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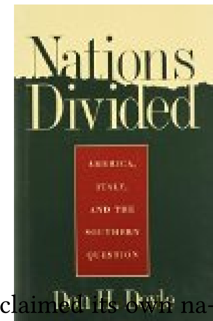
Don H. Doyle. *Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002. xvii + 130 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2330-5.



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In this deceptively small book, Don H. Doyle, Nelson Tyrone Jr. Professor of History at Vanderbilt University, tackles two of the most important questions of modern history, namely the nature of nationalism and the construction of nationhood. Doyle reflects upon similarities between American history of the Civil War and Italian history of the Unification, and the insights to be gained from a comparative view. Indeed, he formulates bold hypotheses regarding the nature of the national identity of both Italy and the United States.

Thinking of Italy, says Doyle, helped him to understand how America came to define its national identity. The topic has been mostly ignored by the vast recent scholarship on nationalism, which focused on exposing the "primordialist basis" of nationhood as a constructed identity. The United States had always been, instead, a nation that was consciously modern, proud to be born "without a navel," as Ernest Gellner put it; a "civic nation" founded on common belief not on blood. Doyle points out, however, that nationalism is not something that elites can foist at pleasure upon passive masses, but corresponds to needs people feel on their own, among them a need for primordial ties as a source of identity. American identity, Doyle states, is in fact rooted in the Civil War, where "the United States ... demonstrated that its brand of civic nationalism could tear a country apart every bit as viciously as primordial nationalism" (p. 88). But the Civil War was a result of regional diversity within the United States, namely, the conflicted relationship between the South and the rest of the country.

Such was Don Doyle's thinking when this historian of the American South found himself in Italy in 1995. These were the roving years of Umberto Bossi's Northern League, a "new" political party that defined itself in geographical and racialized terms, proclaimed its own nation "Padania," and threatened secession from the Mezzogiorno, seen as backward and barbarous, feudal, ignorant, and government-dependent. In Naples and Sicily, on the other hand, Doyle encountered the American Confederate battle flag on bumper stickers, perceived as a symbol of Southern pride. "We too are a defeated people," his Neapolitan friends explained, "conquered and disempowered" (p. 5). "To an American eye, it all seemed very familiar" (p. 89).

Thus, the co-author of *The South as an American Problem* found himself exposed to Italy's "Southern Question" and national regionalism, and began thinking comparatively. Historically, the two countries shared the difficulty of defining nationhood–Italy out of campanilistic and localistic cultural groups, the United States out of diversity of immigrants, religions, and cultures. Each found the solution in constructing an internal other. If "the South [was] an American problem," so was the Mezzogiorno for Italy. Both Souths were at odds with the ideals of the new nation, at least as they came to be defined by Northerners. "Whatever their many differences, each nation had within it a region that came to represent the 'other Italy' and the 'other America' " (p. 6). Each defined itself against the image of this internal other. "Paradoxically, opposition within nations could produce cohesion" (p. 6).

Some historical parallels in the making of the two new nations are obvious: Wars of Unification and the Civil War; Garibaldi and Lincoln; industrial and developed against rural and backward; the two Souths. Once a nation was made, the nationals had to be made in an ongoing struggle, Ernest Renan's "daily plebiscite." Both nations used the well-known venues of nationalizing the

masses–school as a civil church, heroes and monuments, national holidays–with differences: for example, America's Independence Day (July 4), a national holiday experienced locally by all, has no correspondent in Italy, which has never found a comparable single founding event (the "Statuto Day," September 20 or April 25 all failed as national holidays).

But the strongest moment of cohesion in the making of the two nations, Doyle suggests, has been finding (imagining) an enemy that threatened their integrity and unity, and against whom the nation could stand as one. To stand as one, however, you need the other. A foreign enemy is the easiest other; in fact, the struggle for liberation from foreign rule is one of the most important sources of national identity. But a struggle against an internal "other" can play the same role as a conflict with a foreign nation, as the examples of the United States and Italy demonstrate.

