Talking Points

Liberal Italy: The Midwife of Fascism, or a Much-Maligned State?

F.G. Stapleton defends the record of Italian governments from 1861 to 1914.

The Debate
For students of Italian history, the period of liberalism between 1870 and 1922 is all too often an unfrequented backwater. It is glanced at, if at all, as a topic that either ends the glorious period of Italian unification or, alternatively, prepares the way for the coming of the Fascists. It is a thin and unappetising filling between the far more important ends of an Italian historical sandwich. It was the tragic failure to the high hopes of the Risorgimento, and also the obvious causal factor behind the emergence of Fascism. Marxists like Antonio Gramsci have condemned the regime as toothless, corrupt, self-seeking and illegitimate. But are such viewpoints accurate and historically fair? Some historians have challenged the notion of a doom-laden state that spent over half a century awaiting its own inevitable demise. For Trevelyan in 1910, it was the remarkable apotheosis of nineteenth-century liberal-inspired nationalism. Pertinently, Denis Mack Smith and Michael Clark have asked what the regime could have done better, given its problematic inheritance.

What nails hold down the coffin lid of Italian Liberalism and are they secure?

Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928). He was Italian Prime Minister five times between 1892 and 1921, and yet his achievements have seldom been recognised.
Italy’s king was renamed Victor Emmanuel II, despite the fact that this was literally true only for Piedmont, and his dynasty monopolised the Italian throne.

Italian dead after the disastrous battle of Caporetto on the Isonzo Front, October 1917.

Crispi reached for the ‘Transformismo comfort blanket’. Its constitutional elasticity was truly impressive.

The Liberal Economy – A Curate’s Egg?
Detractors often point to the Italian economy over this 50-year span as proof of failure. Agriculture is characterised as backward and depressed, and industrial development as taking place only in the northern provinces of Liguaria, Piedmont and Lombardy. This failure was reflected in the mass migration of Italians to the Americas. In 1879, 20,000 Italians left; by 1900, the figure had escalated to 150,000 per annum. In 1900-1914, 1.5 million emigrated, almost three-quarters of them from the south. Indeed the economic disparity between north and south throughout this period has been offered as the greatest failure of liberalism. These points are well made and valid. Yet all too often the economic successes of the regime have been completely forgotten.

Let us first look at agriculture. In the 1880s and 1890s modernisation of agricultural production was encouraged and financed in regions like the Po valley. Between 1873 and 1913 wheat production doubled. Landscapes dotted with thousands of hectares previously uncultivated were put under the plough. Irrigation schemes, diversification programmes and mechanisation were all subsidised.
This poster associated youth and health with Mussolini’s regime. Such Fascist propaganda has often cast the liberal regime in an unduly unfavourable light.

by government. The question, therefore, is why did such programmes falter in the south? Firstly, the old feudal power structures had remained strong there. The Latifundia were influential, and even when land reform proposals were passed, as in 1906 and 1907, they used their local hierarchical networks to dilute and distort the original proposals. Secondly, the peasant population of the south largely remained conservative in outlook and suspicious of ‘northern directed’ reforms.

When one looks at industry, there can be no doubt that the regime achieved some marked successes. As early as 1870, the government began to invest in infrastructure and communications. Countless roads were reconstructed (or, in the case of the south, built for the first time). Between 1870 and 1883, 21,000 kilometres of roads were constructed, a great feat. Yet, whilst the building of the Autostrade under Mussolini was heralded as proof of Fascist economic and organisational competence, this success is quite forgotten. The spread of the railways was no less impressive (from 2,404 kilometres in 1868 to 16,429 kilometres in 1930).

The Liberal regime was equally well aware of the need to develop an iron and steel industry - the bedrock of primary industrialisation. In 1884 at Terri a state-owned steel plant was opened. In 1880 production stood at less than 4,000 tonnes per annum; but by 1890 it had risen to 157,000 tonnes. In 1911 Italy had created a steel cartel, the IVA, one of the largest in Europe. In 1900-1914, Italy’s steel production grew at an average rate of 5.7 percent per year. Firms like Fiat, Isotta Fraschini, Lança, Ifsa, Frelli and Montecatini emerged as global companies. In 1904 the government invested heavily in the Naples area to stimulate a southern industrial renaissance and to compensate for the decline of the silk industry. To counter the problem of the peninsular mineral deficiency administrations began to develop hydro-electric power earlier than much of Europe, turning mountainous terrain into a national asset. In Bugnati’s phrases this development was ‘remarkable’. Equally impressive between 1896 and 1914, the average growth in GDP per capita in Italy was 2.1 per cent annually, compared with 0.9 per cent in Great Britain, 1.8 per cent in Germany and 2.0 per cent in France. Those who scoffed at this economic competence at the regime have been overly selective with their evidence! But what of the need to make Italy? Why was religion not used as a coagulant to incite Italian homogeneity?

