

Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Italy

THE NATION OF THE RISORGIMENTO

**KINSHIP, SANCTITY, AND HONOUR IN THE ORIGINS
OF UNIFIED ITALY**

Alberto Mario Banti



The Nation of the Risorgimento

This book is a translation of *La Nazione del Risorgimento*, one of the most important and influential works on modern Italian history published in recent years. It analyses the aspects of the ideas of nationhood and patriotism that impassioned and energized the Italian Risorgimento movement during the first half of the nineteenth century. Employing an innovative interdisciplinary approach that examines the cultural production and consumption of the period, the author has challenged the orthodoxies of post-1945 Italian historiography. He explores the developing themes that gave strength to the idea of the Italian 'nation', and in the process persuasively explains why so many young men and women were willing to lay down their lives for the '*patria*' and its independence.

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Translated by Stuart Oglethorpe

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Preface to the English edition

It is always strange to talk about oneself at the start of a book that has nothing autobiographical about it, and even stranger to do this by talking about the self of some years ago. However, this is what is required when presenting the translation of a book that first appeared in Italian in 2000. Since then, *La nazione del Risorgimento* has generated various reactions: perplexity in some cases, especially among Italian Risorgimento scholars of a more traditional orientation; gratifying appreciation in some other cases, with reverberations beyond Italy's borders.¹ Now, however, is not the moment to reprise the different phases of the book's reception.² It will be more useful to note, in summary fashion, the more important conclusions of this research.

The task that I had set myself was to describe the way in which Risorgimento activists of the most varied political orientation understood the concept of 'nation'. I did this by employing the tools of cultural history, leading me to identify three fundamental 'deep images', which were heralded in the book's subtitle.³

The first is the image of kinship. It was precisely through reference to such a simple and easily understandable image that one of the essential ways of framing the national discourse developed. Imagining the nation as a kinship system – a web of relationships that stretches back towards past generations, operates in the present for members of the community, and reaches forward to the generations of the future – has two essential implications. First, it means that the nation is imagined as a community by descent, endowed with its own specific historical past. Second, it means that great emphasis is placed on the importance of biological ties as the cement of the national community; this explains the frequent recourse to terms such as '*razza*', '*stirpe*', and '*sangue*' ('race', 'stock', and 'blood') to illustrate the type of relationship that connects members of the same national community to each other. With this in mind, we can also see why the national discourse was expressed through the systematic use of vocabulary that referred to the sphere of the family: national territory was the '*madre-patria*' ('mother-fatherland'); the movement's leaders were the '*padri della patria*' ('fathers of the fatherland'); and the national community consisted of '*fratelli*' and '*sorelle*' ('brothers' and 'sisters').

The images that referred to the world of kinship and the family, a set of metaphors that were all very easy to understand, had the effect of mitigating the abstract

nature of the concept of 'nation'. This operation acquired even greater strength because it was linked to a second 'deep image', 'sanctity', closely connected to the theme of 'sacrifice', which transformed national ideology into a quasi-religious discursive system by introducing the themes of suffering and death into the symbolic world of the nation. The moral duty to sacrifice oneself for the *patria*, to the point of one's death, acquired particular meaning through regular use of the word 'martyr', a highly charged concept taken from the Christian symbolic tradition. The connection made between the patriotic martyrs and the Christ of the passion, the archetype of sacrifice and martyrdom, was extraordinarily important and very rich in its implications. The national hero came to be regarded as an *alter Christus*: a projection of the suffering of Christ and the early Christian martyrs. The essence of the connection lay in the word '*martirio*' (martyrdom), which can be defined as 'proof of one's faith, through the sacrifice of oneself'. The suffering of Christ and those of his followers who were subjected to martyrdom provided evidence of their religious faith: testimony that was supposed to reawaken all humanity. On a different level, but no less effectively, the sacrifice of the patriotic martyrs provided evidence of their political faith: testimony that was supposed to reawaken the entire national community and inspire it to fight for liberation, if necessary enduring the most extreme suffering. This way of facing pain and death gave the national discourse a para-religious tone, which explains why nationalist speakers very often resorted to terms of religious provenance such as 'faith', 'mission', 'regeneration', '*risorgimento*' ('resurgence' – the Italian word having the meaning 'resurrection' at that time), 'holy war', and 'crusade'.

The moral values included within this symbolic system were completed by a third 'deep image' built around the concept of 'honour'. In the works that gave life to the Risorgimento concept of the nation there are a surprising number of stories of rape or attempted rape, with enemies or traitors as the perpetrators and chaste or pure national heroines as the victims. There are essentially three ways in which these episodes are resolved: if the national heroine is violated, she dies from an overpowering physical and psychological breakdown; she may instead commit suicide before her violation; or she is saved before the worst can happen, thanks to the timely intervention of a national hero. If we set aside the male obsessions that clearly enlivened these fantasies and focus on the way that the national discourse operated, the important thing was the reference to the need to defend collective honour by protecting the integrity of the nation's women. What must be protected, in this case, is the uncorrupted nature of the genealogical line, which is the central axis of the nation as a community by descent. The conclusion of these stories of rape with either the woman's rescue or her death is a narrative solution that is supposed to reassure the national community, by saying, in essence, that no hybrid stock can ever corrupt the purity of the nation's genealogical descent.

