

Guido Pescosolido, *La questione meridionale in breve. Centocinquant'anni di storia*, Donzelli, Rome, 2017, pp. 168.

The so called “Southern Question” has played a significant role in Italian history since national unification in 1861. It refers to an intricate set of problems posed by the existence within the country of a large area, roughly corresponding to the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which had – and still has – a weaker economy and a lower level of development in crucial aspects of social and civil life than the North of Italy. The expression “Southern Question” first began to be used in the historiographical and public debate during the 1870s, when a group of intellectuals from both central and southern Italy – the so-called *Meridionalisti* – began inquiring into the social and economic conditions of the *Mezzogiorno* and denounced the backwardness of the southern provinces that had been annexed by the nascent Kingdom of Italy. However, the Italian government was made forcibly aware of the troubles caused by the inclusion of the economic and social system of the South within the new-born State immediately in 1861, with the rise of brigandage.

This book by Guido Pescosolido, professor of Modern History at the Sapienza University of Rome, offers an in-depth synthesis of the “Southern Question.” It is based on substantial statistical documentation and offers a brilliant account of the thought and works of the most important scholars who expressed their ideas on this essential theme in the political and economic analysis of Italian capitalism and sketched out possible solutions. The author has devoted a long and fruitful academic career to this issue. He provides a sound, critical analysis of all those forms of revisionism that have sought to water down the differences between North and South, that have recently created a ridiculous neo-Bourbon mythology, that have considered the Southern Question obsolete, or even denied that it ever existed.

In clearly explaining the connections and the disconnects between the economic and the civic development of Italy within the international

community, Pescosolido refers to the “Question” as not only a “Southern” or even solely an “Italian” but a “European” issue. And he contends that cultural studies over the past few decades have demonstrated that the Question was rooted in trends and ideas that antedated 1861, even though the decisive impulse in its emergence was imparted by Italian national unification.

This broader, longer-term perspective helps to highlight the various political and emotional manipulations that have borne on the Southern Question. According to the deep-rooted stereotype created by the perceived difference between North and South, the latter was barbarous, backward, retrograde, virtually a different country, an uncivilized land to be colonized. But Pescosolido’s original long-term point of view also helps explain the complex dynamics of the Italian market and society, its integrity and its position within the larger European scenario, which was already decisive in the nineteenth century. This enables us to really see how in fact the South was an integral part of the capitalist development of Italy, how it fuelled transfers of financial resources, and the great significance of southern markets for the inception and the consolidation of northern industrialization, at least up until the Second World War.

A second of the volume’s strong points is that it always qualifies the problems, never stopping at mere quantitative data, an error that scholars make more commonly than one might imagine. The author does not neglect the considerable, often stunning progress that the South has recorded in a century and a half of history, in terms of income, infrastructure, quality of life, transformation of the economic and social structure of the countryside, urbanization, education, and welfare state. It thus brings to light the unexpressed potential of the much-reviled extraordinary intervention of the Southern Italy Development Fund (*Cassa del Mezzogiorno*), which had the potential to totally close the gap between the northern and southern regions. Pescosolido emphasizes that in the course of Italy’s “economic miracle” not only the North but all of Italy was finally transformed into a true industrial society. This put the

country in an unrepeatable situation of economic impetus, not artificially stimulated by public deficits, inflation or devaluation. However, politicians and the ruling classes failed to capitalize on the funds and the resources available in this most favourable circumstance, and even civil society proved to be incapable of overcoming stagnation and decadence. For the first time since 1861, between 1957 and 1974 there was significant economic convergence of the southern economy with the national average; from a gap of 53% in 1951 to 34%, thanks to mass internal migration and rapidly rising productivity. Local development and external industrialization displayed a powerful capacity to feed on one another, triggering a virtuous circle that projected its effects from the economy to the society. At the turn of the 1970s the South could be considered as an industrial system in course of consolidation, with many fragilities and enormous inefficiencies, to be sure, but with a clearly identified basis of vocations and potential. What was required, then, was to intensify and optimize the use of resources through rigorous incomes policy and a farsighted program to definitively resolve the "Question". Instead, the major trade unions and political forces were responsible for wage policies and an unwise use of public resources that, far from solving the problems and differences, increased unproductive expenditure and the public debt and turned public southern development spending into a kind of nature preserve of corruption.

Since the 1970s the situation has only worsened. The wounds that the financial crisis has inflicted on the Italian economy since 2008 are still profound. Looking at the present, Pescosolido draws inspiration from his thorough historical research on the Southern Question and suggests possible solutions. He explains how essential it is for Italy to carry out substantial institutional reforms at national and regional level, from the justice system to law and order, from education to health care, and to re-launch a bold public intervention to revive the South's capacity for supplying goods and services not solely through the State as entrepreneur but also thanks to private industry operating in a favourable environment.

BOOK REVIEWS

This book gives a precise account of the missed opportunities and failures of national policy to eliminate or at least attenuate the disparities between North and South and offers concrete suggestions on how a realistic approach to the Southern Question could help Italy to face the challenges in the global market which lie ahead.

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