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The Spanish Constitution of 1812 and the Mediterranean Revolutions (1820-25)

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The bicentenary of the Constitution of Cadiz has come at a good moment. After a long period of neglect Italian historians have begun to take new interest in the revolutions in Naples, Sicily and Piedmont of 1820-21. This in turn reflects new ways of thinking about and studying Italy's Risorgimento, in particular new emphasis on the need for broader transnational understanding of the history of the 19th century Italian nationalist movements. If the history of Italy's Risorgimento spans much of the century before Unification in 1860, there was arguably no moment that was more transnational than the revolutions of the early 1820s. Yet no period of the Risorgimento has been less studied. When we turn to Spain we find too that while the impact of the *Trienio Liberal* on Spanish America has been studied quite intensely, its resonances in Europe - especially in Italy and the movement for Greek independence - have by contrast until recently been curiously neglected.¹

There are many reasons why historians and contemporaries chose to forget the liberal revolutions that started in Naples and Sicily (July 1820) and in Piedmont (March 1821) in response to Rafael Riego's *pronunciamento* in Cadiz in January 1820 and the promulgation of the Spanish Constitution of 1812. The revolutions all failed and the next generation of nationalists and political activists were unsure how to interpret their significance. The revolutions had followed paths that had much in common, yet were very different from the now classical model of the French revolution of 1789. While all of the liberal revolutions had given rise to potentially ruinous divisions between moderates and radicals, all had fallen victim to foreign intervention and not to internecine strife (although that had not been absent). But they had also all been marked by a sense of international solidarity, a distinguishing feature that would never again be repeated, not even in the revolutions of 1848-9 that would adopt goals that were more nationalist than internationalist. The international solidarities of the liberal

¹ Maurizio Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile: Italian Émigrés and the Liberal International in Post-Napoleonic Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

revolutions were not immediately extinguished, however, and would – as Maurizio Isabella has recently argued – provide the post-1821 (in the case of Italy) and post-1825 (in the case of Spain) generation of exiles with the essence of their political project – a project that sought to democratize the Mediterranean world.²

Italian liberals sought refuge first in Spain and Portugal, before being forced northwards like their Spanish and Portuguese companions to Paris or London. Some, like Giuseppe Pecchio and Santorre Santarosa, would join in Greek insurrections in 1825. Others, like the Neapolitan Guglielmo Pepe, chose to support the cause of Greek independence not with their swords but with their pens. But in their writings and in their appeals to the sanctity of the cause of emancipation of the peoples subject to foreign tyranny, the liberals of the 1820 revolutions joined together to invoke ancient liberties and envisage new forms of Mediterranean democracy across an area stretching from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, from the Tagus to the Balkans.

Did this constitute what José Luis Comellas termed the “liberal international”?³ The idea cannot be completely dismissed, and the liberal revolutions of the early 1820s reveal unusually strong transnational features. Unlike those of 1830 and 1848 the revolutions were the result not only of planning but of international planning. There had been close contact between members of the Italian secret societies (the Carbonari and Filadelfi) and Spanish freemasons in 1819. The Carbonari lodges in southern Italy had formally adopted the Constitution of Cadiz as their political program in the same year. They followed similar patterns and in Spain, Naples and Piedmont the revolutions all began as military *pronunciamentos*. The revolutions varied in length – three years in Spain, nine months in Naples and Sicily, less than a month in Piedmont – but they shared a common political program. The inspiration for that program was the Spanish Constitution of the 1812 Cortes of Cadiz. Although when it came to Greece adherence to the Spanish constitution was a matter for individual leaders, the “liberal international” of the early 1820s found in the Spanish Constitution the template for a democratic project that was both transnational and Mediterranean.

