MODERN ITALIAN SOCIAL THEORY
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Ideology and Politics from Pareto to the Present

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For my parents
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The present book originated from my Cambridge doctoral dissertation on the origins and political influence of the historical philosophy of Benedetto Croce. I am very grateful to those who helped with the original project and encouraged its expansion into the present form: namely my examiners Jonathan Steinberg and Maurice Cranston, and my supervisors Vittorio Sainati and Quentin Skinner. Professor Skinner has been particularly encouraging, giving me much invaluable advice at the planning stage, and his ideas have clearly influenced the form this study has taken.

Cambridge and Oxford are often portrayed as advocating incompatible approaches to the history of political thought. I have never accepted the implied distinction between historical and conceptual types of analysis, believing rather that the one requires the other. The Warden and Fellows of Nuffield College, by generously accepting me as a Research Fellow, enabled me to test my view that Oxford destinations are best arrived at by the Cambridge road. I
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INTRODUCTION

The unification of Italy – making the ideal real

The Italian state existed as a theoretical ideal long before it became a practical reality. Nineteenth-century Italian social and political theorists concentrated on constructing and agitating for an ideal Italian state united more by a shared culture than by common political institutions. They blamed the social and economic differences between classes and regions on the largely foreign-backed regimes which governed the various parts of the peninsula. When unification was achieved finally in 1861, it seemed to many intellectuals that, in the words of Carducci, ‘the epoch of the infinitely great had been followed by the farce of the infinitely small . . .’¹ Disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the reality of the political settlement linked thinkers of all ideological and methodological persuasions. For the earlier ideal continued to inspire the ideas and actions of Italian social theorists, although they had to turn their attention to finding new explanations to account for its failure to materialize. Thus fifty years later, when the editor of the Florentine journal La Voce sought a phrase representative of the diverse aspirations of his contributors,² he chose the words of Giovanni Amendola – ‘The Italy of today does not please us’ (L’Italia com’è oggi non ci piace).³ As I shall show below, the divergence between ‘the higher concept of life and individual morality’ of the intellectual elite and the values governing Italian political life formed a constant theme in the culture of modern Italy,⁴ and the tension between theory and practice became the main preoccupation of political thinkers from the Risorgimento to the Second World War.

This book provides an outline of the principal texts of the six main social and political theorists of this period: Pareto, Mosca, Labriola,
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Croce, Gentile and Gramsci, and a chapter on a discussion between two philosophers writing after 1945, della Volpe and Bobbio, concerning the policies of the Italian Communist Party. As such, I cannot pretend to offer a complete history of modern Italian social theory. However, I have not restricted myself simply to giving an account of the major works of the thinkers under consideration either. Some people conceive social theory as timeless ruminations on the eternal problems of political organization. Others, whilst acknowledging recurrent themes in the history of social thought, regard it as addressing a particular set of issues arising out of a given society at such-and-such a time. In adopting this latter approach, I consider two factors which served to place a range of problems on the agenda of Italian social theorists. The first is the social and economic condition of contemporary Italy, and the development of political institutions since 1870. The second is the intellectual tradition in which they thought and wrote. The questions they posed themselves were constrained and in part constituted by the norms of current political discourse. As a result, issues and difficulties which seem central to us today often did not arise for them, whilst they concentrated on many areas peripheral to or ignored by current social theorists. Reconstructing the political and intellectual contexts of the principal writings examined here has made it necessary to advert to more ephemeral literature, both by the chief protagonists and other, lesser, figures. A more complex history of Italian politics and ideology, therefore, underpins the analysis of the classic texts.

