

**THE LIBERAL IDEA IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ITALY:  
BUILDING A NEW SCIENCE OF POLITICS**

by

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## **THE LIBERAL IDEA IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ITALY: BUILDING A NEW SCIENCE OF POLITICS**

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Liberal ideas in France grew within a long-established state, with the result that they sought either to reconceptualize political power (Guizot) or to challenge the very entrenched view of that state (Tocqueville). By contrast, liberal ideas in Italy combined with nationalism to generate a variety of ways to achieve national as well as individual liberation. The prospect of a single political regime for the entire Italian peninsula and islands generated considerable debate as to what kind of liberal, constitutional design or model of government was best suited to a population that had lived under separate and diverse political regimes for more than thirteen hundred years. This debate gave rise to two broad currents of thought and action known as moderate liberalism and radical, or democratic, liberalism. Both were intended to realize, promote and advance what has been called "the liberal conception of European history" (Tilly 1975, 37). But the two differed on some fundamental aspects. The first derived from notions of constitutional monarchy and representative government, drawing support from the British experience and particularly the work of John Stuart Mill; the other rejected constitutional monarchy and went beyond representative government to include principles for a self-governing, as opposed to state-governed, society, drawing support from Tocqueville's analysis of democracy in America. The first is closely associated with the Piedmontese Prime Minister Cavour and the creation of the Italian state; the other with the Milanese writer Carlo Cattaneo and the constitutional design that did not happen, the defeated federalist

alternative. The net result was that, while the former lent support to the entrenched European view of the state, the latter lent support to a non-unitary, polycentric, political order. For this reason, Cavour and Cattaneo could agree on the basic features of incivilimento or progress in Europe and even on how to resolve the Irish question, but they could not agree on what system of government was best suited to a free and united Italy.

I have elsewhere discussed the chains of events that created the prospect of a single political regime for the entire Italian peninsula and islands, the considerable debate it generated as to which constitutional design or model of governance was best suited to a pluralist society like Italy and the chain of events that weighted the result of the Risorgimento in favor of the creation of the state organized as a milder form of the French system of centralized government and administration to minimize the problems of bureaucratic preemption and failure associated with the French case (Sabetti 2000: chaps. 2-3). In this paper, I propose to focus, more specifically, on how liberal ideas were used to provide an Italian parallel to what Tocqueville sought to do by examining Carlo Cattaneo's attempt to fashion a new science of politics for a self-governing society. I will discuss Cavour and Mazzini only in so far as their views contrasted with Cattaneo's. There is no attempt here to negate or minimize the part that they both played in advancing the cause of unification and liberation. Even revisionist historians like Denis Mack Smith have acknowledged, for example, the important role that Cavour played in strengthening the working of the constitutional monarchy and representative government in both Piedmont and united Italy.

A contemporary of Cavour and Mazzini, Cattaneo was a gifted Milanese publicist and a leading figure in the radical liberal - or republican democratic - movement for the liberation and unification of Italy. Following the collapse of the 1848 revolts, he settled in Switzerland, where he is now regarded as one of Canton Ticino's outstanding nineteenth-century figures. The paradigmatic significance of Cattaneo is that he tried to do for Italy what Tocqueville tried to do for France, though their respective points of departure were different. Cattaneo sought to orient people to the problematics of change facing Italy under foreign occupation or illiberal governments, while rejecting the entrenched European view of the state. He questioned Hegel's view that the actualization of freedom could best take place in a unitary and monarchical state and, like Tocqueville, found in federal principles of organization a more appropriate basis for constituting order and for advancing a new science of politics for the actualization of freedom. The more Cattaneo sought to understand the Italian case, the more he was faced with theoretical questions about the meaning of long-term trends of the French revolution toward individual equality and national independence and the puzzle that these trends posed for liberty and the innovative potential for 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The paper proceeds, first, to highlight the need for a new science of politics that emerged throughout Europe following the Congress of Vienna, and, then, turns to how Cattaneo proposed to meet that challenge in the context of the struggle for Italian liberation and unification. The paper will try to sketch answers to the following questions: what allowed Cattaneo to cast his inquiry and to propose answers as he did? What factors help to explain the framework of ideas he constructed for himself? To paraphrase what Larry Siedentop (1994, vi) said about

Tocqueville, what was Cattaneo's vantage point and how did he find it? But before proceeding, let us clarify the meaning of 19<sup>th</sup> century liberalism and give it context.

### **Liberal Ideas**

Access to 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian liberal thought requires first of all the removal of several layers of misunderstandings by going beyond certain intellectual tendencies deeply entrenched in political theory and comparative politics. One tendency, attributable to the rise of Fascism and inspired by nationalistic as well as by Gramscian and non-Gramscian revisionist historiography, has been to project 20th century political failings or excessive expectations onto the previous century. As a result, pre-World War I appraisals of the liberation and unification of Italy as "the most marvelous and difficult struggle for freedom recorded in modern times," (Thayer 1911, 2: 507, quoted in Romeo 1965, vii) were replaced by scornful and contemptuous reappraisals: the theme of failure used as the explanatory key to characterize the entire Risorgimento and the Liberal Italy that followed (cf. the same for 19<sup>th</sup> century Spain, Ringrose 1996, chap. 1). A second tendency proper to the study of political theory has been to view liberal ideas as the product of the modern break with the past. Again, it is possible to see the intellectual dynamics that apply to Liberal Italy (and Spain) at work here as well. Different analysts often moved by opposing philosophical dispositions (Straussian and non-Straussian alike), concur in calling up thinkers from Machiavelli to Hobbes and even the entire Enlightenment, more generally, to sketch a conception of liberalism either disembodied of facts and without historical roots, or, just as questionable, imbued with possessive individualism. This impoverished or exaggerated view of liberalism has produced several developments: for some time in the nineteenth century and until the 1880s, it incited the

papacy to issue a general condemnation of liberalism, causing problems for liberal Catholics in Piedmont, Sicily, Lombardy, France and other parts of Europe; it gave rise to a general neglect of the variety of liberal ideas that we now know existed even in France (Craiutu 2001; Lilla 1994; Siedentop 1979); and in more recent times, it fostered, and continues to foster, to considerable misunderstanding about methodological individualism, the evolution of institutions for collective action and the problematics of change and reform more generally. A third tendency combines the previous two: squeezed between the two dominant philosophical schools of Anglo-American empiricism and skepticism and of German idealism, liberal thought and practice in 19th century Italy appeared at best derivative, certainly weak and lacking a vigor of its own, making it unworthy to retrieve from the dustbin of the history of European liberalism where it had been relegated by Fascism, liberal Hegelians and Gramscians alike (e.g. De Ruggiero 1927). Not surprising, works such as those of Kent Roberts Greenfield ([1934] 1965) on economic and political liberalism in Risorgimento Lombardy and James M. Buchanan (1960) on the Italian tradition in constitutional economics and public finance, from the time they first appeared, remained marginal to mainstream political theory and comparative politics (cf. Ostrom 1999).

The European tradition or movement of ideas we have come to know as liberalism antedates the early 19th century, when the terms liberal and liberalism first gained first currency in Spanish. The growth of liberal ideas in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century involved no sharp break with the Italian past for - without going back to Cicero and Roman times (Hayek quoted in Gray 1995, 5-6; Skinner 1998) — many attributes of liberalism were operational in Italian (and European) public life before modernity: a

meliorist "science of man" recognizing human liberality and freedom without denying fallibility (if only as original sin), processes of constitutional choice, assorted forms of self-organized and self-governing ventures, systems of representative government, due process of law, and a complex bundle of property rights together with exchange mechanisms for moveable and immoveable goods (e.g. Sabetti 2001). What helps to explain this continuity is attributable to two sets of facts: long before the creation of the Italian state, the area had been the scene of many other experiments in political, economic and ecclesiastical organizations; and some unique features of the Italian Enlightenment.

Though Italy was considered one country (un solo paese), from as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the vicissitudes of dynastic succession and free cities had created several distinct Italian political communities, each characterized by varying degrees of "liberal" ideas and practices, or self-governance. As late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the peninsula was, in Franco Venturi's apt characterization, "still a sort of microcosm of all Europe" where, even more than in Germany, it was possible to compare and contrast" a great variety of political forms and varying constitutions - theocracy, monarchies, dukedoms, and republics, from Venice to San Marino. The Italian setting was fertile ground for examining the clash between kings and republics and the tension between Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment" (Venturi 1971, 20). But presumptive knowledge of Italian diversity and the very territorial presence of the papacy had created considerable problems for treating the Italian scene seriously as a laboratory for exploring the clash between kings and republics and the tension between Utopia and reform. Part of the problem is suggested by a recent collection of essays on Italian culture in Northern Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that sharpens "our sense of the ageless polarity in British

cultural attitudes towards Italy, between an envy of her resourcefulness on the one hand, and a fear, on the other, of her sophistication as the vehicle of luxury, Popish intrigue and loose morals" (Keates 1999, 18).

