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# No Future For You: Italy Between Fictional Past And Postnational Future

**Emanuel Rota**

*Io non mi sento Italiano  
ma per fortuna o purtroppo  
lo sono*  
--Giorgio Gaber

In the past few decades the intellectuals who have been discussing globalization have predicted the demise of the nation-state. Italy is probably the first western country where such predictions have become common currency. Given the fragility of Italian national identity and the weakness of the Italian state, the foundering of the nation-state in Italy should not be a surprise. The celebrations for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of political unification and their limited and controversial success in capturing the Italian political imagination should serve as a reminder that nation-states are, despite their efforts to appear timeless and transcendental, recent, historically-specific creations. Now, at what may be the end of an epoch, the present and the future of Italy already are already looking post-national.<sup>1</sup>

## *The “Southern Question,” Northern Separatism, and Pseudo-Federalism*

The globalization debates have underscored the long-standing failure of the Italian state to solve its most important and most obvious problem: the Southern Question. In 2007, according to the European Union, five southern regions of Italy—Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily—had a GDP per capita that was still less than 75% of the European average, while all the Northern Italian regions had a GDP per capita equal or superior to the European average (European Commission 2011, 47).

As the map below shows, the GDP of Italy’s five southernmost regions is in line with the GDP of Greece and Portugal, while the GDP of the central and northern regions of Italy is in line with that of the neighboring countries to the north and west. In Europe a similar gap between two macro-regions of the same nation can be found only along the line that divided Germany into two blocs after the end of World War II.

These economic data portraying an Italy economically divided into two dramatically different areas have inspired brilliant and very convincing analyses of the South’s economic underdevelopment.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the state has been incapable or unwilling to equalize the productivity and the wealth of these two macro-regions and the

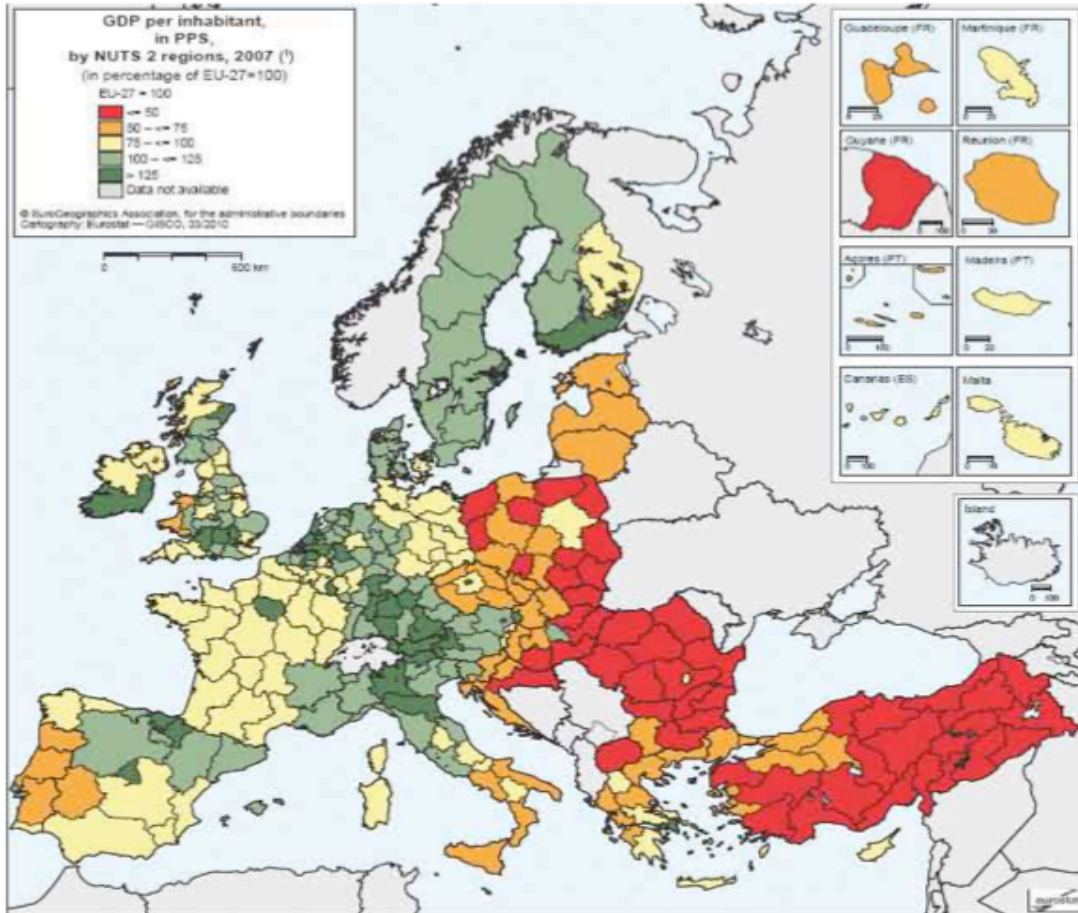
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<sup>1</sup> On globalization see Arrighi (2008), Bauman (1998), Beck (1999), Gallino (2007), Giddens (1999), Sassen (1999).