In both cases, the other is the South. Its relationship to the nation in both America and Italy is peculiar: initially included, in time it was demonized for "being backward, out of phase with the progressive aspirations of the larger nation, and a threat to national well-being" (p. 66). Wars of the 1860s, claims Doyle, were wars against this internal other, an imagined enemy. Both, the Brigands War (I shall return later to the role Doyle attributes to the new Italian state's fight against Southern brigandage) and the American Civil War, started as struggles of young nations to subdue rebellious provinces and ended as wars between civilization and Southern barbarism. Both led to the construction of the other that, in turn, helped define the ideal nation as "un-South." The South was an alien place inhabited by alien people, backward and barbarous, enslaved either by feudalism, despotism, and the Church, or by a slave-holding aristocracy. It did not belong in the national community. Against it stood the un-South, the constitutional, liberal, free-labor North. The North thus became the repository of the national ideal, while the South became its perversion. Anti-slavery and anti-despotism quickly evolved into anti-Southism.

Realizing the role the Southern Question played in Italian history helped Doyle understand the American Civil War. Understanding how the American South came to be seen as not belonging in the national community helped him, in turn, to understand the way in which the Mezzogiorno did not belong.

Doyle's is an interesting way of practicing the comparative approach, moving back and forth between national cases, from an "outsider" to an "insider" perspective, with one culture's *emic* becoming the other's *etic*. It often permits us to unlock meanings initially hidden, or to uncover an existing phenomenon by calling it with a collective name.

I am too ignorant of the historiography on the American Civil War to appreciate what the understanding of the Risorgimento may add to it. But the other way around, looking at the process of Unification through American eyes, allows Doyle to formulate the radical thesis of the Mezzogiorno as the definer of Italy's national identity. Thus, the American Civil War's parallel in Italy, the foundation moment of national identity, becomes the "Brigands War" of 1860-64. This was a huge and bloody military campaign of repression of the brigandage in the South; it counted more casualties than all the Risorgimento Wars but is mostly ignored by the Risorgimento historiography. Proposing it as a foundational moment comparable to the Civil War is decidedly provocative. The elements that compose Doyle's argument are well known. Another work that compares the two Souths and the two Southern Questions, by Enrico Dal Lago, also points out how, from the 1830s and until the Civil War and the Italian Unification, abolitionists and Democrats prepared to overthrow reactionary regimes that dominated the two Souths. They came to see and respect the North as "un-South," and in time it became the "liberator" of the helpless Southern masses.

The Italian Southern Question has, of course, a long history, from the meridionalisti of the 1870s, Pasquale Villari and Franchetti Sonnino through Fortunato, Nitti, Salvemini, Rossi Doria. The last in line is the neo-meridionalist revisionist scholarship of the 1990s gathered around the review *Meridiana*. It centered mostly on politics, economy and society, cultural practices, and dissemination of information, but it fed, and coincided with, a wave of studies–often English or American–within the framework of cultural studies and influenced by cultural anthropology. These studies have done much to puncture the prevalent stereotypes of the South. Anthropologist Jane Schneider analyzed the Southern Question in orientalist terms, as a discourse about radical, essential difference between North and South; cultural historian John Dickie showed how the Brigands War was a breeding ground of the language of negativity; literary scholar Nelson Moe showed how the other was construed over centuries; political geographer John Agnew demonstrated how regional divides and the North/South cleavage continue to determine political behavior of the Italians; legal historian Roberto Martucci showed that the war against brigandage was instrumental in the inven-

tion of united Italy; and I, as a historian, have argued that the construction of the Southern Question was the work of the Southerners themselves.

Italian scholars remain reluctant to study the South as a cultural construct and even more to acknowledge that a racialized discrimination may lay at the basis of the Italian historical discourse. But in the recent cultural climate, when Italians lament the lack of unity among their people and the weakness or weakening of national identity, when books proliferate with titles such as *The Death of the Patria*, *Italians without Italy*, *The Imperfect Risorgimento*, *A Country Manqu*–in such a climate Doyle's bold thesis could change the parameters of the debate.

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