Marco Meriggi

Notables, Bourgeoisie, Popular Classes, and Politics

The Case of Milan at the End of the Nineteenth Century

In recent years Italian social historians have devoted increasing attention to the nature and morphology of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. Traditional historiography viewed the bourgeoisie as key par excellence to the political change played out between 1859 and 1871. It was seen, on the one hand, as integral to the formation of a liberal political regime based on a limited suffrage, and, on the other, as critical to the outcome of the peninsula's national unification of a dozen small states, most of which were previously governed by absolutist regimes.

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According to this interpretation, the bourgeoisie—understood as a group controlling capital and the means of production—supported unification and liberalization primarily in order to promote its economic interests. The argument held that, for the bourgeoisie, these changes were necessary in order to expand the market and restore its dynamism by abolishing the various controls on trade imposed by the petty absolutist regimes. The bourgeoisie, liberalism, and the nation thus were described as foundational elements of a single phenomenon.

There were doubts about such an interpretation, in Italy and elsewhere. One needs only reflect on the German case, in which critiques have emerged recently about the historiographical value of similar heroic and ideal-typical visions of the German nineteenth-century bourgeoisie (Kocka, 1993). Today, this concept of the bourgeoisie is in crisis. The bourgeois figure of the nineteenth century seems to be melting away, a little more every day, as meticulous research reveals a many-sided pattern of situations, functions, and activities. The bourgeoisie has been found on the one hand to have been diluted by the presence of aristocratic and landowning elements, which, by no means seduced by the theory of profit, simply sought to collect their rents; on the other hand, the bourgeoisie willingly adopted "backward" behaviors (linking its fortunes to the traditional authoritarian monarchy, as did bureaucrats and those of the liberal professions, in contrast to the industrial bourgeoisie, which promoted civil society [Meriggi, 1993]). With reference to the political tendencies of the bourgeoisie, then, historians today emphasize its limitations and elitism as much as its democratic potential.

In Italy particularly, historians take note of both the small size of the industrial bourgeoisie—at least until the end of the last century—and its limited representation in the governing elite; they have discovered substantial regional or even city-by-city variation as characteristic of the liberal period. Indeed, in place of the "epoch of the bourgeoisie," the period is now often called the "age of the notables" (Romanelli, 1991).

The notable is of course a historical figure as elusive as the bourgeois. Nevertheless, it seems difficult to find a more useful term to describe that restricted group of aristocrats, landowners, merchants, industrialists, public functionaries, and professionals to whom the Italian electoral law granted the vote until the reforms of 1882 (for national elections), and 1889 (for municipal and departmental elections) widened the franchise. It was not a

group with internal cohesion. This fact was confirmed in the 1880s, when the extension of the suffrage modified the very political mechanisms that had guaranteed political domination of the notables, with the result that unprecedented internal rivalry within the group emerged.

Starting from a concrete case, that of Milan at the end of the century, I seek here to illustrate and discuss the modalities and significance of these changes. At the municipal elections of 1899, the government of the city of Milan was conquered for the first time by the left parties. The coalition of Radicals, Republicans, and Socialists received 18,000 out of 30,000 votes cast in this election and decisively defeated the liberal-moderates, who had governed the city for 40 years without interruption.[1] Historians have conventionally privileged a political reading of this event, interpreting it most often—despite granting its contingent nature—as a chorus of rejection by Milanese civil society of the state of siege and repression imposed by General Bava Beccaris on the Lombard capital, which at that time was seeking to establish its own identity distinct from the central government in Rome (cf. Canavero 1976). I instead propose here an interpretation based on a longer view, sensitive to the social and structural context of the problem.

Despite the decisive contribution of the socialists to the winning ticket, and the election on their part of 12 members of the city council, the victory of the left was a political statement of the "new" bourgeois Milan, the Milan of the "*cavalieri e dei commendatori*" (honorary titles typically granted to industrial bourgeois). The Radicals and Republicans (who received, respectively, 41 and 10 of the 80 council seats) were backed by the Circle for Industrial, Agricultural and Commercial Interests, and by the federation of shopkeepers, the interest-group associations of industrialists, wholesale traders, and shopkeepers.[2]

During the preceding 40 years, to the contrary, it was essentially the large provincial landowners and businessmen whose firms were tightly connected to agrarian activities—bankers, silk brokers, and merchants—who had governed the city. This was a social milieu strongly intertwined with aristocratic families through membership in three particularly exclusive and refined social circles: Società dell'Unione (the Union Society), Società del Giardino (the Garden Society), and Società degli artisti e Patriottica (the Patriotic Society of Artists).