This dual perspective will, I hope, help in the examination of the key issue of the Italian political tradition – namely the relations between theory and action. The methodology outlined above is particularly relevant here, since the political intent of a given work can be inferred from the manner in which the author manipulated prevailing ideological assumptions concerning a particular practical context. Thus for some writers, notably Pareto, the connection between ideology and political behaviour was purely instrumental, presenting an *ex post facto* justification of action performed for quite different, usually irrational, motives. Others, like Gramsci, regarded the relationship between the two less cynically – they specifically sought to develop a critique of erroneous forms of thought and to elaborate an alternative political culture as the basis for a new politics. Both projects exploited similar ideological conventions to different political purposes – in Gramsci’s case with Pareto’s work and that of similarly-minded thinkers, such as Michels, in mind. In spite of their differences, both Gramsci and Pareto shared a common concern with a certain set of problems: the relationship of elites to
masses, the role of ideology in legitimating political power, the organization of parties, the rational arrangement of productive forces; and divided a similar lack of interest in other problems, such as constitutional and institutional questions. Thus whilst they challenged conventional wisdom on these issues, they were also subtly constrained by contemporary definitions of the political sphere. Understanding either theorist, therefore, involves an appreciation of the interrelationship between shifting political relations and alterations in intellectual conventions, not just to explain one by the other, but because of the mutual dependence and internal dynamics of both.

Finally, this method may shed light on the kind of political and intellectual environments which have generated some of the concepts and approaches of current social thought, revealing their contingent and necessary elements. The historical approach to social and political theory had often been charged with foreclosing the possibility of investigating the theoretical or conceptual validity of past bodies of thought, and thus of advocating antiquarianism. This characterization trivializes and misrepresents the relationship of social theory to its past. When we turn to the history of thought it is naturally and inevitably with our present concerns in mind. However, to learn from any thinker one must first try as far as possible to understand what they are saying in a historical context, and only then decide which issues we find relevant and reject others with little bearing on our own societies. Thus the ideas of the Levellers on liberty, property and democracy are still believed pertinent by some people today, but nobody, as far as I know, wants us to return to the framework of ancient constitutionalism within which they were originally developed. Yet it is because salient aspects of these theories only make sense within their original context that they have a limited application for us today – a fact revealed by an historical approach rather than a conceptual analysis which applies anachronistic and parochial standards.

Whilst knowledge of the origins of these ideas aids our understanding of their true force and limitations, to base our criteria of relevance solely on whether or not they echo our own beliefs and judgements would prevent our learning from the past. History renders an important service because it makes us aware both of the varieties of political discourse and of the evaluative assumptions implicit in our own. We can locate, for example, the different social and linguistic contexts to which political terms such as justice, liberty or democracy have referred in earlier times, perhaps forcing us to change or expand our ideas on the subject. The relevance of a
previous body of thought not infrequently derives from its dissimilarity to contemporary theories, helping us avoid incarceration within a present school of philosophy. The study of social and political concepts, in sum, is not a self-sufficient study, but requires history as its natural accompaniment. For these concepts change as social life changes; the two processes are inextricably linked. Thus in providing a historical survey of these thinkers, I wish neither to immure them in a museum, nor to provide a parentage for some pet theory of my own concerning the ills of modern society or their cure. Rather it is an investigation of a particular tradition of social and political thought, which by presenting familiar ideas on unfamiliar terrain will perhaps make us less confident to pronounce on the ‘invariant’ and ‘omnipresent . . . central features of our social experience’. Herein lies the ‘important educative task of intellectual history.’

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The above discussion risks becoming over-generalized and too programmatic. I shall therefore briefly describe the main elements of the socio-political and ideological contexts prevailing in 1860, and highlight a number of the core themes which recur in the six main thinkers explored in the rest of this book.

