

## **Italy: The Temptation of Revisionism**

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**As Italy celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its unification, revisionist historians radically challenged the standard history of unification and its consequences. This offensive, backed by certain politicians, spared none of the important moments of Italian history. Might this be the sign of a more far-reaching crisis in the national narrative?**

In 2011 Italy not only endured the protracted agony of Berlusconiism and the widening “spread” between its treasury bonds and those of Germany but also celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its unification. That Italy is an unfinished nation is hardly news. For twenty years the Italian past has figured in the battle for political supremacy between left and right, and for fifty years the study of history has been central to the preparation of left-wing leaders. Since the mid-1990s, however, the battle of ideas seems to have shifted in favor of the center-right and its challenge to the cultural hegemony of the left. The coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi reaped the benefits of thirty years of “mass dis-education,” which it promoted through its control of state and media institutions.<sup>1</sup>

These Italian historical disputes were shaped in part by two phenomena that exist in many other countries as well: a durable conservative revolution and a profound change in the status of

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<sup>1</sup> E. Scalfari, “Il bunga bunga che segna la fine di un regno,” *La Repubblica*, October 31, 2010.

knowledge. There is in fact nothing new about revisionist historiography. For French readers, the term “revisionism” may be associated with Holocaust negationism, but revisionism is a normal and permanent process of historiographic evolution, a natural consequence of scientific criticism of historical sources. In Italy, revisionism was initially associated with groups linked to the extreme right but later invoked by all sorts of movements whose only common trait was their opposition to the “official history” allegedly promoted by the intellectual and political “establishment.”

### **Unmentionable Unity**

*Terroni*, a book by journalist Pino Aprile, was one of Italy’s best-selling works of 2010, with some 250,000 copies sold. The work focused on “everything that was done to ensure that the Italians of southern Italy would become southerners,” that is, backward and despised second-class citizens. The word *terrone*, “dirt eater,” is a pejorative term that northern and central Italians have used since the 1960s to describe migrants fleeing the endemic poverty of the South. The central thesis of the book is that the structural backwardness of the South relative to the North “exists not *in spite of* Italian unification but as a result of it and has endured because it is the motor of the northern economy.” The ancient Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which was “until the aggression [of 1860] one of the most industrialized regions of the world,” was allegedly “unified by force, stripped of its wealth, and subjugated in order to allow the development of the North.” The conquest and systematic pillage of this region were comparable in barbarity, the author argues, to the Nazi occupation, the Balkan wars, and Stalinist terror. In other words, “the inferiority of the South, which was a product of massacres, pillaging, and unjust laws,” was in fact “the North’s greatest achievement.”<sup>2</sup>

Was the South the victim of a unification led by and for the North? The thesis is hardly new. Early in the twentieth century the journalist and economist Francesco Saverio Nitti marshaled a large body of statistical evidence to evaluate the economic potential of the Mezzogiorno prior to unification and to demonstrate that the development of the North after

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<sup>2</sup> P. Aprile, *Terroni : tutto quello che è stato fatto perchè gli italiani del Sud diventassero meridionali*, Milan, Piemme, 2010.

unification was due in large part to sacrifices imposed on the South. Despite his professions of patriotic faith, Nitti's views were vehemently criticized, as were those of his friend and "compatriot" Giustino Fortunato (both men were natives of Basilicata). In a letter to Emilio Gentile, Fortunato wrote that Italian unity, "which was supposed to lead to our moral redemption, [...] unfortunately led to economic ruin instead."<sup>3</sup> In the *Prison Notebooks* (composed between 1929 and 1935 but not published until after World War II), Antonio Gramsci compared the North to "an octopus that fed on the South" and asserted that its "economic and industrial growth was directly proportional to the impoverishment of the southern economy and agriculture."<sup>4</sup> Such attitudes, often categorized as "*meridionalismo*," went out of fashion in the late 1960s owing to the "Italian miracle," which allowed the Mezzogiorno to catch up to a certain extent with the rest of Italy socially and economically. Over the past twenty years, however, the criticisms have returned and acquired a new polemical edge.

