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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When we think about modern states we often envision statistical aggregates. Area, population, size of the gross national product, the level of the national debt, these are identifying features that we take for granted, as an obvious way of representing territorial entities. Yet numbers have not always enjoyed this position, and in fact their rise as a fundamental mode of representation is a relatively recent process. Although the first systematic attempts to provide numerical evaluation of the population and wealth of states can be traced back to the consolidation of modern states in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is particularly when the form of the nation-state imposed itself in Europe and America, in the late eighteenth and during the nineteenth century, that statistics became a widespread practice and attracted the solicitous attention of ruling elites and reformers alike.

Since Harald Westergaard's studies on the history of statistics, historians have been aware of the "enthusiasm" for social counting that gripped several European countries in the 1830s–1840s.¹ This enthusiasm led to the launching of specialized journals, the formation of statistical societies for the purpose of collecting numerical information on the most diverse social facts and phenomena, and the establishment and consolidation of state bureaus for the collection, classification, and analysis of increasing quantities of data which administrators and political leaders deemed essential for the guidance of political decisions and for the governing of society. It is well known for example that the business of parliamentary government in liberal England was largely based on a vast amount of statistical information collected and diffused by both state agencies and private "statistical societies" – the great collectors of "Facts" which Charles Dickens satirizes in his novel *Hard*

¹ *Contributions to the History of Statistics* (London, 1932). Westergaard uses the expression "era of enthusiasm" to refer to the period 1830–1849 (see pp. 136–171).

Times (1854).² In France, statistics flourished particularly during the Napoleonic regime which vigorously promoted the collection of information for administrative purposes;³ interest in the numerical description and analysis of society powerfully re-emerged among the French elites in the 1820s and 1830s, giving rise to authoritative institutions and publications.⁴ In the United States, from the very beginning of the nation's history, constitutional provisions linking the apportionment mechanism to census-taking brought statistics to the very center of political and social life.⁵ If perhaps not to the same extent as in these countries, a similar trend occurred in other states.

Besides being linked to the consolidation of modern states, the development of statistics in the nineteenth century paralleled the growth of a reading public and other historical processes to which we usually refer through the short-hand labels of industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of a mass society. Almost by definition, since statistics is the domain of large numbers, it may seem to be an ideal way of representing these large-scale processes; some have even maintained that statistics is “a perspective genuinely in harmony with the statistical structure of modern society.”⁶ Yet the reason why we think about modern societies the way we do, namely as aggregates of large numbers, is in turn the result of the very rise of statistics to a hegemonic status as a mode of representation – a process which did not

² On the parliamentary uses of statistics see D. Eastwood, “Amplifying the Province of Legislature: the Flow of Information and the English State in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Historical Research* 62 (1989), pp. 276–294; on British statistical societies see M. J. Cullen, *The Statistical Movement in Early Victorian Britain. The Foundations of Empirical Social Research* (New York, 1975); V. L. Hilts, “*Aliis extendum*, or, the Origins of the Statistical Society of London,” *Isis* 69 (1978), pp. 21–43.

³ See *La Statistique en France à l'époque napoléonienne*, Journée d'étude, Paris, 14 février 1980 (Brussels, 1981); J.-C. Perrot and S. J. Woolf, *State and Statistics in France 1789–1815* (London, 1984); M.-N. Bourguet, *Déchiffrer la France. La statistique départementale à l'époque napoléonienne* (Paris, 1988).

⁴ On the various aspects of nineteenth-century statistical investigation in France (crime statistics, public hygiene, etc.) see the essays in the collective volume *Pour une histoire de la statistique* (Paris, 1977). For a general overview see H. Le Bras, “La Statistique Générale de la France,” in P. Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de la mémoire*, vol. II, *La Nation* (Paris, 1986), pp. 317–353. See also S. J. Woolf, “Statistics and the Modern State,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (1989), pp. 588–603.

