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Like another Chouannerie

Reckoning Day for Neapolitan Bourbonism

September 27, 2017 by Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur

The ‘Repubblica Partenopea’ lasted only a few months from 24 January 1799 until 13 June when it was destroyed by the royalist forces of Cardinal Ruffo with the assistance of an English fleet under Nelson. Although proclaimed in the name of liberty and equality, and in the interests of the entire people, it was unique among eighteenth-century republics in having been made possible only by foreign arms against a popular army which, insofar as it had any discernible political identity, was monarchist, conservative and Catholic. The republic was — as Vincenzo Cuoco, its historian, and one of its few active members to escape with his life, said of it — ‘a revolution which was intended to create the happiness of a nation, but instead has brought about only its ruin.’

— Anthony Pagden

God listens. Thus, He sent Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo in 1799 to save the decaying Neapolitan kingdom. Ferdinand IV of Naples (and later Ferdinand I of the Two Sicilies), however, though “thankful” in some sense for his work in driving out the French republicans and their Italian collaborators, would not heed to his proposals. Having rejected the cardinal, God would punish Ferdinand for his insubordination and temporal arrogance by sending the wicked Garibaldi some 60 years later to finish off his estate (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Gaeta_%281860%29) (by then under the dominion of his great grandson), this not counting earlier disturbances. (<https://www.ohio.edu/chastain/rz/twosicil.htm>).

What has not befallen the Italians? Are they even white? Many right-wing intellectuals would dispute it (They’re *meds*, of course.) Regardless of their ancestry, the Italians have certainly had a large share of dubious experiments with “liberty” in one form or another.

Charles Martel conquered the Frisians in the northwest by 734 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Boarn), and Charlemagne did the same with the Lombards in the South 40 years later. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Pavia_%28773%E2%80%9374%29).

To the Frisians, Charlemagne would grant an unprecedented degree of liberty (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karelsprivilege>), “liberty” in those times meaning of course elevated to a status not beholden to intermediary lordship. The *Frisonica libertas* consisted essentially of pre-feudal Germanic village communities with self-elected judges, but with a class of *haedlingen* (“headmen”) gradually emerging as leaders and ultimately by the 14th century as territorial lords.

As Normans (of the Hauteville dynasty primarily), Angevins and Aragonese would variously rule over the South, the Italian city-commune (or “republican”) movement would consolidate itself in the North by the 12th century, in an analogue though not a conscious imitation of the Frisian phenomenon.

Fashionable terminology from Roman law aside, the “republics” were usually bishoprics or duchies that gradually transitioned into consular regimes with rotation in office. Founding consuls of Milan like Oberto Dall’Orto were feudal lawyers. In the case of Pisa, this transition received explicit imperial assistance in the form of a charter granted in 1081 by Henry IV, Holy Roman Emperor which allowed for a 12-man colloquium to veto the decisions of the then-ruling Margrave of Tuscany. As such, these developments were not always purely defensive or reactive.

Chris Wickham, in his *Sleepwalking into a New World*, gives us an idea of the mores of Italian communalism with respect to the Milanese consulate:

It has not been stressed by most historians that so many of the Milanese political leadership had surnames beginning Caga- or Caca-, that is to say “shit.” ... Cagapisto probably means “shit-pesto” — as, for example, in the pasta sauce. In the case of the two brothers Gregorio and Guilielmo Cacainarca, again both iudices and active consuls between 1143 and 1187, their surname means “shit-in-a-box.” That of Arderico Cagainosa, consul in 1140 and 1144, means “shit-in-your-pants.” Other prominent families included the Cagalenti, “shit-slowly,” the Cacainbasilica, “shit-in-the-church,” the Cacarana, “shit-a-frog,” the Cagatosici, “toxic-shit,” and there were many more.

“Shit-in-your-pants” — the culmination of civic humanism right there.

These are the representatives of the “high-IQ” communal republican movement. Who would have thought that the right half of the bell curve was inversely correlated to one’s level of potty training?

Regardless, the many familial feuds and strifes associated with this period wouldn’t mean shit in the end, as the primary political players of Venice, Milan, Florence and Naples would emerge, and most remaining communes had devolved (or perhaps evolved) into signorias, possibly so as to ensure greater control over public sanitation.

The Peace of Lodi in 1454 would end the wars between Venice, Milan and their respective allies. Dynastic politics would intervene in 1494, but the topic of the Italian Wars is too large to deal with here.