The social and political problems facing the new state were twofold. They consisted essentially of cultural and economic divisiveness between both the educated classes and the unschooled masses, and between the different Italian territories, particularly the developing north and the underdeveloped south. In 1861, 75% of the population were illiterate, and barely 8 per thousand head of population spoke the national language. Only 418,696, 1.9% of the population, had the right to vote, and of those just 57.2% exercised it in the elections. Provincial differences provided a further source of difficulty. The growing industrial zones of the north, around Turin and Milan, contrasted sharply with the declining peasant communities of the south, and the very different urban development of Naples and Palermo. This situation placed grave obstacles in the way of a unified and participatory political system. Regional interests inevitably prevailed over national ones, with the bulk of the population tied by tradition, language and economic necessity to the local sources of political power. This was especially true of the south, where landlords controlled the livelihood of the peasants so completely that few could afford to take an independent stance. The ‘southern question’ came to epitomize these problems, and, with the
exception of Pareto, it is significant that all the thinkers examined here came from the peripheral, mainly agricultural, areas of the mezzogiorno and Sardinia. As a group of writers, known as the meredionalisti or ‘southernists’, were at pains to show, unification had simply legalized the local oppression of the peasants by landowners and mafia bosses, and extended their ominous influence into national politics into the bargain. Indeed, more Italian troops died suppressing the groups of ‘brigands’ formed amongst southern peasants than in expelling the Austrians from the north.

Although the Italian parliament contained two broad groupings of deputies, the ‘Right’ and the ‘Left’, neither constituted real parties with the ideological and bureaucratic structures we expect today. The Right tended to come from amongst the aristocratic, land­owning class, who formed the liberal establishment and had engineered Italian unification. Principally from the north, with a traditional allegiance to the Savoy monarchy, they also had many prominent spokesmen amongst southern thinkers – not least the Neapolitan Hegelians De Sanctis and Silvio Spaventa, and subsequently Mosca and Croce. Their wealth and background gave them a reputation for disinterested service to the community, which contrasted strongly with the common view of the Left, as ‘unscrupulous manipulators and common fixers, with no personal convictions and no dignity.’

Lawyers rather than landowners, the Left’s foremost concerns were local and personal. Thus, whilst the Right favoured a more centralized government, somewhat inconsistently combined with a commitment to free trade and balanced budgets, the Left devised schemes which, by channelling central funds through to their friends in the municipalities, increased their local power base. Given the lack of party organization and the relations between national and local politics, the descent into clientalism seemed inevitable. In 1876 the parliamentary majority grouped around the Right finally broke down. Thereafter, governments rose and fell by the manipulation of state patronage to gain the support of different factions, whose only allegiance was to the highest bidder. The policy of trasformismo, as it came to be known (transforming an erstwhile opponent into a supporter by bribery and corruption), dominated the contemporary political scene, having its heyday under Giolitti, who effectively held office from 1900 to 1914 by means of this procedure.

All the theorists under discussion condemned this system, although Mosca and Croce revised their opinion following the rise of fascism. However the problem appeared insoluble. The two most frequently canvassed reforms were to widen the suffrage and decentralize local
government. But, as the Left's frequent support for such measures suggests, in the Italian context these schemes merely exacerbated the problem. Until the rise of organized labour, which many of these thinkers saw as just another interest group subjugating the rights of the individual, the electorate hardly had a will of its own. For they remained economically dependent on the only groups with the resources to seek office – the landowners and businessmen. Since no clash of interests or ideologies around which rival parties could form divided them, they remained what Gramsci termed 'an historical block' constituted of the dominant economic and social classes, which no extension of the vote could shift. Economically, the rural south provided a cheap source of materials and labour, and a market for the industrialized north. Politically the peasantry were in the pockets of the landowners, who traded their votes to the northern businessmen to maintain their respective power bases. As long as this system remained mutually beneficial, democratic procedures were little more than a facade behind which the dominant groups exploited the mass of the population.

The Risorgimento – the nineteenth-century movement for national unity – bequeathed a distinct intellectual legacy to the thinkers confronting this situation. Both the Giobertian catholic-liberal school and the republican democrats inspired by Mazzini had professed essentially eschatological ideologies, in which the unification of Italy was conceived as the realization of a national destiny. Both movements had placed great emphasis on the role of the people as carriers of this national consciousness – they constituted the 'real' nation in contrast with the largely foreign-backed regimes then governing various parts of the country. Whilst effective as a means of legitimizing the revolt against the de facto governments of the time, it had profound drawbacks once unity was achieved. As we have seen, the cultural and social cohesiveness such theories required was plainly lacking. They had attempted to gain the people's allegiance to the new state by invoking nationalism as a quasi-secular religion. Yet the vast majority of the populace remained faithful to the Catholic Church, which did not recognize the united Italy until after the First World War, and forbade participation in elections. In D'Azeglio's famous phrase, the Risorgimento had made Italy, but it had not made Italians. The intellectuals found themselves an isolated group, politically conscious yet rarely holding power, so that the divide between social theory and action seemed unbridgeable.

