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## Two Case-Studies in Comparative History: The American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno

*Enrico Dal Lago and Rick Halpern*

The present volume arises from the 1999 Commonwealth Fund Conference in American History, held at University College London. The conference, entirely dedicated to exploring the prospects for comparison between the American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno,<sup>1</sup> originated from detailed reflection on the current state of the art of comparative studies involving the US South. For the past 50 years, American historians have utilized the comparative approach to southern history with different results: by viewing the South in a wider perspective they have tended to either refine the perception of its distinctiveness or, conversely, demolish the assumption of its uniqueness.<sup>2</sup> A growing body of scholarship increasingly sees the American South as simply one of many regions of the world with particular characteristics – a pre-eminently agricultural economy and a tendency to conservatism in society and politics – that have combined to produce a path to modernization dramatically different from northern American and European standards.<sup>3</sup>

Building upon these foundations, the contributors to the 1999 Commonwealth Fund Conference accepted the challenge of comparing the American South with another such region – the Italian Mezzogiorno – with similarities in its process of modernization, but also with striking differences in social and cultural terms. Historians at the forefront of the two regions' historiographical revolutions engaged in dialogues over specific topics and discovered the comparability of issues as diverse as the stereotypes relating to the two souths, the ideology of the landed elites, the treatment of labourers on the large landed estates, the importance of gender in the understanding of social relations, and

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the connections between progressive political forces and between migratory movements across the two sides of the Atlantic.

This collection of essays is a selection from those originally presented at the conference and then revised in light of critical discussion. The topics covered here are by no means exhaustive: the essays are intended to suggest lines of inquiry for future comparative studies of the American South and the Mezzogiorno through careful juxtaposition of individual case-studies focused on specific issues. At the same time, the dialogue between scholars belonging to the two different fields is – in the words of Peter Kolchin – ‘a step that is especially useful in creating what might be called a comparative consciousness’.<sup>4</sup> Piero Bevilacqua considers the nurturing of this sort of awareness the foundation of ‘a “comparative culture” ... a knowledge of different social realities grounded in comparative historical research’.<sup>5</sup> As such, this collection is at the same time an experiment and an invitation to pursue further comparison between the two souths as a way of building bridges between practitioners of the historical discipline in two countries that have more in common than has been acknowledged so far. In this sense, Kolchin’s suggestion, supported by Piero Bevilacqua, of placing the comparison of the two souths in the wider context of comparison between the history of the USA and Italy, and American and Italian historiography, is particularly stimulating and points toward a promising way forward for future research on the two regions.<sup>6</sup>

Our point of departure is the definition of comparison and the designation of the units of study that are comparable. In his keynote lecture, reprinted here in expanded form, Peter Kolchin defines three approaches to the comparison of the American South: comparison between the South and the North, comparison between regions within the South, and comparison between the South and other societies. Kolchin goes on to say that while the first and the third approach have characterized most comparative studies, the second approach has been surprisingly neglected until relatively recently. Perhaps more important is the fact that several historians have used comparison with the North (the ‘un-South’) and comparison with other regions of the world (the ‘other souths’) to perpetuate the fallacy of a unique southern path to modernization.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note – as Kolchin does, citing Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman – that, even though the nineteenth-century South lagged behind the North in terms of industrialization and economic development, in absolute terms it was one of the most prosperous regions of the world.<sup>8</sup> However, it is also important to put this statement in the context of the north–south

divide in the USA. Absolute comparisons must not simply take into account economic factors, but social, political and cultural ones as well. The American South is a specific region within a nation-state, as Kolchin himself emphasizes in his historiographical survey of the literature on southern nationalism, and as such it should be compared with regions of other nations, whose recent history and historiography have been constructed in opposition to other norths, or 'un-Souths'.<sup>9</sup>

Following Kolchin's suggestions, Bevilacqua notices in his contribution that the historiographical perception of the North as 'un-South' is one of the strongest points of comparison between our two case-studies. Like the American South, the Mezzogiorno has been constructed, or perhaps imagined, in opposition to a supposedly more industrialized and economically developed north, or 'un-South'.<sup>10</sup> In both the USA and Italy, this construction has led to a paradigm of backwardness that has informed the historiographies of the two regions for most of the last 50 years. Both Kolchin and Bevilacqua notice the connection between the relatively recent reaction of American and Italian economic and social historians to this paradigm and the subsequent production of widely controversial works, such as Fogel and Engerman's *Time on the Cross* and Marta Petrusiewicz's *Latifundium*.<sup>11</sup> Both in the USA and Italy, the reaction to a simplistic view of southern backwardness has led to a more sophisticated analysis of the actual economies of the two regions. This, in turn, has led to the discovery of a much more complex picture that has demonstrated the importance in both souths of particularly dynamic productive sectors dominated by agricultural operators who had a clear capitalist mentality.

