

Unity in disunity italian process of state history essay



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Nations and states have changed and evolved over centuries and are further developing today. Europe has experienced different events, which influenced and triggered the state and nation building process individually. Historians agreed on several concepts as being essential for the foundation of a modern state such as Feudalism, the City-States and the French Revolution. Roberts (1979) defines a state by “ the presence of a supreme authority, who is recognized as having power to make decisions in matters of government and is able to enforce such decisions and generally maintain order within the state” (p. 32). This paper investigates deeper into these particular ideas and applies them on Italy. Throughout history, Italy was characterized by fragmentation into several smaller states. A constitutional monarchy under King Victor Emmanuel was successfully created in 1861, which united Italy under political and territorial aspects. However, Italy failed to become a nation-state until 1914, despite a political community. The national identity was merely weak and is still today.

In October 2012 thousands of people were gathering for independence for the Venetian region. The population strives for an independent republic mainly because of the economic disadvantages of the region. Furthermore, movements for autonomy can be developed in Sicily, Sardinia and Naples (Russia Today, 2012). Lega Nord, a federalist and regionalist party in Italy, strives for regional autonomy and at times even demanded independence for northern Italy. Hence, throughout Italy difficulties are apparent to accept a centralised state. Therefore, it is from interest to discuss why the Italian state was created when there is only weak national solidarity.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the state and nation building process in Italy. Therefore concepts are examined from the early Middle Ages onwards until the outbreak of the First World War to show that the weak national feeling can be traced to Italy's state formation. The first section explains the development to a modern state. The focus of the second part is then on the national question and the examination why Italy failed to become a nation-state until 1914.

II Process of state building in Italy

The Roman Empire covered the entire territory of today's Italy. During that time a first political and cultural uniformity was visible. The Romans were undisputedly a highly developed society having a first concept of citizenship, but also legal and political culture, art, architecture and town planning. However, the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD destroyed this arguable political unity. From that point onwards the Italian territory was not unified until 1861. Since the 5th century the Italian peninsula was the scene of numerous invasions and battles.

II. 1 Feudalism

A determining factor in state and nation building processes in Europe was Feudalism. Opello & Rosow (2004) argue that " the construction of the idea of " Feudalism" as a unified coherent system of social relations was used to help legitimize the modern state by contrasting modern conditions." (p. 33). Charlemagne was a representative of Feudalism through which he gained control of his decaying empire. The feudal system consists of obligations of duties of the feudal and his loyalty to the lord. This means that the lord gave

land and grants to a subordinate who provided military and financial service to the lord in return. Feudalism split up the territory into several small states, which belonged to different feudal lords but the centre of the feudal state remained with the king. This fragmentation was necessary for a successful unification of an empire in a political sense (Hall, p. 4-6).

The influence of Feudalism in the Italian state was low. However, elements of this system existed. The Longobard's kingdom in northern Italy was integrated in the Frankish empire in the 8th century. The Frankish emperor took on Longobards laws and introduced Frankish institutions. The latter had some form of vassalage, which included an interaction of the king and subordinates. Nevertheless, those elements are not enough to speak of a "socio-political system, which we know as Feudalism" (Fischer, 1962, p. 182). In southern Italy Feudalism was introduced after the Normans conquest in the 11th century. The evolving system was called *latifundia* and is similar to feudalism. This fragmentation into entities in the south hindered the development of centralised power and no single sovereign could emerge. The different developments in northern and southern Italy can be seen as a reason for the economic differences apparent until today (Duggan, pp. 31-35).

A central and dominant authority was missing in Italy, which could have taken advantage of the feudal state. Charlemagne created a centralized state, which was possible because of the fragmented feudal territory. However, we can draw parallels between these two states, by a closer look at the City-States.

II. 2 City-States

All over Italy powerful City-States grew through the preoccupation of the two main forces - the Frankish Emperor and the Papacy. During the 11th century the former was occupied solving a civil war in Germany. Additionally, a conflict between the Pope and the Emperor arose and the ecclesiastical schism in 1054 undermined the Popes authority. However, the two powers continued to intervene, the Papacy for example provided food supplies to the cities and supported their defence to be secure of possible invasions. Hence, it favoured the development of autonomous cities (Azzara, 2002). The Pope also supported the Signore, similar to dictators, who were nominated to secure peace within the City-States. It was the breakdown of the two major political powers and their remaining desire to regain influence, which allowed City-States and communes to emerge (Duggan, 2002, p. 37).

