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(doi: 10.1412/104425)

Ricerche di storia politica (ISSN 1120-9526)
Fascicolo speciale, luglio 2022

Ente di afferenza:
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Fulvio Cammarano

A New European State
Italy and the Liberal Constitutionalism as a Language of Political Recognition (1861-1915)

Abstract

The article retraces the first fifty years of the history of Italy as a nation-State in the European context. In particular it focuses on the political and institutional culture of the Italian ruling class posing as part of liberal constitutionalism. It is argued that adoption of this specific language in the aftermath of creating a new State, and then during the watershed '80s, the end-of-century crisis and the Giolitti era, was a bid to seek political recognition and legitimation in the international arena.

Keywords: *Italy, Constitutionalism, Risorgimento, Liberalism.*

The New State in Context

The State- and Nation-building processes that in Italy's case ran from 1861 to her entry into the First World War form an integral part of that fast and deep change in politics and society, both in Europe and worldwide, that was sparked off by the American and French revolutions. Though the political and social circumstances were *sui generis*, Italy's State and society were subject to the same challenges as faced by many other countries to varying degrees; challenges that linked Italy to nations not only in Europe but in the Americas and Asia.

Yet during the years in question the Italian ruling class was conscious of forming part of the liberal constitutionalism phenomenon rooted in the United States[1] but above all in European history and politics. The pioneers of that great ongoing transformation were Great Britain, France and later Germany; they were the models cited in discussions and disputes as to how to shape the constitution and modernise politics and the economy[2]. Though there was frequent

[1] See A. Korner, *America in Italy: The United States in the Political Thought and Imagination of the Risorgimento 1763-1865*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017; E. Dal Lago, *Lincoln, Cavour, and National Unification: American Republicanism and Italian Liberal Nationalism in Comparative Perspective*, «Journal of the Civil War Era», 1 (2013), pp. 85-113.

[2] On the question of how Italians saw their own world role, see A. Giardina (ed.), *Storia mondiale dell'Italia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2017.

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talk of national «destiny» and a *sonderweg* in that period, these had a common basis in all countries, however much they might be disguised or justified by the trappings of national peculiarity.

Over and above the meetings and exchanges involved in international diplomacy, there was no moment when liberal Italy tackled issues and processes without there being supranational overtones. Though this article is confined to certain aspects of the political and institutional culture of Italy's politicians and intellectuals over the first fifty years of the nation-State, one cannot stress too much how clear it was to the protagonists that Italy belonged to a multiform European reality[3].

Fragile and incomplete it may have been, but the Italian State had every right to stand among the European powers, following Cavour's intuition that it was both desirable and expedient to tie the unification process to the culture and political fortunes of Europe, though it was also the prosecution of supranational integration, a process that had already begun in many walks of political thought and Risorgimento liberalism[4]. In size of territory and population the new nation was one of the largest on the continent. It was quite another matter when it came to economic and civil development: there the country lagged behind many others and would take years to catch up. All in all, the birth of Italy was hailed with enthusiasm by international public opinion. It was seen as a test of whether the revolutionary principle of nationality could successfully combine popular legitimation with monarchy, liberty and order. Possessing the new mechanism of parliamentary representation and values based on legal equality, she stood as the last tile in the mosaic of European liberal constitutionalism.

Pointless to look for the Italian State's *raison d'être* among the time-hallowed criteria for legitimation: a dynasty or simple military power. What distinguished it was its political modernity, and in Europe from the 1830s to the 1870s that meant Parliament. A «modern» system ensured representation of the individual property owner; it maintained order by free discussion, not repression; as for inclusion of the lower people, that was put off till some vague future date, and to be achieved by gradual stages. The French Orléanist Chamber here stood as the continental example of Britain's mythical constitutional tradition by which governments, to stay in office, needed to enjoy the confidence of Parliament. Over the decades many parts of continental Europe viewed the institution of Parliament as the solution to the burning question

[3] See U. Levra (ed.), *Nazioni, nazionalità, Stati nazionali nell'Ottocento europeo*, Roma, Carocci, 2004.

[4] On the European and transnational roots of Risorgimento culture, see A. de Arcangelis, *The Cosmopolitan Morphology of the National Discourse: Italy as a European Centre of Intellectual Modernity,* in T. Hauswedel, A. Korner, U. Tiedau (eds.), *Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery. Asymmetrical Encounters in European and Global Contexts*, London, UCL Press, 2019, pp. 135-154; C. Bayly, E. Biagini (eds.), *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of Democratic Nationalism 1830-1920*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2008; M. Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile: Italian Émigrés and the Liberal International in the Post-Napoleonic Era*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2009; Id., *Nationality before Liberty? Risorgimento Political Thought in Transnational Context*, «Journal of Modern Italian Studies», 17-5 (2012), pp. 507-515; G. Pecout, *The International Armed Volunteers: Pilgrims of a Transnational Risorgimento*, «Journal of Modern Italian Studies», 14-4 (2009), pp. 413-426; A.M. Banti, *L'onore della nazione. Identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla Grande Guerra*, Torino, Einaudi, 2005; A. Arisi Rota, *Risorgimento. Un viaggio politico e sentimentale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019; G.L. Fruci, A. Petrizzo (eds.), *Culture visuali e forme di politicizzazione nel lungo '800 europeo. Con interventi di Enrico Francia, Eva Giloi, Rolf Reichardt*, «Passato e Presente», 100 (2017), pp. 25-54.

of how to square the claims of the masses – which the French Revolution had elevated to a political subject – with the need to preserve power in the hands of the traditional social hierarchies. Admiration for Parliament was, as it were, the cultural precipitate from this search for a tool that would combine freedom with order.

So, Parliament was seen as the embodiment of modernity and ideals. De Sanctis fondly recalled his youthful fervour in Naples on reading the French newspapers available at the Caffè del Gigante and learning of the «oratorical jousting» of Guizot and Thiers at the French Parliament under Louis Philippe[5]. The same jousting was a feature of the mythical House of Commons which Bagehot hailed for its pedagogical even more than political importance; it was, of course, based on an unrepeatable system of historical equilibriums.

