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978-0-521-44450-7 - Crime, Disorder and the Risorgimento: The Politics of Policing in Bologna

Steven C. Hughes

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

e qualunque volta alle universalità delli uomini
non si toglie né roba né onore, vivono contenti
Niccolò Machiavelli

The original inspiration for this book came from scholars such as James Richardson, Roger Lane, Wilbur Miller, Alan Williams, Eric Monkonen, and the many other historians who have studied the police in countries other than Italy. Despite their variety of approaches, all of these authors have recognized the police as a key institution of the modern age, and one that can be tied to a host of historical concerns, including the growth of urban bureaucracy, changing perceptions of crime, shifting class relations, and the evolution of new forms of political power. As a distinct institution, the centralized police is a relatively recent phenomenon, and its advent on the European continent in the eighteenth century and throughout the rest of the western world during the nineteenth century marked a fundamental departure from traditional modes of administration. Both obvious and ubiquitous, the police symbolized a new personalized presence of the government in people's everyday affairs, and it remained to each culture to determine the nature and limits of that presence. Historians have thus come to realize that the method by which a society enforces its laws is often as revealing as the laws themselves.

In Italy, however, police history has not fared well. Until very recently, it has been confined to abstract juridical discussions of the law, which seldom touch ground, and "alternative" diatribes, which seek to expose the police as a nefarious instrument of class warfare.¹ This study

¹ On recent Italian police history see Steven Hughes, "La continuità del personale di polizia negli anni dell'unificazione nazionale italiana," *Clio*, April–June, 1990, pp. 338–339. One should also see Carlo Mangio, *La polizia toscana. Organizzazione e*

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originally set out to help fill this historiographical gap. It aimed to provide a local case history of Italian policing which would duck beneath the theoretical umbrella of legislation and observe the police in a real social setting across time. Bologna was selected for the study because after three months of slogging through various cities in Italy it became apparent that its police archives were among the best preserved from the nineteenth century. Moreover, as a provincial capital, rather than a national one, Bologna's police history was somewhat comparable to that of most Italian cities, which had to deal with orders emanating from a detached and distant headquarters. In addition, Bologna sported a lively tradition of local history which included some of the most important and productive social historians in Italy. In particular, the works of Luigi Dal Pane, Carlo Poni, Renato Zangheri, and Athos Bellettini made the reconstruction of Bolognese society a much easier task, and left more time to focus on the police as an institution.

On one level, then, this book is simply a detailed administrative history of Bologna's police system. In a narrative fashion, it describes the papal government's attempts after the Restoration to maintain the centralized police apparatus erected by the French during the Napoleonic occupation. It was adopted not so much as an instrument of social control or public security but rather as a means of reinforcing the absolute authority of the Pope over his temporal dominions. This administrative chronicle shows as well the many efforts to reform Bologna's new police institution when it failed to deal effectively with the prevailing problems of the day, including political conspiracy, rampant unemployment, widespread poverty, and endemic crime in both the city and the countryside. A major theme of these reforms was the growing belief that effective policing depended more on consistent deterrent patrol by uniformed officers than on individualized exceptional measures, such as preventive arrest, special surveillance, or restraining orders. After 1840, this attitude was greatly reinforced by the burgeoning reputation of the London Metropolitan Police force as a model of efficiency and respectability, both of which the papal police sadly lacked. But all meaningful movements towards reform of the police would be hamstrung by the political and financial constraints of the regime as well as by the inveterate opposition to change on the part of the papal curia. When real change did come with Pius IX in 1846 it was soon swept up in the tide of European revolution, leaving the restored papal government in 1849 ever more inflexible in its attitude towards bureaucratic renovation.

criteri di intervento (1765–1808), Milan: 1988; and Giorgia Alessi, *Giustizia e polizia, il controllo di una capitale, Napoli 1779–1803*, Naples: 1992.

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In the course of digging this administrative story out of the archives, however, it became apparent that the consistent failure of the regime to reform its police, combined with the deteriorating social situation in Bologna, had serious ramifications for the temporal power of the papacy. Although I had always assumed that the history of Bologna's police would be influenced by political considerations, it came as a shock to find that, conversely, Bologna's politics were constantly being shaped by problems of policing. Consequently, what had originally been intended as purely an administrative history rapidly matured into a reinterpretation of the Risorgimento as it unfolded in the Papal States, and the subtitle "The Politics of Policing in Bologna" clearly reflects the wider causal dimension of the final text.