Beginning with the 8th century, commerce grew. By the 11th century Italian trade was flourishing and more developed than in most European states. Further, a rise of cities can be discovered and traced to the extraordinary good conditions of their economy. Cities became centres of prosperity especially in northern Italy and also in the south, even though they never achieved a comparable degree of autonomy. By the 12th and 13th centuries the cities had emerged to self-governing republics with democratic essentials.

Within the powerful and wealthy City-States like Florence, Milan, Genoa, and Venice several basics for a modern state such as a strong economy and first concepts of taxation, democratic basics and cultural life, existed. During the

Renaissance the Italian City-States developed an efficient civil administration
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and a first diplomatic corps. By the 17th century this “ apparatus of administration, taxation, and military conscription gradually became part of the structure of the absolute state” (Meriman, 1996, p. 280). However, because of their small population and thus low tax capacity, none of the City-States could gain dominance in Italy. The rise of a territorial nation-state requires a moderate size. England, France and Spain succeeded in establishing a nation-state, as they possessed resources and had a strong economy within manageable seize. Empires such as Russia or Austria, however, failed to be efficient by being too large and unwieldy.

It was the Plurality of Power, which made a unified rule over the whole Italian territory impossible. The Holy Roman Empire and the Papal State dominated the north until the late Middle Ages. By the 18th century it was marked by a high degree of fragmentation consistent of small republics, duchies and kingdoms. The South was predominated throughout the centuries by the Kingdom of Naples. What is most significant is that a territorial Italian state, as we know it today, simply didn't exist thus there were no attempts for unification yet.

II. 3 Estates

While discussing Feudalism and City-States, the Estates, which developed in European countries, are also of most importance. The Estates are divided into three different categories: the Clergy, the nobility and the third estate. In several European countries a tension between the first estate and the monarchs was apparent. This was mainly because of different claims of the monarch and the Church. The Papacy claimed to obtain a unique and spiritual power while the monarch was seeking a supreme, independent and

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secular authority. The second estate formed by the nobility, gained huge influence in the feudal state. The third estate included merchants and artisans living in towns (Hall, 1984, pp. 4-7).

A chain of mutual obligations between the different Estates legitimized the state. Rulers secured justice, carried out military campaigns and provided religious leadership and patronage. It is remarkable that those principles are still partly elements of today's states. However, feudal systems lacked key features such as permanent structures for decision-making, a standing army and an extensive administration following a codified law. Hence, the king who remained in the centre of the feudalist state, received advises from the Great Council. This Great Council included representatives from all three Estates. Therefore, the monarch and the Estates governed feudal states together as the Crown had to justify itself for wars, and was moreover highly financially dependent on the Estates (Opello & Rosow, 2004, pp. 29-45). In Italy, despite an interrelation of the Estates and rulers, first assemblies, comparable to the Great Council, came into being in much smaller scales such as the City-States and communes.

In the cities new mercantile elites grew, which were seeking civic autonomy. It was the old military families who had the most influence, but now the old aristocracy had to cooperate with the new elite. Consuls were created, which won the battle against the former ecclesiastical power of archbishops, as it was the case in Milan. A temporary sense of unity existed while facing a common enemy represented by foreign powers. Struggles between the cities themselves however, hindered to establish a common sense of unity. Various

conflicts required a raise of taxes to finance the wars and thus bank systems were founded (Coleman, 2004, p. 36).

In the south, the Normans established a centralised and strong state in the 11th century, which did not tolerate local autonomy. They also had a sophisticated bureaucracy mainly going back to the appearance of the Arabs and Greeks in Sicily. In contrast of favouring trade to obtain political power, they imposed high taxes, weakening the southern cities in their competition with the northern trade cities. Again the different influences are apparent. While the one part of Italy was dominated by the autonomous western structure, the other was Arabic centralised. This led to a division, which can be recognized today (Duggan, 2002, pp. 37-40).