<sup>2</sup> The bibliography on the Southern Question is simply too vast to be properly represented in a footnote. A list of fundamental works on the subject can be found in Pescosolido (2004).

consequences are, obviously, enormous. Past and present failures to provide equal economic opportunity give us little reason for optimism about future developments.

**Map 2.2.1:** GDP per inhabitant, in PPS, by NUTS 2 regions, 2007 (as percentage of EU-27 = 100)



(\*) Turkey, 2006

The revolt mounted in some of the northern regions was one political consequence of the North-South divide. The Lega Nord and its leader, Umberto Bossi have emerged from micro-movements demanding a secession of the North from the rest of Italy to become central players in Italian national politics. Their choices of alliances have determined the composition of most governments over the past twenty years. The political program of the Lega has changed over time from secession to demands for a large degree of autonomy for the Italian regions, but it has never made a mystery of its refusal to transform itself into a national party by constantly stressing that its loyalty goes only to the northern part of the peninsula. As a political movement akin to the independence movements of other European regions (e.g., Catalonia), the Lega Nord claims its source of legitimization not from the Italian nation but from a distinctive northern Italian history and people. With its electoral successes the Lega has introduced into the Italian political system the proposition that there is not only one Italian nation, but that there are at least

two nations, and that federalism is not only a solution for the ineffectiveness of centralization, but also the proper form of government for a multinational state.<sup>3</sup>

The national political parties, both from the Left and from the Right, have accepted the idea of a federalist reform of the state. This is a necessary precondition of forming alliances with the Lega Nord; it is also a strategy that attempts to neutralize the anti-national element of the Lega by presenting federalism as a form of decentralization for all Italians, rather than as an agreement between separate nations, North and South. Even if this political operation succeeds, however, it will undermine a central idea that provides major ideological support for the Italian nation-state: the necessity of a strong political and cultural center for the solution of Italy's current problems, its future development, and its rightful identity in the community of nations.

In the past twenty years while the political Right has contested the legitimacy of the Italian nation-state from the point of view of regional identities, the Italian Left has won general elections at least in part by advocating a strong Europeanism. In its willingness to devolve certain powers of the central government to the European Union the political program enacted by Romano Prodi and his coalition of Center Left parties suggests, just as much as the anti-national program of the Lega Nord, that the future of Italians is no longer imagined as dependent on the Italian nation-state. The major achievement of the Prodi government was to join the first round of countries that created the Euro. The Italian lira, a major symbolic and economic tool in the hands of the Italian government, was abandoned to adopt a European unified currency that, in the minds of the European federalists, signified the point of no return in the European process of unification (Albertini 2010). Today, with the transferring of the major economic decisions to a non-national level and with the attribution of competences on education and public health to the Italian regions, most Italians recognize that the national government is losing its power to monopolize the imagination of their communities, together with its power to protect and direct them.

### *Demographic and Biopolitical Retreat*

At the social level a key index of the inability of the Italian nation-state to perform its historical functions is the substantial absence of serious discussion of the future in the face of an aging and shrinking national community. Italy has one of the lowest percentages of high school and college graduates and one of the highest rates of youth unemployment among western countries. The entry-level salaries of those who are employed are also among the lowest in the West. Young Italians are among the last to achieve financial independence from their families and among the last to create their own families (50% of Italian women do not marry until they are 30; 50% of Italian men marry after they turn 33). Moreover, young Italians inherit from previous generations one of the highest debts per capita and are only 25% of the electoral body, compared to the 30% of countries with similar populations such as France and the UK. In absolute numbers, only 12.5 million Italians are between 18 and 34 years of age and, in 2005, the number of Italians who were between the age of 15 and 24 was equal to the number of those who

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<sup>3</sup> On the Lega Nord see Jori (2009), Diamanti, (1996) and De Matteo (2011).

were between age 65 and 74 (Rosina and Balduzzi 2011). The sense that new Italian generations have no future seems to have moved from the punk lyrics of the Seventies into the numbers of the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT).

