

## **Traders, Taxpayers, Citizens.**

Jonathan Morris

### **Traders, Taxpayers, Citizens. The Lower Middle Classes from Liberalism to Fascism.**

#### SUMMARY

This article argues that it was through their common relationship to the commercial environment formed by the city that the independent lower middle classes were able to construct a collective identity. The article examines these identities first in the context of a comparison between Rome and Milan, and then within the provincial towns of Lombardy. It suggests that the concern of the petite bourgeoisie towards their city and its administration lay at the heart of an 'apolitical' conception of politics that privileged their own interests as traders, taxpayers and citizens over those of other residents. The consequences of this are explored in a final section devoted to the immediate post-war era.

#### BIO

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## **The Lower Middle Classes from Liberalism to Fascism.**

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The collective identity of the lower middle classes was probably more closely tied to that of the city than that of any other social grouping during the industrial era. This was especially true for the so-called *petite bourgeoisie* of self-employed small traders - manufacturers, retailers and service providers - on which this article will concentrate<sup>1</sup>. The city formed the common location of these traders' businesses. The raft of local regulations, restrictions and duties created the commercial environment in which they all traded. It was through their common relationship to the city that this highly diverse grouping was able to construct a common identity.

In writing of 'the city' in this context I am thinking of the Italian term *città* which, of course, embraces many forms of urban settlement, from a small town to a large metropolis, and which usually corresponds to an administrative area or *comune*. Of course, different interests and identities might well exist between traders within fractions of a city, depending on the location and character of these, while it is equally possible to discern divisions between traders based on the nature and size of their businesses, or on cross-cutting identities such as those of origin or religion. This article analyses the attempts of various journals and associations targeted at the *petite bourgeoisie* to construct identities that could span these divisions, and thereby mobilise traders into collective (usually political) activity in defence of what were presented as their common interests. Such identities cannot simply be read as indicative of the position of the *petite bourgeoisie*, rather we need to question who proposed them, to what ends, and how they were received. However in seeking to

shape the petit-bourgeois mindset, these constructions were also shaped by it, not least in terms of the language and logic through which they were expressed. It is no accident that the city, in all its senses, was placed at the centre of discourses designed to furnish the petite bourgeoisie with a collective identity.

The modernisation of the Italian economy began in the Liberal era as industrial manufacture serving a national market evolved from within the handicraft based regional economies, many still subject to elements of corporate-style regulation, that were formally joined together at unification. Economic modernisation was, of course, paralleled by the transformation in Italy's political and administrative structures. Petit-bourgeois identities therefore differed significantly between individual towns and cities depending on the functions and fortunes of these within the evolving Italian economy.

This article explores these identities in two contexts. First it contrasts the petit-bourgeois outlooks forged in Rome and Milan during the Liberal era, both key urban centres within the newly modernising Italy, but occupying very different roles within it. A national capital primarily inhabited by public employees clearly constituted a very different environment from an industrial and commercial city in which the private sector predominated.

The article then turns to examine the evolution of petit-bourgeois identities in the provincial towns of Lombardy, a region experiencing modernisation but in a selective manner with certain towns becoming linked to the national economy, while others were left isolated from it. This conditioned the attitudes of the petite bourgeoisie towards their *città* and its administration, and can be seen to lie at the heart of a petit-bourgeois attitude to politics that privileged their own interests as traders, taxpayers and citizens over those of other residents. The effects of this

identification with the city are explored in a final section devoted to the petite bourgeoisie in the immediate post-war era.

### **Petit-bourgeois identities in Rome and Milan**

The two most prominent petit-bourgeois movements to develop in Liberal Italy were based in Milan and Rome. The two were very different in their character, however, reflecting the contrasts between the commercial environments in these cities. This could be seen in the different associational models adopted by the movements. Whereas the leading Roman traders' association, the *Società Generale fra Negozianti ed Industriali*, embraced all forms and dimensions of private enterprise in the city, the Milanese *Federazione Generale degli Esercenti* was much more restrictive, confining itself to proprietors in the primary retailing and service trades such as butchers, bakers and trattoria owners. It refused to have much to do with large-scale entrepreneurs, and effectively excluded proprietors of productive enterprises.

The difference in the membership and aspirations of the two organisations was captured by the language employed in their titles: negozianti, like commercianti, was a term that implied mercantile activity, but could be stretched to embrace all types of commercial enterprise from shopkeeper to large scale trader; whereas esercenti - perhaps best rendered as practitioner, was clearly understood to denote a small proprietor in contradistinction to a large one, such as when it appeared in the titles of local and national organisations for industriali, commercianti ed esercenti.

The restricted appeal of the Milanese Federation can be dated back to its origins as a defensive organisation for suburban retailers i.e. those who were located outside the city walls in the so-called corpi santi<sup>2</sup>. The duty charged on all retail

goods known as the dazio consumo was applied with different tariffs and collected with different methods in the two zones, with the result that suburban shopkeepers were able to sell goods at lower prices and thus win the custom not only of suburban residents, but also of a significant number of the lower class inhabitants of the city centre who would cross into the suburbs to buy their provisions. The number of shops that sprang up alongside the city walls was testimony to this.