Thus, when Cavour adopted *government by discussion* in Italy it seemed a well-judged decision subscribing to a culture whose legitimizing power he well knew on the home front and in international relations. It formed part of the new economic and social conditions in which the 19th-century process of transformation was proceeding. Italy seemed from the outset the concrete example of a liberal nation, arising from a need for independence from foreign domination; she appeared happily able to marry prospects of liberal constitutionalism with the requirements of the Savoy dynasty, as well as the people's claims in a Mazzini-esque democracy. But it proved a marriage not without its pains. Politics and institutions were heavily conditioned by the conflict and division that had dogged the pre-unification period. Territorial unification had come about by the Savoy Kingdom annexing the peninsula's existing States (or parts of them).

Legal and political problems beset the new State from its inception. Its government under Cavour saw it as a simple territorial enlargement of the Kingdom of Sardinia, beginning with the Albertine Statute which the Sovereign granted in 1848 based on the Belgian constitution, and extension of the Savoyard administration which was heavily centralised on the French model. Cavour's aim in this was both to reflect the decisive role the ruling House had played in creating Italy, and to block any hopes of constitutional power, which the whole Risorgimento had been about. The State was to have no other legitimation than would derive from extension of the Savoy kingdom.

For years the best way of combining independence, unity and a well-preserved tradition had seemed to be decentralization. But the events of 1859-1861, and subsequent outright warfare in the South between the Italian army and bands of brigands – with all the horrors of civil war for the fledgling nation – had caused a short-circuit scuppering all such ideas. In the upshot, apart from isolated protests, all real moderate-liberal alternative vanished. One way or another, all the strands of Italian liberalism had accepted both liberal census-based individual representation (in force throughout most of Europe), and a system of centralised administration which seemed most suited to maintaining unity.

However, this peculiar path to stable unification in no way deterred the Italian ruling class from fully identifying with the political and cultural universe of European liberalism[6].

[5] See F. De Sanctis, *La giovinezza*, Milano, Universale Economica, 1950, pp. 96-97.
[6] See F. Chabod, *Stato nazionale e ordinamento europeo secondo Mazzini e i moderati italiani*, in Id., *Idea di Europa e politica dell'equilibrio*, ed. by L. Azzolini, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1995, pp. 63-92.

At least down to the 1870s-1880s the benchmark was Great Britain – and not only for the politicians. Britain was constantly observed and cited in parliamentary and intellectual debate; she was praised for her way of splicing the mechanisms of the liberal system with attention to juster redistribution of power among the emerging social classes. The search, that is, was for a way of preserving liberalism's elitist tradition amid the dawning manifestations of democratization. Side by side with that model, comparisons and not a few points of contrast were pointed out with the French model. The latter was either commended or disparaged as illustrating the role of political conflict and democratic pressure in the process of nation-building.

The roots may have lain in European culture, but nonetheless the new Cavourian and Savoyard rulers had difficulty in justifying their own legitimacy. They enjoyed no common traditions, prestige or foothold in the country's society. Throughout the 1860s the foreign offices of the main European countries had grave doubts whether the new State would hold[7]. For behind the political and diplomatic manoeuvre that had ushered in the new kingdom of Italy there lay no cohesive social bloc, and certainly not the aristocracy: weak and aloof, the latter lacked all links with their rural setting, and were hence no point of ethical or political reference vis-à-vis the common people. Institution-wise, the situation was no less problematic. From the top down, no sense of prestige attached to the ruling House[8]. Though the 1848 riots had been quelled, the liberal community at first admired the way the Savoys preserved the Statute. But admiration turned to disappointment amid the tribulations and uncertainties of the ensuing years, not to mention the dearth of international prestige. Although the monarchy was secure in its role as the national dynasty, the gap robbed it of credibility as a force for change or as a symbol of stability.

On top of these limitations, Cavour's premature death removed the only figure of European stature able to steer through the post-unificatory chaos. Raised overnight to national institutions, the Savoyard administration was considered neither modern nor liberal by the «Piedmontified» centre-north States and communities, while the former Bourbon lands saw it as a violent bully. Moreover, the rulers' patent fear of «armed rising», and the increasingly evident weakness of the royal army, meant that military prowess could not be held up as an ideal. The Senate itself suffered from the drawbacks of the aristocracy that provided many of its members, and could not be looked on as a vital point of reference. Let us not forget, either, that Italy was born and brought up wedded to the Catholic Church whose widespread moral and political authority was bent on delegitimizing the constitutional and symbolic foundations of the new power system.

In such unfavourable circumstances, then, the politicians reluctantly and paradoxically found themselves the main institutional representatives in the delicate process of legitimizing the new State and political system. From the time Italy unified, the leaders and politicians had to stand proxy for the shakily legitimate institutions. Low though the degree of popular participation was in public life, they very soon became the primary source offering surety for the national institutions. But that meant it was politicians, individual leaders, who

[7] See E. Ragionieri, *Italia giudicata 1861-1945*, vol. I, Torino, Einaudi, 1976, p. XXV.
[8] See P. Colombo, *Storia costituzionale della monarchia italiana*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2001.

legitimized the institutions and not vice versa, as happened in Great Britain, for example[9]. This peculiarity conferred great institutional centrality on the political class, on top of the political and ideological centrality that came from the twofold legitimation that ushered in unification. For no sooner had the country unified than Parliament became politically identified with the great nebula of Italian liberalism, hence roughly reproducing the great political divide that had typified the Risorgimento: a moderate governing component espousing Cavour's political line, and a democratic opposition whose matrix was Garibaldi's activism and Mazzini's intellectual framework. The two areas were later labelled Right and Historic Left. Around them would cluster a medley of parliamentary groups, often linked by regional interests or polarised around a charismatic politician, yet always unbridgeably disagreeing as to how the process of national unification should be achieved. Contrasting ideas between the two major parliamentary forces produced a natural opposition almost amounting to that desirable bi-party division in the party system which was held to be so special about the British model[10]. Indeed, judging by the way the deputies voted in the Chamber in the first twenty years of unification, the Italian politicians were *closer* to the mythical British bi-party model than their counterparts in the United Kingdom. For unlike what is commonly thought, the British Parliament of the time practised no consistent party dialectic or clear-cut division between the majority and the opposition. Down to 1886 the dominant model in Parliament was actually an alliance of Tories and Whigs against the Radicals. As late as 1883, for example, the leaders of the two parties voted on the same side in 46% of major votes in the House of Commons[11].

