

P. Carusi (ed), *La capitale della nazione. Roma e la sua provincia nella crisi del sistema liberale*, Viella, Rome, 2011.

by **Francesco Dandolo**

Rome's destiny is closely interwoven with the development of the Italian state. So much so that it had already become a myth during the Risorgimento, capable of arousing energy and passion among Italy's "founding fathers". This myth, however, risked being shattered when the epic period came to an end with the breach of Porta Pia, and the city's backwardness – the very opposite of the splendour of the imperial era – had to be reckoned with. There was no widespread national consciousness that could recognize Rome as the new kingdom's capital. This greatly limited the energy available for the *Urbe*. Consequently there was a period of uncertainty, which lasted some time, fostered by the politicians' failure to draw up a proper plan in building the secular capital. This phase continued for several decades, and is marked by the Liberals' supremacy.

The impact of World War I brought about a change: in his Preface to this book, Paolo Carusi points out that mass mobilization in the name of the country's symbols resulted in Rome no longer being on the margin, but becoming the real nerve centre of Italian life. The war gave the Eternal City a new, more striking dimension, which did not come to an end when the war was over, but which reached its peak during the Fascist era. As Adriano Roccucci wrote in a phrase, quoted by Carusi, the control of Rome "ensured the greatest influence over the key sectors of the state" (p. 15). The protagonists of this new period were the Nationalists and the Fascists, who aimed to defend their homeland within which Rome was called to play a role that cannot be disregarded.

In the book those crucial years are the subject of systematic, multi-disciplinary research on *Roma e la sua provincia*, coordinated by Mario Belardinelli and based at Roma Tre University, a project that in the past has already given rise to two other volumes¹. And in fact the methodological approach is wide-ranging: the division into sections (*L'ambiente e il territorio*, *Il quadro amministrativo e le forze politiche*, *Le forze economiche e sociali*) shows clearly the authors' aim: they wanted to provide a complex, well-constructed overall picture of the processes that evolved between World War I and the rise of Fascism. In this review, we can mention but a few of the many issues dealt with in the book, which contains a wealth of research and represents an almost inevitable point of reference for later research on twentieth-century Rome.

In the first place, as is seen in Lidia Piccioni's paper, the province of Rome corresponded to the Latium region, a territory of some size whose already marked differences tended to become even more apparent between Unification and World War I. Rome,

of course, was the hub, and, like other Italian cities, witnessed feverish activity in the building sector in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This was the period when the first signs of discontinuity with pre-Unification Rome were seen: in Roberto Cassetti's wide-ranging paper, it was the time when "the city's image changed completely" (p.64) with the construction of new roads and an urban structure which differentiated between workplaces and residential areas, culminating in the Monumentalism period of the 1920s, that aimed to display the grandiose remains of the ancient city and consequently demolished the medieval fabric. In contrast to this project of reviving the *Urbe*'s imperial image, the condition of the countryside around Rome is the subject of Lidia Moretti's paper which shows how age-old inactivity came to an end with the advent of Fascism. The dynamism seen in that area, "at first slow and fragmented, and then increasingly rapid and widespread" (p.86-87), encouraged the process of dividing estates into small plots, and was rudimentary compared to much more wide-ranging projects, leading to the idea of land reclamation that appeared at a later stage. Carla Masetti's paper is in line with this picture: she has made a careful study of the cartography between the end of the eighteenth century and the early 1920s, highlighting the changes to the land, which were accelerated when the operations of the Società Bonifiche Pontine were planned and began to be carried out.

The section entitled *Il quadro amministrativo e le forze politiche* is of particular interest. Mario Belardinelli's wide-ranging and well argued paper shows how the new phase of economic planning that began during World War I and its aftermath was accompanied by the emergence of a political coalition of Liberals, Catholics and Nationalists that aimed to manage the city's modernization. In March 1918, the *Commissione Reale per il Risorgimento economico di Roma* (Royal Commission for Rome's Economic Recovery) was set up. This was followed by a series of measures to give the capital prestige. It was a busy period which, with the advent of Mussolini, led to the institution of the *Governatorato*, and the substantial reorganization of Rome's project for production, which Mussolini resumed a few years later from the city-planning point of view.