⁵ See P. C. Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America* (Chicago and London, 1982); M. J. Anderson, *The American Census. A Social History* (New Haven and London, 1988).

⁶ K. H. Metz, “Paupers and Numbers: The Statistical Argument for Social Reform in Britain during the Period of Industrialization,” in L. Krüger, L. J. Daston, and M. Heidelberger, eds., *The Probabilistic Revolution*, vol. 1, *Ideas in History* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1987), p. 338.

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arise automatically from social transformations, but has in fact a complex history. It is the story of this rise in a specific historical setting that I tell in this book by focusing on the case of nineteenth-century Italy.

In the histories of positivism and the social sciences, nineteenth-century Italy stands out almost exclusively as the country which produced Cesare Lombroso and his school of criminal anthropology, the epitome of a stultifying application of measurements and numbers to the understanding of human differences. Although Lombroso will make an appearance towards the end of this story, this book does not deal with him or his followers, but focuses on an earlier period, the years between the Restoration of 1815 and the early 1870s which were characterized by the movement for Italian independence and unification and by the first efforts at national integration. In the period before the proclamation of the Kingdom in 1861, statistical investigations were strongly promoted and developed by “opposition intellectuals” in their struggle against domestic “autocratic” regimes and foreign domination.⁷ Journals largely devoted to statistics were founded in places as diverse as Milan and Palermo. From the 1830s on several private researchers undertook to describe not only single communities and provinces, but also the condition of the peninsula as a whole, as if Italy were already a unified country. During the same period, the absolute governments re-established by the Congress of Vienna collected statistics for diverse administrative purposes, at first keeping their results secret but later increasingly making them public.

Historians of Italy have often used this literature in their reconstructions of the economic and social conditions of the Italian states before unification, and to portray the condition of the new state at the beginning of its existence. The debates on statistics which took place in the 1820s and 1830s have been studied by historians of economic thought as episodes in the formation of the specific inflection of political economy that prevailed in the Italian states of the first half of the nineteenth century. Aurelio Macchioro has coined the word *statisticismo* to indicate a political economy which clung to its old identity of

⁷ “Opposition intellectuals” is an expression used by M. Berengo, “Intelletuali e organizzazione della cultura nell’età della Restaurazione,” in *La Restaurazione in Italia. Struttura e ideologie. Atti del XLVII Congresso di Storia del Risorgimento italiano* (Rome, 1976), pp. 297–307. As for “intellectuals,” I find it useful to think about this category in the way that Katherine Verdery, following the lead of Zygmunt Bauman, does: “sometime occupants of a site that is privileged in forming and transmitting discourses, in constituting thereby the means through which society is ‘thought’ by its members” (*National Ideology under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu’s Romania* [Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford, 1991], p. 17).

empirical discipline;⁸ Roberto Romani has recently emphasized the long-lasting presence of a “culture of observation” among nineteenth-century Italian economists.⁹ The importance that statistics had for the new ruling elites after the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy (1861) has been underlined in studies which have stressed how it became the self-legitimizing ideology of the new state apparatus engaged in the process of nation-building.¹⁰ During the first decade of existence of the new state, the publication of grand statistical summaries actually constituted, as Raffaele Romanelli has observed, one of the few truly “national” manifestations of the country.¹¹

But if historians of Italy have thus often noticed that the ruling elites’ first knowledge of the country was of a statistical nature,¹² and have written extensively on the politics of Italian positivism,¹³ yet they have not investigated the cognitive implications and the “reality effects” of this practice of knowledge. Nor have they investigated how it contributed to the understanding of what Italy was about, or how it shaped the image of this entity both before and after its existence as an independent state. This study will explore precisely these issues and will contend that in Italy statistics not only performed a work of ideological and political legitimation, but also contributed to the creation, the “production” as it were, of the Italian nation, that is of the very entity that they were supposed to describe.