The comparative approach between different regions within the souths – the 'many souths' – has characterized very few historical studies, and yet, as Kolchin notices, this is one of the most promising avenues for research.<sup>12</sup> Comparison between the historical development of the different regions that constituted the original American South – as in Ira Berlin's recent *Many Thousands Gone*<sup>13</sup> – has shown the importance of the diverse experience of slaves in relation to the shaping of different labour systems. In reality, this is not a wholly novel approach in slave studies, since historians of slavery have long been accustomed to thinking comparatively about slave life and labour systems across a whole range of different cultures in time and space. However, what is new here is the application of this method to a single slave society in order to show its internal differences, or rather its regional variations. It is certainly no accident that the two historians Kolchin credits for this

– Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan – are also the editors of major comparative collections on slavery in the Americas.<sup>14</sup>

As Piero Bevilacqua acknowledges, this second approach has enormous potential for the study of the Mezzogiorno.<sup>15</sup> The detailed analysis of the ‘many souths’ that formed the Italian South has been one of the most important characteristics of revisionist historiography. Beginning with the edited collections of essays on specific regions that appeared as volumes of the *Storia d’Italia Einaudi: Le Regioni*, and continuing with a series of major monographs focusing on particularly important centres of entrepreneurial activity (such as the Terra di Bari or the Conca d’Oro), regional analysis has been a defining feature of recent southern Italian historiography.<sup>16</sup> Yet what is missing is a comparative study between two or more of the ‘many souths’ that make up the Mezzogiorno following the methodological lead offered by Berlin and Morgan for the American South. While Piero Bevilacqua has written the best comparative synthesis available on the economic regions of the Mezzogiorno,<sup>17</sup> no historian has yet attempted to compare two areas of southern Italy in order to analyse similarities and differences in the historical development of their economies and social structures.

The third approach to the comparative history of the American South – comparison with ‘other souths’ – is, according to Kolchin, the most readily identifiable with the wider body of comparative studies.<sup>18</sup> This is in part because of the enormous popularity it has enjoyed among students of slave studies since the 1947 publication of Frank Tannenbaum’s *Slave and Citizen*.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, more recent and highly praised works – such as Kolchin’s own *Unfree Labour* and Shearer Davis Bowman’s *Masters and Lords* – have pushed the boundaries of comparison between the nineteenth-century South and contemporary societies well beyond the confines of slave studies and have hinted at a breathtaking range of possibilities for future research. Central to these new comparative developments is the questioning of the simplistic dichotomy of slavery/free labour and its consequent replacement with a sophisticated scale of degrees of unfree labour, among which slavery is simply the strictest in legal terms.<sup>20</sup>

This new approach to slavery and unfree labour contains an implicit suggestion for comparison with other nineteenth-century agrarian societies such as the Italian Mezzogiorno. According to Piero Bevilacqua, even though in nineteenth-century southern Italy there was no slavery in legal terms, agrarian labourers were far from being free. They were exploited and abused, and overall were objects of ‘specific forms of subordination which psychologically and morally tied the peasants to

# Notes on the Contributors

**Piero Bevilacqua** is one of Italy's leading historians and public intellectuals. He teaches *Risorgimento* History at the University of Rome and is the editor of the journal *Meridiana*. He has written extensively on the economic and social history of Italy and the Mezzogiorno. His books include *Breve storia dell'Italia meridionale* (1997, 2nd edn), *Sull'utilità della storia* (1997), and, more recently, *Venezia e le acque* (1998). He is also co-editor of *La Calabria* (1985) and editor of *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea*, 3 vols (1989–91).

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