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The Realms of Identities

A Comment on Class and Politics in Milan

At the very end of Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s The Leopard the priests come and remove the relics preserved and protected by the Prince of Salina’s aged daughters, virtually the last survivors of the family. Nothing is left of the fabled world of the Sicilian aristocrats. Even the material and symbolic artifacts of their eminence—the religious relics they guarded and the palace over which they presided—have turned into rubble or taken on the musty air of decay. The world of the Prince of Salina, a world of inherited wealth

and power stretching back to the Norman conquests of the eleventh century, of aristocratic balls, of shimmering palaces in Palermo and vast estates in the interior—that world has come to an end.

The three articles on Milanese class formation and politics take up the story where di Lampedusa left it. They describe and analyze modern, class-based political and social organization, the world the Prince of Salina understood had triumphed over his own and from which he withdrew, weary and malcontent. But the articles also present a picture that is not quite as linear as di Lampedusa's novelistic and (auto)biographical rendering of Italian history. Modern forms of organization and politics triumph, to be sure, but they carry inheritances from the past and the victory is always contested and tenuous.

In that sense, the view from Milan seems not all that different from those from Vienna, Berlin, Paris, or London, or, for that matter, Linz, Düsseldorf, Lyons, or Manchester. And why should it have been different? Milan was northern Italy to the very core of its being. Its historical associations were with Austria and France, and even with England. In Milan as in the greater part of Europe west of Slovakia, the idealized universal politics of liberalism fractured in the late nineteenth century. The bourgeoisie organized itself in ever more tightly entwined political, economic, and social organizations. The petite bourgeoisie set out on the hunt for some kind of association to protect itself from organized capital and increasingly assertive labor, and often wound up in the political camp of strident nationalism and anti-Semitism. And workers initiated the century-long era in which trade unions and socialist parties, with their idealization of male productive labor, dominated left-wing politics.

The three articles, then, provide the northern Italian dimension of a trans-national process characteristic of late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. Italian history is usually discussed in European history survey courses as the site of the Renaissance and of fascism, as if nothing of significance or interest occurred in the intervening four centuries, except perhaps national unification. By exploring in depth the Milan case, the articles illuminate a history that is too often confined to the margins, its development known only to specialists.

More importantly, the three authors work out of a broad literature on class formation and political organization that, in the last two decades, has been at the center of historical social science research. And it is precisely at
the joint between the two—class and politics—that their empirical studies give rise to the most critical issues: the relationship between class as a materially-based, structural reality and as a form of identity; the intersections and fractures among class-based and other kinds of identities; the position of class formations within larger regional, national, and international contexts; and the relatively unexplored linkages between class formation and deformation.

All three articles demonstrate a growing sense of class awareness among workers, the petite bourgeoisie, and the "real" bourgeoisie. These classes were either created or greatly expanded by the emergence of commercial and industrial capitalism. Each of the authors implicitly dismisses postmodernist interpretations that would see class identities emerging exclusively out of linguistic formations, the narrative "fictions" that people freely create. Indeed, it is hard to deny the material realities of class when notables defend a highly limited franchise, pork butchers protect the tax advantages of the city's outer rings, and workers pour out into the streets to demand higher wages.

At the same time, none of the authors posits a direct, unmediated relation among interests, identities, and organizations. Significantly, each poses spatiality as a critical factor through which class identities and class politics are constituted. Milan's spatial division into two tax and regulation zones impelled suburban shopkeepers to defend their fiscal privileges. The later erasure of the boundary forced them to expand their notion of "respectable" occupations and to organize on a citywide basis. Meanwhile, the spatial redistribution of capital and labor in Milan and Lombardy led to more concentrated working-class neighborhoods, heightening labor's capacity for self-organization and political engagement. And notables governed the city for decades through the tight associational networks formed in the social and physical spaces of clubs. For the notables, Marco Meriggi writes, "politics represented . . . the almost natural extension of personal relationships . . . cultivated around the card tables, at the balls, in common attendance at lectures or concerts."

In all three articles "space" is not a metaphorical concept. It is, instead, a bounded, physical arena in which human interaction takes place. This emphasis on spatiality serves to re-ground class identities in the structured, material world. But it is necessary also, it seems to me, to devote attention to the multiple spatialities that people occupy—local, regional, and national;
workplace and household; residencies and sites of sociability—and to the ways that they represent these spaces. Spatiality functions as the "hard," structural dimension of class formation, but it hardly covers the entire terrain. Class formations can no longer be treated adequately if they are seen as exclusively materially-based processes—as the three authors demonstrate, but not, perhaps, to the extent possible. If the process of class formation is not "natural" and linear, as all three articles also argue, then the discursive and ideological constructions of class take on particular saliency. As Geoff Eley and others have argued, the languages of class served as ways of "fixing" unstable identities to make them politically salient, to open the way for the assertion of class-based politics.

