

*The political economy
of shopkeeping in Milan
1886–1922*

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Introduction: shopkeeping as a historical problem

The initial spark for this study came from a different set of shopkeepers in a different city from that with which it deals. In the mid-1980s I spent a year studying in Bologna, a city well known for the profusion of small shops under the porticoes of its historic centre, and in which the suburbs still host a far greater number of shops, bars and restaurants than similar cities in Britain and America.¹ The proprietors of these establishments were the first people I got to know in the city, and they good-humouredly assisted me in my struggle to learn Italian by engaging them in conversation whilst having my hair cut, buying my groceries or drinking my *cappuccino*. As an outsider I was very struck by the contrasts between the Italian small retailing sector and that in my own country, prompting a curiosity about the history of shopkeepers in Italy. To my surprise I found that no modern Italian scholar had investigated this stratum of society.²

In retrospect this does not appear so unusual. Even after the explosion of interest in social history in the 1960s, historians throughout Europe regarded the lower middle classes with suspicion. Workers and peasants made more ideologically acceptable subjects for the practitioners of 'history from below' who tended to sneer at the *petit-bourgeois* values that theorists and psycho-historians suggested were indicative of inherently authoritarian, if

¹ The small shopkeeping sector in Italy is in decline, however, the victim of the supermarket habit and the chain retailer. Lonardi, 'Scompariranno centomila negozi'. (All notes and references are given as author plus short title; full details are given in the bibliography.)

² On the lack of literature on the Italian lower middle classes see Berezin, 'Created constituencies', p. 143. Rossano Zezos did write the delightful *Vita della bottega* in 1942, but the subtitle, 'a sentimental guide to commerce', indicates the approach he adopted in this and several other works.

not Fascist, tendencies.³ Mainstream historians utilised these stereotypes to bring Hitler and, crucially for the Italian case, Mussolini to power, but provided little of the context in which the actions of these strata could be understood.

This was especially the case for the 'old' lower middle class of shopkeepers and master artisans that has come to be known as the *petite bourgeoisie*. Indeed the inadequacies of this approach were highlighted by the repeated linkage of the 'old' and 'new' lower middle classes within a single group. The key to understanding these classes, it was argued, was the concept of status anxiety. Fearful of finding themselves squeezed into extinction between the interests of big business and organised labour, the lower middle classes were prepared to look beyond the political mainstream for a strategy to preserve their status. Arno Mayer, in an essay on the lower middle class (note the use of the singular), argued that

in ... moments of extreme crisis ... the vague sense of negative commonality – of being neither bourgeois nor worker – is transformed into a political awareness or consciousness of economic, social and cultural identity. The economic incompatibilities and the status incongruities between the major occupational and professional segments of the lower middle class do not disappear, but in moments of soaring disequilibrium, which bring existential issues to the fore, these internal strains and tensions become of lesser importance than the immediate conflicts with external economic and social forces.

At these moments a '*grande peur* of downward mobility ... is the root of the erratic and intermittently frenzied politicisation of the lower middle classes'.⁴

In many ways, however, Mayer's 1975 essay marked an important step forward in the analysis of the lower middle classes. An attack on Marxist determinism, it was intended as an injunction that the lower middle class should be studied 'on its own terms'.⁵ In the mid-1970s several scholars published work predicated on concrete research into shopkeeper and artisan movements. Robert Gellately's study of the shopkeepers' movement, Shulamit Volkov's work on urban master artisans, and Heinrich Winkler's broad-canvas

³ Nord, *Paris shopkeepers*, pp. 8–16 provides a good review of this and associated literature on the lower middle classes.

⁴ Mayer, 'The lower middle class as a historical problem', p. 434.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

interpretation of the politics of the *petite bourgeoisie* were all readings of the German situation that sought to explain support for Fascism through an analysis of the pre-war period.⁶

Two features of this period commanded particular attention. First, there was the fact that, in mid-century, artisans still voted liberal but had turned to the conservatives by the end of the century. Volkov's analysis of this phenomenon suggested an anomaly, however. Despite their support of liberal parties that advocated wider political participation, artisans were fearful of *laissez-faire* economics, and continued to be attached to the pre-industrial gild system. Their failure to adapt to new forms of production was accentuated by the onset of the great depression that reached its nadir in the 1890s. The institution of a wider franchise after unification, albeit in a restricted political system, encouraged artisans to advance their anti-modernist and backward-looking sentiments, until by the turn of the century they were associated with the extremist and anti-Semitic parties of the right.

