A History of Italy 1700-1860
The Social Constraints of Political Change

Stuart Woolf
First Published in 1979, *A History of Italy 1700-1860* provides a comprehensive overview of Italy’s political history from 1700-1860. Divided in five parts it deals with themes like the re-emergence of Italy; Italy as the ‘pawn’ of European diplomacy; social physiognomy of the Italian states; problems of the government; enlightenment and despotism (1760-90); the offensive against the Church; revolution and moderation (1789-1814); revolution and the break with the past; rationalization and social conservatism; the search for independence (1815-47); legitimacy and conspiracy; alternative paths towards a new Italy; and the cost of independence (1848-61). It fills a major gap and presents a thoughtful and well-integrated political narrative of this complex period in Italy’s development. This book is an essential read for students and scholars of Italian history and European history.
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Contents

Preface 9
Introduction: The land and the people 13

Part 1 The re-emergence of Italy 1700-60 27

1 Italy, the ‘pawn’ of European diplomacy 29
   The search for a new equilibrium 29
   The Italian states 34
   Peace and political impotence 39

2 The social physiognomy of the Italian states 43
   The countryside and landed power 43
   Systems of tenure and peasant pauperism 50
   The cities: economic activities and social structure 56

3 The problems of government 63
   Administrative confusion and financial crisis 63
   Autocracy and reform: Piedmont 66
   The early reforms: ecclesiastical privilege, administration, finances 69

4 The ‘new’ intellectuals 75
   The origins of the new culture 75
   Italy and Europe: reason and reform 80
   The Enlightenment vision of the social bases of reform 84
   Production and public happiness 88

Part 2 Reform and authority: Enlightenment and despotsim 1760-90 93

5 The years of collaboration: 1765-75 95
   Naples: the traditional reformism of Tanucci 97
   Lombardy: Viennese administrators and Milanese ‘philosophers’ 98
Tuscany: the physiocratic victory 104
Modena and Parma: the limits of reformism 107
Piedmont, Venice, Genoa: the absence of reformism 110
6 The offensive against the Church 112
Rome: hopes of ecclesiastical reform 112
Princes and churchmen: the subordination of Church to State 114
7 The crisis of collaboration: 1775-90 120
Princely domination and intellectual withdrawal 120
Joseph II: the autocratic reformer 125
Leopold of Tuscany: physiocracy and Jansenism 130
8 Belated collaboration: 1780-94 136
The Two Sicilies: Genovesi's pupils and the lack of effective leadership 136
The Papal States: the impotence of reformism 144
Modena: Ricci, the isolated reformer 147
The consequences of Enlightened reformism 148

PART 3 REVOLUTION AND MODERATION 1789-1814 153
9 Revolution and the break with the past: 1789-99 155
France and Europe 155
Italy and the revolution 157
The ‘liberation’ of Italy 162
The Jacobins 167
The Italian republics 174
The two Italies 181
10 Rationalization and social conservatism: 1800-14 188
Napoleon and Italy 188
The Italian Republic 195
The Grand Empire 206
The Kingdom of Naples 213
The revolt against Napoleon 218

PART 4 THE SEARCH FOR INDEPENDENCE 1815-47 227
11 Legitimacy and conspiracy: 1815-31 229
Restoration in Europe 229
Restoration in Italy 236
Opposition to Restoration 246
Revolution and reaction 255
Disintegration of the Restoration 265
12 The society of Restoration Italy 275
The countryside 275
The cities 283
CONTENTS

13 Alternative paths towards a new Italy: 1831-48 293
   Political and economic change in Europe  293
   Mazzini and the democratic initiative  303
   Political liberalism and economic progress  316
   Cattaneo: the idealization of the Lombard middle class  331
   Gioberti: the neo-guelph illusion  338
   The years of moderate hopes  346

PART 5 THE COST OF INDEPENDENCE 1848-61 361

14 The contradictions of revolution: 1848-9 363
   Le printemps des peuples  363
   The high tide of revolution in Italy  371
   The ebb of revolution  389
   Republican Italy  397

15 The compromises of diplomacy: 1850-61 407
   The breakdown of the European concert  407
   The crisis of the political democrats  418
   The hegemony of the political liberals  432
   The triumph of political moderatism  445
   The final drive on democratic unitarianism  457

16 Epilogue 469
   Glossary 481
   Bibliography 485
   Index 501
Preface

Big books (and some small ones too) often take far longer than anticipated. As far as I can recall, I began this history of Italy in the mid-1960s. It has formed part of my intellectual (and material) luggage ever since, written at intervals at Reading, Settignano, Cogne, Turin, New York, Paris, Melbourne and Colchester. An earlier version in Italian was published by Einaudi of Turin as part of its courageous and enterprising Storia d'Italia, and I am grateful to Giulio Einaudi and to the editors of this collective undertaking, Corrado Vivanti and Ruggiero Romano, for offering me the challenge of writing a foreigner's interpretation of the most 'national' period of Italy's long history. The present book, besides a substantial revision of the original Italian edition, includes four new chapters.

There are obvious disadvantages in writing a book over so many years. Knowledge deepens, so that one is inclined continuously to rewrite the same parts. But, at a certain moment, it is necessary – if the book is ever to be finished – to let the publisher prise the manuscript out of one's hands. New materials and new interpretations have continued to appear inexorably and sometimes with terrifying rapidity. I have not always been able to take them fully into account. It is true that a portion of this vast production of printed matter might appear to the disenchanted observer of Italian cultural practices as the inevitable (and often superfluous) legacy of a particular tradition of humanistic rhetoric and the consequence of the more general requirements of academic advancement. Delay has sometimes relieved me of the need to read what soon has been justly forgotten. I hope it has not led me to neglect that substantial part of Italian historical writing of notable quality and integrity which has appeared over the past fifteen years, and which has led to a radical and deep revision of the traditional interpretation of the Risorgimento as the triumphantly inevitable culmination of the previous history of Italy. Vivacious intellectual curiosity, backed up by tenacious research and sophisticated maturity of interpretation, are
characteristics of the best Italian historiography of the most recent decades, one more facet of that remarkable cultural vitality displayed by the Italian people after the years of suffocating conformism of the fascist regime.

That I owe much to Italian historians, particularly of the younger generation, will be evident to the reader. My debt is not confined to their writings, but extends to the discussions we have carried on, as if without interruption, over twenty years. By chance, I have researched mostly in the three capital cities of unified Italy – Turin, Florence and Rome. But if I have been able, in this book, to share with the reader my understanding of the tormented history of Italy, I believe it is not only as a result of what I have studied and discussed with historians, in these three cities and elsewhere, but also because of my personal 'non-academic' life in Italy, my experiences of living with and among Italians. However pretentious an echo of Machiavelli's dictum this may sound to the 'cultured' reader, it is written with humility and gratitude. It is difficult, indeed arrogant, to write the history of a foreign people, as it presupposes an understanding of a civilization, a culture, a mentality, absorbed from earliest childhood and only observable by the outsider in fragmentary perceptions derived not only from the written documentation, but from the visible and oral evidence that surround him incessantly. I was fortunate in commencing my earliest researches in Italy before the dramatic – and traumatic – pace of industrialization transformed social relations and led, through the painful experience of mass migration from south to north, to what might be considered in many ways as the real unification of the Italian people.

I have been even more fortunate, through the kindness and sympathy of an ever growing number of friends, in being offered the rare privilege of a hospitable introduction into a vast and bewildering variety of groups, families and homes, in remote mountains and villages as much as in the plains and cities. It has taught me the obvious lesson that in Italy regional and local diversity runs deeper, for historical and cultural reasons, than in most western European countries and that it maintains its vitality despite the impact of apparently overwhelming national changes. It has also taught me the equally evident truth (unfortunately noted infrequently by political historians) that the history of Italy is not just – is not even primarily – the history of its cities, however resplendent they may appear as testimony of past glories. It is the history of a harsh, mountainous land, where a living has to be torn from a soil impoverished by inclement natural conditions and human neglect. These structural influences play, and have always played, a complex role in conditioning social as well as more easily visible political developments in Italy. It is difficult to understand their relationships; but to ignore them is to run the risk of writing a history that ignores as much as it explains.

The new generation of Italian historians is very aware of these slow-
moving undercurrents of long-term change, and in recent years has begun to explore them. But the social history of Italy, particularly in the nineteenth century, remains to be written. So that, in one sense, my rash attempt has come too early: I cannot write where research does not as yet exist. I have endeavoured to piece together what evidence is available, from original sources, from my own researches and from the work of young Italian and non-Italian historians; and on this basis I have written the pages that discuss social structures and social changes in Italy. The gaps are evident, and I am acutely conscious of the inadequacies of what I have written. But I remain (indeed I have become ever more) convinced that political history, if it is to be more than just the recounting of a story, is so far from offering an autonomous approach that it can only be understood through the conditioning and slowly changing structures of society. Perhaps this attempt to offer a synthesis at least will serve the purpose of indicating useful lines of research.

Like all authors, I owe thanks to a host of people. Above all, I am grateful to Brian Pullan and Paul Ginsborg for their patient and immensely helpful detailed comments on large portions of the text. Eric Jones, Olwen Hufton, Verina Jones and Maurice Aymard read chapters at different stages of the book's prolonged birth, and I hope I have benefited from their pertinent remarks. My thanks also to Ian Fletcher for his assistance in rendering Italian doggerel into its English equivalent.

This book is dedicated to Anna, who will probably be glad not to look at it again, and to Deborah, who has seen it around the house for most of her life.

March 1978

Stuart Woolf

Note on references

I have kept the footnotes to an absolute minimum in order to avoid overburdening the text unnecessarily, as was requested for the earlier Italian edition. Therefore the references are given at the end of each quotation, the number after the author's name indicating where the full reference is to be found in the bibliography, which is divided into sections.
Introduction: The land and the people

Italy has always attracted foreigners, from ancient Greek settlers to present-day whistle-stop tourists, from pilgrims to mercenaries, from artists to romantic poets. Over the centuries, it has retained its hold over the imagination of the western world, an appeal perhaps varying in intensity over time, but never absent, and fundamentally explicable in terms of two different (although sometimes superimposed) images of the country: its cultural traditions, both religious and secular, and its fertility.

The theme of the natural fertility and wealth of the peninsula may surprise readers of today, only too accustomed to discussions of development and under-development, of industrialization and economic backwardness. But that Italy was ‘the garden of the Empire’ was an image which remained unchallenged until the seventeenth century, only aroused serious criticism in the eighteenth, and was still applied – inappropriately – to the physical potential of the southern regions in the decades after unification. It was an image composed of the historical memory of the south as the ‘granary’ of the Roman republic and empire and of contemporary impressions (from the eleventh until the sixteenth century and beyond) of the fertility of the landscape of the Po and Tuscan plains and the wealth of their cities.

The making of the landscape, as much as the building of the cities, were the result of countless generations of human endeavour. For physical geography has endowed Italy with few advantages. Within natural frontiers formed by the Mediterranean and the awesome barrier of the Alps, four-fifths of the territory consists of mountains and hills. Not only the great Alpine arc, sweeping west to east from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic, but the steep hostile range of the Apennines, stretching irregularly down the length of Italy, north-west to south-east, and the mountains of Sicily and Sardinia, have set permanent barriers to the possibilities of cultivation. Beneath the permanent or semi-permanent snow levels, the higher slopes of the Alpine mountains and Tyrrhenian Apennines are covered by only a thin

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surface of soil; the steepness of the slopes in the sub-Alpine chain and the Apennine ridge has led to erosion, not least because of the continuous deforestation; in the low hills and plains of the south and islands the humus is extremely thin. Climate has imposed another, equally rigid limit, sharply dividing the more temperate, humid environment of the northern and central plains and river valleys, with their richer soils, from the hot, arid, typically Mediterranean climate of the south and islands, marked by long months of drought, interrupted only briefly by violent rains, which swell the rivers and streams into threatening torrents. The line dividing the south from the north is an irregular one: the Tuscan Maremma can be regarded, from the point of view of physical geography, as belonging to the south, Campania to the north. But in pedological, climatic and agricultural terms, the division between the Mediterranean south and the more amenable north has constituted a permanent barrier over the centuries, explaining much of the differences in development of the two regions. Within both regions, the enormous and often abrupt changes in altitude, climate, soil and vegetation - probably greater than in any European country - as well as the presence of extensive marshlands and the constant threat of the irregular flows of torrential streams have conditioned the varying forms of human settlements and agriculture.