What do I mean by this statement? It is important to explain here how I use the term “statistics” since it has several and historically changing meanings. In today’s ordinary use, the word “statistics” refers not only to the methodology for the treatment of quantitative data, but

⁸ A. Macchioro, “La Raccolta Custodi di ‘Scrittori Classici di Economia’ fra la statistica e l’economia politica,” in D. Rota, ed., *Pietro Custodi tra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione. Atti del Primo Convegno Nazionale* (Lecco, 1989), pp. 139–164.

⁹ See R. Romani, *L’economia politica del Risorgimento italiano* (Turin, 1994), p. 26.

¹⁰ See R. Romanelli, “La nuova Italia e la misurazione dei fatti sociali. Una premessa,” *Quaderni storici* 15 (1980), pp. 765–778. This essay is the introduction to a monographic issue of the journal devoted mainly to the study of the political context of the production, and the actual outcome, of several statistical investigations in post-unification Italy.

¹¹ R. Romanelli, *L’Italia liberale (1861–1900)* (Bologna, 1979), pp. 8–9.

¹² Besides the already mentioned works by Romanelli, see E. Ragionieri, “La storia politica e sociale,” in *Storia d’Italia*, vol. iv, *Dall’Unità a oggi* (Turin, 1976), pp. 1714–1716.

¹³ On the period before unification see for example G. C. Marino, *La formazione dello spirito borghese in Italia* (Florence, 1974); among recent contributions on the post-unification period see G. Sola, “Sviluppi e scenari della sociologia italiana: 1861–1890,” in G. Barbano and G. Sola, *Sociologia e scienze sociali in Italia 1861–1890. Introduzioni critiche e repertorio bibliografico* (Milan, 1985), and R. Camurri, ed., *La scienza moderata. Fedele Lampertico e l’Italia liberale* (Milan, 1992).

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also to the data themselves and to the practice of collecting these data performed by the state or by private agencies or individuals. In this book I will also use the term “statistics” in its nineteenth-century meanings to refer both to a specific governmental science and to a genre of writing which employed numbers to describe territorial entities and collectivities – a mode of representation which first emerged in the mid-eighteenth century and became very popular throughout the following century.¹⁴ When I say that statistics contributed to the “production” of the Italian nation I mean to refer, on the one hand, to the place that statistics occupied in the formation of a liberal and nationalist outlook and, on the other hand, to the contribution it gave to the very imagining and shaping of a national space.¹⁵

Risorgimento nationalism is a topic from which recent historiography, especially in Italy, has shied away. Both general historiographical trends of the past few decades (the rise of social history) and the troubled relation of Italians with their national identity, especially after the disastrous experience of fascism and of World War II, have made the issue of Italian nationalism an altogether unpopular topic of investigation. There is of course an old tradition of studies on the ideas of nationalist thinkers – Giuseppe Mazzini primarily, and the moderates such as Vincenzo Gioberti and Cesare Balbo – but little innovative research from new perspectives has appeared in recent years.¹⁶ In this book I do not deal directly with nationalist ideology, with the ideas of major or secondary thinkers of nationalist sentiment, but I look at the making of the nation which took place in the practices of description

¹⁴ When I use the term in the plural I mean the actual numbers and the texts in which they are collected, in the singular all the other meanings of the word. Necessarily in several cases it will be the reader’s task to elicit from the context the sense in which the term is being used.

¹⁵ I use the term “production” to stress that statistics, like any representation, do not merely “reflect,” but “supplement” reality and contribute to its making: see D. LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” in D. LaCapra and S. L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp. 47–85. On representations as social practices see R. Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (London, 1988).

