

**TOWARDS NATIONHOOD:
THE PUBLIC AND POLITICAL SPHERE IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY ITALY**

**VERSO LA NAZIONE. SFERA PUBBLICA E POLITICA
NELL'ITALIA DEL PRIMO OTTOCENTO**

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Abstract: this essay aims to reconstruct the dynamics through which a public sphere was formed, within the Italian peninsula of the early nineteenth century, that was capable of perceiving itself as a political community that stretched beyond regional or national boundaries. This community adopted increasingly critical views towards the political and constitutional order established at the Congress of Vienna, which Austria, until 1848, sought to impose on the Italian States through the use of force and strict censorship over the press and the circulation of ideas. Drawing partly on unpublished sources and in dialogue with an extensive international literature, the essay intends to demonstrate that the development of this self-aware public sphere was the result of discursive processes developed within the channels of the written and spoken word. Key points along these channels were the formal and informal institutions associated with reading and conversation. Within these institutions, exemplified by the paradigmatic case of the Gabinetto Scientifico e Letterario established by Giovan Pietro Vieusseux in Florence, a new type of sociability developed that fostered an explicitly political public debate opposed to the use of censorship and with openly declared supra-regional and national aspirations.

Keywords: Italian Risorgimento – public sphere – literary salons – censorship – discursive practices – nineteenth-century nationalism

Abstract: il saggio si propone di ricostruire le dinamiche attraverso le quali, nella penisola italiana dell'inizio del XIX secolo, si formò una sfera pubblica in grado di percepirsi come una comunità politica che si estendeva oltre i confini regionali o nazionali. Tale comunità assunse posizioni sempre più critiche nei confronti dell'ordine politico e costituzionale stabilito al Congresso di Vienna, che l'Austria, fino al 1848, cercò di imporre agli Stati italiani ricorrendo alla forza per controllare ogni forma di associazione tra i sudditi e a una

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rigida censura sulla stampa e sulla circolazione delle idee. Attingendo in buona parte a fonti inedite e in dialogo con un'ampia letteratura internazionale, il saggio intende dimostrare che lo sviluppo di questa sfera pubblica consapevole di sé fu il risultato di processi discorsivi sviluppatisi attraverso i canali della parola scritta e parlata. Punti chiave lungo questi canali furono le istituzioni formali e informali legate alla lettura e alla conversazione. All'interno di queste istituzioni, esemplificate dal caso paradigmatico del Gabinetto Scientifico e Letterario fondato da Giovan Pietro Vieusseux a Firenze, si sviluppò un nuovo tipo di socialità che favorì un dibattito pubblico esplicitamente politico, contrario al ricorso alla censura e con aspirazioni politiche e costituzionali sovraregionali e nazionali apertamente dichiarate.

Keywords: Risorgimento italiano – Sfera pubblica – Salotti letterari – Censura – Pratiche discorsive – Nazionalismo ottocentesco

Introduction

Any discussion of the emergence of the concept of Italian nationhood and the processes whereby the public sphere was politicized in the early nineteenth century must start from the consideration – by no means self-evident – that during the early years of the Restoration such an idea remained extremely indistinct in the peninsula's collective imaginary. The same was even more true of its image which was virtually absent from the institutional perspective. In essence, achieving nationhood was not on the agenda of Italian subjects in the early nineteenth century¹.

It is equally clear, and this serves as my starting point, that a rudimentary national image emerged quite rapidly, in as early as the second half of the 1820s. However, this emergence was marked by numerous fluctuations and variations, only some of which focused on the modern idea of national belonging. Our attention should therefore focus on whether an embryonic public sphere that would eventually produce a more critical public opinion took shape, and where and how it did so².

To take things in their proper order, consideration first needs to be given to an analysis of the public sphere. Did it in fact exist at all? And if so, did it foster a public opinion truly capable of perceiving itself as a national community eager to be constituted? The answer, as I see it, must be a positive one, albeit with a few considerations.

¹ For an understanding of the archaic and pluralistic nature of the concept of nation in Risorgimento Italy see A. Benedictis, I. Fosi, and L. Mannori, 2012; for a wide-ranging view, see also, among others, J.H. Shennan, 1991, 689-710.

² See among others K.M. Baker, 1990; M. Ozouf, 1988, 1-21; and K. Wetters, 2008. For a conceptual and methodological framework, see D. Hucker, 2012, 775-794.

The issue of the «public sphere» is not new. In fact, we might say that the earliest works of Risorgimento history themselves stressed the role of the «public spirit» in national events, extolling it as a definite, undeniable fact³. These analyses took this spirit for granted to such an extent that they rarely even studied it, in most cases merely regarding it as the natural conduit for an equally natural, self-evident metamorphosis that would subsequently lead to the physiological birth of a single State in the peninsula. In other words, they adopted a teleological interpretation that regarded the public sphere and public opinion as essential elements in the surge towards Italian nationhood.