Ultimately, the 'deep images' appealed to the subtle elements that together structure individual personalities, because they provided explanations – partial, perhaps, but perfectly understandable – to existential puzzles that we all have to address regarding the meaning of being born, loving, suffering, and dying. These were themes that mined the depths of the individual and collective imaginary;

at the same time, they were discussed using a repertoire of images drawn from symbolic systems that were already in existence, were very well known, and were often highly respected: royal lines of descent, the Christian tradition, and the moral code of the nobility. This explains why these images were ‘deep’. The national discourse took them, transferred them from their original semantic field, and relocated them in a new one, through cultural media (historical novels, poetry, plays, paintings, and operas) that transmitted engaging narratives, steeped in patriotic values, with the capacity to arouse profound emotions.

There is no need to dwell further here on what is discussed more fully in the chapters of the book itself. However, there is still one observation that I would like to make. When I wrote *La nazione del Risorgimento*, Europe’s neo-nationalist movements did not have the strength and impact that they have acquired in more recent years. I have not, of course, come to think that the symbolic material that I believed I had uncovered in the national discourse of the Risorgimento might directly offer keys to explaining the operation or success of movements such as the Italian Lega, France’s Rassemblement National, the pro-Brexit parties, and yet others. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the constellations of symbols explored in this book were enduring; that they were shared by other nineteenth-century European nationalist movements; and that they had the capacity to re-emerge, often in a pernicious form, during the twentieth century.⁴ Finally, I believe that they are, at least in part, still alive and kicking today, in the rhetoric and imaginary of the neo-nationalist populist movements that have been the perpetual and daily topics of news coverage during this disturbing start to the twenty-first century.

Alberto Mario Banti
October 2019

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Since this book was first published, I have discussed its themes and ideas with a great many people. I am grateful to them all, but would particularly like to thank Silvana Patriarca, Carlotta Sorba, Gian Luca Fruci, Pietro Finelli, Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti, Alessio Petrizzo, and Gian Luca Albergoni: their comments, their criticism, their encouragement, and their own research have all been very important to me. Special thanks go to Stuart Oglethorpe, who has translated the book, but has actually done much more: he has been an intelligent and valued editor, who has forced me to reflect on my choices and to make my ideas clearer than they had been in the Italian edition.

Notes

- 1 ‘Alberto Banti’s Interpretation of Risorgimento Nationalism: A Debate’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 15, no. 3 (2009); ‘Entretien avec Catherine Brice’, *Revue d’histoire du XIX^e siècle*, 44 (2012).
- 2 For a survey of the most recent debates, see S. Patriarca and L. Riall, ‘Introduction: Revisiting the Risorgimento’, in *The Risorgimento Revisited: Nationalism and Culture*

in *Nineteenth-Century Italy*, ed. S. Patriarca and L. Riall (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

- 3 I coined the expression ‘deep images’ after this book had been written, to capture the profound nature of the symbols and narratives that gave life to the idea of ‘nation’ shared by the patriots of the Risorgimento. I explain in the next few paragraphs what these ‘deep images’ are. The phrase was first introduced in the following publications: A.M. Banti, ‘Conclusions: Performative Effects and “Deep Images” in National Discourse’, in *Different Paths to the Nation: Regional and National Identities in Central Europe and Italy, 1830–70*, ed. L. Cole (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); A.M. Banti, ‘Deep Images in Nineteenth-Century Nationalist Narrative’, in *Historiein. A Review of the Past and Other Stories*, 8 (2008); A.M. Banti and P. Ginsborg, ‘Per una nuova storia del Risorgimento’, in *Storia d’Italia. Annali 22: Il Risorgimento*, ed. A.M. Banti and P. Ginsborg (Turin: Einaudi, 2007).
- 4 I have pursued these arguments in two of my subsequent books: *L’onore della nazione. Identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla Grande Guerra* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005); and *Sublime madre nostra. La nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo* (Rome–Bari: Laterza, 2011).

Preface to the first edition (2000)

Italian national identity has long been a lost theme in historiography; perhaps it should instead be said that it has never actually been a proper historiographical theme. The historiography of the Risorgimento ought to have directly addressed this, but has never made it the specific focus of research or discussion. The 'political resurgence of the Italian nation', whatever might have been intended by this expression, was the watchword for the various strands that contributed to the construction of a unified state in the Italian peninsula; despite this, Italian national identity has been regarded as a given, a sort of *a priori* element for any of the political and cultural groupings with a national and patriotic orientation, rather than as something requiring its own exploration and analysis. As a result, however strange this might seem, there has never been any research specifically devoted to national identity in Risorgimento Italy.¹

Until very recently, the attention devoted to this theme by historians writing about post-unification Italy has not been much greater. Other phenomena have demanded priority for analysis: the development of the socialist and then communist movements, or of the Catholic movement; Italy's industrialization; governmental institutions of the unified state; practices of political mediation; the social nature of the elites; the Fascist regime's features and support base; and so on. The theme of the nation was thus not included among the most important items on the agenda of historical studies in the first forty years after the Second World War.²