To see this, it will suffice to mention a few of the books published in connection with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of unification but in a spirit of counter-celebration: *The Ravages of Unification, 1861-2011*,<sup>5</sup> *Divided Unity, 1861-2011: The Real Italy Speaks Out*,<sup>6</sup> and *With the Benefit of Hindsight: Looking Back on 150 Years of Italian Unification*.<sup>7</sup> Apparently, the time had come to rehabilitate the losers and "victims" of unification: the soldiers of the king of the Two Sicilies,<sup>8</sup> peasants and bandits who rebelled against the unified state,<sup>9</sup> the Church,<sup>10</sup> and

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<sup>3</sup> G. Fortunato, *Carteggio 1865-1911*, Bari, Laterza, 1978, p. 64-65.

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Il Risorgimento*, Rome, Editore Riuniti, 1979, p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> S. Lanza et G. De Crescenzo (dir.), *Malaunità : 1861-2011 centocinquant'anni portati male*, Naples, Spaziocreativo, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> *L'Unità divisa : 1861-2011: parla l'Italia reale*, Rimini, Il Cerchio, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> *Il senno di poi : l'unità d'Italia vista 150 anni dopo*, Rimini, Il Cerchio, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> G. Di Fiore, *I vinti del Risorgimento: storia e storie di chi combatté per i Borbone di Napoli*, Turin, UTET, 2004; G. De Antonellis, *Non mi arrendo : da Gaeta a Civitella l'eroica difesa del Regno delle Due Sicilie*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2001; F. Izzo, *I Lager dei Savoia : storia infame del Risorgimento nei campi di concentramento per meridionali*, Naples, Controcorrente, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> On this theme, too many works have been published to cite them. Among the most widely read are G.B. Guerri, *Il sangue del Sud : antistoria del Risorgimento e del brigantaggio*, Milan, Mondadori, 2010; V. Romano, *Brigantessa : donne guerrigliere contro la conquista del Sud (1860-1870)*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2007; S. Scarpino, *La guerra cafona : il brigantaggio meridionale contro lo Stato unitario*, Milan, Boringhieri, 2005; F. D'Amore, *Viva Francesco II, morte a Vittorio Emanuele! : insorgenze popolari e briganti in Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise durante la conquista del Sud, 1860-1861*, Naples,

residents of the South generally. Very few writers would have dared to defend the Bourbons of Naples and their regime in 1961, but today the Bourbons are described as model sovereigns, while their regime is celebrated as a sort of lost paradise.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, criticism of the leading figures of the *Risorgimento* has been unsparing, starting with Giuseppe Garibaldi and his henchmen, described as “predators of the South.”<sup>12</sup>

The temptation to rewrite history is not unique to a South that feels mistreated by history. Was unification a bonanza for the North? Not at all, argues Lorenzo del Boca in a book that is the mirror image of Aprile’s and which is entitled *Polentoni* (“polenta eaters,” a term used by southerners to refer to northerners). Or at any rate, not a bonanza for the real North, the North “of farms and factories,” which was betrayed by “a few hundred bourgeois in control of the state, who aspired to impose a more extensive government.” According to del Boca, the true North is still paying the price of an artificial and hasty unification.<sup>13</sup> Hence northerners have little reason to be happy about a unification that saddled them with both a centralized state and the burden of the South. They, too, are among the “losers” in the *Risorgimento*. This view has been one of the building blocks of the secessionist movement spearheaded by the Northern League and its leader Umberto Bossi, whom del Boca describes as one of “the most clairvoyant” of Italian politicians. Furthermore, while the Catholic Church seems to have come to terms with unification, which stripped the papacy of its temporal power and secularized the state,<sup>14</sup> many Italian Catholics still