Vincenzo Pacifici's paper is on the gradual broadening of parliamentary representation and the various stands taken, whereas Paolo Carusi concentrates on the Radicals and the Roman Republicans during the decline of the "democratic political area" (1913-1921). In particular, Carusi shows that the 1913 election was

a turning point, transforming Rome's political geography and leading to the democratic parties taking on a subordinate role, both in the political arena and in electoral dynamics" (p. 175). The well-documented analysis retraces the course of the two parties in relation to general political alliances over a period of eight years, showing the links with Freemasonry, which arose straight after the war in answer to the advance of the mass parties. Paolo Mattera shifts the focus to the proletarian and socialist world, which, following the economic difficulties caused by the war, gave vent to its malaise with unrest and strikes that culminated in the Socialist Party's success in the election of November 1919. However, as in other cities, "a common front of middle-class people was soon formed, people who, united by the fear of revolution and by anti-Socialist loathing, appeared ready to play a greater part in the press campaigns, which vociferously requested a more resolute repression" (p.211). And, in fact, this was the beginning of the decline of the Italian Socialist Party. At the same time – as emerges from Tommaso Baris' paper – the bourgeois' support of Fascism was not at all to be taken for granted, while "the working classes were openly hostile" (p. 225). The march on Rome gave rise to vastly different vicissitudes, which involved the asserting of the "Roman spirit" as Fascism's principal myth and the subsequent institution of the *Governatorato* in Rome, counterbalanced by the creation of the provinces of Frosinone, Rieti and Viterbo. These were operations that aimed to foster agreement among the different social classes, in that they reflected demands that had been expressed at a local level for some time. Antonio Scornajenghi's paper focuses on the *Partito Popolare* (Popular Party), which was destined to play an important part in Rome right from the start. In fact it became the party with the most votes at the 1919 election, although it went on to lose a great number of votes in the following local elections in 1921. All in all, it was a party that struggled to find its position, so much so that it was judged to be against the system and Scornajenghi wonders whether a more flexible attitude, aiming to encourage alliances, would have weakened the explosive force of the Fascists and the Nationalists. This is an interesting question, even though the attitude of the members of the Popular Party can be understood in the light of the party's very recent origins and of the fundamental inexperience of its leaders.

The last section, entitled *Le forze economiche e sociali*, begins with a paper by Giacomina Nenci on the situation of the peasants in the province of Rome. A composite world emerges, anchored to two basic

issues: collective rights and the need for land reform. Various attempts at land reform had been made after World War I, including the Visocchi Decree, mostly in the province of Rome. Rita D'Errico's paper is closely connected with these matters: it examines the legislation of 1921-22 on the land reclamation projects for the countryside around Rome. It is a sharp analysis, the result of in-depth research, which shows the function of rural centres, a type of settlement instituted in 1919 with the Riccio Decree. The situation was greatly changed with the law of 1921 when the government was made responsible for their creation. The rural centres epitomized the basic elements of total land reclamation, and the countryside around Rome was chosen as the testing ground before tackling the issue nationwide. Daniela Rossini's paper focuses on the conference of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, which was held in Rome in May 1923. Despite the repressive atmosphere of those years, for many Italian feminists the conference was an important occasion, where motions which had gradually taken shape in the previous years – and which were key issues for women's status – could converge. Lastly, Michele Manzo writes about the Catholic Rome of Benedict XV, whose reign was heavily marked by the events of the war. And, in fact, the message which emerges from his teaching is unambiguous: "In contrast to a Catholic world fascinated by Nationalist propaganda" – notes Manzi – "he persists in spreading pacifist ideas which are characteristic of the Gospel" (p. 325). This was the background to the letter *Al tremendo conflitto*, while Benedict XV intensified his strategy to win over the city of Rome, giving the imprint of a clearer Catholic vocation.

In conclusion, this book shows how useful a multi-disciplinary route is for the understanding of a historical process which, in the case of Rome, is taken for granted. And in an era of forced simplifications and facile schematizations, which unfortunately are to be found even in historical research, the book edited by Carusi is excellent and contains a wealth of data, contributing to a better understanding of Rome's part in a key period of Italian twentieth-century history.

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1. P. Carusi, (ed.), *Roma in transizione. Ceti popolari, lavoro, territorio nella prima età giolittiana*, (Viella, Rome 2006); P. Carusi, M. Belardinelli (eds.), *Roma e la sua provincia (1904-1914). Poteri centrali, rappresentanze locali e problemi del territorio*, (Croma, Rome 2008).