

## Rethinking the Italian Liberal State

Nick Carter

*University of Wales, Newport*

*Abstract: This article explores historians' changing and competing interpretations of the liberal Italian state, its governing class, the bourgeoisie, and of the performance of – and state's role in – the Italian economy, 1861-1915. Post-war accounts of the period commonly split along two lines: those that emphasised the peculiarities and shortcomings of the liberal state and held the state (and the bourgeoisie) responsible for Italy's failings and for Fascism, and those that stressed Italy's progress under liberalism and denied or played down the link between liberal and Fascist Italy. In recent decades, however, 'revisionist' interpretations of liberal Italy have reframed the debate. By looking at liberal Italy 'on its own terms' (i.e. rather than in relation to Fascism) and by placing the Italian experience within the broader European context, revisionism has helped to 'normalise' the Italian state and bourgeoisie. Similarly, studies since the 1990s of the liberal Italian economy have generally presented a more positive picture of growth, development and state intervention than traditionally has been the case.*

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Italy has never failed to disappoint. From the moment of unification in 1861, the Italian nation has been ridiculed, criticised and vilified, by both Italians and *stranieri*, by both those on the Right and those on the Left of politics. It is not surprising then that a sense of failure pervades much of modern Italian historiography: the familiar story is one of unfulfilled dreams of national resurgence (*'risorgimento'*), of chances missed and wrong turns taken, of decadence, division and deviancy, of vanity, vice and violence.

Historians of post-unification 'liberal Italy' have frequently written in such wretched terms, deeply critical of the new liberal state, of its governing class, the bourgeoisie, and of the performance of the Italian economy under liberal-bourgeois leadership. This article examines the post-war 'anti-liberal' critique of liberal Italy and the opposing arguments of the rival 'liberal' school, which together dominated liberal historiography until the 1980s. The focus here, however, is on later 'revisionism': how historians since the 1980s have reinterpreted the liberal

state, the Italian bourgeoisie and the national economy (and specifically the state's role in its development).<sup>1</sup>

### **The liberal state**

In the first three to four decades after the Second World War, we can identify a particularly strong 'anti-liberal' historical school, predominantly – but not exclusively – Marxist, with Antonio Gramsci the key figure.<sup>2</sup> Anti-liberal accounts emphasised the trading of votes and loyalties in Parliament in return for favours (*trasformismo*), the repressive measures employed by liberal governments to control social and political unrest, the endemic corruption that characterised national and local politics, and, linked to these, the state's failure to govern by consensus or solve (or even respond adequately) to the emerging 'Southern Question'. The anti-liberal critique of the liberal state was more than simply an inventory of its failings, however. According to the anti-liberal school, liberal Italy was a deviant state: it had strayed from the 'normal' path of modern state development represented by the likes of Britain and France, and instead had followed an altogether different road, one that ultimately led to Fascism.<sup>3</sup> The twin catastrophes of the Fascist *ventennio* and the subsequent wartime double occupation were as much the responsibility of Italy's liberal political elite as they were Mussolini's (or as the democrat Gaetano Salvemini put it, 'Giolitti [liberal Prime Minister on five occasions] was for Mussolini what John the Baptist was for Christ: he paved his way' (cited in Salomone, 1960: 131-132)).

At this point, it is worth saying a little more about the dominant Marxist (Gramscian) anti-liberal interpretation of liberal Italy. For Gramsci, liberal Italy was from the beginning a 'failed' state: it was effectively born 'bad'. Comparing Italian unification unfavourably with the French Revolution, Gramsci described the Risorgimento as a less-than-successful 'passive' bourgeois revolution, whereby a weak Italian bourgeois class – itself a reflection of the country's weak capitalist economic base – had been unable to impose itself on the 'old feudal classes', or establish 'hegemony' – influence – over the popular classes. As a result, the new Italian state lacked popular legitimacy – and hence had to rely on coercion – and was neither fully bourgeois nor capitalist, with negative consequences for the liberal Italian economy. In short, the Italian bourgeoisie had failed in its historic task:

The merit of an educated class, because it is its historical function, is to lead the popular masses and develop their progressive elements ... [the Italian educated classes] said that they were aiming at the creation of a modern state in Italy, and they in fact produced a bastard. They aimed at stimulating the formation of an extensive and energetic ruling class, and they did not succeed; at integrating the people into the framework of the

new state, and they did not succeed. The paltry political life from 1870 to 1900, the fundamental and endemic rebelliousness of the Italian popular classes, the narrow and stunted existence of a sceptical and cowardly ruling stratum, these are all the consequences of that failure (Gramsci, 1971: 90).

The new Italian state was a long way from what Gramsci described as the 'compact modern French nation' (1971: 79), created by the French bourgeoisie in the 1790s. Fascism was essentially the 'revelation' of recent Italian history.

Not all historians accepted the anti-liberal thesis (Marxist or not). Set against it was a vigorous 'liberal school', closely identified with Benedetto Croce, which challenged both the negative portrayal of the liberal state and the assumed link between liberalism and Fascism (Croce, 1929; Chabod, 1996; Romeo, 1959 and 1963b; Salomone, 1960).