Only in the last ten years has the urgency of international and domestic events forced the public to re-examine itself on the issue of the nation. From the late 1980s onwards, Italian historians and social scientists have also been returning to this lost theme, and have realized that the nation and the *patria* had been extremely important conceptual elements in the experience of many of those who lived in the Italian peninsula. However, this research has principally focused on the post-unification phase; in particular, it has examined the organization of rituals and symbols that enabled any effective instruction regarding the nation, and which instilled an awareness of this in illiterate populations that were often barely able to recognize elements relating to their identity that extended beyond the shadow cast by the bell-tower of their rural community.³ Meanwhile, there has never been any specific examination of the meanings attributed to '*la nazione*' during the Risorgimento.

This state of affairs seemed an excellent reason for setting myself to work on the original phase of development of Italian national identity; in brief, I think this should be regarded as the experience that provided the basis for the following one hundred and fifty years of Italy's history as a unified country, whatever one's perspective. Having decided to move in this direction, I was guided by a series of initial questions. Why did someone become a 'patriot'? Why decide to join some secret group, or Giovine Italia? Why decide to acquire banned books? Why embrace theories of geopolitical transformation that were such a radical departure from existing arrangements in the peninsula between 1796 and 1860? In general terms, these sorts of questions had already been highlighted some years earlier by one of the most incisive studies ever published on the theme of national identity: Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, a book that was extraordinarily rich in the avenues that it opened up.⁴ Among other things, it invited its readers to carefully consider the importance of symbolic elements in the invention of the nation, although it then only offered a partial exploration of this line of enquiry; similarly, the assumption of a subjective analytical perspective – the world seen through the eyes of history's protagonists – was advocated more than it was actually put into practice.

At the beginning of my work, I thought that Anderson's proposals should be taken more seriously than he had taken them himself, and that the best way of exploring the issue of national identity would be to ask oneself – within the limits of the possible – what it had meant to the men and women who thought of it as an important part of their lives. It is precisely because of this 'subjectivist' orientation that the book's title refers to 'the nation *of* the Risorgimento' ('la nazione *del* Risorgimento'): this means that its concern is not the idea of the nation during the historical period that ran from 1796 to 1861, but rather the idea of the nation as it was understood by the protagonists of the Risorgimento movement.

In order to look at the issue from this perspective, I started by referring to writing of a private nature. The memoirs and correspondence of people who had in some way taken part in the national movement of the Risorgimento then led me to focus on a group of texts that were predominantly (but not exclusively) literary. These, I came to think, could be seen collectively as the 'Risorgimento canon', because it was in the images, symbols, and plots developed in these works that young readers of both sexes, subsequently patriots, started to discover '*la nazione*'.

The context within which literature of a patriotic stamp developed is explored in the first chapter; in the second, we move on to describe the image of the Italian nation that was constructed by the texts of the 'canon'; the third chapter looks at the conceptual, rhetorical, and narrative resources used by Romantic intellectuals to focus on the idea of an Italian national community and turn it into an image of great communicative strength; and in the fourth, a range of evidence is offered in order to assess the impact that this idea had on the reading public. Much of the analysis is devoted to describing the conceptual features of the Italian nation that predated its political formulation and incarnation, as they emerge from the texts of the 'Risorgimento canon'; this was not my analytical preference, but more a

choice made by the authors of these texts, determined, at least initially, by the censorship and other constraints that affected intellectual communication in the different states in the peninsula during the first half of the nineteenth century. For a series of reasons that I examine in the third and fourth chapters, these ‘pre-political’ features played a decisive role in the dissemination and success of the national discourse.

In summary, the work has taken the form of research into the passions that were fostered by the reading of a certain number of specific books: an exercise undertaken by young men and women in the period between the *triennio giacobino* and Italian unification. A similar process has affected the writing of my book, as is always the case: it has been shaped by reading that has generated in me some intense emotions, although these have been of a very different nature to those that coursed through both the hearts and minds of many Risorgimento readers. Some volumes have left an especially deep impression; their influence explains the titles of the main chapters, which should be regarded as a series of tributes to works and methodological frameworks that, while adhered to very loosely, have played a very important part in ensuring that the materials gathered have been marshalled in a coherent picture.⁵

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At the conclusion of this work, it gives me great pleasure to be able to thank Paul Ginsborg, who has generously had faith in me; Adriano Prosperi, who had the patience to discuss a particular aspect of this research with me, and made some valuable suggestions; Mariuccia Salvati, Laurence Fontaine, Kathy Isaacs, Barbara Henry, and Gilles Pécout, who invited me to present part of my work at the seminars run by them at, respectively, the University of Bologna, the European University Institute in Fiesole, the University of Pisa, the Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna in Pisa, and the École Normale Supérieure (rue d’Ulm) of Paris; and Michele Battini, Roberto Bizzocchi, Manuela Garuglieri, Roberto Pertici, Ilaria Porciani, Raffaele Romanelli, Anna Scattigno, and Arnaldo Testi, who read and commented on the typescript of this work.