In the latter 1880s attempts were made to reduce the amount of 'duty-free' goods that customers could take back through the walls into the centre, notably the bread rolls known as micca which were taken in as lunch by workers from the suburbs. By the mid-1890s, the need for more revenue led the Milanese municipality to begin a campaign to extend the dazio belt to the entirety of the city. Both proposals provoked predictable protests from those suburban proprietors whose interests would inevitably be harmed, as well as the approval of city centre traders who felt they were disadvantaged.

During these years, then, traders' collective identities were not constructed in relationship to the city, but to the fraction of this that they inhabited. Although the Federazione degli Esercenti was theoretically open to shopkeepers on both sides of this spatial divide, its early existence was dominated by the fight to retain the existing dazio system, and it drew its main support from those suburban retailers who benefited from this. As the dazio issue was only of interest to retailers selling directly into the public market, there was no reason for the Federation to extend membership beyond this restricted stratum. Political and social solidarities were also a product of this division with suburban shopkeepers proclaiming their empathy with their lower class customers, while the Federation endorsed the electoral lists of the predominantly

suburban 'democratic' political associations that challenged the hegemony of the 'moderate' elite whose core constituency came from the city centre.

In Rome, by contrast, there was no significant dazio division to divide traders, and the initiative to found the Società Generale fra Negozianti ed Industriali in 1892 appears to have been based upon a desire to mobilise the broader commercial sector, which, following the franchise extensions of the later 1880s, had assumed a new importance in the political arena. Until this point commercial associations had been restricted to an elite set of interests. By adopting the format of a 'mixed' society – both in terms of the inclusion of both manufacturing and commerce, and with regard to the size of the operations included within the society's remit, the organisers of the Società Generale were able to incorporate the petite bourgeoisie into their constituency, thus maximising the numerical (and hence political) weight of the commercial interest in a city dominated by the public sector. This was an attempt to construct a much broader and inclusive identity with activity directed towards defending the common interests of all commercial enterprise within the city. One of the Società Generale's first campaigns, for example, was to contest the manner in which the Comune (local authority) determined the incomes upon which the tassa di ricchezza mobile (income tax) was imposed, resulting in the inclusion of business representatives in the commissions that determined this<sup>3</sup>.

The distinctive feature of the Roman commercial environment was that the city's population, and hence its retail market, was dominated by public employees - mostly civil servants or members of the military. There was little in the way of industrial development, with the most buoyant sectors being those of construction and finance - the one financing the building of housing and offices by the other. While the years following the transfer of the capital resulted in a property boom from the

expansion of the state, this turned into a speculative bubble that collapsed with disastrous results in the 1880s, leading to social tensions that exploded in March 1888 when unemployed building workers stormed the shops and bakeries of the city.

According to a pamphleteer writing in 1889 on behalf of the city's shopkeepers, as many workers had now left the city, traders were even more reliant on the custom of those civil servants who remained. So, when these groups began forming consumer cooperatives amongst themselves, this threatened the very existence of traders who had no other customers to whom to turn because of Rome's particular characteristics. This moved him to ask:

Is it beautiful, is it humane, is it equitable, the operation of the cooperatives? The protests and cries of pain from those who are damaged are but the consequence of the new economic and commercial order installed in Rome, a city noted for lacking industrial establishments that attract workers and resident consumers in from other cities, and in which - could one say - small commerce is almost exclusively sustained by the impiegati (clerks) and military personnel<sup>4</sup>?

What is striking is that this lament about cooperatives becomes part of an attack on the operation of the free market per se; indeed the appearance of these institutions is presented as the consequence of the adoption of the new canon of 'freedom of trade' which means that 'anyone can set up as a wholesaler or retailer and not only deal in any products he wants, but at any price he chooses as well'<sup>5</sup>. We cannot be certain whether this was a deeply rooted conviction amongst Roman traders of the time, or just an embellishment of their case by the lawyer who wrote the pamphlet on their behalf - but it is surely likely that those who commissioned the

pamphlet would have approved its contents. If so, this call for a re-regulation of the market, would have put Roman traders in opposition not just to economic modernisation, but to the very political project that had transformed their city.

The campaigns against military and civil service consumer cooperatives continued to dominate the activity of the Società Generale fra Negozianti ed Industriali in Rome during the decades prior to the First World War. In particular, it highlighted the effect of the protection granted to state employees through the law on the 'non-sequestration of stipends' that allowed for a fifth of public sector salaries to be paid directly into cooperative credit institutions. As well as preventing this money reaching the hands of private traders (including any to whom the civil servant was indebted), these accounts were frequently linked to consumer cooperatives that the individual then patronised. This was the system employed by Unione Militare, the equivalent of the British 'Army and Navy ' stores, for example, which was particularly resented by retailers because it had been granted both start-up funding and a privileged position as a supplier of uniforms by the Ministry of War. Based in Rome, it became the largest national consumer cooperative with around thirty branches throughout Italy and its colonial outposts by the early 1920s<sup>6</sup>.