For all its pages of prose, the main theme of this study is really rather simple. It suggests that the papal regime adopted a modern centralized police system to enhance its absolute power as an administrative monarchy. By centralizing power, however, the new regime also centralized responsibility, eliminating useful buffer institutions at the local level. Even minor matters of sanitation and traffic thus reflected on the regime in Rome, while major problems like poverty and death struck at the very heart of papal legitimacy. The papal police could not shake their image as arbitrary and capricious watchdogs of the Pope's absolute prerogatives, yet they appeared incapable of eliminating the basic dangers facing Bologna's citizens. Specifically, their inability to prevent certain types of street crime made it seem as if society might be slipping into anarchy. Combined with hordes of beggars, insolent servants, and radical agitators, these crimes signalled for Bologna's elites the progressive deterioration of social hierarchy. Not only did this fear of crime eventually help discredit the sovereignty of the Pope, but it also mobilized Bologna's elites into organizations of self defense that naturally had political overtones. Twice within a twenty-year period (1828 and 1846) the papal government had to allow Bologna's elites to arm themselves in posse-style Citizen Patrols because of the pressure of rising crime; and in both of these cases the Patrols led to the formation of a Civic Guard that became a rallying point of reform and eventually revolution. Thus the failure of the papal police to assure public order not only kept the regime off balance but helped organize the opposition as well.

Understanding these problems of policing also makes the major political events of the period more intelligible. It helps explain why conservative and cautious men came to lead the revolution of 1831 and why their alternatives of action were so limited. It further illuminates the growth in the 1840s of a moderate program of reform that stressed

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education and employment as the keys to a successful and peaceful society. Finally, the complete failure of public security during the revolution of 1848 and 1849 offers new evidence for why the Roman Republic lacked support in Bologna, and why, in the wake of the restoration, those interested in politics began to look north to Piedmont for a program of “order and war.” Crime and public disorder were not the only factors affecting the Risorgimento in the Papal States, but they were among the most important and they have hitherto been cast aside by historians as excuses for rather than causes of political action.

The only exception to this historiographical tendency has been John Davis, whose book *Conflict and Control: Law and Order in Nineteenth Century Italy* was published after the original version of this work was completed.² Davis has done an exceptional job of depicting the social scene in Italy during the Risorgimento period and has stressed as well the importance of crime and disorder as a political issue among Italian elites. But because of its temporal and geographical breadth, covering all of the peninsula from 1750 to 1900, Davis’ book remains very general in its approach and does not delve beneath the surface to portray the causal dynamics of politics and policing at the local level, especially with regard to the significance of civic guards and other voluntary organizations of public security. Likewise, Davis deals very little with the Papal States. His treatment of the problem, however, confirms the basic themes that follow and suggests that Bologna’s problems of policing, crime, and public order – and their resulting political impact – were not specific to the Papal States, but rather serve as a key to understanding the unification process in other parts of Italy.

Also in contrast to Davis, the present work attempts to deal with the problem of quantifying crime during the period. Although not vital to the central thesis, which is based on the perception rather than the reality of criminality, the available statistical evidence suggests that Bologna did undergo large fluctuations in the frequency of certain “confrontational” crimes such as mugging and assault to which the Bolognesi were particularly sensitive. Moreover these fluctuations corresponded chronologically with the elites’ complaints of insecurity and the rise of the aforementioned posse groups. In order not to break the flow of the narrative, these statistics and discussion of their reliability have been set apart in an appendix at the end. It is further argued that there may have been some connection, albeit a rough one, between popular politics and various sorts of crime. Indeed, it seems that the most politically active sectors of Bologna’s lower classes also tended to be the groups most

² John Davis, *Conflict and Control: Law and Order in Nineteenth-century Italy*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: 1988, especially pp. 1–187.

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suspected of criminal activities. What this suggests, in combination with the fluctuations in crime, is that Bologna's complaints against the papal police and against the regime in general were neither contrived nor misplaced, but arose from very real conditions. Bologna's elites may have overreacted to the danger, but they were not necessarily wrong about what was happening in the streets nor about the basic economic and demographic causes of disorder in the province.

In preparation, something must also be said about the term "elites," which has already started to creep into the text. The term avoids many of the pitfalls of more exclusive categories such as aristocracy and bourgeoisie. While it is true that Bolognese society was heavily dominated by the agrarian nobility, there were sizable groups of landed commoners and propertied professionals who could influence their noble neighbors.³ Wealthy merchants, lawyers, and professors all enjoyed substantial status within the city and usually held common cause with those who relied on their estates for their livelihood. Certainly in the documents of the day the major divisions in Bologna's social system were those between "civil" citizens who had property to lose and the *popolo*, the masses who used their bodies to earn their bread. Petitions to the papal legate complaining about crime and other matters were inevitably signed by a mixture of nobles, *rentiers*, and professionals that confused standard demarcations of social class. Consequently, it seemed best to opt for the more generalized term "elites" and then differentiate further where absolutely necessary.

