

Chapter I

How Premature Development Became a Factor of Backwardness

“One, None, and a Hundred Thousand”

Postunitary Italy, far from presenting a well-defined face, is the unstable combination of some particular characteristics. The first of these is the fragile dialectic between the various geographical pieces that make it up: the “thousand bell towers,” the regional particularities, the use of dialect as a badge of local identity, the relations between the center and the periphery—most particularly, between the north and the south, ever a source of jealousies, haggling, and friction.

When, beginning in the 1880s, the governments of the *Sinistra* attempted to bind up certain of these divisions, they began by co-opting emerging interest groups, or those previously excluded from power (the southern elites, above all), and did so simply by juxtaposing them to the already dominant interest groups. Political institutions thus became the venues of incessant bargaining. The formation of these fragile and temporary alliances between particular and sectoral interests was referred to as “transformism,” a process that has accompanied the entire history of united Italy. This fragmentation hampered the search for a national “common interest” and consequently prevented the development of any long-term national strategy.

The impossibility of defining objectives not at the mercy of such transactions hindered the formation of national political parties able to represent alternative interests in any enduring way. The problem, which Francesco de Sanctis described as early as 1877—“We are now at the point where there are no solidly constituted parties, except perhaps for those based on regions and on clientele, Italy’s two scourges,” he said¹—was a constant of Italian history up to the 1990s. Until that time, the peninsular political system, lacking viable alternatives, always pivoted around a sort of “single party”—at times surreptitious, at times official. The liberal monarchy, fascism, and the Christian Democratic republic all experienced, under different forms, governmental mechanisms incapable of any change except by traumatic rupture. Opposition parties were thus always forced to choose between “subversivism” (different from subversion, which they never practiced) and more or less open collaboration with power; they sometimes managed simultaneously to be both subversive and governmental.

In the early years of the country's existence, these opposition groups, though kept at a distance from official political life, possessed a capital that the forces of the government and the administration lacked: identity. The democrats, the Catholics, and the Socialists benefited from having strong and clear identities, which were even more salient in contrast to the governing powers, which lacked any clearly defined personality.

The fragmentation of the ruling class, the fortuitous character of unification, the mistrust of politics, and the "pragmatism" of the transformist governments thus deprived this new creature of a clearly defined national character. At the beginning of the Italian adventure, the country's new leaders—the *Destra*—were preoccupied with building from nothing the structures of a new state with suddenly enlarged borders, and they had little time to abhor any ideological vacuum. But this changed once Italy found itself projected into the center of a system of international relations in which it supposedly had a role to play; the difficulty of defining a plausible national identity began to pose a major problem when compared to other countries that had constructed their own over centuries. From that point forward, any shift in the international order had repercussions for Italy, provoking a more or less serious internal crisis that aroused new doubts about its identity.

Dynamic Constants

The constants of postunitary Italian history reflect realities rooted deeply in the social life of the country. Yet, unless one analyzes their interconnections, there is a risk of magnifying them as pure manifestations of political folklore, or of using them as ideological cover for otherwise unmentionable struggles between conflicting interests. Through most of the history of unitary Italy, that has been true of the north-south "dualism": detached arbitrarily from other factors, the "southern question" has given rise to partial interpretations, used by some in the ruling southern classes as an ideological alibi to solicit every sort of public assistance.

These unilateral visions produced other risks. To continue with the example of the north-south "dualism," other inequalities in the country's interior have often been neglected, such as the existence of a center and a northeast, with their own distinct characteristics. The social and economic phenomenon referred to, appropriately, as the "Terza Italia," ("Third Italy")—an industrial area that notably includes Veneto, Emilia, and Tuscany, as well as the Adriatic regions—has arisen and asserted itself, despite the ruling class's near-sightedness.

A too-hasty analysis of these factors leads to a further misunderstanding: their unchanging aspect ends up completely overshadowing their dynamic aspect. In other words, the fragility of national identity, transformism, state control, clientelism, regional divisions, de facto "single-partyism" and interference by the Church crop up so regularly that they can leave the impression that Italian society of the past century and a half has scarcely evolved at all.

In reality, it is clear that these factors, appearances notwithstanding, never remain static. Even those that lend themselves most readily to folkloric representations of the supposedly eternal “Italian genius”—the Mafia, for example—have undergone radical transformations through their history, always linked to the radical transformations of the conditions with which they have interacted. The Mafia arose, according to certain interpretations, as a sort of feudal agent defending the “oppressed,” but it was “baptized” only after Italian unification, and today represents a veritable multinational entity with both licit and illicit interests.²

The same can be said of other strictly political factors. As one historian has noted, the “law” of transformism appears only when one assesses the history of Italy on the basis of an external model, namely, on the basis of a level of institutional functioning that one supposes the country could have attained and that it has failed to reach because of its defects.³

Nearly all recent studies on the relationship between north and south in Italy find that the gap between the two regions can be viewed as a consequence of unification, to the extent that unification—by bringing the regions under the same, uniform institutional framework—tended to institutionalize the gap. At the same time, if one considers the dynamic aspect, it becomes clear that over the past fifty years the difference between the two has remained essentially constant, which means that in relative terms the south has developed at rates comparable to the north.⁴ This reading of “dualism” undercuts the conventional wisdom on the situation of the Mezzogiorno.