The liberal historical perspective on liberal Italy is relatively straightforward. Despite facing great obstacles and challenges, and despite some minor character flaws and failings, the liberal state was generally a success. No one could doubt 'the leap forward that the new national collectivity achieved [under the liberals] in comparison to the somnolent reality of the tiny pre-Unification states' (Romeo cited in Galasso, 1999: 267). For liberal historians, the high point of liberalism was undoubtedly the 'Giolittian age', c.1900-1914. During this period, Italy experienced 'a true national resurgence' (Salomone, 1960: 97). 'Italian life after 1900 had overcome the chief obstacles in its course, and [...] flowed on for the next ten years and more, rich both in achievement and in hope' (Croce, 1929: 214). One particularly enthusiastic Italo-American liberal historian even considered the Giolittian state, 'the predecessor of the modern welfare state [...] Giolitti was in some ways the forerunner of Franklin Delano Roosevelt [...] both men were essentially democratic figures' (Coppa, 1971: 107).

Of course, if the history of liberal Italy was one of achievement, and gradual democratisation (Arcangelo Salomone's study of Giolittian Italy was actually subtitled 'Italian democracy in the making') how then could it be responsible for Fascism? Croce is the supreme example of this line of argument. *A History of Italy 1871-1915*, Croce's 'splendid apology for liberalism' (Mack Smith, 1973: 56), tellingly stops on the eve of Italy's entry into the First World War. Fascism, on the other hand, was 'an intellectual and moral disease', a 'parenthesis', an 'accident', an 'infection', 'a sickness that arose in the veins of all Europe as a result of the First World War', a 'bewilderment, a civic depression and a state of inebriation caused by the war' (Croce cited in De Felice, 1977: 14, 26; Croce cited in Ward, 1996: 73). There was nothing to connect Italian liberalism to Fascism.

Two schools then, concerned with the same issues: the 'success' or 'failure' of the liberal state, and – closely tied to this debate – the 'responsibility' or otherwise of the liberal state for Fascism. The concern

with Fascism is understandable if we bear in mind that the two schools were born in the shadow of the dictatorship: the key works of Croce and Gramsci actually date from the Fascist period, and a number of the chief protagonists in each school – including Croce, Gramsci and Salvemini – were politically active in the liberal period itself. (Croce entered the Senate in 1910 and twice served in government. Gramsci, of course, was an extremely important figure on the Left during the *biennio rosso*, 1919-20, and instrumental in the creation of the Italian Communist Party in 1921. Salvemini was an outspoken critic of Giolitti, whom he famously described in 1910 as the ‘Minister of the Underworld’). It is equally understandable that, with the passage of time and as the liberal and Fascist periods passed out of lived historical memory, later generations of historians should reframe the debate on – and ask new questions of – Italian liberalism. Since the 1980s, we have seen a revisionist trend away from traditional approaches that try to prove or disprove the ‘peculiarity’, ‘deviancy’, or answerability of the liberal state for what followed, towards more explicative and less judgmental accounts. The emphasis now is on looking at the liberal state ‘on its own terms’, rather than in the light of what came after it. Historians have also shown a greater interest in the broader European context: Italy is no longer considered *sui generis*. In general, these accounts have helped bolster the reputation of Italian liberalism.

Raffaele Romanelli’s 1988 work, *Il comando impossibile: Stato e società nell’Italia liberale* is an important early example of this approach. According to Romanelli, the liberal state was genuinely committed to liberal principles, not least the idea of local political autonomy. The state assumed extensive central powers not to control the periphery but rather to provide the impulse for liberal mobilisation and modernisation at the local level. The prefect – so often seen by liberal critics as an instrument and symbol of government authoritarianism and repression – was in fact the champion (and if necessary the enforcer) of liberal values in the regions, where often civil society was weak and local self-government a novelty. The problem for the liberal state was that it could not enforce liberalism (Romanelli, 1988: 7-30). Romanelli describes this as the liberal state’s ‘impossible command’: ‘I order you to be free’ (Romanelli, 1988: 8). In fact, as Christopher Duggan has noted, the ‘language of liberty furnished local elites with a fiendishly powerful tool with which to resist the incursions of the centre’ (Duggan, 1999: 1346), and block the liberal revolution from above. Central government respect for local autonomy and the weakness of liberal authority at the periphery – the prefect was often an isolated figure – meant the state was unable to enforce its will.