Given that the benefits extended to civil service cooperatives could only be resolved by the repeal of measures at parliamentary level, the Società Generale sought to extend its field of reference from the local political arena to the national one. It organised a series of national campaigns against these cooperatives, reaching out to other trader's associations that had sprung up in different cities across the country following the stimulus of the franchise reforms. The highpoint of this was a series of demonstrations and petitions presented to parliament in 1900 and 1902<sup>7</sup>.



Reporting these events, however, the Milan shopkeeper newspaper, L'Esercente, dismissed the complaints against the cooperatives as 'unimportant trifles' while the Federation notably failed to sign the anti-cooperative petition<sup>8</sup>. To understand this contrast we have to remember that Milan's position as a rapidly expanding commercial and manufacturing centre meant that its population was primarily composed of workers in the private sector. The leading cooperatives were those catering to private sector white-collar employees: the Unione Cooperativa, for example, was founded by the Associazione Generale fra gl'Impiegati Civili in 1886. This became the most important retailing operation in the city developing a widespread network of branches which sold to the public as well as to members, yet it never penetrated the working class markets which remained the preserve of private shopkeepers. This was because shopkeepers alone were prepared to use their local neighbourhood knowledge to grant their customers credit - something cooperatives either refused to do on principle, (as was the case at the Unione), or were unable to accomplish in practice (the cause of the demise of most working class cooperatives)<sup>9</sup>.

Consequently, although L'Esercente attacked the so-called 'privileges' of consumer cooperatives catering to these sectors, both it and the Federazione were quick to disavow any desire for controls over the market or protection from competition. As an article in L'Esercente of 1892 explained:

We desire equality of treatment. With every privilege abolished petty commerce will willingly endeavour to struggle with the cooperatives, certain of beating them - private initiative, activity and intelligence being worth much more than any big bureaucratic mechanism<sup>10</sup>.

The contrast between the faith in the free market expressed by the Milan newspaper and the doubts raised by the Rome pamphleteer three years previously is striking.

During the 1890s the two cooperative 'privileges' which had attracted the ire of the Milanese movement both disappeared. White-collar cooperatives, which operated the dividend system, had refused to pay tax on that portion of their income that they returned to their members, but in 1895 the obligation to do so was established at law. Three years later, when the Milanese dazio boundary was extended to include the corpi santi, this eliminated the exemption enjoyed by cooperatives set up 'for the needy' located there, striking a further blow against working class cooperation. By 1902, therefore, according to L'Esercente, the protests centred in Rome aroused 'total indifference' amongst traders in the Lombard capital<sup>11</sup>.

This indifference was reflected in the lack of interest shown by the Milanese Federazione in participating in attempts to construct a national interest organisation for traders in the 1900s in which the Roman Società played a leading role. In 1903 it combined with the Associazione commerciale industriale agricola romana – an association with a much more elitist membership - to host a conference of industrial and commercial associations from across the country that set up a Comitato permanente pro industria e commercio in 1903 which was transformed into the Confederazione commerciale ed industriale italiana in 1906. Once more, then, the Società involved itself in the construction of broad social and national alliances in order to pursue its aims. Conversely the Milanese Federazione regarded mixed organisations as diluting the identity and independence of the petite bourgeoisie. Its suspicions were fuelled by the activities of the rival Associazione fra Commercianti, Industriali ed Esercenti led by the chemical manufacturer Ettore Candiani which, though claiming to speak for all forms of enterprise, essentially articulated the

interests of larger scale operations in the city. It was Candiani who became the leading Milanese figure in the *Confederazione commerciale ed industriale italiana*<sup>12</sup>.

These contrasts between Rome and Milan can only be understood in terms of the different functions of the cities, and the commercial environment created within them. The Roman position was conditioned by the fact that the state protected both consumers and cooperatives within the city through the law against sequestration that delivered one to the other. In a city dominated by public service, there was no other market sector large enough to support private traders. To assert traders' interests it was necessary to create as broad an alliance within the business community as possible, and to extend this to the national level in order to contest the privileges granted by parliament to the cooperative sector. Although the *Società Generale* did not speak purely for the petite bourgeoisie, therefore, it proposed a collective identity for all traders within the city and a strategy through which to pursue their interests.

Conversely the industrial and commercial character of Milan was crucial in reducing the threat of cooperatives, and explains why the city's traders believed they could be beaten through competition, rather than regulation. The particular issues surrounding the dazio belt were particular to Milan, while the cooperatives attempts to avoid tax on the dividend were addressed through the appeal court rather than parliament. Hence the *Federazione's* social isolationism was overlaid by its localism, reflecting its sense that the context of the city, like that of the petit-bourgeois stratum, was unique.

