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Back to the Future (Again): Further Comments on the Risorgimento

Randolph Starn

Albert Ascoli and I had no qualms whatsoever about opening our issue of *California Italian Studies* on “Italian Futures” with a roundtable on Paul Ginsborg’s re-reading of the contemporary relevance of the Risorgimento. Versions and visions of the future are already factored, together with the past, into the term. Foundational myths of the nation-state are always hostages to revision, particularly in Italy where the terms of national identity are often recast and always contested. The cutting edge of a programmatically “new” history of the Risorgimento focusing on its cultural matrices is still sharp. Many readers might have welcomed some respite from the heavy weather of celebration, reconsideration, and repudiation for last year’s 150th anniversary of Italian unification, but the old phoenix is a hardy survivor.

The comments solicited by the editors of this issue make the point however much their authors would like to get beyond the constraints of the Risorgimento paradigm. Norma Bouchard begins with an admirably clear summary of Ginsborg’s *Salviamo l’Italia* that may serve as a useful introduction to or reminder of his argument. It is, she points out, “deceptively simple” but “multilayered” and “complex” in its combination of old and new approaches, the old tropes of historical failure redeemed by a national awakening and the current emphasis on the “morphology of nationalistic discourse” as a mobilizing force capable of mediating between passion and program, private and public, attitude and action. Not only that, he innovates on the innovators by drawing out the “minoritarian” strands in the Risorgimento—federalism, cosmopolitanism, ideals of equality, and a teasingly elusive “mildness” or “gentleness” (*mitezza*)—in counterpoint to the aggressive hierarchical and authoritarian tendencies that it bequeathed to the twentieth century with disastrous results and lingering traces in the present. For Bouchard, however, the search for the future in a Risorgimento past risks reinstating that toxic legacy and, at the end of the day, fails to come to grips with the twenty-first century realities of Italy as a “globalized nation.” As readers will find out, her case is at once powerful, passionate, and sophisticated, “deceptively simple” but “multilayered” and “complex,” one might say.

Raymond Grew also bids good riddance to the Risorgimento paradigm—but only half of it. He welcomes the recovery of its positive side, even imagines a possible resurgence, a “fresh start” for Ginsborg’s—hopeful—reading of Risorgimento values after the “wasteland” left by Berlusconi. But Grew also indicts the negativity bound into the felt need for redemption as a self-fulfilling prophecy that has all too often resulted in bipolar shifts from exaltation to abjection, scenarios of victimization, the mantra of Italy’s “obdurate uniqueness” as an excuse for failures, including the failure to do enough to correct them. Along these lines the Risorgimento, cast “as the original sin of the new Italian state, predicts failure, justifies cynicism, and discourages efforts at reform.” Grew’s strongest antidote is comparative history. Italian traditions of critical engagement with the political, social, and cultural world bear comparison with the best in Europe; the concurrent histories of other European nation-states are hardly unadulterated success stories of community and competence, let alone virtue.

Whether Grew’s qualified approval can withstand Bouchard’s exorcism of the Risorgimento with “new modalities of citizenship and belonging to the increasingly multicultural and diverse world,” readers will have to decide for themselves. This much will be obvious: that

the Risorgimento still inspires passion, including the skepticism and outright hostility that it has occasionally prompted from its own time to ours. It is also clear that the Risorgimento has a future in the sense that its history remains something of an “unmastered past” that calls for further investigation on issues underscored by the original roundtable and these comments, most significantly perhaps its links to Fascism, the Resistance, and the post-war Republic. This is as it should be, for in one version or another the Risorgimento raises profound questions for understanding national identity and the nation-state, and forces us to come to terms with the relationship between Italy’s pasts, presents, and futures where the dark “specter” of Bouchard’s Risorgimento may also harbor Ginsborg’s blithe spirit.