A far more discerning, attentive line of study has emerged only more recently. This has turned the analysis of the processes shaping public opinion into one of the main tools for understanding early nineteenth-century Italian nationalism, a nationalism that – it has to be said – was for a long time driven by influences largely unrelated to the modern sense of national belonging, and often drew instead on more archaic or utopian aspirations. Recent historical analyses of the emergence of a strong national opinion tend to stress the robust links between literature and politics, between men of letters and nationhood and, especially, between words, ideas and the nation⁴. Essentially, this approach, which is undoubtedly inspired by Alberto Mario Banti's perceptive analysis⁵, proposes that the study of the processes responsible for the formation of Italian national identity should be based on an analysis of the impact of literary works and their circulation. By drawing on images rooted in the deep collective imaginary, such works rallied every reader unconditionally to the national cause⁶.

From letters to politics

In essence, this interpretation is based on the ability of particular books to turn readers into revolutionaries, facilitating an apparently «self-evident» leap from literature to politics. Albeit identified and probed through a striking and highly original lens, this link has struck a chord with many historians⁷. The contribution of their works is very useful, especially with regard to the possible interactions between authors (printed works), readers and discursive formations. It is precisely by referring to such exchanges that we

³ For a pioneering historical analysis on the subject, see D.G. Boyce, 1978, 214-228; for just one example regarding the situation in Tuscany, cf. G. Scaramella, 1901.

⁴ See C. Charle, 1996; P. Casanova, 1999; P. Benichou, 1993; M. Lyons, 1987; and G. Albergoni, 2011, 86-100.

⁵ Cf. A.M. Banti, 2000; but also Id., 2005; and now, and indeed first and foremost, A.M. Banti and P. Ginsborg, 2007, 541-566.

⁶ B. Anderson, 1983, is still of fundamental importance on the impact of discursive practices and the sociability of the written and spoken. For an analysis of the English case in the long nineteenth century, see the following collection of essays summarising a debate that lasted over a decade: L. Brake, B. Bell, and D. Finkelstein, 2000.

⁷ G. Albergoni, 2008, 349-365; and L. Mannori, 2008, 367-379.

can imagine the emergence of a politically «auto-conscious» public sphere that, following Michael Foucault's refined insights, we might describe as a cultural historical fact⁸.

For the purposes of our considerations, it seems to me that in the study of the process of the formation of the public sphere and, in particular, of the maturation of a national consciousness, aspects influencing reception are also of great importance⁹.

Moreover, since it would be rash to assume that every reader was rallied to the cause of nationhood, I take the view that when analysing the sociogenesis of the spirit of national belonging in relation to the circulation of the written word it is also well worth taking into consideration, as far as possible, the practices through which often disconnected individuals came into contact with this written material, before reinterpreting it, absorbing its unifying properties and eventually reintroducing it into circulation, infused with their own perspectives¹⁰.

In other words, it is in the practices underpinning the nineteenth-century discovery of the written word's potential to animate first individual and then collective emancipation that we might locate the initial developments that led to the birth of a public sphere critical of the restored systems. A public sphere which, in the long run, was fundamental to the formation of a more mature, self-aware public opinion capable of assimilating a spirit of national belonging as unprecedented as it was overwhelming¹¹.

The pivotal actors in this context are thus the community of writers, the community of readers and the critical public, and it will only be possible to read the key passages if the networks of horizontal and vertical solidarity that grew up around these points of coagulation from the early years of the Restoration are investigated fully. Places like reading cabinets, libraries equipped with reading rooms, cafés and theatres¹² swiftly emerged across all the States in the Italian peninsula (and we will consider the most emblematic case below). They served as liberated spaces from which a common, structurally supra-regional discourse radiated, and within which people gradually began to discuss – and sometimes even criticize – politics, including the politics of the various Italian and European governments¹³.

It appears to me, in other words, that great importance attaches to practices, specifically to those that enabled growing swaths of the indeterminate mass of the peninsula's subjects to perceive themselves first as a community of writers and then as a

⁸ M. Foucault, 1966, is a highly suggestive and effective contribution.

⁹ For a very interesting approach, see the essays included in R.C. Holub, 1995; see also W. Iser, 1978.

¹⁰ On the responses that can ensue from the collision between readers and printed works, see R. Darnton, 1988.

¹¹ For an evocative analysis of the paths leading to the encounter between writing and reading see P. Ricoeur, 1991; still fundamental as a historical and historiographical orientation is R. Darnton, 1994, 117-154; for a long-term overview see, among others, G. Cavallo and R. Chartier, 1995.

¹² See, among others, C. Sorba, 2006, 595-614; and Id., 2021.

¹³ For the French case, see F. Parent-Lardeur, 1982. For the Italian case, see L. Desideri, 2004; and L. De Franceschi, 2013, 69-170.

community of readers, and subsequently to attain their own collective critical «autonomy» from the political authorities.