Over the thousand years from antiquity to the modern period, three broad trends can be discerned in human endeavours to control and exploit the environment in Italy: irrigation and drainage schemes to control and harness the permanent presence or recurrent threat of water; a more-or-less continuous process of deforestation, worsening the hydrological disorder; and fluctuations in the frontiers of the cultivated areas, corresponding to the periodic increase and decline of the population. In the course of this long period, the landscape of Italy was slowly shaped, from the carefully irrigated and intensely cultivated lower Lombard plain, with its mixed husbandry, to the vast, uninhabited wheat prairies of the Roman and Sicilian latifundia, from the great sheep runs of the Abruzzi, Lazio or Apulia to the specialized fruit and market gardens near the cities throughout Italy, from the hill-top villages of the south, in flight from the malaria-infested plains, to the isolated farmhouses of the central Italian sharecroppers. The process was slow, but occurred for the most part between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. The deep depression of the seventeenth century, like the demographic growth of the later eighteenth, both left their mark; but not until the present century was the landscape again to undergo drastic modification.

By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the cities of northern and central Italy, as much as the countryside, had already acquired that characteristic physiognomy of towers and civic buildings, of markets and economic bustle, which amazed all foreign visitors and distinguished Italy from the rest of Europe. In a feudal world, with universalist ideals of Church and Empire,
the supremacy of these merchants in their communes, independent city-states, represented an aberration, which imposed itself on Europe because of an undeniable economic hegemony, soon accompanied by a cultural superiority. The reasons for this secular leadership in a Christian world are not to be found in any ‘national characteristics’ of Italians (for, if this were the case, how can one explain the subsequent centuries of Italian ‘failure’?), but – in origin at least – in the one crucial advantage with which geography had endowed the peninsula: its central location within the Mediterranean. Within the context of a general European economic revival from the ninth and tenth centuries, Italians were able to play a growing and soon a dominant role because of their virtual monopoly of trade between East and West. The products and cultures of the Orient, Byzantium, the Arab world and beyond, as far as China, were filtered through Italy to the feudal Christianity of Western Europe; spices and silks, saints’ remains and heresies, ancient manuscripts and contemporary plagues, all passed through Italian ports – Amalfi, Pisa, Genoa, Venice – and inland cities – Milan, Pavia, Bologna, Florence.

The great success of Italians between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries cannot, however, be ascribed to purely geographical causes. In part it was due to the revived importance of Rome, formerly capital of a secular empire, now see of the successors to St Peter. Pilgrimages and Peter’s Pence created new routes from north to south, crossing those from east to west, and assisted (even if they did not create) the fortunes of Emilian, Tuscan and Umbrian cities, such as Bologna, Florence, Siena and Viterbo. As a city, Rome – with a population of perhaps 30,000 in 1300 – was of little material importance compared to Florence and Venice, with populations of 100,000, or Milan, with 80,000. But as a myth, a symbol of continuity with the greatness of antiquity, both secular and religious, its significance cannot be underestimated in medieval Europe. Alongside the unprecedented modernity of the communes, the antiquity of Rome represented the other, contradictory image of Italy – its continuity with the glories of the past.

The independence of the communal cities of northern and central Italy was essential to their economic success. Contemporaries were startled by these Italian city-states precisely because they stood out in sharp contrast, as islands in the sea of feudalism of medieval Europe. Feudalism continued to dominate large areas of Italy as well – and was ultimately to prove the downfall of the communes. Not only in southern Italy, where the Norman and Angevin conquests suppressed communal independence, but in Piedmont, the Trentino, Friuli and large areas of central Italy, the feudal structure of society remained unchallenged. The area of communal Italy always remained confined. But within this area the relationship between the cities and the surrounding feudal territories was fundamentally transformed. Far
from depending upon the feudal lords, the urban centres asserted their control over the surrounding territories. It was the requirements of the cities, with their rapidly growing populations and expanding trade, that underlay the dissolution of the manorial system and the commercialization of agriculture. It was the predominance of the urban economies that explained both the leading role played by merchants and artisans and the residence of noble families within the cities. For visitors accustomed to the unchallenged supremacy of the feudal order, the distinctiveness of the Italian communes lay in the acceptance by Italian nobles (whether willing or coerced) of the political independence and economic activities of the citizens. The development of the structures of communal government and of the guilds, as much as the characteristic and endemic struggles between the cities or between factions within each commune, took place with ever less reference to the world of feudalism, precisely because the nobles of northern and central Italy accepted the hegemony of the urban centres.

The citizens of these communes, like the foreign visitors, were conscious of their material wealth. It was a wealth based on industry – the production of high quality, mainly textile goods – but regulated according to the demands of international trade. Italian merchants and bankers dominated European trade because of their entrepreneurial skills. The technical innovations – the coining of gold and silver moneys, letters of exchange, double entry book-keeping, insurances – were perhaps less revolutionary than has been claimed. What was revolutionary was the physical presence of Italian merchants and bankers throughout Europe and beyond, their knowledge of prices over a wide geographical area, and their ability to turn this knowledge into profit by relating it to time. The basic skills of literacy and numeracy, essential for these trading activities, can be linked to the internal needs of government and administration of these independent communes. More importantly, the mobility of these merchants and their capacity to group themselves in commercial organizations – which ultimately explains their superiority over their foreign rivals – probably need to be explained in terms of family and kinship structures and in forms of ‘sociability’ particular to the Italian cities.

By the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries the leadership of communal Italy within Europe was an established fact. It was a cultural, as much as an economic, leadership of which Italian citizens were wholly conscious in their contemptuous references to the ‘barbarians’ beyond the Alps, and their exaltation of communal patriotism in urban chronicles and civic buildings. For foreigners, Italy aroused both admiration and envy. It was the centre of culture, both religious and lay. With the formal institution of jubilees in 1300, Rome successfully asserted its role as the religious and administrative centre of Christianity, where the path to redemption could be eased by the discomforts of the long journey and the purchase of
indulgences. But other cities equally exerted their appeal as centres of culture: the university towns, especially Bologna, already from the twelfth century establishing a new jurisprudence; later, supremely by the fifteenth century, the humanist cities – Florence, Venice, Milan – attracting the intellectuals of Europe in search of manuscripts and ideas.

Civic Italy reached its apogee as a source of cultural inspiration when, economically and politically, it was already in decline. The famines and epidemics that affected all Europe, culminating in the terrible Black Death of 1348, checked the expansion of the Italian economy. The land routes to the East were interrupted by the end of the 'pax mongolica' in the early fourteenth century; Venice, Genoa, Florence, Naples all experienced monetary crises; the great banking houses of Florence, Genoa and Venice ran into increasing difficulties and often collapsed; Italian merchants abroad began to be persecuted; textile production in Florence, Brescia, Pisa, Venice and Verona, declined; the urban populations fell sharply. In the countryside, particularly in Tuscany, Lazio and Sardinia, the enormous loss of life through the plague led to the abandoning of villages and cultivated areas; marshland and malaria forced a retreat from the plains, in the north as well as the south; arable was converted into sheep pasturage; ports and river deltas silted, especially in the south, but also in the lower Po valley, the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic coasts and the Tuscan Val di Chiana.

The contrast between the earlier expansive development of the economy and the deep crisis of the later fourteenth century is dramatic; it led to long-term changes within the cities and in the relationship between city and countryside. The economic activities of the Italian cities revived during most of the fifteenth century, as did the European economy. But Italian merchants no longer dominated Europe. Despite the spectacular image offered by great banking houses, such as the Medici, the urban economies remained tied to the production of luxury goods and hence particularly vulnerable to interruptions in international trade. Within the cities, the lesser guilds, the popolo minuto, lost their struggle for power. The urban revolts of the textile workers in the later fourteenth century, at Lucca, Siena, Perugia, Genoa, Verona and, above all, the famous revolt of the Florentine Ciompi in 1378, had failed. Production was increasingly controlled by the popolo grasso, the merchant-bankers. The guilds closed in upon themselves, increasingly concerned to protect their monopolies and privileges, hostile to competition, reluctant to innovate. Urban Italy remained tied to the production of high quality, expensive goods, which – after a final boom towards the mid-sixteenth century – proved ever less capable of competing with the new, cheaper textiles produced in England, Holland and France.

The triumph of the merchant-capitalists over the popolo minuto carried with it the destruction of the communes. Internally, the history of the
communes is one of perennial instability. The endemic struggles of guilds, factions and families had blocked the development of the bureaucratic and financial instruments of government and the transformation of the cities into states through the establishment of uniform administrations. Wealthy oligarchies asserted their control over the communes, but were easily overthrown because of their lack of a broad social base. In Florence in 1343, only 3500 citizens were eligible for office in a population of over 70,000. It was always possible to challenge the authority of the ruling families by appealing to the people, especially in times of economic difficulties or after a military defeat by a rival city. As vast numbers of citizens withdrew from active participation in public life and concentrated on their economic activities, the signori seized power in the communes.

The transformation of the communes into signorie was not just the consequence of the internal weaknesses of the former. It was even more symptomatic of the isolation of the communes within a feudal world and of the close links between the urban oligarchies and the feudatories. Once food supplies and free, adequately secure communications had been assured, the communes had never attempted to challenge the continued existence of feudal holdings. Indeed, the landed purchases of rich merchants and the urban residence of magnates created multiple ties between the two groups, which became closer as the nobles – excluded from power in the thirteenth century – again asserted their right to hold public office. The convergence of interests between the two groups underlay the progressively oligarchical development of the communes; even in republics such as Venice and Genoa exclusive power was seized by limited numbers of families. Elsewhere, the condottieri who served the communes and the signori who overthrew them – the Visconti, Estensi, Gonzaga, Scaligeri and many others – often came from feudal families. Their feudal territories provided them with the base from which to seize power, or even – as with the Visconti or Carraresi – to regain it, if thrown out of the cities.

The diffusion of the signorie in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in northern and central Italy accentuated the feudalization of society, long characteristic of the south. If power was easy to seize, it was difficult to retain. The extension of the territorial authority of the signori, such as the Visconti or Sforza in Lombardy, was achieved at the expense of compromises with the local oligarchies, by the granting of privileges and ‘liberties’. From the final decades of the fourteenth century, old and new families were granted feudal investitures, with tax exemptions and judicial rights. The feudal world reasserted itself, as the urban classes bought land, acquired titles and gradually adopted the feudal code of values, from knightly conduct and noble honour to rigid social hierarchy and reluctance to engage in ‘mechanical’ arts. Even the republican citizens of Venice created a feudal system of investitures for lands in their colony of Crete.
The effects of these transformations were equally profound in the countryside. The earlier expansion of the communes had led to the dissolution of the manorial system, the emancipation of the peasants and their property, the creation of semi-independent rural communes, the encouragement of a commercialized agriculture with the development of urban markets. With the crisis of the fourteenth century, the cities no longer offered an outlet for the pressure of the population on the land. Even if the disastrous plague of 1348 momentarily relieved this pressure, the peasants were only able to benefit temporarily, because of the urban demand for land: the properties around the cities were rapidly acquired by magnates and citizens. The security offered by the signori encouraged investment in the land. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed a progressive transformation of property and landscape, at the expense of the peasants. Large estates were created in northern and central Italy and consolidated in the south. Rural communes lost their autonomy together with much of their commonlands. If some wealthy peasants emerged, the majority were dispossessed by this concentration of property. At the same time, agriculture in the north and centre became increasingly commercial. The estates were often rented to capitalist entrepreneurs, fittabili, ‘country merchants’, concerned to maximize production rather than increase productivity. Share-cropping contracts (mezzadria), introduced in Tuscany through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, became increasingly common, but changed in character, as growing labour demands were imposed upon the peasants in order to introduce new cultures, such as hemp, or increase profitable existing ones, such as vines. Mezzadria spread into Emilia in the fifteenth century, Umbria, Piedmont and the central and western Po valley in the sixteenth and seventeenth. If the shortage of livestock constituted a structural limitation on agricultural productivity, except in a restricted area of the Lombard plain, the introduction of specialized cultures reflected the commercialization of the countryside: industrial plants, such as woad in Lombardy and saffron in the Abruzzi, olive oil in Apulia, sugarcane in Sicily, rice in the Vercellese. Above all, the reclamation of marshlands and the expansion of sheep flocks and pasturages marked the changing agrarian landscape. From the late fifteenth century wealthy citizens, aided by their governments, invested huge sums in and made equally large profits from drainage schemes in Venetia, along the Tuscan coast, and near Bologna, Ferrara and Mantua. In the Tuscan Maremma, but even more in Roman Lazio, Neapolitan Apulia, as well as in Sicily and Sardinia, the great feudal landowners raised vast sheep flocks, seriously reducing the arable area and hence threatening the wheat supplies of the cities.

