Chapter 6

A Culture without a Nation

Linguistic Dirigisme

At the moment of Italian unification, the ruling Piedmontese class faced an unexpected reality: Rather than governing a small, semi-French, mostly homogeneous, subalpine region, it now had to govern an almost entirely Mediterranean entity, disparate both geographically and in human terms. Deeply pragmatic, these first rulers wasted no time contemplating their difficulties, but instead plunged straight into what they considered the most urgent tasks facing them. The thorniest of these, in their eyes, was the survival of the new state.

In the early years of unitary Italy, the fear that this barely constructed edifice might collapse under the concentric attacks of the Catholic powers (Austria and France) and of the Bourbons of Naples, exiled in the Pope’s court, outweighed all other concerns. Thus, instead of any discussion of the formation of a “nation,” the ruling classes gave immediate priority to the creation of the state, which is to say the establishment of an administration and of a coercive, unitary governing apparatus.

Paradoxically, it was precisely these coercive structures that proved to be the most rapid and effective, at least in the short term, in a first “nationalization” of the masses. Indeed, they succeeded, just years after the new state’s birth, in giving rise to movements of rebellion that involved the real masses of the entire country. The extremely unpopular wheat tax provoked, in December 1868 and January 1869, a wave of revolts that spread from Lombardy through the entire peninsula, forcing the army to intervene.1

But the best-known case was the contribution that mandatory military service—especially during World War I—played in diffusing the “national” language. Beginning in 1915, peasants from every region of Italy found themselves at the fronts, communicating together for the first time, with army chaplains often serving as intermediaries and interpreters. The language that provided a common vehicle for communications was a new and original Italian, impregnated with dialects and military jargon, in which the Piedmontese dialect of the old hierarchies and the southern accents of the new ones predominated. It thus took nearly sixty years of unitary life and a world political catastrophe for

M. Graziano, The Failure of Italian Nationhood
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a “national” language to begin to be understood (if almost never practiced) by a majority of the Italian people.

A particularity of the Italian dialects—certainly the most original one—is that their diffusion was, so to speak, “democratic.” In the other national entities that sprang into being in the nineteenth century, a scholarly language, used by the political, economic, and cultural elites, existed in opposition to the popular forms of speech; in Italy, on the contrary, dialects were used by every social category not only in private life but often in official and public occasions as well. The first Italian king hated speaking Italian; his prime minister, Camillo Benso di Cavour, felt much more at ease with French or even English, and ministerial meetings were regularly conducted in Piedmontese, until after unification.

In 1868, Alessandro Manzoni was named to head the Commission of the Ministry of Public Instruction, in charge of linguistic questions. For decades Manzoni had dreamed of being able to contribute to the birth of the new unitary language, but his wish had collided with another of his dearest hopes—for the revolution to take place without a revolution. As the linguist Giacomo Devoto emphasizes, the demand that unitary political institutions be linked to a unitary language encountered a key obstacle in “the social immobility accompanying the national revolution.” The persistence of dialects, adds another linguist, Tullio De Mauro, was the consequence of “the plurisecular stagnation of the economic, social and intellectual life of the country.”

Manzoni favored a language imposed from top to bottom: Florence should thus have fulfilled the centripetal role played in France by Paris, in Spain by Madrid, and in England by London. This policy, later described as “dirigiste,” proved illusory, and not just for the reasons mentioned by Devoto. Even the notion of sending Tuscan teachers across the national territory to serve as “missionaries of the language” failed in the end, principally because of the clear lack of structure in the Italian educational system in the early decades of the unitary experience. According to a ministerial inquiry of 1910—fifty years after unification—two-thirds of all classrooms were “inadequate” and half of the sixty thousand teachers were “insufficient”; in some cities, the law explicitly authorized placing illiterate teachers in charge of classes when necessary; and under the pretext that students did not understand Italian, their teachers generally spoke in a dialect. Della Loggia quotes the Economic Archives of Italian Unification as saying that in Tuscany, the land of the “language missionaries,” only 20 percent of those who had attended school could actually read. According to De Mauro, Manzoni’s “dirigiste” proposition ultimately engendered “a new purism and a new pedantry” that had no practical effect on language training or on a national conscience.

A Dead Language

As we have seen, the linguistic tools used for centuries by the various populations that were now brought together under the virtual name of “Italians” created more division than cohesion. The persistence of dialects is like a dust cloud left by the peninsula’s history of fragmentation; the Italian language, for its part, was just