In connection to this, we must then ask ourselves how politics make its way into this public sphere. Put another way, how did the subjects involved in various ways in the «agglutinating» process originating from the dissemination of literature develop the self-awareness that led them «collectively» to perceive themselves as a critical avant-garde opposed to the systems of the period?

The politicization of the public sphere in the early nineteenth century remains a focal point for numerous scholars working in several disciplines, and the subject of research undertaken with very different approaches. However, for the purposes of our discussion it will be as well not to stray beyond the bounds of the evolution of practices. I contend that the majority of this politicization stemmed from a reaction to the plans for the peninsula developed by Vienna, which was seeking to establish what I have previously dubbed a «State without a public». Under Metternich's direction, this strategy aimed to strip the community of subjects of even the slightest political autonomy,¹⁴ and, in the ultimate analysis, to prevent the growth of a self-aware, critical public sphere. Right from the beginning, in the early twenties, the Austrian chancellor himself, while downplaying the extent of the phenomenon, alerted Emperor Franz of Habsburg to the burgeoning press in the Italian peninsula, a «fléau inconnu au monde avant la dernière moitié du XVIII siècle»¹⁵. He also warned of the passion for reading that had led subjects to the dangerous presumption that they could pass judgment on anything they chose, and even to criticize the actions of sovereign powers. Metternich cautioned the emperor against allowing the «classe intermédiaire»¹⁶ of readers and critics to gain ground. Aligned behind this approach, which was strongly supported by Metternich, the peninsula's governments adopted a policing strategy centred on controlling the circulation of ideas, texts and individuals¹⁷.

Continuing with this analysis, it becomes apparent that consideration has next to be given to the entirely unprecedented trends that encouraged groups of the peninsula's subjects to devise new forms of socialization that emerged as an alternative to state-imposed bureaucratic forms. Simultaneously, subjects also sought fresh opportunities within more traditional settings, such as the academies¹⁸. By providing, so to speak, an

¹⁴ Regarding the political intentions of the Restoration and the conduct of the peninsula's governments in the years before unification, A. Chiavistelli, 2006, 74-93.

¹⁵ In English: «a scourge unknown to the world before the second half of the eighteenth century». K. von Metternich, [1820], 1881. For a pioneering study of the hostilities from various forms of power towards books and the written word in general, see J. Holbrook, [1932], 2001.

¹⁶ K. Metternich, [1820], 1881.

¹⁷ See Palazzolo, 2003; M. Infelise, 1999; L. Di Fiore, 2021, 29-53. For a more in-depth study of the Tuscan case, see A. Chiavistelli, 2009; and M. Meriggi, 2005, 37-53; Id., 2006, 107-120.

¹⁸ Regarding the situation in Lombardy and Veneto cf. M. Meriggi, 1992, 29-41. On the situation in Tuscany, see E.W. Cochrane, 1961, 15-150; F. Adorno, 1988; and A. Chiavistelli, 2011, 95-139.

induction into the exercise of the critical spirit¹⁹, such forms generated an entirely unprecedented self-awareness in the public, which thus became increasingly engaged over the medium to long term.

The sociability of speech

The Restoration thus witnessed a new form of sociability²⁰, which, paradoxically, was fostered by the State's determination to suppress all avenues for political debate. It is evident and well worth stressing that these forms of socialization were initially very far from shaping a political community capable of directly challenging the sovereigns. This notwithstanding, from the start of the Restoration, a sort of «community of the word» began to coalesce in the subjects' imaginary. This was characterized by an increasingly intense need to socialize, read and debate public matters, and ultimately also acquired political dimensions²¹.

Indeed, the persistent bans on a number of contemporary writers and the concerted endeavour to censor their writings elevated them to the status of political symbols in ways that they had not envisioned at the outset, and which in many cases exceeded their real intentions²². For instance, after Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi's novel, *L'Assedio di Firenze* (The Siege of Florence), was subject to systematic confiscation by the police in all the States in the peninsula, the Romantic imaginary came to see Guerrazzi himself (in no small part because of the censorship) as an icon of the national identity oppressed by the foreign invaders²³.

Remaining on the topic of old and new forms of socialization and politics, it is also worth noting that in nearly all the States in the peninsula the police reported that the reading of foreign political newspapers, as well as unauthorized meetings and discussions of government conduct – all considered serious crimes – in the overwhelming majority of cases took place in public venues. These included cafés, beer halls, literary clubs and retail spaces. This proliferation of social interaction linked to the circulation of printed materials and to subsequent discussions and group readings was a rapidly expanding

¹⁹ See M. Kallich, 1970.

²⁰ Of great importance in relation to this are the studies by Maurice Agulhon, see in particular, M. Agulhon, 1993. For an original approach to the subject see A. Lilti, 2005. It is interesting to observe how in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the processes of sociability in England followed paths that were in part different and in antithesis to those followed in France. On the English case see V. Capdeville and A. Kerhervé, 2019; and on the Italian case, A. Chiavistelli, 2006, 119-179.