By the mid-sixteenth century, the fundamental differences between the commercial agriculture of the north and that of the south were apparent:
intensive farming, with a certain degree of specialization, in the north and centre; extensive wheat and sheep culture in the south. The structure of landholdings, tenurial contracts and human settlements reflected these differences: vast estates and small peasant properties or leaseholds in the south (except near the major cities), with the mostly landless populations travelling considerable distances from their large villages according to the demands of the agricultural cycle; varying sized estates, divided into smaller working units according to the size of the peasant family, with isolated homesteads or small villages near the cultivated land, in the plains and villages of the north and centre. Only in the mountain valleys did peasant smallholdings remain predominant.

What was common to all regions was the hostility of the citizens towards the peasants. The working population of the countryside is satirized in literary works between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries as stupid, hypocritical, dishonest – and as a threat. The peasant response, after the failure of sporadic risings in the fifteenth century, was a retreat into the paese di Cuccagna, a fairyland, upside-down world, replete with food, where sleep, not labour, created earnings, where lords and gentlemen did not exist and peasants were free. Here too the difference between the two basic regions of Italy remained firm; for this popular literature only circulated in the north and centre.

The political crisis and collapse of an independent Italy in the early sixteenth century did not modify, but accentuated these long-term trends of Italian society. The period of the signorie had continued the development towards regional states within the peninsula. But the dominant cities – Venice, Milan, Florence, Rome and the smaller capitals – had proved incapable of creating solid and uniform state structures. The Sforza of Lombardy, like republican Venice or Medicean Florence, controlled large but heterogeneous territories by a mixture of force and compromise with the local urban oligarchies. In the kingdoms of Sicily and Naples the feudal barons retained their power, even after Ferdinand of Naples' massacre of those who had plotted against him. In the Papal States, the schisms encouraged the creation of abusive fiefs, only formally checked during the foreign invasions of the sixteenth century by papal exploitation of the insecurity of the other Italian rulers. The long period of relative peace from foreign threats enjoyed by the Italian rulers from the mid-fourteenth century, culminating in the apparent balance of power established by the treaty of Lodi (1454), masked the weakness, not the strength, of the Italian states. The much-lauded skills of Italian diplomacy served to hide the military impotence and fears of internal plots of the signori and republican oligarchies. That the wealth of Italy continued to attract foreign adventurers is demonstrated not only by the invasion of the French king Charles VIII (1494), but even more by the rapidity with which the emperor Maximilian
and Ferdinand of Spain, as well as Charles’ successor Louis XII, hastened to join in this division of the booty.

The collapse of Italy, consecrated definitely in the peace of Cateau-Cambrésis (1559) which established Spanish hegemony, shocked contemporaries because it contrasted so violently with Italy’s ancient and recent glories. Above all, the political failure coincided with—and accelerated—Italian cultural influence throughout Europe, from France and England to Bohemia, Poland and Moscow. Italian humanism, painting, sculpture, architecture, the decorative arts, urban and garden planning, offered models to European intellectuals, artists, nobles and royal courts from the later fifteenth until the seventeenth century, from Pico della Mirandola and Leonardo da Vinci to Machiavelli and Borromini. The collapse of the signori and the increasingly repressive atmosphere of counter-reformation, Spanish Italy led to the exodus of innumerable Italian artists and craftsmen who left their characteristic imprint throughout the Continent. The contrast between the material evidence of Italy’s great past and her present decline, a commonplace of all foreign travellers between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, expressed in terms of shock, nostalgia, contempt or philosophical resignation according to period and nationality, was fundamentally based upon a judgement of Italian cultural achievements.

For Italian intellectuals the shock of the collapse was obviously more immediate and overwhelming. The writings of Machiavelli and Guicciardini, their discussions of ancient Greece and Rome, reflect their constant striving for the means to adapt sixteenth-century institutions and customs into safeguards of an illusory independence. But even before the foreign invasions, as the rigidity of oligarchical control increased, the humanists had begun to withdraw from their role as public servants. Alberti could deny that honour was to be found in public service. With the wars in full course, Castiglione accepted the new realities of absolutist power, while striving to preserve the dignity of the intellectual in his new role as courtier. But already in the same years, his contemporary Ariosto gained public acclaim for his advocacy of the need to eulogize the prince and so obtain his patronage.

The change had come rapidly. By the mid-sixteenth century, Italian political writers accepted established authority; soon, they also accepted Italy’s loss of independence. The steady stream of treatises on political and social behaviour published through the seventeenth century alternated between opportunistic counsels on how to manipulate ‘reason of state’ and open advice on the search for pensions and benefices through panegyric glorification of the prince. Anti-Spanish proclamations of the need to regain the ‘liberty’ of Italy merely masked a practical withdrawal from political commitment into a concern for private, and especially family, advancement.

Counter-reformation, Spanish Italy was a country of rigid social stratification. Both Church and Spanish protocol encouraged and codified this...
hierarchical division of society. The Church’s role was twofold: suppression of dissent and consecration of a divinely ordained and fundamentally immovable social order. Its success in Italy was unusually complete, because of the structural weaknesses of the Italian states and society, but also because of the restoration of papal authority, achieved with remarkable rapidity in the council of Trent (1545–63) and confirmed by the support of that Most Catholic Sovereign, Philip II of Spain. A mere half-century separated the ill-famed political intrigues of Alexander VI (Borgia) from the fanatical authoritarianism of Paul IV and Pius V. By the later sixteenth century, heresy in Italy had been stamped out by the restoration of the moral authority of the Church, often described as the Catholic reformation, but even more by the extreme centralization of authority by Rome. Whole villages of Calabrian Waldensians were massacred while the council of Trent was still in progress. Dissent was suppressed by intimidation, the ever-present threat of the inquisition and the introduction of a general index of prohibited books. Jewish communities were expelled or forced into ghettos. The significance of the successful defiance of a papal interdict by Sarpi’s Venice (1606) is not to be found in any challenge to Catholic orthodoxy, but rather in its firm rejection of papal pretensions at the political level of Church-State relations.

The counterpart to the repression of heresy was the inculcation of a set of imposed beliefs and external practices of piety upon a laity excluded from active participation within the religious life of the Church. The publication of the Roman catechism (1566) offered an effective instrument to shield the laity from the dangers of contamination through direct contact with the Scriptures. At the popular level, a flood of edifying publications on piety and the lives of the saints accompanied the ‘missions’ of Jesuits, Barnabites and the new religious orders, through the seventeenth century, into the cities and countryside of Italy in order to win back the people to the true religion. Superstitious practices and baroque churches were complementary aspects of this Catholic reconquista of Italian society.

The Church was particularly successful in Italy because of the broad identification of its vision of society with that of the ruling groups. If, at the political level, it had been forced to accept its role as a separate, albeit autonomous, organization from the secular polity, it remained intimately linked by multiple ties to the various nobilities and oligarchies of Italy. The Jesuits had replaced the humanists in the education of the noble young. The ecclesiastical hierarchy continued to be recruited from patrician families. Benefices and lay control of nomination of priests to churches, appointment of administrators of charitable institutions, were instances of the continuous, close links between ecclesiastical authorities and secular oligarchies. However separate as an organization, the Church confirmed and reinforced the aristocratic ideology of society, from its affirmation of the sovereign as the
earthly manifestation of divine majesty and its hierarchical structuring of
religious ceremonies and processions to its homilies to the humble on the
duties of respect, obedience and resignation.

Spanish influence accelerated the aristocratic restructuring of Italian
society. In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries aristocratic
wealth, power and ideals definitively replaced those of communal merchants.
The process is most immediately evident in the massive purchase of land by
the urban ruling groups and in the inflation of noble titles. Land offered
security, tax exemptions in many cases, food supplies for the family, and the
most legitimate base for claims to office or titles. It could also produce a
satisfactory income through supplementary seigneurial rights and, above all,
through the exploitation of labour, facilitated by harsher tenurial contracts
and the growing indebtedness of the peasants. Nor did possession of land
exclude speculation in large-scale trade or industry, or in usury. Titles, as
barons, counts, marquises, dukes or princes, legitimated the entry into the
aristocracy of new nobles and confirmed – through upgrading – the superi-
ority of the old. Both land and titles offered the structural supports for the
exercise of power. The rulers of Spanish Italy could not be overturned, like
the signori of the previous centuries. But their endeavours to create the
bureaucratic and fiscal structures of absolutist states required the collabora-
tion of the landed nobility. Excluded from – or reluctant to accept – the
most influential positions in the central administrations, the patriciates of
northern and central Italy retained the monopoly of local office, identifying
themselves increasingly with the traditions and privileges of their own
cities. It was these local nobles and notables who dominated the life of their
cities, often exploiting their administration of religious and secular institu-
tions for personal profit. In southern Italy, the financial weakness of the
Spanish monarchy progressively excluded any possibilities of administrative
change. The Neapolitan revolt of the populace in 1647 then forced the
government to accept the expansion of feudalism as the price of political
security.

Aristocratic ideals permeated Italian society to a degree probably only
paralleled in Spain. The nobilities of the various states maintained their
power by co-optation into their ranks of the most successful urban bour-
geoisie. The one state that attempted to maintain a closed caste – Venice –
was forced to change its policy in the mid-seventeenth century. Education
and charity were offered to poor nobles, lest they degrade their status. The
conservation of the family patrimony became a matter of overwhelming
importance, to be achieved through legal entails on property, self-imposed
sexual abstinence of younger sons and daughters, the careful accumulation
of funds for the provision of dowries. Heredity and status conditioned the
structure of noble families. Honour, military prowess, duelling, private
violence and contempt for inferiors imbued their behaviour.
The triumph of this aristocratic revival was in part the consequence (as well as a cause) of the structural crisis of the Italian economy. The traditional urban industries proved unable to compete effectively against English, French and Dutch production. The output of woollen textiles declined sharply in Florence and Milan from the 1560s, in Venice by the 1620s. The guilds proved unable to guarantee employment even to their own members. New luxury industries emerged or survived – crystal glass, leather, printing, quality soaps and sweets, above all silk, which developed into the major Italian industry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But, increasingly, Italy shifted from the production of finished cloths for both foreign and domestic markets to the export of agricultural produce and semi-finished goods. The population of the cities – Venice, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Rome – stagnated or increased only marginally. But their consumption demands remained and indeed were reinforced by government legislation, concerned to ensure adequate food supplies at controlled prices. The vast capitals of the south – Palermo with a 100 000 population, Naples, the most populous city in Europe with 250 000 inhabitants at the end of the sixteenth century – became parasitical centres of government, with little or no industrial production and vast consumption needs.