Suffice to say, the ultimate outcome involving Spanish imperial control over Naples and Sicily was far less of a “despotism” than the indignation of the Risorgimento presented it.

When Naples was ceded to Frederick II of Aragon (a.k.a. Frederick the Catholic) in 1504, from then on establishing continuous Spanish rule in Southern Italy under the Habsburgs and Bourbons once the realm would pass to Frederick’s grandson, Charles V — a strict dualism was at first maintained between the Aragonese (and then Castilian) and Neapolitan realms. The city of Naples’ privileges were confirmed, it was exempted from the *donativo* tax, and nor were the baronies disturbed.

One of the Spanish Habsburgs’ early absolutist policies was the imposition of the *Consiglio Collaterale* as a sort of supreme jurisdictional organ to displace the earlier Aragonese *Sacro Regio Consiglio*, but it would take over a century for it to definitively assert its power, starting in around 1632.

Unity existed at the institutional level of the Crown, but there was no forced regional integration. There existed in practice a mediated system of “five compromises”: between monarchy and the feudal aristocracy, between monarchy and the capital city, between public finance and the private tax farmers,

and between state and Church, particularly w.r.t. customary tax exemptions.

Thus, writers like Eugenio de Narbona could recommend to Spanish imperial counselors that “Information about the land, customs, conditions, and natural propensities of the peoples of the kingdoms of his prince is knowledge necessary for a counselor.”

Royal control could also incentivize shrinking offices. Mireille Petayvin notes that a report of a visit to Naples in 1606 signaled that the number of clerks of the *bagliva* (court of petty misdemeanors) had increased to 104 positions, when the authorized maximum was at 24.

The *capitoli* prepared by the royal Council of Italy generally dealt with minute changes (even if in large quantity) rather than overarching reforms: numbers of clerks in secretariats, court jurisdictions, job descriptions, minor behavioral regulation, etc.

(Of course, the Spanish Bourbons in particular would go on to enact heinous and unforgivable reforms (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nueva_Planta_decrees) later.)

Additionally, there existed a segmentation between the higher patrician nobility (the *nobilita di piazza*) in the city of Naples who controlled the Tribuna di San Lorenzo, which exercised policing and regulatory functions, and the various lower clerks, ministers and magistrates subject to more direct imperial control.

Nevertheless, these *togati* (men of the robe), though managing to mitigate the power of royal writ by their control of the city tribunals, ended up developing a sense of consciousness as enlightened administrators destined to rid Naples and Sicily of “oppressive” feudatories — for feudal tenure and banal rights were indeed widespread, much more so than in the North.

The English traveler Henry Swinburne had plenty of good to say about Neapolitan manorialism, around 1776:

At present very little remains unlet; the rents are paid as the crops are got in and sold, not at stated days of payment. All tithes belong to the Lord of the Manor, who is the lay impropiator; for the Church has only its glebe. Many gentlemen of secondary rank hold their land of the prince as under-tenants by payment of a fixed fine of investiture nearly in the same manner as our copyholders make surrenders and hold estates by copy of court-roll. There are besides many owners of land, not of noble degree, who pay the tenth of their crops to the Prince.

Reform-minded tendencies had taken hold in the Bourbon court by the 1780s. The Jesuits were expelled in 1767. The *Supreme Council of Finance* was organized in 1782 and various economists and philosophes were invited. In 1783, ecclesiastical authority over marriage was abolished, and civil marriage imposed. In 1791, the ancient right of sanctuary in churches was abolished.

Come the French Revolution, these ambitions were scaled back, but the intent had been revealed — and the punishment on way.

Antonio Genovisi, political economist, wrote: “In every civilised country to be found in Europe today the tone of society is set neither by the populace nor by the great, but rather by the middling order, by which I mean priests, friars, teachers of letters, magistrates and private gentlemen.”

(The priests and friars would not last long.)

Genovisi's intellectual heir, Gaetano Filangieri, put it even more bluntly: "The glory of the man of letters is to prepare information that will be of use to those who govern."

Francesco Mario Pagano, one of the chief architects of 1799's Neapolitan revolution, was quite a case. "All these colleges. How many small groups there are in the city of Naples. And what delight, what energy, what loyalty men have to these bodies, while there is no attachment, no zeal for the community or the public good" — so he lamented. Serve Leviathan or serve no one.