**Liberal Anti-Clericalism - A Wasted National Crusade?**

The familiar argument is that the state was anti-clerical from its commencement, taking the Papal States in 1860 and Rome in 1871. Pius IX was made a prisoner in the Vatican, benefit of revenues and compromised in his claims of being an independent prince who could speak for the universal Catholic Church. From 1870 salt was rubbed into the wounds by an array of anti-clerical legislation. The papal response was to demand the withdrawal of practising Catholics from politics. Hence, the very legitimacy of the state was denied.

But this overview is peculiarly simplistic. Certainly Church and State were not in a permanent ideological political arm-lock between 1876 and 1914. As in France and Germany, anti-clericalism in Italy was of the ‘bital variety’: it ebbed and flowed, depending on factors ranging from the personalities of individual pontiffs to tensions prevailing within domestic policy. For example, the state would negotiate on an equal footing with Pius IX (1846-1878), who saw the emerging liberal democracies as the ‘pall bearers of papal independence’ and reacted with a programme of ideological retreatment, ranging from the Syllabus of Errors in 1864 to the doctrine of Papal Infallibility in 1870. However, the ‘Law of Guarantees’ (1871) genuinely tried to negotiate a compromise with the Vatican. It guaranteed papal spiritual influence, left the papacy immune from arrest and taxation, accepted the existence of a fully equipped vatican diplomatic corps, gave Pius IX compensation for the loss of Roman and papal territory (750 million lire per annum) and accepted the compromise outright. The Italian State, once abruptly spurned, inevitably chose a more anti-clerical approach. When the Church decreed Catholic non-participation in national elections, the state responded with intermittent and, certainly at times, petty legislation. For 20 years the state and Church vied for the loyalty of Italian Catholics. The Church created the Opere del Congresso in 1874 to sponsor Church centred national institutions.

Crissi in 1890 and di Rudini in 1897 attempted to dilute these bodies’ influence by legislation. Yet these attacks were never as zealously applied as they had been in the French Third Republic or in Germany during the Kulturkampf. It was not lost on many liberal politicians that Catholic charitable organisations often ‘subsidised’ state taxation for welfare services. Furthermore, by the 1890s tensions between the two had begun to wane. In 1891 Leo XIII warned the Church to recognise the threat from a ‘atheistic socialism’. Concerns that the raw anger reflected by Pius IX began to mutate into the submariner emotions of diplomatic frostiness. By the turn of the century, then, the conflict had commenced. The early 1900s saw the rapprochement of Church and state. In 1904 Pius X (1903-1914) urged Catholics to vote to halt the spread of socialism, dissolved the Opera institutions a year later, and in 1909 gave permission for Catholics to stand as candidates in around 150 constituencies. By 1911 Catholics were part of governing coalitions in cities like Turin, Bologna, Florence and Venice. It would be wrong to say that, by 1914, the Church and state were united and one. They were not ready for marriage or even engagement, but they were being increasingly seen out in each other’s company. In this sense, the foundations of the Lateran treaties began well before 1922. But if the demise of the liberal state was not to be found on the domestic front, it must instead lie on the foreign.

**Foreign Policy - an Achilles’ Heel?**

From the moment of its birth, the new united Italy struggled to achieve Great Power status. Comparisons between it and the newly united Germany clearly reflected the limitations of international Italian influence. The Bismarckian German State moulded the European political scene to the advantage of German interests; and it was unrealistic of the radical Italian right to ask why Italy did not do the same.

By the latter quarter of the 19th century the greatness of a power was judged by:

- The effectiveness of its armed forces
- The size of the exportable imperial possessions opened to it
- The security of its sovereignty guaranteed by international defensive alliances.

Not surprisingly, Italy’s immediate aim was to secure her sovereignty by defensive alliances. Foreign intervention had been a major factor in keeping Italy weak for centuries, and so from 1870 to 1880 the state concentrated on securing benevolent neutrality from its neighbours. But Italy harboured antagonism to France and when she turned Tunisia (a zone of Italian influence) into a Protectorate in April-May 1881, Bismarck was quick to offer Italy a place in the Triple Alliance. The alliance was designed to keep France isolated in Europe, with north-eastern expansion effectively blocked, Italian governments shifted their gaze to further horizons. When Britain reneged on her original plan to jointly occupy Egypt in 1882, Italy was encouraged to take Massawa in Eritrea. Under Crispi, the Italian possessions were formally recognised as Italian Eritrea in 1890. But when Crispi tried to incorporate prosperous Ethiopia within Italian Somaliland in 1896, Italy succumbed to superior strategy and greater numbers. The Ethiopians crushed the Italian army at Adowa. For well over a decade Italy would not again get enmeshed in African expansionism.