Given the unusual coherence of the political objectives of the “liberal international” why did so little trace remain after the revolutions collapsed? The two questions are interlinked because the failure of the revolutions played a large

² *ibid.*

³ José Luis Comellas, *El Trienio Constitucional* (Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, 1963), 397. See also Marion Miller, “A Liberal International? Perspectives on Comparative Approaches to the Revolutions of the 1820s in Spain, Italy, and Greece,” in *Greece and the Mediterranean*, ed. Richard W. Clement, Benjamin F. Taggie, and Robert G. Schwartz (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1990), 61-68; and Isabella, *op.cit.*

part in ensuring their subsequent neglect not only by historians but also by the next generation of political activists. After the event some of the most outspoken critiques of the liberal revolutions came from the political *émigrés*, many of whom devoted their careers in exile to endless polemics to justify their own positions and condemn the tactics of their opponents.⁴ Some blamed their fellow liberals, others blamed the Spanish Constitution – described later by the Piedmontese writer Cesare Balbo as “the worst of all forms of Monarchy and of all forms of Republic: the form of representative government least in accord with the precepts of the science of political representation.”⁵ Others took up the criticisms of the Spanish constitution that had been raised when it was first adopted – especially in Sicily, where there was strong preference for the earlier Sicilian bicameral Constitution granted during the British tutelage of the island in 1812.⁶

In Italy, the most damaging criticism came from Mazzini, for whom the federalist features of the Constitution of Cadiz were anathema - a hostility reinforced by the constitution’s Spanish origins. Indeed, when Mazzini founded *Young Italy* in 1832 its manifesto roundly rejected all the principles on which the liberal revolutions of the previous decade had been based. In place of the Constitution’s federalist inflections and its project of constitutional monarchy, Mazzini advocated the democratic Republic “one and indivisible.” When the Mazzinian projects faltered during the revolutions of 1848-49 no one looked back to the Spanish Constitution of 1812, not even committed federalist republicans like Carlo Cattaneo, Francesco Ferrara and Michele Amari.⁷ By the 1830s the only part of the experience of the *trienio liberal* that seemed still of interest for the Italian radicals was the idea of the popular war: the *guerrilla* and the *guerra della bande* which found in the Piedmontese writer Carlo Bianco de Saint-Jorioz an early champion whose ideas were taken up first by Mazzini and after 1848 by Carlo Pisacane.⁸

By the 1830s Italian moderates had gravitated away from the Spanish constitution of 1812 as well, adopting instead the French model, the “chartre octroyée” of the July Monarchy and example of moderate British reformism set by the Great Reform Act of 1832 and the administrative revolution that followed.

⁴ Isabella, *op.cit.*

⁵ Andrea Romano, “L’influenza della carta gaditana nel costituzionalismo iberoamericano y latino,” in *La Constitución de Cádiz de 1812: hacia los orígenes del constitucionalismo iberoamericano y latino*, in ed. Asdrúbal Aguiar (Caracas: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 2004), 369.

⁶ Antonio de Francesco, *La Guerra di Sicilia: il distretto di Caltagirone nella rivoluzione del 1820-21* (Catania: Bonanno Editore, 1992).

⁷ Amelia Crisantino, ed., *Introduzione agli “Studi su la storia di Sicilia della metà del XVIII secolo al 1820” di Michele Amari* (Palermo: Associazione no profit “Mediterranean”, 2010).

⁸ Miller, *op.cit.*, 64.

For those who rejected Mazzini's revolutionary and republican nationalism, the abbè Gioberti's *Primacy of the Italians* - an immediate best seller after its clandestine publication in 1843 - offered a moderate, constitutional and federalist alternative. Gioberti looked to build on the historical roots of Italian liberties in order to restore Italy's historical position as the political and cultural leader of the Mediterranean world, a claim that reflected the more narrowly nationalist objectives around which the cosmopolitanism of the liberal nationalism of the early 1820s were being revised.⁹

However, the neglect of the liberal revolutions of the early 1820s in Italy in the decades that followed was not because nationalism had become less liberal in Italy; that shift would occur after, not before the revolutions of 1848-49. But what had changed most obviously was Spain itself where the failure of the *Trienio Liberal* had been followed by protracted political instability and above all the rise of Carlism.¹⁰ In 1820 Spain had been the beacon of Italian liberals, but by 1848 it represented something very different - the bastion of reactionary clerical conservatism and counter-revolution. By 1848 Spain could no longer be an inspiration for Italian liberals because it now presented a real and present danger that materialized when the Spanish government responded to pope Pius IX appeal's to the Catholic Powers to restore him to his throne in the Eternal City, which the Revolution had forced him to flee. Spanish participation in the crusade against the Roman Republic, whose defense in 1849 transformed Giuseppe Garibaldi into an international hero, meant that for Italian moderates and democrats alike Spain now represented the counter-revolution. That image would be reinforced when in 1860 the papal government recruited Spanish Carlist officers to lead the popular insurrections against Unification that had erupted in many parts of southern Italy.¹¹

