

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher Duggan. *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy since 1796*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. xxiii + 652 pp. Illustrations. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-618-35367-5.

Reviewed by Emanuel Rota

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## The Force of the Canon

Next spring, when I teach my course on Italian history from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, *The Force of Destiny* will be a required text. Christopher Duggan's new book literally fulfills an old desire of mine: having a book that teaches an English-speaking audience what a learned Italian with a reasonable interest in history would know about his or her own country. Now, provided that my students and I do our jobs, it will become possible for them, at the end of the semester, to have a conversation with Italians on Italian history, as if they had gone through a good Italian *Liceo*. Giuseppe Mazzini and Camillo Cavour, Giuseppe Garibaldi and Alessandro Manzoni, Giacomo Leopardi and Ugo Foscolo; Cesare Lombroso and Filippo Turati, Francesco Hayez and Gabriele D'Annunzio, Madame de Staël and Benito Mussolini; Carlo Collodi and Edmondo De Amicis, Francesco Crispi and Giovanni Giolitti, Massimo D'Azeglio and Francesco De Sanctis—all are presented, with many others, in a narrative that will sound uncannily familiar (or should I say *un-heimlich*?) to Italians. I think that many of my students will be fascinated, as I was, by the collection of stories that make up, collectively, the narrative of modern Italy and will likewise enjoy Duggan's robust prose. In short, I would strongly recommend this text to anybody, student or otherwise, who wants to know the canonical history of contemporary Italy.

Duggan's moderate historicism would also resonate well with the common historical sense of a hypothetical learned Italian. His desire to tell the stories "from

the standpoint of the participants" (p. xxii), without succumbing to the perils of moral relativism, seems to me a noble dream that deserves respect, even from those who, like me, do not believe in this dream. His thesis, the idea that Italy has been the political project of a small elite who only partially managed to overcome the tremendous difficulties presented by the task, will persuade all readers, except, perhaps, the most rabid nationalists. Moreover, even an Italian chauvinist will find Duggan's account respectful and sympathetic, despite his presentation of the shortcomings of the Italian nation-state. *Molto perbene* would be a synthetic way to describe this work, full of *le buone cose di pessimo gusto* that one can find in the Italian family album.

In this context, most of the objections that I would make to the book are really objections to the way in which most learned Italians would tell the story of Italy. The mix of historicism and sensitivity to the Italian national consciousness inspiring Duggan's book captures so well what an Italian would learn in a *Liceo* that the book sometimes upsets me in the same way my history manual did as a student in Bergamo. The book's most obvious shortcoming would be the overwhelming presence of poets, politicians, historians, and other assorted humanists at the cost of peasants, workers, and artisans. If you choose to tell the story of Italy as the story of the small elite who built the nation state, this is what you get. It is the story of the small, largely hegemonic, groups. Social history is marginal. Women are marginal. The Italian Jews are mentioned only as the victims of confinement

or persecution and, even so, only a few times (an international event like the Edgardo Mortara case is not mentioned). The *briganti* are presented with sympathy, the symptom of the shortcomings of the unification process, but they are only the symptom of the problems encountered by the Italian elite in creating a working nation-state. The socialists are mostly Filippo Turati and a few other leaders. The book is as useful to a course on Italian Culture (capital “C,” as in Giambattista Vico, Cuoco, and De Sanctis or Foscolo, Leopardi, and Manzoni) as it would be out of place in a course on Italian culture (“culture” as in cultural studies, as in “culture as a whole way of life”). Duggan makes sure that we know that the founding fathers were not infallible saints, but this is still the story of the founding fathers with a small side dish of other inhabitants of the Italian peninsula.

Since this is the modern Italian canon, the reader finds an abundance of information about the Risorgimento but very little about the Republic. As with my *Liceo* manual, one has the feeling that the syllabus ends with fascism and what comes afterwards will not really be part of the program. This might be the consequence of an explicit choice on Duggan’s part, considering his thesis, but it is a little unfair to the twentieth century and its protagonists. If the author finds a way to mention Niccolò Tommaseo and Ippolito Nievo, perhaps he could find a way to mention Italo Calvino as well. If he mentions Andrea Costa, perhaps he can say something about Antonio Gramsci, other than the fact that his writings were

generically important for the Italian Communist Party.

In some instances, one suspects that the author could have done a little more to account for other narratives while remaining faithful to his project. The idea that the Italian lower classes are always simply religious, merely choosing between the rival religions of socialism or Catholicism, is reductive of both socialism and Catholicism. The absence of any meaningful account of 1968 in Italy is perplexing. The description of left-wing terrorists of the 1970s as “groups of revolutionary intellectuals” is sociologically inaccurate. The Italian Trade Unions were more than just expressions of their parties of reference. Italian women should not be reduced to Sophia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida. Immigration, I suspect, will have more lasting consequences for Italy than Silvio Berlusconi, but there is a lot of the latter and nothing of the former.

This is the book, and you can enjoy its narrative and still be taken by a serious desire to destroy the canon. Perhaps one day a history of Italy, rather than a history of the Italian elites, with less Manzoni and many more Italians, will replace Duggan’s book in my course. What seems clear to me, however, is that most Italians still accept the canon, and in teaching Italian history it would not make sense to ignore it. Thus, as I said from the beginning, this will be a required text for my students. I will argue with it and I will ask my students to imagine other ways to narrate Italy, but I will tell them that this is how the canonical history of Italy is told.

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