Finally – and this is what I most wanted to be able to write – this book is for Manuela, Rachele, and Tommaso.

Notes

- 1 The idea is discussed in Giulio Bollati’s magnificent and allusive essay ‘L’Italiano’, first published in 1972 and then reprinted in *L’Italiano. Il carattere nazionale come storia e come invenzione* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983).
- 2 There are, however, some splendid exceptions. As well as Bollati’s essay, see, for example, S. Lanaro, *Nazione e lavoro. Saggio sulla cultura borghese in Italia, 1870–1925* (Venice: Marsilio, 1979).
- 3 See B. Tobia, *Una patria per gli italiani. Spazi, itinerari, monumenti nell’Italia unita (1870–1900)* (Rome–Bari: Laterza, 1991); U. Levra, *Fare gli italiani. Memoria e celebrazione del Risorgimento* (Turin: Comitato di Torino dell’Istituto per la Storia

del Risorgimento Italiano, 1992); E. Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. K. Botsford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996; first published in Italian, 1993); S. Soldani and G. Turi, eds, *Fare gli italiani. Scuola e cultura nell'Italia contemporanea*, 2 vols (Bologna: il Mulino, 1993); M. Baioni, *La 'religione della patria'. Musei e istituti del culto risorgimentale (1884–1918)* (Treviso: Pagus, 1994); I. Porciani, *La festa della nazione. Rappresentazione dello Stato e spazi sociali nell'Italia unita* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1997).

- 4 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1991).
- 5 I list these books here with the nervousness and respect owing to essential works (or, at least, works that seem essential to me, if not to others): V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. L. Scott, 2nd edn (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968; first published in Russian, 1928); M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972; first published in French, 1969); R.C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984); S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); U. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990; also pub. as *I limiti dell'interpretazione*, Milan: Bompiani, 1990); U. Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose, ed. S. Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).



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1 The ‘Risorgimento canon’

1.

What did ‘*nazione*’ (nation) and ‘*patria*’ (fatherland) mean to the men and women of Italy’s Risorgimento?¹ During the first half of the nineteenth century, many people decided to take action, often dangerous, in their name, risking exile, imprisonment, and their lives. What did they signify?

By this point, these words had acquired meanings that were markedly different from those they had had prior to the 1790s. Not only had their respective semantic fields been modified, but, unlike earlier, when they had operated as contiguous but relatively autonomous terms, they had also become structurally connected within the same lexical constellation, and had acquired a wealth of connotations that previously were entirely unfamiliar. This was an important development of the sort that leaves a deep impression on the conceptual panorama of an entire period. Before addressing fundamental questions about the meaning of the national and patriotic vocabulary of the Risorgimento, we need to briefly review the principal meanings attributed to these two words during the eighteenth century; this will allow us to observe nineteenth-century affairs with a greater awareness of their radical newness.

So, back to the eighteenth century. The term ‘*patria*’ had at the time two primary meanings. First, it indicated ‘the place where one is born, or from which one traces one’s origins’, and might refer just to a village or town of birth, to the local home town or city, or to a wider territorial area corresponding to a specific state or cultural region.² In eighteenth-century texts, ‘*patria*’ thus referred to individual towns and cities just as much as to regions such as Sardinia or Sicily, states such as the Venetian Republic, the Kingdom of Naples, Spain, or Britain, and cultural areas such as Italy or Germany.³ Second, ‘*patria*’ could also mean the political and governmental system to which subjects or citizens owed their allegiance, when this had been governed by the involvement of a good prince or a worthy body of officials. This meaning, which was not to be found in the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, had however been fully developed by Paolo Mattia Doria in his book *La vita civile* (Civil life), published in Naples in 1729. According to Doria, love for one’s *patria* is inspired by the respect felt in encounters with officialdom, senators, or the prince. These need, firstly, to be able

2 The 'Risorgimento canon'

to win for themselves the admiration and respect of the citizens or subjects, but above all they need to be able to do this in a way that ensures security and contentment, rather than through the illusory renown that may result from military conquests, splendid but, equally, heralding suffering and bereavement.⁴ Commenting only on the nature of the relationship between the public and authorities, and thus leaving aside the legitimation that the latter might enjoy, Doria made no distinctions between monarchy and republic, despotic and shared government, oligarchy and aristocracy, or mob rule and democracy. The term '*patria*' is frequently encountered in eighteenth-century texts with this generic political connotation; in articles in the eighteenth-century Milanese periodical *Il Caffè*, for example, it appears both as a 'political and governmental system' and as a 'community that lives under the laws of this system', as well as with the meaning of a place of birth. For all these articulations it might be proper to nurture love and loyalty, or to undertake worthy deeds.⁵