Basically two strategies developed for analysing society, reflecting the two main schools of nineteenth-century Italian thought –
Positivism and Idealism. The latter seemed particularly compromised by the reality of the new state, since they had explicitly adopted the Hegelian theory of the 'national spirit', or Volkgeist, as the basis of their political demands. 'The ideal of nationality', according to Silvio Spaventa, 'has been either the express subject or the intimate and vital material of the Italian movement.' It constituted the 'living consciousness of the state, because it is the intimate reflection of its own material in which human association is brought about, that is to say, the complex of the universal and distinctive characteristics of the people.' Once in government, as a member of the Right, Spaventa was confronted with the awesome task of 'making Italians', thereby reversing the original Hegelian formula of the nation creating the state. The 'heroic age' had passed, and a 'realist idealism' was called for, which would give practical content to the Hegelian's ideas by recognizing the 'limits' of the present. Machiavelli joined Hegel as a patron saint of their creed. The ideologues of the idealist school saw their chief task as residing in the creation of a native cultural tradition, believing 'political unity is not possible where there is no ethnic and linguistic homogeneity.' The chief products of this project were Bertrando Spaventa's studies on Italian philosophy, and Francesco De Sanctis' magisterial History of Italian Literature. Both works sought to prove that the ideals of modern philosophy formed part of the real development of history. Their political role as an intellectual elite lay in educating the rest of the population, principally through a national secular school and university system. As Silvio Spaventa wrote

We would not be fulfilling our duties if first of all we did not strive with all possible effort and expense, so that the culture, which illuminates the peaks of the social classes and was the principle of our Risorgimento, penetrates slowly into all the valleys and lower strata; and illuminates them with its light, germinating the seeds of intelligence, morality and human activity, which in large part are contained within them, so as to reap the fruits necessary for a healthy and robust national life.

They accepted that education alone would not transform the condition of the people. Silvio argued that the state must interfere in social and economic life 'to make the general interest triumph over the particular interests which fight it . . . It must promote universal well-being.' The masses 'desired to participate in the goods of life . . . And the civility of a people consists precisely in this . . . Civility is the unity of culture and well-being. One cannot call a people civilized, where only a few [have the capacity for] knowledge and
enjoyment, but a people amongst whom the majority know and enjoy is truly civilised. In Hegelian fashion, they regarded the state as an ethical unity, transcending and rendering possible the life of contracting individuals in civil society. ‘The state’, wrote Bertrando Spaventa, ‘must draw and concentrate within itself, in its universal substance, the dispersed and diverse individuals, unite in a single and common end the souls and wills of everyone.’ A common national spirit, inherent in the particular goal of each citizen, was the pre-requisite of a politically united Italian state. In the absence of a common culture its guardians, the intellectual elite, were justified in governing over the rest to secure those universal goods upon which the pursuit of all individual projects on an equitable basis depended.

This ambitious political programme later inspired, albeit in different ways, Labriola, Croce, Gentile and Gramsci. Cultural politics – the ethical transformation of society on the part of an intellectual elite – was an essential element of all four social theorists. Yet the project was compromised from the outset by the paradox that both aspects of their strategy – cultural and political reform – presupposed the other. The legitimacy of their social policies assumed the existence of a popular national culture, which in turn was unlikely to flourish without drastic changes in the political system – a fact discovered too late by Silvio Spaventa, whose party was indecorously ousted from office in 1876. Finding a real basis for their ideals proved an intractable problem.