Following the occupation of Venetia and the entry into Rome, the divide lost its original sting, though for some years it presented the real dynamics of a modern parliamentary system. It is a measure of the new climate of political opposition between Right and Historic Left in the decade following the mid-Sixties that, come the fall of the last Right-wing government in 1876, the press registered no significant concern about any crisis of the system. The only fear was on the part of the moderates: nothing to do with the constitutional reliability of the Left, but the possibility it might more or less unconsciously act as a bridge to extremism and republican radicalism: politically and culturally insidious phenomena that had figured so prominently in Risorgimento battles.

What then took place was a kind of *conventio ad excludendum*: the radicals were to be allowed into the political arena, and even (from the late 1880s on) into local administration, but they were barred from any real participation in government of the country. Unlike the situation when Bismarck brought about the birth of the German Empire, neither party succeeded in claiming sole responsibility for unification, or in marginalising the other politically and culturally. Not only: both formations, with various different nuances, claimed to represent the same

[9] See F. Cammarano, *Crisi politica e politica della crisi: Italia e Gran Bretagna 1880-1925*, in P. Pombeni (ed.), *Crisi, legittimazione, consenso*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2003, pp. 81-131.

[10] See F. Cammarano, *Strategie del conservatorismo britannico nella crisi del liberalismo. National Party of Common Sense (1885-1892)*, Manduria, Lacaita, 1990, pp. 24-49; Id., *To Save England from Decline*, Lanham, University Press of America, 2001, pp. 21-40.

[11] See H. Berrington, *Partisanship and dissidence in the Nineteenth Century House of Commons*, «Parliamentary Affairs», 21 (1968).

niche and image in the political universe: revolutionaries fighting for progress[12]. As the moderate Romualdo Bonfadini explained:

> Our parliamentary parties all have a common origin, – revolution. Those who dreamed up […] a Left championing progress and a Right championing conservation gave names taken from foreign qualities and things to Italian facts, which they failed to see or failed to judge […][13].

Revolutionaries one and all, then. But of course, no-one could have played the «conservative» role without being crushed by a torrent of delegitimization reserved for those who sided with clericalism and anti-unitarian restoration. Those were the real enemies, the anti-system faction[14]. The hostile capillary network of the Catholic Church throughout the country on the one hand singled out a nucleus of «troublemakers» (the culturally and politically diehard «enemy») that helped the first years of the kingdom of Italy to forge a common language – that of unity – among the mixed bag of post-Risorgimento politicians; but on the other hand it planted a tendency to squabble over the legitimacy of the liberal institutions, and this, after the brigands had been put down, soon brought the social question into the open and caused an internationalist mentality to spread across Italy from which, as in other parts of southern Europe, anarchy came to the fore.

The Watershed ’80s

Social discontent spread and the «real country» began to exert pressure; this was spurred to hostility not just by socialism, but frequently by all-pervasive Catholic intransigence, down to the eve of the First World War. And yet the role of Parliament was never jeopardised as the place where the «legal country» was politically represented. It was true of all 19th-century European parliaments that, instead of being stable venues for organized party conflict, they acted as clearing houses for interests and rifts arising in society. Members of parliament were thus not the mouthpieces of rigid political groups, let alone party groups, so that when the original bones of contention between Right and Historic Left began to wane in Italy, the criteria for forming majorities in Parliament became fluid and indeterminate, drifting away from stable criteria of partisanship, and hence in line with the mentality of 19th-century political representation.

[12] In the *Quaderni del carcere* Gramsci suggested the idea of subordinating the Partito d’Azione to the moderate hegemony, claiming that «the difference between many men in the Partito d’Azione and the moderates was more one of «temperament» than anything organically political»; A. Gramsci, *Il Risorgimento*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1991, p. 93. On the complex and ambiguous nuances in the relationship between the two groups, see F. Conti, *L’Italia dei democratici*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2000 and G. Belardelli, *Una nazione «senza anima»: la critica democratica del Risorgimento*, in L. Di Nucci, E. Galli della Loggia, *Due nazioni. Legittimazione e delegittimazione nella storia dell’Italia contemporanea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2003 pp. 41-62.

[13] R. Bonfadini, *I partiti parlamentari in Europa*, «Nuova Antologia», 1894, p. 627.

[14] For a concise overview of Catholic protest against the new regime’s legitimacy, see G. Rumi, *I poteri del re. La Corona, lo Statuto e la contestazione cattolica, 1878-1903*, in L. Di Nucci, E. Galli della Loggia, *Due nazioni*, cit., pp. 93-106.

As the 1870s merged into the 1880s, this style of representation began to alter, revealing a transformation in the cultural parameters that had hitherto prevailed. Those years saw a real volte-face in the political and social mentality: in the heart of the system the values of organization, centralization, administration and political machinery underwent a shift. In short, a change in the «vulgar» but effective tools for interpreting and controlling democracy would enable Parliament too to introduce the first forms of discipline and coordination of representation, which would soon turn into a more rigid, stable division of the sides producing a majority and an opposition.

That deep change stemmed from a complete revolution in the way of interpreting the paradigms of modernity arising when the German Empire came to the fore as the main continental power.

It was a phenomenon that involved the politics of Europe as a whole and many areas besides throughout the world.

> The real origin of the present state of affairs – wrote Pasquale Villari, for example, in the Contemporary Review – dates from 1870 – the year of the Franco-German war and of our entry into Rome. From that moment everything in Italy began rapidly to change[15].