In his study of the Italian Enlightenment, Owen Chadwick (1981) has found that what passed for self-evident truth was not reliable. The impressions conveyed by European travelers tended to ignore the facts on the ground. One notable example is the case of Edward Gibbon. In his first tour of Italy in 1764-5, Gibbon was dismissive of the Italian universities, singling out the University of Padua as "a dying taper" (quoted in Chadwick 1981,91). We now know that the 18th century was not a good time for universities anywhere in Europe, including Oxford, and, as Italy at that time had the largest number of public universities in the world, it is possible that some Italian universities were worse off than the British. Chadwick's research cast considerable doubt about the generalizability of Gibbon's observation to the entire Italian scene for several reasons. The University of Padua "was not, or was not in all faculties, a dying taper". Moreover, "several seminal minds occupied chairs in Naples, Pisa, Bologna, Padua, Pavia. All the northerners regarded the Papal States as poor, obscurantist and backward. But [the papal states'] historic university at Bologna was the only university in the world to have two women among its professors." (Chadwick 1981, 91.) Chadwick continues:

The Northerners found it hard to understand Italy. The works of Galileo stood upon the Index of prohibited books. Northerners imagined therefore that no one might teach that the earth goes round the sun. They could not understand it when they found that the seminary at Padua was one of the leading centers of Galileo-study in all Europe, and that the statue of Galileo set up in Florence was erected there with the complaisance of the Roman Inquisition (Chadwick 1981, 92).



It is likely that Gibbon's general observation may apply to the old kingdom of the Two Sicilies - but even there the situation does not easily lend itself to dismissive comments or easy generalizations. Whereas the Sicilian parliament had allowed the extension of the Spanish Inquisition to the island only to emasculate its institutions once they reached Sicily, the Neapolitan parliament had stubbornly succeeded in rejecting the extension altogether. It is true that by the 18<sup>th</sup> century the ancient medical school of Salerno, near Naples, had lost its former excellence, and that the universities at Naples and Palermo were enmeshed in antiquated learning; Vico himself eventually came to see his failure in the academic competition of 1723 a blessing in disguise. But this is not the whole story.

The University of Naples continued to excel in the study of law, political economy and alternative forms of property rights whose importance has been highlighted by recent studies of common property resources. Moreover, the kingdom possessed long-lasting self-organized, and self-governed, and privately endowed, autonomous societies of investigators — comparable to the Royal Society in London and the French Academy in Paris - involving a complex mix of research centers, salons and bookstores often located in particular city neighborhoods; Croce and his institute of historical research in Naples, and the publishing house of Laterza in Bari, continued publicly to promote that tradition of liberty and free inquiry even during Fascism. In fact, the introductory essay to Vico's autobiography by Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin notes that these circles of exploration and debate made Naples "the freest-thinking society in Italy" in the eighteenth century (Fisch and Bergin [1944] 1975, 31). Opened to the outside world, learning much from the French, the Spanish and the English, the Neapolitan

Enlightenment cultivated and promoted long-held eclectic interests and enthusiasms in useful or applied knowledge — a plurality of inquiries which included atomism and Epicureanism, modern naturalism and experimentalism as well as the rationalism of Descartes and Hobbes. The Neapolitan Enlightenment produced Filangieri, Genovesi and Giannone as well as Vico; the problem for many modern historians is that Naples produced reformers, not revolutionaries.

It is true that most Italian Enlightenment figures rejected truths based on mystery and miracle as taught by the Catholic Church, but they all retained an important feature of Catholicism - an emphasis on the union of thought and action. This emphasis served to orient people toward a tradition of inquiry aimed at acquiring useful knowledge, and problem-solving. "The tendency to be very practical" (Chadwick 1981, 90) is a chief characteristic of the Italian Enlightenment. Intellectuals and officials formed habits of thought constrained by what to do "about practical problems, economics, prosperity, government, penal reform and education," applying to political philosophy, and for the first time, the phrase "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (Chadwick 1981, 90). They had none of the anti-historical and anti-legal bias that characterized the philosophes and legislators of France. All this does not mean that the union of thought and action was easy to establish and maintain in the secular as in the spiritual realms. The history of church institutions and Catholic spirituality suggests how difficult it is even for individuals who willingly accept this norm to so order their lives and live by it constantly. Equally, some Italian intellectuals and officials - often the same people in Naples, Milan and Florence - did try to disregard the norm and emulate the French - espousing, in Tocqueville's words, "a literary view of politics" (Tocqueville [1856] 1956, pt.3, chap. 1)

to liquidate the heredity of the past. A classic case is the attempts by the Neapolitan viceroy and former Neapolitan ambassador to France, Domenico Caracciolo, in Sicily in the 1780s (Sabetti 1984, 29-32, 44-45). But the widespread legitimacy of the union between thought and action as a deeply held societal norm served to check both revolutionary inclinations and foreign rulers, as well as to temper the tension between Utopia and reform in Sicily and the mainland (Sabetti 1996, 27-28). When they succeeded in emulating the French as in the 1799 revolution for the Parthenon republic, the Neapolitan Jacobins failed to get the support of the very same people whom they thought needed to be delivered from bondage (cf. Journal of Modern Italian Studies 1999).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, liberty gained broader dimensions as the term liberal was applied, with the help of Masonic lodges, throughout Europe: it came to stand for the replacement of absolutism by constitutional government, secularization or a complete break with the Catholic church, and electoral reform aimed at broadening political participation. Powerful as these dimensions were the term liberal carried additional meanings in Italy. In the past, liberal ideas had remained fundamentally regional, so that we can speak of Neapolitan national aspirations as opposed to Sicilian or Piedmontese; by 1848 the prospects of a federal union helped liberal ideas to encompass plans for the liberation from the dominion of foreigners, for a view of liberty as national independence, and for the search for a constitutional design appropriate to an entire nation. It was the commingling of liberalism and nationalism that helped to extend constitutional aspirations to the nation as a whole. But, at the same time, the strong local and regional roots of constitutionalism - a rich constitutional culture (Grew 1996, 221-31) - posed dilemmas in the Risorgimento about the meaning of the past and how to face

the future through processes of macroconstitutional choice. The search for an appropriate constitutional knowledge grounded in human liberation offered a critical challenge concerning what useful knowledge ought to apply for rethinking the conditions of life associated with human artisanship and civilizing progress (incivirimento) and whether the world of action should have reference less to education and more to plotting and waging wars of liberation with the alluring rhetoric of statecraft. Unlike Germany, no clash occurred in Italy between the liberal creed and the struggle for national independence (Woolf 1975, 359-60). But the fundamental challenge faced by Italian liberals and patriots still remained, in the words of James C. Scott and Vincent Ostrom, a choice between "seeing like a state" or "seeing like citizens" (V. Ostrom 2001).

### **The Challenge: Is A New Science of Politics Possible?**

The reconstruction of Europe that followed the Congress of Vienna in 1815 restored absolutist and dynastic principles to their former pre-eminence in the practice of rule. The restoration thwarted but could not entirely stunt the growing aspirations of people to rule themselves that had been given impetus by the American and the French revolutions, the rise of nationalism, the spread of free trade among nations, as well as by the democratic direction of long-term social change. As a result, no sooner had the sovereignty of kings been reasserted that it ran up against the claim of popular sovereignty. As Mazzini put it in an essay on "Thoughts Upon Democracy in Europe" for a British journal in 1847:

The democratic tendency of our times, the upward movement of the popular classes, who desire to have their share in political life - hitherto a life of privilege - is henceforth no Utopian dream, no doubtful anticipation. It is a fact, a great European fact; which occupies every mind, influences the proceedings of governments, defies all opposition.

And, defending his life as a professional agitator, Mazzini continued,

Whatever may be said to the contrary, no one, nowadays, sees in the ever-strengthening voice of rising nations, of generations desirous of laying the foundations of a better future, of oppressed races claiming their place in the sunshine - nothing more than the vain imagination of a writer, or the cry of an agitator thrown out haphazard among the crowd. No, it is something more serious; it is a page of the world's destiny ... (Mazzini [1847] 1891, 4:98).

Liberalism, with its emphasis on macroconstitutionalism, representative government, the rule of law and private property, was becoming reconciled with nationalist aspirations, but what constituted democratic governance was still unclear.

The last decade of the eighteenth century brought the word "democracy" into the public discourse of different speech communities, to the point of being favourably invoked and used by people as diverse as Paine, Robespierre and the prelate who became Pius VII in 1801. But, according to R. R. Palmer (1959, 1:18), "it was in Italy that the word 'democracy', in a favourable sense, was most commonly used in the years from 1796 and 1799." Common usage was not enough to fix its meaning, however. In fact, a chief problem was that Italian democrats, as elsewhere in Europe, tended to confuse democracy either with a unitary state or with the universality of citizenship (Palmer 1964, 2: 302-5), with the result that Mazzini, in his own time, could still write, "(t)he union of the democratic principle with representative government is an entirely modern fact, which throws out of court all precedents that might be appealed to; they have nothing in common but the word in common; the thing is radically different" (Mazzini [1847] 1891, 4:102; italics in the original). What this "thing" stood for was not entirely clear. The term, Cavour noted in a review essay in 1850, was "too elastic and can be equally applied to systems quite different, and corresponds to ideas as diverse as those of Gioberti and

Mazzini, Louis Blanc and Americans followers of Washington or Jefferson" (Cavour [1850] 1971, 171-72). One issue, however, seemed clear enough: neither the liberal nor the democratic movement, or some combination of the two, offered a satisfactory resolution to the paradox of revolution that had emerged with the French Revolution and was reaffirmed in the 1820 and 1848 revolts. In the aftermath of successive failed revolts, and in spite of Mazzini's revolutionary fervour, one fact had become evident in Vienna as in other European cities: just as national armies could not indefinitely shore up absolutist rule, so popular uprisings could not succeed without falling back into new forms of tyranny and subjection. For these reasons, Tocqueville was not exaggerating when in 1835 he noted, "the organization and establishment of democracy in Christendom is the great political problem of our times" ([1835] 1961, 1:337).