Turning to the positivist school, one might hope to encounter a little more of the ‘clear thinking’ and ‘attention to reality’ which De Sanctis had urged upon his fellow idealists. However, despite differences in method and approach, the positivists shared remarkably similar beliefs about the difficulties attendant upon unification and their solution. Pasquale Villari, whose *Southern Letters* provided the spur for the empirical study of the ‘social question’, remained convinced that the chief problem was a lack of patriotic sentiment. He surmised that

If the Italian revolution had lasted half a century, without the need of outside help, it would certainly have created, through misfortunes, sacrifices, defeats and victories, a new generation; [which would have received] the great education which the sorrows suffered in a noble cause give to a people. But, instead, our patriotism was supported by diplomatic intrigue, outside help, and good luck, such that, in a very short time, with comparatively few sacrifices, we obtained the independence and political unity we’d so desired. And the old generation found itself faced with the colossal task of creating a new society within this new political form.
Villari similarly turned to Machiavelli and Vico for inspiration, and discovered therein a cultural political role for the intellectual class.\footnote{25} Positivism, no less than idealism, took on the character of a surrogate religion, an attempt to 'make Italians'. A younger generation than the idealists, and predominantly a northern movement, the theme of 'modernising' Italy replaced the search for national unity per se. They believed that by industrializing the country, particularly the south, they could solve the 'social question' of the exploited peasantry and indigent urban masses. A political harmony would gradually evolve, mirroring the interdependence of economic interests governed by free market relations. Once again it was a tradition with eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century forebears, reaching back to the political economists Antonio Genovesi and Carlo Cattaneo respectively.

As a result, they were less concerned with building up a native cultural tradition, identifying instead with European writers – particularly Mill, Spencer, Darwin, Comte and Taine. Yet the problem of social cohesion, and in particular of developing a common identity, remained the chief issue. Like the Hegelians they assumed the inner rationality of reality as the basis for linking the development of a unified civic consciousness with the creation of a united modern state. If the Hegelians interpreted this dual process in terms of the progressive unfolding of a metaphysical entity, Geist or Spirit, inherent in both the individual and society, the positivists believed the whole of reality could be interpreted in terms of certain basic physical laws.

Roberto Ardigò, the principal figure of Italian positivism was, like the idealist Bertrando Spaventa, an ex-priest, who transferred his allegiance to a new creed. He adapted Spencer's theory of an evolutionary development from a primordial homogeneity to greater heterogeneity within the social organism. He argued that all 'natural formations', including the solar system and human society, evolve from a single inchoate 'indistinct' unity, to a plurality of 'distinct' spheres. He believed

The major wonder of the orderliness of nature . . . consists in the fact that the prodigious diversity of the objects which compose it, and the inexhaustible variety of forms it takes, is the result of a simple mechanism, that is of nothing more than attractions and collisions: and that . . . each smallest part . . . working alone and on its own account . . . , or as the blind force which moves it dictates, . . . finishes by harmonising with the small whole of which it forms a part, and this with all the others; and not once but always and in every moment . . . a faultless order, an intelligent rationality of the whole
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always succeeds in being present, even when one believes there to be disorder amongst the parts.²⁶

He applied this theistic Newtonianism, in true enlightenment fashion, to the understanding of human psychology. The choice is significant, since it reflects the Italian preoccupation with educating its citizens, rather than studying social and economic processes directly, in order to tackle the issue of political organization. He held that the mind (ego) and natural objects were both constituted of sensations, and differed only according to the nature of the synthesis established between them. Consciousness, he believed, created the links between sensations itself, as ‘autosynthesis’; natural objects were formed by external action, in the ‘heterosynthesis’ which gave rise to things. Morality derived from our increasingly internalizing the connections between our acts and their consequences.²⁷ Ardigò advocated a quasi-behaviourist system of education to aid this process, already implicit in the rational development of modern industrial society, since the technology and complexity of the productive process encouraged increasingly instrumental forms of reasoning on the part of its members.²⁸ His ideas influenced the Italian school of criminology, particularly Cesare Lombroso and Enrico Ferri, who argued that penalties should aim at preventing crime by being relative to the psychological type of the delinquent, rather than providing a set punishment for a particular category of offence.²⁹

