

## Book Reviews

**Manfredi Alberti**, *Senza lavoro. La disoccupazione in Italia dall'Unità a oggi*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2016, pp. 226.

Rising unemployment has been a pressing policy issue in Italy ever since the effects of the 2007-08 US subprime mortgage crisis spread to Italy's economy and particularly after the European debt crisis erupted in late 2009. Starting in 2007, the official unemployment rate doubled to reach 12 percent in 2014 before slowly declining to about 11 percent in the summer of 2018.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, unemployment still draws a great deal of attention, but in fact it has long been a matter of national concern. National data on unemployment have been published by Italy's National Institute of Statistics (Istat) since 1977, and Istat also provides some estimates of unemployment looking backwards to 1959. However, we have very little quantitative (and qualitative) information on the matter for the years before World War II (Istat, 2011).

Historians and economists alike have long neglected to investigate the evolution of employment over a long time horizon. Manfredi Alberti's book *Senza lavoro. La disoccupazione in Italia dall'Unità a oggi* (2016) takes up the challenge, offering a contribution that is both necessary and relevant within the broader field of Italian economic history.

The book tackles a multitude of questions revolving around the concept of unemployment: How did the very idea and definition of unemployment change over time? How has it been measured statis-

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<sup>1</sup> The figures refer to people older than 15 and come from <http://dati.istat.it/>.

tically? How has unemployment evolved since the unification of Italy? How does it help shape changing political agendas, policy aims and state intervention? Thus, Alberti's study touches on several topics that relate to economic history, the history of statistics and the history of economic thought.

Alberti's main argument is that today's unemployment is not new in the sweep of Italy's long-term growth, for it is embedded in the nature of Italy's capitalist economy. Nevertheless, the author maintains, it would be wrong to see unemployment as a natural phenomenon: a variety of forces – most importantly state intervention and technological progress – can affect it significantly.

Every section of the book treats these themes. The organization of the chapters is chronological and follows the periodization widely adopted by Italian economic historians: the Liberal Age, from national unification up to the year preceding Italy's intervention in the Great War (1861-1914); the Great War, interwar years and World War II (1915-1945); and the long post-war period extending from the creation of the Italian Republic to the present day.

Unemployment was certainly not a central issue on the national agenda after unification. This began to change when economic hardship, emigration and the rise of socialist movements brought the issue to the fore during the 1890s. These developments led to important reforms concerning employment, including child labour laws and the creation of a state agency providing benefits to injured workers. The attention paid to unemployment – or underemployment, given the very different functioning of the labour market of the day – also fostered more systematic study of its magnitude, in Italy and elsewhere. Indeed, apart from telling a story of economic, social and political events affecting unemployment, Alberti, relying on his expertise in the history of statistics, gives us a vivid picture of the challenges that quantification of the phenomenon entailed.

Studies of unemployment and the public discourse surrounding its

trend became more common after the Great War, following the government's extensive involvement in the economy. When, building on social unrest and political instability, the Fascists seized power, they limited workers' rights: among the measures that the regime introduced was a ban on strikes by unauthorized (non-Fascist) unions. At the same time, the government started to "hide" unemployment and its traces in official statistics. For example, new legislation prohibited internal migration to major cities, to avert the concentration of jobless workers, thus making them less "visible" to the public. Italy's colonial effort in Africa must be seen through the same lens, i.e. as an attempt to push unemployed people out of Italy's economy (and statistics).

After World War II, with the founding of the Republic, workers' rights became central to the political debate and full employment came to be one of the main goals of economic policy. Despite the expansion of economic planning and state intervention in the economy and the rapid growth of per capita GDP (more than 5 percent per annum in real terms) during the 1950s and 1960s, strikes increased and labour unions grew significantly, as the life of many workers (especially women) was still plagued by job instability, lack of protection and low wages. The strength of the labour movement led Parliament in 1970 to enact the Statute of Labour Rights (Law 300/1970), a fundamental step towards implementing the provisions of the Italian Constitution concerning the "right to work," which reinforced the bargaining power of workers through national unions.

In his concluding pages, Alberti criticizes current economic policy measures that reduce workers' rights. In light of the historical evidence, he argues, the regulations and legislation governing the labour market have little effect on unemployment compared with economic factors. Alberti suggests that policy action in other fields, such as public (and private) investment in technology and education and training, may be more effective in addressing unemployment. Despite this, innovation and schooling have received scant attention in Italy in the last 30 years,

while policy has pushed reforms designed to increase labour market flexibility and erode workers' bargaining power.

Alberti's work is impressive for its scope and depth, and for its ability to elaborate a common framework encompassing policy-making, political history, the history of ideas and statistics, and the long-term evolution of unemployment. Still, some aspects of the book have room for improvement.

The main criticism is that the book lacks a connecting thread to link the various sub-themes that crop up in the different chapters. Although Alberti promises at the beginning that theory and the history of technology will be two important beacons throughout the book, they are not given sufficient prominence alongside his excellent discussion of historical evidence and facts. A more systematic incorporation of different economic theories, as well as of the global and national history of technology and of the history of Italian firms (Colli and Vasta, 2010; Nuvolari and Vasta, 2015; Colli and Rinaldi, 2017), would have done a lot to help readers make sense of the impressive amount of evidence presented throughout the book. The absence of a concluding chapter makes this even more palpable.

A promising link between Alberti's book and Italian economic history is the issue of human capital and schooling (as the author himself acknowledges), an issue that has attracted the attention of economists, policy makers and economic historians because of its complementarity with technological progress (Felice and Vasta, 2015; A'Hearn and Vecchi, 2017). In the future, analysis of the matter could also be enriched and expanded through a comparative perspective. For example, an investigation of countries such as Germany, with more rigid labour markets but lower unemployment today than Italy, would improve our understanding of the relative importance of economic versus political factors. Last but not least, a thematic rather than chronological organization of the book would have allowed more systematic linkage of the different issues, enhancing the long-term perspective adopted by the author and helping readers not to lose the main thread.

Despite these observations, *Senza lavoro* is a solid piece of work, a well-written and appealing historical treatment of a neglected issue that combines case studies, anecdotal evidence and statistics. It is an original contribution that, hopefully, will stimulate further research on the topic.

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