The regression of the urban economies, increasingly heavy taxation and aristocratic landownership, had negative repercussions in the countryside. The rapid growth of the rural population in the sixteenth century, as earlier in the fourteenth, exerted increasing pressure on resources. By the last quarter of the sixteenth century, the difficulties became too great for this subsistence economy: heavily indebted peasants abandoned their cultivated lands, the rate of growth of the population slowed down, famines recurred, culminating in the terrible years 1590–1. In the seventeenth century, the pressure of population slackened, particularly after the plagues of 1630 in Lombardy and 1656 in the kingdom of Naples; but in most regions, agriculture remained weak.

The structural weaknesses of a rural economy – incapable of any major increase in productivity through shortage of livestock and traditionally reliant upon an extension of the cultivated area to meet the demands of an increasing population – were laid bare in the later sixteenth century. Urban landownership and consumption demands threatened the self-sufficiency of peasant family economies by a growing commercialization of agricultural products. The dominant form of landed tenure in seventeenth-century central and northern Italy, share-cropping, created limits to any significant increases in production and made the share-cropper peculiarly dependent upon the owner or his estate manager. Because mezzadria was based upon a division of the produce, the size of the farm and the choice of crops was necessarily structured around the consumption requirements of the peasant family. But the owner's direct control of the running of the farm and, above
all, the peasant’s total dependence upon the owner for all working capital – seed, animals and tools – rendered him acutely vulnerable to demands on his labour. As the mezzadri fell into debt, the owners could improve their land with little capital expenditure by obliging the tenants to plant trees or vines, extend the drainage ditches or terrace the hill-slopes. Rigidly controlled in their private lives, their right to marry, their daily behaviour, the extended families of mezzadri, once in debt, were liable to dismissal or, alternatively, could abandon the struggle through flight.

It would be absurd to assert that all the peasantry were in the same condition. In the higher mountain valleys peasant property and extensive communal lands permitted the survival of a subsistence economy – although, in times of population growth, at the price of annual migrations of most of the male population. In the countryside fairly near to the cities of northern and central Italy, the rapidly developing silk industry offered supplementary or substitutive domestic employment to large numbers of peasants. In the Valle Caudina, in the kingdom of Naples, the sharp drop in population after the 1656 plague enabled the former day-labourers renting land to become virtual proprietors and maintain a fragile subsistence economy until the terrible famine of 1764. In the Piedmontese plain, small peasant owners endeavoured to uphold their independence by carefully balancing size of family, age at marriage, and purchase and sale of plots of land.

Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that, from the later sixteenth century, the rural population became increasingly pauperized. In Sicily, meat vanished definitively from the diet of day-labourers, to be replaced by a growing consumption of wine. In Venetia, and slowly through the Po plain and the less fertile hills, maize began to be cultivated because of its high yield. Throughout Italy there is evidence of growing peasant indebtedness. When the population began to grow again in the eighteenth century, conditions immediately worsened.

Pressure on subsistence and loss of economic independence led almost invariably into indigence and dependence upon charity. The problem of poverty was not new. Indeed, in a Catholic society it was the necessary counterpart to wealth, permitting the private atonement of sin and the public mitigation of harsh laws through charity. Socially, it was not even necessarily undesirable, as the insecurity of dependence on alms encouraged meekness and gratitude. Italian society had developed a sophisticated battery of institutions to cater for the poor, from pawnshops and hospitals to confraternities and retreats. What was new was the pressure of the poor upon these institutions in the later sixteenth century and the harsher response of society. Some 20 to 30 per cent of the urban populations of Italy depended on charity, either wholly or in part. By the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Italian society adopted an increasingly harsh attitude,
distinguishing between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor, identifying unemployment with sloth. Above all, both ecclesiastical and civic authorities displayed a steadily more hostile approach towards beggars and vagrants, regarded as dishonest rogues, evil and idle, carriers of disease, an embarrassment to the faithful within the churches. Residence was a sign of respectability, vagrancy evidence of impiety and illwill. Beggars had to be removed from public view by their enclosure in special institutions. The ‘hostels for the poor’, that were created in Bologna, Milan, Turin, Venice, Florence, Naples and Genoa in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, collected heterogenous populations of aged and infirm, women householders and prostitutes, orphans and immigrants, beggars and criminals.

By the end of the seventeenth century, Italy had become a country of external pomp and ubiquitous poverty. Italian society had become rigidly hierarchical and passively conformist, concerned to uphold a static social order. Its more fortunate members had withdrawn into the pursuit of family fortune and honour, if necessary by employment of ‘honest disimulation’, to quote the title of a successful Italian pamphlet of 1641. But it was also a society, as the Scottish traveller Gilbert Burnet noted in 1685, ‘full of beggars’.*

* Some letters containing an account of what seemed most remarkable in travelling through Switzerland, Italy, some parts of Germany . . ., Rotterdam, 1687, p. 90.
Part 1
The re-emergence of Italy 1700–60

But to leave these futile lamentations and sorrowful memories, let us rather give our thanks to the divine mercy, that this year has caused the fury of rulers to cease and by their withdrawal from the states they have had to cede has restored tranquillity and cheer to so many kingdoms and principates enveloped in the calamities of war for seven years. This peace must be judged the more memorable not only because it has spread throughout all Europe, but because it has been accompanied by universal peace throughout the earth; for in these times no other war of significance has been heard of in the other parts of the world; and thus we have no reason to envy the times of Augustus.... But besides the thanks we owe to the supreme Author of all good, it also behoves us to send to His throne our humble prayers that the great good of peace restored to us be not a gift of a few days, and that the potentates of Europe finally sacrifice their resentments, and likewise machinations of ever restless ambition, to the repose of poor peoples, who after so many calamities are beginning to breathe. While peace reigns in Italy, what can we not hope for, since we have princes of such good will and rectitude? (Muratori, 26, t.XII)

To Lodovico Antonio Muratori, seventy-seven years old, the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748 brought an overwhelming sense of relief and a glimmer of hope – relief that the savage futility of warfare was finally at an end, hope that the rulers of Europe, on whose decisions Italy’s fate rested, would at last leave her in peace, and that Italy’s princes would lead their ‘poor peoples’ towards a brighter future. Muratori’s long life had witnessed the changes which had marked Italy’s slow emergence from a state of impotence and isolation to an awareness of the backwardness of the Italian ‘nations’ in the general advance of European civilization, to a belief in the possibility of renewed contact and integration with Europe.

This provincial abbé, of cosmopolitan curiosity and erudition, was born in 1672, a moment when Italy’s ‘decadence’ seemed to have touched its lowest point, when Spanish rule and influence had penetrated the entire peninsula, when industrial and commercial activities had been eclipsed by

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the significant advances of the English, Dutch and French, when social relations had crystallized into a rigid, formal mould, symbolized by the Spanish etiquette adopted in all the local courts, manifest in the search of nobles and non-nobles for the security and prestige of landed possessions; a moment when intellectual and cultural enquiry seemed to have lost its vitality under the deadweight of the scholastic, casuistic, fossilized humanistic education inculcated by the Jesuits, when the princes, descendants of the more fortunate and successful *signori*, strove to create absolutist structures of government and the republican oligarchies withdrew into an affirmation of their privileges.

By the time of Muratori’s death in 1750, the political, economic and intellectual world of the Italians – though less so the pattern and relationships of Italian society – had undergone deep transformations. These were changes which emerged concurrently with, and were at least partially dependent upon, the renewed contact with Europe; and they gave rise to that belief in the possibility and effectiveness of rapid social change within a basically static structure which was to lie at the centre of the preoccupations of the generation of reformers and intellectuals who followed Muratori. But this world of the reformers of the later eighteenth century, imbued with an optimism generated and sustained by the very diffusion and apparent reception of their own convictions, was different from that in which Muratori had worked and hoped in isolation, almost alone. How this world came about, how Italy emerged from its prolonged isolation to observe a Europe which bore little resemblance to the Europe of ‘barbarians’ described by its humanist writers, are the first and most immediate questions that require explanation. For it was the interactions of this new European influence with the legacies of Italy’s ‘Spanish’ past that were to mark the course of the eighteenth century.
I

Italy, the ‘pawn’ of European diplomacy

The search for a new equilibrium

Italy was thrown into brutal and violent contact with Europe by the break-up of the Spanish empire. Only once, during the previous century and a half, had Italian soil offered the battlefield for European warfare – during the Thirty Years’ War – and even then fighting, however savage, had been restricted to the northern plain. Spain had acted as a shield between Italy and Europe, by its direct rule of Lombardy, Naples, Sicily, Sardinia, the Tuscan garrison of the Presidi, and by its effective control of the political activities of the other Italian states.

With the death of Charles II of Spain (1700), Italy once more attracted the attention of European diplomacy as a crucial element in the overall balance of power. For both Habsburg and Bourbon the possession of Italy offered a dominant position in the Mediterranean. Half a century of wars was needed before a stable equilibrium was reached, an equilibrium based on the relegation of Italy to the periphery of European power politics, and on the achievement of a local balance of power within the peninsula through the exclusion of the direct rule of any of the great powers. During this half-century, and indeed after the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748), Italy was conceived of, not as a collection of separate states, but as a single piece on the chess-board of European international diplomacy. But this piece, especially after 1748, was regarded as of no more significance than a pawn. Although Italy continued to represent an ‘object’ of European diplomacy, it remained, until the new conflicts aroused by the French Revolution, an object of minor importance.

How these transformations and diminution of Italy’s international importance came about needs to be explained in terms of the political ambitions of the great European powers, not in those of the almost uniformly insignificant hopes, intrigues and activities of the Italian rulers. It was the extension of the struggle of the great powers to their colonial possessions outside Europe, the revival of Austria and the rise of Russia, and the new threat to
the equilibrium represented by Frederick II of Prussia, that shifted the battlefield away from the Mediterranean and Italy. But during these long and bloody decades the desire for peace grew stronger among Italians, and was accompanied by a recognition by Italy's princes and ruling classes of the peninsula's insignificance in the world of power politics. Italy became neutral in 1748 because the great powers so decreed. But it was Italy's rulers who ensured that its neutrality was maintained.

The struggle over the fate of the Spanish empire in the opening years of the eighteenth century had witnessed the alignment of the Bourbons of France and Spain against the Habsburgs of Austria allied to Britain and the United Provinces. The underlying purpose of the struggle was to maintain the balance of power by a territorial distribution among the two rival dynasties which would avoid the threat of predominance over Europe by either. It was to achieve this end that Britain, the major naval power, firmly installed in the Mediterranean through the conquest of Gibraltar and Minorca, ensured the strengthening of the house of Savoy by its acquisition of the former Lombard provinces of the Alessandrino and of the kingdom of Sicily. For this stronger Savoy was to act as a counterbalance to the extension of Austrian power with the imperial possession of Lombardy, Mantua, Naples and Sardinia (treaty of Utrecht, 1713). The three wars which followed – in 1718–19, 1733–6 and 1740–8 – centred wholly or partly on Italy because of the traditional rivalry of Habsburgs and Bourbons. But the roles of the two dynasties were now reversed: it was Bourbon Spanish and French hostility to the Austrian occupation of Italy that maintained the tension and led to hostilities.