The positivists maintained that social injustice would cease once individuals had acquired the altruistic morality attendant upon a progressive evolution of human sentiments – a development facilitated by the introduction of an enlightened system of education and a reformed criminal code. Yet the practical implementation of their proposals confronted the identical dilemma facing the idealist school. The postivists argued that the intellectual transformation of the people would produce concomitant changes in the political and social organization of the country, yet unless they had already established a political base the reforms they desired were unlikely to occur. This became evident, as we shall see, when Ferri attempted to apply these ideas to the formation of an Italian socialist movement.³⁰

Ardigò died in 1920, but the influence of his school began to decline around 1900. Pareto and Mosca dropped the metaphysical overtones of positivism, though the study of human psychology and the faith in a crude empiricism remained basic to their understanding of political institutions. Labriola, a former pupil of Bertrando Spaventa, began the criticism of positivism and the return to the
thinking of the Hegelian school. Croce and Gentile republished the works of De Sanctis and of Silvio and Bertrando Spaventa, and worked a remarkable renaissance of the idealists' cultural project. Both men were influential ministers of education and successful popularizers of the Italian literary and philosophical tradition. Finally, Gramsci directly confronted the central difficulty of their political isolation, carving out a practical role for intellectuals in the changing of society.

Although each of the following chapters can be read independently of the others, a number of common themes concerning the relation of social theory to political action are developed throughout. I pay particular attention to the relationship each thinker established between consciousness and economic and social conditions, both as a theoretical and a political tool. The different views of Marxism of these thinkers naturally form a sub-theme of the book. Each chapter has roughly three main sections: a brief biographical note; a discussion of methodology, and especially the theory of action of each thinker; and an examination of the application they made of their respective theories to the analysis of Italian society. Since all these theorists commented at one time or another on each other's work, reference to their differences will be made throughout – a comparison aided by the chronological arrangement of the authors. The concluding chapters reflect on the relationship between political theory, ideology and action within the Italian tradition, chapter 8 centring on the post-war debates between Bobbio, della Volpe and Togliatti aroused by Bobbio's book Politics and Culture (1955), and chapter 9 offering a number of more general remarks.
Pareto, when studied at all, is generally interpreted in two apparently mutually exclusive ways. Economists regard him as a classical liberal, who made important contributions to the theory of rational choice underlying the defence and analysis of market mechanisms. Sociologists and political theorists, by contrast, tend to dismiss his ideas as crude and illiberal – as attacking the role of reason and democracy in politics, and exalting the use of force by an elite to impose its will on the populace. The two images are said to correspond to different periods of his life. The first belongs to the early phase when, as an engineer and later a captain of industry, he threw himself into the movement for free trade. The second resulted from disillusionment at the frustration of his early hopes. An exile and recluse in Switzerland, he became the bitter and cynical commentator and dissector of contemporary events. The two divergent views are thereby reconciled by the thesis of an historical break between the early and the late Pareto.

This chapter challenges this view by exploring the development of his sociology in the context of his political opinions and involvements. If disappointment with Italian politics is indeed the key to his sociological thought, then the ideals of the early period repay study by providing the background to his later criticisms. This constitutes the first section of this chapter. I then turn, in section two, to the examination of his system to show how the principles of his economic liberalism governed those of his sociology. Finally, in section three, I demonstrate the continuity between the supposed two Paretos, revealing how his use of the insights of the Trattato to describe political developments from the First World War to his death in 1923, echoes his analysis of events before the war.

I claim that the similarity between Pareto's earlier and later views derives from the conceptual scheme he employed to interpret human
behaviour. Pareto’s liberal principles led him to shrink the political spectrum drastically, reducing all human activity to certain sharply-defined and contestable types – essentially ‘rational’ or ‘irrational’. These categories were then enshrined within his sociology. This, in turn, had the effect of legitimizing a particular form of political practice – namely fascism. Pareto’s development thereby illustrates the central issue of this book – namely, the nature of the relationship between social theory and political action.