Communities and cities had developed autonomous features within the system of the estates. An autonomous state with taxation and first assemblies resting on democratic foundations was essential for the development towards a modern state. The cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall (1986) argues that the Italian communes were “ based on an oath of loyalty between a ‘ community’ of equal citizens” (p. 6). However, because of constant invasions and rivalries of the City-States, a huge uncertainty amongst people was visible. Almost anarchic conditions prevailed in some cities, as it was the case in Florence (Duggan, 2002, p. 42). A general rise of insecurity from the late 10th century onwards, favoured the movement of founding castles out of which a distinction between aristocratic and non-aristocratic arose. Castles had their own military to defend a certain territory. This development reinforced the fragmentation of power (Wickham, 2002, pp. 135-137). The rising feeling of

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insecurity and numerous rivalries as well as several technological inventions led to the Military Revolution.

II. 4 Military Revolution

In order to oppose the rising insecurity of the people in the small autonomous centres of power, many feudal states and City-States built up their own small army. Further technological inventions changed warfare fundamentally between the 13th and 16th century. In the feudal state, knights were obliged to serve military in exchange for their fiefs. This warrior aristocratic caste was now replaced by a professional standing army to stay competitive with other states. The changes in warfare transformed the indirect and decentralized rule of Feudalism in to the direct and centralized rule of the medieval state. This was an early form of a territorial state, and mainly occurred as rulers began to levy taxes on the Estates to finance the on going arms race. Further, towns renounced their privileges and autonomy to reintegrate themselves into territory-wide legal frameworks. A professional state administration emerged because the monarch's properties had to be administrated and tax collection guaranteed. Chancellors were appointed to carry out those duties. Hence a first bureaucratic state organisation emerged (Opello & Rosow, 2004, pp. 47-50).

During the Middle Ages duchies, kingdoms and republics, profited from the on going struggle in neighbouring countries between crown and the feudal nobility. By the end of the 15th century, however, the monarchies successfully recovered their strength and were from then on highly superior to the small Italian states. The Military Revolution played a small role in

Italian history since the states “ could not match the demographic and <https://assignbuster.com/unity-in-disunity-italian-process-of-state-history-essay/>

economic strength of the monarchies beyond the Alps" (Symcox, 2002, p. 105).

Piedmont was the first state, which reformed into an efficient, centralised bureaucracy. Since the nobility with feudal privileges did not have to pay taxes for most of their income, the state missed out on a huge amount of money. Reforms were carried out including the legal system, the educational system and economic changes to build up a strong military state. These reforms were unique in Italy at this time but were not less important since they gave certain strength and authority to the Piedmont state and released it from the necessity to reform the state after 1730 (Duggan, p. 77-78).

Italian City-States developed these important changes in state organisation even before they were introduced in other parts of Europe. The example of Piedmont illustrates that scenarios and changes, which occurred in the great European states, were carried out in Italy on a much smaller scale because of the foreign domination and territorial fragmentation. Within developed state such as Piedmont the concept of the Sovereign state evolved.

II. 5 Sovereign State

The 14th and 15th century was a period characterized by several crises such as overpopulation, epidemic, wars of religion and civil strife. The Thirty Years War in the 17th century resulted in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. It recognized and normalized the principle of state Sovereignty, and encouraged the use of it. A uniform system of public law was developed through the rediscovery of Roman law on the one hand and new legal codes written by the monarchs on the other hand (Opello & Rosow, 2004, p. 55).

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The Principle of Sovereignty is defined by one person ruling over subordinates completely independently. Only the Sovereign himself can make the laws and thus obtains the absolute authority. A Sovereign needs to be recognized by the people as well as by other countries. In Italy, however, the developments were differently.

As a result of the absence of an absolute and territorial ruler as well as the fragmentation into many different states, it was impossible for one authority to emerge within Italy. Nevertheless of this absence, the existence of absolute despots can be found on a smaller scale in the City-States. In this regard parallels can be drawn between the small Italian states and the great European powers. In this context it is important to mention the concept of the Reason of State, a guideline for rulers how to build a sovereign, secular and strong state. Several authors such as Machiavelli and Botero describe this concept. It aims to separate the state and canon law, and to abolish the old order. During the second half of the 16th century the Italian politics followed this concept because they were more interested in competing with imperial systems with republicans and absolute systems. Machiavelli considers a standing army to obtain authority as the most important body of a state. It can be suggested that Machiavelli sees an interrelation between his idea and the Military Revolutions during that time (Craig & George, 1995, pp. 5-13).

