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David Gilmour. *The Pursuit of Italy: A History of a Land, Its Regions, and Their Peoples.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011. 480 pp. $32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-28316-2.

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"Sic Transit Gloria Mundi": Gilmour's Pursuit of a Stronger Italy

In his latest book, David Gilmour provides a lengthy four-hundred-page account of Italian history from ancient times to Silvio Berlusconi's latest exit, to engage what he sees as the discrepancy between the glory of some of Italy's regions and the failure of the Italian national project, "a sin against history and geography." For Gilmour, "the parts [Italy's regions] are so stupendous that a single region–either Tuscany or the Veneto–would rival every country in the world in the quality of its art and the civilization of its past. But the parts have not added up to a coherent or identifiable whole." This verdict, as well as the entire book, glorifies the Italian past through the relics that erstwhile Grand Tour voyagers and current tourists have been known to venerate. Italians, writes Gilmour, "have created much of the world's greatest art, architecture, and music, and have produced one of its finest cuisines, some of its most beautiful landscapes and many of its most stylish manufactures. Yet the millennia of their past and the vulnerability of their placement have made it impossible for them to create a successful nation state" (p. 399). Gilmour's book has two, somewhat contradictory goals: first, to explain why Italy never attained "real" national identity; and second, to show why some of Italy's regions would have fared better under a nonnational or federal political solution. There are a few problems with such a double-headed argument, specifically because the book's main focus is on politicians' actions and, more frequently, failures. If, on the one hand, the cause of Italian failure at nationalism is its rulers' incompetence, then there is no long-standing social or cultural cause for that lack of nationalistic spirit. It should follow that under better leadership Italy's (northern, Gilmour suggests at several points in the book) regions would have actually enjoyed a better-wrought nation. If, on the other hand, something essential has prevented Italians from passing Gilmour's test of nationalism, then the reasons for it should not be limited to rulers' bureaus and correspondences. That way, no matter who ruled which kingdom in what exact period, Italy's nationalist spirit would have been "predestined to be a disappointment" (ibid).

Gilmour's book provides a political history centered on kings, advisers, ministers, and the like, complemented by his own impressions and judgments of Italian art, culture, and society, which he has gathered during his voyages in Italy's twenty administrative regions. It contains roughly three parts: a chronicle sketch of Italian history leading to the Risorgimento, where Gilmour tries to find answers to what Cicero and Virgil thought of Italy; the heart of the book–a political history of the Risorgimento and its aftermath, with a heavy focus on the ineptitude and personal shortcomings of the period's leading dramatis personae (Camillo Cavour, Giuseppe Mazzini, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Vittorio Emanuele II); and a consideration of the ramifications of the Risorgimento's failures for the country's recent history, from Fascism to the present.

This is a history of long duration indeed. Yet it lacks the adequate perspective to deal with the time span that the book intends to cover. Rather than a historical plot to support Gilmour's attempt at a causal explanation of the Italian present, the book oscillates between personal political history and cultural claims. We receive a chronicle of political head figures, with Gilmour's opinion of "essential Italy" in the background: "Essential Italy remains the Italy of its communes, as it was in the Middle Ages. *Campanilismo*–parochialism or loyalty to the municipal bell-tower–has always been strong, so strong perhaps, that, as Giordano Bruno Guerri has suggested, it has helped make Italians a 'non-people with a non-state"' (p. 396).

Social histories and anthropological accounts of Italy and its various regions abound. The best have set out to analyze the various elements in the peninsula's his-

tory. To mention three examples, Salvatore Lupo's work on the Sicilian Cosa Nostra (*Storia della Mafia* [1996], which Gilmour does not mention), Berardino Palumbo's *L'Unesco e il Campanile* (2003), and Silvana Patriarca's *Numbers and Nationhood* (1996) take great care in analyzing the complexities of, respectively, organized crime, local patriotism, and North-South tensions in unified Italy. But this kind of attention to processes does not interest Gilmour, who prefers to fix these tensions as perennial aspects of Italian mores and then use them to explain what he thinks went wrong with Italian nationalism.

Nor are we given any clear sense of what nationalism or a "real" nation would look like. Granted, Gilmour declares at the opening that his is not an academic book. But in the lack of any clear articulation of what that term would denote for him, we are left with the author's nation-state yardstick, which, unsurprisingly, resembles a liberal conservative (in the British sense), preferably constitutional nation-state. For example, this conceptual liberty enables him to write that "the Romans of the first century BC were not nationalists and never had been" (p. 46). The notion of nationalism is thus projected some two millennia backward, in order to substantiate later claims of Italians' shortcomings in the same matter. All this, while he concludes the treatment of each region's historical role by arguing that Venetians, Florentines, Piedmontese, Neapolitans, and Lombards would have benefited from a political arrangement fitting their essential "Campanilismo."

Gilmour applies the same unqualified treatment to race: "The lengthy ethnic hybridization that produced modern Italians did not of course mean that they all now look similar. No one denies that Sardinians are easily recognizable or that the inhabitants of Parma do not resemble those of Palermo. Yet, however noticeable physical differences may often be, race has never been a serious factor in Italian history: there is no Italian race and there never has been one. The arguments of those who claim otherwise, usually fascists or extreme nationalists, are ludicrous" (pp. 25-26). Here, Gilmour venerably counters racist arguments only by comparing Italians and the basis of their nationalism to nations that actually do have a race, all in a discussion of such diversities as this lack of racial uniqueness, which stand between them and proper nationalism.