Spain's disappearance from the constellations of political liberalism had been prefigured even before the end of the *Trienio Liberal*. One of the stock criticisms raised by the Italian *émigrés* during the *Trienio Liberal* was that Spain had failed to intervene to protect its sister constitutional regimes in Naples, Sicily and Turin when the Austrians invaded in 1821. But the Italians also decried the fact that Spain and Portugal had failed to form an alliance to block the French intervention in 1823, and that in both Spain and Portugal the governments were

⁹ Maurizio Isabella, "Liberalism and Empires in the Mediterranean: The View Point of the Risorgimento," in *The Risorgimento Revisited: Nationalism and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Italy*, ed. Silvana Patriarca and Lucy Riall (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2012), 232-54.

¹⁰ Romano, *op.cit.*, 268.

¹¹ John A. Davis, "Anti-Risorgimento," in *Gli italiani in Guerra: conflitti, identità, memorie dal Risorgimento ai nostri giorni*, ed. Mario Isnenghi and Eva Cecchinato (Turin: UTET, 2008-09), 753-69.

much too willing to accommodate British and French hostility to the unicameral Constitution of 1812.¹²

The failure to accommodate their Spanish American colleagues when they called for independence discredited the Spanish liberals' government in the eyes of their European sympathizers. But the same shortcomings had been no less evident in the liberal revolutions in Italy, and most notably in the bitter conflicts between Naples and Sicily that were provoked by the refusal of the Neapolitan liberals to listen to the separatist demands of their Sicilian counterparts. The issues were very similar to those that divided Iberian and Spanish American liberals and in both cases raised major questions about the coherence of the liberal project. In the Italian case the issue of Sicilian autonomy had become a major cause of friction because of the terms of the Restoration of the Bourbon rulers in southern Italy after the fall of Napoleon in 1815. The declaration of a new and unified Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in 1816 followed the centralist logic that guided the Restoration settlements throughout Italy and Europe. But the creation of a new unified monarchy deprived Sicily of the autonomies that it had enjoyed for centuries as a separate crown within a joint monarchy. Palermo, the Sicilian capital and formerly a royal city with its own Parliament was now downgraded to the status of a provincial city with a vice-Regal court. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in 1820 the principal objective of the Sicilian liberals was to protest the 1816 Act of Union and regain what Michele Amari described as the inalienable rights and autonomies of the Sicilians who he believed constituted the oldest "nation" in Italy.¹³

In Naples, the constitutional government failed to anticipate the strength of separatist sentiment in Sicily – and especially Palermo – as became evident when it imposed the Spanish constitution without prior consultation. When the Sicilians protested, the liberals in Naples refused to listen. The separatist cause was more strongly supported in Palermo than in the more commercial cities of eastern Sicily (Messina and Catania), but opposition in Palermo to the unyielding liberal government in Naples quickly led to the adoption of a rival constitutional project: the bi-cameral constitution conceded by the British in 1812 and then abolished by the Bourbon monarchy in 1815. Even before the liberal government in Naples collapsed following the Austrian invasion in March 1822, Naples and Sicily were on collision course and the rift that had opened up between the Sicilian and the Neapolitan liberals would never be healed. During the revolutions of 1848, Sicily renewed its bid for autonomy and broke with Naples. In 1860 Sicilian separatist sentiments provided Garibaldi with the means to bring about the collapse of the Bourbon kingdom in the South. By destroying the Kingdom of

¹² Miller, *op.cit.*

¹³ Crisantino, *op.cit.*

the Two Sicilies in 1860, it was the Sicilian separatist project that had been born in 1820 that caused the unexpected political unification of the Italian states.

