

L'UNIFICAZIONE ITALIANA
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ITALIAN UNIFICATION
AND EUROPEAN POLITICS



ITALY IN EUROPE: A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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The commemoration of the creation of Italy as a nation state succeeded in attracting public interest worldwide to the extent that one of the most widely read history books in 2011 was related to Italian history. This is David Gilmour's *The Pursuit of Italy: A History of a Land, its Regions and their Peoples*, wherein the author discussed the vibrancy of Italy's regional identities and what he termed as the deficiencies of the Italian state, the roots of which, according to him are to be found in the limitations of the political process that occurred 150 years ago. In *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*, another outstanding book, David Abulafia shows Italy's determining role in the formation of one of the world's great centres of civilisation, that is the Mediterranean.

The narrative of the Italian Risorgimento is still a point of historical controversy. The Italian peninsula, which in the famous or infamous phrase of Metternich, was a 'geographical expression' until the achievement of the Risorgimento, had been a whirlpool of influence throughout the centuries. Jacques Le Goff affirms that the concept of European cities originated in Italy after the fall of the Roman Empire. Therefore, if one accepts Simon Schama's interpretation of the French Revolution as the affirmation of the legal concept of citizenship, this revolution has its roots in the history of this peninsula and Le Goff's concept of European cities. One author, Franco Venturi, is convinced that the notion of the Enlightenment had originated in Italy from where it was diffused to the rest of Europe.

Even if territorially Italy lacked political unity, this did not impede the people living within the Italian territories from becoming important stakeholders of Mediterranean and European history. One cannot study our medieval past without referring to the Italian Republics and their contribution to Europe's maritime development. By the third century, the Roman Papacy began to express theological superiority over all other Christian beliefs, a position that continued to hold until the Reformation.

Italy's over-reaching superiority was also expressed through her political and philosophical thought in the High Middle Ages. It gave birth to the communes, and from the fourteenth century onwards became the exemplification of the European Renaissance. Its importance does not wane in the early modern period. New powers came into being. Italy was seen as a land of conquest but still, she succeeded in becoming the centre of Europe's Counter Reformation, the land of a strong Papal State. Soon, this country would house a powerful kingdom in the South which became, in the eighteenth century, the articulation of a new Italian expression.

Thus, what happened in the nineteenth century was a reassessment of this Italian expression. Despite the fact that Southern Italy took the lead in the early eighteenth century, to the extent that Naples became the second most important city in Europe, after London, it failed to keep up with the rest of the European states. The Savoy Monarchy would seize the day, leading to the formation of a new political reality, which would once again turn Italy into a major European power.

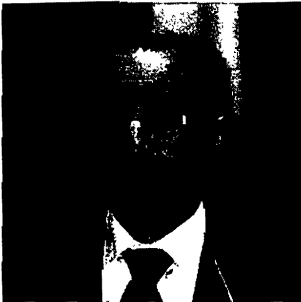
The new Kingdom still remained tied to its Savoy origins, symbolized by the fact that King Vittorio Emanuele did not renounce to his "II" title, despite being the first king of the newly united Italy. More importantly, these events commemorated a unity when in reality important geographical areas of the present Italian State, that is Venice and Rome, were not yet part of the new Italy in 1861.

The new Italian State would become both a European and a Mediterranean power. It ventured into colonial expansion, following in the footsteps of other European states, upheld racial theories, produced first class political analysts, from Mazzini to D'Annunzio, from Benedetto Croce to Gentile and Gramsci. It was not a history without mistakes. The Savoia family together with the Italia Liberale politicians made the mistake of considering the southern regions as lands of territorial expansion while central Italy was seen as too clerical and in need of a forced liberal indoctrination. Territorial cohesion was mistaken for territorial expansion leading to economic underdevelopment. More than any other country in Europe, this new Italian reality became an expression of a cultural divide, embracing a myriad of political creeds from arch-conservatism to extreme and irresponsible liberalism. Fascism was to become a mainstream political thought in the 1920s and 30s and was replaced, after the Second World War, by Marxism and Communism, juxtaposed with Christian Democracy.

There is general historical agreement that the Italian unification brought about the creation of a new power with which the other emerging powers in Europe had to come to terms. Despite all the undercurrents, political and military defeats, this unity guaranteed to the Italian nation its existence. Its politicians knew how to change a defeat into a victory. History taught them how to detach themselves from unfortunate and outmoded political entitlements. It was not a question of chance that the treaty which initiated European unification was signed in Rome.

Celebrating the Unification of Italy continued making news and conditioning Italy's internal politics. There was verbal criticism expressed by one of the main political parties on the right of the political spectrum, the Northern League, towards the 1861-2011 celebrations of Italian unity, which brought about a reaction from the electorate.

As a historian, I am honoured to have chaired this round-table conference, which brought together professors of history from major educational institutions in Europe to discuss the contribution that the new Italy, formally created in 1861 through the declaration of the *Regno di Italia*, brought to Europe.



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A graduate of the University of Malta and of the Paris IV – Sorbonne, Dr Simon Mercieca, who read history and historical demography, is Director of the Mediterranean Institute at the University of Malta. He has organized a number of conferences including one on the bicentenary of Giuseppe Mazzini's birth (2005) and another on the bicentenary of Giuseppe Garibaldi's birth (2007) and edited a number of publications, comprising a book on Mazzini, entitled *Malta and Mazzini* (2007). He is the author of a number of articles on the Italian Risorgimento and Malta such as *The 'Scoglio Ingrato': Archaeology, History and Mazzinian beliefs in Malta through the views of Francesco Crispi* (2007) and *Opera Music and the Salento Connection: The Story of Giacomo Lombardi* (2012).