Austrian policy was divided between concern for its possessions in Germany, Hungary and the Balkans and hopes of its new Italian lands. The major impulse towards an active Italian policy came from the Spanish exiles at Vienna – the 'Catalans', who had followed Charles VI (1711–40) when he abandoned Spain – and above all from the victorious and powerful general and statesman, prince Eugene of Savoy (1663–1736). Italy was of more immediate economic importance to the emperor than his possessions in the Netherlands as a market for commercial activities, as the base for a Mediterranean fleet and as a source of taxes. As the Piedmontese diplomat, marquis Ignazio del Borgo, wrote in 1725: 'The provinces of Italy are the Indies of the Court of Vienna. For more than 25 years a good part of the silver of Italy has gone there' (Quazza, 17, p. 30). The years before and after Utrecht witnessed Austria's attempt to consolidate and expand its power in Italy by exploiting its claims as imperial suzerain of fiefs scattered in the territories of the other Italian states. The acquisition of Sicily in exchange for Sardinia in 1720, which was imposed on Victor Amadeus II, left Austria as strong in Italy as had been Spain and gave rise to hopes of power in the Mediterranean.
ITALY, THE ‘PAWN’ OF EUROPEAN DIPLOMACY

But Austrian influence in Italy was constantly undermined by the Bourbon threat and by the inefficiency of its government in the early years. Initially welcomed by large sectors of the ruling classes in the former Spanish provinces, as well as by heterogeneous groups in the other Italian states, who looked to the emperor as the natural and traditional leader of the struggle against the world of the counter-reformation, almost the personification of what was anachronistically regarded as the ‘ghibelline’* cause (Venturi, 30, p. 18), Charles VI and his representatives failed to live up to expectations. The corruption of the ‘Catalans’, the exaction of heavy taxes, the lack of resoluteness in the struggle against the papacy in southern Italy, led increasingly to abandonment of the imperial cause, even to nostalgia for Spanish rule. Austria never managed to consolidate its power in the kingdoms of Naples and Sicily. Only in the duchy of Milan did the ruling classes remain firmly tied in allegiance to Vienna, not least because of their fear of conquest by the enemy at Turin, who had already annexed the duchy’s western provinces.

The basic cause of the insecurity and apparent fragility of Austrian rule was the Spanish challenge. The close ties between the Italian and Iberian peninsulas had not been snapped by Utrecht. Too many Spaniards owned lands in Naples and Sicily. Too many Italians still served as Spanish diplomats, too many nobles, merchants, craftsmen, bureaucrats, and soldiers had emigrated to Spain in the previous century. Philip V’s second wife was a Farnese; her chief minister, cardinal Giulio Alberoni (1664–1752), aimed to oust the Habsburgs and ensure the return of Spain. Alberoni’s ‘plan’ was more than a mere return to the past. It was an unusual mixture of old and new. It picked up the theme — so frequently voiced by seventeenth-century publicists — of freeing Italy from the foreigner; it offered one more scheme to upset the local balance of power in favour of a single Italian dynasty. But at the same time it proposed a novel solution: that Italian states, when ruled by foreign princes, should not thereby revert to the status of provinces of the major European powers, but should remain autonomous. Spanish power was to be used to evict the Habsburgs from Italy. But the

* The term ‘ghibelline’ was a conscious re-evocation of the medieval struggles between supporters of the emperor (ghibellines) and those of the pope (guelphs). The words lost their original meaning almost as soon as they became current, and were used to describe or legitimize a multitude of factional, family or personal feuds before falling into disuse during the long period of Spanish and counter-reformation dominance. The revival of the term ‘ghibelline’ (to which the antiquarian studies of these years perhaps contributed) — as even more the diffuse usage of ‘guelphism’ a century later in the romantic and historicist environment of the post-Napoleonic period — throw an interesting side-light on the difficulties experienced by the Italian intellectual class in freeing itself of the heavy burden of Italy’s past.
vacuum would not be filled by a simple restoration of Spanish power. For the new prince, don Carlos, son of Philip V (1683–1746) and Elizabeth Farnese (1692–1766), would rule over the Habsburg Italian possessions independently of Spain; the throne at Madrid would descend from Philip V to his eldest son, Carlos' half-brother Ferdinand. A new and powerful Bourbon-Farnese dynasty, closely linked to the Farnese of Parma (whose state would be enlarged) would control Italy.

Alberoni’s plan survived the failure of the Spanish invasion of Italy in 1718 and the cardinal’s own fall the following year, to remain as the dominant theme of Italian and Mediterranean politics until Aix-la-Chapelle. The birth of a second son to Elizabeth and Philip, don Philip, merely led to the extension of Alberoni’s plan, with the proposal to create two Italian states rather than one for Elizabeth’s children. If the states could not be created at Habsburg expense, the imminent extinction of two of the old Renaissance dynasties – the Farnese of Parma and the Medici of Tuscany – offered a timely alternative solution. The complex modifications of Italy’s political geography in these decades reflected Elizabeth Farnese’s determination – reluctantly accepted by the other great powers – to instal her two sons on Italian thrones. It would be anachronistic to ascribe ‘patriotic’ motivations to Alberoni’s plan. The cardinal conceived it in terms of the dynastic juggling of the age. It offered a solution which requited the ambitions of both the Spanish Bourbons and the Farnesi. Even if Elizabeth’s children, don Carlos and don Philip, ruled autonomous states in Italy, they were expected to remain – and for many years did remain – diplomatically, financially and militarily dependent on Spain. The relative independence and neutrality which ultimately characterized the new Italian dynasties was unforeseen and unexpected.

The initial short war upon which Alberoni embarked in 1717 only gained a promise from the Quadruple Alliance (Britain, France, Austria and the United Provinces) that don Carlos would inherit the states of Tuscany and Parma, which he would hold as imperial fiefs (1720). The following decade of continuous tension culminated in 1731 in the guarantee of this pledge by the introduction of Spanish troops into the fortresses of Tuscany and Parma. But the War of the Polish Succession (1733–8), in which French, Spanish and Piedmontese armies attacked the Habsburgs successfully in Italy, brought a new territorial arrangement: don Carlos received Naples and Sicily (he was King of the Two Sicilies from 1735 to 1759, and then King of Spain from 1755 to 1788), the Austrians were compensated with the duchy of Parma; Tuscany was to be given to Francis, duke of Lorraine, in exchange for his own state, ceded to the unsuccessful candidate for the Polish throne, Stanislas Leszczynski, with the promise of Lorraine’s reversion to France on his death (1766). The War of the Austrian Succession, which lasted for eight bitter years (1740–8), led to only one further change:
the assignment of Parma to don Philip (1745–65). In 1748 the eighty-eight-year-old Alberoni triumphed, thirty years after he had first put forward his plan.

These decades witnessed a diminution of Britain’s direct involvement in the Mediterranean. Italy’s importance for British commercial activities had increased rapidly in the course of the seventeenth century. The control of trade with Leghorn, Genoa, Naples, Messina and Venice was fought over by the Levant Company and the Merchant Adventurers. Imports from Italy between 1717 and 1740 averaged about £500,000 annually, or nearly 10 per cent of all British imports. Strategically, Italy was of great significance for the British fleet. It was for this reason that Britain had assigned Sicily to the ruler of a small, almost land-locked state, the duchy of Piedmont-Savoy, which was bound to England as an export market for its silk produce, and wholly dependent on the British fleet: in 1713 the new king and his retinue were transported to the island kingdom on English ships.

British political intervention in Italian affairs was a response to Habsburg-Bourbon rivalry. Alberoni’s adventure, while confirming British naval supremacy (Admiral Byng destroyed the Spanish fleet off Cape Passero in 1718), also led to the sacrifice of Victor Amadeus II (1675–1730) and acceptance of the Habsburg possession of Sicily in exchange for Sardinia (1720). British policy, especially under Walpole’s leadership, remained tied to the traditional alliance with Austria and the United Provinces. But the advantages of a Bourbon counterweight to the Habsburgs, in the form of don Carlos, were not to be underestimated. Thus Britain was involved in Italy because of its concern for the European balance of power. As Victor Amadeus II wrote in 1729, ‘to dominate Italy has been the aim both of the Emperor and Spain . . . as experience has taught that domination in Italy goes far towards upsetting the universal balance of power’ (Quazza, 17, p. 136). Savoy was to be strengthened in order to check the French advance in the Mediterranean; don Carlos was to be supported as a balance to both Savoy and Habsburg Italy. Britain dominated the search for a secure solution to the Italian problem until the early 1730s, when Walpole’s parliamentary difficulties enabled Fleury to seize the initiative with the Franco-Savoyard and Franco-Spanish treaties (1733). Even in the following years Britain remained deeply involved, attempting to mediate in the Polish Succession War, preventing don Carlos from attacking the Austrians in north Italy in 1742 by a threat to bomb Naples. But British interests were turning elsewhere, to Germany and, supremely, towards the colonies. The equilibrium finally achieved at Aix-la-Chapelle could hardly have proved more satisfactory for British interests.

For the French the 1748 treaty did not mark so decisive a dividing line. French influence in Italy was still to be pursued, but by the more peaceful and personal methods of marriage ties and family pacts. Even before
Aix-la-Chapelle, French concern with Italy had changed in tone. It is a matter of historical dispute whether Louis XIV – in accepting the inheritance of Charles II of Spain for his grandson – was aiming at a Bourbon hegemony of Europe, such as the earlier Habsburg union of the Spanish and Austrian empires under Charles V had seemed to threaten. But the Spanish Succession War that resulted had involved Bourbon France (whether for itself or on behalf of Bourbon Spain) in its last serious attempt as a dynasty to dominate Italy. In the two subsequent wars intervention in Italy played a subordinate part in a broader plan in which French strength and influence on the Rhine and in central Europe was regarded as of greater significance. It was in this context that the marquis d’Argenson put forward his famous plan in 1745 for a federation of independent Italian states, a ‘Republic or eternal association of Italic powers, like the German, Batavie and Helvetic ones’ (Quazza, in 4, vol. 2, pp. 845–6). The plan expressed an acceptance of what, by now, was strikingly clear – the futility of continuing the struggle for mastery of Italy and hence the need to achieve a permanent equilibrium outside foreign control.

Italy, ‘that apple of discord, that for so long has kept wars going almost continuously’ (in the words of a Savoyard diplomat, marquis d’Arvilliers) was being pushed towards the periphery of European politics (Quazza, 17, p. 157). Strategically and, even more, commercially, the peninsula retained its importance. The great powers were determined to maintain their influence – but by diplomacy and intrigue, not by war. Thus, at moments of crisis, pressure was brought to bear on the Italian princes. The princes responded with increasing reluctance. As awareness of their political impotence grew deeper, their desire for neutrality became stronger.

The Italian states

The wars had marked Italy deeply. The end of Spanish rule had aroused new hopes and expectations, and at the same time had revived memories of the past, of the glories of long-past communal independence. There was thus a search for a new political solution, but also a retreat into traditional structures. The wave of ‘ghibellinism’ which emerged in Italy in the years after Utrecht typically combined this anxious probing into the future with a resurrection of the past. But Charles VI betrayed these anti-curial forces and, in a desperate effort to guarantee his daughter Maria Theresa’s succession to his throne, compromised with those Italian supporters regarded as his natural enemies. Yet, in these opening decades of the eighteenth century, were these ‘enemies’ any more substantial than the ‘ghibellinism’ of the emperor himself? Or were the one and the other mere wraiths from the past? The papal curia, even France, no longer represented immediate and total threats to the survival of the Italian states.
ITALY, THE 'PAWN' OF EUROPEAN DIPLOMACY

By the 1730s these early hopes had been shattered. Economically, after the apparent revival of the 1720s, Italy may have experienced a brief slowing down, curiously out of phase with general European trends. Intellectually, the spirit of enquiry, the political passions of a Muratori, a Giannone, which had emerged in the years of the collapse of Spanish rule, gave way to feelings of disillusion and disenchantment, to withdrawal into erudition or Jansenist asceticism. Politically, the Bourbon-Farnese adventure acted as a catalyst for the composite, heterogeneous forces which arose for a variety of reasons in reaction to Vienna – in vindication of their local privileges, in traditional assertion of their anti-imperial spirit, or in equally traditional defence against the threat of a single foreign ruler.