As in Spain, the revolutions of the early 1820s left legacies of conflict and suspicion among the liberals and caused the following generations to view them as failures to be avoided in the future. But explaining why the Mediterranean revolutions of the early 1820s left no deeper trace is in many ways easier than explaining the enthusiasm they generated at the time and about which there can be no doubt. In the words of Cesare Balbo, in 1820 the Constitution of Cadiz had been “the great hope of liberals everywhere in Italy.”¹⁴ Nothing encapsulated those expectations better or more fully than the Spanish Constitution of 1812. But why was this and what did the Constitution of Cadiz mean for Italian liberals in 1820?

This is not an easy question to answer, not least because it remains a matter of debate in Spain as well. Was the Constitution of Cadiz a revolutionary or a conservative document, was it the beginning of new ways of perceiving politics and political representation or was it the last gasp of the Ancien Regime and a reversion to a still fundamentally corporatist conception of politics?¹⁵ In the case of Italy, we know that the Constitution of Cadiz had aroused great interest from the time of its promulgation. The first Italian translations were published first in Messina (Sicily) in 1813, just as the new Sicilian Parliament was opening in Palermo, and a year later in Milan and Rome. The text adopted by the Neapolitan government in July 1820 (which was then subject to minor amendments) was the one first published in Messina. Versions of these texts also circulated through the lodges of the secret societies in both southern and central/northern Italy. So not only in the South and in Sicily, but also in the Romagna, in Tuscany, in Lombardy and in Piedmont Italian liberals were familiar with the text.

What exactly did the constitution mean to them? In an essay published in 1950 Giorgio Spini emphasized the importance of the “the myth of Spain” – and especially the myth of the Spanish national revolt against Napoleonic France. As he saw it, the attraction of the Constitution of Cadiz in Italy lay not in any specific detail, but in the association with the Spanish war against Napoleon that made the Constitution by inference a nationalist and anti-Napoleonic manifesto. What made this Constitution – rather than the Constitution that the English had established in Sicily in 1812 for example - especially relevant for Italian liberals was the similarity of their experiences of Napoleonic rule between 1805 and 1815 and their opposition to its political legacies in Italy. Those sympathies were strengthened by the fact that many leaders of the Italian revolutions had served

¹⁴ Romano, *op.cit.*, 354.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 351.

with the French armies in Spain where they had made contact with Spanish liberals; their own nationalist feelings were often reinforced as a result of exposure to the strong hostility of the Spanish liberals toward France.¹⁶

The “Spanish myth” and Spanish resistance to Napoleon certainly added to the attractiveness of the Constitution of Cadiz, and explains why in 1820 both Italian and Greek liberals believed that Spain was destined to play a leading role in advancing the liberal revolution. But an argument can be made that the attraction of the Spanish Constitution in Italy was based on more than myth and sentiment. The Spanish Constitution was not only a symbolic manifesto. Its text was well known and well understood in Italy and was adopted by Italian liberals in preference to alternative constitutional models because it appeared to offer a coherent alternative to the political system they were seeking to destroy: the autocratic “administrative monarchies” that had been the principal legacy of Napoleonic rule in Italy and which had been carefully preserved in the Legitimist monarchies of the Restoration.

The Constitution of Cadiz was the template for a constitutional monarchy ruling in conjunction with a single representative chamber in a political framework that would protect the established church and respect local rights and autonomies. This was a political project that made perfect sense for Italian liberals. Among the reflections in his (much later) *Prison Notebooks*, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci reflected at some length on the revolutions of 1820-21 in Italy, and wondered whether the adoption of the Spanish constitution in Italy should be seen simply as another example of the “laziness” (*pigrizia*) of the Italian bourgeoisie – an argument that Mazzini might well have endorsed. But Gramsci rejected that explanation, arguing instead that the Spanish constitution in fact addressed very effectively the real needs and concerns of the Italian liberals at that time.