The Società dell'Unione was founded in 1841 and in its time pioneered

an innovative role in the dynamics of urban elite relations. Its founders were aristocrats who had quit the Casino dei Nobili, a social club restricted to those with the bluest blood, to establish an association which would be open as well to the wealthiest bourgeois of the city: large property-holders, landowners, financiers, bankers. Nonetheless, even at the end of the century, the aristocratic element dominated the association, comprising more than 60% of its over 300 members.

The Società del Giardino had been founded earlier, at the end of the eighteenth century, as a circle of middle or petty bourgeois who played *bocce*. During the first half of the nineteenth century, it had taken on the profile of a true gathering place for the middle-to-upper bourgeoisie of the city, counterposing itself first against the Casino dei Nobili and later against the Società dell'Unione. The Union and the Garden societies were both circles whose activity was purely recreational.

The Società degli artisti e Patriottica, a merger of three smaller associations, came into being in the 1870s. Less exclusive than the other two—it did not prescribe a *numerus clausus* (a fixed limit on the number of members)—the Patriottica pursued cultural ends rather than recreational ones, and its admission fee was considerably lower. It welcomed members who were middle bourgeois, not very wealthy: merchants, professionals, landowners, artists, and other cultural figures. This population of middle bourgeois was nevertheless quite restricted in numbers, and already legally enfranchised under the narrow electoral law in effect prior to 1889.

Thus, while the social base from which the Union and Garden societies drew their members amounted to only several hundred persons, that of the Patriots did not extend beyond a few thousand. At the moment of its greatest expansion in the 1890s, the Patriots never surpassed 1,000 members.

As late as 1892, 40% of the city councillors belonged to the highly restricted social group composed of the members of these clubs. Earlier, the proportion of Unionisti, Giardinieri, and Patriottici among the city councillors had been even higher, generally around 50%. For a long period, then, the circles in which the urban patrimonial high society met, talked, ate, and relaxed had served as the privileged recruiting ground for the municipal political elite. These clubs, originally serving simply as displays of social prominence, had become means of establishing political superiority (Meriggi 1992).

Not surprisingly, when the liberal-moderates lost the elections of 1899 the percentage of Union, Garden, and Patriot society members among the communal councillors fell steeply; from 40% in 1890–92, it declined to 17% in 1899–1901.[3] The victory of the left coalition that joined industrialists, shopkeepers, and workers thus meant the retreat and fall of the large landowners, bankers, and silk merchants, of that milieu of the members of the elite clubs, which—to differentiate it from the emergent new bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century—will here be called the "old notables."

The factor that had made possible the long political hegemony of this latter group was the longstanding legislation which restricted the suffrage on the basis of income, producing an extremely small electorate. In 1860 the number of Milanese men (for only men could vote) eligible to vote in the municipal elections was only 10,438 out of some 250,000 inhabitants of the city; by 1885, the number eligible to vote had increased to 23,692, but the population had climbed in the same period to more than 350,000, thus the percentage of those permitted to vote continued to be exceedingly modest. Moreover, until the end of the 1880s, the difference between those enjoying the right to vote, and those actually casting ballots was substantial. In 1860, only some 3,944 voters went to the polling place and voted; in 1885, it was only 8,610. Thus less than one-half, indeed little more than one-third, exercised their right to vote in Milanese municipal elections.

These low voting proportions reflected a shared understanding of electoral competition as essentially *non*-political. The notables who enjoyed the right to vote often did so as though they had nothing better to do, apparently perceiving the right they alone had enjoyed for so long as merely an unwanted intrusion of public life into the peaceful stream of private life and the promotion of personal interests. They formed a civil society that was not only extremely elitist, but also relatively free of ideological disagreements. In the period in which members of this society were obliged to devote some of their energies to politics, they preferred to put their faith in the elementary structures of kinship, friendship, and patron-client relations rather than in a more complex formal party organization. After all, it was a civil society shielded from any politically legitimate class competition. The Republican party, the sole radical opposition to the system, was highly marginalized, constantly subject to police surveillance, and often reduced to semi-legality.

