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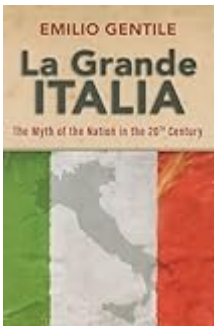

Emilio Gentile. *La Grande Italia: The Rise and Fall of the Myth of the Nation in the Twentieth Century.* Translated by Suzanne Dingee and Jennifer Pudney. George L. Mosse Series in Modern European Cultural and Intellectual History. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. Illustrations. xiv + 408 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-22810-1; $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-22814-9.

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Published on H-Nationalism (October, 2009)

Commissioned by Paul Quigley (University of Edinburgh)

Making Italy, Making Italians

Scholars of nationalism are fond of quoting Massimo d'Azeglio's famous dictum–"We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians"–to illustrate the constructed nature of national identity. Similarly, the Risorgimento is often presented as a prototypical example of nineteenth-century state formation. With a few exceptions, however, the study of Italian nationalism has remained relatively untouched by constructivist theories of the nation, and tends to be approached either via the lens of political and social history or through in-depth studies of such protagonists as Camillo di Cavour, Giuseppe Mazzini, and Giuseppe Garibaldi.[1] A thorough study of Italy's "imagined communities" or "invented traditions" has yet to be written.

While not explicitly invoking Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1991]), Eric Hobsbawm (*Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Myth, Programme, Reality* [1992]), and others, Emilio Gentile's *La Grande Italia* (originally published in 1997 as *La grande Italia: il mito della nazione nel XX secolo*) is a rigorous examination of what the concepts of "nation" and "Italy" have meant across the tumultuous transformations of the past century. As Gentile notes in the preface, the Italian-language edition of this work was written against the backdrop of the mid-1990s, a period in which many Italian commentators were proclaiming *la morte della patria* ("the death of the fatherland"). At the end of the twentieth century, few residents of the peninsula identified with the nation, other than during the World Cup every four years. When *La Grande Italia* was first published in 1997, then, the "rise and fall" of the national idea in Italy was a pressing contemporary concern, as it remains today.

Significantly, Gentile's narrative begins not with nineteenth-century national unification but rather in 1911 with the "Jubilee of the Fatherland" that commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of national unification. This event provides an ideal setting in which to examine the liberal monarchy's patriotic rhetoric and its self-presentation as the fulfillment of the Risorgimento. Marked by international expositions in Turin, Florence, and Rome, the jubilee was a celebration of a dynamic and

unified Italy ready to take its place alongside the Great Powers of Europe. Above all, it aspired to the "conquest of modernity," to a progressive and democratic vision of the nation that challenged stereotypes of Italian backwardness and indolence (p. 20). A particularity of Italian nationalism was the tension between an inferiority complex vis-Ã -vis northern Europe and a sense of cultural superiority deriving from the peninsula's glorious historical and artistic heritage.

The "new" Italy, therefore, had to overcome the "old" Italy on its path to modernity, and this challenge elicited a range of responses that would shape the country for the next several decades. Gentile surveys the various positions that emerged in the early twentieth century, from the "modernist nationalism" of avant-garde aesthetes, like Filippo Tomasso Marinetti's Futurists, who sought the creation of a New Italian, to imperialists who dreamt of an expansionist state, to humanists who saw themselves as the guardians of Mazzinian liberty.

All of these currents, in turn, either fed into or were suppressed by Fascism, and the middle section of the book is devoted to Benito Mussolini's regime. While Fascism is typically presented as a pathological form of hyper-nationalism, Gentile argues counterintuitively (though persuasively) that it also represented the decline of the national ideal. Even as it exalted *italianitÃ* and *romanitÃ* (Italianness and Romanness), Fascism "demanded exclusive control over patriotism" leading to "the 'Fascistization' of the nation, institutionalizing the role of the party as the pillar of the new state and the creator of a new Italy" (pp. 152-153). Mussolini's regime sought to remake the country in its own image, subjugating it to Fascist ideology and state authority. More than a nation, Italy would be a hierarchical and universal community, the core of a new order emanating from Rome and transforming all of Europe. The substitution of "Fascist" for "Italian" reached its peak–and its moment of crisis–during the Second World War, when Mussolini invoked the "the 'Fascist war' and 'Fascist victims' almost as if the war had been waged for the party rather than to save the people and the Italian nation" (p. 200).