In the 16th century, the Spanish king Philip II technically ruled over most of Italian territory, since his reign officially included the Kingdom of Sicily, the Kingdom of Naples and the Duchy of Milan. Hence, Italian territory was under rule of an absolutist. The rest of Italy including the Papal States, Genoa, <https://assignbuster.com/unity-in-disunity-italian-process-of-state-history-essay/>

Florence and the other smaller Italian states were not officially under his rule but this was not from great importance since they had not enough autonomous power to stay independent. Only the Republic of Venice achieved to retain the political autonomy and privileges (Dandeleit, 2002, p. 15).

Throughout Italy City-States, Feudalism, Estates and absolutism and even the results of it such as Sovereign rulers and democratic basics were apparent. However, within Italy there was no unity at all nor did the idea even exist that there should be a unity. Nationalism only arose with the advent of the French Revolution, which had an impact in Italy, too.

II. 6 French Revolution

The French Revolution was indisputable a turning point in European history. The Revolution encouraged ideas of equality and freedom, and also a patriotic sense of nation. In Napoleon Bonaparte's attempt not only to unite France but entire Europe under the French leadership, Italy, too, was of interest. The French rule in northern Italy introduced secular and liberal ideas pleasing especially educated classes. The Austrians, who occupied also regions in the north, were striving to control the educated classes by authoritarian and suppressing regime (Peri, 2000, p. 253). The resulting new laws created new sources of social mobility and favoured administrative centralisation, which was necessary for warfare in the French part (Riall, 1994, p. 12). However, this repetition of suppression in combinations with the ideas of the French Revolution finally led to a first national feeling in Italy. In his critical analysis of the western representation of the East, Edward Said (1995) stresses out that a common feeling is more likely to exist while <https://assignbuster.com/unity-in-disunity-italian-process-of-state-history-essay/>

facing a common enemy, which you can oppose yourself. More precisely it means that Italian people yet did not know who they were but who they were not faced by the despised enemy France and Austria.

The most essential ideas of the French Revolution were not of popularity and importance in the south of Italy, a very backward territory. There, the loyalty to God and King was still the most popular concept. In contrast to this, the ideas of the French Revolution had been taken into consideration in the North of Italy as “ a liberation from arbitrary or obscurantist rule” (Lowe, 1990, p. 1)

II. 7 The Risorgimento

The Risorgimento is the political and social movement, which finally liberated Italy in the 19th century. In 1815 the Italian territory was composed of eight separate states, most of them ruled under Austrian leadership or other absolute kings. This was mainly a result of the Congress of Vienna in 1814, which ended the Napoleonic attempt to unify Europe under his leadership. During the previous twenty-two years forgoing, northern Italy and many other parts in central Europe, had experienced several territorial changes. The five great powers, England, Prussia, Russia, France and Austria-Hungary, took up the challenge of deciding where to draw the state boundaries and to whom they would give authoritative power in order to re-establish the balance of power. By strengthening the direct neighbours of France the five great powers expected to be able to contain the power the French state (Lowe, 1990, p. 23).

Most regions had been incorporated into France or unified in small republics or Kingdoms during the Napoleonic era. In the south Napoleon secured his influence through installing a general rule over the kingdom of Naples (Lowe, 1990, p. 17). The five great powers reinstated the Habsburg rule in central duchies of Parma and Modena. Even though this reorganisation supported the balance of power system, it is also an expression of Austria's personal interests to strengthen the financially poor and military weak state. Austria managed to gain increased influence in Italy by acquiring Lombardy, Venetia including the Adriatic possessions. In particular, the loss of Venetian independence was striking since it has been independent and wealthy for centuries. The selfish behaviour of all the great powers threw a negative shadow over the Vienna settlement, and is often referred to as being responsible for the failure of re-establishing the old order within states (Lowe, 1990, pp. 23-29).