²¹ Cf. R. Koselleck, [1959], 1972; and also J.H. Billington, 1980, 170-177.

²² On the role assumed by authors of printed works and writers in general, see the fine work A.-M. Thiesse, 2019.

²³ Cf. A. De Rubertis, 1924, 25-40; M.I. Palazzolo, 1990; and Id., 2006, 71-89. On Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi's contribution to the spread of the historical novel in nineteenth-century Europe, see R. Macchioni Jodi, 1994, 389-416.

phenomenon in both the peninsula and the rest of Europe²⁴. In fact, almost all regions, and cities large and small, witnessed the establishment of places intended to accommodate a public engaging in such sociability. New cafés, libraries and reading cabinets offered shelter from police spies and opportunities to read texts of all kinds and discuss their contents²⁵. Despite the generality of this phenomenon, it is interesting to note that Tuscany, and particularly Florence, emerged as exceptionally fertile grounds for this sociability through written and spoken discourse.

In Florence, where several dozen businesses were specifically designated as cafés²⁶, certain establishments attracted particular attention due to their «suspect» clientele. Notable among them were Giuseppe Carobbi's Caffè del Bottegone on the cathedral square, Francesco Orlandini's in Piazza Santa Maria Maggiore, and the Trattoria della Stella and the Caffè dell'Elvetico in Via Por Santa Maria²⁷. The situation was the same in Pisa, where the Caffè dell'Uszero, which was a hub for discussions echoing in and around the University, was likewise kept under close surveillance²⁸. In Livorno, a port city with one of the most dynamic citizenships on the Italian peninsula and therefore a place highly sensitive to emerging supra-regional public discourse, the Caffè del Commercio, Caffè Americano, Caffè della Minerva and the Caffè Etrusco were singled out as centres of early «liberal» socialization²⁹. Meanwhile, Padua's Caffè Pedrocchi had been a gathering spot for locals and foreigners interested in exchanging news for over a decade, as an article devoted to it in the *Annali Universali di Statistica* reported³⁰.

This liberal phenomenon was not restricted to cafés, as academies, university lecture halls, theatres and literary clubs also took on a fresh life of their own, asserting themselves as free arenas for the exchange of ideas and reading materials, and for the critical exchange of views³¹.

²⁴ See, among others, E.K. Carpenter, 1986; and the classic R.D. Altick, 1988.

²⁵ See H.-M. de Langle, 1990 ; W. Scott Haine, 1997; Id., 1992, 607-626; F. Parent-Lardeur, 1999; H.E. Bödeker, 1990, 517-538. On coffee's role in encouraging early forms of literary sociability in South America, see M. Guicharnaud-Tollis, 1993, 137-154; and for an overview on the sociability of conversation in the contemporary cafés of Eastern and North Africa, O. Carlier, 1990, 975-1003.

²⁶ Archivio Storico del Comune di Firenze (ASCF), *Atti magistrali*, corda 4991, Nos. 29009, 29022, 29023, 34057. The best-known included the cafés on Piazza San Giovanni: Giuseppe Carobbi's Caffè del Bottegone, Jacopo and Roberto Romiti's establishment, and the café run by the Nistri brothers and Giuseppe Piccini, nicknamed the Antico Castroni.

²⁷ Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), *Buon Governo Segreto*, 1819-1821, folio 4, No. 20; cf. A. Baretta, 1978, 55-56; E. Benedetto, 1939, 191-229.

²⁸ Cf. E. Michel, 1949; and D. Barsanti, 1997, 124-128.

²⁹ An exhaustive account of pre-1848 socialisation in Livorno can be found in F. Bertini, 2003, 16-280. See also U. Canessa, 2000.

³⁰ Indeed, socialisation was also taking over new public arenas in Lombardy and Veneto: «the stranger who, in recent years, rushed to visit the university shortly after arriving in Padua [...] now makes straight for the Caffè Pedrocchi [...] whose renown is now famed throughout Europe»: *Annali universali di statistica, economia pubblica, storia, viaggi e commercio*, 1834, 288-290.