For a while there were those who hoped that an Italian prince – the king of Sardinia, Charles Emanuel III (1730–73), or don Carlos, now king of Naples and Sicily – might gain control of all Italy and free it of the foreigner. But these were voices from the past, faint echoes of Machiavelli, soon silenced by the thunder of cannon and shrieks of war reverberating through an Italy that knew little and cared less about the reasons for this new descent of barbarian armies. ‘A dance of destruction’ was the Udine nuncio Tartagna’s description of the siege of Mantua in 1734 (Battistella, 18, p. 1422). An attempt at Rome by Spanish agents to conscript troops for the war led to popular riots that shook the authority of Clement XII. By the time the even remoter Austrian Succession War savaged Italy, the feeling of weariness and scepticism had become widespread. ‘Among the ideas that sometimes pass through our head, we have also thought of composing a treatise, Of martyrdom by neutrality’, said Benedict XIV with bitter resignation, as he tried to organize charity for his subjects in the Romagne and Marches, whose lands had been ravaged by the Spanish and Austrian armies (Venturi, 30, p. 105). As in the previous war, desertions from all armies were continuous. A new standard was set in 1742 when Charles Bourbon’s Neapolitan army – consisting in good part of Austrian soldiers captured at the battle of Bitonto in 1734 – was ordered to march northwards against the Austrians, but dissolved and vanished en route. By the latter years of the war, weariness and scepticism began to give way to popular resistance. Already in 1742 the Garfagnana peasants in central Italy had blocked attempts by the Bourbon ‘Franco-Spaniards’ to build a road across their mountains. In 1744 the peasants of the Cuneese mountain valleys in Piedmont launched into a real ‘guerilla’ war, harassing the Franco-Spanish army, killing the enemy officers they captured. At the end of 1746 it was the turn of the Genoese populace, rising in mass against the shameful surrender of their city to the Austrians and defending their liberty in alliance with the peasants of the surrounding mountains. The people – ‘the poor peoples condemned to do penance for the lofty plans of their sovereign’ (Muratori, 26, t.x ii, p. 277) – were tired of war.
This weariness, this sense of the futility of the wars, took the form of a search for protection against disaster in local and traditional structures. In Tuscany the very territorial unity of the state, which had been consolidated with such effort in the previous two centuries, seemed about to break down as the Medici dynasty drew to its end. The old communes, Florence, Siena, Pisa, reasserted their claims and revived their ancient rivalries. In Genoa, the rising against the Austrians momentarily rekindled the flame of the old popular administration: the demand was voiced for the reform of the 1576 law which had consolidated the power of the oligarchy, and the pre-oligarchical Assembly of the People was revived. Elsewhere, in Lombardy and Naples, the nobles confirmed and asserted their local aristocratic privileges. Throughout Italy there was a withdrawal into the traditional structures of the city, the region, the petty state, in a desperate attempt to avoid the destruction of war and the changes imposed by foreign powers.

Not all states were successful. Few emerged unscathed. The old seigneurial and Renaissance dynasties, the descendants of the tyrants who had seized power between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, suffered most, for, by chance, they were reaching the end of their successions. The destiny of their states depended on their relations with the Bourbon and Habsburg dynasties. Cosimo III de' Medici (1670-1723) could only protest against the arbitrary assignation of his state to a foreign prince, 'which was just not decent with regard to our quality and the gratitude we owe our subjects' (Quazza, 17, p. 96). On the death of his degenerate heir Giangastone in 1737 the grand-duchy of Tuscany passed to Francis of Lorraine (1737–65), future husband of Maria Theresa. It was this marriage and the arrangement by which Lorraine was to revert to France that kept Habsburg and Bourbon armies off Tuscan soil in the Austrian Succession War. Francesco Maria Farnese (1694–1727), duke of Parma and Piacenza, could only look to his niece Elizabeth and Bourbon Spain for salvation. On the death of the last Farnese, his brother Antonio (1731), the duchy paid the price for its weakness: assigned to don Carlos in 1732, it was dismembered in the Polish Succession War, then to be annexed (with Piacenza) by Austria in 1738, only recovering its independence under the rule of don Philip in 1748. The Este dynasty of Modena survived with difficulty, and primarily through its close ties with Vienna. With the duchy occupied by the French from 1733 to 1736, the dynasty risked its existence in 1737 on the death of duke Rinaldo: his son Francis III (1737–80), who was far away fighting the Turks in Hungary, was only able to return through Habsburg benevolence. This was no empty risk – only twenty years earlier the Gonzaga of Mantua had lost their duchy to the Habsburgs because of their opposition to the emperor. As the marquis d'Argenson commented, 'The petty tyrants of Italy have become the prey of the great ones. Shameful image among men of what occurs among ferocious animals' (Venturi, 30, p. 5).
Nor were the larger states immune from danger. The republic of Genoa, tied financially to Spain, paid the price of its imprudent intervention in the Austrian Succession War – an intervention provoked by the threat of the Piedmontese acquisition of Finale, which would have cut its territories in two – by the surrender of the city in 1746. Genoa emerged territorially intact from the wars, but with the prestige of its oligarchy weakened, its finances imperilled, its authority eroded by the recurrent Corsican rebellions. The republic was to survive the century, but under the protection of Bourbon France, to which it ceded Corsica in 1768.

The republic of Venice maintained its traditional neutrality with apparent success. The succession wars, though costly, left its territories relatively unravaged. Its success was admired by the other states. But Venetian neutrality was hardly a free choice. Economically weak, incapable of supporting a large army, the Serenissima had been hemmed in since Utrecht by Austrian possessions. The Habsburg advance in the Balkans had deprived the republic of the commercial hinterland of Venetian Dalmatia; Trieste and Fiume were being developed as rival ports; Austrian Lombardy and Mantua pressed against the Venetian frontiers and threatened the transit trade along the Po. Venice lived on, comforted by the myth of its divine right to survival. But it survived helpless, in the claws of a grasping Austria.

The papacy's divine right to survival was even better attested. Its helplessness was as evident. Clement XII (1730-40) in 1736, like Clement XI (1700-21) in 1720, had launched an appeal for an Italian league to settle the peninsula's fate without the foreigner: 'to make us capable of supporting each other and freeing us from the outrages that foreign nations inflict on poor Italians, always vulnerable to being treated as their enemies' (Quazza, 17, p. 316). The impotence of the papacy rendered the appeals pure rhetoric. Papal territories submitted perforce to the passage of the opposing foreign armies.

The former Spanish provinces were equally helpless. The two islands were awarded as prizes by the great powers in their search for a settlement: Sardinia to Austria and then to Savoy; Sicily to Savoy, to Austria and finally to don Carlos. Naples, which had looked expectantly to the emperor Charles VI, welcomed don Carlos at least as warmly after his victory at Bitonto in 1734. The Neapolitan people had no choice. They could only hope for a king who would show concern for his kingdom and its inhabitants. The kingdom of Naples experienced the discomfort of enemy armies in both the succession wars. But the damage and devastation it suffered from the wars was insignificant compared to that endured by Lombardy. This duchy was of crucial importance to Vienna, for both economic and strategic reasons. It was the one Italian province neither Charles VI nor Maria Theresa (1740–80) were prepared to cede. Its misfortune was that it was
regarded by the dukes of Savoy as the natural and traditional area of expansion. It offered, in consequence, the major battlefield for the succession wars in Italy, and suffered the loss to Savoy of some of its most fertile provinces as the price of these wars: in 1706 the Alessandrino, the Lomellina and part of the Novarese; in 1737 the Tortonese and the remainder of the Novarese; in 1748 the Vigevanasco, the Oltrepò pavese and the Val d'Ossola. By Aix-la-Chapelle, the Lombards had seen their state thrice mutilated, found themselves cut off from their traditional communications with the Mediterranean, and had been reinforced in their mistrust and hatred of Savoy.

The duchy of Piedmont-Savoy, alone among the Italian states, had acted with a certain autonomy during the wars and had emerged from them, as the kingdom of Sardinia, considerably increased in territory and prestige. The strength of its rulers lay primarily in the geographical location of their states, straddling the Alps, which made Savoyard support essential to Habsburg or Bourbon for a successful campaign in Italy. Victor Amadeus II had exploited this position in the Spanish Succession War with audacity and conviction. His son, Charles Emanuel III, attempted to continue the same policy, but showed far less ability or finesse. In terms of European politics, Piedmont-Savoy was only of importance at moments of direct confrontation between France and Austria. At all other times – like the other Italian states – it could only accept the decisions of the major powers. Victor Amedeus had been obliged to recognize this in 1720 with the enforced exchange of Sicily for Sardinia and the introduction into Italy of the new and potentially powerful rival dynasty of the Bourbon-Farnese by his protector Britain. Charles Emanuel found himself in the same helpless position with the Franco-Austrian agreements of 1735 and 1756. As the Neapolitan representative at Vienna, Di Majo, noted with a certain satisfaction on the latter occasion, ‘accustomed to fish in troubled waters, the Sardinian king must sit on this occasion silent spectator of what others do’ (Valsecchi, 19, p. 201).

It was as much the impotence of Turin, caught between the pincers of Paris and Vienna, as the geographical shift in interest of the great powers, which spared Italy the bloodshed of the Seven Years’ War (1756–63): by then, suspicion of the ambitions of the Sardinian rulers had set deep in Italy, suspicion mingled with awareness of Charles Emanuel’s weakness. It can be seen even in the popular poems which circulated in Lombardy at the time of his temporary and unsuccessful conquest of Milan (1734):

The glories of the king of Sardinia – with the replies

Already Insibria* lies in my power
And the gates of Milan have been broken down
Caesar has lost the laurels of his crown
He’ll be Duke no longer in Milan

Don’t we know it.
Milan threw them open.
Well, he jacked them in.
Oh yes, he will.

* ‘Insibria’ was the Roman term for modern Lombardy.
Peace and political impotence

The treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle marked a decisive moment in Italian history. It led to almost 50 years of peace. Initially its stability was doubted by both Italians and foreigners. Would the peace offer more than yet another temporary truce to Bourbon attempts to oust the Habsburgs from Italy? The ambitions of the house of Savoy, the strength of the new Bourbon dynasty of Naples, the uncertainty over the destiny of the duchy of Parma pointed to the likelihood of a revival of the conflict. Already in April 1749 negotiations for a treaty between Piedmont and Prussia seemed to threaten Italy with involvement in any renewal of the European struggle.

Yet within a short span of years the conviction had grown that Italy had finally reached a state of equilibrium which would enable its rulers to conserve their neutrality. A balance of power had been achieved within the peninsula between the three major states of Lombardy, Sardinia and Naples. The mutual suspicions of the princes and their individual ambitions had inhibited all attempts at an Italian federation. The effect of the wars, in fact, had been to crystallize the political situation, to drive the ruling groups into a search for salvation in their traditional, local divisions. The Italy which was finally emerging was to be an Italy of different ‘nations’, Tuscans, Genoese and Lombards, as much as Neapolitans, Sicilians or Venetians. This composite Italy, of the many independent states and cities, each searching for its own ‘liberty’, emerges clearly in the judgement of the Tuscan chronicler Giuseppe Maria Mecatti on the Genoese revolt of 1746. He acclaimed

the illustrious glories of the Genoese people, when rising above every other Italian nation they shook off that unworthy yoke of servitude that others wished to place upon their neck and that they had never been accustomed to bear;

* Mercy was the name of the Austrian commander.
when with their industry and valour they freed themselves of the outsider’s oppression and resumed their prior freedom, so displaying that the ancient valour of Italians was far from spent. (Venturi, 30, p. 64)

The peoples of Italy, as much as their rulers, were tired of the senselessness of the wars, and wanted peace and the liberty of their states. Recognition of this new situation was symbolized already in 1750–1 by the readiness of the Piedmontese and Lombard governments to settle their frontier disputes peaceably and facilitate trade.

The major threat to this stability and peace was represented by the close family ties of Bourbons and Habsburgs with so many of the Italian dynasties. It was true that the major powers had decided that Italy should remain at peace. In 1752 Vienna and Madrid confirmed—and obliged Turin to agree—that Italian crowns should remain separate from those of other states. In 1756 the famous ‘diplomatic revolution’, which witnessed the alliance of the traditional enemies at Paris and Vienna offered a further reassurance. In 1759, when Charles of Naples succeeded to the Spanish throne, it was the agreement between France, Austria and Spain, supported by Britain, which ensured the maintenance of the status quo, by blocking the accession to the Neapolitan throne of Charles’ brother, Philip of Parma.