The problematics of revolution, reform and change reverberating throughout Europe gripped the imagination of many intellectuals and challenged them to offer solutions. To those schooled in the statecraft of despotism - enlightened or not- the growing aspirations of different communities of people to rule themselves represented a paradigmatic challenge of major proportions. At the same time, these growing aspirations could easily go astray if people were unacquainted with, or did not understand how to reap the fruits of, the long-term democratic tendencies, incivilimento, taking place in society. Witness what had happened to the 1812 constitution of Sicily and to the liberal movement in Spain after 1820. The former had been doomed to failure, not only by the hostile international climate, but also by the very haste with which it had been introduced; the latter by its excessive rationalism or Jacobinism. Self-rule required new ways of thinking about old issues, as well as new ways of governance and a radical

reordering of political ideas and practices that could not be easily achieved in a short-time span. And here critical issues emerged that could be ignored only at great peril: where could people turn for the likely sources of such ideas? What prior conditions were necessary for new habits of heart and mind to flourish? Could the paradox of revolt be overcome? Could constitutional government be obtained only with the consent of the monarch? If, in the eighteenth century - to paraphrase Filangieri - philosophy had been called to the aid of the Government, now philosophy was called upon to aid the people to govern themselves and even to change the world.

An important response came from France, couched not in the form of a philosophical treatise or manifesto, but in the form of an empirical investigation by a young aristocrat and magistrate, Alexis de Tocqueville. France was important because of its experience in dealing with the meaning of the long-term trend toward equality, and the puzzle that the trend posed for liberty and innovative potential in nineteenth century Europe. Rather than study France, however, Tocqueville's response was to study those trends in the United States. For, as he explained,

in that land the great experiment to construct society upon a new basis was to be made by civilized man, and it was there, for the first time, that theories hitherto unknown, or deemed impracticable, were to exhibit a spectacle for which the world had not been prepared by the history of the past (Tocqueville [1835] 1961,1:26).

What could Americans teach Europeans?

The American experience suggested that it was possible to have local autonomy, and to fashion self-governing units, without reference to unitary conceptions of rule or to central authority, that possibilities other than central government monopoly existed for solving public-sector problems and that, contrary to prevailing fears in Europe, equality of conditions was not incompatible with the maintenance of liberal practices like

representative institutions, individual liberties, local autonomy, private property, and even religion. It was possible for society to govern itself by itself.

Tocqueville drew attention to three sets of factors that helped to explain this state of affairs: peculiar and accidental circumstances such as physical conditions; institutional arrangements and laws; and the manners and customs of the people. He identified the moral and intellectual conditions of a people - the habits of the heart and the mind - as the most important of the three without, however, discounting the close links between the character of the community and their institutions for making it possible for people to rule and be ruled at the same time. In brief, by studying American democracy Tocqueville had found a way to "overturn the established European idea of the state" as the only way to establish and maintain political order (Siedentop 1994, 41) - thus broadening the meaning of liberalism beyond representative government.

The American federalist experiment had radical implications for understanding the meaning of self-governance beyond particular forms of government, for building the commensurate institutional structures and, equally important, for conceptualizing modes of analysis appropriate to a democratic age. A science of the state, government or legislation could not encompass what is required for the development of self-governing units. Instead, a science of association was called for as the appropriate theoretical foundation for a self-governing society. Tocqueville's new science of politics also drew attention to the importance of long-term cultural development and suggested particular relationships between democracy and civilization. With the benefit afforded by the possibility of looking back, we now know that Tocqueville's response to the problematics of his time, as well as his concern for what sort of democratic despotism nations have to



fear, continue to be of practical significance in our own time. But in his time, Tocqueville's paradigmatic shift stood in sharp contrast to the tradition of the French philosophes, which had given scant consideration to the history of human development, and to the prevailing efforts at reform and change in France, which, far from bringing out the advantages of democracy, reiterated some of its vices by extending the prerogatives of government and increasingly preempting individual autonomy. Tocqueville's paradigmatic shift contrasted equally with dominant modes of constitutional problem solving and statecraft in Europe.

One influential tendency among European intellectuals was to dismiss altogether the theoretical and practical significance of America's "great political experiment". Just about the time that Tocqueville and Beaumont were setting out on their journey to North America, Hegel was lecturing to students at the University of Berlin that Europeans had nothing to learn from America politically, for it was still a developing country, lacking a fully developed central authority or state. Hegel told his students that "It (was)... not yet possible to draw any lessons from America as regards republican constitutions" (Hegel [1830] 1975, 170). For Hegel, individuals achieve full or true freedom only as members of the (unitary) state. In his critical commentary on Hegel, Marx advanced a conception of democracy consistent with Tocqueville's conceptualization of society governing itself (Marx [1843] 1970, 29-30). But whereas Tocqueville held the view that popular democracy, as a mass phenomenon, required all the more a new science of politics to minimize new sorts of despotism, Marx held the view that once democracy was in place a science of politics would no longer be needed, because the difference between reality and appearance would, just like the state, wither away (Marx [1843] 1970, 31).

British analysts, and especially John Stuart Mill, showed, in turn, more appreciation for Tocqueville's work. But they generally did little to amplify or extend his analysis. This does not mean that British thinkers did not have aspirations to develop a new science of politics (see also Gray 2000). In fact, such aspirations led to a diversity of intellectual endeavours in the course of the nineteenth century (e.g. Collini, Winch and Burrows 1983; Harvie 1976). But these endeavours did not go beyond reiterating the principle of representative government as "the grand discovery of modern times (James Mill, quoted in Collini, Winch and Burrows 1983, 102, emphasis added). The general tendency among British analysts - often described as the "lights of liberalism" (Harvie 1976) - was to treat the British parliamentary system as the exemplar of representative government in action, and to equate the meaning of democracy with forms of government, national elections and majority rule.

For these reasons, colored by the expectations of an imminent collapse of the papacy and even disappearance of the Catholic church, "the lights of liberalism" as late as the generation of James Bryce, who in his youth had unsuccessfully sought to join Garibaldi's irregular army in the liberation of Southern Italy, hailed the creation of the Italian state as one of the most notable achievements of the nineteenth century. However, by privileging this particular process of unification, they missed or ignored a movement of ideas connected with the struggle for Italian liberation and unification, whose preoccupation about the problematics of revolution, reform and change in Italian society, whose understanding of the meaning of democracy and whose attempt to fashion a new science of politics paralleled Tocqueville's concerns and differed sharply from prevailing

British and German ideas. It is among these currents that it is possible to find serious discussions about what lessons American democracy could furnish Europe.

This movement of ideas in the Risorgimento could be found throughout the entire Italian peninsula and islands but was especially prominent in Austrian Lombardy-Venetia, from where, in fact, it had spread. Austrian rule or yoke in Lombardy was not as oppressive as later anti-Austrian propaganda would lead us to believe, and, in part for this reason, Lombardy had come to occupy a leading position among all the Italian communities in the making of books, and in its extensive agencies of thought and literature, extending to periodicals and reading rooms. By the first half of the nineteenth century, Lombardy had evolved into the most economically prosperous and politically progressive community of all the Italian communities. Perhaps no other publicist of the period typifies the movement of ideas in Lombardy more or better than Carlo Cattaneo.

### **Responding to the Challenge**

Cattaneo's interest in the American political experiment developed independent of Tocqueville's. Just around the time when Hegel suggested that there was not much to learn from America, and when Tocqueville was still composing the first volume of Democracy in America, Cattaneo used the Nullification Controversy between South Carolina and President Jackson to reflect on the American experience - in what was also his first-signed article for a leading Milanese journal, near the end of his apprenticeship years (Cattaneo [1833] 1956, SE, 1:11-55). On the strength of the American and British documentation available in the Milan reading rooms and, perhaps through consular services, Cattaneo brought to life for his readers the complexities of the Nullification Controversy, the problem-solving capabilities of a federal union and, more importantly,

the principle of a nation that can govern itself by itself (che una nazione puo' reggersi da sel) (Cattaneo [1833] 1956, SE, 1:30). He drew attention to the importance of religion - from a human point of view as opposed to what constitutes true faith - for the working of democratic institutions, and viewed slavery with deep foreboding for both the oppressed and the oppressors for "no one offends the laws of humanity with impunity" (Cattaneo [1833] 1956, SE, 1:27).

