

The Italian Political System 150 Years On: The *Risorgimento*'s Relevance Today

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This article is a review of the Conference Group on Italian Politics and Society (CONGRIPS) panel at the 107TH annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA), Seattle, 1-4 September 2011.

The call for papers, issued by CONGRIPS Programme Chair James Newell (University of Salford, UK), aimed at collecting papers addressing 'the significance of Unification itself for an understanding of the nature of Italian politics and/or society today'. Papers could aim at tackling: 1) the extent to which the problems that stood in the way of effective unification remain significant today; 2) the extent to which the creation of Italian national identity had been completed or old and new problems still stood in the way, and 3) the extent to which the most significant issues surrounding Italian democracy today can be understood in light of the circumstances surrounding Unification. The papers that were eventually submitted (listed below) addressed all of these problems and focused on the long shadow of the *Risorgimento* on current Italian politics and policymaking.

1. Rosario Forlenza (Princeton University) and Bjorn Thomassen (American University of Rome), 'The *Risorgimento* in 20th Century Italian Political Discourse'
2. Arianna Farinelli (Baruch College (CUNY)) and Alessandro Cagossi (West Virginia University), 'A Search Long 150 Years: Understanding Cabinet Instability in Italy'
3. Elisabetta Cassina Wolff (University of Oslo), 'Neofascist Interpretations of *Risorgimento* and Criticism to the Mussolinian Project on Anthropological Revolution in Italy (1945-1955)'

4. Christophe Roux (University of Montpellier), 'Was Italian Nation-Building Really a Failure? An Empirical Investigation into the Nationalization of a Peripheral Territory: The Case of Sardinia'
5. Laura Polverari (University of Strathclyde), 'Italy at 150: Still a Divided Society'.

Despite their different targets, all the papers brought into relief the continuing relevance of the *Risorgimento* for Italian politics today. They were mostly qualitative and non-comparative papers (at least not explicitly) thus suggesting an 'exceptionalist' reading of the Italian experience with state-building. All papers obviously engaged the *longue durée*: they focused on the cultivation of memory, the reconstruction of history and the interpretation of facts, apparently subscribing to the general 'constructivist turn' in political science that we have recently witnessed (though in a soft manner). All recognised the contested nature of facts and events and all presented this contested-ness as running particularly deep in Italian political debate, suggesting that perhaps the well-known ideological polarisation of Italy may have its roots in this contested reading of its past history. So, even while all the papers tried to 'normalise' the Italian state-building experience – which country does not have interpretative fights over its own creation? – the papers perhaps unwittingly ended up reinforcing it. The contrast between France and Italy lurked in the back of most papers and was at the centre of one of them in particular. France, whose state-building process is conventionally portrayed as much more successful, has been a player also in the making of Italy, at times favouring and at times hindering the formation of an independent and strong Italian state. For this and other reasons, an explicit comparison between the two state-building experiences cannot be fully accomplished. Most papers thus focused on Italian history emphasising its problems, divisions and tensions even while trying to expose and overcome the Italian fixation with highlighting what is wrong with its own history. This in itself was a *leit-motiv* running through all these papers and Italian unitary history.

The lively debate that followed indicates that interest in Italian politics is alive, particularly when set in a comparative perspective. The 150th anniversary of Italian unification was aptly marked both through this stimulating scientific panel and the friendly reception that followed.