A feature of liberal Italy frequently seized upon by its critics as evidence of its shortcomings is the limited nature of the electoral franchise. Liberal Italy, it is argued, not only lagged behind other ‘modern’ European states in this regard, but the restricted franchise also meant the gap

between 'legal' and 'real' Italy could not be bridged and 'thus just over half a million male voters, dominated by a few thousand influential men, determined the fate of 25 million Italian subjects' (Absalom, 1995: 57). Revisionism turns even these criticisms on their head, however. The national electorate may have been small but even before the 1882 electoral reform act it included all the propertied and professional classes (i.e. the franchise incorporated the same "civic stratum" of the population' in Italy that had the vote elsewhere in Europe (Romanelli, 1991: 724)). Revisionists have been quick to point out, too, that liberal politicians recognised the need to broaden the suffrage; the question was how to widen participation without damaging the state. Here revisionism treads some old historiographical ground. Although anxious to 'make Italians', and aware that to establish a collective identity required the 'education in liberty' of the masses, the ruling liberal class feared that to do this would give oxygen to 'anti-system' (i.e. anti-liberal) forces (socialism and Catholicism) which in turn would threaten the liberal institutions which underpinned unification. The perceived threat to the liberal state posed by socialism and Catholicism meant that liberal politicians would not consider what Cammarano (1993) calls the 'politicisation of the nation' (i.e. the creation of an adversarial political system allowing for the re-composition of social tensions in political terms). Liberals regarded organised political parties as potential threats to the liberal state. In such circumstances, *trasformismo* was a natural response. By creating a solid parliamentary majority, *trasformismo* was a source of stability: it allowed Parliament to meet the immense challenges of unification, to enact necessary reforms, to extend political consensus without undermining the state's structures. Seen in European terms, liberal Italy's response was also not unusual (there are comparisons with liberal Spain, for example). Moreover, if Italian liberals were guilty of 'failing' to establish a modern mass party (commonly seen by liberal critics as indicative of liberalism's failure to fuse 'legal' and 'real' Italy) then this was part of a broader failure of European liberalism: no such party was created elsewhere on the continent either (Cammarano, 1993; Riall, 1995; Duggan, 2000; De Grand, 2002).

The major casualty of liberal revisionism has been the anti-liberal school: the liberal state now looks merely different rather than 'deviant', its idiosyncrasies more easily understandable given the contemporary political (and social) context. The Gramsci thesis has particularly suffered, and not only at the hands of liberal revisionists. Little remains of the basic Marxist historical model that Gramsci adapted to the Italian context. Few historians now recognise the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution. If the Italian bourgeoisie did not realise its 'historic task' to carry through a full 'bourgeois revolution' in Italy, it was not alone: no bourgeois class in nineteenth century Europe did so (Mayer, 1981). More broadly, close study of the European middle classes has called into question the apparent and

many 'peculiarities' (failings) of the Italian bourgeoisie – the class most closely identified with the liberal state, and held responsible both for its shortcomings and, ultimately, for Fascism.

### **The bourgeoisie in liberal Italy**

The bourgeoisie constituted a tiny fraction of Italian society in the liberal era (Socrate, 1995: 365; Romanelli, 1991: 723). As Francesco Nitti observed in 1905, the Italian bourgeoisie was more 'a bourgeoisie of landed proprietors and professionals than an industrial bourgeoisie' (Banti, 1996: 65). Land fascinated the bourgeoisie: it confirmed wealth and conferred status; in short, it demonstrated that one had 'made it'. The bourgeoisie's obsession with land meant the Italian middle classes continued to prioritise investment in real estate long after their counterparts in Western Europe had made the switch to other more mobile forms of wealth, stocks, shares and bonds (Malatesta, 2004: 51). Prestige also derived from membership of the 'free' (i.e. independent) professions, law and medicine in particular. Given the size and relative poverty of the Italian population, liberal Italy contained a remarkable number of lawyers and doctors (there were 24,000 lawyers in 1901, quadruple the number in Germany or France; doctors numbered 22,000, equivalent to 6.7 doctors per 10,000 inhabitants, a ratio close to that seen in England and Wales). Such was the status attached by the middle classes to these two 'historic' professions (a lawyer's or doctor's income was often quite meagre) that both were hugely oversubscribed. There were, for example, twice as many graduate lawyers as vacancies by the turn of the century. Despite this, and the high levels of graduate unemployment in Italy that resulted, law and medicine remained the most popular subjects at university until 1910, when engineering enrolments exceeded those in medicine for the first time. Large numbers of law graduates made their way into politics: although lawyers constituted less than 0.1 per cent of the total population they made up 48 per cent of parliamentary deputies and senators in 1913; over a quarter of government members, 1870-1913, had legal backgrounds.

As John Davis has observed, until the 1980s, Italy's bourgeoisie was 'more widely blamed than studied' (1994: 301). The case against the Italian bourgeoisie rested on the following arguments:

1. *The Italian bourgeoisie failed to behave like a 'true' bourgeois class, i.e. it was neither a proper capitalist class nor a sufficiently liberal one*

As a capitalist class, it failed on several counts. First, the bourgeoisie's obsession with land betrayed its pre-modern roots and its unhealthy pre-occupation with prestige. The Italian bourgeoisie bought land in order to be like the nobility and, like the nobility, once it possessed land it opted for *dolce far niente*, content to live off rental income. The constant concern with

status also explained the upper bourgeoisie's taste for titles (ennoblement), and their passion for the professions. Second, for some time after 1870, the bourgeoisie showed a disdain for/hostility towards industry and industrial development. Only when colonial ambitions came to the fore in the 1880s did it embrace industrialisation. Third, the new industrial bourgeoisie that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century showed little appetite for risk-taking, preferring instead the protection of the state; like the rest of the middle class, it too exhibited pre-modern attitudes (Banti, 1996: 228; Meriggi, 1993: 433). As a liberal class, the bourgeoisie's short-comings were reflected in those of a liberal (bourgeois) state plagued by corruption, cronyism, patronage and clientelism and prone to authoritarianism (a fact linked, in Marxist analysis, to the failure of the bourgeoisie to impose itself on the old 'feudal' aristocracy).