¹⁶ For an updated discussion of these issues see L. Riall, *The Italian Risorgimento. State, Society and National Unification* (London, 1994), ch. 5. For a recent overview of nineteenth-century Italian nationalism see A. Lyttelton, “The National Question in Italy,” in M. Teich and R. Porter, eds., *The National Question in Europe in Historical Context* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 63–105. F. Chabod’s 1943–1944 lectures on ideas of nationality in Italy and Europe (*L’idea di nazione*, ed. A. Saitta and E. Sestan [Bari, 1961]) are still a useful introduction to Risorgimento nationalism, as well as a touching document of Chabod’s attempt to affirm a democratic idea of nation amidst the tragedies brought about by the extreme nationalisms of this century.

of a “literature of facts” that aimed at producing an authoritative image of Italy based on “positive,” that is numerical, knowledge.

While nationalism became a central political issue on the agenda of the Italian moderates only after 1848, already before then debates, projects and writings about statistics constituted an organic component of the epistemological and ideological battle which liberal writers conducted in order to create a public opinion favorable to the cause of economic progress and the reform of government structures. As the dialogue and the exchanges taking place between intellectuals across the various Italian states show, this public opinion was increasingly national. In these states, I will argue, the practice of statistical writing was the expression of the awareness, widespread among the educated elites, of the relative backwardness of Italian society; it was part of their attempt to modify that condition and had an important pedagogical value. From the 1820s and throughout the 1850s authors of statistical works engaged in a work of description of individual localities or of the whole of Italy which embodied an aspiration to re-ordering and rationalizing society and to the exercise of power. They established new taxonomies reflecting bourgeois values and aspirations. The liberal reformers’ projects of modernization of society and the state were predicated on an interest in economic development and the introduction of representative institutions, and on their anxiety and fears about the consequences of uncontrolled economic change and popular unrest. A more effective government of society meant for them the capacity to check all possible threats to the social order. But making government more effective was a goal to which Restoration rulers too could not be indifferent since they faced severe difficulties in governing societies increasingly disrupted by economic change and political turmoil.¹⁷ They could not ignore the advantages offered by a statistical surveillance, as it were, over the societies they ruled, and therefore did not dismantle the structures for data collection which in most cases they had inherited from the Napoleonic regimes. In fact they even created new ones, with uneven results.

After 1848, some nationalist liberals explicitly enrolled statistics in the cause of national independence as one of their tools for the creation of a new “fatherland.” Statistics, which liberals considered a fundamental institution of representative government, destined to spread with the diffusion of liberal institutions, then became part of the project of a minority – but a very vocal minority – which aimed at the

¹⁷ For a detailed overview of the problems of “public order” faced by Restoration governments see J. A. Davis, *Conflict and Control: Law and Order in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (London and Atlantic Highlands, N. J., 1988).

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building of an Italian nation-state capable of becoming a significant presence in the arena of the advanced European nations. In that context, I argue, descriptive statistics had a “constitutive” function which its proponents did not fail to deploy as a tool in their political struggle. In the hands of supporters of the national cause such as Pietro Maestri and Cesare Correnti they truly became “patriotic” statistics,¹⁸ instruments of nationalist propaganda aiming to show the viability of the future nation. In the Kingdom of Italy, I further argue, statistics continued to perform a constitutive task by offering the new ruling elites the help of “scientific” observation in order to address and solve contentious issues facing the new state. The proliferation of statistical investigations in the 1860s was directly linked to problems of governance and aimed at mapping the distribution of people, resources and institutions on the national territory; statisticians monitored the development of the population and attempted to check the performance of local government in the context of the new liberal institutions.

Statistical investigations and descriptions were predicated on an idea of the nation as an object to be known, measured, compared, and governed. Various conceived in terms of territorial boundaries, Italy appeared essentially as an ensemble of resources; the “people,” understood by romantic nationalism as the bearers of a common language and culture, and especially of a collective will, were absent from statistical descriptions except as population, namely as a fundamental resource to be governed. They made up a society of which the state was the “tutor,” its paternal and paternalistic educator and the enforcer of social discipline. This vision fitted well the ideology of the Italian moderate liberals whose interest in change and reform coincided to a large extent with what they considered useful and necessary to prevent greater and uncontrollable change.