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Controcorrente, 2004; F.M. Agnoli (ed.), *Dossier brigantaggio : viaggio tra i ribelli al borghesismo e alla modernità*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> H. de Sauclières, *Il risorgimento contro la chiesa e il Sud : intrighi, crimini e menzogne dei Piemontesi*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, G. Rinaldi (ed.), *Il Regno delle Due Sicilie : tutta la verità*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2001. And in the same spirit : *L’età di Re Ferdinando : 1830-1859*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2006; *Le Due Sicilie nella Restaurazione*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> L. Salera, *Garibaldi, Fauché e i predatori del regno del Sud : la vera storia dei piroscafi Piemonte e Lombardo nella spedizione dei Mille*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2006; A. Pellicciari, *I panni sporchi dei Mille : l’invasione del Regno delle due Sicilie nelle testimonianze di Giuseppe la Farina, Carlo Persano e Pier Carlo Boggio*, Rome, Liberal, 2003; G. Rinaldi, *Garibaldi : l’avventuriero, il massone, l’opportunist*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> L. Del Boca, *Polentoni : come e perchè il nord è stato tradito*, Milan, Piemme, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, at the 63<sup>rd</sup> National Assembly of Bishops in May 2011, Mgr Angelo Bagnasco, the president of the Confederation of Italian Bishops, said that “we will never stop repeating that national unity is a fundamental value and an achievement that we cannot renounce.” See [http://www.chiesacattolica.it/pls/cci\\_new\\_v3/cciv4\\_doc.edit\\_documento?p\\_id=15377](http://www.chiesacattolica.it/pls/cci_new_v3/cciv4_doc.edit_documento?p_id=15377).

look upon the construction of a unified Italy as a war machine directed against the Church and a repudiation of Italy's deeply Catholic heritage.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond their differences, all the critics of unification believe that there is an “official” history of the nineteenth century that is in need of systematic revision because it is a product of the dominant culture imposed by the winners and perpetuated by their successors. That is why they all claim to be “revisionists,” as if appealing an unjust verdict. Their aim is nothing less than to “deny the negation,”<sup>16</sup> to destroy “the patriotic lie,”<sup>17</sup> to combat “the manipulation of history,”<sup>18</sup> and to reveal “the forbidden history”<sup>19</sup> by elaborating a “counter-history.”<sup>20</sup> Today, it is academic historians who find themselves in the dock, accused of abandoning their critical mission and ignoring the journalists, lawyers, physicians, teachers, and scholars who had the courage to brave the prevailing *doxa* and speak out.

For Lorenzo del Boca, “the losers of the nineteenth century—southerners, outlaws, proletarians, the Church—stood up and spoke out. What had not been possible for a hundred years was achieved in the past twenty thanks to ever more abundant and thorough reporting and research, which undermined the traditional vulgate. But the official [*sic*] historiography was incapable of incorporating the revisionist theses alongside traditional ideas, so that the distance between the intelligentsia and ordinary people gradually widened to the point where the gulf is today almost unbreachable.”<sup>21</sup> This is a facile position: a portion of the public is clearly receptive to “inconvenient truths” and conspiracy theories of one sort or another. It is not just a question of a market for these ideas, however: these recurrent accusations reflect the mentality of a

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<sup>15</sup> A. Pellicciari, *Risorgimento da riscrivere. Liberali & massoni contro la Chiesa*, Milan, Ares, 1998; *Risorgimento anticattolico: la persecuzione della Chiesa nelle Memorie di Giacomo Margotti*, Casale Monferrato, Piemme, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> N. Zitara, *Negare la negazione*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> G. Lentini, *La bugia risorgimentale: il Risorgimento italiano dalla parte degli sconfitti*, Rimini, Il Cerchio, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> L. Salera, *La storia manipolata 1860-1861: documenti e testimonianze*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> *La storia proibita: quando i piemontesi invasero il Sud*, Naples, Controcorrente, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> G. Di Fiore, *Controstoria dell'unità d'Italia. Fatti e misfatti del Risorgimento*, Milan, Rizzoli, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> L. Del Boca, *Polentoni*, cit., p. 10.

subculture with its own publicity networks, which sees the propagation of “its own truth” as a war of position.