## **The Petite Bourgeoisie and the City in Provincial Lombardy**

Examining the case of the petite bourgeoisie in provincial towns in Lombardy presents us with another opportunity to explore the extent to which the city acted as a collective focus through which lower middle class identities could be constructed. This section analyses this process through an examination of the publications linked to various forms of traders' associations that appeared during the Liberal period<sup>13</sup>. It highlights the attitudes towards the phenomenon of economic modernisation developed amongst the petite bourgeoisie in those towns whose position left them at the edge of the phenomenon, rather than its centre. This will enable us to move beyond the usual discussion of the connections between the lower middle classes, anti-Modernism, and Fascism, to attempt to construct an interpretation of events in the post-war era as deriving from the ways in which the petit-bourgeoisie thought about the city itself.

The scope for collective activity amongst the petite bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century was restricted. In Lombardy the guild system had been in decline for several centuries prior to its formal abolition under Joseph II in 1786 with most regulatory powers having long passed from corporations to the local comune<sup>14</sup>. Consequently there was no call for the creation of self-regulating trade associations while proprietors had little need for syndical activities given that only a small proportion employed workers, and negotiations between employer and employee were usually conducted on an individual basis. This left little opportunity for associationism beyond the friendly societies that appeared amongst some proprietors in the more secure trades, such as butchery and bakery.

There was, however, one interest that all small proprietors shared, and that was in the locality in which they traded. Within the city this was experienced at the level of the neighbourhood in which the enterprise was located and from which it drew its clientele. Here individual traders were in constant competition against each other, with their nearest neighbours representing their greatest threat. At the level of the city, however, all traders had to operate within the commercial environment of regulations and duties that were either imposed or implemented by the local comune. As one publication put it:

Each of us has continuous, multiple relationships with the Comune; the proprietor whose ways of trading are regulated by municipal decree has them and the taxpayer of every class has them because it is the municipal commissions that decide on the tax rates<sup>15</sup>.

These twin identities as traders and taxpayers in the municipality straddled the whole gamut of economic activity, thus helping to foster a petit-bourgeois identity, as distinct from a trade or craft-based one.

These twin forms of identity were combined in the first forms of collective organisation amongst the Lombard petit-bourgeoisie to extend their reach beyond individual trades - the consortia (consorzi) set up amongst traders to collect the dazio consumo. In the provincial towns this tax was usually farmed out for collection by a private contractor who therefore had every incentive to impose as high a rate as possible amongst the contributors. In 1884, the bulletin of the Monza consorzio claimed that the actions of a 'discreet number of esercenti' had demonstrated once and for all that by uniting in a 'collegial, fraternal association', to pay their taxes to the

Comune, one could avoid falling into the hands of 'a stranger who had himself designated as collector in order to take many more coins out of our pockets for the profits he wished to make!'<sup>16</sup> Instead the consorzio promised that it would come to accords with each type of trader using 'neither airy or personal criteria, but practical and reasonable ones'<sup>17</sup>. Nonetheless there is evidence from other consorzi that the better-off traders who set them up lightened their own burden at the expense of their weaker colleagues: in Gallarate, where a consorzio was set up in 1864, the pizzicagnoli (vendors of oils and dairy products) successfully protested against the duties levied on them by the six salsamentari (pork butchers) who held the contract for collection<sup>18</sup>.

The stimulus to move to other forms of activity was provided by the expansion of the local electorate following the franchise reforms of 1888 that lowered the taxable income qualification, thus enfranchising many members of the petite bourgeoisie. Small traders now had the chance to influence the conduct of the Comune, either via their own efforts, or by working in conjunction with other social actors who needed to court their votes. In Varese, for example, where the number of those entitled to vote rose from 1,068 to 2,060 out of a population of just over 14,000, the 1889 elections saw the first electoral banner to be hung up in the town appearing under the main archway, appealing to shopkeepers to defend their interests against rising local taxes<sup>19</sup>.

Alongside the vote itself, the better-off traders had acquired admittance into other representative public institutions, such as the Chambers of Commerce. In the 1890s new, permanent organisations were set up to appeal to this constituency in towns such as Brescia, Como, Pavia and Cremona. Although the names of these associations sometimes only mentioned commercianti and industriali, they were,

nonetheless, keen to recruit the newly enfranchised members of the petite bourgeoisie who were being encouraged to regard themselves as part of the broader entrepreneurial class within the city, and, as such, as commercianti or industriali themselves. In 1897 an Associazione fra commercianti and industriali with 200 members appeared in Varese. Its statutes, though, declared its aim was that of 'procuring for the class of esercenti, representatives in the town council who will know how to protect their interests'<sup>20</sup>. It was necessary that all commercial elements felt equally represented within these institutions if they were to function effectively as pressure groups. The Associazione commerciale industriale agricolo of Pavia, for example, paid little attention to small traders in its journal, except to lament their understandable failure to turn out and vote for Associazione endorsed candidates in the 1891 elections<sup>21</sup>.