The evasion of these issues in the Italian political arena can be read in the light of Michel Foucault's analysis of biopower as the defining characteristic of European politics in the age of the nation-state. According to Foucault in *Society Must Be Defended*, biopower appears, at the end of the nineteenth century, as a form of knowledge and control over "sets of processes such as the ratio of birth to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population, and so on" (2003, 243). The rise of biopower and of the welfare state are, in Foucault's description, part of the same process that put the control of the population, its mortality rate, its system of insurance, its birth rate, and its health at the center of the state's interventions. In that imagined kinship that was the nation-state, the care of the elders, of the sick, of births and deaths and of the hygienic practices of the members of the national community was partially transferred from the family to the state. The progressive shrinking of the Italian welfare state cannot be without political repercussions for a biopower whose legitimacy rested on its ability to manage these biological elements. In other words, the demographics we have cited are bound to have repercussions on the biopolitical functions of the Italian state.<sup>4</sup> To take just one example, Italians who have to turn to the market of immigrant workers (*badanti*) to care for their elders cannot count on either the family or the state. The privatization of welfare in Italy and its transformation into a black market inflicts incalculable damage on the sense of national solidarity the welfare state had created (Gallino 2006).

The production of knowledge regarding the condition of the Italian population is still managed by state agencies. However, the connections between data and effective policy are increasingly tenuous and occasionally embarrassing for Italian politicians. On October 6, 2010, the online edition of the *Corriere della sera* reported that the president of INPS (Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale), the organism in charge of administering the retirement plans of most Italians, had declared that "if we had to provide the forecast of the retirement plans for those who are employed with temporary contracts (*lavoratori parasubordinati*), we would risk a social earthquake" (2010). The suspicion that statistical data predicting the future of most young Italians is both dismal and out of control seemed to have been officially confirmed. That the quotation turned out to be inaccurate does not change the fact that the Italian major news organizations believed it to be true, because it seemed to reflect the common belief of many Italians. As Italian President Giorgio Napolitano acknowledged in his annual official address on December 31, 2010, Italians fear that they can no longer expect economic development and progress, generation after generation, as they did in the past.<sup>5</sup> The future is no longer what it used to be, and the Italian nation-state seems to be incapable of reversing the situation.

Without the idea of progress toward a better future, Italian nationalism loses important ideological tools to counter a conceptual or actual withdrawal of allegiance to

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<sup>4</sup> On this subject see also, Golini, Mussino and Savioli (2006). The authors argue that immigration will not be enough to reverse the effects of the Italian demographic trends.

<sup>5</sup> Napolitano's exact words were: "ormai da qualche tempo si è diffusa l'ansia del non poterci più aspettare - nella parte del mondo in cui viviamo - un ulteriore avanzamento e progresso di generazione in generazione come nel passato" (2010).

the nation-state. Nationalism predicated on the ideal of expanding the nation as an ethnicity, as a cultural entity, or as a military and economic power, is not, by itself, incompatible with the perception of contraction and decadence. From the last chapter of Machiavelli's *Prince* to the literary canon of the Risorgimento, Italian nationalism has always taken decadence as a central motif of inspiration to call Italians to react to the present and create a better future. However, when the division of Italy is no longer understood as the remediable cause of Italy's predicaments and when there is little hope for a new birth of the Italian nation, nationalism becomes rhetorically impotent. What is the point in managing "the ratio of birth to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population, and so on" (Foucault 2003, 243), if expansion is considered impossible? And what is the future of the nation-state when the nation, without any state intervention, autonomously decides to shrink?

Even Malthusian pessimism, in its battle against the Enlightenment's notion of progress, assumed that life naturally expanded and relied on the state to keep life in check. In Italy, however, the state no longer needs to promote Malthusian policies because civil society has appropriated Malthusianism. In a generalized vote of no confidence on the future of Italy, Italians ignore the natalist invitations of the state and of the Catholic Church. With youth unemployment (15 to 24 year-olds) at 28.9%, even moderate commentators, like Giovanni Sartori, write on the pages of a moderate newspaper like the *Corriere della sera* that this percentage will not change in the foreseeable future (2010). De-natality seems a rational choice.

