

“One Hundred fifty Years: Reflections on Italian Unity” (Comment) Spencer Di Scala

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I would like to thank the speakers for two papers that make us reflect on the Italian unification 150 years after the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy, an event that united the peninsula for the first time since the invasion of the Lombards in the 6th century. This occasion should be one that makes us consider that movement and its consequences in a way that is not only celebratory, but also thoughtful.

This anniversary comes at a particularly difficult time in Italian history, when forces in Northern Italy say that unity was a mistake and that the North should secede. For this reason, the success of the celebrations in Italy and abroad take on special significance, as Masi has noted. It seems that, for all of the political, social, and economic problems that the country faces, Italians believe that unification was a great event. Dr. Masi has cited statistics to this effect, so I will not repeat them. He has also cited the role of President Giorgio Napolitano in supporting the Risorgimento, and we might also cite that of President Carlo Azelio Ciampi before him.

I note with pleasure that both of these presidents hail from the Italian left, because, although secession has become the battle cry of the Northern League, we should remember the corrosive effect of the left on the idea of the Risorgimento and understand its role in denigrating the movement.

The criticism of unification was of course present during the movement itself. The Risorgimento was a complex movement, beginning in the wake of the French Revolution in the 1790s under the aegis of Italian Jacobins, that is, of the left. Without going into details, the left viewed unification as a revolutionary movement, and indeed, it

passed through several waves of revolutions in the 1820s, 1830s, and, especially, 1848-1849. However, given the European context, the left could not bring unification to a successful conclusion. I will leave aside here the battles within the left because Professor Sarti has already summarized them, except to say that Mazzini was never by any stretch of the imagination a rightist and the attempts of the more extremist leftists and the Fascists to paint him as such are simply ridiculous.

After 1848, the Risorgimento became more mature and at least a part of the left cooperated with the monarchy to unify Italy. However, it is important to remember something that generally goes unmentioned: that the monarchy evolved from an absolute, unenlightened monarchy into a liberal one, with a constitution that started out as restrictive and quickly evolved into a liberal one with that most important feature, the responsibility of the government to parliament, not the monarch. It was this evolution, whose most important representative was Cavour, who fostered the alliance between the left and the monarchy that made independence and unity possible.

This development left a bitter taste in the mouths of extreme leftists and they took their revenge in historiography. While the historiography of the victors was merely hagiographic, that of the left was destructive. Its most important representative was Antonio Gramsci, who argued that the Risorgimento was “una rivoluzione mancata” (a “failed revolution”). His thesis was that a social revolution was possible but that social conservatives hijacked it. We can see this thesis in literature as well, for example, in Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *Il Gattopardo*. For Gramsci and his supporters, Garibaldi was no hero but a traitor, because he should not have handed over the South to Victor Emanuel II but have held out for a Constituent Assembly that would have posed conditions before

the South would have become part of a united Italy. A successful historical school has been developing this thesis ever since, never asking if Gramsci was wrong. If we look at Gramsci's evidence, however, we note that it was mainly literary (Verga) and we might ask why Garibaldi never hesitated to bring the South into the union even though he was a leftist. I might shed some light on this: he did so because it was likely that the movement for unity would have fallen apart had he not done so; in that case we would probably be here condemning instead of praising him.

I consider Gramsci's thesis not only wrong but also nonsensical, but it has contributed mightily to the denigration of the Risorgimento, culminating in the de-emphasis of the study of the movement in Italian schools by Luigi Berlinguer as Minister of Education in the late 1990s.

Considering the books that Dr. Masi has reviewed for us lets us know that Risorgimento studies are still vital in Italy. The most interesting work he has reviewed, I think, is Lucio Villari's *Bella e Perduta*. The value of this book is that it emphasizes what I consider to be the most important aspect of the Risorgimento, which is not unification but liberation (I discussed this thesis here at the Dante in September 2010 in a lecture sponsored by the club of the Abbruzzesi). Unity is important of course, but it is the way liberty organizes itself in the modern world—the nation-state. We tend to forget that before the Risorgimento, the Italians were downtrodden and subject to the control of different countries—Spain, France, Austria. To put liberation on the front burner was the great contribution of the left, not unification, which was a political movement in which compromises had to be made. In this the Italian left has a lot to be proud of, because the Risorgimento was a modern movement—one of a weak, oppressed people achieving

freedom through uprisings that are constantly defeated but that capture the imagination of other countries and eventually win out.

In this it bears a likeness to the revolutionary process that occurred in China, Cuba, and Vietnam. If this is true, however, why didn't the Italian revolution wind up in a similar way, i.e., as a dictatorship? For this we have to turn to the forces in Italian society that were more moderate and that were able to exercise a countervailing power on the more extremist ones, precisely what made Gramsci mad. These included forces that understood that under prevailing European conditions, Italy would never gain its independence unless those who guided the process became more moderate. These people included Cavour, Mazzini, and Garibaldi.

I find Mazzini's case to be the most interesting, and that's why I invited Professor Sarti to speak here today, not because he lives in Amherst. Mazzini was an important revolutionary because in those days to support Italian independence meant to be a revolutionary—and Mazzini was one of the most feared revolutionaries in Europe. Unlike the Italian extremists (Filippo Buonarroti, with whom Mazzini polemicized, is a good example), Mazzini emphasized liberty instead of social revolution and class warfare that usually ends in a civil war. This focus has made him a favorite target of Marxist historians, but Mazzini's insights have proven to be correct. It would be a mistake to think of Mazzini as only an Italian patriot, because he had a worldwide influence. Gandhi, for example, cited him as an example for Indian independence and the first celebrations of the 200th anniversary of his birth in 2005 began in India, and Woodrow Wilson began his trip to Italy in 1919 by paying homage to him in Genoa.

For Mazzini, politics was a "religion," as Sarti states in the subtitle of his

biography. Mazzini was important for Italy because he placed Italian freedom into a worldwide context and gave it a mission. God had given all nationalities their own special mission, and to suppress nationalities was to go against God's will, according to Mazzini. That is why Mazzini correctly predicted the end of multinational empires such as the Austrian, the Turkish, and the Russian. This prediction has since come to pass and, more than being on the "winning side," Mazzini delegitimized those empires and was a cause of their extinction. However, he also emphasized cooperation among nationalities and can be considered one of the "granddaddies" of the European Union.

Thus, it is an error to consider the Risorgimento in isolation, or similar to German unification. The Risorgimento produced worldwide figures such as Mazzini and Garibaldi, who is not the "hero of the two worlds" for nothing. Nor are Italian and German unification similar movements, despite superficial resemblances. I can't say I knew Bismarck personally, but Bismarck was no Cavour. Bismarck crushed the Prussian liberal movement, reinforced Prussian absolutism, and put together a collection of German states dominated by Prussia; Cavour made Piedmont more liberal, attracted the support of liberals in other states, and won their support for Italian independence. *Pace Gramsci*, the Italian Risorgimento had the support of the masses within the Italian and European contexts of the period, which is the only way we can make these judgments, and the history of the Risorgimento from the 1790s to 1850 clearly illustrates that a social revolution was not possible.

To conclude: 150 years later, the Risorgimento unfortunately still suffers from partisan interpretations; it is still, to use an Italian phrase, "tutto da scoprire," and I hope that the reflections of this year will contribute to that process.