Winkler and Gellately concentrated on the ways in which the parties of the right attempted to incorporate shopkeepers and master artisans into their bloc. Winkler argued for the development of *Mittelstandspolitik*, a series of measures of social protection, such as the re-establishment of gild organisations and discriminatory taxes against department stores and consumer cooperatives, by which the conservatives recruited the lower middle classes into their camp as a bulwark against the Socialists. This social protectionism, it was argued, caused the German shopkeepers and artisans to identify with the authoritarian conservatism of the final decades of the Empire and to regard the new Weimar Republic with suspicion. Thus the German *Mittelstand* were incorporated into the political system as adjuncts to an authoritarian, predominantly agrarian, conservatism which only survived as a result of the anachronistic political development of the nation.

These interpretations were criticised by the group of historians who participate in the international round tables on the *petite bourgeoisie* led by Geoffrey Crossick and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt.⁷ In

⁶ Gellately, *The politics of economic despair*. Volkov, *The rise of popular anti-modernism in Germany*. Winkler's work is usefully summarised in his article 'From social protectionism to national socialism'.

⁷ For an account of one of these see Blackburn, 'Economic crisis and the *petite bourgeoisie*'.

a collection of essays published in 1983, Crossick and Haupt argued that there was a 'regrettable' tendency for research on shopkeepers and artisans to focus too heavily on the political sphere, ignoring the social and economic context in which activity took place.⁸ Where a trader's business was located, for instance, had a critical effect upon his relations with his clientele and on how he conducted his trade. In a working-class suburb his social status would be high and his economic power considerable, even if his actual business was not all that large. In a more mixed residential area the shopkeeper would find himself lower down the social scale, and might have to show deference to his 'betters' in order to retain their custom.⁹ These kinds of consideration had considerable implications for the development of a *petit-bourgeois* identity.

In effect Crossick and Haupt called for a far more vigorous investigation of the *petite bourgeoisie* on its own terms. Instead of reading the history of *petit-bourgeois* organisations as that of the origins of Fascism, they sought to understand the reasons for the development of such associations in terms of their meaning to their members. One way of avoiding overly teleological interpretations was to concentrate exclusively on the pre-1914 period, as did all the essays in the published collection. Another was to recognise that 'at the level of national comparisons, similarities might be more striking than differences, especially in daily existence and experiences. The interesting contrasts might be less those amongst countries, and more the distinctions between types of town.'¹⁰

The value of city studies was proven by Philip Nord, a member of the round table, in his book on Parisian shopkeepers published in 1986.¹¹ This revealed the very different experiences of those retailers who had stores on the new avenues constructed by Haussmann and those left in the back-street arcades. It was the latter, under the influence of the deprivation wrought by the great depression, who set up shopkeeper organisations and allied themselves with that other section of society in decline, the displaced literary *boulevardiers*. The commercial environment created a fragmentation of interests and an autonomy of response that belied any deterministic notion of politics within the shopkeeper sector.

⁸ Crossick and Haupt, 'Shopkeepers, master artisans and the historian', p. 6.

⁹ On this see Blackbourn, 'Between resignation and volatility', p. 53. Vigne and Howkins, 'The small shopkeeper in industrial and market towns', pp. 194-5, 206.

¹⁰ Crossick and Haupt, 'Shopkeepers, master artisans and the historian', p. 22.

¹¹ Nord, *Paris shopkeepers*.