*2. Italian bourgeoisie was not only a small class; it was also divided and weak*

Indicative of a weak sense of bourgeois identity and of the divisions between and within the different bourgeois groups, associational activity, a vital component of bourgeois cultural identity elsewhere in Europe, was limited in Italy and rarely co-ordinated at a national level. The Italian bourgeoisie was not a 'national' class in any sense: *campanilismo* – parochialism – was the dominant motif of the Italian middle classes. *Trasformismo* was a reflection of this: parliamentary deputies acted as the agents of powerful, local interests; they traded their support in the *camera* in return for concessions and favours granted to these interests.

Since the 1980s, there has been an upsurge in historical interest in the Italian bourgeoisie (and the European middle classes generally). Viewed as much in cultural as economic terms, and in a genuinely comparative European context, a rather different picture of the Italian *borghesia* emerges.

*1. Capitalism, liberalism and the Italian bourgeoisie*

Bourgeois landownership and capitalist innovation were by no means exclusive. For example, Alberto Banti has shown that middle class landowners in the Emilian province of Piacenza responded in typically capitalist fashion to the agricultural crisis of the 1880s. They organised at both the local and regional level to facilitate the introduction and rapid dissemination of new techniques, technologies (e.g. artificial fertilisers) and machinery in order to raise productivity and cut labour costs. Landowners' associations also managed to establish strong ties – and negotiate favourable credit terms – with local banks, thus securing the capital required for innovation. At the same time, the associations helped landowners to present a united front in the face of labour unrest (Banti, 1989; Banti, 1996: 274). Land for these middle-class landowners 'was seen as an investment that brought not only substantial prestige but also economic profit – especially if it was well managed' (Banti, 1995: 241). Nor,

writes Banti, was this attitude to property limited to the northern bourgeoisie:

In Naples it was urban real estate that was most attractive to [middle class] professionals with savings to invest. And although there was perhaps a speculative or parasitical element in their economic behaviour, these professionals paid close attention to the trend in property rents; they were quick to seize the best opportunities for profit, and they were adept analysts of shifts in the economic trend. The assets of the Neapolitan lawyers, as Paolo Macry has observed, displayed 'a strategy which preferred profitability to property as a status symbol'. Of course, in both the north and south of the country, professionals were fully aware of the prestige accruing from property ownership; but their major concern was the yield on their investments, and only secondly its symbolic value (Banti, 1995: 241).

Looked at in European terms, too, the Italian bourgeoisie's predilection for land does not appear that unusual. As Maria Malatesta has pointed out, 'In France, the bourgeoisie continued to invest in the land throughout the nineteenth century, even if the share of landed property in urban wealth generally diminished, while in late-nineteenth-century England the successful professional often crowned his career by purchasing a rural estate' (Malatesta, 1995: 22). The German bourgeoisie, as Blackburn and Eley (1984) have shown, behaved likewise.

Similarly, Italian bourgeois attitudes to industry seem less peculiar when looked at through a European lens. For many years after unification, the Italian middle classes *were* generally hostile towards industry, believing that industrialisation would lead to political and social upheaval as it had in England and France. Besides, the nation lacked the necessary resources to develop an industrial base: Italy was an agricultural economy and should remain so (Banti, 1996: 143-144). However, the Italian bourgeoisie were not alone in harbouring such 'anti-modern' sentiments: these were views shared by many of their European counterparts, including from that most industrial, capitalist - and bourgeois - of nations, Britain (Riall, 1998: 22).

Did the Italian industrial bourgeoisie eschew risk in favour of state protection? Yes and no. 'The entrepreneurial world was, between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, a variegated world, divided by diverse economic interests, by various associative configurations, sometimes by different political contacts' (Banti, 1996: 178). Although certain industrial groups lobbied hard for - and secured - state protection, others remained committed to free trade, and even set up their own organisations to counter the demands of the protectionist lobbies (Banti, 1996: 170).

Regarding the authoritarian tendencies of the liberal state, revisionism explains this with reference to the challenges of modern state formation (an



issue we shall return to later) rather than to 'feudal residues' or a weak commitment to liberalism on the part of Italy's bourgeois political class. That sections of the bourgeoisie abandoned or opposed liberalism did not make them any less bourgeois given that liberalism was *not* a defining characteristic of middle class culture (Kocka, 2004: 32).