The Bible is perhaps the most cited work in all of Cattaneo's writings. He viewed the Scriptures as furnishing the moral basis for covenantal arrangements among people, so that it may be possible to speculate that his sympathetic understanding of the plight of Jews in his own time derived both from his appreciation of the Bible and from his liberalism. In fact, his liberalism, not unlike that of French Restoration liberals, drew strength from the moral equality found in Christianity - a point he often loved to make in his more polemical, anticlerical, writings. What is also equally clear that Cattaneo recalled with fondness the formative influence in his life of "three good priests" (Cattaneo [1836] 1949, EP, 1:401-2) and looked to the local parish and priest as one of the most important local institutions in Lombardy: "The parochial organization, child of the country, nurtured in the country, foreign to all commotions that occur beyond the limits of each separate part of the country, incapable of opposition and turbulence, almost inaccessible to fanaticism, may be the most power and certain minister of the common prosperity" (Cattaneo 1841, quoted in Greenfield [1934] 1965, 34). What may have thrown false lights on this aspect of Cattaneo's life and liberalism is the widespread, if dubious, tendency to equate anticlericalism with irreligiosity and even atheism. It should be perfectly possible to acknowledge Cattaneo's strong religious sense and his

appreciation of the role that the inquiry about humanity's place in the cosmos played in the growth of human civilization, without making him into another Alessandro Manzoni.

Extending his reflections beyond America and Europe, Cattaneo called for "a public science" to understand how "culture, order and tempered liberty [enlightened self-interest]" can be brought together to offer better life prospects to peoples in Europe and other parts of the world (Cattaneo [1833] 1956, SE, 1:23). Whether Tocqueville knew of Cattaneo's work remains a puzzle, but there is no puzzle about whether or not Cattaneo knew Tocqueville's work. Cattaneo approvingly cited from the first volume of Tocqueville's Democracy in America two years after it was first published and, soon afterwards, from Tocqueville and Beaumont's report on the United States penitentiary system (Cattaneo [1837] 1956 SE 2: 68; [1847] 1964, SP, 1: 283, 300, 317, 383).

Cattaneo followed French events closely and wrote in French an entire book on the 1848 revolt in Lombardy, after having chained himself, as he put it, to a table in a house in Paris. Cattaneo's interest in the political experiments of both the United States and France parallels Tocqueville's, as each analyst applied himself, in his own way and from his own station in life, to practical problems in the world.

To be sure, Cattaneo was not the first Italian thinker to look to the United States and its constitutional arrangement as a model for a functioning republic. Already in the 1780s a young Lombard aristocrat, Luigi Castiglioni, had spent two years travelling in all thirteen states, curious "to see the political birth of a republic composed of diverse nationalities, scattered over vast provinces far removed from one another and varied in climate and products" (1790, quoted in Grab 1989, 41). Admiration for the United States extended to the intellectual and ruling class of the kingdom of Naples as well, to a point

where the name Philadelphia was given to a Calabrian village rebuilt after the earthquake of 1783 (Grab 1989, 46). Many Italian patriots during the so-called triennio, the revolutionary years of 1796-99, felt a strong affinity to the Americans for, in the words of a Venetian translator of both the Pennsylvania constitution of 1776 and one of Benjamin Franklin's books, they "were the first to philosophise on the true spirit and advantages of liberty" (quoted in Palmer 1964 2: 299). Cattaneo himself appears to have studied intensely some of the twenty-nine volumes on the history of North and South America, published in the early 1820 by Giuseppe Compagnoni (Cattaneo [n.d.] 1981 2: 63nl; Treves 1981, xxi). Compagnoni's other achievements included the introduction of the Italian tricolour flag and the first professorship of constitutional law in a European university (at Ferrara in 1797) (Palmer 1964, 2:299).

Nor was Cattaneo the only Italian of his generation to be touched by Tocqueville's Democracy in America. Many other educated Italians had been equally impressed. The Trentino-born Catholic priest and liberal philosopher Antonio Rosmini incorporated Tocqueville's ideas in his two-volume work on the philosophy of politics (Rosmini [1837] 1994, 2:54, 59, 101,184-86, 231-32,323-25,338, 396-98, 410, 417-18, 428-30; see also Butta' 2000).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most prominent was Camillo Benso di Cavour, the future prime minister of Piedmont and a chief artisan of Italian unification. Cavour personally knew Tocqueville (and Beaumont), whom he had met in Paris and London (with Nassau Senior), and admired Democracy in America for, in Cavour's own words, it "throws more light than any other on the political questions of the future" (Cavour, cited in Jardin 1988,228; see also Brogan 1992, 132 note 16).

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<sup>1</sup> In hindsight, Rosmini and Cattaneo agreed more than they disagreed, though in the late 1830s they had a heated exchange of public letters about the perceived (negative or positive) influence of sensist ideas, and of Locke and Romagnosi in Italian culture (but see also Bobbio 1971, chap. 2; and Cook 2000).

What is distinctive about Cattaneo is that, perhaps more than any other Italian publicist of his time, he looked to federal, non-unitary principles of organization as providing a solution to the problem of how to reconcile national unification and local autonomy, how to effect self-rule with shared rule but without hierarchic coordination. Like Tocqueville, Cattaneo sought to help people of his generation to orient themselves toward the challenge implied by the progress of civilization and the aspirations of people to govern themselves. Both looked to the American federal experiment to argue that it was possible for a democratic society not to succumb to centralization. Both, in fact, were interested in overturning the entrenched European view of the state. It is evident that their individual projects were animated by a common vision of what constituted political order and by a strong interest in connecting political theory to political practice. The circumstances of their lives,<sup>2</sup> including the specificities of their particular political problems, led them to pursue their respective inquiries in different ways.

Whereas Tocqueville used the American experience to present an alternative vision to that offered by the philosophes and the French statist experience, Cattaneo suggested that the alternative vision provided by America was consistent with the basic features of Italian and European ways of life and with what was universal, even if hidden from view, in the human condition. Cattaneo shared Tocqueville's concern about the danger of democratic despotism and the long-term viability of democratic prospects, but Cattaneo was still primarily preoccupied with the development and affirmation of liberty itself. For this reason, Cattaneo sought in a more self-conscious way to think through the

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<sup>2</sup> Whereas Tocqueville was a nobleman, Cattaneo was a commoner with deep roots in the Lombard countryside. Their wives were both from the British Isles, but the similarity ends here. Whereas Tocqueville's wife was a commoner, while Cattaneo's wife came from the Anglo-Irish nobility with family connections to the French aristocracy.

problem of articulating the conditions under which the capacities for individual freedom and for self-governing systems can be developed and sustained while pressing for liberation from foreign rule. If in writing Democracy in America, Tocqueville sought to overturn the established French idea of the state, Cattaneo in his work sought answers to the fundamental problem facing Italians in Restoration Europe: how can national liberation and independence be achieved without destroying local institutions of self-rule -that is, without following the model history of European nation states and without repeating the paradox of revolution experienced in France? Could local autonomy and even local patriotism be compatible with, and made to work for, national unification?

Cattaneo as well as other federalist patriots drew particular inspiration and support for their national political program from developments taking place in Lombardy-Venetia. The evolutionary insight they derived provided the vantage point or basis for proceeding through reflection and choice rather than force or by accident. Justification for the eventual creation of a federal system for Italy, and ultimately for Europe, was grounded in the particularities specific to Italy and Europe, as well as in the more general foundations of self-governance that Cattaneo saw present, if often unobtrusively, in most societies. Let us briefly explore these aspects of his inquiry.

#### "A Conspiracy in Open Daylight"

What developments were taking place in Lombardy-Venetia that inspired Cattaneo and other federalist patriots to develop their framework of ideas? There, under Austrian rule, a veritable agricultural, industrial, commercial and educational revival was taking place that had all the characteristics of a risorgimento. In his now classic work on



economics and liberalism in Lombardy between 1814 and 1848, Kent R. Greenfield successfully captured the course of action that had the potential of achieving through reflection and choice the combined goal of independence and liberty:

It is clear that in the inner circle of publicists who ventilated the public interests of Italy between 1815 and 1848 there was a common idea that even when cooperating with Austria they were working towards ends that were beyond the reach of Austrian policy, and also a common conviction that they were in conspiracy with the course of events, with the march of the 'century'; in other words, that they had found a method of action which compelled even the national adversary to cooperate with them, in so far as that power was alert to its material interests. This was their 'conspiracy in open daylight.'

Greenfield continued:

They were right in their strategy: witness the confused and helpless opposition of Austria, whose rulers suspected but never fully comprehended their power. Metternich, with his germ theory of revolution, his persistent obsession that it grew solely out of a Jacobinical conspiracy which could be isolated and destroyed if the governments would only act in concert, proved incapable of meeting them on their own ground... liberal journalists [like Cattaneo] saw at least a partial fulfilment of their hopes. By 1848, largely through their efforts, an Italian public opinion had been formed that could never again be governed successfully by the principles and methods of the ancien regime, less because their material interests of the Italian community had been revolutionized than because the public had been indoctrinated with a new conception of those interests (Greenfield [1934] 1965, 286-87).