### *The Spectacular Politics of Emergency*

The pressure of de-nationalization, economic decline, and falling birth rates has radically transformed the character of Italian politics. Since the issue is no longer planning the future, Italian politics, with the possible exception of the active anti-national projects of the Lega Nord, is fully concentrated on the present. A permanent state of emergency dominates the political discourse to the point that some emergencies are permanent or recurrent. For instance, Naples' garbage emergency was officially declared with the appointment of a government Czar, in 1994. On January 4, 2011, seventeen years later, Giorgio Napolitano announced during an official visit to Naples, his hometown, that, in the face of the garbage emergency "there seems to exist a very constructive [political] climate that allows us to hope" *La Repubblica* 2011; pare che ci sia un clima in questo momento molto costruttivo che lascia ben sperare). Other emergencies are assumed to be beyond solution, like the so called "smog emergency," which affects northern Italy almost every winter, when the level of pollutants in the air surpasses the limits, determined by law, of what is considered safe for human beings. Presenting that which is normal as a state of exception, because no future transformation can be reasonably expected, becomes the new mark of political power in the Italian context.

Despite the universally recognized lack of trust in politicians and in the effectiveness of the Italian government, politics has not become less interesting for Italians. On the contrary, the transformation of politics into a pure struggle for conquering and preserving power has increased its entertainment value. The data provided by the Osservatorio di

Pavia, the most accredited Italian research center on media activities, offer a transparent picture of the pervasive attention to politics in Italy. Italian politics occupies 34.8% of the news of Italian public television (RAI), whereas the percentage is only 16.5% in other major European countries (UK, France, Germany and Spain) (Osservatorio di Pavia 2008). Those who are familiar with Italian television also know that Italian politics is not confined to the news, but overflows in many other TV programs, from comedy to gossip shows, from talk shows to the many news shows that are explicitly dedicated to political discussion (*Porta a Porta*, *L'Infedele*, *Matrix*, *AnnoZero*, *Ballarò*, etc.). The entertainment value of politics for Italians is such that it seems to have challenged soccer as a spectacle. The more Italian politicians complain about “the alarming disconnection between politics and its democratic institutions on one hand, and society, its intermediate bodies, and especially the young generations on the other” as did Napolitano in his official address on New Year’s Eve 2010, the more Italians consume political news in magazines, newspapers, TV and radio shows.

The transformation of Italian politics into a talk show has become evident since the 1990s, when the news on TV started to be monopolized by pronouncements of politicians at the expense of time dedicated to concrete political action. In 1992 the major Italian news organizations still gave almost equal time to political events and to discussion of these events. By 2007, political declarations occupied 76% of the news, and only a meager 24% was reserved to actual actions. These numbers are even more significant if compared with the rest of Western Europe where, on average, 74.6% of the political news is about actions undertaken (Osservatorio di Pavia 2008). Thus, since the end of the cold war and the beginning of the so-called “second republic,” Italian politics has become a rhetorical battle where politicians aim at winning not so much through what they actually do as through their interpretations of what they have or have not done.

Rather than celebrating the 150 years since unification, it might be more appropriate to celebrate the 151 years since the publication of Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, with the postmodern twist that the State is no longer a work of art as much as an exercise in the interpretation of a work of art.

### *Non-Fictional Fictions and the Complicit State: De Cataldo and Saviano*<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, some of the most successful literary works created in Italy in the past decade are in effect reflections on the withering of the Italian state. Both Giancarlo De Cataldo’s *Romanzo Criminale* (2002) and Roberto Saviano’s *Gomorra* (2006) depict the state’s inability and unwillingness to prevent the formation of alternative centers of power in its territory. The two books, which have quickly become popular phenomena, tell the stories of criminal organizations that have grown, not so much by challenging the sovereignty of the state, as by occupying the vast territory that it already did not control. The state, in both cases, relies on the networks created by the criminal organizations, rather than confronting them as a menace to the integrity of its power.

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<sup>6</sup> [Editors’ note: on De Cataldo, see Lorenzo Fabbri’s essay, “Italy: A Post-Biopolitical Laboratory” in this issue; on Saviano, see Simona Bondavalli’s “Waste Management” and Valentina Fulginiti and Maurizio Vito’s “The New Italian Epic,” both in this issue.]