But statistics also created a particular image of the national space, they gave a body to an abstract entity. Of course, they were not the only genre of writing that tried to give a body to this abstract entity; other discourses, notably history, a favored genre of patriotic authors, and geography, did the same. What was specific about the image of Italy created by statistics? What distinguished and distinguishes statistics as a mode of representation? This book tries to answer these questions by tracing the projects, expectations, and conflicts that surrounded the writing of statistics at the moment of its first rise to prominence and by analyzing the logics of statistical descriptions. From a conceptual stand-

¹⁸ This role of statistics had already been noticed by C. Pazzagli, “Statistica ‘investigatrice’ e scienze ‘positive’ nell’Italia dei primi decenni unitari,” *Quaderni storici* 15 (1980), p. 797.

point the three genres I just mentioned, were, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, much closer than they are today. Many of the works defined by early nineteenth-century writers as statistical were largely qualitative and difficult to distinguish from works of political geography. Statistical works moreover sometimes incorporated historical narratives; and the famous phrase coined by August Ludwig von Schlözer in the early 1800s – “History is a statistics in movement, statistics is stationary history”¹⁹ – which pointed to the common object of both, the state, continued to make sense for some time in the nineteenth century.

This proximity was partly due to the fact that the three genres shared a similar genealogy: in one form or another these modes of writing were all actively engaged in the service of the modern state. Since the sixteenth century at least, as Michel De Certeau has observed, historical discourse “provides [power] with a familial, political or moral genealogy.”²⁰ As an academic discipline history was promoted in the nineteenth century to glorify the national state; where national states did not yet exist national elites enrolled history in their cause.²¹ As the knowledge of the king’s lands, geography too developed in an organic relation with the growth of state institutions; historically it had served the military needs of state elites, the practice of military reconnaissance providing in turn a model for the geographer’s observation. In the nineteenth century, with the growth of nationalism and the nation-state, geography acquired new tasks and functions, and was taught in schools, along with history, to arouse “love of fatherland” in the hearts of prospective citizens.²²

Recalling the proximity among these genres does not mean to deny the existence of obvious differences, which actually increased during the nineteenth century. While old descriptive geography was being questioned by a new geography of Humboldtian inspiration, statistical writings became more numerically oriented. This transformation was not without important epistemological and ideological consequences

¹⁹ *Theorie der Statistik nebst Ideen über das Studium der Politik überhaupt* (Göttingen, 1804), p. 86.

²⁰ *The Writing of History* (New York, 1988), p. 7.

²¹ Many decades ago Benedetto Croce pointed out the relation between the development of historical writing and the formation of a national consciousness in nineteenth-century Italy in his *Storia della storiografia italiana nel secolo decimonono*, 2nd edn. (Bari, 1930), especially ch. 5 in vol. I.

²² By saying this, I do not intend to rule out other matrices which shaped the development of geography. For a general overview of the history of geography see G. Dematteis, *Le metafore della Terra. La geografia umana tra mito e scienza* (Milan, 1985).

which we usually tend to take for granted. The way in which numbers construct and visualize entities of various kinds is distinctive and has consequences that go beyond their capacity for manipulation. Even more strongly than other forms of inscription, numbers insure the mobility of things by “immobilizing” them.²³ The use of numbers in the representation of the world is predicated upon procedures of classification and separation of the “identical” and the “different” which result in the building of a rigid perception of reality.²⁴ Applied to society, quantifying procedures, while making comparison easier (if not providing its only basis), give a concrete body to abstract entities and ideas, and make concrete things more abstract. The full sense of these observations will become apparent in the course of our account of the use of statistics in the representation of Italy.