In the 1870s-1880s, then, the German model came in: following Sedan, it proved a worthy alternative to the classic British model, suited to constitutional modernity. «Prussianism», with its brand of statism made up of administration, science, economic and military force, began to exert a new fascination even over many liberals of the «old school»: those who saw Gladstone and his «peace, retrenchment and reform» as the embodiment of liberal government. The major themes traditionally associated with Gladstone as a politician from the 1860s on (pluralism in Church-State relations, liberalism, minimal State and flexible use of administrative mechanisms)[16] had long been the cement linking all the liberal elites of Europe, even where, as in Italy, they thought the model could not be reproduced, especially on the decisive issue of self-government.

Closely bound up with that transformation and in the same decades, the whole of Europe began to feel an acute need for «government» of society as the pace of social and economic change suddenly began to heat up. There was a new tendency to view politics in executive or «cabinet» terms rather than as a «plural dialogue among interests». In Italy too, cessation of that ideal discipline, which had in fact conditioned delegates' behaviour down to the entry of the Bersaglieri into Rome, showed up the need for bolstering the executive, freeing it from the sword of Damocles of majorities that had grown unstable. The pace of legislation and decision-making needed adjusting to suit the times and the increasing stress of meeting the challenges posed by

[15] P. Villari, *Contemporary Life and Thought Italian Politics*, «Contemporary Review», 43 (1883), p. 592.

[16] See H.C.G. Matthew, *Introduction to the Gladstone Diaries*, voll. X-XI, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. xxxiv-xli.

the social question, economic competition and colonial expansion[17]. Transformism may here be seen as the Italian response to the need to have a stronger Prime Minister with greater freedom of action on the part of the government.

It was a short-cut on the part of the liberal leaders as they sought to slim and make more effective the relationship between Parliament and the Cabinet. The importance of the latter was growing, we have seen, as people clamoured more and more for «government» of the social sphere and international competition. Though the goal was the same – to bolster the cabinet's power of decision without delegitimizing Parliament – it was reached by opposite routes. In Italy and France, the mechanism was to leverage broad party areas traditionally thought inimical into supporting the government; whereas in Great Britain the broad Whig and Tory factions that traditionally ganged up together in Parliament, often placing the Cabinet in difficulty, were now forced to separate on a stable basis by the prolonged violent conflict triggered by Gladstone's 1885 proposal for Irish Home Rule. Out of the tension of those years and the formation of rigid groups based on allegiance to ideals, there arose the well-known mechanism that enabled a broadly two-party British system to acquire reliable stable government. The key consisted in having a clear unchanging disciplined majority party, held to account by an equally well-defined disciplined opposition.

The issue was not the centrality of government. That, since the Fifties, had been recognised as the true legislatory engine of the constitutional system. The real issue was limiting the power of Parliament in favour of the Cabinet, a demand that came not from right-wing anti-parliamentarians, but from a section of 19th-century European radical political thinking. One significant example is Joseph Chamberlain, the much-feared British radical: in 1886, although already converted to the unionist cause after the proposal for Irish Home Rule, Chamberlain was still a beacon for discontent with the system's traditional institutional equilibrium: «Our misfortune is that we live under a system of Government originally contrived to check the action of King and Ministers and which meddles therefore far too much with the Executive of the Country. [...] My radicalism at all events desires to see established strong Government and an Imperial Government»[18].

On the same lines the moderate French republican Paul Deschanel, future President of the Republic, argued that parliamentarism should be cut down to size and power returned to the executive and to institutions less tied to direct representation:

> To prevent Parliament from being absorbed by the executive, we have fallen into the opposite extreme: government absorbed by an assembly. How can one possibly call a Directory government when it can continually be rescinded and is often a mixed bag?[19]

[17] On the 1880s as a watershed, see F. Cammarano, *Il XX secolo*, in R. Brizzi, F. Cammarano, S. Cavazza, G. Guazzaloca, M. Marchi (eds.), *Fare storia politica. Studi dedicati a Paolo Pombeni*, Roma, Viella, 2018, pp. 9-27.

[18] *A.J. Balfour to Lord Salisbury*, 24-3-1886, cited in *Salisbury-Balfour Correspondence*, ed. by R. Harcourt Williams, Hertfordshire, Record Society, 1988, p. 137.

[19] P. Deschanel, *La République Nouvelle*, Paris, 1898.

At the close of the century the traditional constitutional scenarios were thus perceived to be changing. In 1882 the *Nuova Antologia* published an article outlining the issue explicitly. It described it as an ongoing Europe-wide conflict, and wondered what kind of new constitutional equilibrium might lay the ghost both of «personal government» and of «omnipotent assemblies»:

> Between ministerial irresponsibility as proclaimed by the Prince of Bismarck, and the omnipotence of the nation's representatives upheld by our parliamentary customs, there is a middle course: the legitimate action of the two powers hemmed within precisely established confines which no-one may transgress[20].

That new «middle course» had the by no means easy task of satisfying the mounting demand for government which was spreading along with what «neutralising» liberal parlance dubbed the «social question». European liberalism was forced to make a clear statement of its own political plan to deal with the key issue of the nineteenth century: how and when to integrate the masses into the State. A worrying reality had to be looked in the face: broad strata of the people lagged behind in the process of moral and political education, making it alarming to imagine classes being incorporated into Society when they were obstinately unwilling to dissolve in the «sun» of civil equality and thus bear out the liberal prophecies of the early nineteenth century[21].

Through the fault of liberal ideology itself, a demand had taken root, described in 1878 by a conservative liberal as «the right to welfare. Whence the situation that whoever lacks it – nearly everyone, that is to say – feels defrauded of what is his by right»[22]. For the first time in the history of European liberalism things had progressed beyond statements of «potential» social integration made possible by the ideals of liberty and nationality. Back in 1848 the political and social implications had still seemed hazy and remote, but now, trembling after the Paris Commune, the situation was poised, amid countless contradictions, on the brink of imminent concrete democracy.

The headache of keeping political and social order in face of the often-unruly advance of the masses snuffed out the short-lived liberal flame that had been kindled in Italy with the Cairoli government (1878) and in Britain with Gladstone's return to power in the 1880s. Instead of a gradual unfolding of rights and liberty as these governments had vouched for by way of updating the liberal and radical tradition, it was becoming more and more urgent to bolster the administration in response to challenges at home and abroad: «national efficiency» needed boosting, a phrase that was beginning to creep into the British press.

