Nations Divided

AMERICA, ITALY, AND THE SOUTHERN QUESTION

Don H. Doyle
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America, Italy, and the Southern Question

DON H. DOYLE

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On October 19 and 20, 2000, Georgia Southern University celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Jack N. and Addie D. Averitt Lecture Series. The speaker was Don H. Doyle, who holds the Nelson Tyrone Jr. Chair in History at Vanderbilt University. He approached the series’ theme, “Regions and Identities,” from an international perspective and cast new light on the role of regionalism, along with other factors, in national unification and civil war. How can people overcome fundamental differences such as region, race, ethnicity, religion, and language to form one nation? What happens when political unity disintegrates and parochial loyalties pull a nation apart? These are the questions that Professor Doyle explored in his lectures and that he examines in greater depth in the essays in this volume.

Doyle’s comparison of the United States and Italy demonstrates that nationalism is a powerful agent that shapes identity and inspires individuals to sacrifice their own interests—and sometimes their lives—for a common cause. Nationalism, he argues, is not a vague abstraction created and propagated by political and cultural elites. It is, instead, a dynamic force that draws its meaning and vigor from the ideas and actions of ordinary citizens. Doyle delineates nationalism as it is incorporated into popular culture and practiced in daily life. Civilians and soldiers who participated in pageants and parades; townspeople who raised money to build monuments and memorials; teachers who passed patriotic lore and legend on to their students—all had a hand in constructing na-
tional identity. If nationalism is a civil religion, as some scholars have argued, Doyle establishes that it is characterized by a pattern of call and response rather than by liturgical commandments issued from on high.

National solidarity is often forged through vilification of a real or imagined enemy and, as Doyle’s analysis of the “southern question” in the United States and Italy shows, sometimes that enemy can come from within. Regionalism—“southernness”—became the counterweight by which national values were measured. For northerners in both countries, southerners served as foils for models of civic virtue, rebels who refused to conform to national ideals. Southern Italians and white southerners in the United States resented attempts to obliterate their customs and institutions in the name of nationalism. In both places, the North and its vision of national unity prevailed, but regionalism persisted as southerners created their own myths of nations lost.

Despite the differences between the historical experiences of the United States and Italy, these essays reveal that the two nations—and the two Souths that have so often been at odds with their northern compatriots—share much in common. The comparison provides some useful lessons. Americans bewildered by civil wars in countries around the globe would do well to remember the bitter strife in their own history. At the same time, as Doyle eloquently argues, the American struggle to build and sustain a heterogeneous nation “may offer some insights, even hope, for a world of nations undergoing turmoil brought about by migration, ethnic conflict, and separatist rebellion.”

Many people have contributed to the success of the Averitt Lecture Series. Past and present administrators at Georgia Southern, including President Bruce Grube, Provost Vaughn Vandegrift, Interim Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences Jeffrey
Buller, and History Department Chair Jerome O. Steffen, have recognized the importance of the series to the university and the community. Wesley Sumner of the public relations office assisted with publicity, and graduate students from the History Department served as ushers during the lectures. Malcolm Call and Alison Waldenberg of the University of Georgia Press have made the publication process a pleasure and have offered valuable advice as well. Alan C. Downs, co-chair of the History Department’s Averitt Lecture Series Committee, and committee members Ruth A. Thompson and Jeffrey R. Young cheerfully fulfilled their responsibilities. History Department secretaries Patricia Lanier and Lisa Sapp deserve special thanks for handling countless details with their customary serenity, efficiency, and patience.

The lecture series is made possible by a gift from Jack N. and Addie D. Averitt. Professor Doyle’s topic was of particular interest to Mrs. Averitt, who maintained a lifelong commitment to helping people understand and overcome the differences that spawn hatred among individuals and war among nations. Unfortunately, for the first time since the series was inaugurated in 1990, she was unable to accompany Dr. Averitt to the lectures. Two months later, on December 19, 2000, she passed away. A native of Tennessee, Mrs. Averitt was a graduate of Peabody College in Nashville. She moved to Statesboro in 1946 to accept a position as reference librarian at Georgia Teachers’ College, now Georgia Southern University. From that time onward she played an active role in academic and civic life on campus, in the community, and in the region. She promoted the cultural enrichment of students, faculty, and local residents, and fostered understanding among people of diverse backgrounds. Long before globalism became a watchword in higher education, Rotary International honored her for “her selfless work expanding human horizons to encompass the globe.” She became the first woman to receive the organization’s Distinguished Service Award.
Possessing dignity, grace, and a generous spirit, she had the unerr- ing ability to put everyone she met at ease. Her death was a great loss to her family, her friends, and the community, but her memory and the values she cherished will endure in the lecture series that bears her name.

Anastatia Sims
Co-chair, Averitt Lecture Series Committee
This book deals with the two most important features of American history: the creation of a new nation and the secessionist rebellion that tore it apart. The American Revolution and the American Civil War define one nation's special history, but they also have meaning to the world of nations that has taken form since the late eighteenth century. This book invites readers to look at America’s experience in the broader context of that international world and see it as one of many stories about building nations that contain diverse peoples and interests.