STATISTICS AND OBJECTIFICATION

To look at statistics means to look at a particular component of elite culture. In the native land of Croce and Gramsci, where the traditions both of idealism and of historical materialism have exercised, and still exercise, a great influence, the history of the Italian elites' culture represents a prominent field of investigation. Scholars of diverse ideological orientation have worked predominantly along the traditional lines of intellectual history.²⁵ The conscious dimensions of ideas and systems of thought, seen either as the autonomous creation of intellectuals, or as the more or less mediated reflection of class interests, have been the major focus of investigation. In contrast little attention has been paid to the analysis of discursive practices and systems of representation from the standpoint of their own internal logic and specificity, of the “very devices, rhetorical articulations, and argumentative strate-

²³ Bruno Latour has called attention to this property possessed by all forms of inscription in “Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands,” *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present* 6 (1986), pp. 1–40.

²⁴ For important reflections on the characteristics of a knowledge based on procedures of classification and the search for the “identical” as it emerged in early modern culture see M. Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), esp. chs. 3 and 5.

²⁵ The essays on “culture” in the volumes of the *Storia d'Italia* published by Einaudi in the 1970s are paradigmatic in this respect. Things began to change slowly, however, in the 1980s; and the essays in the *Annali* of the same *Storia d'Italia* are indicative of an attention to some new perspectives and new subjects. For a critique of the study of culture in Italian historiography see also the introduction to the recent volume by S. Soldani and G. Turi, eds., *Fare gli italiani. Scuola e cultura nell'Italia contemporanea*, vol. 1, *La nascita dello stato nazionale* (Bologna, 1993), pp. 9–33.

gies”²⁶ which characterize them. In this book I try to combine a textual analysis of descriptive practices with an attention to the conscious projects and claims of individuals and groups. I am convinced that the adoption of this kind of approach – one that is partly inspired by the so-called “new cultural history”²⁷ – can bring a fresh perspective on the history of nineteenth-century Italian culture. By increasing an awareness of the complex interplay between ideologies and representations,²⁸ it can further a less ideologically constrained reading of the period and open new avenues of investigation.

Besides being in dialogue with the historiography on modern Italy, this book is also conversant with the growing body of literature which in recent years has been investigating the history of statistics in both its administrative and scientific dimensions – as a technology of power and knowledge, to employ a Foucauldian expression. In fact the original impulse to undertake the study that then evolved into this book came to me from a need to question assumptions and implications about the use of quantitative methodologies in history and the social sciences. Like many other social historians employing quantitative sources and methods in their work, in the mid- to late 1980s – partly in connection with a more general epistemological shift across the human sciences, which has come to be known as the “linguistic turn,” and partly out of a personal dissatisfaction with quantifying procedures – I began to feel a desire for a better understanding of the epistemological and rhetorical foundations of my work.²⁹ The new sensitivity for

²⁶ The expression is from R. Chartier’s rich introduction to his *Cultural History*, p. 10.

²⁷ See the introduction by L. Hunt to Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989).

²⁸ I tend to use the term ideology to mean a “system” or a “set” of beliefs (without implying unity and coherence), those “symbolic practices” which pertain to social action or political projects. There is a useful discussion in J. B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), although the author makes a plea for what he calls a “critical conception” of ideology on which I have many reservations. The notion of representation is not easy to pinpoint especially in its relation to ideology: representations could be seen as parts of ideologies, but they can also in turn “contain” the latter: see H. Lefebvre, *La Présence et l’absence. Contribution à une théorie des représentations* (Paris, 1980). I find particularly insightful M. Poovey’s work on gender representations, where these are defined as “part of the system of interdependent images through which ideologies be[come] accessible to individual men and women” and as “sites on which ideological systems were simultaneously constructed and contested” (*Uneven Developments. The Ideological Work of Gender in Victorian England* [Chicago, 1988], p. 2). I believe, however, as I will try to make clear in this book, that existing “technologies of knowledge” – statistics being one of them – play a role in shaping social representations.

²⁹ The literature on the linguistic turn is becoming immense. Still useful is J. E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of