*Romanzo Criminale* is perhaps the less radical of the two books in focusing on an earlier period, prior to the end of the 1970s, because the reader can still assume that the historical circumstances in which the events took place were exceptional. At the end of the 1970s, on the eve of the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, the protagonists of the book, the criminals of the *Banda della Magliana*, take control of the most lucrative criminal activities in Rome—drugs, usury, illegal gambling, and money laundering—without encountering any resistance from the duly constituted authorities. The gang uses the basement of a government building to store the weapons that they use in their activities. The Italian secret service, in a narrative where history and fiction are often indistinguishable, contact them to find out where the Red Brigades hold captive Aldo Moro, president of the dominant Italian political party, and the connection is established through the Camorra. The Mafia and the Camorra are the only powers that the *Banda* cannot ignore or challenge directly. The Italian secret service is portrayed as directly or indirectly responsible for organizing political assassinations and terrorist attacks, and as in charge of protecting and maneuvering fascist terrorist groups. All this occurs not in the rebellious South of Italy, but at the heart of the Italian state in Rome.

Faithful to one of the characteristics of “crime fiction,” *Romanzo Criminale* presents a cynical view of the state and its actions. In the book, one of the two historical leaders of the *Banda della Magliana*, “il Freddo,” constantly manifests his distaste for politics. In his desire for power and control, he is proud of the autonomy of the *Banda*, a killer and a drug dealer who thinks that politics is dirty. The policeman who investigates the crime is also forced to admit that he does not represent the state or even an idea of justice. He simply wants to prove that he is right about the existence of organized crime in Rome, despite the indifference or the hostility of the rest of the police and the magistrates. He also competes with one of the leaders of the gang in a fatal attraction for a prostitute. In a minor episode in the book, the policeman’s decision to alert an ex-girlfriend that she is about to be arrested tells readers that he too always puts his personal connections above the law. Readers of post-ideological novels would probably be suspicious of any character who really believed in legality and justice.

What cannot be ascribed to the genre, however, is the fact that this “crime fiction” is, for the most part, a work of non-fiction. The characters in Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* might closely resemble real people, but there is no binary correspondence between, for instance, Fanucci, the man killed by Vito Corleone in the book, and historical events. On the contrary, the people killed in De Cataldo’s “crime fiction” were actually killed. Here, reality is separated from fiction only by the pseudonyms for the characters and the completeness of the reconstruction. The absence of an official history of those events, sanctioned in a court of law through a juridical process, creates the space for a mixture of fiction and facts. The fictional characters of *Romanzo Criminale* kill a fictional journalist named “Ricciolodoro,” but Gaetano Pecorelli, the real “double” of Ricciolodoro, was indeed killed.

The problem that “crime fiction” seems to address is that, even though the special bullets used to kill Pecorelli/Ricciolodoro connected this homicide to the *Banda della Magliana* nobody was found guilty of the murder in a court of law. After many trials, those accused of the murder were all acquitted: Giulio Andreotti and Claudio Vitalone, two politicians; Massimo Carminati, a fascist terrorist and a member of the *Banda*; Gaetano Badalamenti and Giuseppe Calò, two Mafia affiliates (*La Repubblica* 2000).



There are no established facts, only opinions. In the history of the Italian Republic, considering the number of unresolved cases that point to a joint venture between national politicians, organized crime and fascists—from the Massacre of Piazza Fontana to the Massacre of Bologna—the “solution” of a combination of facts and fiction seems to offer up the truth that the state has been incapable or unwilling to provide. The distinction between a “criminal novel” and history becomes unclear, and fiction gives answers to historical questions.

More subtly, it is not only the distinction between organized crime and the Italian State that is put in question in the book, but also Italy as a national community. The gang is from “la Magliana,” a Roman neighborhood, and their power can only extend as far as Rome because, outside of Rome they have no control of the territory. Milan is a different world. The South, where other criminal organizations operate, is off limits. Despite their fascist ideology, they are not nationalists. Their fascism is a form of nihilism that recognizes only the accumulation of power as an ideology. Political chaos, as in the weeks during the Moro kidnapping, is what makes them prosper and what allows them to pursue their own personal power and their criminal order. Like “il Vecchio,” the truly fictional character who directs the state’s illegal activities in the book, the fascist members of the gang are anarchists. “Il Nero,” the character of Massimo Carminati in the book, a fascist terrorist and a member of the *Banda*, sings “Addio Lugano Bella,” the most famous Italian anarchist song when he is trying to leave Italy. “Fatherland, family and God,” the traditional keywords of the conservative Right, have no meaning for them. Their community is not the imagined community of the nation-state, but the local and concrete community of their immediate friends. There is no space for transcendence in their actions; everything for them is purely immanent, and the future they imagine can only be an extension of the present.