In sum, the history of Bologna's police is also the history of the city, and in some ways the history of the country. The failure of the police in both image and performance ultimately led to the alienation of just those groups that should have been most closely tied to the forces of law and order. Papal administrators felt that by adopting the police mechanism of a great continental state they had inherited the means of assuring absolute temporal power, a dream long sought but never achieved by the papacy. Instead, that mechanism could operate only as efficiently as the economic and bureaucratic backwardness of the Papal States would allow. The story that follows then suggests that overly centralized power placed on an incomplete political and social substructure can lead to instability rather than control. The modern police are now a global phenomenon, and many an emerging nation is trying to use them as a means of legitimizing its existence, but the papal police should serve as a warning of what can happen if the pretense of power exceeds its capabilities.

³ Dominique Schnapper, "Storia e sociologia: uno studio su Bologna," *Studi storici*, 1967, pp. 558–559.

CHAPTER I

**SETTING THE STAGE: BOLOGNA,
THE ANCIEN RÉGIME, AND NAPOLEON**

A striking city of ubiquitous red roofs, circuitous streets, and massive porticoed sidewalks, Bologna sits between the Reno and Idice rivers where they escape out of the Apennines to journey north across the valley of the Po. Nestled against verdant hills of surprising beauty that open on to a plain of rich farmland, Bologna currently offers the appearance of a terra-cotta sculpture in a garden of abundance. In the nineteenth century, this portrait was all the more picturesque because great turreted walls, punctuated and perforated by twelve elaborate gates, still surrounded the city. Within the walls, solid parish churches dominated their neighborhoods, rivaled only by the massive *palazzi* of the major families, whose pedigrees dated back to the sixteenth century, if not before. Squarely in the middle of the city, the elegant Piazza Maggiore – bounded by thirteenth-century public halls, fifteenth-century luxury apartments, and an enormous unfinished Gothic cathedral – served as the geographic and symbolic center of social and political activity. Nearby were the fancy painted hallways of the Archigennasio which had once been the seat of the University of Bologna, an institution going back to the twelfth century and a source of great pride to the Bolognesi. Overlooking it all, stood the Garisenda and Asinelli Towers, inverted analogs of Bologna's long medieval roots.

Such sturdy ostentation bespoke the city's past prosperity, based in large part on its political and economic domination of the surrounding province and its rich agricultural produce. Although this included grains, grapes, and livestock for local consumption, large amounts of land and labor in the early modern period were also devoted to hemp and to a lesser extent silk, both of which went to the city for transformation into finished export goods. Thus in 1780 over 16 per cent of the arable acreage was planted in hemp, usually in rotation with wheat. In consequence, the province did not grow enough cereals to feed the city, but it could generally count on surpluses from the

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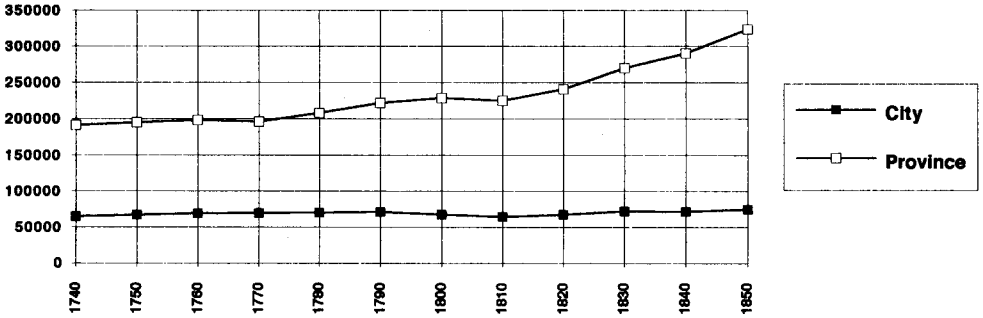
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Graph 1 Population of the city and province of Bologna 1740–1850.
 Specific years estimated from data in Athos Bellettini and Franco Tassinari, *Fonti per lo studio della popolazione del suburbio di Bologna da secolo XVI alla fine dell'ottocento*, Bologna, 1977, p. 45.