## *2. The divisions and weakness of the Italian bourgeoisie*

Research in recent decades has confirmed the old picture of an intensely parochial and highly fragmented Italian middle class (Banti, 1996). The middle classes tended to live and work in the towns and cities of their birth. If they bought land, they bought locally. If they organised collectively (as, for example, landowners, entrepreneurs, or professionals) or socialised together in the multitude of recreational, cultural, scientific, educational, sporting and philanthropic societies that sprang up across urban Italy in the late-nineteenth century, they did so overwhelmingly at the local level: regional and inter-regional organisations were rare and genuinely national associations virtually unknown before 1900.

More than localism divided the bourgeoisie, however. The middle-class professions, for example, were riven internally by social, territorial, technical-professional and political differences. In medicine, rural-based practitioners earned considerably less than their city counterparts did, while the incomes of city-based doctors varied wildly within individual cities and between regions. The political affiliations of medical professionals, at least in the north and centre, tended to differ with income and status: while the elite within the profession generally backed centrist politics, many of the poorer, lower-status, *medici condotti* embraced socialism. Rigid hierarchies within the hospital system and the development of specialist branches within medicine served to splinter further the profession. The many splits within the medical world meant that no broad-based national association representing all doctors was established during the liberal era (instead several professional associations representing particular groups of doctors were created). Similar fractures – with similar consequences – were evident in all the 'free' professions (Banti, 1996; Malatesta, 1993, Lyttleton, 1991).

Again, though, when viewed in a European context, such traits appear less 'peculiar' than once thought. As Peter Gay has written, the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie was 'diverse and deeply fissured'. Indeed,

The historian attempting to understand the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie must come to terms with pervasive conflicts among those who defined themselves as 'middle class' as much as with the qualities that made them kin...divisions were so acute that it is tempting to doubt that the bourgeoisie was a definable entity at all (Gay, 2001: 4-5).

Little wonder that many historians now prefer the plural 'bourgeoisies' or 'middle classes', to the singular 'bourgeoisie' or 'middle class' (Kocka, 2004: 18).

Of course, it is possible that the fissures within the Italian bourgeoisie(s) were deeper and of more consequence than elsewhere on the continent. In fact, it seems probable given the centuries-old political fragmentation of the Italian peninsula prior to unification and the very different histories and economies of the various regions, not to mention the rudimentary transport and communications networks within and between pre-unification states. The parochialism displayed by the Italian bourgeoisie after 1870 was entirely to be expected: how could it have behaved otherwise? Localism, inevitably, was a defining feature of *all* classes in the newly unified kingdom.

The Italian bourgeoisie, however, did possess some 'qualities that made them kin'. First, they were defined by a sense of difference: they were not the aristocracy (despite the merging of the *haute bourgeoisie* with the lesser elements of the nobility); and they most definitely were not of the working classes. As the labour movement grew stronger and more militant during the liberal period, this 'relational' aspect of bourgeois identity (fear of the masses, fear of socialism) became increasingly important. Agrarian and industrialist groups in the Giolittian era, for example, began to use the term 'bourgeois' as a term of self-identification ('almost as a battle cry' (Banti, 1996: 324)) in their confrontation with the labour movement. It was also around this time that the first *national* organisations representing bourgeois economic interests emerged. Second, the Italian bourgeoisie held, albeit with regional variations, to a common set of cultural values, behaviours and practices. They shared a particular ideal of the family. They believed in the gendered separation of private and public spheres, in certain notions of respectability and in the value of education (and of a particular type of education). They married within their own class (even if they sometimes only married within their own particular social group: Socrate (1995: 391-392) notes how the Milanese entrepreneurial class rarely entered into marriages with members of the professional or bureaucratic middle classes). They engaged in the same forms of sociability: theirs was a world not only of clubs and associations (even if these were sometimes a source of division) but also 'of the café, of the theatre and the opera [...] of the literary society and the charitable organisation, and of the holidays *in collina* and, increasingly after the turn of the century, at the summer villa by the seaside' (Corner, 2002: 20). Finally, and despite their parochialism, the bourgeoisie displayed a strong sense of patriotism. Indeed, as John Dickie notes, 'The term "patriotic classes" gets closer to capturing the way Italy's rulers understood themselves than does the term "bourgeoisie"' (1999: 18). Members of the bourgeoisie displayed their patriotism in all manner of ways. They participated in new 'national' celebrations. They were

