



Francesco Fusi. *Il «deputato della nazione» Sidney Sonnino e il suo collegio elettorale (1880-1900).* Segrate: Le Monnier, 2019. xii + 268 pp. EUR 34.00, paper, ISBN 978-88-00-74985-5.

Reviewed by Marzia Maccaferri (Goldsmiths, University of London)

Published on H-Italy (June, 2020)

Commissioned by Matteo Pretelli (University of Naples "L'Orientale")

A Neglected History? The Political Life of Sydney Sonnino between Biography and Local History

This dense book by Francesco Fusi on the early stages of the long career of the Italian statesman Sydney Sonnino is a welcome addition to the recent literature on Italy's liberal age. Based on the author's PhD thesis discussed at the University of Pisa, the book adopts an interesting approach combining biography, local, and political history. As accurately stressed in the introduction, the figure of the Tuscan parliamentarian is analyzed through the particular prism of the relationship with his constituency, San Casciano Val di Pesa (near Florence), in the period between the first widening of electoral suffrage and the new century. Thanks to a vast new corpus of archival material, all of which is meticulously investigated, this local perspective has allowed the author to focus on a lesser-known part of Sonnino's biography vis-à-vis the material aspect of his political style, highlighting practices and contextualizing traditional readings of the liberal age.

Sidney Sonnino was a moderate liberal member of Parliament from 1880 to 1919, when he chose not to stand in the first general elections run according to the new proportional representation system. He served twice as president of the Council of Ministers (in 1906, for a few months, and between 1909 and 1910), and was minister several

times, noticeably in the Foreign Office during World War I and, with the Italian prime minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, represented Italy at the Paris Conference in 1919. Intellectually committed to universal suffrage and, at the same time, to a traditional liberalism that considered government as the neutral institutional instrument of the constitutional representation of the general interests of the nation, Sonnino advocated the creation of an organized political party while the leadership, especially Giovanni Giolitti, preferred the idea of politics as administration. Famous for his article in the *Nuova Antologia* "Torniamo allo Statuto" (Back to the Constitution), Sonnino has been usually depicted as an exponent of the notability incapable of comprehending the nascent demands of modern politics or, contrariwise, as a pedantic old-fashioned politician totally detached from the people: this was the image portrayed by the local chronicles, as the author fully reconstructs in chapter 1.

All the benefits and risks involved in the process of adapting a PhD thesis into a monograph can be found in this book. Extremely interesting is the vast corpus of sources explored in its four hundred pages. The author takes advantage of the usual traditional archives (the Archivio storico di

Firenze as well as the Archivio Centrale dello Stato) but, most importantly, he interweaves his analysis with a list of less-studied sources, among which the private papers of Sydney Sonnino stand out, especially the electoral correspondence, and the papers of two of his less famous colleagues: Piero Guicciardini and Ippolito Nicolini. This original and comprehensive reconstruction has been developed in four extensive chapters that retrace chronologically the first steps taken by the Tuscan parliamentarian and his process of adaptation to the change in the electoral laws (from a single-member to a multi-member constituency in 1882, and back again to a simple plurality vote in 1891). This trajectory intercepts all of the major events, from the institutionalization of the Sinistra Storica (reformist liberals) to Crispi's sharp political adventure, and touches the emerging forces of the modernization of Italian politics: the appearance of mass politics, the social question, and the Left. The book ends, "arbitrarily," as the author admits (p. 10), in 1900, leaving undisclosed what might yet have been a stimulating comparison. From this perspective, I will make a comment that, however, does not intend to undermine the value of this research: the broad reconstruction of the socio-economic situation and of the historical powers—that be in the territories of Sonnino's constituency before his time presented in chapters 1 and 2, although empirically significant, might appear heuristically unfruitful. The author himself recognizes this discrepancy (p. 319).

The Sonnino we discover at the end of the book is a more complex and multifaceted politician as compared with the picture portrayed by the mainstream historiography, holding an articulated relationship with his electorate, albeit difficult and unpleasant.[1] A series of comments in which the Tuscan parliamentarian stated his dislike for having to attend "popular" events like public fairs or exhibitions, charity events, even political rallies, provides for entertaining reading.

On the one hand, the author has had to deconstruct and handle two mainstream narratives: the stereotypical reconstruction of Italy's politics as mere corruption and *transformismo* (the institutional practice of a "flexible" centrist government coalition which isolated the extremes), and, secondly, the neglected legacy of Sonnino himself, usually idealized as a morally intransigent and inflexible man of integrity. These two aspects, as Fusi clearly shows, clashed and the beginnings of Sonnino's political career were not so antithetical to the mainstream customs of the other exponents of the so-called *destra storica* (liberal moderates). On the other hand, even though the author presents his research as a case study of a more national-historical development, the local dimension of the historical reconstruction is still preponderant, as a discursive process as well as a contextual specificity, as a cultural factor as well as an empirical element. Nevertheless, the tension between Sonnino's two political personas—the national parliamentarian and the local notable—described here confers a more general significance to the research.

Note

[1]. See especially F. Cammarano, "Sydney Sonnino. Un liberale tra riforme sociali e crisi del 'parlamentarismo,'" *Contemporanea* 5, no. 3 (2002): 597-600. For a more comprehensive analysis, see P. Carlucci, *Il giovane Sonnino fra politica e culture: 1847-1886* (Rome: Archivio Guido Izzo, 2002); and P. L. Ballini, ed., *Sonnino e il suo tempo (1914-1922)* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2011).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

Citation: Marzia Maccaferri. Review of Fusi, Francesco. *Il «deputato della nazione» Sidney Sonnino e il suo collegio elettorale (1880-1900)*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. June, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55369>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.