book they hardly even whisper. Two categories of intellectuals do the talking instead, in this impressively documented but somewhat undisciplined narrative. The first category is the priest, Gramsci's traditional intellectual par excellence, and the other is the physician, who over the century came to play an increasingly organic role in the reproduction (and sometimes in the questioning) of exploitative class relations. Both priests and doctors wrote extensively on the immensely diverse conditions of Italian peasants, in both descriptive and normative registers, at times creating provisional alliances but more often disagreeing in the name of tradition and progress. This study, however, deals mostly with the medical class, which Prosperi dissects with remarkable subtlety and critical empathy over the course of 18 loosely chronologically arranged chapters.

The author reminds us that for much of the century Italy had more doctors per capita than France or Germany. Some of these health professionals, like Agostino Bertani and Achille

Sacchi, played prominent political roles in the heady days of the Risorgimento, all the while reflecting on the connections between poverty and disease in a language that in Italy dated back to Agostino Ramazzini, the seventeenth-century ‘founder’ of occupational medicine. Other doctors, like Paolo Mantegazza and Cesare Lombroso (the subjects of a chapter), became international celebrities by titillating the collective imagination of an increasingly curious bourgeoisie. Many more doctors spent quieter but perhaps more productive lives as *medici condotti*, physicians working on behalf of municipal governments, and the book relies heavily on the investigations and reports crafted by this small army of committed doctors, who at times wrote under instigation from the central governments and at other times felt compelled to contribute to the mounting public debate on ‘social hygiene’.

Indeed, the obsession with hygiene and its complex social imbrications constitutes the book’s main thematic thread. The author rallies an astounding amount of evidence to explore the multiple dimensions of the many medical gazes that scanned the smelly and damp recesses of nineteenth-century rural Italy. These doctors’ contradictory emotions, ranging from revulsion to rightful indignation, come alive in Prosperi’s ornate and passionate prose. All too rarely did these emotions lead to concrete action, with the partial exception of vaccination. The author devotes a chapter to the debate on the causes of pellagra, rescuing from partial oblivion the brave doctors, like Ludovico Balardini, who emphasised poverty and overwork as essential conditions for the disease against the more reductionist explanations of Lombroso and many others, who (wrongly) imputed pellagra solely to the contamination of incorrectly stored maize. In this case, as for the many other ills that plagued the Italian lower classes (malaria and cholera above all), good intentions and scientific prowess had to yield to the impossibility of structural changes and to the imperative of continuing production and accumulation.

One of the book’s most important historiographical contributions is its interpretation of the famous agricultural investigations (*inchieste agrarie*) of the late nineteenth century, and especially the one led by Stefano Jacini, as the culmination of debates and tensions that dated back decades. In the book’s final chapters Prosperi roots the origin of these investigations in Agostino Bertani’s comprehensive and progressive vision, and in his dogged determination as member of parliament. Jacini and others diluted and defanged Bertani’s vision with their productivist preoccupations, a betrayal that Bertani denounced repeatedly. Mass emigration and grass-roots resistance (the book pays particular attention to the paradigmatic ‘la boje’ movement in the Mantuan countryside of the 1880s) became the responses that neither priest nor doctor could contain. In conclusion, this is an impressive reconstruction of the economic, cultural, and above all medical debates on the conditions of the peninsula’s rural masses, rather than the history of the Italian peasantry its title seems to promise. The book reads like an expansive, if somewhat messy, canvas in which landlords, priests, and doctors argue against a background of almost unimaginable suffering by multitudes who remain, alas, faceless and nameless.

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