But «national efficiency» was only the Tories' strategic proposal corresponding to the British upper- and middle-class demand that reforms and integration of the lower classes

[20] *Gli italiani alle urne*, «Nuova Antologia», 35 (1882), pp. 521-522.
[21] See H.J. Laski, *The Rise of European Liberalism*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1947.
[22] A. Guiccioli, *Diario di un conservatore*, Milano, Edizioni del Borghese, 1973, p. 36.

be put on hold; anyway, it offered no way out of the loop of modernising the system. The Tories had now long become to all intents and purposes a branch of the liberal galaxy, and as such were ill-disposed to upset the applecart of reforms achieved in the last twenty years, the social side to which they preened themselves on having inspired.

In the end the Conservative leader Lord Salisbury overcame his hesitation and went over to the creed of the «opposition within», the Tory democrats: the idea that the forces behind the surge of «modernity» (acceptance of the State as the organ of intervention, and party organization as the linchpin of political consensus) could best be managed by the Conservatives – sole custodians of true liberalism, they believed, after the Gladstonians went chasing after the chimera of «radicalism» upon which the Empire was in danger of foundering. Radicalism in its various forms was blamed for stirring up class egoism, moral and social disorder, and in the rest of Europe it was likewise being reviled by the ruling elites. Things had reached the point where the backlash to the liberal successes of the late 1870s was being justified as a corrective to the excesses of radical democracy (for which the liberal vanguard were partly to blame). The goals of this last were nearly all questionable: they were premature and hence irresponsibly dangerous to national interest.

French republican Jules Ferry attacked the radicals' unruly haste for social reform and administrative decentralization, placing the system under pressure. There was no incompatibility of programmes, he argued, but only of timing and methods: «Progress comes not by leaps and bounds or strongarm tactics, but a phenomenon of social growth and transformation, born as ideas, then becoming custom and finally entering the law»[23].

Hence democratic radicalism might be opposed but not delegitimated. However eccentric or visionary, it formed part of a set of theories and values (the role of individual responsibility; the enlightenment principles – variously played down but not to be repudiated – of universalism, cosmopolitanism and contractualism: powerful dredgers of class stagnation under the *ancien régime*), nor could the liberals disavow them. On this point the hostile ranks of clericalism delighted in reminding all timid liberal moderates of the embarrassing relatives they were consorting with. Indeed, the family album was now complete: the chain that began in 1789 had found a last link in the nascent socialist movement. However, among the European intelligentsia in the 1880s, while phenomenal scientific and technological changes were being witnessed, a slow turn took place away from the «crucial» experimental positivism focusing on individual participation in society, towards a «naturalistic» form of positivism with an organicistic view of public life. A greater need was felt for systematic models from which functional and developmental «laws» could be deduced, soothing the anxiety of a society that seemed to have thrown all its hierarchical benchmarks to the winds and was groping towards an unknown goal[24]. It was another sign of fatigue besetting the enlightenment legacy[25] which had welded many devotees

[23] Cited in M. Winock, *La febbre francese dalla Comune al maggio '68*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1988, p. 71.

[24] See N. Urbinati, *Le civili libertà. Positivismo e liberalismo nell'Italia unita*, Venezia, Marsilio, 1990.

[25] See Z. Sternhell, *Fascism. Reflections on the Fate of Ideas in Twentieth Century History*, in M. Freeden (ed.), *Reassessing Political Ideologies. The Durability of Dissent*, London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 92-115.

of liberalism together, including the radical wing. Behind that reaction to the more enlightened liberal reckoning with modernity there was growing cultural uncertainty and a more pronouncedly aggressive political and social mentality. All the branches of liberal politics favoured this trend to pen the radicals and democrats in political isolation by bolstering, inter alia, the parliamentary majority supporting the government. This occurred even in France. Although the strong secular tradition linking all republicans viewed radicalism, even in Clemenceau's intransigent version, as an acknowledged last-ditch defence against episodes of anti-system recrudescence, the trend towards a «gathering of the centres» showed that the system could afford to marginalise radical pressure, using the centre-right as fallback support. What is sure is that the 1880s saw a generalised «need for a centre» of government, a fortress to withstand extremist pressure. By various routes this brought certain elements of the old radical «extreme» tradition into the heart of government thinking: those like Chamberlain, Gambetta, Crispi or Clemenceau who were most enamoured of progress as the product of «Jacobin» statism. Tension among the various branches of liberalism thus threw into relief the core of the conflict: viz., definition of the role and function of government in the systems of parliamentary representation. Chamberlain, who by 1886 was aligned with the conservatives, felt free to sum up the crux of the broader political issue with brutal frankness, showing how «democracy» and «radicalism» were terms suited to the cause of dirigisme and imperialism: «A Democratic Government should be the strongest Government from a Military and Imperial point of view, in the world, for it has the people behind it»[26].

Parliament's prerogatives thus needed curbing, beginning with

> the practice of unlimited discussion [which] has become incompatible with the proper progress of business under modern conditions. [..] Its limitation [...] is urgently and speedily demanded if we would preserve the potent instrument of popular government from ridicule and failure[27].

A fundamental requirement if one was to meet the demand for a strong executive which could yet count on a stable majority, safe from the snares of radicalism or the exhausting shifts in the «perpetual wave of politics». It is no accident that such a need became felt in Italy and Great Britain by most of the ruling class just when bold though inevitable electoral reforms were approved. Broadening the electorate in Britain (1867 and 1884-5) and Italy (1882) was experienced as a «leap in the dark» by the moderates and conservatives of either country. It is also far from accidental that the requirement of a more stable parliamentary majority became feasible after Gladstone was defeated in Britain and Cairoli in Italy. Both defeats matured out of the abandoning of certain cherished tenets of liberal and radical tradition. On the one hand, a plan to integrate the masses entirely based on the value of liberty with no concessions to the new role of public finance and the rise of «statism»; on the other, a less aggressive and hence less expensive foreign policy (Irish Home Rule presented as the prologue to calming domestic ten-

[26] Cited in *A.J. Balfour to Lord Salisbury, 24-3-1886*, in R. Harcourt Williams (ed.), *Salisbury-Balfour Correspondence*, cit., p. 137.