He also had a neat absolutist argument against feudalism, although really it's an argument against fiscal federalism. Sovereignty includes the right to impose taxes. Feudalism makes such rights alienable to one degree or another, therefore feudalism is anti-sovereign and an abomination. Or, as the folks at the Journal of Neoabsolutism might say: "Muh insecure power! Le imperium in imperio!"

Pagano saw to it that civic virtues must be inculcated. Accordingly, he called for a provision "in every commune [of] public places and gymnasia set aside for various gymnastic and war-like exercises," and the creation of *Sala d'istruzione pubblica*, comprising all children over the age of seven who would be sent to learn their republican catechism on every feast day. Furthermore, a 5-man tribunal of censors (the "priests of the patria") were to go around and look for people "who do not live democratically, that is to say all those who lead a dissolute and voluptuous life, who give a vicious education to their family, adopt arrogant and insolent manners... [they] shall be deprived by the censors of their active and passive rights of citizenship."

These were the beautiful thoughts occupying the men of letters, assisted by royal patronage in later years.

Having made their bed, they slept in it...

As the Corsican mountebank Buonaparte was wreaking havoc in the North with his Cisalpine Republic, he would descend south of Piedmont into Perugia and Ancona, ultimately annexing the whole of the Papal States, declaring it the "Roman Republic" in February 15, 1798. Pope Pius VI was exiled to France and died a year later.

Ferdinand of Naples decided to thwart this. A letter to the ministers of the King of Piedmont-Sardinia was also dispatched, which advocating inciting popular revolt against the Treaty of Paris (1796) which ceded Savoy and Nice, along with granting the French armies free passage: "The French battalions, careless and secure, are scattered throughout Piedmont. Rouse the patriotism of the people to enthusiasm and fury; let every Piedmontese aspire to the honour of trampling down an enemy of his country. These partial massacres will be of more advantage to Piedmont than successful battles. Nor will the justice of posterity stigmatise with the hideous name of treachery the energetic deed of a whole people who march over the corpses of their oppressors to liberty."

It is playing with fire for the Crown to throw the *populus* a bone like this, but in any event, with the Austrian general Karl Mack von Leiberich at the head of the Neapolitan troops (Naples had been part of the First Coalition prior to that from 1793-1796), the Papal States were reclaimed and Pope Pius VII brought back. The army would retreat after a French counter-attack, though the Papal States themselves would last until subjugated again in 1808. In fear of Jacobinism, Ferdinand would retreat to Palermo as Jean-Etienne Championnet made his way to Naples.

So, the work of the Neapolitan Enlightenment would reach its practical culmination in the 5-month period between January and June of 1799, in the form of the Parthenopean Republic.

The most famous contemporary chronicler of said republic is probably Vincenzo Cuoco (as mentioned in the beginning), whose *Saggio Storico sulla Rivoluzione Napoletana del 1799* received an English translation in 2014.

Cuoco tells us that we were certainly dealing with a very *competent* government here.

For instance, their administrative reform in creating departments as the units of local administration: “The populations of Apulia were forced to become part of Abruzzo; the capitals of the departments were not in the centre but on the edges; some cantons had no inhabitants, while a great deal had too many, because the map showed the names of the towns, but not their features. Many capitals of cantons were uninhabited lands, either mountains or valleys or rural churches, etc., which had names on the maps; many areas which had two names were made to belong to two different cantons.”

On taxation: “On entering Naples with his victorious army, Championnet imposed a tax of two and a half million ducats, to be paid within two months. Such an imposition was utterly exorbitant for a city already decimated by the immense depredations perpetrated by the previous government... We saw families with millions taxed just a few ducats, while those which possessed nothing were taxed the most exorbitant sums. I saw the same tax imposed on people with annual incomes of 60,000, 10,000 and 1,000 ducats.”

Cuoco draws this remark: “The obsession with reforming everything inevitably leads to counterrevolution. In such cases the people are not rebelling against the laws, for it is not the general will they are attacking, but the individual will.”

Rousseauism and tradition all the same. (Perhaps not entirely surprising. Rousseau’s letters on the Corsican constitution contain some surprisingly reactionary proposals, though they are barely read.)

