

FINAL DRAFT

Some notes on the idea of national identity in Italy

The following notes do not want to have a scientific value. They follow up prof. Kraatz's essay on German national identity and simply aim at suggesting ideas for a possible comparison among different nations on the theme of national identity.

The problem of the Italian national identity has never been openly and accurately debated, although, from time to time, it regularly becomes a subject for political discussion.. According to the historian G. E. Rusconi¹, because of its insistence on patriotic themes, fascist nationalism was probably responsible for the annoyed reaction that the Italians often have towards everything which recalls the nation, the homeland, the feeling of Italian nationality. "Fascism - Mr Rusconi says - took advantage of the national feeling of the Italians to lead them to the disaster of World War 2. After that the idea of nation and homeland was deeply prejudiced."

However, he points out that also the Resistance to Fascism was strongly linked to patriotic ideals. Indeed both Fascism and the Resistance referred to the 19th century ideals of the Italian Risorgimento, though from different points of view: the former supported the notion of homeland and the desire to make it as powerful as the other nations; the latter pursued love for liberty and hate for tyranny.

The theme of national identity became up-to-date and attracted general attention again between the late 1980s and early 1990s. That was a time of serious crisis for Italy: a new, locally based, political movement (the so-called Lega Lombarda and Lega Veneta, which joined together in the Lega Nord), achieved a considerable success in the general elections of 1992 (8.7%). In their political campaign they contrasted the North of Italy (active, efficient, and modern) to the central government in Rome – a central government which wasted resources – and to the South of Italy corrupt and outdated. The Lega Nord was in favour of a federal form of Government, but it also openly mentioned the idea of secession of the Northern regions from the rest of Italy. Some intellectuals – including the above mentioned Mr. Rusconi and the philosopher Massimo Cacciari, later mayor of Venice – addressed the majority of the Italians asking them to reject the threaten of secession, which, by then, has certainly decreased in strength. At the moment, however, the Parliament is working on a reform of the government based upon the idea of federalism.

Therefore the problem does exist. Is Italy just one country? Is the feeling of belonging to the Italian country stronger than the feeling of belonging to a particular region? An example can be useful to understand that Italians have never had a common historical past until the 19th century.

The above mentioned Lega Lombarda chose a name and a symbol which refer to the medieval past: the "comuni" of northern Italy joined in a "lega – a coalition" to fight against the Emperors Frederic I (1167) and Frederic II (1226). The "comuni" won both the battles.

Frederic II himself, who fought against the "comuni" in the North, was buried in the cathedral of Palermo, Sicily, after his death and even nowadays the Sicilians always bring fresh flowers to honour his tomb, because they consider him the best monarch they have ever had – indeed "Federico" is the most common name in Palermo, a city rich in Swabian and Norman remains. Furthermore a famous University in southern Italy is entitled to him.

In spite of the different historical past of its regions, Italy was finally united in 1861; it has had 140 years of national history since then. In this period lots of events have taken place which could – or better should have – joined the population together, increasing the feeling of belonging to the same nation: workers and farmers uprisings at the end of the 19th century; World War 1 and 2; the

¹ Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Se cessiamo di essere una nazione*, Il Mulino, Milano, 1993

struggle against terrorism in the 1970s; the fight against “mafia” and political corruption in the 1990s.

The problem of national identity is also influenced by the geographic features of the country. Italy is bigger in length than in width.; the Appennine mountains make it difficult to move from the Adriatic to Tyrrhenian coast, although there is a small distance between them. Two large islands belong to Italy and one of them is very far from the coast. The Italian Constitution took into consideration also these problems, on top of the historical differences, and five regions were granted a particular statute with a large degree of autonomy, even from the legislative point of view.

Finally, since the 1920s and in particular after World War II, there has been a further element of disunity, represented by the two main political parties: the Christian Democracy and the Communist Party. In fact both of them made reference to institutions or ideologies (the Catholic church or Soviet socialism) which did not belong to the tradition of “Risorgimento”, the movement which succeeded in uniting Italy in the 19th century.

The two “churches”- catholicism and socialism – demanded total faithfulness from their “followers” and this attitude distracted them from the real needs of the country. These “beliefs” replaced the secular quality which had been a distinctive feature of the Italian nation from “Risorgimento” to the beginning of the 20th century.*

From this point of view in recent times, (1980s - 1990s) two great events should give new strength to the national feeling: on one side the dissolution of the communist world and the transformation of the Italian Communist Party into a reformist party, on the other the collapse of the Christian Democratic power, after the financial unbalance/disrupt and the great inquiries of judges.

* The overwhelming role of the catholic Church in the Italian historical contest is a relevant factor. In the 1920s Piero Gobetti, an antifascist historian, maintains that the Catholic reaction to the Reformation was responsible for weakening people’s conscience. He believed the authoritarian attitude of the Church had made people hypocritical and servile.

Gobetti complains for the absence of a Protestant Reformation in Italy, and when he says that he refers to the “free exam doctrine”, and he doesn’t certainly speak of the Reformation prof. Kraatz refers to, which, instead, would have increased people’s attitude of obedience.

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