This approach, when joined to the recognition that identities are also not infinitely malleable, that the menu of possibilities is bounded by the structural realities of class, including its spatial dimensions, becomes particularly compelling because class identities do not exist in pristine isolation. Each of the articles demonstrates quite effectively how particular class identities were forged in collaboration and in conflict with other class-based identities. But how did workers, the petite bourgeoisie, and the bourgeoisie assert a class identity in association with, and in opposition against, other forms of identities? What were the appropriations and exclusions that enhanced or defined class-based identities and politics? How did particular constructions of masculinity and femininity, of nationalism and internationalism, figure into the process of class formation? If butchers and bakers laid claim to political and social leadership among the diverse strata of the Milan suburbs, as Jonathan Morris shows, did they also claim to function as the backbone of the nation, a common enough form of identity-creation among the petite bourgeoisie? When, if ever, did the linguistic construction of identity move beyond the local to the national plane? Did the old notables of Milan lose in part because they were never able to assert effectively a national claim? And what are the habits of daily life that make possible the unquestioned provenance of associational life in political organizations? How did duels, drinking, and sexual practices play into the various forms of identities?

In short, class is only one of the varied identities that defined individuals and social groups; the spatial linkages between class and politics only one of the places that people occupied. Here I think works that have explored the mutually constitutive character of gender and class have been particu-
larly insightful—not least because in the process they have demonstrated also the mutually constitutive nature of the physical space of workplace and residency and the linguistic and ideological representations of these spaces.²

All three articles also stress the independent significance of politics for class formation. Indeed, reversing the flow of causation long predominant in studies of class formation, they argue that the range of political opportunities shaped the possibilities for and content of class identities. Louise Tilly argues that strikes, the most visible form of working-class protest, were related more to the political capacity to act than to the simple movements of the business cycle. Printers and construction workers tested their strength in strikes, and each success led to additional strikes, greater organizational capacities, and, presumably, more intense identification as workers. The extension of the franchise drastically altered the political possibilities for all social groups, leading to the “logic of large numbers,” as Meriggi nicely phrases it. To survive in the new political world, each social class had to engage in mass politics and corporate self-organization. Hegemony could no longer be assumed; it had to be fought for, and explicitly, in the political arena. Class interests did not give rise in a simple, unproblematic manner to political organization. Instead, class identities were mediated through politics, a position that, in my view, broadens significantly the empirical and theoretical lens and rescues the saliency of class from both the reductionist standpoint that would simply derive politics and identities from class positions and the counter-extreme that posits the autonomy of the political realm.³

Finally, all three articles emphasize the tentative nature of class identities. Tilly proposes the term class transformation, an important rhetorical shift that buries the notion of a unilinear process of class formation. Bringing together the various elements of her discussion, she argues that such transformations are specific to time and place and decisively related to political opportunity structures. If, as all the articles stress, class formation is a difficult, extended, and tenuous process, how are we to understand the opposite end of the process, class decomposition? There is now a substantial literature on the process of working-class formation, a growing one on bourgeois- and petite-bourgeois-class formations. The process of decomposition has been left largely to present-day commentators, usually bemoaning the “decline” of the working class. But if class is understood as not only a material reality, but also a fleeting form of identification and politics, then the twen-
tieth century is marked by more or less continual cycles of class formation and decomposition. What are the theoretical markers that define the process of decomposition? How do they affect different social classes? Can one even talk about decomposition in the case of the bourgeoisie? By exploring in a non-reductionist fashion the complex interactions among class identities, interests, and organizations, the three articles establish approaches that can be used profitably to explore the class transformations (to use Tilly’s term) of the twentieth century, most notably the massive and often violent attempts to destroy class identities and place in their stead nation and race.

At the outset of his article, Marco Meriggi notes that recent historiography has displaced the narrative of the heroic bourgeoisie propelling forward the Risorgimento. In Louise Tilly’s hands, workers move hesitantly and inconclusively toward class-based organization and politics. Rarely do they evince that capacity for class-conscious activism that constituted the myth of socialist ideology for over a century. The petite bourgeoisie has rarely stood at the top of anyone’s list of heroes, other than the self-appointed advocates of shopkeeper organization—though Jonathan Morris at least gives them the complex and nuanced historical treatment that they deserve. Gone are the heroic narratives of the bourgeoisie creating the nation, workers contesting decisively their oppressors, the modern classes together driving the aristocracy to justly deserved oblivion. Each social class is internally divided, and barely manages to establish any cohesion. Politics and identities have become more complex, even confused. The Prince of Salina survives after all.

Notes