Four days after the proclamation of the Parthenopean Republic, Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo began his counterrevolution. Ferdinand of Naples made him his Vicar General, his mission being to raise the provinces for the king. Ruffo’s men were a diverse lot, ranging from proprietors, artisans, field laborers right up to convicts. This irregular army would be named the *Armata cristiana della Santa Fede*. 9000 men join him at Mileto alone by late February of 1799. Ruffo also functioned as a de facto magistrate, in one instance abolishing the heavy duties imposed on the local silk industry in Monteleone, a town which surrendered without resistance on March 1799. Throughout March, his troops would successfully besiege Catanzaro and Catrone, with reprisals against French Jacobin invaders.

Ruffo had a realist angle to him also, declaring that “Religious fervor and devotion to the person of the King may yield excellent results, but if we want to maintain the vassals of His Royal Highness in a state of calm and loyalty to our good cause, a well-filled war chest is indispensable.” In one instance, the Queen Maria Carolina suggested that Ruffo abolish feudalism in the conquered provinces of the *sanfedisti* so as to preempt the French, but the cardinal refused. In one of his many reports to Sir John Acton, the prime minister of the Neapolitan Bourbons and Ferdinand’s agent, Ruffo summarized his aims as being “to moderate the taxes owed to the barons without destroying them, to reduce the taxes paid by the poor and to try to get trade and commerce moving again if possible.”

By June, Naples itself was subdued, with the assistance of British naval commander Horatio Nelson. The royal court-in-exile at Palermo (in its last days there) prepared for summary executions of Jacobins. Though many were deserved, Ruffo, not one to spare the sword in a fight, nevertheless protested the use of these measures after wartime, lest class war be provoked: “I foresee that our greatest obstacle will lie in the fear of deserved punishment, in the despair of ever more being able to have employments, places

and consideration, in the certainty of being always, in the midst of the reestablished monarchical government, suspected and maltreated on every occasion. Now if we show that we mean to try, and to punish; if we do not make them believe that we are completely persuaded that it was necessity, error, the force of the enemy and not treason that occasioned the rebellion, we play into the hands of the enemy and cut off our own way to reconciliation." As such, he concluded that "a few bombs and a general pardon will finish our business."

To express his gratitude, on April 25, 1800, Ferdinand of Naples passed an edict abolishing the *Sedili di Napoli* (or the Piazze) along with the Tribunale di San Lorenzo, the two municipal corporate bodies that had been the bulwark of the city's authority for centuries. The city of Naples was to be put under direct regal control, and its nobles reduced to mere civil servants.

Naples would be seized by the French once more in 1806, and not until the Congress of Vienna in 1815 was it brought back into the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Not for long. For those who dip their feet into enlightened reform must be subsumed by it.

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5 thoughts on "Reckoning Day for Neapolitan Bourbonism"

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2. marcusmontisursinensis says:

[September 30, 2017 at 12:10 pm](#)

It is said that Ferdinand's father, Charles III of Spain (the third son of Philip V, himself the first Bourbon in Spain to become king, following the death of his two elder half-brothers) designed the present "false tricolore" Spanish flag. The lifespan of Charles III is almost coincidental with that of Frederick the Great (the good friend of that pamphlet writer and forger Voltaire) and Maria Theresa. While Joseph II and Leopold II would be more of "classic-style" "enlightened monarchs (the first one more bookish and therefore half-mad; the latter one more cunning, pragmatic and dangerous – just referring to the Syndico of Pistoia, for example), where would you place Charles III and Maria Theresa?

While Maria Theresa was in general quite a successful ruler (given the circumstances unfavorable to her), and a pious Catholic, which is both in contrast with the nightmare of her son Joseph II, what perception of her rule would you suggest from our reactionary standpoint. She started many reforms. Well, reforms must be frequently carried out, so that a person, a family, a village or a kingdom may adapt to the external pressures and internal toxins. Interesting to read Father Waldstein's reflection: <https://sancrucensis.wordpress.com/2017/05/09/maria-theresia/> (Fr. Waldstein was the signatory of the theological critique of Amoris Laetitia made by 45 scholars; yet not among the initial 62 who signed the recent Correction based on the Critique).

Reply

◦ [Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur](#) says:

[September 30, 2017 at 12:37 pm](#)

I have a book on Maria Theresa's agricultural reforms that I need to get to later, but I don't know if I'd place her as worse than Charles III and his entourage of afrancesados. She did have Kaunitz, but the real devil in the Habsburg retinue (Johann Anton von Pergen) would not shine until Joseph II. And then Portugal had their estrangeirados, with the Marquis of Pombal the greatest character of them all.

Reply

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