Gramsci’s argument is worth pursuing more closely. How and in what ways did the Spanish constitution address the “real needs” of the Italian liberals in 1820? The constitution – at least, as it was understood in Italy – offered a compromise between a political project that was monarchist (constitutional monarchy) but representative and anti-aristocratic (single chamber). It provided for a wide franchise and it offered guarantees to the Catholic Church, although it is significant that in the Italian versions these were modified. To understand the significance of these provisions we must bear in mind the similarities between the Italian and the Spanish experiences of French rule and occupation and rule in the previous decades.

¹⁶ Giorgio Spini, *Mito e realtà della Spagna nelle rivoluzioni italiane del 1820-21* (Rome: Perrella, 1950).

Both Italian and Spanish liberals at this moment were preoccupied by the threat of popular counter-revolution. Like Spain, Italy had been the theatre for powerful popular counter-revolutionary movements, the best known being the southern Sanfedism of 1799. But that was by no means an isolated case, nor was counter-revolution a southern monopoly as the *Viva Maria!* mobilization against the French in Tuscany in 1798 and similar insurrections in Lombardy, Venetia and central Italy in the same years had revealed. As in Spain, the popular counter-revolutions in Italy had been fiercely anti-French, but even more fiercely opposed to their Italian supporters - the Italian Jacobins and liberals. For that reason, from the time of the Republics of 1796-9 the Italian democrats had sought every means to avoid alienating the clergy- especially the lower clergy – in the attempt to avert the danger of popular counter-revolution.¹⁷

The fear of triggering new popular counter-revolutionary upheavals weighed heavily on Italian reformers, and the promise of firm government was not least of the reasons why the French invaders after 1800 were warmly welcomed, at least initially, by the Italian progressive classes. But as those initial expectations dissipated and as demand grew (primarily through the secret societies) for constitutional concessions from the Napoleonic rulers, the Italian liberals and radicals continued to be wary of anything that might weaken the forces of order and open spaces for popular counter-revolution. Hence the preference for the politics of the *pronunciamento* and for making the military an instrument of liberal revolution, one capable of coercing the rulers without giving free reign to popular unrest. Hence, too, the preference for the organizational structure and clandestinity of the secret societies, which in Italy proved very effective after the Restoration in infiltrating the civil administration, sections of the judiciary and above all the officer corps – and perhaps especially the NCOs – of the armies of the Italian rulers.¹⁸

The protection that the Spanish constitution of 1812 offered to the Church also spoke very directly to the concerns of Italian liberals. Since the catastrophic overthrow of the Jacobin Republics in the closing years of the previous century, Italian liberals had labored to avoid direct conflict with the Church, which was rightly seen to be the principal instigator of counter-revolutionary violence. But Italian liberals were no less attracted by the assurances that the Spanish Constitution offered with respect to local autonomies and rights. Indeed, for Italian liberals these were perhaps the most important features of the Spanish constitution, since the guarantees it promised for local rights and autonomies

¹⁷ John A. Davis, *Naples and Napoleon: Southern Italy and the European Revolutions, 1780-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Giuseppe Leti, *Carboneria e massoneria nel Risorgimento italiano* (Genoa: Libreria Editrice Moderna, 1925); and Giuseppe Gabrieli, *Massoneria e carboneria nel Regno di Napoli* (Rome: Atanòr, 1982).

stood in sharp contrast to the bureaucratic and centralist projects of the Napoleonic order. The centralizing logic of the Napoleonic reorganization of the Italian states had throughout the peninsula given rise to a new awareness of regional and local identities, while the struggles to protect, preserve or regain those autonomies were the main cause of the political instability that became endemic in the Italian states after the Restoration. The reason was quite simply that rather than reverse those tendencies the Restoration rulers had seized the opportunity to consolidate and extend the centralist process initiated by the French. Of this the unification of the southern mainland and Sicily was only one example: the integration of Mazzini's Genoa (formerly the capital of an independent Republic) with Piedmont, the creation of a new Kingdom of Lombardy – Venetia from two historically distinct provinces and the brusque incorporation of cities like Bologna, Ferrara and Ancona into the enlarged Papal State in 1814 all followed the same logic and all became constant flash-points of Risorgimento political unrest.