The issues around which small traders could be mobilised were those concerning the commercial environment of the city. In particular, they were concerned that their town should benefit from the economic transformation taking place within the region. Above all this meant being connected to the key agent for the transmission of modernisation - the train and tram networks. The Monza consorzio criticised the council in 1885 for 'not having competed, either morally or materially' to make the city a hub on which train and tram routes in the region converged<sup>22</sup>. In 1910, the Cremona Federazione di Commercianti ed Industriali, speaking for its 550 members, claimed:

We want the introduction of **electric trams, we want the railway question resolved, we want covered markets for the contraction of all business, we want all necessary services provided to the suburbs**

giving this part of the city that which it has the right to expect. (bold text as in original)<sup>23</sup>

While the typical member pays up (i.e. his municipal taxes) 'he wants, he demands, with reason, the means to earn'<sup>24</sup>.

Implementing this programme required investment in the city. This was usually the cause of conflicts between liberal, democratic forces within local politics who favoured this approach, and conservative moderate ones that were inclined to oppose it. The conservative forces justified their position by arguing that railways might actually bring the dark, destructive, side of modernity into the town. In Brescia, the clerico-moderate paper, Il Cittadino, observed that it was:

a fact demonstrated by the crudest statistics that the railways had displaced the centre of commercial activity of entire provinces, actually ruining small commerce and extinguishing the traffic that in the past had rendered medium-sized towns prosperous<sup>25</sup>.

The moderates therefore proposed building a (much cheaper) network of steam-powered trams to link up local centres while remaining outside the national rail system. This argument held no appeal for the Brescian urban petite bourgeoisie, however, who formed a key element of the democratic power base constructed by Zanardelli in the city, around the promotion of prosperity through railway building. The petite bourgeoisie in Lombardy did not reject modernisation: indeed they actively sought it.



We should not over-identify the petite bourgeoisie with a particular political grouping, however. They saw their identity not in political but occupational terms. Consequently they acted autonomously from political parties, favouring candidates on the basis of their occupation rather than affiliation. Traders' organisations frequently recommended a list of candidates featuring names chosen from several different formations. At the 1897 elections in Varese, two of the four candidates proposed by the Associazione fra i commercianti e gli industriali were elected to the town council - one was a Moderate, one a Democrat, while all four proposed candidates were carried on the Clerical list<sup>26</sup>.

Petit-bourgeois electors were equally inclined to reject lists supposed to represent their interests if they felt occupational criteria had been ignored. In the 1891 election in Varese, a letter signed 'un esercente' was sent to the moderate newspaper Cronaca Prealpina complaining that the democratic list contained only professionals such as doctors, engineers, lawyers and notaries. The Cronaca replied that it recognised the right of the esercenti to a voice but 'being as the best part of them are tied up with (their) affairs', perhaps they should be represented by an industrialist<sup>27</sup>. Traders responded by running their own, autonomous, list, even though it was inevitably unsuccessful.

This strong sense of a common identity deriving from occupation was usually described by petit-bourgeois publications as being 'economic' as distinct from 'political' in nature. This had important implications for the petite bourgeoisie's relationship with the city, and, in particular, its governance. Their attitude was summed up in the Monza bulletin's justification for recommending a list of candidates at elections:

he who contributes, with good money, to sustain the spending of the Comune has the right to enter into the administration of public business<sup>28</sup>.

The telling terms here are administration and public business (pubblica azienda), which is here used as a synonym for the municipality. The municipality, and the way that it should be run, were conceived in 'economic' terms - the council should 'administer' the city, not become the forum for political projects and quarrels. Note also that the reason the esercenti had a right to have their interests taken into account in this administration because they were taxpayers, contributors to the city enterprise. Citizenship, therefore, was equated with taxpaying, not residence. This had important implications for the broader social identity of the petite bourgeoisie.

During the nineteenth century, as we have already seen in Milan, social solidarities primarily revolved around the dazio consumo which was described by the Monza consorzio as 'one of the most odious taxes which the art of fleecing the people has yet devised' because it hit the poor especially hard by increasing the prices of primary articles of consumption, and consequently reduced the volume of trade and the earnings of the esercenti<sup>29</sup>. This reinforced the close identification between traders and their clientele that was articulated in alliances representing the popular classes revolving around abolition of the dazio. In Varese in 1889 a list appealing to 'esercenti, negozianti ed operai' - i.e. small business proprietors, traders and workers – was formed that hinged on an agreement to remove the dazio consumo from basic goods, the opening of public contracts to cooperatives, and the provision of training schools to train workers in arts and crafts<sup>30</sup>.

This was an unequal relationship, however, in which the enfranchised esercenti spoke up for their non-voting clients, rather than campaigning alongside

them as equals. The 'esercente' who criticised the absence of traders on the Democratic list in Varese in 1891, dismissed the demands of another letter writer who signed himself a 'nullatenente' - that is a 'have not' owning no property - for greater consideration. According to the 'esercente' he was

asserting the privileges of a class who pay taxes and which therefore has the right to vote directly for the town council, while the nullatenente wants to see represented a class whose rights are relative<sup>31</sup>.