Fragmented Italy was not considered, as belonging together and, therefore, became object of any despotism of the great powers. However, this was about to change. The renewed fragmentation and occupation in combination with revolutionary ideas, led to the development of the idea of a unified Italian state. Several attempts of liberation from foreign rule started from 1820 onwards. However, they were all crushed by powers such as Austria. Within Italy several underground movements had been developed. The difficulty with these movements was that they lacked a concern for unity and a clear aim to strive for (Duggan, 2002, p. 103). Still, the rivalry between the several rulers, made liberation impossible, which was especially the case when the Austrians once again succeeded in suppressing uproar in central

Italy in 1831 (Duggan, 2002, p. 107). A key figure in the liberal movement in Italy was Giuseppe Mazzini. He was inspired by the principles of Machiavelli and the German writer on nationalism Herder with a “ conviction that Italy was destined for unity and for greatness” (Duggan, 2002, p. 108). He set up a secret society called Young Italy, aiming for a united and liberal republic. However, they were still lacking a broad support among the population.

1848 became to be known as the Year of Revolution. Within all Italian regions, Piedmont, the Kingdom of the two Scillies, the Papal States, the Duchies, Lombardy, and Venetia several revolts arose. Even though some of them were temporarily successful they would decrease again within a year, as it was the case in Venetia or Piedmont. The main reason why the revolts failed was the fact that they at first took advantage of the fall of Metternich but nevertheless, the resulting power vacuum was only temporarily. They could not obtain the recently gained independence. Furthermore a nationwide Italian idea was still missing (Gooch, 1986, pp. 19-20). However, it must be said that this number of failed local revolutions was essential in the state building process of Italy. The failures created a consciousness to understand why the revolutions were not successful. A unity in the prevailing disunity and a nationalist feeling was necessary. It was then when a national revolution evolved, as Gooch (1986) describes it “ many struggles came together to become one” by realizing the overall and mutual aim to liberate oneself from foreign domination (p. 1). The dual revolution and the arising romanticism were further catalysts for the ideas of spiritual and political freedom (Peri, 2000, p. 253).

In 1848 the Piedmont' king granted liberal freedom and established a parliament. In the following years Piedmont succeeded to liberalise the state piece by piece and became a strong power. With the collaboration of France, Piedmont defeated the Austrian in northern Italy and formed a union with the governments of Tuscany, Parma and Modena. Additionally, the leader of the popular army Giuseppe Garibaldi succeeded in overthrowing the Bourbon monarch in Sicily. Seeking for stability, Garibaldi entered into a union with the Piedmonts. The Piedmonts army conquered the Papal States except for Rome. In 1861 the king of Piedmont Victor Emanuel II, was crowned as king of a united Italy. The young kingdom of Italy annexed Venetia in 1866, and finally managed to conquer Rome, except for the Vatican since the Pope did not accept the new state. With the declaration of Rome as the capital the process of state building in Italy was completed in December 1870 (Riall, 1994, pp. 13-15).

The new kingdom of Italy was constituted as a parliamentary monarchy. However, the kingdom's political life consisted of unstable majorities and political leaders who tried to stay in power as long as possible. The struggle with the Catholic Church, who did not acknowledge the Italian state, caused further instability. The Industrial Revolution occurred in Italy rather late, which decelerated the emergence of the social problems within the population. That explains also the late introduction of universal male suffrage in 1912. The Italian peninsular faced social problems such as poverty and illiteracy. The latter was responsible for a low participation of the broad population in policies. Anterior liberal Italy failed to satisfy the needs of the population, which still lacked a national identity. This failure

finally can be seen as one of the main reasons for the outbreak of fascism in Italy (Palmer & Colton, 1995, pp. 597-598).

III The National Question

The unification of the Italian territory through the kingdom of Italy in 1861 was a milestone in the process of Italian state and nation building. However, the striving force for the unification was not the nationalist movements, but more the desire of several small nations for independence, which could only be achieved by a united action. Anthony Smith describes a nation as a “ named human population sharing historic territory, common myths and memories, a mass, public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members.” (Editor, 1996). However, such a nation cannot be found in Italy until 1914.