Since the popular classes, a good proportion of which were petty bourgeois, did not have the suffrage, why should the notables take time away from the pursuit of their personal interests to "squander" it on political games?

To explain the heavy abstentionism of the Milanese notables one has to look also at the peculiarity of the urban governing class in the Italian context. Their traditional self-identification as an elite civic alternative to the state, or at least to formally public institutions, owed much to the fact that for decades before national unification these institutions had been dominated by foreign powers (first French, then Austrian). Even after 1859, this long-established attitude continued in the notables' cautious diffidence toward the unified Italian state itself. The old notables held the reins of the city administration for the 30 years after unification, but they had hesitated to merge their own sense of identity into the task of governing the city. A large proportion of them had continued to prefer the pursuit of private virtue, through charity and philanthropy in particular. These were non-institutional activities with a civic function that opened the possibility of individual or familial influence on the popular classes. On the one hand, such activities seemed as effective as more directly political means for preserving social order, and, on the other hand, they were more immediately gratifying, in terms of the deference received by those who practiced them. Following this course the old notables maintained their social and civic power and warded off political defeat up to 1899. This continued despite the radicalization of the working class which was abandoning the old mutual-benefit societies (dominated by the notables) and forming resistance leagues in their place, a strategy which denied those notables significant advantages they had enjoyed in their system of civil influence. It was in the electoral process that the limitations of the traditional order of Milanese society were suddenly revealed.

It was only after 1889, when the law regulating the municipal franchise was amended, that the relative size of groups eligible to vote changed significantly. The new electoral law for city administrations extended the right to vote to all male citizens 21 years or older who knew how to read and write and paid at least a five-lire tax per year. In Italy as a whole the number of eligible voters for municipal elections increased from little more than 2 million in 1887 to almost three-and-a-half million in 1889 (from 2,026,619 to 3,343,875).

Thanks to the new ordinance of that year, the electorate in Milan grew

to 41,449, and 21,131 of these voted; in 1899, with an even larger eligible pool (51,433), some 30,000 cast ballots in a city that by then had 450,000 inhabitants. Thus in 1860, only about 5.5% of Milanese had the right to vote; forty years later, the corresponding proportion was 9.5%. Moreover, the more the right to vote was extended to groups that had previously been excluded, the greater the propensity to exercise that right (Nasi 1968, 1969). This ended any remaining effects of that "law of small numbers" which had earlier guaranteed the political predominance of the old notables.

Let's think about the 10,000 eligible voters in 1860, and the 3,944 votes cast. In that period, the three elite social clubs of the city had in total 750 members—that is, potentially just under 20% of the voters. Based on similar calculations, the club-based sociability of the old notables, plus their connections in terms of kinship, friendship, and patron-client networks enabled the elite to make an effortless leap from the cloistered social rooms of the circles into the city council's meeting hall. Sometimes temporary electoral committees quartered in the social clubhouses were established to this end, but often, simple participation in the clubs' social activities was adequate to guarantee election to the city hall. Politics represented, in this sense, the almost natural extension of personal relationships cultivated around the card tables, at the balls, in common attendance at lectures or concerts. In this way, one could send a fellow club member, with whom one shared a proud sense of superiority and social exclusivity, into the city council in full confidence of exercising daily influence over him in a setting that was almost familial, and far-removed from public scrutiny.

In the 1890s, the picture changed profoundly. This decade marked the entry into politics of sectors of the bourgeoisie which until then had been marginal to the bourgeois world of power; their growing political and organizational strength was indeed strongly influenced on the one hand, by that of the working class, and on the other hand, that of the petty bourgeois shopkeepers.

If one compares the constitutions of the clubs of the old notables and that of the Circle for Industrial Interests—the organizational center of the Milanese radicals—one is struck by the differences which are symptomatic of the two types of association. Unlike the Union or Garden societies, the Circle for Industrial Interests did not restrict membership—it imposed no *numerus clausus*—and its annual dues were much lower than those for the old

clubs (24 lire instead of over 100); above all, it presented itself as a venue for the articulation and representation of interests, while the old clubs tended to function simply as a stage setting for the reflection and display of the "natural" urban social hierarchies.

