
The Polycentric Nature of Italian Historiography in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

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Historical writing has been an immensely important part of Italian identity. Given its long and uninterrupted memory of the past from the rise of Rome as the capital of a global empire in continental Europe and the Mediterranean area, Italy has developed a historical awareness and historical myths as crucial components of its culture*¹. It has also been highly receptive to very different ways of making sense of the past by the time Italy completed the process of national unification in the second half of the 19th century. Until very recently the national unification was called the “Risorgimento,” the Italian word for “re-birth” or “resurrection,” as though the glorious past of the Roman time could come back and inspire the creation of a national State*². An extremely fragmented territory from the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth century C. E. until 1870, Italy has nonetheless preserved abundant traces reminding of the past and reconnecting cities great and small to the Roman and later Christian-medieval ages. Fosco Maraini was most likely the best Italian scholar of Japanese culture. When he first landed in Japan in 1938, Maraini summed brilliantly his impressions pointing to the fundamental difference between Italy and Japan: Italy is a civilization of stone and bricks, while Japan is “a civilization of wood and paper-houses, temples, objects of everyday use, boats, umbrellas, windows, handkerchiefs, books, and newspapers, even clothes: wood and paper are intricately bound up with Japanese civilization in innumerable ways”*³. Maraini meant that human existence in Italy is steeped in the traces of the past: buildings and artifacts are intended to stand the test of time and exist forever and for this reason they have been built in the most lasting material, stone, bricks, marble. These civilizations “of stone and bricks” have developed their philosophies of history and their peculiar views of the nexus between the past, the present, and the future. Within the European context, Italy is an extreme case due to the sprawling building activity of the Greeks and later of the Romans. Some classical temples and theatres to be seen in Southern Italy date back to the 6th century BC, more than 2.500 years ago.

In most cases, Italian cities still show remnants of the Roman times and an impressive core of buildings from the middle ages that usually make up the center of the towns, while the outer rim of the city center dates back to the late 19th century*⁴. Stone architecture made Italian cities permanent or at least semi-permanent, as much as such a thing is possible at all and despite occasional bombings during the Second World War. However, with some significant

exceptions like the destruction of the Abbey of Montecassino (6th century) in 1944, the core of the late medieval and early modern architectural heritage survived the military events relatively unscathed. Preservation and heritage belong to Italian culture in a very peculiar way, to a degree hardly possible in other countries. As Hayden White claimed some years ago, history comes natural to Italians, as they live in historical settings, are intimately connected to the past in their daily life and are bound to perceive the persistence of the past: sometimes they cherish the past, sometimes they hate and despise it*⁵. The sensory overload of the past and its ubiquity are or can become a problem. To round up this very sketchy hints at the background of the Italian historical vision, let me remind you that Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, is a religion based on history. The Bible is a work of history, and Christianity is a religion that developed a philosophy of history since Eusebius of Caesarea and Augustine of Hippo more than 1700 years ago, and established the succession of Popes as heads of the Church in the name of God.

Continuity and the lingering power of founding acts, perpetuated in buildings many centuries ago, shape the Italian way of dealing with the past. This aerial photograph of Lucca in Tuscany shows this point: a Roman urban structure, with an amphitheater close to its administrative center, that was time and again reused since the middle ages as the infrastructure for daily life, public civic events, and economic production. Since its construction in the second century BC with 18 rows of seats holding as many as 10.000 spectators, the amphitheater was reshaped continuously along the centuries and eventually turned into an oval urban square in the early 19th century, without ever losing its meaning and structure*⁶.

This is an engraving from 1845 showing the exterior:



An aerial picture shows the present situation:



An even better-known monument, the Pantheon in Rome, is witness to the persistence of classical antiquity at the very heart of the Italian capital while adjusting to the changing context and the shift in fundamental political and religious persuasions. Its construction started under the emperor Trajan and was completed in the reign of Hadrian around 125 CE. In 608 it was converted into the church of St. Mary of the martyrs: the permanence of its physical existence was grounded on the change of its functions*⁷. No matter what functions it performed along the centuries, the Pantheon was a part of everyday experience for all Romans.