When the nullatenenti began helping themselves in ways that threatened to deprive the petit-bourgeoisie of their custom, such as the constitution of tax-exempt cooperative soup kitchens in Monza, the consorzio cautioned that 'while we are not opposed to these useful institutions, nonetheless we cannot allow them to damage the esercenti in small commerce'<sup>32</sup>.

These frictions intensified significantly after the end of the century leading to an increasing sense of a social separation between small traders and their working class customers. The local franchise introduced in 1888 had initially privileged the petite bourgeoisie, but this advantage was gradually eroded as the spread of education and industrial wages enfranchised workers, enabling parties whose appeal was fundamentally to the popular classes to increase their representation within the comuni and form centre-left coalition administrations such as that of 1899 to 1904 in Milan<sup>33</sup>. Giolitti's more liberal approach to industrial relations meant that many small businesses found themselves caught up in industrial disputes with their workers, often organised through the chambers of labour, while the increasing scope allowed to local authorities to extend their activities through measures such as municipalisation

(formally approved by parliament in 1903) allowed popular parties, notably the Socialists and the progressive Catholics, to implement a series of measures which favoured particular groups of residents, rather than investing in the kinds of infrastructure improvements sought by city businesses.

The resultant tensions were captured in the Cremonese journal of 1910 when it adopted the figure of Pantaloon, the merchant character in commedia dell'arte, to represent the social groups with which its readers identified.

The Pantaloon of today is not the same of that of 30 years ago.

Pantaloon then was a man of the people who paid up and kept quiet: he couldn't therefore be confused with the worker of today, whose economic conditions continually improve because salaries today rise in step with the work of legislators designed to exempt the worker from each and every tax.

For them healthy and cheap housing is erected, for them cooperatives supported by aid and privileges are set up, for them there are maternity rooms and institutes for suckling babies, children's and adult hospitals, free medicines, kindergartens, schools, meals, recreation centres, clothes, books, pictures, etc., etc. Instead Pantaloon today is represented, in the broadest sense of the word, by the class of clerks and better still by the small businessman, by the trader, by the industrialists who the taxman considers as the army of those first in line, first in line that is to be inexorably squeezed down to the minimum necessary<sup>34</sup>.

The article suggests the abandonment of a conception of the self-employed and workers as forming a single popular class, for one in which the key to the identity of Pantaloon is that he is a taxpayer, a trader a citizen, while the worker residents are

not only exempt from taxes but the beneficiaries of a whole host of unprofitable political initiatives in which the comune should not be engaged.

It was for these reasons the Federation explained that:

we, apolitical people, want to set up a wise and active administration ... so that political contests cease, so that one will have a true administration concerned only with the good of the citizen<sup>35</sup>.

It believed that 'by entering the town council in good numbers, we will put an end to this poisonous struggle that paralyses the best energies, the best initiatives'<sup>36</sup>. This explains the apparent paradox that an article asking 'commercial electors ..do you want ELECTRIC TRAMS? Do you want the railway question resolved? Vote for our list!' should be headlined with the leading slogan of the association: 'Down with politics'<sup>37</sup>!

The Federation's list was unsuccessful in the elections of this year, and it admitted that it had yet to fully interpret the sentiments of its constituency. We should be careful therefore about regarding this highly political 'apolitical' vision as representative of all petit-bourgeois opinion; rather it was a manifesto produced to in attempt to build a platform around which the business interests within the city could unite. Yet in its labelling of these groups as 'the true working force of our city' and its call to reject 'politics and the ideals relating to it' and install an administration of 'those who know, those who can, those who can do' to implement 'all those initiatives that could bring benefit and real advantage to our city which lives by work'<sup>38</sup>, it foreshadowed many of the themes that dominated petit-bourgeois discourse concerning the politics of the city in the crisis years following the First World War.

## **Reclaiming the City. The Petite Bourgeoisie in the Immediate Post-war Era.**

It is not the intention of this article to analyse the experience of the petite bourgeoisie during the post-war era, but rather to demonstrate how the ways of thinking about the relationship between traders and the city that we saw develop in the pre-war period informed responses to the crisis years of 1918-1922<sup>39</sup>. It is noticeable that in justifying their positions during this period, petit-bourgeois associations continued to insist on the distinction we have seen developed between ‘political’ and ‘economic’ activities, both in terms of asserting their own common interests, and as regards the administration of the city by the comuni .

The outbreak of the First World War dramatically altered the nature of the commercial environment in which traders operated as the state increasingly intervened in the economy in order to control food supplies to its citizens. The most important manifestation of this was in 1916 with the introduction of price controls (calmieri) on a variety of staple goods, combined with various forms of rationing of supplies<sup>40</sup>. Many traders were prosecuted for contravening the complex and frequently changing regulations governing the system, leading to claims the government was effectively ‘criminalising’ the commercial classes. Social tensions were further exacerbated by rising inflation and reached their height with the ‘cost of living’ riots that swept through Italian cities in 1919<sup>41</sup>. Not only did the forces of law and order appear reluctant to protect commercial premises from this onslaught, the state subsequently refused to compensate shopkeepers for their losses and instituted further price controls that appeared to respond to the rioters’ demands.