Is it true that for 150 years academic historians have been stuck in the rut of a liberal-patriotic view of the *Risorgimento*? Were they conformists? Was it more lucrative to rehearse conventional wisdom? Were they incompetent? The muckrakers would have us believe all of these things. But what sources do the heralds of the hidden history of the *Risorgimento* rely on? For these latter-day positivists, it is enough to produce new facts and documents. To enter the archives is proof of one’s good faith. In fact, they have discovered little that is new, but that is not the only flaw in their case. Their main error is the failure to recognize that historical truth rests on criticism of the sources. It is one thing to subject the legend of the *Risorgimento* to critical examination but quite another to propose the Italian states of that era as paragons of good government on the basis of cherry-picked evidence. The Bourbon kingdom in Naples did indeed build the first railroad in Italy: inaugurated in 1839, it linked the capital, Naples, to the suburb of Portici. But this railroad was only 8 km long and intended almost exclusively for the use of the royal family. In 1860, moreover, the largest state on the peninsula had only 124 km of rail lines, compared with 308 in Tuscany and 866 in Cavour’s Piedmont. Indeed, much of the territory (including Sicily) was completely without railroads. Many other points are open to dispute, but Lorenzo del Boca is correct when he speaks of two irreconcilable worlds. The work of the revisionists quite simply has “nothing in common with the writing of history, with scientific research, or with the need of every investigator to put together the pieces of the puzzle in such a way as to understand what really happened in the past.”<sup>22</sup>

### **A Revisionist Offensive**

The *Risorgimento* and its historians were not the only targets of revisionist attack. In 2009, the historian Angelo del Boca wrote in the introduction to a volume of essays on the phenomenon that “for a decade, the political use of history, which has nothing to do with

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<sup>22</sup> « *Manifesto sul revisionismo* », published in *La Stampa*, Sept. 20, 2000, and signed by such well-known historians as Giuseppe Galasso, Massimo L. Salvadori, Nicola Tranfaglia, Maurizio Viroli, Roberto Balzani, Sauro Mattarelli, Luigi Mascilli Migliorini, Gerardo Marotta, Antonio Gargano, and Maurizio Ridolfi.

historiographic research, has touched on all the major questions of [Italian] national history: from the *Risorgimento* to the colonial conquests, from the fascist era to the figure of Mussolini, from the invasion of the Balkans to relations with the Vatican, from the role of communism to racist laws and the persecution of Jews, from the Resistance to the Salò Republic, from the postwar period to the birth of the Republic.”<sup>23</sup> Not even the revolutionary and republican experiences of the period 1796-1799 were exempt from the debunking spirit.<sup>24</sup>

Apparently, everyone who rejected the unified republican state and who saw themselves as losers in the historical process from which it emerged rallied to the revisionist flag: traditionalist monarchists; old and new champions of regional identities; fundamentalist Catholics hostile to secularization and “cultural relativism”; and nostalgic supporters of the fascist regime and its colonial ventures. The simultaneity of these attacks was of course not a coincidence: although there is no proof of a concerted offensive, it is difficult to ignore the links between one form of revisionism and another. The whole long gestation of the modern Italian state and society became the target of a polemical literature whose method was invariably to exhume some “truth” ostensibly hidden by the dominant (left-wing) culture. History was rewritten in order to disqualify the progressive forces that had allegedly set Italy’s course from the time of the French Revolution to the era of Garibaldi and, ultimately, the heyday of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Thus, for example, the *Risorgimento* was presented as a “Jacobin” plot led by a small number of Freemasons and Protestants with foreign support and intended to undermine Italy’s fundamentally Catholic character. The “sister republics” imposed by the revolutionary armies had the same purpose. And fascism, we are told, was a product of the struggle against communism, while the Resistance was not so much a war of liberation as a form of class warfare if not a fifth column serving foreign interests.