The discovery of such concrete diversity within the *petite bourgeoisie* led the historians of the round table to reject the idea that this stratum proceeded along an inexorable path from left to right across the political spectrum. In Paris, for instance, members of the league of shopkeepers were prepared to support the far-right Nationalists and anti-Semites when these groups espoused shopkeeper concerns, but they were equally prepared to move back towards the conventional right when it appeared they would gain from doing so. Under certain circumstances, Nord claimed, it was possible to imagine the *petite bourgeoisie* finding allies not on the right but on the left.¹²

The explanatory power of *Mittelstandspolitik* was attacked from several directions. Its linkage to German particularities was undermined by the discovery that many governments, notably the Belgian, had made use of similar strategies to woo the *petite bourgeoisie*. Furthermore most of the measures governments introduced were of little real benefit to shopkeepers and master artisans; and traders, aware of this, continued to judge political programmes on their merits. In Germany, for instance, many small trade associations refused to support the conservatives' financial reforms of 1909 (which would have increased retailers' overheads) and switched their adherence to the liberal *Hansabund*.¹³

This flexibility was hailed as an indication of political autonomy. The *petite bourgeoisie* were neither incorporated into the conservative forces that sought to use them to bolster their own position, nor so excluded as to pose a threat to the system itself. Rather, they

¹² Nord raised the question of whether or not a form of revisionist Socialism that was more accommodating to the concept of private property might not have exercised some appeal on Parisian shopkeepers: *Paris shopkeepers*, pp. 16–17, 291, 431–2. Haupt, analysing the overall situation in France, states that the tendency to turn to the right should not be exaggerated and that although conflicts between workers and small capitalists became more violent at the end of the nineteenth century many *petits bourgeois* who employed no outside labour found no problem in supporting the Socialists: 'The *petite bourgeoisie* in France', pp. 111–12. Blackburn argues that, in Germany, shopkeepers in working-class areas often lived within the subculture of the labour movement, particularly the small publicans who were prominent in the SPD, and that many proprietors 'were actually refugees from the working class following depression or victimisation, who were locked firmly within the subculture of Social Democracy': Blackburn, *Class, religion and local politics*, p. 185n, and 'Between resignation and volatility', pp. 53–5.

¹³ On Germany see Blackburn, 'The *Mittelstand* in German society and Politics' and 'Between resignation and volatility', pp. 50–3. On Belgium see Kurgan-van Hentenryk, 'A forgotten class', p. 129.

showed themselves prepared to turn to whatever political parties came closest to addressing their concerns, forming temporary alliances on the basis of specific policies. They were much more politically independent than earlier commentators have given them credit for.

Inevitably historians are now importing the round-table approach into the inter-war era. In 1990 Rudy Koshar edited a collection of essays on the politics and the lower middle classes in this period, and used his introductory essay to provide a typology of the political trajectories identified by the contributors.¹⁴ These were support for political parties of the established centre or right, support for Fascist or Radical Nationalist parties, involvement with the left, and attempts to establish independent political parties of their own. The diversity of strategies again confirmed the political flexibility of these strata.

Such variety, however, can blind us to the fact that the first two trajectories were by far the most widely chosen, even in most of those states where others were available. This was not a purely post-war phenomenon. As Volkov observed when reviewing the Crossick and Haupt collection, the fact that a shift to the right was not predetermined does not mean that it did not take place.¹⁵ It was not inexorable, it may not have been the product of authoritarianism or *Mittelstandspolitik*, but it still has to be explained.

This book reviews some of the questions raised by previous research within the Italian, and more specifically Milanese, context. The approach mirrors that of the round-table historians in that my primary aim was to analyse the emergence of a small-trader movement in Milan after 1885 through investigation of the social and commercial circumstances of shopkeeping in the city. The bulk of the book, a substantial revision of my 1989 thesis on the subject, concentrates on the first twenty years of the movement during which time a shopkeeper newspaper, federation and bank were all founded, and a variety of political positions were adopted culminating in an unsuccessful attempt at collaboration with the left.¹⁶ I have added a chapter on the succeeding twenty years of the movement in order to explore further the vexed question of why shopkeepers ended up on the right in the post-war era.

¹⁴ Koshar, 'On the politics of the splintered classes', in *Splintered Classes*, pp. 15–17.

¹⁵ Volkov, 'Review of Crossick and Haupt, eds.', pp. 266–9.

¹⁶ Morris, 'The political economy of shopkeeping in Milan'.