The political character of the city had also changed. The franchise reforms of 1912 and 1918 resulted in the introduction of virtual universal manhood suffrage, enabling parties with a mass electorate, such as the Socialists, to win outright control over many cities. These administrations introduced their own calmieri well prior to action being taken by the state, while the operation of the national controls was also devolved to local authorities and commissions drawn from local representatives. Many city administrations also set up so-called aziende consorziali di consumi, bulk purchasing agencies, which supplied goods to non-profit outlets, including consumer cooperatives, in order to keep prices in check: in some cases, such as those of Milan and Rome, the aziende went as far as setting up their own distribution outlets. The Milanese mayor Caldara made clear that he saw this as a first step towards the total suppression of the private sector<sup>42</sup>. Consequently taxpayers were subsidising municipal ventures that were often run at a loss, and which, furthermore, directly damaged the interests of traders. The city seemed to be setting itself up in direct competition with its shop-keeping citizens.

Traders sought to reclaim the city for themselves by restoring freedom of trade and restricting the comuni to their purely 'administrative' functions. However, the ways in which this task was approached again varied between cities. In Rome, the Società generale fra negozianti ed industriali once more concluded the most effective approach lay in a national political campaign to abolish the state-created institutions of the wartime economy, and set up a new Confederazione generale del commercio italiano through which to pursue this. Although its rhetoric stressed its lack of ties to political parties, the Confederation leader Ercole Cartoni entered politics himself, first standing as a free market Liberal in the 1921 parliamentary elections and then

moving the Confederazione towards the Fascists in 1922 when they began advocating deregulation of the economy<sup>43</sup>.

Cartoni's actions were condemned by a new association of Roman small traders, one catering specifically to the more marginal elements of the self-employed, particularly those who rented, as opposed to owned, their premises. In 1921, it too established a national confederation, the Confederazione Nazionale Piccoli Industriali, Commercianti ed Esercenti (PICE). The key word here was piccoli as this Confederation confined its constituency to the petite bourgeoisie alone, in clear contrast to the attempt to unite all forms of commercial interests in the manner practised by the Confederazione generale del commercio<sup>44</sup>.

Much of the philosophy of PICE echoed that which we saw expressed by esercenti organisations in the pre-war era, notably an emphasis on the idea that what united traders was not a 'political', but an 'economic' interest. They wished to remain aloof from participation in politics 'otherwise we will have, as previously, the monarchist esercente, the socialist esercente, the clerical esercente, the republican esercente, but not the esercente organised in defence of his own interests'<sup>45</sup>.

Proclaiming that the government of public affairs should not pertain to one or another political faction but to all social classes, the PICE offered its support to politicians of any colour who actions favoured their programme as summed up in the slogan 'Liberty, Order, Economy, Work'<sup>46</sup>. This too recalled the pre-war practice of endorsing mixed lists of candidates believed to be favourable to commercial causes.

The Milanese esercenti organisations again abstained from participating in these new national associations. They were hesitant to link themselves to particular political parties, instead seeking to force the Comune to close down the Azienda consorziale di consumi, to loosen its price controls, and to withdraw from activities



such as running the municipal slaughterhouse<sup>47</sup>. These demands were highly city-focussed, and evidently constituted an attempt to reign in the Comune's activities that was consistent with the emphasis placed on the need to restrict local authorities to their 'administrative' functions.

Yet these demands could hardly be seen as other than political in that they put traders squarely in opposition to the Socialist administration. In 1920 the various elements of the esercenti movement all endorsed the multi-party list coalition known as the *Blocca Azione e Difesa Sociale* in a two horse race against the Socialists. However, at national elections, Milan's esercenti movement was split with the Federazione degli Esercenti's decision to endorse 'democratic' lists being contested by the newspaper L'Esercente which argued against the principle of endorsement of a single political group when there were both 'catholic' and 'lay' esercenti, while also despairing that none of the parties seemed likely to deliver a return to the deregulated economy desired by small traders. The paper went as far as to suggest that it might be necessary to use extra-legal measures to overthrow the government's provisioning regime, and pronounced that 'the moment has arrived in which inertia represents the major danger'<sup>48</sup>. Significantly, the trigger for this despair was not the national political situation, but the victory of the maximalist Socialists in the local elections of October 1920.

In August 1922, the city council was indeed overthrown as a result of direct action when the occupation of the town hall by the Fascists prompted the dismissal of the Socialist administration by the Prefect. This apparent victory attracted little coverage in the city's shopkeeper press, however. It would seem that the leaders of the Milanese esercenti associations continued to believe that while there were common 'economic' and 'administrative' interests that united their members, it

remained necessary to respect the variety of political convictions of within them. Consequently although the overthrow of the administration was surely seen as satisfactory (and was certainly never condemned in the shopkeeper press), the fact it was predicated on Fascist activity meant it was largely ignored. Even when there were clear links between traders' activities and those of the Fascists, this remained the case. The key role of the Fascist syndicates in defeating a bakery workers' strike in the city in 1922, for example, was similarly played down - even by those bakers' leaders who were themselves close to the Fascist movement.