[27] J. Chamberlain, *Shall We Americanise Our Institutions?*, «The Nineteenth Century Review», December 1890, p. 875.

sion, and Italy's «clean hands» policy outlined in Berlin, 1878, showing awareness of her limits of power, and also the decision to prioritise domestic consolidation).

For all the huge gap between the political and social situations in Italy and Britain, both government lines were markedly similar in basic design, and not surprisingly were rejected by their respective public opinions, symbolically reflecting the new European trend: for a pause, on the home front, in reforms extending freedom and citizenship[28]; and greater emphasis, in foreign policy, on national primacy and imperialism. The 1880s thus marked a proper watershed in history, spilling over from intellectual and political thinking into politics proper and institutions. There were differences, however, between the French and British situations on the one hand, and Italy on the other. In the former the reaction did not amount to anything systemic, allowing the radical democrats to return to the arena, find their niche and dialogue with the other political cultures even in terms of government (this, among other things, enhanced the two political systems' potential for political strategy). But in Italy from that moment onwards aversion for radical democracy turned into rigid political ostracism. Though Giolitti partly remedied the situation in the early years of the twentieth century, such exclusion tactics left an indelible mark on the politics and institutions of the country.

At the turn of the century progress accordingly took two guises: in the ideals of the nation such as representation, liberty and democracy, and in terms of power and «expansionist» protectionism linked to State support for industrial development. The contrast reflected society's anxiety at losing all hierarchical benchmarks and heading into the unknown.

Institution-wise, all this translated into scepticism about the previous generation's belief in discussion as a value (and hence into a growing shared dislike of the *discutadora* class image by which the reactionary Donoso Cortes had branded the liberal bourgeoisie in 1850). Such scepticism infected British political thinking too, without gaining the upper hand – though we have seen how Joseph Chamberlain went so far as to advocate curbing parliamentary discussion so as to preserve the potent instrument of popular government from derision and failure[29].

Not surprisingly, the practical outcome was that regulations to rationalise the work of parliament began to increase, while cabinets became organized on a more stable footing. In Italy the reforms to the Chamber of 1887-1890 set precise limits to the practice of raising questions in the House, which encumbered the business of legislating and cramped discussion of proposed bills. As for government, and confining ourselves to the most important changes, the Secretariat to the Prime Minister's Office came into being in 1881 and gained further strength in 1888. Similar steps were in progress in many other European countries.

The transition from a legislative to an executive emphasis should thus be seen as part of a growing trend, in theory and practice, towards fencing round independent government action, and likewise as a counterweight to extending suffrage. From the 1880s on, the three main parliamentary systems took diametrically opposite ways of disciplining political representation and reining in the dangerous tendency to pander to an enlarged and increasingly unqualified

[28] See I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789-1914*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011, especially pp. 143-217.

[29] See *A.J. Balfour to Lord Salisbury, 24-3-1886*, cit., 1988, p. 137.

electorate: transformism and opportunism in Italy and France; institutionalising of the majority-opposition mechanism in Great Britain. By different routes (centralising in the former, separating in the latter) the executive-legislative relationship seemed to be working out in favour of the former. The main exponent of this line in Italy was Francesco Crispi who, note, also came from the radical stable and continued even when in the cabinet to voice disapproval at the «betrayal» of the Risorgimento. He embodied both the classic image of power, and that of protest against the parliamentary regime which was born «sickly» in Italy, he used to say, imported from the France «of the July Monarchy». It was Crispi the fan of Bismarck who presumed in the 1890s, protected by the monarchy and his own record of fearless patriotism, to pursue a policy of restoring order on the home front, and «the position she is owed» abroad. He was determined to end unification «micromania» which had focused on the «little virtues» of retrenchment and material welfare at home, and «clean hands» abroad, the typical doctrinaire liberalism of Cairoli and Giuseppe Zanardelli. Crispi could not abide the image of Italy as a mere larger Belgium among great powers. That was his answer to Emile De Laveleye who had famously remarked in 1884: «Italy would have nothing to fear from anyone if she contented herself with a status like Switzerland's or Belgium's»[30]. Under Crispi, who distinctly modernised the country's administration, for the first time since the capture of Rome there began to be mutterings about «Italy's mission»: gradually various strands of public opinion came to believe in her right to being a power.

One example of this was Crispi's attempt to establish a genuine colony in Africa, what he called Eritrea, boosting the image of power. Just as France, Britain, Belgium, Portugal and Spain were doing in Africa and Asia, Crispi sought to impose the principle of executive-superior-to-parliament in areas like the colonies which tended to lack the constitutional guarantees enjoyed by the «Metropolis» (or mother country):

> Colonies, said Crispi before the Chamber in 1890, are State dependencies, not an integral part of it; they are not in the State but under its dominion [...]. They are extra-statutory territory, and the executive has full power over provinces that do not form an integral part of State territory. It has the right to re-order and constitute them as it pleases[31].

End-of-Century Crisis

As the century drew to a close, legal experts, economists, politicians, theoreticians of the modern social sciences and political commentators expressed their distress over the political system in a series of articles, speeches and essays broadening the original topic of «degeneration of Parliament» onto the entire institutions of the country and all the problems arising

[30] Cited in B. Croce, *Storia d'Italia*, Bari, Laterza, p. 121.

[31] *Le colonie in parlamento*, in P. Ballini (ed.), *Alla ricerca delle colonie (1876-1896*), Venezia, Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2007, pp. 187-273.

with the new mass electorate[32]. From ritual charges of parliamentary «degeneration» and «transformism» – now no longer seen as bolstering cabinet stability but masking unseemly and corrupt trafficking – other charges included: a political decision-making deficit, corruption in political representation, and failure by the State to reflect the active forces of civil society. More generally there was a mounting chorus of condemnation for «parliamentarism» which had declined from the «memorable times of our Cavours, Sellas, Scialojas and Minghettis» and was now a «gymnasium for partisan rivalry»[33].