Given the excesses of Fascism, it is unsurprising that postwar Italy took a diffident stance toward nationalism and statism. The bitter struggle between the Resistance and the Nazi-backed Italian Social Republic belied the myth of national unity, and most Italians preferred to retreat from public life and focus on their private interests; this also enabled them to present themselves as innocent victims of Mussolini's regime. Militarism and authoritarianism were believed to be embedded into the nation's "genetic code" (p. 239). Nevertheless, as Gentile ably demonstrates, the country's anti-Fascist leadership after 1945 strove to rehabilitate the principle of nationality and defend national unity. Most significantly, this included both the Communist Party, notwithstanding its internationalist and pro-Soviet orientation, and the Christian Democrats, despite Catholicism's traditional antipathy toward the Italian state. A new mythical image of the Italian people was erected–no longer based on imperial conquest and military discipline, but on the heroism of the Resistance and the nation's victimization by Fascism. Gentile concludes the book in 1961, with the celebration of the centenary of national unification. By this point, the anti-Fascist coalition had been torn apart by Cold War politics, and with it, any prospect of a coherent and unitary identity for Republican Italy–a state of affairs that seemingly extends into the present.

Gentile is extremely prolific, and those familiar with his other works (in English, see, for example, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* [1996] and *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism and Fascism* [2003]) will not be surprised at his encyclopedic grasp of modern Italian political culture or his broad and ambitious vision of national history. By the same token, this book also shares many of its predecessors' limitations. One criticism that is often leveled against Gentile is that he tends to focus solely on elite discourse, and refuses to consider how ideological debates "from above" relate to popular reception "from below." *La Grande Italia* is no exception in this regard. Despite his claims that the liberal state successfully instilled a belief in the "religion of fatherland," and passing nods to institutions, like schools, the army, and the press, there is virtually no evidence of how everyday Italians responded to the national project, or how they negotiated between national, regional, political, and religious identities (p. 72). The persistent divide between *l'Italia reale* and *l'Italia legale*–between the authentic nation and its "paper" or official version–is not sufficiently bridged here.

One might also question Gentile's rather sunny view of Risorgimento and liberal nationalism, which he sees as an enlightened "fusion between nation and freedom" (p. 48); this despite the fact that Italian unification was largely the result of a conquest–by force of arms–led by a conservative monarchy (Piedmont) with little sympathy for participatory democracy, and imposed without significant popular consent or enthusiasm. Gentile's championing of nineteenth-century liberalism means that all challenges to the prevailing order–whether from social-

ists, Catholics, or republicans–are portrayed as pathological adversaries of democracy rather than expressions of genuine tensions and divisions within the body politic. Similarly, Gentile repeatedly accuses Fascism of "ideologizing" the national myth, as though its previous incarnations were somehow not "ideological" themselves. The periodization of the narrative–from the eve of World War One to the aftermath of World War Two, with Fascism at the center of its "parabola"–reinforces the sense that this book might actually be more about the demise of the liberal ideal, the excesses of Mussolini's regime, and its aftermath, than about Italian nationalism in the *longue durÃ©e*.

A final shortcoming–or rather, a missed opportunity–is that the book has not been substantially updated in this new version. The present edition appears over a decade after the Italian original, and one would have thought that the intervening years would have provided ample opportunity for Gentile to reflect on more contemporary events, from 1968 and the "Years of Lead" to the post-Cold War collapse of the "First Republic," to the emergence of the separatist Lega Nord and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. Concluding the narrative in 1961 would seem to suggest that Italian national identity has remained static for almost half a century.

Even with its biases and limitations, *La Grande Italia* is a masterful survey of the national idea in Italy–an idea that has always been contested, appropriated, and reframed. To scholars of modern Italy, it builds an effective bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and between the story of national unification, Fascism, and the postwar Republic. To scholars of nationalism, it offers insight into one of the most important and compelling manifestations of the national idea in Europe.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Nicholas Doumanis, *Italy* (London: Arnold, 2001); and Alberto Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento: parentela, santitÃ e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000).

Citation: Joshua Arthurs. Review of Gentile, Emilio, *La Grande Italia: The Rise and Fall of the Myth of the Nation in the Twentieth Century*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

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