This was the Pantheon in its 18th-century setting when Rome was the political capital of the Papal States and the religious center of the Catholic Church.



In the 1990s the Pantheon has visibly stood the test of time:



Lucca and Rome display exceptionally valuable traces of their deep reach into the past, but most Italian cities were proud of their civic traditions and have cherished the investigation of the sources supporting the independence of the local institutions. The fragmented political

landscape generated a remarkable variety of historical approaches and perspectives.

Geopolitical realities have influenced the way in which historical research was conducted for most of the Italian history. A deeply political agenda has shaped the methodological priorities that historians as individuals and groups of historians as “historical schools” followed in order to pursue their goals when the “Risorgimento” was a *fait accompli*.

Establishing itself as a full-fledged, relatively powerful and expansionist national state in the late 19th century had a number of consequences for the historical studies in Italy. Two features represent the source of the diversity inherent to the Italian approaches. The first consequence is that regionalism remained strong in the unified monarchy. Since the 18th century historical studies were pursued with an eye to fortifying the local identity: the civic privileges, the foundations of social status, the balance between urban centers and the countryside, the economic and juridical power of the local Church, these are among the most sensitive subjects that invited a historical treatment that engaged scholars in research and publications. Since the university structure was very weak all along the 19th century in terms of chairs of history taken by historians involved in the process of professionalization, it was the non academic network of local scholars, historical associations, historical journals, that became very strong and was the backbone of much of the Italian historical culture ever since*⁸. Nowadays the national ministry for the preservation of cultural heritage is still funding this network, considered to be a bedrock of historical culture parallel to and independent from academic research. The second consequence has been that historical research into the past was seen as a foundation (and occasionally an obstacle) to the process of nation-building. The whole process of unifying the different Italian states was based on the vision of the past and promoted an interest in the past. As much as in most European countries, the 19th century was really the “century of history”. A variety of ways were used to present aspects of the Italian past that related to the political tasks lying ahead, including the historical novels and painting of historical subjects. The “opera italiana” was a powerful way to highlight the role of Italy in events of world history such as the Crusades through Verdi’s opera *The Lombards at the First Crusade*. The spectators were encouraged to think of themselves as crusaders and the Austrians as their natural enemies*⁹. The interest for local history and the drive to unification were not mutually excluding: the vision of a unified Italy, for the first time since the Roman Empire 1500 years earlier, was not at all a predetermined script, rather a highly volatile undertaking. History was therefore to provide a blueprint for the future and ought to be interrogated accordingly.

Professional academic historians, committed to the ‘scientific’ methodology, were rare in 19th century Italy: most of those who wrote on historical subjects belonged to the leisured upper class and the nobility, were civil servants, diplomats, and belonged to the judiciary. Some were successful journalists and priests who wrote for the public with a clear political or