instrumental in the erection of hundreds of new national monuments across Italy. They – local ‘scholars, teachers, and headmasters, prefects and municipal administrators, provincial politicians and country pharmacists, the presidents of patriotic societies, and editors of anonymous gazettes’ – produced thousands of pamphlets celebrating the new nation, its founding fathers and myths (Dolci cited in Banti, 1996: 221). The sources of bourgeois patriotism were several: language, literature, the arts, education and, of course, the state (which was both the reflection and source of middle-class power and prestige). That parochialism *and* patriotism should both be defining features of the Italian bourgeoisie appears at first sight counter-intuitive, yet it is perhaps not so surprising if we (once again) look beyond Italy’s borders. As research into the development of German identity in the late nineteenth century has shown, it was entirely possible for the bourgeoisie in imperial Germany to maintain and express a deep sense of local identity while simultaneously ‘becoming national’. In the German case, the regional bourgeoisie ‘internalised the nation-state by transforming it into a local experience’ (Confino, 1997: 50). The German bourgeoisie re-framed sources of local identity and pride (history, landscape etc.) to connect the local to the national: each region, because of its unique historical, political or cultural significance, was important to the nation and to the new German identity. In Italy, the local bourgeoisie appear to have acted in like fashion. Axel Körner, for example, has shown how the Bolognese middle class ‘rediscovered’ the city’s history and archaeology to champion the importance of Bologna (over and above that of other cities) to the nation and national identity (Körner, 2009). Italy was ‘a nation of municipalities’, the ‘nation of the hundred cities’: here, as in Germany, the parts contributed to the whole (Körner, 2009: 5, 164). This, of course, meant that the ‘nation’ was understood very differently from one city to the next, but as Dickie writes, ‘one of the secrets of the nation’s success as a concept is that it allows people to express entirely different meanings when it seems they are talking about the same thing’ (Dickie, 1999: 18). Unsurprisingly, deeply rooted local and regional rivalries continued to play out within the new national context. In 1884, for example, pilgrims from Cesena in the province of Forlì, threatened to withdraw from the ‘national pilgrimage’ to the tomb of Victor Emanuel II in Rome if they were paired with a delegation from the neighbouring province of Ravenna (Tobia, 1993: 234). For these *Forlivesi*, claiming an Italian identity clearly did not involve the abandonment of pre-existing local loyalties and prejudices.

### **The liberal Italian economy**

If the liberal state and Italian bourgeoisie have benefited from revisionism in recent decades, the same can generally be said for the liberal Italian economy, often portrayed in negative terms by leading post-war economic

historians, whether Marxist (e.g. Emilio Sereni) or not (e.g. Alexander Gerschenkron).

Sereni's thesis, developed in the 1930s but only published in 1947, neatly dovetailed with Gramsci's idea of the *Risorgimento* as a 'passive revolution'. Sereni traced the weakness of Italian capitalism to the 'incompleteness of the bourgeois revolution in Italy', specifically the absence of an agrarian revolution at the time of unification. The failure to create a new peasant land-owning class and to sweep away the 'feudal residues', Sereni argued, reinforced agricultural backwardness, perpetuated rural poverty and, crucially, prevented the development of a domestic consumer market for manufactured goods. Without robust domestic demand, a vigorous industrial capitalist economy could not develop (Sereni, 1947). Writing in 1975, Sereni put it thus: 'The concentration of feudal residue in the property relations on the land [...] takes on, in a large part of central and southern Italy, a sufficient importance so as to seriously inhibit the free development of productive forces' (Sereni cited in Cohen and Galassi, 1990: 646).

For Gerschenkron, the chief characteristics of the liberal economy were slow and retarded growth. Although the economy experienced a transformative 'great [industrial] spurt', 1896-1908, Italian industrial growth generally proceeded 'in a less uniform and more jerky fashion' than might have been expected, while the 'spurt' itself, when it eventually occurred, should have been stronger (Gerschenkron, 1962: 79). According to Gerschenkron, the liberal state was largely responsible for Italy's belated and relatively modest industrial (and by extension, general economic) 'take-off'. Italy's political elite, he argued, did not possess an industrial ideology. Italian governments failed to exploit the industrial opportunities connected to the expansion of the railways. The 1887 grain tariff was a 'luxury' that Italy 'never should have dared subject the tender plant of its industrial growth to', while the industrial tariff on imported iron and steel and textiles rewarded the 'least deserving branches of industrial activity' and discriminated against those industries with the best prospects of long-term and sustainable growth. Italy's industrial revolution after 1896 was constrained first by parliamentary conflict and political crisis in the late 1890s and then by Giolitti's conciliatory approach to labour militancy: industrial strife - and higher wages resulting from successful strikes - acted as brakes on growth (Gerschenkron, 1962: 79-89).

According to the great liberal historian Rosario Romeo, the story of the Italian economy in the liberal period - and of the state's role in its development - was (predictably) a far more positive one than the 'anti-liberal' interpretations allowed. Romeo attacked the Marxist notion of a missed opportunity for an agrarian revolution in 1860 (there was no opportunity) and the idea that such a revolution in landownership would necessarily have advanced Italian capitalism. The creation of a class of

small peasant landowners 'would have blocked the development of capitalism in the countryside', involving the 'liquidation of the progressive agricultural sector' and dealing an 'arresting blow' to Italy's economic modernisation (Romeo, 1963a: 22-24, 29, 32). Limited domestic demand was not, for Romeo, a significant obstacle to industrialisation. Rather, the underdeveloped nature of Italy's economic infrastructure posed much more of a problem. Its expansion and modernisation was, according to Romeo, an indispensable condition for industrialisation, and the unreformed agricultural sector paved the way for this.