adjoining regions of Ferrara and Ravenna to even out the balance. Overall, Bologna's countryside had remained remarkably stable since the sixteenth century, but during the eighteenth century some important changes started to occur. First and foremost, maize gradually began to rival wheat as the major grain of the region. It offered higher yields and a greater abundance of food for the rural population, which, as evident in Graph 1, began to expand after 1750, much the same as elsewhere in Europe. In addition, rice culture was introduced at the end of the eighteenth century, and with its need for heavy capital investment and for a more organized work force it initiated a significant break with traditional forms of production and land tenure which would have important consequences later on. Finally, the production of raw silk began to slip as demand from the city lessened in response to growing foreign competition.¹

Bologna's rural economy derived much of its stability from the centuries old system of land tenure known as *mezzadria* or sharecropping.² Complete with its own rigid hierarchy and rituals, *mezzadria* was based on extended families working individual holdings or *poderi* and then splitting the produce, according to precise contract arrangements, with absentee landlords. Strict rules governed the lives of the *mezzadri*, who were under the dictatorial control of the male head of household, or *reggitore*, who in turn had to answer to the landlord. The

¹ Luigi Dal Pane, *L'economia bolognese nell'età del Risorgimento*, Bologna: 1969, pp. 68, 77, 94–99, 103–104.

² Carlo Poni, "Family and 'Podere' in Emilia Romagna," *The Journal of Italian History*, Autumn 1978, pp. 201–234.

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reggitore allocated duties, determined work schedules, and maintained family discipline, although even he had to operate according to long-standing customs which controlled courtship, marriage, inheritance, and even sleeping arrangements. The life of the mezzadri was not an easy one. Aside from the social rigidity of the system, they worked very hard, especially during the planting and harvesting season, and some crops such as hemp required a great deal more labor than others. For all of this they received a stable domicile and a fairly regular diet of wheat or corn, occasionally enhanced by chicken or meat. Nevertheless, sharecroppers could and did count themselves lucky compared to the *braccianti* or day laborers, who worked for daily wages and rented what lodgings they could. These folk often drifted from job to job and constantly lived on the edge of dearth and misery. On the bottom of the hierarchy and excluded from marrying into the sharecropping system, they created a rural proletariat which was feared as a common source of trouble, crime, and disorder.³ Social control, if not harmony, depended on most of the rural population finding a niche within the sharecropping hierarchy, which in turn depended on the ratio of land to people and the willingness of the landlords to maintain their mezzadria contracts. These clearly operated to the advantage of the landowners, who gained a disciplined work force and a reasonable return from their land with minimal investment of either money or worry. Since contracts were renewed each year they could always use the threat of dismissal to control their tenants, and this power was often compounded by debts incurred by the mezzadri over the year. On the down side, the landowners lost some flexibility because the conventions and tools of mezzadria allowed for little innovation or experimentation, but this was usually not a problem because of the conservative nature of Bologna's agricultural elites who were themselves caught up in the rhythms and rituals of past practice.⁴

Bologna's rural economy was closely tied to that of the city. Most of the province's landowners lived there and their households constituted an important source of urban consumption. Likewise, most rural goods had to come to the city for market and unless the owner enjoyed some special exemption they were subject to the municipal *dazio* or tax. Perhaps most important, many of the city's workers and merchants depended for their livelihood on the manufacture and export of various agriculturally based products. These included soap, paper, linens,

³ On braccianti see Isabella Rosoni, *Criminalità e giustizia penale nello Stato Pontificio del secolo XIX: un caso di banditismo rurale*, Milan: 1988, pp. 49–63; and Domenico Demarco, *Il tramonto dello Stato Pontificio: Il papato di Gregorio XVI*, Turin: 1949, pp. 55–61.

⁴ Dal Pane, *L'economia*, p. 76.

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woolens, and of course *mortadella* sausages, which would eventually carry the city's name around the world. But the two major pillars of Bologna's early modern urban economy were unquestionably hemp and silk, which were sold outside of the province as finished textiles. Indeed, in the early 1790s, out of an urban population of around 70,000, approximately 5,000 people worked in hemp, and another 12,000 were engaged in some aspect of silk manufacture. Much of the latter was organized around rather sophisticated "silk mills" requiring substantial investment in plant and technology, and in this sense economic historians have described Bologna as a city with "industrial sectors," despite their appearance before the age of coal and iron and the fact that they were still overseen by guild structures.⁵ Unfortunately, both of these industries were in decline at the end of the eighteenth century, and by 1791 the city fathers were talking about a major crisis in silk production and what to do about the social consequences of the resulting unemployment.⁶ Despite its past prosperity, Bologna's economy was in a particularly vulnerable position as it entered the new century.⁷