confessional agenda. Turin might be representative of this general trend. In 1833 the president of the University of Turin, Prospero Balbo, suggested to the king the establishment of a state-sponsored Academy devoted to the historical studies with a patriotic perspective. Its members, appointed by the king, were civil servants, noblemen and amateurs who compensated for the virtual absence of professional historians at the university. Their aim, however, was not general history nor the 18th-century style cosmopolitan view of the progress of humankind. They intended to deepen the investigation of local history, in Latin: *historia patria*, the past of the Fatherland. History teaching at the university had still a long way ahead. In 1846 the first university chair in history in Turin was given to the author of *The History of the Italian Compagnie di Ventura*, the mercenary troops in medieval Italy (published in 1844). Ercole Ricotti was a hydraulic engineer with strong mathematical interests and an officer in the Piedmontese army^{*10}. His first job was in military history. A couple of years later he finally turned from military history to general history: he wrote influential histories of Italy and of Europe. But like many of his colleagues his focus was firmly on military history for the rest of his life. Ricotti was representative of his generation in that he was mainly interested in the Middle Ages. Ricotti viewed the Middle Ages as the epoch when the crucial questions of Italian history were posed. The political fragmentation that haunted the 19th century was the outcome of the fall of the Roman empire and invasion of the alien tribes from the German barbarians to the Arabs, that mixed with the local population, mostly converted to Christianity and established feudalism. 19th-century Italian political reality was so deeply imbued with these developments that it came natural to prioritize their description and explanation. Two major issues emerged in the first half of the 19th century. Their repercussions were remarkable beyond the limits of local erudition. The first question was the role Longobards played in their effort to unify Italy under their leadership in the 8th century CE. In 773 Longobards were defeated by the Franks under Charlemagne, who was supported by the Pope. Political fragmentation was established through the joint decisions of a foreign power and the Roman Church. A Longobard myth and antimyth developed with evident political, confessional, and social undertones, that engaged at last the greatest Italian writer of the 19th century, Alessandro Manzoni, to write extensively on the historical role played by the Longobards. The second crucial and extremely controversial topic related to the Arab-Muslim invasion on Sicily and the experiment in cohabitation between Muslims and Christians, Italians and Arabs. A non-academic historian, Michele Amari, devoted to this question an important work, *The History of the Muslims in Sicily*, published in three volumes from 1854 to 1872^{*11}. It was a masterpiece of erudition (Amari was a self-taught Arabist with a solid knowledge of the Muslim sources and a secular outlook) and a testimony to the political discussions of his time, as Amari was inventing the myth of the Sicilian local identity as distinct from the Neapolitan tradition that was dominating Sicily when the first volume book first came out in 1854. Michele Amari was a fierce opponent of the Catholic Church and wished that Sicily regain the status of an independent state. Historical traditions on a local

basis were supported by political interests. They were also fueled by fake documents. This is an obviously relevant point that should be taken in serious consideration when analyzing polycentrism in the Italian tradition. The weakness or outright absence of a central academic institution until very late gave way to an unregulated market of ideas, documents, sources, complacent institutions that did not stop the spread of fake texts supporting a variety of political and religious claims. Diplomatic codes, inscriptions, kings' and emperors' letters were frequently made up, written down on parchment and circulated as though they were authentic. Despite the tradition of critical editions dating back to Muratori and the 18th century scholarship, in the 19th century Italian sources were far from being undisputed. In 1867 the doyen of critical editions Theodor Mommsen spent seven months in northern Italy double-checking inscriptions and library materials for his impressive *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. He came back in 1877-78 and spent time in Southern Italy and Sicily. Thanks to his vision of true sources, he was merciless in expunging fake inscriptions and documents, proving that so far the Italian historians had not developed a trustworthy method to discriminate true from false sources and that political priorities had the upper hand over scientific honesty^{*12}. Partisanship was rampant. In 1861, Cavour, the prime minister of Piedmont who almost single-handedly devised the unification process, died suddenly. In 1894 his long-time friend and political advisor Costantino Nigra burnt 24 love letters from Cavour to his lover, claiming that they might tarnish his fame: even the most sophisticated intellectuals like Nigra could not really conceive that all sources are valuable and deserve protection and respect whatever their content might be^{*13}.

Mommsen and more generally the German school of erudite critical editions became the example and model for Italian historians who realized that politically biased historical writing was not in tune with the major trends in Europe. A learning process was initiated that led to the formation of a school attracting all those who believed in the importance of primary sources. The historians who followed the historical-philological approach focused on documents, mainly from the Middle Ages: they believed in carefully publishing, placing in the historical context, explaining to the readers from a philological perspective and interpreting every source. This school expressed an approach to history that owed much to positivist philosophy: holding on to the realities of the past as the safest way to provide the "right" interpretation of relevant historical issues. While this positivist approach was instrumental in bringing European methods into the Italian historical culture, its legacy is controversial. On the one hand, it made a serious effort to unify the different research traditions that since 1861 (Rome being the exception) had to carry on their business within the framework of one university system, under the same political leadership provided by the Piedmontese monarchy and a census-based representative Parliament. The critical-historical positivist school established a network of scholarly journals, intended to cover a national discussion and offering a high-level opportunity