A Heavy Heritage

Generally those who have sought to explain the traditional weaknesses of the Italian ruling class without resorting to shortcuts like fatalism, moralism, or even racism, have insisted on the backwardness—or backwardnesses—of the country. We should keep in mind that the notion of backwardness is relative and based on multiple factors. It necessarily implies a comparison with other entities presumed to be more advanced, or examined under different points of view. It also supposes, naturally, the existence of a competition, of whatever nature.

Italy, even while expressing fairly early on a subjective will to compete with the other powers of the “European Concert,” found itself from its very birth in objective competition with those powers, by reason of its history, its “geopolitical capital,” and the uses the other powers sought to make of it. In the Middle Ages, Italy was the leading capitalist country in the world, both chronologically and in terms of its importance. That conferred certain responsibilities: the commercial expansion led by the Venetians and the Genoese, the financial importance of the Lombard and Florentine bankers, the prodigious cultural splendor dispensed by the universities, the literary schools, the centers of pictorial and musical arts, all left a concrete heritage, of which the use of Tuscan as the lingua franca of many intellectual and commercial circles was long the most salient sign. If we add to that the role of universal spiritual power played by one of the peninsular states and, no less important, the aura of ancient Rome, we can see that the *Risorgimento* myth

of a “Third Rome” was far weightier than anything the bards of Italy’s “manifest destiny” could support.

The Italian colonies present on the Adriatic, in Malta, in Tunis, in Alexandria, in Istanbul, in the Aegean, and even on the shores of the Black Sea endowed unified Italy, virtually, with a far from negligible political capital that it could have used, at least proportionately, the way de Gaulle used the Francophone community. Although there were no substantial initiatives to this end, the inheritance of the past nonetheless helped the new country occupy a space—and not just geopolitically or geoeconomically—with which others, and Italy itself, would henceforth have to deal.

The ruling class in Piedmont that now found itself in command, preoccupied with internal concerns and accustomed to dealing with other powers from a subordinate position, reacted slowly to the new international reality. Relations with the outside world were perceived without the problem of the *saltus* really being raised—and consequently, without necessary connections to internal problems being made. The theoretical awareness of the gap between ambitions and the means to achieve them emerged slowly among most of the ruling class: yet, it was precisely this gap that was to mark the subsequent history of the country and make its backwardness a problem without a solution.

The *Destra*, despite a rich theoretical tradition far superior to the disordered eclecticism of the *Sinistra*, lost its bearings once unification was achieved. Not only had the imperatives of centralization drained it of its decentralizing liberalism, but also the *Destra* incorporated the interests of a dispersed class of property owners who were weak, few in number, and, with rare exception, insensitive to the requirements of industrial development. Its conservatism was dictated not only by its will, however understandable, to preserve the social relationships from which it drew its wealth, but also by the quite natural sociopsychological reflex through which all human groupings tend to persevere with the mechanisms that made their success possible.

One idea originating in England, and to which the property owners were evidently sensitive, was that “the Italians’ steam is their sun,”²⁵ as the industrialist Richard Cobden told Massimo d’Azeglio in 1847. During the debate on the commercial treaty with France of 1863, the deputy Carlo de Cesare explained to the chamber his free-trade choice by noting that “the climate, the air, the sun, the countryside of Italy will never permit us to become eminently industrial like the English and the French. One struggles in vain against the laws of nature.”²⁶ The pre-eminence of “natural” social relationships, deemed so because of their bond to the earth, led several representatives of the *Destra* to posit a sort of “agrarian fatalism” as one of the “laws of nature.”

When the first serious difficulties appeared, coming on top of the crisis of the southern *brigantaggio*, the need for a more profound consideration became clear. Thus one observer went so far as to describe unification as a distortion of the laws of history and geography and to observe, as did the southern liberal Giustino Fortunato, that the new country had a cumulative “lag of several centuries vis-à-vis other civilized nations.”²⁷ Once the problem of Italy’s “lag” or backwardness was posed in these terms, a small minority began the search for its causes, and the means to attack it.

A “Too-Early” Comer

Among the paradoxes of Italian history, one of the most singular is that the country, generally considered as a “late comer,” is in truth a “too-early comer,” if one can put it that way. The decline and then the decadence of the peninsula after the Renaissance are in direct relationship to the precocity of its development: too much commerce, too much production, too much wealth, and cities that were too large for the economic, political, or military conditions of the era.⁸

Without wading into the debate on the causes of Italian decadence, let us briefly consider a few points that may illuminate the political factors in contemporary Italy and of the social psychologies behind them.

It is necessary first to set aside a few simplifications. While the conditions for the decadence of the richest Italian cities were present by the end of the fourteenth century, it would be inexact to suggest that the Italian economy of the Renaissance was decadent. At the end of the fifteenth century, for example, Florentine banks kept capital reserves two to three times what the bankers Peruzzi and Bardi used in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. More significantly, as the economics historian Vera Zamagni states, at the end of the seventeenth century, Bologna was the most highly industrialized city in Europe.⁹ The decline thus stretched out over a very long period, and it was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that we can really speak of decadence.