Given Giolitti’s artful touch when it came to risk-taking, his instigation of the Libyan campaign of 1911 seems odd. But in fact circumstances began to conspire and effectively force his hand. The threat to Tripoli by France, the vocal encouragement of the right, the exaggerated promise of raw materials and markets, the desire of the Catholic church to convert, and the timely diversion of Europe by the Second Moroccan Crisis, all convinced Giolitti that an invasion of Libya was propitious. Thus 100,000 troops were sent to subdue 35,000 Arabs. By the end of 1912 the Treaties of Lousanne and Ouchy confirmed Libya as an Italian possession, but this apparent success had enormous costs. The cost of the war (1,300 million lire) meant heavier taxation, 1,500 were
killed in action, 1,900 died of disease and 4,000 were wounded. Moreover the indigenous Arab population continued to fight the Italian occupation, putting such a strain on the Italians that the progress of the belle epoch and the prestige of the Italian army were threatened. The simple lesson to be drawn was that, at all costs, neutrality was the best policy for Italy.

1914 AND BEYOND – A STATE OF UNDEVELOPED POTENTIAL

War had taken its toll, but by 1914 Italy was not on course for revolution. Giolitti gave way to Antonio Salandra in March 1914, but he continued the Giolittian system. The far right were noisy but did not threaten the status quo, and the Socialist leaders Turati and Bissolati promoted reform rather than revolution. Italians had no major demands for federalism, as in neighbouring Austria-Hungary, nor did its armed forces dictate foreign policy decision-making, as in Imperial Germany. The general strike was beginning to be a feature of Italian political life, but so it was too in France and, to a lesser extent, in Britain.

Italy did not actively contribute to the tension that led to the outbreak of World War one, and she sensibly stood back and rejected entry in 1914 on the grounds that the terms of the Triple Alliance were purely defensive. Italy could therefore remain neutral with honour intact.

Italy’s tragedy was that she changed her mind. The Central powers and the Allies both made diplomatic overtures, with promises of the gaining of the irredentist territory, colonies and war reparations. The Allies promised the most, with the 1915 Treaty of London, and Salandra took his country to war against Austria in May 1915 and Germany in August 1916.

The war predictably undermined confidence in the liberal state. The armed forces fought on one of the worst fronts of the conflict and conditions were deplorable. Salandra was replaced by Bissolati in June 1916, and he in turn gave way to Orlando in October 1917. The war polarised Italian society as nothing before it. Post-war Prime Ministers Nitti, Giolitti, Bonomi and Facta attempted to glue back together the Transformismo political agenda. But war cultivated the politics of the extreme – militant Bolshevism-inspired socialism on the left and reactionary anti-democratic embryonic fascism on the right. The liberal establishment seemed to be merely combing the hair of a constitutional bedridden invalid, not knowing how to induce effective recovery.

The great challenge of any democratic system is to have its record publicly criticised by a free press promoting its own agenda, amidst the ever-shifting allegiances of parliamentary representatives and their electorates. In retrospect the Liberal State never had the Fascist advantage of ‘creative perception over historical reality’. The trains in Fascist Italy almost assuredly did not run any more efficiently than under the Liberal State – but the myth lives on! The Liberal period maintained legal unity, created the primary transport and industrial infrastructure, transformed the condition of pre-unify rampant illiteracy, instigated a national civil service, promoted universal education, modernised agriculture, fashioned a car industry, maintained internal order, eclipsed extremist politics, produced a greater economic growth rate than the British Empire, and, finally, even wooed an implacably intransigent papacy into a pre-war dialogue with the State. These achievements were real, not requiring the application of exaggerated merit.

An historiographical obsession over ‘how unified was Italy’ has led too many into a negative determinist cul de sac. Indeed to borrow contemporary political journalistic parlance, it is not so much that Liberal Italy has had insufficient historical spin, but that it has been so often, and so unjustly, spun against.

TIMELINE

1870 Rome taken: Unification of Italy complete.
1871 Pope rejects Italian state. Depretis Prime Minister. Primary education compulsory.
1892 Banca Romana Scandal.
1896 Abyssinian War.
1898 Rural/Urban unrest.
1903 Giolitti Prime Minister.
1911/12 Libyan War.
1912 Universal manhood suffrage.
1915 Italy enters World War I.
1917 Italians defeated at Caporetto.
1918 Allied Victory.
1919 Italy disappointed by Treaty of Versailles.
1922 Mussolini appointed Prime Minister.

FURTHER READING

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