for publication to all Italian scholars, irrespective of their geographical origin. The “Italian Historical Review”, founded in Turin in 1888, was only one of these positivist scholarly journals that did much to enhance the historical method drawn from Germany and get it adjusted and accepted in Italy. The “Italian Historical Journal” quickly developed into the leading forum for up-and-coming young scholars striving for recognition as critical historians. On the other hand, the exclusive focus on philology, source publication, extremely limited questions to be investigated, was not appealing to the general public that was interested in wide-ranging subjects and turned away from the accurate and dull products of the historical-critical school. Sweeping narratives corroborating local and national identity were hardly possible for historians who embraced the strict rules of positivist historical writing and shared with the readers the process of assessing the validity of sources. And, speaking of polycentrism at the end of the 19th century, major historians and politicians were convinced that fragmented historical narratives and contrasting philological methods were not conducive to the form of unified identity required to consolidate the newborn State, especially in the face of the challenges coming from the budding socialist historiography and the catholic reactionary descriptions of the Risorgimento. While the long-term creation of a national historical consensus was possible through specialized journal like the “Italian Historical Review”, congresses were launched to bring together historians with a variety of backgrounds and interests and define a common agenda. The first was held in Naples in 1879, the last one in 1895: evidently, not enough to establish a national tradition of historical studies^{*14}. The first national historical congress was called by the Neapolitan association of historical studies, a longtime stronghold of local history with a leaning for German idealism. Universities and academic historians were not involved in the first place, basically because they were considered - and were mostly so as a matter of fact - exclusively teaching institutions. Original research was rather pursued by the state archives and the local, state-sponsored historical associations and individual university professors would have collaborative activities within the associations. In 1879 Naples implicitly claimed to be the center of reliable research by inviting the other historical associations to contribute to discussions on how to public critically the medieval sources. The historical association in Turin, that in its turn was striving for supremacy in historical matters, did not send – as requested – its own representatives as a reaction to the hegemony of Naples. The proceedings of the congress in Naples prove the enduring fragmentation, the local pride and very often the parochialism of actual research after the unification. Participants in the congress in Naples, most of them not professional historians, suggested that positivism provided the theoretical framework necessary for a scientific approach to national identity. As one speaker said, it was historians’ mission to investigate “races, peoples, classes, social orders” to find out “the laws of peoples’ life”. Social facts required the same methods as the natural sciences to be properly investigated. Positivism would show Italy again the road to political greatness and undisputed supremacy, in the European scenario