The early north-south division and thus the influence of two completely different cultures - the Byzantine and the Franks - indicates that there has not been a historic territory neither common myths and memories since the early middle ages onwards. Victor Emanuel II and Garibaldi became the heroes and creators of Italy in the 19th century and the Risorgimento was the first common event all Italy shared (Riall, 1994, p. 63). One might argue that the Catholic Church would present a common culture, however, that is not relevant because the whole European continent was under Catholic domination before the Reformation. Hence the Catholic belief was not something Italy in particular shared. The location of the Papacy and the occurring Papal States might explain why the Reformation was only small within Italy but provided not a national feeling. The Pope was further not interested in a united Italy, indicated by his disapproval of the creation of the <https://assignbuster.com/unity-in-disunity-italian-process-of-state-history-essay/>

Italian state in the 19th century. The Church encouraged a fragmentation of Italy by asking the Franks to take over power in the 8th century (Duggan, 1984, p. 35). The City-States with a strong economy were responsible for an economic imbalance between the south and the north, which is apparent even today. The Italian peninsula could have favoured a united state, but in reality it was more a disadvantage becoming of interests of other powers because of its central location. The importance of the Mediterranean ports in the early Middle Ages made it an area of interest (Duggan, 1984, p. 11).

A nation as Smith describes it cannot be found in Italy neither looking at its development since the early Middle Ages, nor in 1914. However, an Italian state was created, even though one with a weak national feeling. The ideas of the French Revolution were responsible for strengthening the wish of liberation from foreign powers, and resulted in a unified Italy in the long term. Ernest Gellner's definition is therefore more appropriate, stating that nations started to emerge after the French Revolution and further that nationalism creates the nation as a product of history (Editor, 1996). The ideals of the French revolution introduced to Italy during the occupation of Napoleon were necessary to create at least a little sense of nationalism, essential for the unification and liberation of the Italian peninsula (Riall, 1994, p. 66). Hence, nationalism in Italy is a by-product of the French Revolution.

The Risorgimento also became to be known as a liberal type of nationalism aiming to free people from political and social oppression. This kind of nationalism was dominant in the first years of the Revolutions when it was the main aim to gain independence from foreign domination. However, <https://assignbuster.com/unity-in-disunity-italian-process-of-state-history-essay/>

during the upcoming years this nationalism transformed to integral nationalism by becoming more extreme. Despite the formation of the Italian state it was not yet a nation. Therefore radicals claimed the nation to be absolute in which course violence was legitimated as a tool to impose the nation's interests. Those are characteristics of integral nationalism (Alter, 1996, pp. 42-54). The absence of an Italian nation was obvious to the politicians in the 19th century. A statesman declared in 1866: " We have made Italy, now we must make Italian." Italy was a mix of several nations who happened to become unified in one state without being one nation. Several measures were taken out to create a nation such as introducing a common language to generate a homogenous ethnic group. These aggressive and unnatural vain attempts to create a nation would eventually be a reason for development of fascism.

Different cultures and hostilities between the different City-States and regions could not be disposed. This is a product of the Italian process of state formation. Revolutions broke out and accumulated in an Italian state engineered by mix of constitutional reformist and revolutionary nationalists. Further, diplomatic relations and the help of foreign powers such as France and Britain were necessary to create the Italian state. The Italian failure to become a nation until 1914 can be traced to its state formation.

IV Conclusion

Throughout its history, Italy has been fragmented and no national identity existed. All major concepts, which have been agreed on as being essential for state building, can be found within Italy. Hence, the foundation of a modern Italian state was possible. However, because of its process of state

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building, which was more a partnership of convenience to defeat foreign significant powers, it failed to become a nation-state until 1914. When revolutions broke out in the decades after the Congress of Vienna, the revolts did not seek for a united state but for liberation. It was the failure of several attempts of inferior states facing superpowers like the Habsburg that a consciousness for unification grew among the population. To understand why Italy failed to become a nation-state, the process of its state building is the core point. Ernest Renan states that one essential precondition of a nation is the desire of people living together. This desire did not exist in Italy in 1861 or in 1914 and can be seen for the reason why Italy failed to become a nation-state (Schulze, 2003, pp. 97-98).

Italy is today still dominated by disunity. Independence movements can be found in many regions in Europe as for example in the Basque country. Even in Germany a prominent politician recently demanded independence for Bavaria (SZ Online, 2012). However, what is striking regarding Italy is that it is not only o