The debates in the National Parliament which first met in Naples in October 1820 made clear that the issue of provincial autonomies was the major priority and that the new Constitution seemed to offer important guarantees in this respect. But deeper cultural transfers were at work too. Even when translated into Italian, the language of the Constitution of Cadiz reflected juridical premises that were part of a shared legacy inherited from earlier but not distant centuries of Spanish rule in Italy. The principles of local *fueros* and autonomies were embedded as deeply in the institutional and juridical cultures of the Italian states as they were in Spain. In the context of the 1820 revolutions they offered Spanish and Italian liberals a common “usable past” from which to project a new democratic Mediterranean future. These shared institutional and cultural histories played a part in facilitating the assimilation of the Spanish Constitution in Italy, and although as in Spain the principal conflicts would arise precisely over the interpretation of the degrees of local autonomy, similar provisions were absent from the Italian constitutions of 1848-49, which as a result provoked violent reactions in the provinces.

The violence that characterized the revolutions of 1848-49 in Italy was almost completely absent in southern Italy in 1820-21 (although not in Sicily). Despite the conflicts that arose between Naples and Sicily, the revolutions were also in many respects remarkably successful. On the mainland South there was virtually no disorder – the feared popular counter-revolutions never materialized, while the process of electing representatives to the National Parliament went ahead without difficulty. The revolutions were notably successful in winning the support of the lower clergy in particular and the military. Indeed it was because there were no signs in Naples or Piedmont that the armies would turn against the revolutions they had brought into being that the king of Naples appealed to

Austria for armed intervention to end the revolution. Indeed, probably the best measure we have of the revolutions' successes were the massive purges of both army officers and the clergy that took place immediately after the royalist Restorations in 1821. Liberals may later have looked back unsympathetically to the revolutions of the early 1820s, but they had given the rulers a very bad shock and were followed by much greater measures of repression than had been the case in the Restorations after 1814.¹⁹

There is one other feature of the revolutions of the early 1820s that deserves closer attention: the anti-imperial framework of the "liberal international." It is difficult to say to what extent that argument can be stretched to include Portugal and Spain, but amongst Italian and Greek liberals there was a clear awareness that a major obstacle to the political and economic progress of the Mediterranean countries was the commercial and political influence exercised still by France but above all by Great Britain. The liberal anti-imperialist stance in Italy had roots that went back to the 18th century, but acquired new immediacy following the British victories over Napoleon and the acquisition of Malta and the Ionian islands. The collapse of Napoleon's empire had left Britain as the dominant naval power in the Mediterranean and a major political force in the internal affairs of Spain and Portugal. In its negotiations with the restored Legitimist rulers in 1815 Britain had used its power to impose what contemporaries did not hesitate to describe as colonial-style commercial treaties on many of the Italian states, especially the Bourbon rulers of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

The need for transnational liberal solidarity in the face of the realities of British commercial and political power was a constant theme in the writings of the Milanese Giuseppe Pecchio and the Neapolitan Guglielmo Pepe. Both were convinced that the anti-imperial platform gave Italians, Spaniards, the Portuguese and the Greeks a common cause. Both repeatedly criticized the constitutional government in Spain and Portugal for failures to resist British interference and both called on the Spanish and Portuguese to end their disputes with their colonists in South America to present a united front against British imperialism that would join the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.²⁰

Those criticisms were voiced in the final years of the *Trienio Liberal* and after its fall, but they constitute a feature of the liberal project of the early 1820s that deserves closer attention, not least because of the contrast with 1848. By then the anti-imperialist platform had virtually disappeared from Italian liberalism that now took Britain and France less critically as models and allies. In the meantime, Spain had been transformed from liberal beacon to the seat of counter-

¹⁹ Davis, *Naples and Napoleon*, op.cit.

²⁰ Miller, *op.cit.*, 65; Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile*, op.cit.

revolution.²¹ How and why had those shifts come about? That is something that also needs to be studied more closely, but these different positions and political projects illustrate that Mediterranean liberalism was neither peripheral nor purely imitative, and that the Mediterranean world had its own contributions to make to the broader processes of re-imagining democracy in the aftermath of the American and French Revolutions.

²¹ Isabella, "Liberalism and Empires," *op.cit.*