Italy provides a fruitful case study for the analysis of lower middle class politics. Industrialisation in the country that was to be the birthplace of European Fascism began even later than in Germany, but growth rates were extremely rapid, particularly in Milan. At the same time the political system of the country, and to a lesser extent the city, continued to be dominated by an agrarian and professional elite, primarily drawn from outside the industrial zone, whilst electoral and constitutional restrictions limited popular participation in politics.

There was a considerable separation between the 'legal' Italy of the elite political classes and the 'real Italy' that had evolved since unification. The *crisi del fine secolo* (end-of-century crisis) underlined this division, with a sequence of violent public-order disturbances culminating in the May events of 1898 in Milan when military rule was imposed on the city. In the aftermath of the crisis, Giolitti emerged as the dominant figure in Italian politics. His judicious use of *trasformismo*, the art of compromising with one's challengers in order to absorb them into one's coalition, and his understanding of the necessity for an appearance of state neutrality in disputes between capital and labour, apparently enabled him to reconcile 'legal' and 'real' Italy to each other through the management of a transition to mass politics.

These developments can be interpreted in several ways. One is to argue that Giolitti was able to achieve this feat by absorbing a weak commercial and industrial bourgeoisie into his political bloc, thus preserving power for the pre-industrial elites. Other scholars are far more wary of such characterisations of the Italian bourgeoisie, whether in terms of the way it employed its capital, the ways in which it affirmed its identity, and the political directions that it followed. They provide evidence of the development of a bourgeois identity through the growth of myriad associations, an identity that developed in tandem with, and sometimes in contradiction to, that being forged in the working-class institutions set up in industrialising areas within the country. In essence they argue that the bourgeoisie bought itself into the system, but not in order to play the part of liberal democratic revolutionaries.¹⁷ Such readings are especially persuasive when applied to city politics in those

¹⁷ For a review of these debates see Gozzadini, 'Borghesie italiane dell'Ottocento' and Meriggi, 'La borghesia italiana'.

centres in which industrial and commercial growth was most rapid.¹⁸

The history of the lower middle classes has hardly featured in these debates. Raffaele Romanelli has provided a study of town clerks throughout Italy, a unique group of public administrators whose social status varied considerably according to the council to which they were attached.¹⁹ The experience of the *petite bourgeoisie* has yet to be analysed. Were they incorporated into the Giolittian bloc in an echo of the *Mittelstandspolitik* discerned by some scholars of the German Empire, were they an appendage of an industrial and commercial bourgeoisie that was formed within an urban setting, or did they develop their own identity as a borderline class between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat?

This study will address those questions, but before doing so it is necessary to clarify some points of methodology raised by an attempt to understand group politics in terms of class, identity and mobilisation.

If classes are to be defined in Marxist terms, that is by means of their relation to capital and labour within the framework of production and exchange of wealth, then any attempt to lump white-collar workers and small traders into a single lower middle class immediately falls in that the former are employees whilst the latter are self-employed, and, on occasion, employers. It has been suggested that the unique feature of the *petite bourgeoisie* lies in the fact that its livelihood is derived from working its own capital, that is both financing and working within the business.²⁰ As a working definition this is helpful, but both sides of the equation remain fraught with difficulty. Whose capital is employed in a shop when an individual retailer effectively survives on credit from his wholesaler?

¹⁸ On Milan see Meriggi, 'Vita di circolo e rappresentanza civica' and Porro, 'Amministrazione e potere locale'.

¹⁹ Romanelli, *Sulle carte interminate*. Since this introduction was written, a new study of white-collar workers in Milan has been published: Soresina, *Mezzemaniche e Signorine*.

²⁰ Bechhofer and Elliot have argued that 'though a good many [of the *petite bourgeoisie*] also become the employers of hired labour, the scale of that exploitation is typically very small and is an extension of, rather than a substitute for, their own labour' (Bechhofer and Elliott, 'Petty property', p. 183). See also their general discussion of the topic of the characteristics of the *petite bourgeoisie*, *ibid.*, pp. 182-7. For a discussion of the structural difficulties of defining the *petite bourgeoisie* in Marxist terms see Crossick and Haupt, 'Shopkeepers, master artisans and the historian', pp. 6-10.