Romeo argued that there was rapid growth in agricultural production during the 1860s and 1870s, stimulated by the state's policy of trade liberalisation and (until the mid 1870s) rising international prices for agricultural goods. Rising output did not translate, however, into higher peasant incomes or increased consumption but into extra profits - surplus capital - for landowners who, taking the opportunity to exploit higher output per capita, raised land rents. Crucially, this surplus capital was forced out of agriculture and channelled into the development of Italy's social overhead capital (railways most importantly) by government tax and spend policies. The qualitative improvements made to the Italian economy by the Italian state in the 1860s and 1870s and funded by agriculture created the 'preconditions for modern economic development', paving the way for limited (but nonetheless important) industrialisation in the 1880s and the later 'industrial revolution of the Giolittian age'. Romeo admitted that the process 'took place for a long time on a basis of compromise with the semi-feudal elements of the old agrarian world, especially in the south' (Romeo, 1959, cited in Toniolo, 1990: 137). He also acknowledged that this meant the development of the urban north at the expense of the agrarian south - the introduction of protectionism in the late 1870s and 1880s, for example, vital (in his opinion) for the growth of industry, hit the south especially hard (it pushed up the price of industrial goods and hampered southern agricultural exports) (Romeo, 1978: 72). The south, however, had to suffer if industrialisation was to occur - and the south remade:

the challenge facing the participants in the Risorgimento, which they met in the most consistent way, given the constraints inherent in the Italian situation, was to proceed to a forced strengthening of the urban capitalist economy of the north and to the unification of the market, as indispensable premises for the transformation of southern rural areas (Romeo, 1959, cited in Toniolo, 1990: 136-137).

This was the Marxists' argument turned on its head. Economic history has moved on considerably from the models put forward by Sereni, Gerschenkron and Romeo in the middle decades of last century. Economic historians have long since abandoned the idea of an Italian 'industrial revolution' around the turn of the twentieth century: Italian

industrialisation was a far more gradual, cumulative and long-term process dating back to the first half of the nineteenth century; the industrial sector experienced cyclical growth after unification; the Giolittian boom was simply part of this cycle. New estimates of aggregate production (industry, agriculture and services combined) also indicate that the traditional picture of painfully slow economic growth from unification until the late 1890s is wrong (industrial growth in the 1880s was thought to have been offset by a general crisis in agriculture linked to a collapse in grain prices). Instead, the Italian economy experienced 'relatively steady growth', 1861-1913, 'with above-average growth from the late 1870s to the late 1880s, followed by a decade of stagnation and then a second upswing stronger than the first' (Fenoaltea, 2005: 297-298). Most significantly, the new data explodes the myth of a general agrarian crisis in the 1880s: gross agricultural output increased during the decade, as did real and nominal wages - and per-capita consumption. The 'crisis' was an illusion created by unreliable statistics and the gloomy contemporary accounts of grain-producing landowners: falling grain prices meant the majority of Italians were actually better off (Fenoaltea, 2003 and 2005; Federico, 2003a and 2003b).

If in general terms the post-unification economy now appears to have been more robust and in better health than once thought, what of the role of the state? Opinion remains divided on the merits of protectionism. For some, the 1887 grain tariff 'was equivalent to a punitive tax on Italy alone [...] It directed production and employment overseas, arguably by enough to be considered the primary cause of the Italian diaspora' (Fenoaltea, 2003: 715-716). Others see the tariff as unhelpful but argue that its socio-economic impact, while negative, was modest (Cohen and Federico, 2001: 41; Federico, 2006). A third interpretation casts the tariff in a positive light: it encouraged agricultural innovation, raised productivity and output, limited agrarian poverty and stemmed emigration (Zamagni, 1993: 62, 116). Economic historians are similarly split on the question of industrial protectionism (Federico, 2006; Carter, 2010: 38-39). Of course, protectionism was not the state's only involvement in the economy. The state invested heavily in education (crucial to economic growth), transport and communications (notably railway construction), and heavy industry; it (belatedly) sought to improve Italian agriculture (e.g. through the establishment of agricultural schools, the provision of agrarian credit and land reclamation programmes); and it was responsible for the development and maintenance of Italy's financial institutions. While the state's record was far from flawless in any of these areas, economic historians generally acknowledge a 'direct link between the growth of the state and that of the economy' (De Cecco, 2002: 72).<sup>4</sup> There is broad agreement, too, that government policies contributed to the strong and sustained growth of the late 1890s and early 1900s.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

In an excellent but often overlooked recent study of Italian liberalism, Susan A. Ashley writes:

The liberals dealt with significant challenges to their principles and to their power before the war, and they met them in large part successfully. They kept Italy united; they upheld rights, although not always and not for everyone equally; they stretched the state to promote economic growth and to provide a modicum of protection to workers.<sup>6</sup> In the process, they admitted the weight of circumstances, adapted their principles and adjusted to the difficulties of parliamentary rule. The English and the French, those systems commonly credited with success in this period [1860-1914], did no more (Ashley, 2003: 170).

Ashley's verdict on liberal Italy fits neatly into the 'revisionist' category: the liberal state developed a series of rational and pragmatic responses to the political, social and economic questions of the day; seen in a European context, Italian liberalism looks altogether less 'deviant' and less of a failure than its critics contend.

