

A Comparative Survey Of The U.S. And Italy

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Feature Essay

A COMPARATIVE SURVEY OF THE U.S. AND ITALY

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Doyle, Don H. *PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR: Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question.* University of Georgia Press, \$24.95
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The strong winds of political unification during the 1990s were met with a countervailing gust of nationalism. Germany reunited and the European Union solidified, even as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia disintegrated sectional movements in such places as Quebec, Scotland, and Italy gained momentum. Shifting territorial boundaries, not to mention political alliances, kept both states-men and cartographers gainfully employed throughout the decade.

Don H. Doyle's *Nations Divided* is, in part, a comparative historical survey of longstanding regional tensions in the United States and Italy. Doyle is a history professor at Vanderbilt University, but his initial enchantment with Italy grew out of travel rather than academic study. Now he has assembled, in under 100 pages of prose, a synthesis that considers the parallel evolution of the United States and Italy.

The north/south divisions of both countries particularly attract Doyle's interest. A Fulbright fellowship took Doyle to Genoa in 1995, during what now appears to have been the crest of the Northern League, a vaguely secessionist political party in Italy's wealthy north. Back in the U.S., Republicans had captured both houses of Congress running on a platform of devolving power to the states. In both Italy and the U.S., longstanding regional tensions were associated with these movements. American journalists began writing about the Southern captivity of the Republican party, while some southern Italians adopted the Confederate flag as a symbol of resistance to their more prosperous northern countrymen.

Nations Divided traces the United States from its origins as, in Doyle's reading, the first liberal and transnational state, through the rise of regional differences that culminated in the Civil War, to the present-day marital truce between north and south. Italian unification, in contrast, occurred relatively late in the 19th century, and was inspired by Garibaldi's Italian nationalism, itself a Romantic throwback to Czarism and the Renaissance, rather than a derivative of Anglo-American liberal theory. As in Germany, Italy's unification was violent and had a pronounced anti-clerical and anti-monarchal ideological fervor that has little relation to the American Civil War, which was fought between two countries that each claimed George Washington as their founding father.

Doyle gently pushes to color Italy's post-unification history as a halting progression toward the modernization and secularization that the U.S. is credited with pioneering, which perhaps unavoidably generates in its wake a political backlash in those regions and industries that either fear or cannot compete with the new economic order. When Doyle asked an Italian professor-friend whether southern Italians understood the significance of the Confederate flag, she replied that they did. We too are a defeated people, she explained.

One question that Doyle leaves unexamined is the causal direction of Italy's resurgent regionalism. Robert D. Putnam's study of Italy's devolution of power during the 1970s from the centralized state to regional institutions, published in 1993 as *Making Democracy Work*, attributes the early 1990s success of regional political parties to regional pride, anger against the inefficiencies of Rome, backlash against handouts' to corrupt southerners, and veiled racism. The rest of Putnam's book makes the case that this regional consciousness is in no small way an unintended consequence of the 1970s decentralization initiatives. This is a more empirical, but far less interesting, account of contemporary Italian society than we encounter in *Nations Divided*.

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