The revisionist offensive was in part the product of a reactionary ideology that has been a constant if marginal presence in the postwar Italian political landscape. Former fascists, some

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<sup>23</sup> A. Del Boca, “Introduzione,” in Angelo Del Boca, ed., *La storia negata: il revisionismo e il suo uso politico*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2010, p. 9-38, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> M. Cattaneo, “Insorgenze controrivoluzionarie e antinapoleoniche in Italia (1796-1814). Presunti complotti e sedicenti storici,” *Passato e Presente*, vol. 26, 74, 2008, pp. 81-107.

repentant, some not, have been publishing their memoirs since 1945. The fact that the postwar purge in Italy was relatively mild was a factor in the genesis of this literature. To be sure, recent historical work has shown that 10 to 15,000 people were killed in Italy after the Liberation, compared with 10,000 in the French purges. By June 1946, however, the “Togliatti amnesty” (named for Italian justice minister and Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti) allowed most fascists to escape unscathed. The neofascist Italian Social Movement (MSI) was founded on December 26, 1946, and in the 1948 elections sent six deputies to parliament. Despite this lenient treatment, which allowed former fascists and neofascists to return quickly to political and social life, many of them spent the subsequent decades attempting to rewrite history in two ways: first, they sought to show that fascism was not all negative and that the fascist leader Mussolini was a good man, and second, that defeated fascists were the victims of barbaric treatment at the hands of communists.

In segments of the Italian monarchist right, moreover, a legitimist, traditionalist, and regionalist sensibility also lived on. It found quiet expression in the work of Carlo Alianello (1901-1981), the author of an important literary trilogy: *L'Alfiere* (1942), *Soldati del Re* (1952), and *L'Eredità della priora* (1963). The title *L'Alfiere* was borrowed by a “Neapolitan traditionalist publication” founded in 1960 by Silvio Vitale (1928-2005), a member of the MSI, who introduced Italy to the work of Francisco Elias de Tejada, a Spanish traditionalist and philosopher of law and leader of the Carlist movement. Among writers associated with Vitale’s journal was a handful of battle-hardened young scholars, including Salvatore Ruta and Pino Rauti, both MSI activists and later members of the extreme right-wing *Ordine Nuovo*, and Gabriele Fergola (1938-2011), the author of *Antirisorgimento* (1961), which led the way for traditionalist critics inspired by the ideology of Elias de Tejada and the Hispanist Gianni Allegra, who also contributed to *L'Alfiere*. The journal also published translated excerpts of *Revolução e Contra-Revolução* (1959), the most important work of Brazilian traditionalist Plinio Correa de Olivéira, which was not published in Italy until 1977. From 1971 on, religious and political traditionalists from all over Italy gathered annually for *Incontri Tradizionalisti* in Civitella del Tronto, an important site of Bourbon resistance to the military invasion by Piedmontese forces.



For the past twenty years, the ideas of this group of writers have spread beyond a limited audience. Certain publishing houses have made a specialty of revisionist works, following the lead of *Il Cerchio* (The Circle) of Rimini and *Controcorrente* (Countercurrent) of Naples. The first work published by the latter, in 1977, was a volume of the late writings of Julius Evola, a fascist ideologue and theorist of a spiritual form of racism. Its list is primarily historical, however, and centered on the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and banditism but also touching on anti-Jacobin rebellions and World War II.<sup>25</sup> In 1993 the publisher *Il Giglio* (The Lily, after the emblem of the Bourbons) set out “to fight on behalf of the historical memory of The Two Sicilies.” Its list now comprises 22 works of history.<sup>26</sup> The Internet has provided an important showcase for militant groups, which have capitalized on the new technology with a dense network of Web sites and blogs. The site of the *Associazione culturale Neoborbonica* includes 10 links to pages devoted to the Two Sicilies, 7 to sites on banditism, 16 to traditionalist associations, and 2 to referenda against abortion, as well as a link to the online daily newspaper *Il Nuovo Sud*, which was founded in July 2008.<sup>27</sup> Revisionist proselytism has even affected the Italian version of Wikipedia, as can be seen in the warnings of possible “non-neutrality” that precede the entries on *Brigantaggio postunitario* (post-unification banditism), *Piemontesizzazione* (Piedmontization), and *Massacri delle foibe* (massacres of Italians by Yugoslavs in 1945-1945).