³¹ For a critical overview of historical studies on the sociability of conversation see A. Groppi, M. D'Amelia, B. Borello, 2005, 801-834. For case studies on the sociability of the written and spoken word in the various cities of the Italian peninsula in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see, among others, I. Pederzani,

These public spaces hosted a «nascent» public brought together by the desire to talk and socialize, and infused with a diverse mix of inclinations prompted by literary influences, nostalgia for the years of French rule, local ambitions and a sincere critical spirit fuelled by the ability to read freely. This spirit gradually turned its attention onto the circles of restored political power and their participants. The political imaginary within this vastly heterogeneous spectrum varied significantly, ranging from timid political and social gradualism at one extreme³², to the intransigent republicanism of Mazzini and his followers at the other³³. The mass of the subjects still in the process of awakening consciousness, but nonetheless swayed by the many promptings from the various sectors of the public sphere, inhabited a space somewhere in between. The imaginary of these sectors was largely confined to regional aspirations that envisaged confederal solutions for the peninsula³⁴. Occasionally, these concepts took on fanciful forms, such as the Pact of Ausonia, which the Carbonari reputedly had to swear during the investiture of the order's third and highest rank, and which envisaged a «republic» that divided the peninsula into 21 provinces arranged in a pyramid-like framework with multiple intermediate levels. At the top stood an executive body comprising two kings (one of the sea and one of the land) and a confederal parliament constituted of deputies delegated by the local assemblies³⁵.

The principal architects of this collective emancipation effort were of course the authors of printed works³⁶. They were not only the first to fall prey to the war on ideas unleashed by the governments, but were also the quickest to go on the offensive. In so doing, as indicated above, they lay the groundwork for the socialization centred around the written word which went on to form the initial nucleus of the prospective national arena³⁷.

2010, 573-608; I. Colucci, 2004, 449-493; G. Luzzatto, 1966-38-41; O. Raggio, 2004, 161-194; D.L. Caglioti, 1995, 19-38; M.E. Tonizzi, 2010, 609-632; A. Signorelli, 1995, 39-65; A. Floridia and F. Ramella, 1995, 155-184; M. Cattaruzza, 1991, 419-450.

³² Cf. F. Della Peruta, 1999. On the various «political families» in early nineteenth-century Italy, see A. Chiavistelli, 2011, 115-133.

³³ Cf. A. De Francesco, 1999; and M. Ridolfi, 1990.

³⁴ For a fascinating account of the world of secret societies and the political expectations within the Italian peninsula during the crucial years of the revolutionary period, see the comprehensive work : L. Addante, 2024. See also G. Perelli, 2026, 97-131.

³⁵ The full wording of the Ausonia pact can be found in A. Chiarle, 1999, 33-37; and in F. Gualterio, 1851, 5-11. The equally ephemeral Guelf constitution – whose saga traces its origins back to Tuscany, since it was the work of the Florentine Frediani – also anticipated a confederal arrangement. The document called for «a single constitutional, or at least federative government» based on «eleven central cities» subject to a Metropolis whose bodies (a directory of nine members and a security committee of 45, both to be established via a system blending democratic appointment with co-optation) were replicated at the level of towns and villages, in accordance with a hierarchical arrangement. The text of the Constitution can be found in *Segreta*, 1981, 536-547. However, cf. also J.R. Rath, 1963, 343-376; Id., 1964, 353-370; and G.M. Cazzaniga, 2011, 393-413.

³⁶ Cf., among others, G. Albergoni, 2011, 86-100.

³⁷ Cf. M. Berengo, 1986, 54-60; and Id., 2004, 45-101.

The public and political sphere

This situation created a combination of actors with somewhat differing sentiments and demands, who nevertheless were united by their autonomous use of words and printed texts³⁸. The dissemination and reading of newspapers, pamphlets and books, along with organized gatherings³⁹, facilitated connections that engendered a new collective dimension within the community. This innovative form of socialization encouraged the birth of a more distinct «public discourse»⁴⁰ enriched with political content.

The most concrete evidence of the existence of a supra-corporative community centred on reading, conversation and communication emerged from the interaction between the previously mentioned venues and forms of socialization, and the newspapers and periodicals. From this point of view, considering the restored governments' inability to pursue cultural policies capable of rallying support around court circles⁴¹, Tuscany assumed a pivotal role in the national emergence of a self-aware public sphere⁴². In particular, the Genevan émigré merchant Giovan Pietro Vieusseux stands out as a notably influential figure⁴³. Although he can certainly not be considered a patriotic intellectual, Vieusseux played a decisive role in organising a supra-regional community consisting of writers, readers and men of letters in general. It was from this community that the burgeoning public opinion drew its lifeblood.

Indeed, Giovan Pietro Vieusseux realized that despite the immense constraints imposed by the Grand Duchy's government on the movement of individuals and ideas, Florence, «rightly dubbed the Athens of Italy»⁴⁴, attracted a large number of foreigners who «[would have extended] their stay there longer than elsewhere [...] if [they had found there] a public establishment that collected together the periodicals of greatest interest, both from Italy and from overseas and across the Alps, so that they could obtain direct news from the native countries dear to them all»⁴⁵.

As a result, at the end of 1819, Vieusseux made the decision to open such an establishment, which he designed to be «of use and pleasure not only to foreigners, but

³⁸ Regarding the written word's ability to inspire political association see, among others, J. Goody, 2000; E.L. Eisenstein, 1979; and N. Elias, 1978.

³⁹ M. Meriggi, 1992, 112-117.