'*Nazione*', on the other hand, had three main meanings. In the most archaic, still present in the dictionaries, it could stand for '*nascita*' (birth), or rather 'family or social extraction'. In a form that derived from this root word, it referred to '*Generazion d'huomini nati in una medesima provincia, o Città*' ('generation of men born in the same province or city'), a variant that projected the first meaning recorded for '*patria*' onto a collective subject.⁶ Starting from this semantic context, '*nazione*' had also acquired the sense of a community endowed with a shared habitus, made up of traditions and practices that were specific and distinct from those of other communities located in different territorial spaces; this use can frequently be identified in the writings of Vico, Calepio, Bettinelli, Filangieri, Beccaria, Pietro Verri, and Alessandro Verri.⁷ The territorial configuration of communities characterized in this way might vary considerably: in relation to the Italian peninsula, reference was frequently made to geographical areas that did not necessarily coincide with the borders of one of the states then in existence, both in a more localized manner (in which there might be mention of the '*nazione piemontese*', '*nazione veneziana*', or '*nazione napoletana*', and so on) and, conversely, in the translocal sense of '*nazione italiana*' (for example in works by Muratori, Bettinelli, Baretti, and Calepio).⁸ Finally, in the early eighteenth century the term acquired a third semantic field, which was specifically concerned with indicating the existence of an Italian cultural community endowed with a shared language and literature, something that had already been acknowledged for centuries.⁹ This new use of the term, which according to Gianfranco Folena can be traced back to Ludovico Antonio Muratori, had then asserted itself with some effectiveness in the period that followed, so that in 1765 a well-developed and thoughtful interpretation could be found in an article by Gian Rinaldo Carli, '*Della patria degli italiani*' ('On the *patria* of the Italians'), published in *Il Caffè*.

Carli's article took the form of the account of a dialogue that had taken place in a coffee bar in Milan between a group of regular customers and a man not known to them. When the latter entered, one of the regulars, Alcibiade, asked him if he was a '*forestiere*' (foreigner), to which the answer was 'no'. Alcibiade then asked

him if he was from Milan, and the new arrival again replied 'no'. His surprised questioner then insisted on asking him where he could possibly have come from:

I'm Italian, the unknown man replies, *and an Italian in Italy is never a foreigner, just as a Frenchman is not a foreigner in France, nor an Englishman in England, nor a Dutchman in Holland, and so on.* The Milanese strove in vain to advance in his favour the custom universal in Italy of calling anyone not born nor living within the confines of their city walls '*forestiere*', because the unknown man, confidently interrupting him, added: In Italy, this too is one of the prejudices held; nor does it surprise me, but for the fact that I see it embraced by people of intelligence, who with reflection, reason, and good sense ought by now to have triumphed over ignorance and barbarism. This might be called a mysterious talent of the Italians, which renders them inhospitable and unfriendly to themselves, and which as a consequence results in a miring of the arts and sciences and great impediments to national glory, which struggles to develop when the nation is divided into many factions or by many schisms. It does not – he continued – reflect very well on Italian thinking to meet, one might say at every turn, people who are convinced of being, by nature and by *nazione*, different from their neighbours; with one group giving another the title of '*forestieri*'; it's almost as if there are just as many *forestieri* in Italy as Italians.¹⁰

The new arrival went on to observe that it was typical of Italians to also disregard their good qualities, or the great men who had been born in their land; these assertions met with the agreement of those present, who acknowledged 'the unknown person as a man of learning and good sense, and a worthy patriot'.¹¹ This 'unknown man', in order to bolster his argument, then provided a brief historical digression: the origin of the Italian nation, he observed, lay in the expansion of Rome, when this primary city extended its privileges to all the municipalities across the Italian peninsula. 'Thus we have all been similar in origin', he said; 'as the origin of the nation, I name that moment in which interest and honour unites it and ties it together in one single body and one single system'. However, then came the barbarians, and an endless succession of divisions, although these never altered the origin, nor the spirit, nor the common condition of the Italians: it was because of this unbroken continuity that Italians ought to be able to see themselves as part of the same *nazione*.¹²

At this point, Alcibiade introduced the 'political' issue, saying that '[i]f your precepts became widely shared, there would no longer be any distinctions between one city and another, or between one noble and another, and the badges of honour and medals that come to us from the hands of the princes would be meaningless ornaments!'¹³ The unknown man replied that there was no reason not to recognize the current political and governmental distinctions:

Be the towns and cities great or small, be they located in one space or another, let them have particular laws in the revolutions they turn on their own axis; let

4 The 'Risorgimento canon'

them be faithful to their natural sovereign and their laws; and let them have whatever number of administrative bodies they need. But although divided into different domains obeying different rulers, let them come together once and for all in one single system for progress in the sciences and arts; and let love for the *patria*, meaning love for the universal wellbeing of our nation, be the sun that enlightens and attracts them.¹⁴

While the Italian *patria* was, for Carli, a historical and cultural commonality, the patriotism that resulted from it was nevertheless not to be translated into rejection of the principles underlying the political arrangements within the peninsula's various states, the legitimacy of their institutions, or the sovereignty of their princely rulers. Two different ways of being a patriot found their reconciliation here: while on the cultural front it was necessary to seek to contribute to the progress of the arts and sciences that made Italy a nation, on the political front loyalty to one's own '*piccola patria*' was completely unquestionable.¹⁵

2.

