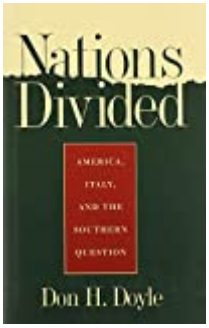
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Don H. Doyle. *Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002. xvii + 130 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2330-5.



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Published on H-South (October, 2003)

The South as an International Problem

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Americans love to believe in their exceptionalism, and nowhere does this seem more striking than in the attitude Americans have historically held towards the ethnic and nationalist conflicts of other nations. They look with befuddlement at the religious conflicts which tore apart the former Yugoslavia, at the ethnic rivalries wreaking havoc in Central Africa (derided as "tribalism"), and at the separatist movements in South Asia. Americans revel in the myth of the melting pot (or perhaps the more recent "tossed salad" analogy), conveniently forgetting their own history of civil war and nationalist strife. Nationalism seems to happen in other places, as evidenced by the relative dearth of writings about the United States by scholars of nationalism in general.

Don H. Doyle's *Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question* uses comparative techniques to remind Americans that their experiences of nationhood, civil war, and enduring regional animosity are less unique or aberrant than they might think. In less than one hundred pages, Doyle traces the parallel stories of American and Italian nationalism, showing that nationalism and separatism are two sides of the same coin. The Italian and American experiences show many striking similarities, yet remain different enough that Doyle can convincingly claim that "the revolutionary origins of America, its history of civil war and reconciliation, offer many examples–often unhappy ones–of the challenge of making nations out of diverse peoples and the terrible cost of failure. For many nations of the world the American past would become their future" (p. 10).

Why use Italy as a foil for the United States? It would appear that the notion came to Doyle, the Nelson Tyrone, Jr., Professor of History at Vanderbilt, at least partially through circumstance. In 1995 he spent a year as a Fulbright professor in Genoa, Italy, a year that coincided with the resurgence of the so-called "Southern Question" in the form of a Northern Italian separatist movement. Doyle shows that despite some significant dissimilarities, the United States and Italy "shared common problems in defining nationhood," specifically with respect to both the formation of the nation out of diverse sections, and the presence of a South that increasingly came to be seen as aberrant within the national whole (p. xiv).

Much of the recent scholarship on nationalism has focused on debunking the idea of national identity as primordial, stressing instead the ways in which it has been invented. Doyle takes a different approach to American and Italian nationalism, preferring to focus on the ways in which these nations specifically constructed their identities out of a blend of ethnicities–in Doyle's phrase "nations where there was no pretense of ethnic kinship and historical continuity" (p. 15). Both the United States and Italy forged their nationhood in times of war, framing themselves in opposition to an occupying power. They did not, however, do this in identical ways. Americans, Doyle points out, "worked at defining their new nation by its future *promise*," while Italian nationalists used the *past* of Rome and Renaissance to unite their diverse population (p. 28). Nor were Southerners quite as enthusiastic in Italy as they were in America, a difference with powerful consequences. Southern Italy had been under the control of the Spanish Bourbons and was brought into the new Italian nation by force of arms. Thus from the start Italian Southerners were outsiders within their own nation in ways that American Southerners were not.

"We have made Italy, now we must make Italians." While Doyle points out that this well-known expression is actually a misquotation, it captures a sense of the work that goes into nation-building. Or, to use the Italian example as Doyle does, the Northern leaders of the new Italian state "were not capable of simply casting people in new national molds. Making Italians was not as simple as annexing new territories and peoples. That would take time and sustained effort ... and it would take a people who recognized a nation worth identifying with" (pp. 39-40). This "daily plebiscite," by which people in both the United States and Italy came to identify with their new nations, employed a variety of holidays and symbols–July Fourth in America, statues of Garibaldi in Italy, public education in both places. Doyle gives the impression that Italian nationalism was always weaker and more contested than the American version, with Italian Southerners more resistant to inclusion in the national whole than their American counterparts. Surprisingly, then, when a full-fledged secession movement appeared, it did so in the American South.

It is when he approaches the "Southern Question" that the differences between the American and Italian situations become the most apparent. True, as Doyle points out, "each of these southern regions became demonized for being backward, out of phase with the progressive aspirations of the larger nation, and a threat to national well-being" (p. 66). As he shifts from the United States to Italy and back again in this section, Doyle tries a little too hard to stress similarities between the two Souths. Suddenly the analogy is not between white Southerners and Southern Italians (as it had been for most of the book), but between slaves and Italians: "Like their American counterparts behind Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman, the Garabaldini went south on a mission to liberate an enslaved people" (p. 69). Leaving aside the question of Union soldiers' desire to emancipate African Americans, this seems at odds with Doyle's more consistent portrait of American Southerners as whites of European descent (like his Northerners). He quickly abandons this line of argument, instead stressing the ways in which Northerners portrayed Southerners as socially backward or polluted by the evils of slavery.

In this chapter, and throughout the book, Doyle writes from the perspective of the dominant nationalized North–both American and Italian. This is unfortunate, for it leaves the reader with the impression that these Souths were problems, more acted upon than actors in their own rights. Too, this more national (as opposed to regional) vantage point leads Doyle to argue that Confederate nationalism was weak and insufficiently differentiated from mainstream American nationalism. He claims that "the racial motive for separation was not the same as a primordial argument for white Southerners as a separate people, distinct from and incompatible with those of the North" (p. 82). But Confederates made that argument as well, stressing the ways in which they were the descendants of the Cavaliers to the Northern puritans and using the language of ethnicity to make a case for secession. In discounting the degree to which Confederates believed in their new national identity Doyle seems to be falling into the historiographical traps he warned against earlier in his study, those of debunking primordialism and of seeing nationalism as "not only a false god but an evil one as well" (pp. 15-16).

Perhaps this is Doyle's ultimate point. Separatism and regionalism did the United States no favors, leaving it with a painful legacy of bitterness, division, and racial hatreds. The Italians fared little better, with the violence of the 1860s Brigands War needed to subdue the South and bring it into the new Italy. Its legacy was generations of southern poverty and perceived racial inferiority. For Doyle, then, nationalism is the proverbial double-edged sword. In an ideal world it could serve as a powerful unifying force, as it did in the United States: "America was a vast container into which poured a multitude of immigrant cultures, languages, and religions. Becoming

American ... did not demand that immigrants give up ethnic, religious, and other identities. The burdens of nationalism, whether official or popular, rested lightly on a vast decentralized society" (p. 90). A sense of common identity, however invented or fictitious, binds disparate Americans together, subsuming other identities and allowing for (largely) peaceful coexistence. And the same basically holds true for Italians, even accounting for their strong regional identities. Yet at the same time, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, nationalism has become an increasingly divisive element, used as the justification for wars against perceived enemies both foreign and domestic. Doyle's hope is that other nations will learn from the American example: there can be no North without a South.

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Citation: Anne Sarah Rubin. Review of Doyle, Don H., *Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question.* H-South, H-Net Reviews. October, 2003.

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