A similar lack of any sense of the future permeates not only the concrete lives, but also the outlook of the Camorristi in Saviano’s *Gomorra*. In the territory around Naples the impossibility of any future takes the form of garbage. Toxic garbage from all across Europe finds a place to rest in the Neapolitan countryside. While the state is ineffectual in organizing a solution to the problem of the collection and treatment of local garbage, despite the exceptional powers of officials dispatched from Rome, the Camorra saturates its own territory with the contaminated waste of Europe. As a consequence, the bosses and their families live in large villas built on top of a poisonous wasteland that they have created.

Unlike the *Banda della Magliana*, the Camorra does not emerge at the end of the 1970s amidst a crisis of the Italian state—it is endemic to the area it controls and the sign of a permanent crisis in the Italian South. Those who live in the area simply call Camorra “il sistema,” the system that organizes the territory. Distributing money, killing those who question—directly or indirectly—their power, and exhibiting their wealth through luxury, the camorristi try to legitimize the power that they already have. The portraits of Mussolini, of Napoleon, and even of Jesus with the Boss’s face constitute the grotesque artistic portfolio of Francesco Schiavone (aka, Sandokan) and testify to his desire to prolong his power beyond the short life of his criminal kingdom, which he justifies through the use of art.

Like De Cataldo, Saviano explains the operations of the “sistema” through a combination of fact and fiction. If the story of the *Banda della Magliana* requires a

literary transposition to account for the absence of a history of the events, the story of *Gomorra* touches the lives of too many people to be told on the basis of documents. The heroin addicts used as guinea pigs to test the quality of the drug, the shop owners whose shops are vandalized to mark the territory, the ambulance drivers who do not bring the wounded to the hospital in fear of retaliation, the young people who find a job in the UK because the Camorra runs an efficient, unofficial unemployment office there, and the many other people who live “in the system” simply do not make it into the documents. However, the system exists because it touches virtually everyone.

The similarities between *Romanzo Criminale* and *Gomorra* are not limited to their shared hybrid genre, a blend of fact and fiction; they are also predicated on the existence of a criminal network that substitutes for a legitimate political order.<sup>7</sup> In Italy, with the specificity of the phenomena discussed in the books, there are powerful and well-organized alternatives to the state’s claims to have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. The state, unable to eradicate these alternative systems, is forced by its own impotence to make pacts with them.

Recent reports on the compromise between the state and organized crime during the events of 1993, soon after the end of the so-called “first republic,” surpass even the literary reconstructions in *Gomorra*. On May 14, 1993, a car bomb with ninety kilos of TNT exploded in Rome, wounding twenty-one people. The same day, Minister of Justice Giovanni Conso revoked the special security measures applied in jail to 140 members of the Camorra, including Schiavone. On May 27, another car bomb, with one hundred kilos of TNT, exploded in Florence very close to Piazza della Signoria, killing five people, wounding twenty-nine others, and causing damages to the historical buildings nearby, including the Uffizi. On July 27-28, three more bombs exploded, one in Milan—killing four people—and two in Rome, in front of the churches of San Giovanni in Laterano and of San Giorgio al Velabro, wounding ten people and causing serious damage to the churches. On August 11, the newspapers reported on a letter written by Francesco Schiavone to the Italian President in which the camorrista asked for the abolition of the special anti-mob laws. On October 17, the judges in the trial against Schiavone reduced his sentence and temporarily freed him. Schiavone is still on the run. On October 31, a bomb placed at the Olimpico (the Roman soccer stadium) failed to explode. On November 5, 1993, Conso revoked the special security measures applied in jail to another 140 members of Cosa Nostra. Even though, based on historical experience, Italians are more likely to find a reconstruction of these events in a sequel to *Romanzo Criminale* or *Gomorra* than in a court of law, the political significance of the decision to suspend the special jail arrangements for some of those associated with criminal organizations engaged in terrorist activities seems clear enough. Representatives of the Italian state evidently believed that the only way to avoid other and more devastating terrorist attacks was through a compromise with the mob.

The normality of these compromises in Italy means that Saviano no longer needs to introduce a purely fictional and conspiratorial character like De Cataldo’s “il Vecchio.” The figure of a fictional puppet master within the State is superfluous. *Gomorra*’s first chapter, “Il Porto,” sets the stage for the rest of the book because, in the anarchy of a global economy, the powerlessness of the Italian state is immediately apparent—a matter of fact. The concrete and metaphorical openness of the Neapolitan port, where there is no

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<sup>7</sup> On this topic, see also Gianfrancesco Zanetti’s essay, “Normative Pluralism,” in this issue.

control over the transit of people and goods, is both an economic boon for the region and its poison. In the port, the ability of the criminal organizations to take advantage of international trade and the violence of an open frontier become an unsolvable conundrum. Like a pharmakon, at once cure and venom, the flux of goods and people in the port keeps the Neapolitan economy alive while it undermines its ability to be healthy. The port is, in Saviano's words, "an infected appendix that never bursts" (2006, 17).