For the first time in Europe as a whole, though varying in style and intensity from country to country, the turn of the century saw open showdown between defenders of politics based on boosting the parliamentary system and extending suffrage, as against advocates of a system based on an executive unshackled as far as possible from the will of the electorate. In most of Europe it boiled down to how the constitution should be framed: in liberal-parliamentary terms or conservative-authoritarian. France's end-of-century crisis formed part of this tussle, but opened it onto new fronts as well: commitment by intellectuals, militant anti-Semitism, and a new role for public opinion. The trigger was the trial that became known as the Dreyfus affair. In Great Britain the turn-of-century crisis lasted from 1885 and Home Rule tensions until 1911 when the Parliament Act subordinated the House of Lords to the House of Commons. The dispute served to redefine power relations within the liberal institutions. It was an attempt to rescale the powers of parliament in favour of non-elective institutions like the House of Lords, and above all to curb the Trade Unions and cut down their political and social influence. In Italy the acute phase of the crisis came after the fall of Crispi and the defeat at Adua (1896). The next year, predictably, Sydney Sonnino was calling for a «return to the Statute», stemming the dangerous trend towards making «the electoral urn the sole basis of the State's political authority»[34].

The issue was not so much about bolstering the executive along the Caesarist route blazed by Crispi, as about freeing government from the shifting combinations in Parliament and giving it a closer dependency on royal power. That would enable the Chamber to get on with its primary task, legislation, while the government, freed from the parliamentary watchdog, could manage *res publica* with greater confidence and authority, away from transformist alliances and dangerous partisan interests. Sonnino spoke for a swing towards authority, reducing the weight of the representative institutions, and this was put into practice by end-of-century governments. It was in May 1898 under Crispi's successor, the Marquis of Rudini, that the fully empowered army under General Fiorenzo Bava Beccaris opened fire on a Milanese demonstration against soaring food prices, and caused over a hundred deaths.

[32] See N. Antonetti, *La forma di governo in Italia. Dibattiti politici e giuridici tra Otto e Novecento*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2002. On the political and journalistic debate in Italy and Britain over that period, see G. Guazzaloca, *Fine secolo. Gli intellettuali italiani e inglesi e la crisi tra Otto e Novecento*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2004; L. Mangoni, *Una crisi fine secolo. La cultura italiana e la Francia fra Otto e Novecento*, Torino, Einaudi, 1985.

[33] N. Marzotto, *La educazione politica e il partito agrario*, «Rassegna Nazionale», 94 (1897), pp. 365-367, *passim*.

[34] S. Sonnino, *Scritti e discorsi extraparlamentari. 1870-1902*, ed. by B.F. Brown, Bari, Laterza, 1972, p. 605.

This was followed by suppression of the socialist, republican and Catholic press and arrest of the leading militants among opposition organizations. Succeeding Di Rudini, Luigi Pelloux set about a policy of curbing the role of parliament and repressing freedom of association and opinion. After initial uncertainty, this was opposed by the liberal Left, especially Giolitti and Zanardelli who brought about the defeat of the liberticide project with support from the socialists. When an anarchist assassinated Umberto I for the «crime» of sanctioning military repression, the two men headed a liberal swing ushering in the new century.

The Giolitti Era

Giovanni Giolitti is still considered one of the few great statesmen in the history of Italy, despite the widespread view that his was an unscrupulous and ideal-less mandate. Undoubtedly, he was a controversial figure and many of his decisions were questionable. One thinks of his manoeuvring in southern Italy to get his own candidates elected, or his grave underestimating of the fascist phenomenon in the early 1920s. However, the force and continuity of his policies were such, and so marked, that he ended by giving his name to the first fifteen years of the new century, and above all led Italy into economic and political modernity while preserving the role of the liberal institutions. Across the two centuries industry took off, enabling Italy to join the European powers, albeit as a late-comer. Italian industry's change of gear was clearly not just due to Giolitti, though it was he who inspired and encouraged transformations in progress by a wise reinterpretation of previous economic policies. And that was Giolitti's forte in politics too: with his knowing manner and rejection of rhetoric or sentimentality, he doused conflict, reforming whenever a chink opened in the wall of consolidated parasitic interests, though he was always careful to avoid reactions he could not control. The target was innovation within continuity, with a new slant to the State's role in employer-worker relations, and a new look at the Triple Alliance in the light of changing relations between Italy and France. Nonetheless, Giolitti's transformation was actually owed to his ability to anchor his policies to a profound belief that his opponents failed to recognise: faith in the centrality of Parliament (once the dark years of end-of-century crisis had passed), and hence in the creation of that indispensable majority on which the fate of an executive depended in the parliamentary system.

Within the ragged development of early 20th-century Italy that choice of strategy enabled him famously to skip from Prime Minister to 'Minister of Crime' and back again on a daily basis.

With Giolitti at the Home Office in Zanardelli's 1901 government and then Prime Minister from 1903 on, defeat of the authoritarian project stepped beyond the issue of restoring the centrality of Parliament and proceeded to cast in liberal terms the question of government's role in disciplining the social question. Parallel with what was happening in France, Britain and the United States, the years leading up to the First World War saw a rethinking and tailoring of liberal culture, taking the name of new liberalism in the Anglo-Saxon world. (In the US it turned into that composite movement of progressivism, while in France the new phase following defeat of the conservatives in the end-of-century crisis was known as the Republic of Radicals).

For all parliament-based systems the twentieth century dawned with a widespread perception that the real problem to solve was the complex web of relations between the State and the world of «plural» interests found in society. That view led to a turn-of-century revising of legal thinking. In Italy, thanks largely to Santi Romano, this produced a new branch of law, independent of private law, regulating the whole organization of the State's social involvement and relations between this and the public. Doctrinal revision of the new concept of «administrative State» as a theoretical response to the complex State-citizen relationship formed the intellectual and scientific terrain for a long-term solution to the new social reality. France quickly developed what Italy would call «municipal socialism», paralleling the legal debate over new mechanisms for managing public services[35]. In Great Britain the age of the minimal State and proud municipal self-government was over, even culturally speaking.