One of the more exciting areas of scholarly inquiries in recent years has been the study of nationalism, particularly its historical origins. It is a subject that demands conversation across academic and political frontiers and bears on the most salient issues of our present time as well as our past. But in reading the theoretical and case study literature on nationalism I was struck by how the United States, and the Americas in general, have been ignored in this discussion, even when American scholars have been major contributors to it. In two collections of essays designed to introduce readers to the scholarship on nationalism (Becoming National: A Reader, edited by Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny [1996], and Nationalism, edited by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith [1994]), not one of the dozens of articles and book excerpts focuses on the United States and only a few even mention it. Except for one piece on Latin America, it would seem the entire Western Hemisphere has been left out of the current discussion of nationalism.
This book is a modest effort toward correcting this omission and, I hope, a stimulus to others. The United States is significant not only because it was the “first new nation” but also because it serves as a prime example of “civic nationalism.” Whereas ethnic nationalism rests on the idea of common descent, religion, language, or other deeply rooted primordial traits, civic nationalism is a political concept that defines the nation as a common government, a state that may encompass a variety of ethnic and cultural groups. It is a nationalism based on common belief, not blood.

One essential challenge to American nationhood has been the problem of defining a community out of a remarkable diversity of immigrants, religions, and cultures. Another has been its regional diversity, most conspicuously the conflicted relationship between the South and the rest of the nation, which resulted in a separatist rebellion, a bloody Civil War, a frustrated Reconstruction, and a legacy of tension. The American experience of cultural diversity and regional conflict, I believe, is increasingly relevant to many nations facing massive migration from without and regional conflict from within. How nations define themselves and their membership is of supreme importance to our ability to live together, to imagine a community capable of embracing diverse citizens.

Instead of casting the American example into an amorphous transnational study, I have chosen instead to begin working within a more manageable framework that compares the United States with one European counterpart, Italy. This focus allows us to see the parallel and contrasting experiences of two nations that, despite obvious differences, shared common problems in defining nationhood. The making of Italy, like that of the United States, involved the amalgamation of many diverse cultural groups. Also like the United States, Italy confronted a South (an ill-defined area the Italians call the Mezzogiorno) that seemed at odds with the ideals of the new nation, at least as those ideals came to be defined by northerners.
This book is based on lectures I gave at Georgia Southern University in October 2000, in the Jack N. and Addie D. Averitt Lecture Series. I am very grateful to the Averitts for their generous support of this event. Dr. Jack N. Averitt attended the lectures and hosted a wonderful dinner for me during my visit. Mrs. Averitt was ill at that time, and I was saddened to learn later of her death. Thanks also to the Department of History at Georgia Southern and its Averitt Lectures committee—Alan Downs, Anastatia Sims, Ruth A. Thompson, and Jeffrey R. Young—for inviting me. I am especially grateful to Anastatia Sims for her wonderful hospitality during our tour of Statesboro and Savannah.

Most of the research and writing took place during a sabbatical year in 1999–2000. I feel very fortunate to be at a university that recognizes the importance of research and supports it generously. Thanks to Vanderbilt University’s College of Arts and Sciences for granting me leave and to the University Research Council for a travel grant. During the fall of 1999 I enjoyed affiliation with the Institute for Historical Research in London. While there I attended the seminar in Modern Italian History and enjoyed stimulating conversations with Lucy Riall, John Dickie, Rick Halpern, and many others. I found in the new British Library a wealth of published materials on the history of Italy and a delightful place to work. During the spring of 2000 I enjoyed a pleasant and fruitful month of study at the American Academy in Rome, where I had begun my love affair with Italy some nine years earlier. Later that spring I was a fellow at the Liguria Study Center for the Arts and Humanities in Bogliasco, Italy. Surrounded by the beauty of the Italian Riviera, a group of fascinating fellows, and many good friends in Genoa, I managed nonetheless to make my Bogliasco stay extraordinarily fruitful. I am very grateful to the staff of the center and to the Bogliasco Foundation for making that possible.

Many others generously expedited my journey into the field of Italian history. Marta Petruvesic has been of extraordinary help to
me from the outset. Alberto Banti shared his bibliography and his wisdom. The Italian Fulbright Commission sponsored two memorable experiences as a Fulbright Professor in Rome and Genoa. I am especially grateful to Larry Gray and Luigi Filadoro of the commission, and to the U.S. Information Agency in Rome for their support of an international conference held in Naples in June 1997, “The Southern Question: Nationalism and Regionalism in Italy and America.” Franco Benigno, Director of I.M.E.S. (Istituto Meridionale di Storia e Scienze Sociali), the leading force for southern studies in Italy, cosponsored the event. It was the stimulating exchange that took place at the conference that started me contemplating the present book. I am grateful to all those who participated in that event and especially to all those I have failed to name who aided me in my struggle to better understand the history of these two nations.

Sue Marasco, Peter Kruyla, Adrienne Lerner, Lee Ann Reynolds, and Henry Davenport, students in my graduate seminar on nationalism, offered helpful comments on an earlier draft of this book. Ed Harcourt cast his keen eye over an earlier version of this manuscript and saved me from numerous errors. Thanks to Lucy Riall, who made several useful suggestions. I am grateful to Alison Waldenberg of the University of Georgia Press for all she has done to bring this book to life. The copyeditor, Trudie Calvert, straightened out my untidy writing with unusual skill. With great sadness I learned later that she did her work from a hospice; it was one of her last completed jobs.

Dozens of people who participate in the discussion groups on H-Net dealing with Italian and United States history have taken time to answer my queries. I am especially grateful to those in Italian history who very kindly helped a novice understand some of the intricacies of their field. The internet nation is an imagined community whose members I may never know except through cyberspace, but it has been a community of very real benefit to me in my research and writing.
This book is dedicated to Marjorie Spruill, who came into my life fortuitously just as I was finishing the last revisions. She shares with me a love of the past and hope for the future—the essence of new unions both imagined and real.
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