If such a conspiracy in broad daylight continued, unhindered to other parts of the peninsula, the time would come when it would be extremely difficult for any absolutist government or army of occupation to defeat it. But events connected with the revolts of 1848 and their aftermaths reduced the prospects of this strategy, as Piedmont became the only parliamentary, constitutional monarchy, with a standing army, capable of taking the lead on the diplomatic front while inspiring liberals throughout the peninsula to favour unification under its banners (e.g. Grew 1963). After 1849, from his refuge in

Switzerland, Cattaneo focused most of his attention and correspondence, and used all his power of persuasion and prestige, in trying to convince radical liberals and republican revolutionaries not to engage in secret conspiracies and revolutionary activities, as they would in the end skew outcomes in favour of the Savoy monarchy. This was the paradox of the Italian revolution.

In 1851, Giuseppe Ferrari, the Milanese radical friend of Cattaneo who had earlier moved to France, published a book on the philosophy of revolution. The theme of Ferrari's work was the revolution of ideas that had swept Europe with the scientific movement of the seventeenth century. He interpreted the events of 1789-1791 in France as giving concrete dimensions to the earlier affirmation of human reason and natural equality. In Ferrari's view, the French Revolution had proclaimed the reign of science, or secular culture, and the reign of equality, although he was compelled to concede that the attainment of both remained elusive as late as 1851. In the words of Clara Lovett, who has written a moving biography of Ferrari's intellectual odyssey, "The revolutionary tradition, of which (Ferrari) felt very much a part, was the constant struggle to attain those goals" (Lovett 1979, 75).

Much of what Ferrari has to say coincides with Cattaneo's understanding of the Western epistemological tradition. In an initial review of Ferrari's book, Cattaneo sympathetically summarized the main points of the work. In keeping with his practice, he returned to the book a few months later with a longer review essay. The earlier praise was still there, for Cattaneo was not unmindful of the French contribution to the civilizing process and the positive revolution in ideas that it implied. As he noted later on, "when the American people proclaimed their independence and when the French people

proclaimed the Rights of Man, they gave a lesson in philosophy to the rest of the world" (Cattaneo [1860] 1960, SF, 1:371). But, now he went beyond Ferrari's argument to reflect on the challenge of transforming the revolution of ideas into principles of self-governance (Cattaneo [1851] 1960, SF, 1:272-86).

Cattaneo found that, while academics continued to be largely concerned with the history of ideas, people beyond university porticoes and in work places, social circles and on street corners were struggling to do political theory. These "obscure Socrates" - so Cattaneo called them - were posing new and unexpected questions about what goods and bads life offered, the monstrous inequality of conditions in which they lived and what constituted the constitution of a good society. This was "truly philosophical material and true philosophy: man studies man and "know thyself [nosce te ipsum], as the ancient saying goes" (Cattaneo [1851] 1960, SF, 1:281-2). While official, university, culture still focused on arcane metaphysical disquisitions, revolutionary ideas discussed among common people were gaining popularity and arming revolts.

The experience of having lived through the crushed aspirations of the revolts of 1821, 1832 and 1848 confirmed for Cattaneo both the problem and the oncoming challenge - that the field for new ideas is neither entirely clear nor self-realizable even when these ideas appear victorious on the streets. It is encumbered with arms, bounded with chains, and laid with traps and gallows. People may have a well-developed sense of the ills of their society, and the injustices they have suffered; they can easily respond to calls for revolutionary action, to the barricades. But, Cattaneo continued, along the same lines as Tocqueville, this very fact may make them more prone to feats of arms and acts of heroism, than apt to learn and to put more trust in the humdrum, less glamorous,

practice of self-governance in their everyday life for they do not yet have explicit and firm ideas of what it means to be free. As Cattaneo surveyed the European scene, he found reckless hopes on one side, and ruthless interests and senseless fears on the other (Cattaneo [1851] 1960, SF, 1:282).

Cattaneo's main preoccupation was that, in such a situation, it was relatively easy to mistake the temporal process of doing something for all that there was to the movement for national liberation and independence. He feared that the rush to action - with the inevitable reaction - would take precedence over learning and reflecting about what ideas to articulate as principles of self-governance. A widespread shared understanding of what liberty and self-governance meant was essential for a proper articulation of ideas as principles of governance. Without such an epistemic base, liberals of all sorts as well as republican revolutionaries would be tempted to mistake - and even engage in - struggles for sovereignty and power as struggles for freedom, as if what type of political order replaced the old made no difference in terms of what it meant to practice the art of free citizenship. National independence cannot be achieved at the expense of liberty. This, Cattaneo thought, would be a disaster of major proportions. Hardly had a few months passed after Cattaneo's reflections reached the finality of print, that Ferrari did something to confirm the validity of Cattaneo's preoccupation.

On December 2, 1851 Napoleon Bonaparte staged a coup d'etat in France and eventually assumed the title of emperor as Napoleon III. Ferrari, who identified himself with the radical-socialist factions in French politics and had a strong sympathy for the French revolutionary tradition, welcomed and supported the Bonapartist coup. He defended his position by insisting that all that the radical-socialists and democrats had

lost was "our inadequate resources, our errors, misconceptions, and illusions; we faced a thick jungle that had to be cleared with a hatchet; should we bewail its sudden destruction by lightning?" (quoted in Lovett 1979, 85-6). In the words of his biographer, Ferrari cast Louis Napoleon "in the role of an avenging angel whose flaming sword was dispelling the fog that had been generated in France by the sudden birth of the democratic republic and by its equally rapid demise " (Lovett 1979, 86).

From Cattaneo's vantage point, Ferrari's parabola epitomized what was wrong with those who put action ahead of the growth of democratic ideas and practices of freedom in society and the utility of institutional forms for the practice of self-government. Cattaneo criticized Ferrari for the same reasons that Tocqueville criticized the radical-socialist faction to which Ferrari belonged (Lovett 1979, 85-7). Unlike Tocqueville, however, Cattaneo did not directly engage his old friend.

In April 1852, in a letter to Luigi Tentolini, an Italian political refugee long involved in clandestine activities in France, Cattaneo did not mince words in what he saw as a critical problem for well-intentioned radicals: "You have a false doctrine; you wish to obtain liberty through means that lead to dictatorship and empire, which is another form of dictatorship" (Cattaneo [1852] 1952, EP, 2:157). A few months later, responding to several queries from a Neapolitan revolutionary friend, Carlo Pisacane, Cattaneo dismissed a book Ferrari had later written defending the Bonapartist coup as a "libercolo", an Italianate rendition of a medieval Latin word (libercul) referring to a book with little value and interest and with false pretensions of validity (Cattaneo [1852] 1952, EP, 2:169). He sought to persuade Pisacane - unsuccessfully, it turned out, as Pisacane died heroically in an uprising with little or no prospect of success - that people

like Ferrari were following a "false doctrine." Though Cattaneo did not engage his friend Ferrari directly, he seldom failed to remind his public interlocutors, or those willing to listen, that,

The French Revolution was unable to go beyond the centuries old tradition of, and its own faith in, the omnipotence of rulers. The king's representatives gave way to the nation's representatives but the fervor engendered by discipline made them abandon liberty. The people had the land but not the commune [i.e. self-government] (Cattaneo [1864] 1965, SP, 4:419).

France is indeed the country that popularized revolution, yet it is the European country where it is least possible to make one, if by revolution we mean a profound overthrow and renewal of interests and not just a superficial change of administrative rituals (Cattaneo [1842] 1957, SSG, 1: 285).

New scholarship is bringing to light that the French experience of state nationalism in the nineteenth century was more plagued with self-doubts and failures than the standard, orthodox view, criticized by Tocqueville and Cattaneo, would lead us to believe. The recent work of Sudbir Hazareensingh, in particular, has drawn attention to the fact that criticism of French state nationalism was widespread among the "free professions," intellectuals, businessmen and politicians, as late as the Third Republic. Frenchmen in different walks of life attributed the problematic nature of French citizenship and the fact that France was still a "country of savages" to the Jacobin project itself. Many people of Tocqueville's generation recognized that centuries of state power and nationalism had neither erased cultural and linguistic differences nor suppressed entirely non-unitary forms of rule, including federalist principles of organization, as viable alternatives to the French state. Even those who worked to shore up Napoleon III's Second Empire recognized the need to reform centralized government and administration for it was blamed "for the good it cannot achieve, for the evil it cannot prevent" on the assumption that hardly any ruler would want to rule under such conditions (quoted from a 1865 law project, cited in Hazareensingh 1998, 56).