Like the Union and the Garden societies, the Circle for Industrial Interests was primarily a gathering place for friends. Its rooms held a collection of newspapers and books, and musical or dramatic presentations were sometimes offered for members and their families. Yet the circle did not seek to recruit individual notables as members; rather, according to its bylaws, it would welcome "all those who are heads of, or in the administration of industrial, commercial or agricultural enterprises, and members of the liberal professions" in order to promote the defense of "the interests of the majority of industrialists, merchants and businessmen" (Circolo per gli interessi industriali, commerciali ed agricoli in Milano, 1892).

Obviously also committed to an analogous principle of corporate representation were, on the one hand, the activity of the shopkeepers' federation, and on the other, the workers' organizations (the Chamber of Labor in the economic sphere, and the Socialist party in the political sphere) (see, respectively, Morris 1993 and Tilly 1992).

In one sense, the success of the anti-moderate alliance had its origin in the "law of large numbers" brought into play by the new electoral rules; it was also and above all the outcome, however, of increasing organizational capacity that was a distinctive feature of the new corporate associationism. Through the elementary and substantially personalistic structure of the elite clubs it had in the past been possible to control the limited number of eligible voters. It was enough for each of the 700 or 800 members of the old notables' clubs to persuade—through links ranging from kinship to patronage, passing through friendship on the way—five or six voters to support the club candidates. Faced with an electorate that had increased to tens of thousands of voters, this kind of "individualistic" propaganda was no longer adequate. The new rules made it imperative to play the game of organizing groups, utilizing a principle of organization that was in itself foreign to the mentality of friendship and family of the old notables, who had been for decades protected against legitimate electoral competition. Now it was necessary, in other words, to elaborate a formal program of their own, to learn to conceive of politics as an arena which no longer coincided with simple sociability.

Beyond the rejection of governmental authoritarianism, the diverse factions in the victorious electoral alliance of 1899 were united above all in the deliberate adoption of new modalities for the aggregation of interests and for partition in electoral campaigns. The old notables simply disdained, or at least did not have the capacity to adopt, these modalities.

New methods had been initiated and perfected in the first place in the practice of the workers' movement, especially after the late 1880s, when it abandoned the "individualist" ethic typical of the mutual-benefit societies and established resistance leagues which sought instead to promote group interests.

The petty bourgeois shopkeepers also gradually adopted similar operating structures in the 1890s. The federation of shopkeepers succeeded in reserving a few candidacies on the democratic list for their organization in the process of negotiating the electoral alliance of 1899; indeed, its members voted not as individuals, but as a bloc representing their collective interests.

The electoral success of the non-landowning radical bourgeoisie at the turn of the century derived to a large extent from its ability to define itself as a body, and to unite in an electoral alliance which, joining workers, storekeepers, and captains of industry, created an unusually broad social grouping. Of the 18,000 votes earned by the left, around 10,000 were attributable to the thick networking of the Socialist party organization, which was the first to establish local committees to register voters. Such committees, although a common practice of Anglo-Saxon liberals for years, were almost completely unknown by the Milanese (and, in general, the Italian) old notables (see Ostrogorski 1903).

The logic of "large numbers," together with the principle of contractual mediation of group and categorical interests, created a new scenario at the end of the century, a scenario which in the upcoming Giolittian period would become common practice in other regions of Italy as well. The new Milanese bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie of industrial interests, first learned to view itself as a group, then provided itself with the structures that, given this perspective, seemed indispensable for the first time. The industrial bourgeoisie hence was ready to ally with other *corporate* forces, most notably with the working class, which although its interests would often clash with those of the new bourgeoisie, already possessed a corporate organizational structure well-suited for the era of "large numbers."

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were only several hundred members in the "individualistic" clubs of the old notables, just as there had been 40 years earlier; in 1904, in contrast, the Milan Chamber of Labor, founded a little more than ten years earlier, was 44,000 members strong; so too, the petty bourgeois shopkeepers' federation counted thousands of members. The Circle for Industrial Interests had fewer members, obviously, but it was not exclusionary; it had adopted as its own the corporative organizational structure precociously accepted by the workers and shopkeepers.