After 1789, a profound change in the semantic fields disturbed this lexical constellation. The impetus for change came from abroad, from France and the extraordinary experience of the French Revolution, and arrived, alongside the Armée d'Italie, in the newspapers, books, posters, and other printed material that were now being published in various parts of the Italian peninsula, especially in the months immediately after the spring of 1796, with astonishing speed and in extraordinary quantities.¹⁶

To some extent, the new political vocabulary of the revolution, which sketched out projects that subverted the sovereignty, legitimacy, and foundations of the legislation and government of the *ancien régime* states, was simply reusing terms that had already been widely employed in political discourse during the previous decades (or even centuries), such as '*sovrano*' (sovereign), '*stato*' (state), '*cittadino*' (citizen), '*libertà*' (liberty), '*patria*', and '*popolo*' (people). At the same time, however, it was characterized by at least two fundamental new elements. The first related to the presence of new words that had hitherto not been part of the constellation of concepts recognized in the political sphere, as was certainly the case for '*nazione*'. During the '*triennio giacobino*' or '*triennio patriottico*', the three-year period that followed Napoleon's arrival in Milan in 1796, this term retained its older meanings; however, it also experienced an enrichment of its semantic field that resulted in its triumphant entry into the new revolutionary political lexicon, in that it had come to describe the fundamental community and primal entity that gave legitimacy to the institutions that had to regulate its collective life within a given time and space.¹⁷ The second new element related to the overall morphology of the new lexical paradigm used to discuss the political and the public sphere, and derived directly from the semantic enrichment that the term '*nazione*' had undergone. This word moved into a central position in the logic of the new constellation of concepts, so much so that it subordinated

all, or almost all, the other terms that belonged to this. In relation to '*nazione*', these other terms came to perform at least three specific functions: they made clear, or gave clearer meanings to, particular areas of the semantic field to which the central term referred (as seen, for example, in the phrases '*stato nazionale*', '*assemblea nazionale*', '*guardia nazionale*', and '*volontà*', '*sovranità*', or '*indipendenza della nazione*' ['will', 'sovereignty', or 'independence of the nation'], or in the connection between citizenship and nationality, which now became definitive); they operated as synonyms (as was the case for the term '*popolo*' [people], for example); or they described the system of relationships that members of the nation ought to maintain with the institutions that were supposed to express its essence. This third function was fulfilled by the word '*patria*' in particular: now, even more than before, it was used in expressions about relationships such as '*amore per la patria*', '*fedeltà alla patria*', and '*tradimento della patria*' ('love for', 'loyalty to', and 'betrayal of the *patria*'), and was now, unlike before, structurally and permanently linked to the term '*nazione*'.¹⁸ Whereas in the previous period '*patria*' had indiscriminately referred to any governmental system that was ruled by fair laws, it now referred to one particular constitutional framework: that of a republic endowed with representative institutions. Thus, as Erasmo Leso has put it, "*patriottismo*" (and "*patriotismo*") no longer referred to a general "love for the *patria*", but to a specific "love for the democratic and republican *patria*", in other words the embodiment of the patriots' principles and political attitudes and orientation'.¹⁹

For the most part, these patriots were young intellectuals, journalists, writers, lawyers, doctors, or former priests, who had been following the events of the French Revolution with enthusiasm prior to 1796. In the early 1790s some of them had tried to organize pro-Jacobin societies, or had even hatched plots, and had therefore been forced into exile in Paris, or in Nice or Oneglia, territories of the Kingdom of Sardinia occupied by the French army between 1792 and 1794; there, they had been able to work on plans to transform the Italian peninsula's geopolitical arrangements, while also developing the idea of French military intervention in the Po valley.²⁰ When France's Armée d'Italie was on the move, they had been among the first to accompany it and to take part in the affairs of the first two 'free republics', the Cispadane and the Cisalpine, and then to become involved in the others, down to the Parthenopean Republic in Naples.

They were the most active in introducing the new vocabulary of French derivation into the political discourse of the republics of 1796–99; at the centre of this new vocabulary, the keywords '*nazione*' and '*patria*' stood out. Sometimes, these words were still being used with the meanings that really belonged to the earlier period, especially in regard to their territorial connotation. Thus in April 1796, for example, when there was a brief attempt to establish an autonomous Republic of Alba, those in charge, among them Ignazio Bonafous and Giovanni Ranza, addressed the first of three proclamations to the '*nazione piemontese*'.²¹ Similarly, a year later, Carlo Botta's '*Proposizione ai Lombardi di una maniera di governo libero*' ('Proposal to the Lombards of a style of free government') addressed its rhetoric to the '*nazione lombarda*'.²² Ugo Foscolo repeatedly referred to Venice as

his *patria* in the letters he wrote between April and June 1797. Subsequently, after 'the sacrifice of the *patria* [had been] suffered' with the Treaty of Campoformio, in a letter dated 20 November Foscolo asked Containi Costabili, a member of the Cisalpine Republic's ruling body, for employment as a '*scrittore nazionale*' (national writer) or 'keeper of the public library', saying that he had chosen '*per patria la Cisalpina*' (the Cisalpine Republic as *patria*).²³ Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel, in a dramatic article in her newspaper *Monitore Napoletano*, in the issue of 11 May 1799, called on the '*Nazione Napoletana*' to gather its strength and fearlessly resist the attack of the reactionary armies.²⁴ Two years later, in his essay on the revolution in Naples, Vincenzo Cuoco placed his reflections on the nature and needs of the '*nazione Napoletana*' at the centre of his account.²⁵