Thus the prevailing notion that the great geographical discoveries of the late fifteenth century constituted the direct and immediate cause of Italian decline must be considered with caution. They doubtless catalyzed—but did not provoke—a process rooted in developments at least a century earlier. When one considers the reasons for decline in their entirety, both economic and political, it becomes clear that many of them are linked to “excess” growth, that is, a physiological defect of capitalism that Italian development highlighted for the first time in history: overproduction.

Among the causes of Italian weakening, Vera Zamagni cites above all the accumulation in a few hands of the wealth engendered by prosperity.¹⁰ This accumulation was due to several causes, starting with the substantial stability of an internal market that, as the misery of the masses persisted, offered few prospects for enlargement outside those guaranteed by the rich merchants, bankers, aristocrats, and princes of the Church, ever more refined and demanding. Then, the increasingly limited dimensions of the world market on the one hand and of technological capacities on the other probably made it difficult to contemplate major investments that would render productivity more extensive or intensive, and this further encouraged the tendency toward what we now would call nonessential consumption.

According to Maurice Aymard, the technological deficit also contributed to inflexibility in different sectors of production. This was true notably in the countryside, in the face of increased demand provoked, again, by growth. Supply shortages pushed up wheat prices, in turn leading to increased salaries for manufacturing jobs, and consequently, a transfer of capital into agriculture, where development potential could be realized only slowly.¹¹

Finally, we must not forget the rigidity of corporations, which tend to perpetuate means of production and levels of remuneration even when they are no longer appropriate.

The “corporations of artisans and tradesmen” began appearing in the second half of the twelfth century, at first simply as associations for defense and mutual assistance; but later, they rapidly became a necessity of economic life in towns and cities, the inevitable consequence of the closed nature of communal markets. The proliferation of autonomous communes—born in just a few decades on the bases of the old Roman cities—had the corollary effect of producing a complete division of work between country and city. Thus each commune, needing to establish a vital relationship with the surrounding countryside, found itself in a state of near-constant hostility, open or latent, with the neighboring commune, typically thirty to forty kilometers distant. In these conditions, the city and the countryside had no choice but to preserve at all costs their mutually indispensable economies. Toward that end, they created mechanisms to regulate, limit, or prevent free competition within the commune. Clearly this artificial equilibrium—which allowed the artisan or small merchant to forecast the precise quantity of merchandise that he would be certain to sell to his restricted and guaranteed clientele—could not be maintained in an era when certain cities had reached far higher levels of development. It was at that moment, in the second phase of the communal age, particularly between the second half of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth, that corporations became major impediments to growth, a key cause of the decline of certain regions to the profit of others with more flexible and lower-cost labor forces.¹²

At this stage of economic and social evolution, the potential offered by the organization of the state began manifesting its clear superiority over the cities: the internal monopoly guaranteed by communal organization was overwhelmed by this newer form of organization that could regulate, protect, and encourage commerce both internally and externally. That gave rise, in effect, to converging movements of the commercial bourgeoisie toward the absolute state (helping it extend the means of communication and defend against the nobility and competitors), and of the absolute state toward the commercial bourgeoisie (furnishing it, through taxes and credit, with the means to finance its administration and its wars).

This tendency toward the formation of national states (as they would be called much later) took shape at a time when the decline of the Italian states had already reached a relatively advanced stage. But the new economic problems alone do not sufficiently explain this missed rendezvous that, in the final analysis, would prove fatal for Italian development.

When the Europe of the fifteenth century—this “hodge-podge of petty kingdoms and principalities, marcher lordships and city-states,”¹³ as Paul Kennedy describes it—began witnessing the formation of the first states of a certain size, the Italian cities, which had developed far beyond the limits of the old, small communes, arose as a final insuperable obstacle preventing the constitution of an absolute Italian state. The great modern monarchies, on the other hand, had the good fortune not to encounter, on their paths toward unification, any serious

urban obstacle.¹⁴ It is not by chance that the south, where urban civilization was much less developed, had been the only region on the peninsula to unify, for better or for worse.

Of course, other factors contributed to this outcome: demographic movements, growth in external trade, the expansion of the monetary economy, the appearance of new competitors in central and southern Europe as well as in Mediterranean trade, the threat presented by Turkish advances, and finally, geographic discoveries, although their real effects would become clear only much later.

But if one wanted to synthesize this abortive process, one could say that each of the five city-regions that then dominated on the peninsula—Milan, Florence, Rome, Venice, and Naples—was too strong to allow one of its rivals to impose hegemony on it and too “weak” to succeed in imposing it. Thus began a period characterized by a long series of debilitating wars, with frequent appeals to foreign powers and the progressive deferment of any hope of being able to manage the creation of a central power or, at a minimum, to reform a fragmented market. These initial characteristics marked the history of the peninsula so profoundly that they would remain present even after unification.