as well as in the historical research. An inferiority complex was all pervasive, especially against the background of Bismarckian Germany: in the eyes of late 19th century Italian historians, German science went hand in hand with German military and diplomatic power. And Italy should follow suit. At least in the historical studies, the influence of Germany dominated Italian historical studies well into the 20th century. German historicism was particularly influential through the kind of philosophical idealism that did much to dispel positivism. Croce and Gentile, before parting ways on a political level after the Fascist power consolidated itself, became the “reference personalities” for Italian historians. Both were born and active in Southern Italy: Croce was born in the Abruzzi, lived all his life in Naples, and published his books and journals in Bari. Gentile was born in Sicily and before settling in Rome was a professor in Palermo and Pisa. Their sense of a national mission for historiography was very strong and based on the power of ideas in history rather than on the historical materialism that positivists treasured. Attention shifted from the critical publication of political, juridical and economic documents (like diplomas, wills, cadasters and real estate inventories) to documents testifying the political projects, the visions and negotiations of leaders in literature, politics, philosophy. According to idealism, history and philosophy supported and complemented each other: a feature of the Italian understanding of history that Gentile, as the minister of the national education under Mussolini, made the cornerstone of the secondary school system in Italy for most of the 20th century. Idealism and Fascism, in a very contradictory way, pushed to nationalize the historical disciplines in Italy in the interwar period: to be sure, they met with mixed success. Under the aegis of Giovanni Gentile and another extremely influential historian, Gioacchino Volpe, the network of the local and patriotic associations was streamlined and managed directly by the central government. It was an authoritarian move by a dictatorial government trying to get rid of any form of civil society and independent interpretation, on the one hand. Its premise was the oath of allegiance that in 1931 every university professor had to swear: only a dozen refused. On the other hand, in 1935 within the same framework the Fascist government finally set up a Central School for Historical Studies, attracting young scholars to Rome to become established, professional, skilled and proficient historians, with jobs in the higher education system and in the state archives. Together with another remarkable undertaking, the *Italian Encyclopedia*, the establishment of the Central School of Historical Studies in Rome expressed the need to overcome the limitations of an exceedingly polycentric practice of historiography. The most innovative and open-minded historians of post-war Italy were given opportunities to develop their skills by these institutions in the 1930s: Federico Chabod, Delio Cantimori, Walter Maturi, Carlo Morandi, Ernesto Sestan among the others, who distanced themselves from Fascism during the war, Arnaldo Momigliano and Sabatino Lopez, who were among those historians who left Italy as a consequence of the anti-Jewish laws of 1938*¹⁵.

From the point of view of the investigation of Italian polycentrism, it may be argued that Fascist centralizing of the historical research, including also the increase in control of appointment to history chairs since the mid-1920s, ran counter a long tradition of local independent research. It fortified strands within the Italian historical culture that parochialism and narrow-minded interests tended to restrain. Thanks to this move, it was possible to publish sources like the reports of the Venetian ambassadors that exceeded the means of any individual local association, and it was possible for Delio Cantimori to study transnational, transconfessional questions of early modern religious history and especially the heretics in the 16th century*¹⁶.

Inadvertently Fascism created a new form of polycentrism whose consequences outlived the regime. In the 1930s the dictatorship forced the different oppositional historical cultures to find a niche in Italy, like Benedetto Croce and, although to a lesser degree, his liberal followers did. They perpetuated an alternative to Fascist and conservative historiography as a form of socially conservative liberalism. Moreover, Fascism strengthened the resolutely alternative historiographies that flourished outside Italy in a variety of ways. It was not just a different political outlook that informed what we might define as Socialist, Communist, Catholic historiographies. Refugee historians came in contact with English and American historical methods and mixed with fellow refugees from Nazi Germany who shared the same trauma and the same dilemma between adjustment and identity. Since the 1930s, polycentrism resurfaced as a reaction to Fascist centralism in a new form. The extreme fragmentation of historical practices and interpretations blatant in the 19th century was indeed impossible in post-1945 Italy at least until the late 20th century, when regional and even local independence came back again as political slogans with a self-made and largely made-up historical background. But more importantly a number of Italian historians got used to a constant interaction with non-Italian historians and built up centers of research abroad to study Italian history by Italian researchers: London, Cambridge and Oxford, Paris, Cambridge Mass., Chicago. Italian historians seem to be much more active abroad than ever. Is this the victory of polycentrism over centralization? If this is the case, is it a trend inherent to post-modernism? Or does it indicate that history-writing has changed its nature and that the historical research as such is – once more – disconnected from university teaching? Has the Italian nation-state been replaced by a multi-centered, cosmopolitan professional identity before having accomplished its function? And how does the Italian polycentrism compare to the trends in other historical cultures in Europe and Asia?