THE POLITICS OF PARETO’S SOCIOLOGY

Pareto was born in Paris in the year of liberal revolutions, 1848. His father, the Marquis Raffaello Pareto, had been exiled from Genoa to France in 1835 or 1836 for his Mazzinian opinions, and had taken a French wife. An amnesty enabled him to return in 1855. A civil engineer, he rose to high rank in the service of the Piedmontese (later Italian) government. Pareto followed his father’s career, graduating in engineering in 1869 with a thesis on ‘The fundamental principles of equilibrium in solid bodies’, which inspired a number of his later ideas on economics and sociology. He was appointed a director of the Florence branch of the Rome Railway Company in 1870 and held this post until 1874, when he became managing director of the Società Ferriere d’Italia.

During these years he increasingly took part in political debates as an ardent supporter of universal suffrage, republicanism, free trade and disarmament. Borkenau and H. Stuart Hughes regard his later debunking of humanitarian and democratic ideas as a reaction to his father’s Mazzinian beliefs. Yet, as Finer has pointed out, there is no evidence for this interpretation. On the contrary, he was plainly attracted by these ideas, regretting the ‘inauspicious circumstances’ that led to his being born in France rather than Italy, and regarding someone opposed to the goals of the Risorgimento as a ‘bad citizen’ and ‘a disgraceful being who lacks one of the prime qualities of man: patriotism and the love of liberty. Far from rejecting his paternal heritage, Pareto’s writings, in both economics and sociology, have their roots in his attempt to analyse the conditions governing the development of democracy in post-unification Italy, and to struggle for its realization in an uncorrupted form.

The difficulties confronting such schemes can be imagined by anyone with a cursory knowledge of Italian history. The moderate conservatives, the ‘Historical Right’, who ruled Italy from 1861 to 1876, were obsessed with reducing the debts incurred by the Risorgimento, the Italians becoming the most heavily taxed populace
in Europe as a result. This was combined with a centralized and heavily bureaucratic administration, distant and remote from the people, only 2 per cent of whom had the franchise in any case. As attention was focused increasingly on internal problems, the Right’s inability to stimulate the economy or ameliorate the social conditions of the masses drew increased criticism. Popular unrest manifested itself in violent mass movements – Bakunin’s anarchism enjoying a spectacular new lease of life – and culminating in an attempted insurrectional putsch in 1874. Unfortunately the parliamentary opposition did little to solve these problems either. The ‘Young Left’ dropped the Mazzinian programme for the privileges of office, seeking little more than a reduction of taxation and a small increase of the electorate (to 7 per cent of the population) to ensure their continued stay in office. Under their leader Depretis, Italian politics became a matter of bargaining and the exploitation of government patronage to obtain the necessary balance between northern and southern interests by the various party or faction leaders to maintain their administration in power. This policy of trasformismo characterized public life for the next fifty years, and effectively blocked any radical change in government.

Pareto’s first political writings were primarily directed against the abuses of the Italian parliamentary system and the ruling classes’ lack of concern for the plight of the people. An admirer of Mill and Spencer and the British political system generally, he argued from the principle of individual liberty for a policy of universal suffrage and free trade. Pareto contended that the opposition of the bourgeoisie to both of these policies was motivated by the desire to protect their privileges, rather than a principled defence of freedom, as they maintained. They argued that the franchise must remain limited, because only those who paid taxes had a stake in the nation, adding that the illiterate masses were unable to make a reasoned decision in any case. Pareto retorted that responsible government would only result when all, through elections, were involved in it. The vote was not, he wrote, a right, but ‘the exercise of a necessary function for the good working of civil society.’ The voter required, as ‘a first and indispensable quality’, the possession of ‘the culture and the necessary knowledge to fulfil adequately his task.’ Compulsory education was therefore a prerequisite in a country where 78 per cent of the people were illiterate, if universal suffrage was to become not just ‘an empty word, but a beneficial reality.’

Following Mill, he defined liberty as ‘the faculty of doing everything which in a direct and immediate way does not harm others.’ Like Mill, however, some of the conclusions he drew from