### *Political Theory against the State*

When we move from the world of semi-literary representations of the state of Italy to some of today's most prominent Italian political theorists we find a shared theme in the failure of classical politics and of its center, the state. These theorists read the European political tradition from the perspective of the failure of the Italian nation-state. The main symptom of this failure is the recognition, in the works of authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, and Roberto Esposito, of the marginality of Italy in the creation of the hegemonic western political tradition.

Antonio Negri, in his discussion of alternative potentialities in the discourses of modernity, has most aggressively pursued the theme of the marginality of Italian political philosophy and its "unnational" dimension. Negri's insistence on the figure of Machiavelli as the prophet of an alternative modernity can be read as an attempt to subtract the author of the *Prince* from the Italian national canon. By re-coupling Machiavelli with Spinoza, Negri has reactivated the ban that the tradition of the social contract had placed on the Florentine.<sup>8</sup> Through the emphasis on the process of the constitution of power, Negri uses Machiavelli to contest the pseudo-naturalism of any national formation. The immortal, ahistorical and transcendental image of Italy, on which the constituted nation-state wanted to rest, is thus denied through the analysis of the most canonical figure in the tradition of Italian political thought. The state, in Negri's reading of Machiavelli, is not the result of a social contract between people, but always the result of conflicts, internal and immanent. Italians "were made" not because of any historical misfortune, as the Italian nationalist tradition suggests, but because communities are always in the making.

While the European tradition of the social contract transformed the state into the product of a free and rational decision, Machiavelli shows the violence of the original accumulation of power, more like crime novels about the mob than akin to Locke or even Hobbes. By making Machiavelli a theorist of what he calls "constituent power," opposed to the theorists of the social contract and their complicity with constituted power, Negri celebrates what the Italian nationalist tradition has always lamented: the lack of a strong center. Machiavelli conventionally appropriated by the Italian nationalists as a source of pride and as the main Italian contribution to the European political tradition, returns, in Negri's analysis, as a solitary figure opposed to the authors of the European political canon and enabled by brutal contests for power in a fragmented Italy.

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance the opening lines of Frederick the Great's *Anti-Machiavelli*. As the Prussian prince wrote, "Machiavelli's *The Prince* is to ethics what the work of Spinoza is to Faith" (1981, 25).

In order to subtract the community from the ideological grip of the nation-state, Negri also attacks the architrave of nationalist thinking: the idea of “the people.” Negri’s notion of the Multitude is thus a direct challenge to the vocabulary created by nationalism. As Negri and Michael Hardt write, “*the modern conception of the people is in fact a product of the nation-state*, and survives only within its specific ideological context” (2000, 102; italics in original). The Multitude is a category with which Negri reopens the possibility of imagining communities different from the naturalistic ideology of nationalism. By conflating in “the people” both the multitudes of the dispossessed and all the members of the national community, the nation-state invented a myth more effective in masking the conflicts that animate history than any theory of the social contract. “The people” not only reduces the plurality of desires to an artificial unity, but it authorizes the state to emerge as the only true representative of this totalized unity. The nation-state thus manages to become not so much an “imagined community,” since all communities need to be imagined, but the only imaginable community, opposed only to other communities identical to itself. Consequently, the emerging Empire is, according to Negri, not good by itself, but is at least good in itself. It is an opportunity “pour faire disparaître cette merde d’État-nation” as Negri put it rather colorfully (in De Filippis and Losson 2005; to make that turd of a Nation-State disappear). Rather than a recycling of Marxist internationalism, with its alliance between different peoples, Negri’s Multitude is an attempt to eradicate the nationalist imagination.

Despite the stark differences that today separate Negri’s autonomist Marxism from Giorgio Agamben’s philosophy, the critique of the notion of “the people” bears witness to an equally radical refusal in Agamben’s works of the notion on which nationalism rests. In “What is a People?” Agamben traces a genealogy of the term similar to Negri’s. The French Revolution, by putting “the people” at the basis of sovereignty, has conceptually unified two different meanings of the word: on one hand, the idea of the destitute, wretched and poor multitudes, and on the other, the citizens of the state (2000). The fracture between these two meanings of the word, which Agamben reads as the fracture between *zoe* (“la vita nuda,” “bare life”) and *bios*, creates the original apparatus of biopower, opposing naked life to political life, and attributing to sovereignty the task of resolving the opposition. Within the framework created by the nation-state, the poor and the ill become the central political problem of a state that finds its legitimacy in the nation. The welfare state, class struggle and extermination camps are, in Agamben’s perspective, different solutions to the common problem of making the people truly one.