⁴⁰ Regarding the situation in France, Jean Ehrard and Jacques Roger have highlighted the interaction between writers and readers by analysing reviews of novels. Cf. R. Darnton, 1982, 160-186.

⁴¹ This was a feature common to the peninsula's remaining sovereigns, a classic example being that of the Milanese *Biblioteca Italiana*, in connection with which see R. Bizzocchi, 1979; cf. also M. Borghi, 2003, 203-216. On the restored governments' inability to adopt a cultural policy, cf. M. Berengo, 1986.

⁴² Cf. M. Berengo, 2004. On the role and unique features of Florence – and Milan – within the nascent literary market, cf. Id., 1986; to be considered in parallel with G. Ragone, 1983. See also G. Biadego, 1913.

⁴³ Regarding the ferment rife in Tuscany in the early years of the Restoration, see A. Chiavistelli, 2006, 119-179.

⁴⁴ Archivio Storico del Gabinetto Vieusseux (hereinafter ASGV), XIX, 2. 2.1. *Notice*, 19 December 1819.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

to the Florentines themselves as well»⁴⁶, and christened it the «Gabinetto Scientifico e Letterario» (Scientific and Literary Salon)⁴⁷. Albeit initially undertaken as a commercial endeavour⁴⁸, Vieusseux's venture played a strategic role in nurturing the supra-regional public discourse that built the initial foundations of a «national» sense of belonging among Italian subjects. Emphasising the centrality of the printed word and the community rallying around it, the Gabinetto Vieusseux acted as a catalyst, uniting a large number of hitherto unrelated parties from all the States in the peninsula.

Vieusseux's offer to this burgeoning supra-regional public was highly enticing⁴⁹. By January 1820, the Gabinetto stocked 16 Italian periodicals: four published in Milan, three in Florence, three in Bologna, two in Rome, two in Naples, one in Genoa and one in Turin. There were also 19 French, four German and nine British journals, as well as maps, dictionaries and «other books to be consulted»⁵⁰, and «everything that [was] needed for writing»⁵¹. What is more, in addition to the «three reading rooms», Vieusseux added «a Conversation room [...] where the assembled gentlemen [could], should they so wish, take coffee»⁵² or other fare, and where «those fond of mental diversion» could play «chess and draughts»⁵³. Admission to the club, which opened «every day of the year from eight in the morning to eleven in the evening»⁵⁴, required the payment of a membership fee⁵⁵, which entitled members to full access to the resources placed at their disposal in the Palazzo Buondelmonti premises.

In short, upon entering Vieusseux's rooms subjects from any State in the peninsula or other part of the world could partake in reading, writing, games and conversation. Above all, they could access numerous newspapers, immersing themselves in current affairs and

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ ASGV, XIX, 2.1.1. *Licence issued by the Royal Commissioner of Santa Croce*, 18 September 1819. The name was influenced by the police regulations, which required the Grand Duke's personal intervention for any company described as an athenaeum or academy, whereas «no difficulties are raised by the Police and Good Governance Department for the opening and founding of a *Gabinetto* specialising in literature and [giving access to] various newspapers and periodicals from the States of Europe for the easier and better dissemination of the century's discoveries and enlightenment».

⁴⁸ See, among others, A. Volpi, 2008.

⁴⁹ Lorenzo Collini, legal expert and erstwhile contributor to the Florentine periodical *Il Saggiatore*, greeted Vieusseux's venture in following way: «the new Scientific and Literary Club founded in Palazzo Buondelmonti will open eight days from today, on Tuesday 25. Monsieur Vieusseux has the well-deserved approval [...] of the Government: if I join him [...] we will make a more respectable force»: letter from Collini to G. Capponi, Florence, 18 January 1820, in G. Capponi, 1881, 49.

⁵⁰ ASGV, XIX, *Libro dei soci*, 1, January 1820–December 1825. *Manifest* [January 1820].

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ ASGV. XIX, *Libro dei soci*, 1. *Manifest* [January 1820]: «The membership charge, payable in advance [...] shall be set as follows: 90 paoli for one year, 60 for six months, 40 for three months, 20 for one month and 10 for one week. For French speakers, the fees were set at 'nine francs for one year, six for six months, four for three months, two for one month and one for one week». Confirming the business-like approach adopted by Vieusseux's venture, the section devoted to the English-speaking community, which, as Vieusseux was well aware, was the largest in the city, was extremely detailed.

developing an understanding of the political and cultural landscape of the whole of Europe.

Indeed, Vieusseux's close-knit network of contacts across the continent is precisely what made this supra-regional dimension possible. Socialization centred on the written word was thus institutionalized throughout the Italian peninsula, which in this way was opened to informal socialization. This was a truly extraordinary combination⁵⁶ that undoubtedly left a new and indelible bourgeois stamp on even the Gabinetto's most illustrious patrons – both in person and through correspondence – inspiring them to embrace the cause of free thinking and releasing them from all limitations, whether traditional, aristocratic, academic or professional⁵⁷.