> Take up a volume of 18th-century statutes – wrote a well-known British constitutionalist in 1901 – and compare it with a volume of the Victorian period, and you will find yourself in a new world [...] the enormous strides of scientific discovery, commercial enterprise, and industrial activity, the new problems presented by the massing of great numbers in towns and factories under artificial conditions – all these causes have materially altered the character and increased the volume of Victorian legislation [...]. The net result [..] has been the building up of piecemeal of an administrative machine of great complexity[36].

As even in Great Britain, homeland of by now anachronistic doctrinaire liberalism, the old concept of local government was disappearing in face of regular invasion by state powers, so everywhere, not excepting Giolitti's Italy, the public sphere was becoming eminently «administrative». But the administrativization of politics should not be seen as a mere dirigiste turn on the part of the liberal managerial class. It was more a multiplication of the centres of mediation and bargaining, quite in line with Giolitti's political design. Thus, renewed in form and content, administration became the place where interests even on the fringe of society found a channel of representation. So it was for the Labour Exchange, for example, which canvased support from representatives of the working classes in 1903, looking for remedies to the social question; likewise in the United States with collective bargaining and creation of the first modern administrative structures based on joint public and private collaboration. In the universe of Giolittian politics such schemes found their natural environment, helped to begin with at least by dialogue with the socialist reformists, on the lines of what happened in France in 1899 when the first socialist joined a bourgeois government, and above all what was happening in the Labour party in the United Kingdom. The same can be said of Francesco Saverio Nitti's reformist career. Whereas at the end of the nineteenth century Nitti insisted on the link between social conquest

[35] Cf. M. Margairaz, *Experts et Praticiens. Les services publics economiques entre experts, praticiens et gouvernants dans le Premier XX siècle: d'une configuration historique a l'Autre*, «Revue d'histoire modern & contemporaine», 3 (2005), pp. 132-165.

[36] C. Ilbert, *Legislative Methods and Forms*, Oxford, 1901, pp. 211-213.

and reforms that must not be «made only on behalf of the people, but *by* the people», in the first years of the new century he opted for Giolitti as his own political reference point and became a minister in the 1911 government.

Nitti's «Atlantic liberalism», with its eye on current changes in how the process of modernization was being handled in Europe and the United States, found concrete outlet in an administration combining technical know-how, social interests and new public functions. The upshot was the organs of so-called parallel administration, the prototype of which was the National Institute of Insurances, set up by the Giolitti government in 1912 upon Nitti's initiative.

That new reformist venture made no mystery of aiming to shorten the distance in economic and social development between the country's North and South, a division that had changed under the Historic Left from an original time-lag needing to be caught up, into a kind of open-ended «southern question».

Giolitti's extension of mediation to parliament and administration caused tension and deep scars in the country's political and social fabric. His skill in handling an often-obstreperous majority, without which every attempt at reform would have lost the essence of reform and social integration, had to reckon with a climate of nationalism and imperialism setting in on the eve of Italy's embarkation on the Great War.

When Giolittian members of parliament were physically attacked and Giolitti himself narrowly escaped lynching, it was the sign of an epoch passing, and also of authoritarian traits re-emerging of the kind he had hitherto so ably held in check. It was most significant that, to interventionists of all provenance and degree, joining in the war implied first and foremost being rid of him, his crafty mediating and prevaricating, and, in short, his prosaic yet effective way of «achieving maximum results by minimum means», at home as in foreign policy. When he came out in favour of neutrality in 1914, the interventionists immediately saw it as proof of how stifling and decrepit Giolittism was: lacking the vim of ideals, it was only good for bargaining. His notorious policy of «a lot to be gained» [by abstaining from war] and his lucid awareness that the Italian army was ill-prepared were views actually shared by Parliament and much of the country, but they were overborne by the joint action of the State top brass: the King, Prime Minister Antonio Salandra and foreign minister Sonnino.

In vain did 300 MPs leave their visiting cards at the porter's lodge of his Rome residence in token of their loyalty. That parliament upon which he had sought to stabilise the constitutional system would buckle before massive popular demonstration. Significantly, the British historian G.M. Trevelyan, an interested witness to the defeat of the neutralist «enemy», wrote: «The Italians are not a great parliamentary nation, but they are a great democratic nation. And in times of political crisis like 1860 and 1915 the people were endowed with remarkable sense and vigour»[37]. In actual fact, that popular force violently opposing Parliament would mark the real debut of fascism in Italy, as Prezzolini glimpsed. For Europe the First World War was a true watershed, over and above its disastrous casualties, for it was not just a clash among nations to impose a new balance of territorial supremacy, but above all the first total showdown seeking to

[37] G.M. Trevelyan, *Scenes from Italy's War*, London, T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1919, p. 17.

define a new European identity. The two great cultures of the public sphere – the parliamentary as in Italy, and the typically Germanic constitutional – no longer seemed capable of coexisting as they used to.

Many intellectuals of the day[38] indeed seemed to grasp that the war also represented «war for the Constitution»[39], that is, towards defining the basic ethical and political character of the future Europe. Ernst Troeltsch, one of the thinkers most involved in descrying the future «European ethos», read the ideological war accompanying the fighting as posing a «real theoretical conundrum: the difference of German political, historical and moral thinking from the western European and American version»[40]. Unlike combatants in the past, in commencing hostilities those engaged thought that the ensuing peace would not be confined to redrawing the boundaries and spheres of influence of the Old Continent. Liberal Italy happened to be the only large country that opted consciously to enter the war ten months after it started. It was a significant peculiarity and showed a will to cut through the old dilemma as to her «true» political nature: a kind of test for herself and the world – which achieved no solution. For, as we know, it foundered on the reef of a «mutilated victory» which left unresolved the doubts and divisions as to Italy's role in the international context.

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[38] On intellectuals and the First World War, see among others R. Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1979.

[39] See S. Mezzadra, *La costituzione del sociale. Il pensiero politico e giuridico di Hugo Preuss*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1999, pp. 187-195.

[40] Cited in G.E. Rusconi, *1914: Attacco a Occidente*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2014, p. 163.