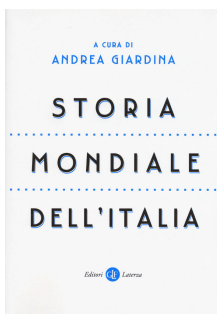


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Andrea Giardina (ed.)

## Storia mondiale dell'Italia

Review by: Joseph Viscomi



**Editors:** Andrea Giardina  
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This monumental book provides a fascinating alternative to the methodological nationalism from which so much scholarship suffers. It also captures the friction of history as experience and history as narrative, and in doing so disrupts both. First, a comment on reading *Storia mondiale dell'Italia*. Taking seriously the suggestion that this book was not intended to be read in a conventional manner, I approached it planning to read it backwards. To begin in the present, as it were, where I was more comfortable and familiar with the political and cultural categories from which the work itself spawns and to travel backwards in time. I kept in mind that *Storia mondiale dell'Italia* (like its French predecessor) was written in response to and in dialogue with the xenophobia of nationalist and nativist narratives that are ever-more present in contemporary political worlds, and continue to be legitimized by their incorporation into governing bodies (in and beyond Europe).

Reflecting on the presence of boxers at different moments in the work, and perhaps drawing on my own experience as an Italian American from Philadelphia raised in the myth of Rocky Balboa, once I stepped into the ring with this book I had the strong sensation that it was an adept boxer. Its quickness hinted at the complexity that awaits just beyond the streamlined narratives which structure identity. In its endurance – its capacity to concurrently embrace vast temporal depth and wide geographical fields I would think that this book exhausts its opponent. Some blows came by surprise: "in queste torsioni ideologiche si dimentica la storia reale" (p. 389) on the memory of Lepanto and the creation of the Fondazione Lepanto in 1982 to defend the borders of an imagined Christian collectivity;

"nazionalismo e internazionalismo non erano in antitesi" (p. 493) on the future-gazing of the nineteenth-century *fuoriusciti*; then, the first time a character appears explicitly with the word/concept "straniero" it is none other than Garibaldi (p. 524); and, the myth of Pinocchio, "paese che vai pinocchio che trovi", the puppet that becomes other than itself (p. 546).

There are chapters in the work in which I paused on the authors' usage of "Italia" or "italiani." Were these terms retroactively applied to the past? Then, I began to question whether this, too, turned much of our engagement with historiography on its head. In other words, we are cautioned to use ideas and concepts contemporary to our periods of study, rather than to impose presentist ones on the past – and rightly so, I would argue, in most cases – and yet, especially in this case where the book's intention is to respond to heavily politicized ongoing debates about nation, identity, and community which inevitably refer to and implicate our understandings of the past, perhaps it does serve us well to "confound" such presentist categories with the substance of the past. To impose the materiality of our historiography on our contemporary categories is also to expose how fragile they are. There seems to be an intentional teleology at play in *Storia mondiale dell'Italia* that is successful at unraveling deterministic understandings of nation, territory, and belonging.

At the same time *Storia mondiale dell'Italia* extends outwards, it contracts inwards. These two movements have shaped and continue to shape the peninsula. Peoples vanish (but not quite) within the folds of its history throughout the book's generative narrative: the tedeschi in Venice (p. 308) the Arbaesch in the South (p. 322); the *normanni* (p. 217). Others depart and play out their overlapping stories elsewhere. Here, it was especially fascinating to read about Cesare Lombroso in Russia in 1876, and then, later, about Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927 Boston; the fate of these two anarchists in part an extension of the application of Lombroso's (and his followers') ideas about race in American legislation, which implicated the lives of many Southern migrants in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century America. Still others "became" other; the inclusion of the "tammurriata nira" comes to mind here, where multiple Souths meet. The book is not, however, populated by exceptions: one also finds the expected subjects: Mazzini; Pirelli; Adua; the Spanish Civil War; Slow Food; to name a few.

Importantly, *Storia mondiale dell'Italia* is not about connections that make Italy global. This is one of the book's strengths. The global scope of the work activates different, often quite "disconnected" histories. Here, for example, we learn of Italo Balbo's visit to the US with the boxer Primo Carnera's title (p. 633). The image of Mussolini's portrait aside Carnera's reminded me of a passage from Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* in which he describes the icons adorning the walls inside the houses of peasants: on one side the image of the Madonna di Viggiano, and on the other side, President Roosevelt. Levi notes with surprise, "Non ho mai visto in nessuna casa altre immagini: né il Re, né il Duce, né tanto meno Garibaldi" (p.113). On one hand, in the case of Carnera, we have the contrast of Italian Americans or Italians in the Americas imagining themselves as part of a global Italy that is elsewhere, embodied in the personality of the Duce; on the other hand, we have Lucani imagining themselves as part of a very different global Italy that incorporates *altri luoghi* through the image of Roosevelt. These two scenes would have been drawn from close historical moments, yet both in their geopolitical imagination conjured disparate worlds.

Overall, *Storia mondiale dell'Italia* resists rigid interpretation, and this could make it an invaluable tool for combatting a public that refuses to read the academic scholarship which they perceive as interpolated by political agendas. Even the supremacy of state politics is disrupted in this telling of history. Rome, for example, emerges almost suddenly in 1848 (p. 523) and comes in and out of the story, decentering state politics in many occasions.

Reading these short chapters, I wondered whether this was an exercise in engaging the 'imagined community' or 'invented traditions' that we have learned to unpack in our historiography since the early 1980s. Here, though, we confront the problem from behind, rather than emphasizing the inventedness of a given category, that category takes shape through a particular historical conjuncture, but also deforms or breaks with the weight of others. In other words, the book does not work to show how histories are constructed, but does demonstrate how various histories have the potential to construct alternative understandings of nation, territory, and belonging. The authors – and the overall structure of the narrative – do not bind the readers to strict realism, on the one hand, nor to postmodern relativism on the other, but embrace history's multiplicity.

Here, I would like to return to the idea of futures. Several chapters in this volume subtly point towards possible horizons at historical conjunctures (*Carlo Magno, i fuoriusciti*, among others). These suggestive instances strengthen *Storia mondiale dell'Italia's* broader project, for the book often seems to say, look not at what was and what is not now, but rather look at what was being imagined as possible at a certain historical moment, and what is no longer imagined as such today.

I want to conclude on a personal note; the immense scope of *Storia mondiale dell'Italia* generates an intimate space in its reading. In the initial discussion of Terra Italia, Giorgio Ferri lists names assigned to various parts of the peninsula in the ancient world. These include Esperia, Ausonia, and Saturnia. In my research on the departure of over 40,000 Italians from Egypt between the 1930s and the 1960s (a story which is very much about the creation of national and imperial subjects through migration), the passenger ships that play the most significant role in their repatriation (*rimpatrio*) are the "Esperia" and the "Ausonia" (both of which were operated by private companies but leased to the Italian state to assist the large number of repatriates). The ship that brought my grandfather's family to Philadelphia in 1947 (after his father had crossed the Atlantic 17 times between 1911 and 1927) was the "Saturnia".

Like the names of these ships, derived from moments far removed from the present to refer to a territory that is being made and unmade at the same time and by the individuals aboard, I found this book an incredible experiment in questioning the value assigned to

national and territorial categories and notions of belonging. Yet, to return to the question of whether the book achieves its goal of responding to social and political debates amongst a wider public, I wonder: why has it not sparked the debate that its French predecessor did?