Three conclusions can be drawn from this, more recent, research (see also Craiutu 1999). The first is that we now know that Tocqueville and Cattaneo were not alone in their criticisms. The second is that the truth value of what they said continued to be valued well after their works were published. The problems of reforming, or decentering, the state in France posed an enormous challenge that could not be overcome by successive generations of people there, including Ferrari's well-intentioned revolutionary bourgeoisie. As Cattaneo put it, "the 'principle of ministerial omnipotence and omniscience' remained as a chief stumbling block to real change" (Cattaneo [1842] 1957, SSG, 1:285). The third conclusion strengthens Cattaneo's argument in another way: recent research on nineteenth century France makes all the more questionable the attempt, particularly since Gramsci, to measure the Italian middle class against an idealized abstraction of the French (revolutionary) bourgeoisie. Assigning to any particular social class (or group, or region like Piedmont) the task of moving a country forward was, for Cattaneo, fraught with danger on several fronts: it dispensed people from properly considering what alternative constitutional designs were available to realize the common objectives of independence, liberation and self-government; it led to the neglect of the role that individuals and groups from all social strata could play in realizing such common objectives (a point learned first hand during the 1848 revolt); and it tended to ignore both the interactive process that applies to any form of collective undertaking and the exceedingly difficult task awaiting any single group trying to achieve and maintain a country-wide political and cultural hegemony. In short, recent research amplifies but does not detract from - indeed lends additional support to - Cattaneo's use of the French example.

We now know that a Sicilian liberal political economist, Francesco Ferrara, shared these views and tried, in 1860, to convey them directly to Cavour, whom he knew personally. Cavour rejected Ferrara's memorandum on the assumption that what he, as prime minister of Piedmont, was working toward would not, in the end, replicate the

French system of centralized government and administration. Cavour genuinely believed that his statecraft would have mostly beneficial effects, for his "theory of the state [did] not imply either the tyranny of the capital over the rest of Italy or the creation of a bureaucratic caste that would subjugate all other bodies and would thus transform the position of the government into an artificial center of an empire toward which the traditions and habits of Italians and Italy's geographic configuration would always be against" (Cavour [1860] 1949, 4:220).

The problem of properly understanding the paradigmatic challenge of liberal democracy, of achieving both independence and liberty, was not just confined to France, to radical socialists like Ferrari, and liberal statesman like Cavour. It extended to Italian republican revolutionaries as well. Writing to Mazzini in September 1850 what is generally regarded the letter that marked the end of their collaboration and the beginning of a disagreement that changed into hostility, Cattaneo tried at some length to convince him - in a language that at times Mazzini must have assuredly found upsetting - that his "little undertakings [i.e. uprisings] will be ineffective if the people do not rise en masse, and they are superfluous if the people truly rises. Go and try to have a levee en masse!" True to his evolutionary perspective and given his experience with the conspiracy in broad daylight in Austrian Lombardy, Cattaneo went on to urge Mazzini to spend all his efforts to affect a change in the people's heart and mind:

I advocate the dissemination of writings that slowly but surely awaken mass consciousness about constitutional rules of governance (diritto), sentiments of freedom and self-mastery, contempt of princely concessions and transactions, respect of nations and reciprocal help, and peaceful resolution of questions of borders and commercial free trade (Cattaneo [1850] 1952, EP, 2:45-6).

Typically, Cattaneo saw the Italian case within a broader European concern, while reasserting the constitutive dynamics of individual action:



It is the duty of every people who succeeds in becoming free to help his neighbors gain theirs before [territorial] ambitions set in and dampen the generous burst of victory among the people. I believe that we would do well to imitate the friars and begin the work of justice ab ego [among ourselves] in the newspapers, reasserting our good name first...

Our enemies are the enemies of the people. They are required by necessity to lie, and contradict one another. All that we have to do is to reveal the truth. When we will have public opinion behind us, which we do not have now, we will have money, armies, soldiers and everything else. Educate the multitude and opposition will crumble (Cattaneo [1850] 1952, EP, 2:46).

Many Italian patriots were in fact educators. But Mazzini would not listen. He was impatient to wait the fruit of what Cattaneo proposed, and continued his conspiracies.

In 1852, in the aftermath of yet another failed uprising organized by Mazzini - this time in Mantua - Cattaneo's impatience grew. Writing to the Neapolitan radical Carlo Pisacane, who was to give his life in an uprising, he expressed his impatience, or foresight, this way:

The professors of revolution do not understand that revolutions, like the seasons of the year, are not at the command of an individual. To expect such occurrences to break out through one's singular efforts is pretentious. And when, in fact, such events do arise, (revolutionaries) seldom know how to turn them to profit and they end up, instead, placing everything in the hands of princes or popes [ie. or acting like absolute monarchs].

And, with an implied sharp criticism of that professor of revolution par excellence, Mazzini, Cattaneo added: "They say: action and silence. [I say:] action is absurdity and silence is betrayal (Cattaneo [1852] 1952, EP, 2:169).

The tendency to downplay the place of ideas and shared understanding in the world of action and even in the constitution of a political order appropriate to human liberation was not, however, confined to engagé intellectuals like Ferrari, Pisacane and Mazzini. As Cattaneo discovered in 1860, when Garibaldi called him to Naples to act in a consultative capacity, it applied to sincere patriots as well. In the end, Garibaldi mistook

Cattaneo's suggestions for a Neapolitan constituent assembly as a step in the creation of a political structure opposed to Italian unification; and Garibaldi was not at all displeased when Cattaneo respectfully withdrew from his entourage, declined to be an envoy in London and returned to his Swiss village (e.g. Armani 1997, 171, 234).

News of the American Civil War must have added to Cattaneo's disappointment as the American civil war appeared to discredit further the extension of federal principles to Italy and Europe -just as it did in the creation of the Canadian Confederation in 1867. Even the creation of the 1868 federal republic in Spain must not have been a source of optimism for Cattaneo as the republic contradicted an important premise in his mode of analysis: the Spanish federal republic had not emerged from below; its constitution was imposed in haste from the top down, without much reflection about Spain's own regionalist tradition and experience. What, then, sustained Cattaneo's positivity? On what did Cattaneo ground his optimistic prognosis for an eventual public acceptability of federalism both as theory of liberty-in-action and as practice of self-governance for Italy, Europe and other parts of the world?

### Foundations for Self-Governance in Italy<sup>3</sup>

Cattaneo considered Italy physically and historically a federal country (cited in Brunello 1925, 168). Almost all his work on Italy since the 1830s is devoted to elucidating this fact. Italy is a country of city and village republics. The educative process associated with the roots of constitutionalism at the local level is necessary to the blossoming of a self-governing society for Italy as a whole. In 1858, he wrote a set of essays reiterating this conclusion against a prevailing argument that what Italy really needed was a strong, centralized system of government and administration to bring an end to weakness and rivalry. By emphasizing the importance of microconstitutional

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<sup>3</sup> This section draws heavily on chapter 3 "The Constitutional Design That Did not Happen" of my The Search for Good Government: Understanding the Paradox of Italian Democracy (2000).

foundations for the blossoming of macroconstitutionalism fit to a self-governing society, he was able to argue against the prevailing argument.

The city, he claimed, was the "only organizing principles that allows us to make an evident and continuous exposition of thirty centuries of Italian histories. Without this organizing thread, the mind becomes disoriented in the labyrinth of conquests, factions, and civil wars, and in the frequent structuring and restructuring of states" (Cattaneo [1858] 1957, 2:383). Cattaneo began by going back to ancient times - to the civic culture of Magna Graecia in the south, and that of the Etruscan communities in the center and in the north. He identified and discussed nine different eras of civil evolution since those early times, and ended his analytical narrative with the city republics of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. He used this history, not to suggest a continuous, unbroken course of city development, but rather to emphasize certain features that made the city, or the local, both an historical community in Italy and an appropriate level of analysis. The set of essays on the city can thus be read at different levels: the city as a conceptual variable, as an historical community, and as a manifestation of the struggle for self-governance - not just as power struggles of the upper classes over time.

Cattaneo sought to draw out features of the Italian cultural tradition that had theoretical and empirical implications for the problematics of political change and reform in his own time. He focussed on the following dimensions:

- Civic consciousness. From the very beginnings, the city in Italy is not the same as that in Asia or Northern Europe. Even the Roman Empire, unlike other empires, began from a city, and retained, for a long time, many of its features. Communal society was and remains important for the shared understanding that enables people to become self-governing. This fact cannot be underestimated for the future of Italian civilization. Though at times this fact was crushed by internal or external forces, or denied by one lordship or another, as soon as the domination was relaxed, for whatever reason, the original elasticity reemerges and the municipal fabric of the city blossomed again to regain its full vibrancy. Sometimes it is the countryside that regenerates a destroyed city. Italy is a country of cities and towns such that no responsible legislator, entrepreneur or

analyst can fail to take notice and respect local patriotism as it gives meaning to life and enlightens patterns of relationship.

