

**V. Torreggiani, *Uniformità, frammentazione e conflitto. Capitalismo e azione collettiva nell'Italia liberale (1861-1914)*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2022, pp. 137.**

The essay traces the evolution of employers' associations in Italy between 1861 and 1914, examining the different strategies adopted to defend the interests of capital, also in the light of development trends in the national and international economy. Within the framework of a wide-ranging analysis, framed by a substantial bibliography on the subject, the book investigates the relations and deepens the ways in which the dialectical tension between the ruling class, entrepreneurs and the working class was managed.

In the context of a general growth of international trade, the adoption of a free-trade orientation had offered new outlets for agricultural production in post-unification Italy. In this scenario, the country's ruling class promoted a growing administrative centralisation, also making use of associative structures capable of guaranteeing effective control over the main productive sectors. It is in this sense that the book identifies uniformity as the essential feature of associationism in the first twenty years following the unification of the country: the State became the promoter of peripheral associative organisations that answered to national guiding bodies and aimed at aggregating the interests of producers and workers in common structures. Examples of this are the establishment of the agrarian committees (*comizi agrari*) in 1866 and the chambers of commerce (*camere di commercio*) in 1862, which refer respectively to the Higher Council of Agriculture and the Council of Industry and Commerce. However, the research emphasises that these State associations did not act in an empty space and places the birth of the first aggregative forms of a private nature around the mid-1860s: in 1863 the *Società agraria di Lombardia* was established, which had come into open conflict with the agrarian committees, thus certifying the reluctance of the local élites to subject themselves to central State control. Similarly, it is shown how in the industrial sector, even before the institution of the chambers of commerce, the *Società di incoraggiamento di arti e mestieri di Milano* had played an essential role in promoting the dissemination of an entrepreneurial culture,

later succeeding in aggregating a large part of the representatives of Lombardy's industry in the *Associazione industriale italiana*, founded in 1878. The essay therefore highlights how in this period the economic agents of the agricultural and industrial world began to see in the associations the natural instrument of aggregation of interests, their representation vis-à-vis the State and the tool for the dissemination of industrial culture. The weak roots of the institutions promoted by governments and the strong autonomy of local producers thus determined the birth of associations capable of acting as spokesperson for the demands of private individuals before the central administration. If between 1861 and 1881 experiences of associationism had mostly arisen with the aim of defending the interests of producers against State initiative, from the 1880s onwards the effects of the agrarian crisis contributed to the fragmentation of employers' interests. Indeed, the book reconstructs the evolution of the forms of representation in the light of the protectionist turn that had characterised most European markets in response to the crisis. The economic depression, as extensively documented in the essay, thus determines an increasing privatisation and sectorization of forms of interest defence. This is the case, for example, in the agrarian world, where the rigidity of land leases generates a bitter conflict between tenants and landlords over the renegotiation of rental terms. The research also highlights the intensification of contrasts at the end of the 19th century between the ruling class and the productive classes: if, on the one hand, the State proposes the creation of a national organisation of agrarian interests with the involvement of wine growers in favour of the free-trade orientation, on the other hand the entrepreneurs, also damaged by the customs war with France, gather in associations that intensify pressure on the government to guarantee greater protection of the Italian market. The progressive closing of the market also became essential in this period for the expanding industrial sectors: as the research points out, a number of important industrial associations were formed in Biella, Milan and Turin in 1877 on the occasion of the renegotiation of trade treaties with France and Switzerland. Overall, the essay thus identifies a direct relationship between the effects of the economic depression and the intensification of the process of aggregation of employers' interests. Even in the context of a general growth in the number of associations, however, it is shown how the crisis led to an overall segmentation of entrepreneurs' demands, fragmenting the front of employers' interests. From the 1890s until the First World War, the conflict between labour and capital intensified and trade unions gained increasing influence. In response to the protests of the working class and agricultural labourers, the business world promoted the birth of new associations

committed to effectively countering the demonstrative actions of the proletariat, thus intensifying solidarity between entrepreneurs and proposing shared strategies to limit losses due to the suspension of production activities. It was in this period, as documented in the essay, that the establishment of common mutual assistance funds for reimbursement of damages caused by strikes, the elaboration of "blacklists" of workers participating in strikes and the use of the lock-out (*serrata*) were proposed. The book also investigates the evolution of the geography of employers' associations: if in the first decades after the Unification of Italy, the birth of federations and societies of entrepreneurs characterised the entire North, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also due to the impetuous industrial development, Turin became the centre of the new aggregative experiences of capital. The Industrial League founded in 1906 assumed a fundamental role in the conflict with the workers' world: in the association's statute there is no reference to the possibility of a peaceful resolution of the dialectic between the entrepreneurial world and that of the proletariat: the conflict thus became an essential element of modern capitalist societies, as well as a characterising trait of the employers' associationism of the entire period. Finally, the essay delves into the analysis of associationism in the credit sector, which presents peculiar characteristics that cannot be compared to those of the agricultural and industrial ones. In fact, the absence of conflicts inherent to the very structure of the production system makes the organisation of employers' interests and the elaboration of strategies to protect investments unnecessary. On the contrary, the birth of associations in the credit world occurs mostly in response to government initiatives to update the sector's tax regulations. In this sense, the book deepens in detail the experiences of popular banks and rural banks. In fact, the banks conceived by Luzzatti organised themselves into temporary collective associations when discussing the government's proposed reforms of the sector, which tended to involve the institutions in the financing of public policies also by increasing the taxation imposed on them. The experience of the rural banks, on the other hand, is characterised by a clear division between institutions of secular inspiration and those of Catholic derivation. After the creation of the first *Federcasse* by Leone Wollemborg in 1887, in fact, the growing influence of the rural banks linked to the Catholic world led to the separation of the associations and the fragmentation of the original unity of the cooperative world. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rural banks were in fact divided between the secular Federation of Rural Banks, founded in 1907, and the Catholic Federation established in 1914 at the end of an intense congress phase that had led to the aggregation of all Catholic institutions. The book points out,

however, that the statutes of these associations do not refer to the management of social conflict, but mostly to the promotion of forms of cooperation, technical assistance and the dissemination of the principles of the cooperative world. Therefore, the associating experiences of the popular and rural banks were also animated by the underlying sharing of values that preceded the foundation of the various banking institutions and that almost naturally led their promoters to create stable forms of association deemed capable of disseminating the principles of cooperation.

Ultimately, the essay offers a detailed reconstruction of the history of employers' associations in Italy between 1861 and 1914. The research highlights some essential elements for a correct interpretation of this phenomenon: firstly, the aggregative tendencies of capital are strongly influenced by economic trends in the national and international context. The need for effective instruments of representation becomes pressing when government choices or changes in the internal and external scenario affect the interests of the class of entrepreneurs and owners. Secondly, the dynamics of the country's development help to determine the evolution of the associations' aims and objectives: if in the first two decades of the post-unification period the dissemination of entrepreneurial culture, research and study were among the primary objectives of the federations, from the 1890s onwards the management of conflict with the working class became the essential aim of the industrial unions and leagues. In the final analysis, a clear link emerges between the crisis – also understood as an interpretative category of historical processes – and aggregation: the difficulties perceived in periods of depression lead to the multiplication of instruments to defend interests. At the same time, however, the tendency towards segmentation that characterises the reaction of the most critical phases of economic cycles is confirmed. In this sense, the growth in the number of associations does not only result in the enlargement of representation, but above all in the fragmentation of the forms of protection of increasingly sectoral and less shared interests.

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