Political history occupies the heart of the book, especially in Gilmour's synthesis of the historiography of the Risorgimento. This section is governed by the oeuvre of Denis Mack Smith, to whose iconoclastic research Gilmour dedicates the conclusion of this section, "Legendary Italy." Yet Mack Smith took great care in distinguishing the examination of the course of events from the judgments some would draw from them either on personalities or on entire peoples and periods, and as a result treats his political protagonists in a more scholarly manner. Gilmour, in contrast, makes precisely such judgments. For example, instead of discussing the dynamics between Garibaldi and Cavour, Gilmour focuses on each of the persons; instead of examining action, he offers judgment of character; and instead of charting the arc of political process, he tells us that what we see in Cavour, we should take to exist thereafter. As for Garibaldi, Gilmour depicts him as a more worthy person, but he does not forget to mention that he was a pirate. The Expedition of the Thousand, he writes, "was indeed a heroic enterprise but it was also, incontrovertibly, illegal. Apart from stealing the two ships, Garibaldi was making an unprovoked attack on a recognized state with which his country, Piedmont-Sardinia, was not at war. History may have forgiven him for the deed, but it was an act of piracy all the same" (p. 193). Unlike history, Gilmour does not forgive.

More generally, the judgments passed on rulers and their actions fall into either of two categories: good rulers and bad rulers. Good rulers are reasonable, rational, progressive when appropriate, and tend to come from the North. In one instance, he explicitly calls Agostino Depretis "in certain ways very Piedmontese–sensible, cautious, and incorrupt–but his political power came from the southern deputies, especially the lawyers among them" (p. 255). Bad rulers are megalomaniacal, corrupt, incompetent, wily, opportunistic, and always bad at war. They are also, more often than not, unenlightened by more Western progress. For example, when he writes on the rule and reforms of the House of Savoy in Piedmont, Gilmour concludes that "such reforms as the government undertook in the early eighteenth century owed little to the Enlightenment: they were inspired by the absolutist example of Louis XIV rather than by any ideas of the *Philosophes*" (p. 126).

Gilmour's prose is captivating and charging, and he has a certain flair for debunking myths about Italian history (for example, Verdi was not a nationalist; Piedmont annexed the rest of Italy, it did not unite it), but the narrative of *The Pursuit of Italy* does not offer a political history, let alone a history of the complex relations between society, culture, and politics, which would have sustained Gilmour's argument about Italian nationalism or the lack thereof. Instead, we receive Gilmour's derivative of political historiography of the Risorgimento in the form of judgment, constructed as a chronicle of failures rather

than a plot of action, which he bases on and then projects on what he sees as "essential Italy." Throughout the book, Gilmour presents quotations of Italians' self-deprecating judgments about their country's essential characters and shortcomings. Yet unlike Mack Smith, who demanded that such expressions be analyzed and explained in themselves, Gilmour takes these statements to explain history.

One possible reason for the absence of social history might be that recent social historiography of modern Italy comes mainly from the Left, which Gilmour does not miss an opportunity to dismiss. He discards Antonio Gramsci, without any further explanation, as "simplistic," and neglects Marxist historians' accounts of popular insurrections during the 1860s (p. 235). Communists in general are suspect of their real intentions, even when after 1991 they were "masquerading as the Partito della Sinistra (PDS)" (p. 375). The tumultuous transformations in the Italian Left notwithstanding, for Gilmour Communists will be Communists. In a similar vein, he describes *Neorealismo* as a political fashion rather than an artistic movement worthy of appraisal on its own terms.

The North-South divide is found in Gilmour's judgment of not only politicians' behavior, but also art, culture, and social demeanors. The only time the South wins is in the battle between pasta and pizza on the one hand and polenta on the other. Otherwise, venerable northern intentions seem to drown in southern moral quagmire. Disregarding works on the political economy of post-World War II development (e.g., Gabriella Gribaudi's Mediatori, 1980), Gilmour declares the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno "a victim of its investment policies but also of its failure to prevent local criminals from stealing so much of its money. One of the worst examples of southern corruption took place after the 1980 earthquake near Naples" (p. 360). Needless to say, Gilmour does not use "northern corruption" when he discusses the affairs of Bettino Craxi, the Mani Pulite anti-corruption operation, or Silvio Berlusconi. For Gilmour, what is wrong in Italy stems from the backward mores pervading its southern parts; this "inability of villagers [in Basilicata] to act together for their common good, or indeed for any good transcending the immediate material interests of the family" (p. 395) can be extended from our understanding of kinship to that of organized crime (after all, they call themselves "families" too). Since all attempts to bring southern Italy to par with more progressive regions failed (due to incompetent rulers), it would then serve all sides to forgo the defunct national experiment. Each region would then be able to cultivate and perhaps rejuvenate the local threads of its glorious past.

The vast bibliographical research Gilmour has obviously conducted enriches his book, supplying vignettes about everything from opera to architecture to the lives and habits of Italy's prominent historical figures. Anyone familiar with Italian modern historiography will find the historical claims familiar. People in search of Italian history will probably fare better by turning to the historical debates Gilmour cites or any of the several authoritative syntheses of Italian (or, indeed, Mediterranean or European) modern history. If you want to know what a liberal conservative opinion of Italy looks like when it is supported by an encyclopedic knowledge of and love for the country's past, read *The Pursuit of Italy*.

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