But these same powers attempted to maintain their influence in Italy by exerting pressure on what they regarded as dependent dynasties. Charles Bourbon was only seventeen years old when his Spanish army won him the kingdom of the Two Sicilies in 1734. Until the death of his father Philip V in 1746 Neapolitan foreign policy was controlled by Spain. Even after Aix-la-Chapelle Charles and his brother Philip remained dependent on their half-brother Ferdinand VI (1746–59) at Madrid for their army, their finances, even their diplomats. Tuscany, in Habsburg eyes, was regarded in similar manner as a province. Its new ruler Francis, Maria Theresa’s husband, only visited his grand-duchy once; half the Regency council consisted of foreigners from his former duchy of Lorraine, while ultimate authority was exercised by a Council at Vienna. In the Seven Years’ War Tuscany was obliged to offer financial and military assistance to the empress.

This subordination was increasingly resisted by the new rulers. After Philip V’s death, Charles of Naples’ main concern was to conserve his kingdom for his own heirs, independent of Spain. As his own succession to the Spanish throne became more probable, he fought against the 1748 agreement which promised Naples to his brother Philip and in his search for autonomy turned to Britain, even to Austria. Tuscany’s evolution was similar: on his accession to the grand-duchy, Peter Leopold (1675–90), Maria Theresa’s son, dismissed his foreign ministers. The desire for autonomy, for the independence of the small Italian states, was strong.

But the pressure of dynastic ties weighed heavily on the rulers and their ministers. When Charles left Naples for his new kingdom of Spain in 1759,
he seemed to be oblivious of his previous policy of autonomy and tried to make Naples join the Bourbon family pact. Bernardo Tanucci, Charles' minister who had fought for the emancipation of the Neapolitan kingdom, resisted: 'France is Bourbon, but Spain is also Bourbon, and the Sicilies are Bourbon too. France has its interests, but so has Spain, so have the Sicilies. This Holy Office of Bourbonism must be extinguished' (Valsecchi, 19, p. 258). Despite Tanucci's hostility, the Bourbon sense of family obligation remained strong: when the papacy attempted to make Parma revoke its anti-ecclesiastical measures in 1768, family solidarity emerged with the French and Neapolitan occupations of the papal territories of Avignon and Benevento and a collective demand by the Bourbon sovereigns that the pope withdraw his decree. Habsburg family ties did not differ. In the 1760s Maria Theresa attempted to extend Habsburg influence by a series of marriage alliances. In 1768 her daughter Maria Carolina married Ferdinand IV of Naples (1759-1825); in 1769 another daughter, Maria Amalia, married Ferdinand of Parma (1765-1802); in 1771 her son Ferdinand (1790-1801) married Beatrice of Modena. As a Venetian diplomat commented: 'hunting royal spouses - for her eight daughters and four sons - she pushes forward in every court, and through such kinship arranges her future claims to interfere' (Valsecchi, 19, p. 258).

Yet, despite these pressures, the Italian states remained independent and neutral. The power of foreign ministers was resented: in Bourbon Parma the reforms of Du Tillot were opposed not least because of the French nationality of their exponent; in earlier years, Richecourt's reforms in Tuscany had met with similar opposition. Ultimately the very clash of influence between Madrid, Paris and Vienna enabled the Italian states to assert their autonomy. The resentment against foreign interference, the determination to remain on the periphery of European politics, reflected a recognition by both rulers and local ruling classes of Italy's weakness, but also of its independence. For the first time in centuries, only two Italian states remained under foreign rule – Lombardy and Mantua. It was the consciousness of this independence that underlay the distress of the new political class at Genoa's abandonment of Corsica to France. As Tanucci wrote to the young Neapolitan reformer Ferdinando Galiani in 1764, 'that the desperation of the Genoese and Corsicans should call barbarians into Italy is not a good thing today when all Italy has its own princes either designated or ruling' (Valsecchi, 19, p. 226).

Corsica was lost to Italy because of the weakness of the Italian states. But for the rest of Italy this weakness was not necessarily a disadvantage. Thirty years after Tanucci's words, in 1796, a leading Tuscan statesman, Francesco Maria Gianni, could theorize and extol Italy's political divisions, its neutrality, the advantages to be gained from the smallness of its states, in terms which recalled Guicciardini's defence of Italy's lack of unity:
Italy can neither be a kingdom nor an independent national republic, and it would mean trouble for Italy and its neighbours if it became a leading actor in the theatre of European politics. . . . The admired prosperity of Italy is born of the division of its states. . . . The republics or principates of Italy have guaranteed the prosperity of their peoples in their respective areas according to the opportunities offered them by the nature of the localities, but this would not have occurred if all the activities of the small governments and small nations had not been concentrated in small zones of territory. (Venturi, 27, p. 983)

To Guicciardini, the peace of Lodi (1454) marked a significant step in the stabilization of a naturally divided Italy. To Tanucci, Gianni and their contemporaries, the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle played a similar role. But there the likeness ended. For the Italy of the eighteenth century no longer led the world.

By 1748 Italians could already measure how far Italy had moved forward. But the peace they now enjoyed only made them more aware of how far the Italian states had fallen behind the civilized world and the magnitude of the problems that awaited resolution. In the years that followed Italy's ties with Europe were to prove of increasing significance. Politically, as the wars of succession had shown, they were ties of dependence. Economically, the prosperity of the Italian states was seen to be closely linked to the European market. Intellectually, the reformers felt the need to learn from and participate in the cosmopolitan circulation of ideas which radiated outwards from France. Italy had re-emerged. There was a general belief that, to progress, it now needed to strengthen its contact with Europe.
The social physiognomy of the Italian states

The countryside and landed power

The Italy which emerged from the long period of Spanish rule had undergone a profound transformation. Economically, its industrial and commercial activities had declined; the population of its cities had long remained stationary or even fallen. Socially, the nobility had grown in strength and prestige, as the merchants and manufacturers weakened. In the ecclesiastical sphere, the Church had increased in influence and privileges, although the papacy’s political power had declined. Administratively, the regional states had developed more centralized structures of government, that accentuated the predominance of the capital cities but were challenged by the survival of local institutions and by the growth of aristocratic and ecclesiastical privileges.

Italy, by the early eighteenth century, had become an overwhelmingly agrarian society – to a far greater degree than two centuries earlier, or than the societies of more advanced countries like England or Holland. The decline of the cities accentuated this agrarian character, but did not lead to the countryside’s emancipation from its servitude to the cities. Indeed, the increasing difficulties experienced by the cities would seem to have strengthened the bonds by which they controlled the campagna (countryside). In three crucial ways the cities maintained their hold. Firstly, the obligation on producers to send large quantities of grain to the cities in order to avert the danger of famine, like the control of grain and other food prices by the authorities, led to continuous, arbitrary interference with market price mechanisms. Secondly, the prohibition of the export of grain and of certain raw materials utilized by city guilds kept prices artificially low. Both these systems were upheld by complex administrative structures and a multitude of laws devised to maintain the typically mercantilist principles of low food prices, artificially sponsored domestic industries, and a strictly controlled balance of payments. Thirdly, the fiscal systems discriminated against the countryside. Although direct taxes on land did not provide the major source

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of state income (in the kingdom of Naples they only provided one-fifth), consumption taxes and the increasing number of exceptional taxes fell most heavily on the rural communities. The salt excise and poll-tax (testatico) were as onerous as the various customs duties. Thus the countryside supported the cities, whose remoteness and authority increased with the development of administrative bureaucracies and the expansion of formalized courts.

Within the countryside the structure of landownship had changed. Ecclesiastical and noble holdings had increased in size and concentration. Ecclesiastical possessions grew steadily with donations to the Church, that varied from small plots to fairly large estates. But although they increased the total areas owned by the Church, they usually did not accentuate the compactness and concentration of ecclesiastical estates, because of the variety of sources from which they were received. Because most land which fell into mortmain, or the ‘dead hand’ of the Church, acquired a considerable degree of exemption from secular control and was unlikely to be sold again, state authorities attempted to limit or prohibit such donations. The regulations were rarely successful, except for brief periods. Possibly of greater long-term significance was the fact that not all land received in mortmain was lost irrevocably to the landmarket. For many smallholdings were sold, according to the testator’s desires, in order to raise the necessary capital to provide an annual income for masses.

Noble landed estates grew more ostentatiously, as the decline of industry and the uncertainties of trade led to an increasing investment of capital in the land, and as the social prestige of the aristocracy induced successful bankers, fermiers and lawyers to buy the estates which were regarded as the necessary accompaniment to their newly acquired titles. By the early eighteenth century, formerly successful merchants of such city-states as Florence or Venice were investing their wealth in the acquisition of estates. The vast increase in the landed holdings of the ruling Medici family — caused only partially by the confiscation of the possessions of rebellious rival families — was symptomatic of a far broader trend. In the feudal principates as well, such as Naples or Piedmont, the increase in titles went hand in hand with a growth in aristocratic landownership. In the south, in particular, foreign merchants and bankers — Genoese, Lombards and Venetians — established and expanded their possession of the land, alongside the great papal families and Spanish officers or courtiers.

The total area of land owned by the clergy and nobles in the early eighteenth century, and the degree of its concentration, can be reconstructed for many of the states with reasonable accuracy. There were wide variations within the different regions of each state and between the states. The areas which resisted noble and ecclesiastical penetration most effectively were, naturally, the least fertile mountainous zones along the Alpine arc and in the
Apennines. In the hills, although smallholdings characterized the system of cultivation, ownership of the land by the privileged classes was expanding, in Piedmont, Lombardy and Venetia as much as in Tuscany, the Papal Legations and the kingdom of Naples.

But it was above all in the plains that the Church and the aristocracy asserted their pre-eminence. In Lombardy, in the mid-eighteenth century, the nobility owned 42 per cent of the plateau and 46 per cent of the plain (alongside 49 per cent of the hilly areas), while the Church (including lay religious confraternities and hospitals) owned 21, 22 (and 23) per cent respectively. In the middle and lower Mantovano, the richest plains of the Duchy, the nobility owned 45 per cent and the Church 13 per cent of the land. In Venetia, in 1740, the ruling oligarchy and local nobles owned 55 per cent of the plain and 38 per cent of the hills, while the Church owned 10 and 7 per cent respectively. When considered regionally, these holdings varied considerably – from the 91 per cent of the Vicenza plain owned by nobles to the 42 per cent of the Adria plain. In Piedmont noble and ecclesiastical ownership was less overpowering: probably 10 per cent of all cultivated land was in the hands of the nobility and 15 per cent in those of the Church. No figures are available for Tuscany, but the vast estates of the Medici, Ferroni or Della Gherardesca families, like those of the Order of Santo Stefano, when considered together with the massive landed investments of the former Florentine merchant families, point to the same conclusion. The Tuscan Maremma plain was dominated by large holdings. The Papal States probably contained the greatest concentration of privileged land in Italy: in the Agro Romano 113 families owned 61 per cent of the land, and 64 ecclesiastical institutions a further 37 per cent (1783). In the Legations the position was slightly better. But the nobility owned 70 per cent of the Bolognese plain (1784), while in the Urbino Legation a contemporary lamented about the expansion of ecclesiastical properties in the coastal plain, that ‘if they progress, all will be of the priests, and nothing of laymen’ (Paci, 180, p. 17, n. 46). In the kingdom of Naples the baronage owned at least 20 per cent of landed income and the Church a further 20 to 30 per cent; in some areas, such as the Basilicata, the proportion of noble landed income rose as high as 42 per cent (1806). The Sicilian barons and prelates did not lag behind their Neapolitan relatives and compeers.

These bare figures reveal the strength of the two privileged classes in the *campagna*. It seems probable that – outside the Papal States – noble landed possessions were growing more continuously and more rapidly than those of the Church. Noble estates also tended to become more concentrated during the eighteenth century by exchanges with or the purchase of private smallholdings, the leasing or usurpation of commonlands, in short, by the conscious pursuit of a policy of consolidation. The size of these estates
varied enormously, from the middling properties of a few hundred hectares* of the Piedmontese nobles to the vast latifondi, extending over thousands of hectares of the papal or Sicilian aristocrats.