Since 1990, revisionist ideas have found an echo among politicians, who had previously kept them at arm’s length. In 1992, Italian authorities launched an operation known as *mani pulite* (“clean hands”), a series of corruption investigations that led to the implosion of the Christian Democratic and Socialist Parties, which, along with the Communist Party, had dominated Italian politics since the end of World War II. At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated a serious identity crisis in the Communist Party. The ensuing political vacuum was quickly filled by new partisan forces, some of which felt free to jettison the ideals of the *Risorgimento* and the Resistance. Among these was *Forza Italia* (“Go Italy!”), the party

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.controcorrentedizioni.it/index.php>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.editorialeilgiglio.it/articles.php?lng=it&pg=1042>

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.neoborbonici.it/portal/index.php?option=com\\_weblinks&Itemid=4](http://www.neoborbonici.it/portal/index.php?option=com_weblinks&Itemid=4)

founded by Silvio Berlusconi in 1994, who assured British journalists in September 2003 that “Mussolini never killed anyone. He sent people on vacation under house arrest.”<sup>28</sup> This was an allusion to the deportation of political opponents to isolated locations in the South, which today have become tourist destinations. Other political parties have openly attacked the Resistance: the MSI did this (although it tried to distance itself from its Mussolinian heritage by changing its name to *Alleanza Nazionale* in 1995), as did various separatist groups. As far as separatist politics was concerned, the economically more developed north led the way: in 1989, several separatist groups merged to form the Northern League. But the South soon caught up, at least in terms of the number of separatist parties.<sup>29</sup>

The influence of revisionist ideas on political discourse undeniably helped to destroy the aura that had surrounded certain key periods of Italian history. As Italy celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its unification, denouncing unity as the source of all present ills even became a popular sport among certain politicians. Raffaele Lombardo, the governor of the autonomous region of Sicily since 2008, declared in October 2010 that in his view, “Sicily ought not to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Italian unification,” because it “was an annexation pure and simple, a war waged on the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which undoubtedly yielded something but certainly not for us [Sicilians].”<sup>30</sup> The Sardinian independence party, *Partito Sardo d’Azione*, sounded the same note. Its national secretary declared that “the Sardinians have little to celebrate [in unity] on account of the many injustices and disequilibria imposed on the island by the Italian government.”<sup>31</sup> Many members of the Northern League, which formed part of the governing coalition until December 2011, ostentatiously boycotted the official anniversary ceremonies. The league’s leader, Umberto Bossi, once he was out of government, lost no time in stating that if the

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<sup>28</sup> “Berlusconi si corregge : ‘Mai difeso Mussolini,’” *La Repubblica*, Sept. 11, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> The *Lega Sud Ausonia* was founded in 1996 in Campania. In 2005, Raffaele Lombardo’s *Movimento per le Autonomie* and the *Unione Federalista Meridionale* were organized. Two years later came *Il Partito del Sud*, which was founded in Gaeta with Antonio Ciano as its leader.

<sup>30</sup> “Lombardo: ‘Unità d’Italia? non c’è nulla da festeggiare,’” *La Repubblica – sez. Palermo*, Oct. 27, 2010 [<http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2010/10/27/lombardo-unita-italia-non-nulla.html>].