It is worth emphasising the extent to which Vieusseux's initiative represented an entirely new departure, extending far beyond the establishment of a club offering extensive and high-quality services. Its significance lies in the chain reaction that it triggered through more or less the entire peninsula, giving rise to a sort of network of venues devoted to the written and spoken word. These quickly began to cooperate with one another and numerous interconnected publishing initiatives also sprang up. It is particularly worth citing Florence's own journal, *Antologia*, which immediately became a virtual place of encounter between texts and readers and, from at least 1827, a platform for militant «literature». Overall, Tuscany played a leading role within a network of discourse-oriented social venues which, regardless of literary currents and the undeniable arguments between different schools, and opposition from reactionary literary circles⁵⁸, had the effect of binding together the emerging public sphere.

As will become evident, the periodicals played the pivotal role in setting the patrons' imaginary in motion. However, it is essential to underscore a highly significant point, namely that the material to be found in more or less all the public venues focusing on the written word was not entirely political: on the contrary, most periodicals, or at least the Italian ones, were «harmless» literary reviews and scientific journals. This notwithstanding, I believe that this by no means secondary aspect is precisely the one that highlights most clearly the innovative impact of the growth of discourse-related socialization on all the States in the peninsula. The «mere» ability to read newspapers freely, and the opportunity that this provided to discover, compare and criticize contemporary culture across different countries, exerted a compelling appeal on the

⁵⁶ This was unlikely to be encountered in other clubs, the best-known in Florence being: Giuseppe Landi's on the cathedral square, a club operated by the bookseller Giuseppe Molini, the *All'insegna della Pallade* (Under the Banner of Pallas) club, and the aforementioned Balatresi establishment. These all had a very precarious existence, and were often dependent on the fortunes of the associated book trade. Cf. F. Borroni Salvadori, 1981, 11-23.

⁵⁷ Regarding the «virtuous» impact of discourse-related socialisation, see the acute analysis by W. St. Clair, 2004, 1-18, 103-121, and 235-267. See also A. Lilti, 2017; and B. Craveri, 2022, 671-680.

⁵⁸ See N. Del Corno, 1997.

public, in addition to being a powerful factor in the development of a collective consciousness⁵⁹.

If we maintain our initial assumption that the practices bound up with the new form of socialization were decisive in the emergence of a public sphere in the peninsula, then it is apparent that so-called «public readings» were one of the collective practices that contributed the most to binding together a wider audience, since they were able to involve even illiterate subjects. In this context, Guerrazzi once again confirms the existence of a «collective desire» to be well-informed and to communicate, and describes how such readings satisfied this desire and played a crucial role in the circulation of the written word:

«the Naples newspapers arrived at the Caffè degli Scolari: and even if the copies had been twice as many, they could not have quenched the young men's thirst for information [...], with the result that they asked me one after another to climb onto a stool and satisfy the cravings of so many by reading them aloud»⁶⁰.

Conclusions

Letters, conversation, circulation and opinion thus emerge as phenomena that the protagonists of the Restoration period themselves perceived as closely interconnected, and as the fountainhead of a major process of political opposition. Two examples may be used to illustrate this awareness. Firstly, in a widely circulated review offering a «national» perspective on Guerrazzi/Gualandi's⁶¹ *L'Assedio di Firenze*, Giuseppe Mazzini was at pains to «accentuate» its political message⁶², explaining that «the author calls on the reader to work together to gain a political end». The relevant question, of course, is

⁵⁹ On the crucial role played by the newspapers in the emergence of a common spirit of belonging, cf. B. Anderson, 1983, 8-83; for an analysis of the impact of discursive practices related to the theatre on the delegitimisation of the monarchy in Restoration France, see S. Kroen, 2000.

⁶⁰ F.D. Guerrazzi, 1849, 47. On circulation in «nonconventional» forms, see F. Ploux, 2003; see also W.J. Gilmore, 1989; and A. Esterhammer, 2008.

⁶¹ For the first edition of the novel, published in Paris in 1836, Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi used the pseudonym Anselmo Gualandi to avoid political censorship. On the use of pseudonyms in nineteenth-century literature see, among others, L. Courau, 2011; and M. Vareschi, 2018.