The predominance of these large holdings was accentuated by their concentration in the hands of a diminishing number of families. The example of the Agro Romano has already been given. But in the duchy of Mantua only 142 families owned one-third of the entire territory. In the kingdom of Naples only 15 out of about 1500 titled families owned three-quarters of all feudal lands, with the Pignatelli family in possession of 72 fiefs. The concentration was assisted in part by the fusion of family properties through marriage or the natural extinction of collateral branches. But it was accelerated by the legal ties on estates that prohibited their sale (entails or fedecommissi as they were usually called). Muratori was only voicing widespread concern when he attacked the negative effects of these entails whose diffusion he dated to the seventeenth century. Noble and ecclesiastical properties thus dominated the countryside, occupying the richest lands. Mortmain and entails, until the later eighteenth century, inhibited the acquisition and expansion of middling and large properties by non-nobles. The countryside tended to be characterized by great estates, alongside small, often minute peasant and communal holdings. The possession of middle-size estates was exceptional, although leasing of middle-sized farms from the great owners was becoming more common in northern and central Italy by the mid-eighteenth century.

The power of nobles and ecclesiastics was reinforced by their privileges. These privileges derived from immunities inherited from the feudal past or from exemptions instituted and enforced by the cities. Traditionally 'feudal' property (i.e. appertaining to a fief) and ecclesiastical lands were exempt from the land-tax (except in Venetia). Lands owned by citizens in some states (for example Mantua or Tuscany) originally also enjoyed whole or partial exemption. But in the absence of accurate measurements of landholdings or cadastral registers listing their taxable value, who was in a position to prevent these privileges being extended abusively to newly acquired lands? Certainly not the peasant, nor the rural commune, for lawsuits were too expensive and could drag on for decades. When Victor Amadeus II completed the first effective land measurement in Italy (the perequazione) in 1731, one-third of ecclesiastical lands previously claimed as privileged was regarded as abusively exempt and subjected to taxes; the total area of similarly abusive feudal land was probably greater.

The fiscal systems further favoured the privileged classes. Those who worked the land paid heavier taxes than those who owned it. The taxes on goods of basic consumption, the excise on the sale of salt, the poll-tax on every adult, the customs duties on manufactures and goods in transit, the

* One hectare equals approximately 2.5 acres.
exceptional taxes which, imposed a first time, tended to be repeated, all favoured the landowners by their method of imposition. In Lombardy in the 1720s the 200,000 people who owned three-quarters of the wealth of the state paid only 6 million lire of the total 21 million raised annually by the state. In Naples, ecclesiastical income was as great or greater than state revenues in the 1720s; it was subjected to a 'voluntary' donativo of 4 per cent (authorized by Clement XI and Benedict XIII), but although the tax had thus been approved in principle by the ecclesiastical order and Curia, the clergy resisted.

Possession of land and exemption from taxes or fiscal privileges thus formed the basis of noble and ecclesiastical wealth. It was augmented by the exaction of seigneurial and ecclesiastical rights. The structure of Italy's feudal past survived in countless forms, from the emperor's claims to suzerainty over northern and central Italy and the pope's similar claims over the kingdom of Naples, to the survival of minute independent fiefs which constellated every area of Italy and impeded the attempts to impose centralized, uniform administrative structures. These feudal legacies sometimes offered protection to the peasants, in the form of commonlands or grazing rights, or fixed dues paid for virtually perpetual leases or emphyteuses received by ancestors in previous centuries.

But the feudal past also survived in the form of seigneurial rights exacted from the peasants. Tithes, both feudal and lay, hunting and fishing rights, tolls, monopolies of mills and ovens, civil, even criminal jurisdiction, payments due in kind and money for a multitude of reasons provided the everyday evidence of a past which refused to die. Apart from the tithes, it is doubtful whether the other seigneurial rights yielded much in financial terms in northern and central Italy. Indeed many of them had been sold to the communes. But in southern Italy feudalism ruled triumphant: three-quarters of the fiefs in the kingdom of Naples belonged to the barons. Small wonder an anonymous writer should state in 1733 that ministers were 'quite careful not to offend the nobility, nor the other orders of the city, because of the reflection that viceroys change, but these others stay for ever and, given their inclinations and nature, are capable of a vendetta' (Marini, 89, p. 30). But even in the north there were areas, such as Friuli or the Bresciano, where the feudatories rampaged unchecked. Throughout Italy the survival of these feudal attributes of jurisdictional and seigneurial rights reinforced the noble’s economic position and allowed him to dominate the local communes, often even to disregard the state administration. Far from declining, the possession of these rights had been consolidated by the eighteenth century.

In this rural world in which land represented the most prized possession, the exactions and obligations imposed by the dominant cities offered the great owners considerable possibilities of increasing their wealth. It was
these proprietors, for the most part, who advanced money to peasants and rural communes when they were unable to meet their commitments. It was these proprietors who speculated on the harvests, storing their grain illegally in order to create an artificial shortage and force up prices. It was these same proprietors who used their influence in the capital to buy the special licences which permitted them to export their surplus. They were both producers and merchants, in Sicily as in Tuscany, in Lombardy as in Venetia. These great proprietors, not surprisingly, tended to support the proposals for freedom of export which emerged in the later eighteenth century. The clergy, especially the absentee prelates, had a further source of income, for they were able to import and export tax free within the law. But this legal concession offered illegal opportunities. As the papal nuncio at Naples wrote with genuine concern in 1713, 'I have written to the Capuchin Provincial and other religious heads, imploring them to observe the proprieties and not to abuse their right to import tobacco at the expense of the royal exchequer and interested parties' (Marini, 89, p. 24, n. 4). The rigidity of control over foreign trade inevitably encouraged smuggling, which remained endemic throughout the eighteenth century. Both poor and rich engaged in this illegal traffic. The poor were usually those who lived near one of the innumerable frontiers. The rich were the great landowners, collaborating — especially in the south — with foreign merchants.

The irresponsibility of these privileged classes was already roundly condemned by the mid-eighteenth century. The ecclesiastics — abbés, priors, above all prelates — rarely resided on their lands. They belonged to the same families as the great secular landowners and shared their concerns and outlook. They dominated the official and intellectual life of the Italian states and were attracted by the possibilities of careers at Rome. But their very dominance and riches rendered them peculiarly vulnerable. The disparity between their wealth and the poverty of the parish clergy, strikingly visible in all the Italian states (though to a lesser degree in Piedmont), created a deep division within their own ranks. Moreover, isolated voices in the early eighteenth century began to suggest that ecclesiastical possessions represented a reserve treasury for the state. This was not a new idea. It underlay the claim by state authorities to exact taxes from the clergy in exceptional circumstances. Venice indeed refused to recognize tax exemptions for the clergy. But the concept took on a more menacing form in the eighteenth century. It was voiced most clearly at Naples, where the struggle against ecclesiastical excesses had first emerged. In 1737 an anonymous writer proposed that the king should guarantee the daily requirements of the clergy, 'and as, given such a measure, it will be unnecessary for ecclesiastics to own such rich possessions, Your Majesty can attach them to the patrimony of the crown and employ them in uses that tend towards the general good of your subjects' (Venturi, 30, p. 35).
The Church was thus open to attack. But its influence and penetration of Italian society remained profound. The very number of clerics bears witness to its attraction: over 20,000 priests and religious in Piedmont in the mid-eighteenth century, 40,000 in Venetia, over 10,000 in the duchy of Modena, 11,000 in the kingdom of Naples, perhaps a majority of the 160,000 inhabitants of the city of Rome. The Church offered security, the possibility of a career, at least the advantage of a benefice. Domenico Passionei, member of a provincial noble family and future cardinal, wrote to his father in 1710 to explain why he was entering papal service: 'I hold dearest the interests of our family, and after theirs my own, and then that our posterity remember me. . . . The brightest lad in every family always takes the cloth in order to advance his family with him' (Caracciolo, 85). Muratori, Maffei, Genovesi, Galiani, Metastasio, Parini, Denina: all were abati. Even in the later eighteenth century, when the reforming movement to construct a lay state had gathered strength, the attraction of the Church remained strong: from clerical ranks were to emerge many of the revolutionary Jacobins. In the earlier decades of the century criticisms might grow, but ecclesiastical power could not be denied. The last auto-da-fé was held at Palermo as late as 1724. It needed the revolution to shift the initiative within the states decisively to the secular authorities.

The power of the nobility was to prove more tenacious. In some of the principates – Mantua, Tuscany, Sicily – the aristocracy had been excluded from public office in the previous century. In the republics – Venice, Genoa – public authority was vested in restricted oligarchies, to the exclusion of the provincial or lesser nobility. But in both principates and republics the nobles retained their hold on traditional institutions and local administrations, which they turned into weapons of defence of their own privileges: the Sicilian parliament or the sedili of Naples, the Milanese senate or the Mantuan congregazione, the town councils or the nominated officials of the Neapolitan fiefs all served the same purpose. The uncertainties that followed the end of Spanish rule had given the aristocracy the chance to consolidate its power in Sicily, Naples, Tuscany, Parma, Lombardy and Mantua. Only in states where there was no discontinuity of political authority – as in Piedmont or Venice – were the pretensions of the nobles contained or even restricted in the early decades of the eighteenth century. The diversity of origins, both feudal and civic, the growth in titles perhaps confused the concept of nobility. In Tuscany Pompeo Neri could write that the nobility could only be identified ‘with the class of persons treated at Florence as nobles’ (Venturi, 30, p. 329). But its power could hardly be denied.

It was a power which acted as a deadweight against change. The aristocracy’s idleness and inertia, its ignorance of and indifference to the public good, were constantly attacked by the reformers. Life at Court and palace
building perhaps offers an over-simplified characterization of the principal concerns of the richer Italian nobles in the earlier part of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, such activities still reflected aristocratic ideals. The Mantuan reformer Giambattista Gherardo d'Arco was convinced that the lack of investment in agriculture, which explained its backwardness, was due to the diversion of resources towards 'expenditure on ostentatious living' (Vivanti, 62, p. 179). The attack on 'luxury', a recurrent motif of the writings of the reformers, was based on this vision of the wasteful expenditure of the nobles. Their absence from their estates, their preference for residence in the cities and attendance at Court was judged equally negatively. As the Tuscan Francesco Maria Gianni wrote:

When you find small Courts brilliant and full of luxury, judge them to be a weakness of the sovereign, draw the conclusion that the nobility which populates them ruins itself, that the civic spirit is corrupted, that a class of subjects is formed in ignorance of truth and the useful sciences which debases itself by its mannerisms of vain pride and hence of contempt for the other classes, that the administration of justice and government normally takes on a character of partiality insulting to the other classes. Birth and favour take the place of merit and reason. (Anzilotti, 64, p. 148)

Yet in areas where nobles were in possession of real feudal power – in the Bresciano, Bergamasco, Friuli, Papal States or the kingdoms of Naples and Sicily – their presence at Court was preferable to their residence within their fiefs. The limitless extent of landed power in the mid-eighteenth century could be a frightening phenomenon. The abuses that often followed upon such residence are amply described in the words of the Neapolitan Paolo Maria Doria:

The baron has the power to impoverish and ruin a vassal; keeping him in prison or not allowing the governor or judge of the commune to expedite his case. Through his right of pardon he can murder whom he wishes and pardon the murderer; through the commutation of sentences he fills the land with rogues and assassins. He abuses his power over the possessions as over the honour of vassals. Trade, like matrimony, must submit to his whims. It is impossible to prove a baron guilty. And the government itself, which can sometimes violently repress a weak baron, has nothing but indulgence for the strong. . . . From these abuses it can be seen that some barons are like sovereigns in their lands. (Villani, 94, p. 599)

**Systems of tenure and peasant pauperism**

Despite the deeply negative aspects of the predominance of ecclesiastics and nobles, it was from some of their estates that the major changes in the rural economy were to develop. The absenteeism of the great landowners led to the emergence of new men who rented and ran their estates. Systems of land tenure varied widely in the different regions. In the Po valley and central