Agamben also agrees with Negri in his refusal of a contractual explanation of the origins of the State and calls into question the idea of grounding political communities “in something like a ‘belonging,’ whether it be founded on popular, national, religious, or any other identity” (1998, 102). The unity of the Italian people, and of any other people, emerges from the work of Agamben as the unsolvable problem that opens the space for a permanent “state of exception” that justifies the persistence of sovereign power. The Italian case, generally absent from Agamben’s pages, is only a minor example of the multiplication of “states of exception” produced by the desire to close the gap between the poor and the sick and the citizen. A reading of the Southern question and of its permanent failure in the perspective proposed by Agamben seems like an obvious task for the scholars of Italy. Cesare Casarino’s recent article on Pasolini’s leap “from the

Italian South to the global South,” through what Casarino calls “transnational universalism,” already reveals the fruitfulness of this exploration (2010, 675).

Roberto Esposito is the author who has called attention to the connection between the present flourishing of biopolitical reflections in Italy and the condition of the Italian state. As he said in an interview with Timothy Campbell, “Italy is a country on the frontier, not only in a geographic sense, but also culturally, between different worlds, between Europe and the Mediterranean, and between North and South...traversed, but also in a certain sense constituted by this fracture, that is, by this sociocultural interval” (Campbell and Esposito 2006, 49). This fracture, as Esposito writes in his recent book on Italian philosophy, limits the state’s claims to unity in theory and in practice (2010, 20). The inability to connect a multiplicity of philosophical reflections in a national framework is, in Esposito’s account, not so much a weakness of the Italian philosophical tradition as the condition of possibility for its independence from the European tradition of political thought embedded in national projects.

Esposito’s analysis of the continuity between biopolitics and thanatopolitics, the politics of death, is a powerful reminder of the risks implicit in the representation of the nation-state as an autonomous body. When the state is put in charge of protecting the living body of the nation from what threatens its health, an autoimmune reaction becomes a historical possibility. When an immunizing reaction attacks what is represented as a life-threatening disease for the community, the community itself can be killed in the name of its protection. The case of Nazi Germany is only the most extreme example of the annihilation of entire populations in the name of the protection of the racial/national community. Esposito’s reflection on biopolitics invites us consider the “unnational” character of Italian philosophy as an opportunity instead of a limitation. In the age of the final crisis of the Italian nation-state, we can infer, a philosophy at the service of national projects would run the risk of being complicit with new policies of death.<sup>9</sup>

### *A Future without a Risorgimento*

Paradoxically, the impotence of the Italian nation-state, which manifests itself daily in the transformation of politics into a spectacle, may have created the possibility for a new unity in Italy between a shared sense of political failure, on one hand, and philosophy, on the other. Silvio Berlusconi’s sustained assault on the borders between public and private has shattered any illusion that the state could maintain an independent position not entirely beholden to private interests or that news organizations are the watchdogs of freedom. The majority of Italians who have repeatedly voted for him no longer expects solutions from the state in the spectacle of the struggle for power. Some of the most successful literary creations of the past decade openly present an anarchical situation, presenting the impotence of the state in all its nakedness and attributing to it a conspiratorial role. The readers of *Romanzo Criminale* and *Gomorra* know that the distinction between fact and fiction has lost its credibility in Italy because of the state’s inability to produce believable narratives about Italy and its past. The Italian philosophers

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<sup>9</sup> [Editors’ note: see also Esposito’s essay, “Fortuna e politica all’origine della filosofia italiana.” in this issue].

confronting the European political tradition from an Italian perspective find a glimmer of hope in the failure of Italian politics and political thinking to conform to the hegemonic western tradition.

The Italian nation-state, in the name of the multiplication of perpetual emergencies, is forced to transform any event into a matter of life and death, only to confess its inability to find a solution. From immigration to the economic reemergence of China, from terrorism to garbage, from the economy to the Italian birth rate, Italians experience this inability daily. The Italian President announces the internal exodus of Italians from the nation-state on television. The coming community can either accept the challenge that Italian philosophy poses and think of politics outside of the conceptual framework of the nation-state or embrace the spectacle of its twilight. In either case, however, the future of Italy does not include a new Risorgimento.

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