Nonetheless, in patriotic circles there was ever more frequent discussion of the Italian '*nazione*' and '*patria*', often voiced by the very same Bonafous, Ranza, Botta, Foscolo, and de Fonseca. This was not all: more importantly, on the basis of the nation's rights to sovereignty people were starting to formulate plans for the development of a unified Italian state. These ideas had already been sketched out in Italian émigré circles in 1793–94, and were reformulated with greater conviction in the spring of 1796, when the Armée d'Italie, now under Napoleon, launched its attack on the Kingdom of Sardinia. With the argument more fully developed, this thinking was put forward again: first in the autumn of 1796, when the governing body of Lombardy, liberated from Austrian rule and perhaps encouraged by Napoleon, announced a competition for essays on the topic 'What sort of free government would best suit Italy?'; and then again in 1799–1800, after the first Restoration, when the pro-unification patriots sought to persuade Napoleon to launch a military campaign for liberation of the whole peninsula.²⁶

A decisive part in fostering greater debate about a potential unified Italian state was played by Filippo Buonarroti.²⁷ When France's Directory started to plan military action against the Kingdom of Savoy and Austrian Lombardy, in early 1796, it intensified its contact with the Italians resident in Nice and Oneglia in order to encourage them to organize acts of insurrection that would help the French army in its advance. Buonarroti acted as the principal mediator between the Directory and Italian exiles in Nice, and was in contact with Antoine Christophe Saliceti, the commissar with the Armée d'Italie, from 30 January 1796. On 4 February, five days after Saliceti's appointment, Buonarroti and Guglielmo Cerise, another patriot in exile, let the other Italians in Nice know that they had had an interview with the new commissar and had found him favourable towards the 'liberty of Italy'. They then outlined the way forward:

We showed [Saliceti] the letter from Bonafous; we assumed responsibility for telling you to hold yourselves in readiness, [...] and to electrify, stir up, and encourage the Patriots who may be in Turin or elsewhere in Piedmont and Italy. As for the means to employ, you will reach agreement in Nice with Saliceti, who will be leaving in a week at the latest. [...] Yes, we cannot wait for the happy moment to arrive when we will see our *patria* free!

And, especially, that among Patriots the trifling distinctions of being born in Naples, Milan, or Turin should disappear.

We are all of one same country and one same *patria*. Italians are all brothers. As you know, these childish distinctions put a thousand obstacles in the way of our common purpose. Italians must all reunite, simply make common cause, and consult with each other to determine the most effective way forward.²⁸

Buonarroti and Cerise concluded their letter by urging that as much as possible should be done to provoke a revolt in Piedmont and to form the nucleus of a provisional government before the French army arrived, in particular to avoid the country having to undergo a period of military rule. Not long after, on 27 March, Buonarroti was instructed by Delacroix, France's Minister for Foreign Affairs, to go to Italy in person in order to coordinate action by the Piedmontese patriots with the military operations of the Armée d'Italie. His departure was delayed, because on 30 March he joined the *Comité insurrecteur* of the Babouvist group in Paris; however, he did not abandon the Italian venture, now placing this within the general framework of the Babouvist insurrection. During this phase, Buonarroti seems to have developed an increasingly strong belief that united action by Italian patriots, which he had been encouraging since February, should be followed by the establishment of an Italian democratic republic with a unified structure. This evolution of Buonarroti's thinking can be seen in two letters to Delacroix, dated 18 and 24 April, in which he complained about Bonaparte's plans, as indicated to Italian patriots in Nice, for military rule to be imposed on the territories as they were occupied in turn. In the letter of 24 April, signed by Celentani, Muzio, and Cerise as well as Buonarroti, the protest was developed:

1. The people cannot accept any form of government if it is not presented to them by some authority that they have appointed: to wish to hinder the formation of this authority [...] is therefore to go against Italian liberty, to treat Italy as a vanquished and subordinate country, and to perpetuate its slavery, which is contrary to the intentions displayed by the French government.
2. If an authority of the people does not steer public opinion, does not take the revolutionary initiative throughout Italy, and does not reconcile the interests of the people with those of the army, it will inevitably follow that the oppression and upheaval of military rule will alienate the people from the French, and will cause the greatest ills [...].

These consequences would be so terrible, so contrary to Italian liberty, and so much the opposite of the friendly approach that you have shown to Italian patriots, that we are compelled to renew our most heartfelt requests that the government should give explicit orders to its generals and agents to encourage with all their power, the moment that they enter Piedmont, peaceful meetings of the people and the rapid establishment of popular authorities, and of *one single centre of Italian national government*.