Bologna was not in a good position to respond to change in either the city or the countryside, because both society and politics were dominated by the conservative landed nobility.⁸ Although they accounted for only some 3 per cent of the population, in the eighteenth century they still owned about three fourths of all the private land in the province. Their urban households offered employment for many servants, just as their taste for luxury goods helped local artisans. Furthermore, their networks of patronage reached deep into the lower classes, providing a network of informal welfare and social control. Their formal political power resided in the *Senato*, consisting of forty of the city's most important families. From their ranks were chosen the top municipal officials and the *assunterie* – specialized committees which oversaw many aspects of the city's administration, including the workers' guilds.⁹ In return for their service, the nobility received numerous privileges, of which by far the most important was their exemption from various fiscal duties, especially the property tax.

⁵ Carlo Poni, "Per la storia del distretto industriale serico di Bologna (secoli XVI–XIX)," *Quaderni storici*, April, 1990, pp. 93–167; Dal Pane, *L'economia*, pp. 231, 272–273, 291–292. ⁶ Poni, "Per la storia," pp. 149–150.

⁷ For hemp see Umberto Marcelli, *Saggi economico-sociali sulla storia di Bologna*, Bologna: 1962, pp. 81–89.

⁸ Angela De Benedicittis, *Patrizi e comunità: il governo del contado bolognese nel '700*, Bologna: 1984.

⁹ Dal Pane, *L'economia*, pp. 171, 396, 416, and 444; Enzo Piscitelli, "Le classi sociali a Bologna nel secolo XVII," *Nuova rivista storica*, 1954, pp. 79–93.

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This fit into the general pattern of papal politics, distinguished by the successful efforts of the aristocrats and their religious counterparts, the cardinals, to remain free of the central control of the Pope, who was in theory unfettered in his absolute rule by parliaments, courts, or statutes. As both spiritual and temporal potentate, his word was incontestable. Yet the reality of the Pope's power in no way matched the pretense. Aristocrats, feudatories, and municipalities fought tenaciously to maintain their autonomy against attempts to centralize more power in Rome. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Pope could boast many of the trappings of absolute government: a stable border, a prestigious capital, and a nascent bureaucracy, complete with a centralized treasury.¹⁰ Papal rule in the early modern period outside of Rome, however, has been described by recent historians as relying on "mediation through privilege"; that is allowing local aristocrats substantial autonomy while maintaining the public appearance of sovereignty.¹¹ Such was more or less the case in Bologna; the central government was represented by a cardinal legate, who in theory was the highest authority in the province, but his power was balanced by the Senate, which made many critical decisions and generally did what it wanted. Indeed, the autonomy and importance of Bologna's Senate was formally recognized in that it was allowed to maintain a permanent ambassador in Rome, a right usually extended only to sovereign powers.

Although the eighteenth century had seen various attacks from Rome on the hegemony of the Senato, its members had defended both their power and their privileges with remarkable success. Their greatest triumph had come in the 1780s after Pope Pius VI ordered a complete tax census to be made of landed property in Bologna as part of a general reform inspired by "enlightened" principles of efficiency. To put teeth in this new economic program – aimed directly at the fiscal privileges of Bologna's nobility – he appointed a new "progressive" legate, Cardinal Ignazio Boncompagni, and put a contingent of papal troops at his disposal.¹² In 1780, for the first time in the city's history, the Pope's army took permanent control of Bologna's walls and gates. Yet

¹⁰ Paolo Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice*, Bologna: 1982, pp. 167–189, and *Lo sviluppo dell'assolutismo nello Stato Pontificio*, Bologna: 1968, p. 10; Giampiero Carocci, *Lo stato della Chiesa nella seconda metà del sec. XVI*, Milan: 1961, pp. 55–128.

¹¹ E.g. Cesarina Casanova, *Le mediazioni del privilegio: economie e poteri nelle legazioni pontificie del '700*, Bologna: 1984; and Paolo Colliva, "Bologna dal XIV al XVIII secolo: 'governo misto' o signoria senatoria?," *Storia della Emilia Romagna*, Bologna: 1977, pp. 13–34.

¹² Enzo Piscitelli, *La riforma di Pio VI e gli scrittori economici romani*, Milan: 1958, pp. 57–71, 177–181; Marcelli, *Saggi*, pp. 114–116; Dal Pane, *L'economia*, pp. 162–168.