- Municipal institutions. The constancy and permanence of municipal institutions is another fundamental fact common throughout almost all the history of Italy. These institutions proved to be more durable than successive waves of conquest.
- Free cities. As self-governing communes, they were important for several reasons: the spread of individual liberties and free standing individuals; the growth of law broadly understood to encompass commercial, maritime as well as manorial or feudal law; the continuous exercise of the art of association within each commune and neighborhood and sometimes across different city boundaries. The basic principles of constitutional government were worked out in the free cities of Italy as well as Germany long before the Americans confronted the problems of constitutional choice. To illustrate this observation, Cattaneo was also fond of calling up the irrigation system in the Po river Plain, which encompassed several provinces and territories. The creation and maintenance of such long-enduring institutions over many centuries, including circumstances where the Po River valley itself was the theater of war and conquest, attest to the constitutional knowledge and artisanship of successive generations of people and how microconstitutional experiments served as an important educative mechanism in the extension of the irrigation system throughout an entire area.
- Civic life contributed in a fundamental way to the growth of important centers of learning and more generally to the growth of a culture that privileged critical inquiry, disputation, problem solving and experimental science more generally.
- The similarities between North and South rapidly changed after the twelfth century. Cattaneo dates the rupture to the Norman conquest of the South in the eleventh century. Recent scholarship suggests that Cattaneo exaggerated the extent of the rupture in the civic culture of the south.
- The insufficiency of the free cities. For Cattaneo, what deprived Italian cities of the capacity to successfully manage local problems, reduce the risk of self-perpetuating oligarchies, and circumvent the prospects of foreign domination and conquest, was, in addition to the growth of absolutist monarchies, the absence of federative arrangements —that is, in Cattaneo's view, the unavailability of a polycentric, federalist perspective to political craftsmanship and problem solving.

The availability of an explicit polycentric, federalist perspective by the 19<sup>th</sup> century meant that it was possible both to avoid past errors and, at the same time, to extend principles of self-government from the individual, to the towns and to the nation as a whole.

In support of Cattaneo's view, it may be added that federalist principles of organization were such a part of the Italian political tradition that self-governing patterns of human relationship were not entirely eclipsed by the victory of unitary principles. Indeed, federalist principles gained renewed support well after Cattaneo's death in 1869, as government performance began to deviate radically from expectations. The establishment of regional and neighborhood governments by the 1970s and the debate inside parliament and out by the end of the 1990s (about federalist solutions to the collapse of the postwar system of rule) attest to the enduring strength and validity of non-unitary political forms. Yet the constitutional design that did not happen in the 19th century may not blossom if, following Cattaneo's logic of inquiry, what is constitutive of a self-governing society — people learning to be free and self-governing and pursuing self-governing undertakings with others - continues to be overshadowed by, and falls victim to, state pageantry and reasons of state.

#### Uncovering More General Foundations for Self-Governance

Cattaneo's experience under foreign occupation made him especially sensitive to what to look for in the way of unobtrusive foundations for democratic self-governance. He spent his apprenticeship year at the journal *Annali* between 1831 and 1834, scanning domestic and foreign news and writing reports concerned largely with the diffusion of knowledge, commerce and technology around the world. He wrote about many topics, including the opening of the Welland Canal in Upper Canada and the introduction of the telegraph in Bengal. If read in a segregated way, these reports appear of little or no theoretical interest. But placed in the larger context of Cattaneo's interest, they take on

entirely new meaning: they convey attentiveness to the rich diversity of human developments across space and, at the same time, to an increasing common characteristic of people in different settings and circumstances struggling to become self-governing as they confronted problematic situations in their lives. Hence the range of news covered must have been puzzling to the Austrian censors as it went - to use one of his memorable phrases — "from the immortality of human ingenuity to the raisin trade" (Cattaneo [1833] 1964,SP, 1:47). In fact, his news notes take on renewed significance, when read against the backdrop of his subsequent attempts to come to terms more directly with the relationship between incivilimento and liberty. In 1833, for example, he focused on events connected with former American slaves in Liberia, highlighting the need for former slaves to be "free possessors of themselves" so that, as free standing individuals, they could reawaken, and put to use, their unused skills and the practice of associating together (Cattaneo [1833] 1964, SP, 1:50, 59). It was in the second half of 1830 that Cattaneo began to construct for himself a more systematic framework of analysis - a public science, he called it - concerned with foundations of democratic self-governance. Here I can only give a brief sketch.

First, Cattaneo argued, there is a need to discern between institutions that are accidental and transitory and those without which a human society cannot stand. This is no small matter for philosophers who have often asked the wrong question: What would life be like without government? He argued that this question is based on the false presupposition that government refers only to the state, which explains the widespread tendency to treat the study of politics almost exclusively as either the study of power or the study of why some states are more powerful than others (Cattaneo [1842] 1957, SSG,

1:255-301). The way to identify which mechanisms are foundational to human existence is to focus on how human beings the world over deal with questions of complementarity, interdependence and coordination. For Cattaneo, a common language as "the first element in social aggregation" is one such mechanism (Cattaneo [1837] 1948, SL, 1:210-11). He argued that, without a state, human society can still stand. People had solved many problems of living together and acting in concert (convivenza civile) through all sorts of human associations, including communal societies and societies of neighbors - and these have existed beyond the family and kinship groups, prior to the consent of state legislators. It must be quickly added that, for all his profound reservations about "the" government and "the" state and for his self-conscious use of terms, Cattaneo himself could not at times escape linguistic conventions in adopting terms like the state as synonyms for non-unitary political forms and political systems in general.

A second set of theoretical factors had to do with being open to the possibility - Cattaneo at times called it a "generous persuasion" - to appreciate the constitutive dynamics of human beings in the world. Cattaneo argued that we should stop treating individuals as blind instruments of a particular time or culture while at the same time remembering that they are not self-sufficiently alone or metaphysically independent of society. The pressing task is to construct a public science or political economy incorporating history, institutions and culture and, at the same time, individuals as beings capable through their actions of destroying, derailing or refashioning the heredity of the past and existing equilibria. His conception of the individual is, in fact, grounded in an ontology of the person that links being, becoming and acting (or behaving) to form the constitutive dynamics of the person or, to use what Siedentop says about Tocqueville's

somewhat similar conception, "virility" (Siedentop 1994, 141). This is another way of saying that Cattaneo sought to understand how individuals learn to be free, sovereign is the word he often used, while at the same time living in complementarity, interdependence and coordination with others - in short, in *convivenza civile*. Interested as he was about the origins of words and the use of language, Cattaneo seldom forgot that the root of incivilimento is *civis*, the citizen. A common language is an important principle of aggregation but it is not sufficient, even in a united Italy, to achieve self-governing patterns of human relationship and to prevent domination and exploitation..

Finally, the constitutive dynamics of human beings that manifest themselves in the world - which he liked to describe as the field of human liberty (il campo della liberta' umana) - must be studied in context, which is within the specificities of particular time and place. This field of human liberty takes individuals to be cocreators with God of the world they live in. This implied that much of the world in which humans live is artificial — Cattaneo used the term *artificial* to refer to artifacts shaped by human knowledge like agriculture, commonwealths and irrigation networks. But this artificial world cannot be theorized about in *vacuo*, as this practice has already produced much disorientation in the history of philosophy. He had a particular dislike of the extreme rationalism associated with - as he saw - Plato, Descartes and Thomas Aquinas. This is why Cattaneo was mindful of Vico's conclusion that "the natural law of philosophers is not the same as the natural law of people" (quoted in Frisch and Begin [1944] 1975, 48). Nor can human and political artifacts be studied solely at the macro, national level, for the history of countries relatively free of foreign domination like Japan (at that time) reveals that "the independence of a state is no automatic assurance that its citizens are



free" (Cattaneo [1860] 1957, SGG, 3:61). By contrast, the work of interconnected local institutions that, over many centuries, transformed the originally inhospitable Lombard Plain and created the social, economic and political wealth that Lombardy has achieved, was the artifactual creation of free people, patient tillers of the soil as well as engineers and masters of canals, -in brief, the display of human ingenuity as even the soil was not a gift of nature (Cattaneo [1845] 1956, SE, 3:5; see also [1844] 1957, SSG, 1:419-33). From this experience, Cattaneo drew theoretical implications for the problematics of change and for the study of self-governance that were to inform all his future work: "the culture and well-being of peoples do not depend so much on spectacular name changes from one regime to another, but rather on the steady application of certain principles that are passed on, unnoticed, through the working of institutional arrangements often viewed as having secondary importance" (Cattaneo [1847] 1956, SE, 3:114:5).

At the same time, Cattaneo acknowledged that the emergence of a more nuanced comparative understanding of incivilimento than in the previous century, thanks in part to the retrieval of Vico's ideas. This more persuasive understanding flowed from an undeniable truth highlighted by Vico, which had probably attracted Cattaneo to Vico in the first place, and allowed him to tolerate Vico's excruciatingly tedious, if colorful, prose. The truth, in Vico's words, is "that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own mind" (Vico [1744] 1994, para. 331, 96). But Cattaneo did not stop there. He extended this conclusion to Vico's own "new science of humanity" for, despite the emphasis on human artisanship, Vico's theory presumed uniformity where there is variety and cyclic immutability where there is adaptation and even progress. In fact,

Cattaneo continued, the discovery of Sanskrit in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had enlarged the universe of human culture and revealed the extent to which Vico's own understanding of humanity was largely confined to where it came from, the Greco-Roman world of classical antiquity (Cattaneo [1846] 1957, SSG, 2:97-113).