The decline of the old notables, clearly visible in the outcome of the 1899 elections, marked the end of a more general cycle of a liberal-elite civil society that had prevailed in Italy for about forty years. This cycle had at its base an ideology professing intensely libertarian principles. The notables defeated in 1899 had previously perceived themselves as the natural leaders chosen by a liberal society with a limited suffrage, proud to cultivate the illusion that potentially it was possible for each individual to accede to the heights of wealth and power. At the end of the century, to the contrary, the language of the individual—for long the prerogative of a restricted elite—clearly gave way to the corporate language of the collectivity, in working class milieux and in those of the bourgeois and petty bourgeois. As the advent of mass society became apparent, "pure" liberalism bowed to democracy and its rules of organized mediation of collective interests.

From various perspectives, the Milanese "laboratory" indeed seemed an exception compared to the characteristic situation in other parts of the country. It is true that the social groups typical of modern class society arose in the Milanese capital earlier than elsewhere in Italy. On one hand, Milan was the industrial capital of the country; on the other hand, it was also the organizational center of the working-class and the socialist movement. More than any other city in the peninsula, it was thus a city of captains of industry and of workers. At the end of the century, each of these groups had demonstrated its skill in changing with the times and adopting models of organization, behavior, and mentalities already achieved in other more economically advanced countries.

The fact that many of the Milanese industrialists had experienced (and some were natives of) other national cultures (German, Swiss, French) at least partially explains their openness to innovation. They were newcomers, and as such, it was natural for them to oppose the personalistic practices that

went under the motto "one big family," typical of the traditional propertied and mercantile elites which excluded them from their salons and exclusive social clubs.

Workers in the Lombard capital in turn were inspired by analogous institutions in France, Belgium, and Austria to found the Chamber of Labor. Although Italy as a whole was far from fully industrialized at the end of the nineteenth century, modern social relations had already arrived, through the establishment of corporative associationism in Milan, Italy's avant-garde city.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the birth of new organizations reinforced the formation and transformation of these classes whose seeds bore fruit in the conditions of the late nineteenth century. The twentieth century saw these classes, formerly developed only on the urban level, acquire a national dimension. From the Circolo per la difesa degli interessi industriali developed the General Confederation of Industry (Confederazione generale dell'Industria, organ of the industrialists' "class"); and from the Chamber of Labor movement, in which Milan's chamber was the leading light, developed the Italian General Confederation of Labor (Confederazione generale italiana del Lavoro).

On this point it is interesting to note that liberal-conservative jurists at the turn of the century were greatly concerned by the appearance of the new mass associationism, which to their eyes represented a highly undesirable drift away from the individualist-liberal "spirit of association" toward a corporate or class outcome. The apparent modernity of these organizations, some legal experts warned, concealed pre-liberal models which hid their double goal; on the one hand, an attack on the freedom of the individual in civil society, and on the other, an attempt to reduce the liberty of the economic actor in the market. The jurists feared the emerging anti-individualist corporative force, uniting workers and industrialists against the old exclusive commercial and landowning elites; in the same period, political experience led the two groups to define their class interests separately—and to end their alliance.

Corporate associationism continued for each group; it prepared them for electoral campaigning in the era of large numbers, and also for dealing effectively with a state which was rapidly abandoning its traditional laissez-faire policy. Together, industrialists and workers had defined the new rules

of the game, but it quickly became necessary for them to play the part of adversaries, instead of allies.

Translated by Louise A. Tilly

Notes

Marco Meriggi (Roma 1955) is associate professor of history of historical writing at the University of Trieste. He studies XIX century social history. His latest book is *Milano Borghese*.

1 Translator's note: The Radicals, as in France, were supporters of a free-market economy but social and political liberals, i.e., supporters of broad civil and political rights. The liberal-moderates were also supporters of a free-market economy, but they were social and political conservatives.

2 Circolo per gli interessi industriali, agricoli e commerciali and Federazione generale degli esercenti. For the former, see Patti 1984, especially 135 and Moneta 1992. On the latter, see Morris 1993.

3 My counts, based on comparing the list of Milan's communal councillors for 1899–1903 in Nasi 1969 with the contemporary published lists of the Union Society, that of the Garden, and of the Patriotic Society of Artists.

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