If the army supports their action, the patriots propose to call the people together on each new advance the army makes and to have them appoint their local authorities, chiefs of the national guard, and representatives charged with forming a *national congress* at the point when they are in sufficient number, and with giving the Italian people their liberty, and a constitution.²⁹

This document provides evidence of a fundamental change of register in relation to the letter of 4 February, which had simply talked in general terms about united action among Italian patriots. Now, however, a path was more explicitly sketched out towards a national congress with the capacity to develop a constitution for the Italian state.

On 10 May 1796, Buonarroti disappeared from the scene for many years as a result of his arrest for taking part in the 'Conspiracy of Equals'. However, his plans were not jettisoned and were taken up again many times in the debate during the *triennio*, and then between the first Restoration and Napoleon's victory at Marengo. This position was taken by those who advocated the establishment of an Italian republic, and particularly drew on three general arguments of a military or political and constitutional nature. A state with a territory as extensive and a population as large as the potential Italian republic, it was said, would be better able to resist the pressures of the neighbouring powers, thus eliminating the weakness that had for centuries undermined the many different configurations of states that had existed alongside each other in the Italian peninsula. Moreover, this type of solution could offer diplomatic advantages to France, which would be separated from its enemy Austria by a powerful sister republic. Finally, the creation of an Italian republic would permit a more radical elimination of the governing bodies, classes, and authorities of the old states, which would be much harder to achieve if the boundaries between their state systems were retained.³⁰

These three arguments were not always employed at the same time; the preference for any specific approach expressed by any particular patriot who favoured the establishment of a unified republic depended on the degree of their political radicalism. These differences of position are very important for a detailed analysis of the course of political debate in the period 1796–1800, and have already been well covered by an impressive historiographical output. My task here is to draw attention to another aspect of this debate.

The logical premise that underwrote all these proposals was the existence of an Italian nation.³¹ As the unique custodian of sovereignty, this had the right to find its recognition in a republic whose institutional arrangements it would be able to choose. While the Piedmontese, Lombard, Venetian, and Tuscan *nazioni* were all still talked of during this period, for many patriots the Italian nation was displacing them as the political community of reference; they must, therefore, have understood what the features of this nation were, and must have believed that it was a more compelling point of reference than any other.

In the debate during the *triennio giacobino*, the existence of a 'spirit of the Italian nation' was acknowledged, reprising themes that had already been present in eighteenth-century discourse.³² It was argued that its principal features were a common historical descent from 'romanità' (Roman-ness), shared blood, a shared religion, the same customs, the same language, and a particular and logically delimited geographical location. All these elements, despite their compelling and rich echoes and implications, were still just fleeting allusions. In important works, whose authors included Matteo Galdi (*Necessità di stabilire una Repubblica in Italia*), Melchiorre Gioia (*Dissertazione sul problema dell'Amministrazione generale della Lombardia: quale dei Governi liberi meglio convenga alla felicità dell'Italia*), Enrico Michele L'Aurora (*All'Italia nelle tenebre l'Aurora porta la luce*), Girolamo Bocalosi (*Dell'educazione democratica da darsi al popolo italiano*), and Ugo Foscolo (*Istruzioni politico-morali*), the theme of the nation's characteristics was rapidly dealt with in a few pages, if not in just a few lines.³³ Within the organization of these texts, reflections on the *nazione* were both quantitatively and qualitatively marginal; they were completely overshadowed by discussions that were thought more important, such as debates over the centralized or federal nature of the future Italian republic, the constitutional model to be adopted, and the economic and social reforms to be introduced.³⁴ Seemingly, the patriots operated in the belief that the Italian case was just a reflection of the French experience. According to Franco Venturi, men like Buonarroti, Serra, Ranza, Cerise, Pellisseri, Celentani, and Galdi 'put the "grande nation" in front of the mirror, and sometimes even seemed to mimic the French, referring to an Italy that was no longer heterogeneous, divided, complex, and puzzling, but was instead made, as they wished it to be, in the image and resemblance of the French republic, one and indivisible'.³⁵ The derivative nature of this operation was evident not only from conceptual and linguistic perspectives, but also in regard to the symbols employed. Italy came to be represented with the same iconographic characteristics as France, 'Liberty', or 'Democracy': as a woman, generally with one or both breasts exposed and therefore ready to provide nourishment to her children, and in the act of freeing herself from the symbols of slavery (chains, sceptres, and crowns) and acquiring the tools of her regeneration (the Phrygian cap and the licitor's fasces). One beautiful Venetian image, dating from the period of the provisional municipality (May–October 1797), offers a very clear demonstration of the 'mirroring' mechanism referred to by Venturi: Napoleon presents Italy – who is finally able to remove her blindfold and tread on the instruments of her oppression – to Democracy (possibly also France), intended to be the model for her regeneration and new life. Italy was thus not much more than a weak reflection, and the proliferation of replications of the original iconographic model (France–Liberty, Figure 1) helped to emphasize the sense of an unclear identity profile; much the same image one moment represented Italy as a whole, and the next a more specific territorial entity such as the Piedmontese '*Nazione*', Neapolitan Republic, Roman Republic (Figure 2), other republics, or individual municipalities within them.

In the end, this sort of mimetic activity rendered the meaning of the term '*nazione*' markedly uncertain. These uncertainties were further compounded by the