⁶² Indeed Giuseppe Mazzini specified that «L'assedio di Firenze [was] the Italian intellect's most daring of the protests [...] that had appeared for many a year against the blind forces that obstruct[ed] its independence of movement»: G. Mazzini, 1849, 119. And, falling in with the pseudonym adopted by the author, with whom he was acquainted, he asserted: «the historical period chosen by Gualandi was worthy of his labours. It is the last in an era of the Italian character. [...] the popular principle – the sole progressive, national principle in Italy had already arisen. [...] [And] there was no freedom, or, as always, freedom for aristocrats only. Popular freedom had [...] all converged, like life in the heart, in Florence»: Id. 121-122. He went as far to assert that, «original and independent, in both concept and form [...] L'Assedio di Firenze has no forerunner [...] Gualandi takes different roads, from beginning to end; Gualandi – as the political goal that he set himself demanded – is on the breach, and he summons the reader to join him there»: Id. 128-129.

not that of any personal contact there might have been between Mazzini and Guerrazzi, but rather the close relationship that the two established by reading each others' works. From this point of view, the Treviso-based polygraph Giuseppe Bianchetti⁶³, a significant promoter of the growing supra-corporative and supra-regional community, remains resolute in stating in a well-known essay that «readers are not only responding, but are responding very actively to a very large number of literary works»⁶⁴ (including political works). He emphasized that «there is between the authors and readers an art, a powerful art, that not only binds them together but calls both groups as such into existence»⁶⁵.

Furthermore, the 1840s, the approximate period when Bianchetti was writing, were a major milestone in the relationship developing in the Italian peninsula between the national public sphere and the restored governments. The political potential of the critical public was by then widely acknowledged by the key figures of the era.

An emblematic illustration of this new atmosphere and of the resulting intermingling of academic and practical knowledge, as well as of science and letters, and letters and politics, was articulated by Giuseppe Montanelli in 1843. Addressing his students at the start of his course delivered as *ius patrium* of Pisa University, the former lawyer stated:

«I deem [...] it advisable to lead into this year's academic course by demonstrating that legal and literary studies are closely bound up together; [...] Do you young men know who will be reputed to represent the height of literary culture? He who hears the life of the nations of yore in the poetry of the past, and the revelations of the present and the omens of the future in that of today [...] And do you know who will be the worthy priest of law? He who has sensed in the judicial incidents of history the struggle between reason and force [...] he who examines the institutions of which present-day society stands in need [...] Therefore, young men, defend literature in the schools of law and jurisprudence in the literary clubs. Unity in ideas, as in life, is what the human race needs, what Italy needs»⁶⁶.

It is within the amalgamation of branches of knowledge advocated by Montanelli that I think we may locate the genesis and profound significance of the Italian peninsula's public sphere, which extended across the national landscape. This was an arena, in other words, that belonged to everyone, distinct from the immediate tumult of the crowd, wherein everyone cast aside their old differences and contributed to the national discourse, drawing on their individual inclinations and motivations.

⁶³ See G. Bianchetti, G.P. Vieusseux, [1848], 1973.

⁶⁴ G. Bianchetti, 1858, 21.

⁶⁵ *Ib.*, 83. Bianchetti remarked that, as a result of this overlap, «literature, and popular literature in particular, like theatre, was always indisputably the more or less manifest, more or less general expression of its contemporaries' mode of thinking and feeling»: 23. For a general discussion, W. St. Clair, 2004, 394-412.

⁶⁶ G. Montanelli, 1843, 5-6, and 24; On Giuseppe Montanelli, one of the driving forces in the unification in Italy, see A. Chiavistelli, 2013. For more historical and historiographical reflections on the connection between the legal profession and politics in the present day, see A. Lejeune, 2011, 216-233.

The spring of 1847 marked an extremely important milestone in this process of the emergence of a public opinion, as the sovereigns in almost all the peninsula's States were compelled, however reluctantly, to grant permission for the publication of periodicals, including those with political content. Although this freedom came in the form of prior censorship⁶⁷, this was an advance with highly significant repercussions: a plethora of newspapers inundated the public space in all the States, and swiftly gained ground as political workshops in which editorial staffs, varying in organization and discipline, did their utmost to convey messages that by this time had become openly political. Additionally, numerous satirical journals emerged, utilizing cartoons and incisive articles to comment on contemporary politics in the different States⁶⁸.

In short, by 1847 Vienna's plan for the Italian peninsula as a «State without a public» had been defeated, and the circulation of the written and spoken word had brought the peninsula's governments face to face with what Giuseppe Montanelli felicitously dubbed «the censorship of censorship, otherwise known as public opinion»⁶⁹.

And so it was that, in 1848, the critical public that had by then been girding its loins for several decades finally recognized and proclaimed itself as a community embodying a new spirit of national belonging. This spirit, and the awareness of it, would continue to be present in public discourse throughout the following years⁷⁰.

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⁶⁷ Preventive censorship, introduced in 1847, permitted the publication of daily newspapers, even those with political content, but only after they had been subjected to the scrutiny of the censor, who was dependent on the police in the various States of the peninsula.

⁶⁸ On the development of the satirical newspaper as a tool of political communication in pre-unification Italy, see S. Morachioli, 2012, 399-422.

⁶⁹ G. Montanelli, 1847, 15.

⁷⁰ Cf. A.M. Banti, 2000, 162-198.

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