Should there be a distinction between labour which adds value to the product, and simply selling ready-made goods over the counter? And when does a proprietor graduate into the bourgeoisie? Working one's own capital would not preclude the employment of others to work alongside the proprietor, but does an employer's retreat from the counter or the workbench to handle the rest of the business signify the introduction of a division of labour sufficient to raise the proprietor into the next class up?

If it is difficult to define the *petite bourgeoisie* as a class 'in itself', it is also hard to see how it might be expected to act as a class 'for itself'. Master artisans and shopkeepers frequently had very different interests: workshop owners accused retailers of stealing their markets by selling manufactured goods that had previously been brought from the producer, whilst shopkeepers resented artisans supplying department stores.²¹ Many trades, such as baking, incorporated aspects of both production and retail, making it difficult to draw even a simple distinction between the interests of shopkeepers and workshop owners that might facilitate some form of sectorial consciousness. Trades such as grocery and pharmacy were often in direct confrontation with one another over which types of good each should be allowed to sell. Even within a single trade the interests of well-established retailers with several hands in their employ were very different from those of the one-man operations set up by retired workers. Ultimately all traders were in direct competition with one another.

A search for the creation of a compact *petit-bourgeois* identity is therefore almost certain to founder. What may be discerned, however, is the mobilisation of certain strata within the *petite bourgeoisie* as they identify common interests between them. These are likely to relate more to specific circumstances within the commercial environment in which they operate, than to a simple shared relation to capital and labour. Some form of mobilisation can be held to have occurred when there is a passage from, say, the existence of simple trade associations to the emergence of institutions representing the interests of several trades simultaneously – federations of such associations, journals targeted at a group of trades, rather than an individual activity, or simple campaign organisations supported by adherents from a variety of occupations, dedicated to the resolution of common problems.

²¹ Blackburn, 'The *Mittelstand* in German society and politics', p. 415.

The problem of identity is better approached by investigating groups who associated with each other because they felt they had similar needs within the commercial environment (that is, by taking account of their own definition of such interests), therefore, than by attempting to discern a class consciousness across the entire range of occupations that make up the *petite bourgeoisie*. The important questions become which groups associated with each other and why they did so, questions which can only be addressed through an understanding of a specific business environment. The local level is key here: small business tends to be locally orientated; small shop-keeping, almost by definition, is so.

Studying shopkeeper movements is not the same thing as studying shopkeeper identity, however. One must distinguish between leaders, members and sympathisers within such movements, and be aware of the diversity of meanings and motivations that participation in collective activity can indicate. Movements do not automatically become spokesmen for all shopkeepers: indeed their failures in this context are as important as their successes. Above all it is necessary to recall that individuals might have several 'identities' formed on the basis of religious, family or neighbourhood affiliations, as well as occupational ones. The relative weight given to these identities might change as a result of circumstance – there is much evidence to suggest that this was the case as regards the political responses of Milanese shopkeepers.

It is the attempts to construct an occupational identity amongst Milanese shopkeepers that occupy the bulk of this book. The existence of a shopkeepers' newspaper, *L'Esercente*, is the key source for this analysis, but I have used it in accordance with the warnings delivered above. It is fortunate that this newspaper was a commercial venture which needed to sell copies amongst shopkeepers in order to survive, and was therefore obliged to print what it thought its readers would accept. More importantly the newspaper was in frequent dispute with the other main institutions of the movement, notably the shopkeepers' federation, with the result that the historian is offered two interpretations of the same situation, albeit that the alternative is sometimes wrapped in the excoriation of *L'Esercente*. Whenever I have been able to check reports of shopkeeper association meetings or statements in *L'Esercente* they have proved accurate; and I have naturally applied the discretion any critical historian should to those which cannot be verified. Political,

commercial and trade association elections also provide substantial clues, particularly when the results provided a clear rebuke to the movement's leadership.

The history of the shopkeepers' movement cannot be approached without an understanding of the environment in which it evolved. The book begins, therefore, with an analysis of the business of shopkeeping in Milan.