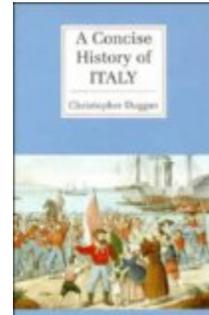


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher Duggan. *A Concise History of Italy*. Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. vii + 320 pp. \$26.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-40848-6; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-40285-9.

Reviewed by Luci M. Fortunato De Lisle (Bridgewater State College)
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In his preface Christopher Duggan comments self-consciously and accurately upon the strengths and limitations of the text that follows. He is keenly aware of the difficulties of fitting the richness and complexity of Italian history spanning two millennia into a slim volume. His solution is to attend to the traditional focus of political history following the theme of nation building and the challenges, especially over the last two centuries, of forging a collective identity—an endeavor he correctly and usefully notes alternated between “materialist” and “idealist” solutions. Except in his early chapters, his attention to economic, social, cultural, and geographical considerations are of secondary interest.

The introduction stands as a well-crafted essay on the idea of “Italy.” The author, while tracing and acknowledging proto-nationalist ideas in the classically inspired works of Renaissance Humanists, in the prose of “literary patriots” such as Manzoni, d’Azeglio, and Mazzini, and more unevenly over time in historical writing, notably by Guicciardini and Muratori, explains that these cultural expressions of nationalism had no real political application. He follows the conventional explanation that political nationalism was not initially home-grown but imported first into Piedmont when the Romantic nationalism of the French Revolution arrived on the peninsula. The Risorgimento raised questions of the political form in which the nation should be cast—questions revisited through the crises of the liberal state, fascism, the republic, and ever-present in the contemporary crises of authority and corruption in the 1990s.

To set the groundwork for the relatively new national experiment, chapter one briefly examines Italy’s geographical position, topography, agricultural resources,

and limited mineral deposits in connection with a variety of economic, social, and political patterns. These include trade, diet, disease, emigration, peasant revolutionary activism, and religious practice and belief, as well as the persistence of linguistic dialects as divisive factors across regional, urban-rural, and social class lines. Chapters 2 and 3 similarly range broadly across time in a survey of the particularism that marked the peninsula’s history from 400 to 1494 and 1494 to 1789, respectively. Chapter 3 offers an especially welcome and engaging treatment of Italy in what Eric Cochrane called the “forgotten centuries” around the themes of stagnation and reform; here the author’s historical anecdotes and insights, illustrations and charts call the reader’s attention to the importance of these centuries in their own right and for understanding subsequent Italian history.

The core of the book follows in chapters 4 through 9, which are organized according to traditional political periodization: first, the emergence of the national question and the accomplishment of the Risorgimento; then, the successive crises of the liberal state, the era of Giolitti, World War I, fascism, and the post-war Republic. The major political leaders of each regime are showcased and their careers examined in the light of the struggle of the emerging nation to modernize. Most of the attention in these chapters is on domestic history and here Duggan seizes upon the social, demographic, law and order, and economic issues of the past two centuries to help illuminate his thesis. He is most helpful in his lively examples and statistical evidence in nuancing his narrative, calling attention often to regional differences and tensions and discussing relations between the periphery and the official center of national power. In the final analysis, he does not shy away from trying to make sense of con-

temporary problems in Italy (to 1993), seeing them as the extension of long historical experience. He contends, emphatically, that the recent crises of political corruption, organized crime, and regional separatist or federalist movements demonstrate that "A nation ... is primarily an idea superimposed on material reality, which needs to be believed in or at least accepted, by a majority of the population. In Italy, such an idea has yet to find any clear delineation" (p. 294).

As a traditional introductory political history of Italy for English readers, the book is insightful and well-informed in its synthesis of up-to-date scholarship and historiography. Duggan manages to incorporate his own special research interests on the Mafia into this more general work as a significant topic without undue emphasis. The book's prose is clear though at times stylisti-

cally repetitive. The key disappointment will be for those readers who are seeking a new approach to Italian history in a general survey text, one that might integrate research from the camp of new historians concerned with broader social history, women's history, and *microstoria*. For Duggan, it seems, Italian history is still best understood from a nineteenth-century point of view; he sees Italian history essentially in neo-Hegelian terms and frames a thesis that continues to read subsequent Italian experience as dominated almost exclusively by political Italy's grappling with the unresolved implications of the Risorgimento.

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