<sup>31</sup> Partitu Sardu, “Italia 150: Colli (Psd’Az), partito non parteciperà a celebrazioni,” *Blog del Partito Sardo d’Azione*, 2011

[<http://www.partitosardo.eu/index.aspx?m=64&f=4&IDNews=1447&annoarchivio=&mese=>].

wars waged in northern Italy on behalf of unification were to recur, “the young people who died in them would this time join the other camp.”<sup>32</sup>

Other politicians did not hesitate to award a seal of respectability to revisionist ideas and their authors. In September 2009, for example, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi recommended that young members of his party read the work of Angela Pellicciari, well-known for her attacks on the *Risorgimento* as a Masonic, anti-religious plot, “in order to refresh their memory and correct erroneous statements about our history.”<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, Sandro Bondi, Berlusconi’s minister of culture, praised “revisionism, meaning a desire for truth,” for having “undermined histories that for fifty years relied on falsehoods and omissions.”<sup>34</sup> And the revisionist movement received more than just symbolic support from the politicians, especially at the local level. Some towns and regional assemblies financed cultural initiatives and research projects with a strong regionalist/revisionist cast and called for “revision” of history textbooks (over which regional governments exercise power).<sup>35</sup>

### **How to Use National Memory**

How are we to understand revisionism’s recent and growing success with the general public, from the hundreds of thousands of readers of *Terroni* to the thousands of “fans” of the Facebook group “*Io non festeggio 150 anni di bugie*” (“I won’t celebrate 150 years of lies”)? Clearly, revisionism resonates with the way in which some Italians view their history. Have the denizens of “the Boot” simply lost their sense of belonging to a single nation? Or perhaps they never had it? Since the early 1990s, many Italian historians and political scientists have looked at the limits of the historical process by which the Italian nation-state was formed. They sought to

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<sup>32</sup> *La Repubblica*, 29 December 2011, [http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2011/12/29/news/bossi\_insulta\_napolitano\_monti-27379323/index.html?ref=search].

<sup>33</sup> Pier Luigi Battista, “La battuta (ignorata) contro il Risorgimento,” *Il Corriere della Sera*, Sept. 14, 2009, p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> S. Bondi, “Liberiamo la cultura della politica,” *Il Corriere della Sera*, Sept. 16, 2009, http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2009/settembre/16/Liberiamo\_cultura\_dalla\_politica\_co\_9\_090916039.shtml.

<sup>35</sup> For instance, the proposal by Francesco Storace, then president of the Lazio region (November 2000), to organize a committee to rewrite contemporary high school history texts. See Turi G., “Una storia italiana,” *Passato e Presente*, vol. XXI, 59, 2003, p.p. 89-98.

identify signs of the state's chronic inability to inspire a sense of national belonging in its citizens and to consider traits of the Italian national character that might explain the absence of national consciousness. In particular, they looked at the tendency to transform civil and political conflict into a social pathology that some have proposed to call "divisiveness."<sup>36</sup> The impossibility of bringing state, nation, and society together despite the promises of the *Risorgimento* is a cliché of Italian history with a history of its own.<sup>37</sup> It should therefore be treated with caution.

In the first place, Italy is not an isolated case. It is not the only European country in which groups of postwar thinkers and activists rejected the foundations of the democratic state and championed a reactionary interpretation of recent history. Nor is it the only country to have witnessed an explosion of attitudes of this sort in the context of the social and political crisis of the 1990s, which raised the issue of the relation between the state and its citizens in acute form. Elsewhere in Europe, regional identities derived from economic, social, and cultural circumstances also flourished in opposition to national identities, and proponents of those regional identities, aspiring to become political actors, challenged existing national histories.