- * 1 See Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, Bari 1917, has been ground-breaking. The most recent update on Croce's view is Giuseppe Galasso, *Storia della storiografia italiana. Un profilo*, Bari-Roma 2017. See (in English) *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, Edited by Daniel Wolf, Oxford 2011, 5 volumes (in particular on Italy: Charles Briggs, History, Story, and Community in Latin Christendom, 1050-1400, vol. 2, pp. 391-413; William J. Connell, Italian Renaissance Historical Narrative, vol. 3, pp. 347-363; Edoardo Tortarolo, Italian Historical Writing, 1680-1800, vol. 3, pp. 364-383; Stuart Woolf, Italian Historical Writing, vol. 5, pp. 333-352).
- * 2 See Alberto Mario Banti, Telling the Story of the Nation in Risorgimento Italy, in *Nations and Nationalities in Historical Perspectives*. Edited by Gudmundur Hálfdanarson and Ann Katherine Isaacs, Pisa 2001, pp. 15-26; Adrian Lyttelton, Creating a National Past: History, Myth and Image in the Risorgimento, in *Making and remaking Italy: the cultivation of national identity around the Risorgimento*. Oxford 2001, pp. 27-76.
- * 3 Fosco Maraini, *Meeting with London* 1959, p. 108. Maraini grew up in Florence as the son of a renowned sculptor.
- * 4 The researches published in the Laterza series "Le città nella storia d'Italia" (Cities in the Italian history) illustrate this point convincingly.
- * 5 Hayden White, Introduzione, in *Forme di storia. Dalla realtà alla narrazione*. Edited by Edoardo Tortarolo, Carocci 2006, p. 13.
- * 6 Giulio Ciampoltrini, *L'Anfiteatro romano di Lucca. Cronache di ordinaria tutela*, Lucca 2016.
- * 7 *The Pantheon: From Antiquity to the Present*. Edited by Tod A. Marder and Mark Wilson Jones, Cambridge 2015.
- * 8 Ilaria Porciani, Jo Tollebeek, Institutions, Networks and Communities in a European Perspective, in *Setting the Standards. Institutions, Networks, Communities of National Historiography*, Basingstoke 2012, pp. 3-26; Ilaria Porciani, Mauro Moretti, Italy, in *Atlas of European Historiography. The Making of a Profession 1800 - 2005*, Basingstoke 2010, pp. 115-122.
- * 9 Opera and Nation in Nineteenth-Century Italy, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17 (2012), n. 4 (in particular Axel Koerner, Opera and nation in nineteenth-century Italy: conceptual and methodological approaches, pp. 393-399).
- * 10 Frédéric Ieva, La formazione di Ercole Ricotti. Dalle scuole di latinità alla cattedra di Storia moderna, in *Il Piemonte risorgimentale nel periodo preunitario*. Edited by Frédéric Ieva, Roma 2015, pp. 175-192.
- * 11 Karla Mallette, I nostri Saracini. Writing the History of the Arabs of Sicily, *California Italian Studies*, 1 (2010), n. 1. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2hmlk07b>.
- * 12 Silvia Orlandi, Maria Letizia Caldelli, Gian Luca Gregori, Forgeries and Fakes, in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Epigraphy*. Edited by Christer Bruun, Jonathan C. Edmondson, Oxford 2015, pp. 42-65.
- * 13 Rosario Romeo, *Vita di Cavour*, Bari 1984, pp. 522-523.
- * 14 Edoardo Tortarolo, I convegni degli storici italiani 1879-1895, in *La storia della storia. Deputazioni e Istituti storici nazionali nella costruzione dell'Italia*. Edited by Agostino Bistarelli, Roma 2012, pp. 103-114.
- * 15 Edoardo Tortarolo, Historians in the Storm. Emigré Historiography in the Twentieth Century, in *Transnational Challenge to National Writing*. Edited by Matthias Middell and Lluís Roura, Basingstoke 2013,

pp. 377-403.

- * 16 Margherita Angelini, *Transmitting Knowledge: the Professionalisation of Italian Historians (1920s-1950s)*, special issue of “*Storia della Storiografia. History of Historiography*”, 57 (2010).