Revisionism is not without problems. One of the major weaknesses of the Crocean-inspired liberal school was its reluctance to criticise or sometimes even acknowledge the obvious shortcomings of the liberal state. Revisionism, too, occasionally suffers from a surfeit of good will towards the liberal political class. In seeking to normalise such 'flaws' as *trasformismo*, and the state's use of the 'iron hand' to impose liberty, revisionists are sometimes guilty of failing to exercise critical judgement on the appropriateness (or otherwise) of those actions. As Lucy Riall has commented of empathetic revisionist accounts of *trasformismo*, 'good intentions' on the part of the Italian parliament, 'did not necessarily translate into good government' (Riall, 1995: 210). Moreover, as Saverio Battente (2000: 314) argues, the Italian state's frequent 'recourse to authority' was certainly not always 'aimed at the growth of civil society' but was 'often an instrument for partisan interests', a fact which revisionism sometimes forgets.

The great value of revisionism over older, traditional accounts of the liberal era is that it alone offers a convincing explanation for the Janus-like character of Italian liberalism. As Riall has pointed out, Italy's liberals faced two key but contradictory challenges. On the one hand, they had to forge a modern state - 'inherently an authoritarian' process and the source of considerable tension, instability and opposition. On the other hand, they had to try to establish a broader political consensus based on representative government. To balance these competing demands was extraordinarily difficult:

Italian liberals had to be pragmatic and conciliatory, and they also had to stand firm against any threat to their position. Arguably, to have any hope of success, they had to come up with exactly the combination of authoritarianism and liberalism with which historians of liberal Italy are so familiar' (Riall, 1995: 211-212).

One final point should be made in relation to liberal Italy. It is commonplace to argue that the liberal state failed to 'make Italians'; that is, it did not manage to instil in the wider population a sense of *Italianità*. Indeed, a weak sense of national identity is still widely considered (rather paradoxically) to be an essential Italian characteristic. This, however, is to confuse *Italianità* and identification with the nation state (Riall, 2004: 446). It is possible to see oneself as part of an Italian nation but at the same time be distanced from or opposed to the existing Italian state (liberal, Fascist or republican) – what Ascoli and von Henneberg refer to as 'the fragility of the political nation on the one hand, and the cultural conviction of "Italianness" on the other' (2001: 5). The extent to which liberal Italy 'made' Italians (with the caveat that 'Many Italians did indeed remain distant from the new nation' (Davis, 2000: 19)) is demonstrated by the fact that 'Even the most committed enemies of the liberal order accepted the sanctity of the nation' (Davis, 2000: 19). Some surprising 'micro' evidence testifying to the success of Italian nation building comes from the account by the playwright and librettist Giuseppe Giacosa of his visit to the Italian immigrant quarter of New York in 1898. Many immigrants came from the south of Italy, arguably that part of the country most 'distant from the new nation'. Yet, Giacosa found 'In every window [...] portraits of Garibaldi and the King of Italy and the Italian tricolour', the great (invented) symbols of Italian national identity (Snowman, 2009: 202). For a variety of reasons, however – the restricted franchise, political corruption, the limits of reform and the limited appeal of liberalism in a new age of mass politics, the strength of anti-liberal ideologies, and the state's use of repressive force as it sought to impose (and defend) itself – Italy's liberal elite was unable to bind nation and state. One hundred and fifty years on from unification and the gap between 'real' and 'legal' Italy remains.

## Notes

1. For a detailed assessment of the historiography of liberal Italy, see Carter (2010).
2. For critical *non*-Marxist accounts of Italian liberalism, see Gaetano Salvemini (1960) and Denis Mack Smith (1959).
3. The anti-liberal interpretation bears striking similarities to the *Sonderweg* ('special path') interpretation of German history, which sees Nazism as the product of a flawed and incomplete process of modernisation.



4. It should be noted that Stefano Fenoaltea, the author of perhaps the most important study of the liberal economy in a generation, is far less sanguine about the role of the state. 'Half a century after Unification Italians in Italy would have been more numerous and more prosperous had the State not limited international trade, had it developed technical education and opened it to merit: had Italy's ruling classes been willing to promote the nation's progress even at the cost of renewing themselves' (Fenoaltea, 2011: 244).

5. For a recent restatement of this position, see Toniolo (2007). The idea that the Italian state ultimately played a positive role in the development of the Italian economy does not rescue Romeo's thesis that the state successfully exploited the agricultural sector in the 1860s and 1870s to modernise Italy's infrastructure as a pre-requisite for industrialisation in the 1880s. First, new estimates of agricultural output for the 1860s and 1870s indicate more modest rates of growth in agricultural output than those assumed by Romeo. Second, investment in social overhead capital grew rapidly *after* 1880. This raises doubts as to whether the 'fundamental infrastructure' was actually in place by the 1880s, as Romeo argued.

6. New labour laws to protect workers were introduced during the Giolittian era. These measures formed part of a broader 'pro-worker' reform strategy adopted by Giolitti in the early 1900s to placate and 'domesticate' the Italian labour movement. Giolitti's approach marked a significant break with the recent past: Italian governments had always favoured repression to reform when confronted with protest and unrest 'from below' during the 1890s.

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