Second, the fragmentation of representations of the past is not as obvious as some maintain. There are lessons to be learned from the various celebrations of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of unification. According to a poll conducted by the Mannheimer Institute, 87% of Italians consider unification to have been a good thing, whereas only 11% consider it to have been a bad thing. Indeed, even Northern League voters view unification in a positive light by a substantial majority (70%). To be sure, the increase in critical attitudes among young people below the age

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<sup>36</sup> The literature is vast. Among other works, see G.E. Rusconi, *Se cessiamo di essere una nazione: tra etnodemocrazie regionali e cittadinanza europea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993; E. Galli della Loggia, *La morte della patria: la crisi dell'idea di nazione tra Resistenza, antifascismo e Repubblica*, Bari, Laterza, 1996; G. Galasso, *Italia nazione difficile: contributo alla storia politica e culturale dell'Italia unita*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1994; N. Bobbio, R. De Felice and G.E. Rusconi, *Italiani, amici nemici*, Rome, Donzelli, 1996; L. Di Nucci and E. Galli della Loggia, eds., *Due nazioni: legittimazione e delegittimazione nella storia dell'Italia contemporanea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2003; M. Graziano, *Italia senza nazione?: Geopolitica di una identità difficile*, Rome, Donzelli, 2007; E. Gentile., *Né Stato né Nazione: Italiani senza meta*, Bari, Laterza, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> G. Pécout, "L'Italie est-elle née et a-t-elle grandi contre les Italiens?," *Vingtième siècle*, vol. 100, 4, 2008, pp. 97-101.

of 24 is more worrisome: nearly one in five consider unification to have been a mistake. Among the reasons for discontent, localism is paramount: 32% of those polled regretted the fact that unification had led to a loss of regional traditions, while 2 out of 3 believe that it is preferable today to think of the European Union rather than national unity.<sup>38</sup> What is in crisis is therefore a unitary vision of history in which the nation stood as the paramount reference point.

Everywhere, the fragmentation of representations of the past has cleared the way for the celebration of diverse memories and the recognition of previously neglected victims in the national saga. In this respect, Italy, like other western nations, has witnessed the emergence of various forms of “victims’ memory.” Victims have sought symbolic as well as material compensation for crimes committed in the past, and they have been able to count on the sympathy of the public and the attentive eye of any number of politicians and political groups. This is terrain favorable to revisionists: as we have seen, they often rely on the apologetic or polemical writings of various “losers” in Italian history (clergy and Bourbons in the nineteenth century, fascists in the twentieth). For example, the journalist Giampaolo Pansa wrote a much-celebrated book dedicated to the “blood of the vanquished” in which he recounted the suffering of victims of “the reds” in the period 1945-47.<sup>39</sup> The emotional charge of these individual stories tends to drown out the critique of historians who point out that the violence in question was in part a consequence of the fascist terror, which peaked between 1943 and 1945. The difference between Italy and a country like France may stem not from competition between different regimes of minority victims’ memories but rather from the majority’s memory of victimization: the political enemies of democracy who emerged from the Italian Resistance depict themselves as both the heirs of yesterday’s vanquished and the representatives of a silent majority against the “knowledge elite.” They are the Italian equivalent of “Anti-France.”

Like historians everywhere, Italian historians have had to relinquish their exclusive hold on historical knowledge and confront the increasingly frequent encroachments of memory entrepreneurs taking full advantage of the latest technologies and supported by sympathetic

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<sup>38</sup> [http://www.clandestinoweb.com/?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=33291](http://www.clandestinoweb.com/?option=com_content&task=view&id=33291)

<sup>39</sup> G. Pansa, *Il sangue dei vinti*, Milan, Sperling & Kupfer, 2003.

political actors. Revisionists insist on their “authenticity” and are not bound by the intellectual discipline of scientific research. The notion that there exists an “official history” enforced by parties of the left and academic historians is a myth, which revisionists use to their advantage. True historical research is revisionist by nature in the sense that the search for truth requires historians to challenge accepted opinions, including those embraced by the general public as well as the academic community.

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