In his 1844 considerations on the principle of philosophy, Cattaneo sketched in more detail his perspective on how to uncover the hidden foundations for self-governance in different societies (Cattaneo [1844] 1960, SF 1:142-70). He began by noting that every civilized nation embodies various organizing principles, each aspiring to permeate the state and make it its own. History and human events offer many examples of enduring contrasts among diverse organizing principles seeking to give direction and uniformity to societies. This heterogeneity of principles is no mere "ideology" but a concrete manifestation of the multiple dimensions that societies possess in the economic, juridical-institutional, cultural and moral realms. There are more than one way to get particular things done - so that, as much as he admired private property rights, Cattaneo was respectful of other forms of possessing. As a way of illustrating the diversity, Cattaneo offers many examples of the multidimensional and complex world in which people have lived through time. He then introduces two important corollaries.

The first corollary is that the tendency for some set of principles to dominate and direct the state is seldom, if ever, realized. Before one set acquires dominance in the intellectual and public realm, including public opinion, other principles tend to emerge often unexpectedly, pushing the current of interests and opinion in other directions. The second is that the more civilized a people is, the more numerous are the organizing principles it contains. This is what made the European civilization "superior" or stand out

when ranged alongside the other major world civilizations. Hence his attempt to understand ancient and modern societies and agrarian civilizations like that of imperial China and Hindu India compared to the rise of Christian Europe as an industrial civilization. But Cattaneo was quick to point out that stationary peoples and societies do not exist except in the abstract or in the minds of some theorists. He illustrates the point using the example of China. After comparing Italy and China, he turns specifically to the latter, focusing especially on its resource-based achievements requiring considerable human artisanship. He summarizes these accomplishments in this way:

The person who considers China stationary will find it in continuous agitation if he looks closely to its history. He will see (people in) China introducing agriculture over a vast territory, embanking rivers, digging up canals, establishing settlements of cultivators along the thousand valleys of its two major rivers and innumerable cities, absorbing barbarous tribes from the mountains, embracing all its peoples in one civilization with the bond of a common language; fashioning laws, arts and writings; and China had achieved all this when Europe was pertinaciously barbarous and stagnating. Then we see China breaking up into several federated realms, and in this comparative liberty developing popular and assorted philosophies; then transforming itself now into one empire, now into two, as Marco Polo found. Twice, like in the case of Italy, barbarians conquered China; the first time it succeeded in expelling them; in other times, it softened their impact and aggregated the conquerors into its civilization. In the meantime, assiduous mental work was propagating on one side the Socratic philosophy of Confucius, and, on other sides, the abstract philosophy of Lao Tsue, and the theological metaphysics of Buddhism; more recently, the foments of a new revolution have come from the Bible [ie.Christianity]. (Cattaneo [1861] 1957, SSG, 3:150-51).

Cattaneo continued, the China we know from history books is an artifactual creation made by successive generations of people - that is, all these activities reflect the development of knowledge and its application to solve, for the most part, concrete problems of human existence. In this sense, China is no different than Lombardy or other parts of the world. The history of mankind is more similar from country to country than

we commonly believe; and the type of progress open to human beings varies as a function of the course of events specific to particular contexts, and not as a function of racial or natural predestination.

To Herder, who characterized the Chinese as lacking a progressive and inventive genius, and suggested that whatever the Chinese could accomplish had already been done by others, Cattaneo noted ironically that "if when Charlemagne subjugated barbaric Saxony to Latin civilization, some Roman or Byzantine had decreed that the semi gothic race could not give itself new institutions shaped by new knowledge and that it was forever trapped by its own nature, that prognostication would be rejected by the emergence in contemporary Germany of people like Herder himself (Cattaneo [1861] 1957, 3:151). And for the same reasons, it is the plurality of constitutive elements, this heterogeneity, which denotes the level of potential progress in a society. Variety is life and a closed epistemic system is death. Those who invoke perpetual peace, through a single universal republic, would reduce the world to an impossible situation.

Movement and heterogeneity are then the life-giving forces of human society. The antithesis between civilization and barbarism is here, and with it the future of individuals and people. Societal conditions provide the range of opportunities and possibilities for the all important associational life, convivenza civile. For man, the greater the variety of impulses that the will can follow, the more vast is his dominion and liberty. By contrast, the more the intellect is devoid of ideas, and the more narrow and limited his field of liberty and action, the more man's capacity to reason will get confused with instinct, jeopardizing his freedom to act or not to act. Savage man is much more restricted in his sphere of action than is modern man; something that, Cattaneo continues, Rousseau did

not consider when he ranked a primitive state above civilized existence. If in his own time, Cattaneo noted, Europe had become synonymous with civilization and Asia with barbarism, this is so precisely because movement and heterogeneity are present in the first and are reduced to the minimum in the latter. Why this is so? How to explain stagnation?

Look, Cattaneo said, to what afflicts cities in Asia today. Their chief problem is not that they lack commerce, industry, a certain tradition of science, love of poetry and music, gardens, perfumes and the opulence of palaces and civilized lifestyle. What afflicts their public life resides in this: people have had neither freedom nor autonomy; cities are without urban law and, as a consequence, without municipal consciousness and patriotism. Most urban dwellers have been conditioned to live as if they were inanimate beings, as if they did not have a capacity to reason and to take individual and joint initiatives. European travelers who have depicted residents of Asian cities as resigned to their fate and unsolicitous about matters of common interests have been correct in their description, but they have been seriously mistaken in explaining the causes. Communal apathy and inertia do not flow from personal characteristics, or even from community ethos. Whatever fatalism, inertia and apathy can be observed, they do not derive from an innate incapacity or inability of Asians. Rather, they derive from the dominant organizing principle of political life and institutional arrangements that shape the political economy of everyday life for most ordinary people. In the case of China, Cattaneo identified the chief problem in the rituals of filial piety toward the emperor, or a descending conception of filial piety that stagnates an entire nation. Against this backdrop, fatalism and inaction

can and do become a way of coping with conditions of life devoid of chances to pursue individual and joint opportunities.

Cattaneo seldom lost faith in the view that human beings in Asia, as elsewhere, could learn to break out of such vicious circles (Cattaneo [1858] 1957, SSG, 2:395).<sup>4</sup> The problematics of change and reform cannot be reduced to simple formulas. Cattaneo recognized that the play of principles that impact on society is not properly speaking dialectic. Change does not occur this way; it occurs rather slowly, unevenly and in a piecemeal fashion. As a result, we may consider all legislation or laws as involving a series of transactions aimed at resolving or meliorating tensions and contrasts among multiple societal elements.

Heterogeneity, then, is both the result and a source of good institutional design. Cattaneo continued to use the term state but defined it as a set of fundamental rules that allow the many elements of social life to have an autonomous, self-governing existence while playing their part in society. The state is then, for Cattaneo, an immense transaction where, among others, property and commerce, what can be held and what can be disposed of, luxury and savings, the useful and the beautiful, operate every day to either conquer or defend portions of the public sphere that allow them to enhance their respective exigencies and compete with one another's way of life. And thus the supreme formula for good government and civilization is to design a system of governance whereby principles and ways of life do not override one another, where none is denied its own space. Just as important - for someone like Cattaneo who remembered his Montesquieu, valued the Enlightenment for drawing attention how to put individual self

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<sup>4</sup> Much of this paragraph comes from my "The Constitutional Design that Did not Happen," (Sabetti 2000, 71).

interest to serve the commonweal, and took pride in the long-enduring institutions surrounding the Po River - there was the need to educate and shape the interests of those controlling collective-choice mechanisms as to allow those officials to invest in maintaining and even crafting better rules for action.<sup>4</sup> This science of association can be extended with the application of federal principles of organization - in short, what he called federal law.

Federalism so understood promotes liberty as a plant with many roots. This is why against all odds, Cattaneo held firm to a positive view of life and to his vision of the possibility to achieve a good life, if only for others yet to come.

### **Conclusion**

The national and international reputation of Cavour, Mazzini and Garibaldi completely overshadowed Cattaneo. His ideas have had better fortune since his death. Cattaneo has been successively hailed as "Italy's greatest political economist and philosopher" (White Mario 1875, 465), as "the most profound and versatile intellectual of all the Italian Risorgimento" (Woolf 1975), as "the only self-conscious theorist of liberalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy" (Bobbio 1971,183), and even as "the last of the great Encyclopedists, the universal scholar" (Carbone 1956). Even when every possible allowance is made for exaggeration, this paper suggests that there is something to these characterizations. The chief reason is that, to borrow from John Gray's description of Mill (Gray 2000), Cattaneo's ideas and framework of analysis — like Mill's - was not shaped by a narrow, intra-academic agenda but by the great social and political transformations of his time. In this, Cattaneo, Mill and Tocqueville were alike. Unlike

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<sup>4</sup> Drawing in part on Cattaneo, Greenfield ([1934] 1965, chaps.1-2) discusses several such rules for self-monitoring and adjustment that applied to renters, water police and canal masters, among others.

Mill, however, both Cattaneo and Tocqueville were reluctant to grant that the choice of liberties is best made through representative political institutions. This paper has tried to show why.



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