This was also the case in instances where the overthrow of a local council was the direct consequence of action taken by traders in conjunction with the Fascists. One such case occurred in provincial Lombardy where a new association for Esercenti e Commercianti was set up in Treviglio in 1920, attracting a membership of 169 from around 600 proprietors in the town. Its journal demonstrates how the 'apolitical' vision of politics developed in the pre-war period could lead to direct confrontation with the council itself. Looking towards the local elections of 1920, it observed that:

the Executive has always remained aloof from political discussions, convinced that if politics were ever to raise its head, it would signal the beginning of the dissolution of our Association.

That said it is easy to demonstrate that with regard to the coming local elections the Association cannot remain inactive *if, finally, that fatal form of politics, which has hindered all good work by previous administrations, is to be overthrown at the elections themselves.*

What must now triumph is the principal that the local administration must have as its principal goal, the good management of public affairs without distinction of party or person.

The town council, which has assumed the duty of administering the Comune on the basis of a *precise economic programme*, must be truly representative of all social classes (original italics)<sup>49</sup>.

By arguing that the council had breached what the esercenti regarded as its moral obligation to administer the city as an economic resource in an apolitical manner, the Association justified political action in order to restore this 'apolitical' approach. It therefore urged its members to avert the 'disastrous spread of the red or white Bolshevik tide' by supporting an 'economic' list, composed of representatives of the 'parties of order' who 'had at their heart the well-being and development of our city, and intend to dedicate themselves to the not inconsiderable burden of administering the public patrimony'<sup>50</sup>.

The list failed to attract much support, however, leaving the Association bemoaning the dangers posed by both red and black extremism - presumably a reference to the Fascist squads. Unable to control the comune through the ballot box, the association began a new direct protest by refusing to pay local taxes from November 1921. The end result of this protest was the dissolution of the council by the state authorities and its replacement by a Royal Commissioner in January 1923 - that is after the installation of Mussolini as Prime Minister. Reflecting on these events in his annual report shortly afterwards, the Association's secretary explained that:

the very character of our Association demands that it takes up without hesitation the interests of our adherents, and because, for us, the hole in the council budget that was growing larger every day appeared dangerous as it would then have to be filled at our expense through hard sacrifices, the key element which decided us upon our actions was our clear aversion to the systems adopted by the men composing the Council executive in the conduct of all affairs of ordinary and extraordinary administration. .. finally through new ideas, changes in the government authorities, the re-emergence of a sense of economy and justice, and eventually via valid collaboration, we obtained the 'liquidation' of an absolutely inadequate administration that was leading us to ruin<sup>51</sup>.

The logic of this position was that the threat to the interests of the taxpayer 'citizens' posed by the maladministration of the shared asset of the city outweighed any need to respect the democratic wishes of its residents. Collaboration with agencies capable of reclaiming the city for its citizens was therefore valid.

The actions of the Treviglio association were far from unique in either approach or outcome. In Lovere, for example, a town situated at the head of Lago d'Iseo, traders organised a strike against the high sales taxes imposed by the Socialist administration, again leading to the dissolution of the authority in early 1923<sup>52</sup>. Of course, these victories were only possible because of the change in the political climate following the success of Fascism. In Lovere, the traders actively sought the support of the Fascists, while in Treviglio it is clear that some prominent figures in the Association were also involved in the Fascist movement. Yet this role was never acknowledged in the trader publications. To have done so would have contradicted the doctrines that lay at the heart of esercenti identity: that what united them was their

economic interest as traders and taxpayers in the common location of the city, rather than their political convictions.

Instead the 'apolitical' Associazione degli Esercenti e Commercianti in Treviglio declared that the dissolution of the town council left it with:

the profound satisfaction of having carried out our duty to the benefit of the class that we represent and of all Trevigliese taxpayers, to whom, in this emergency situation, our association appeared to be the best defence of citizens' interests<sup>53</sup>.

This statement, and the circumstances in which it was issued, confirm the evolution of petit-bourgeois thinking about the city that this article has sought to trace. The city was the focus around which small traders sought to construct a common identity. The forms and content of this identity might differ according to the context of the local commercial environment as the cases of Milan and Rome well demonstrate. Similarly the pattern of shifting social solidarities points to the ways in which changes over time within the context of the same city might affect trader identities. What remained consistent, however, as the evidence from pre- and post-war Lombardy makes clear, was the emphasis placed on the need for the sound 'economic administration' of the city through investment into modernisation projects to improve the returns it generated.

The city was seen as a shared resource, an enterprise in which the petite bourgeoisie had a double stake as traders and taxpayers. It needed to be nurtured through sound administration, rather than become an arena for political projects favouring one social group over another. Even after the extensions of the franchise, this philosophy continued to distinguish between 'citizens' – in effect those who

contributed to the city through their business activities and their taxes - and other residents who lived from the work created by such 'citizens' and were net beneficiaries of the municipality's interventions into the market. Ultimately the interests of the former should be privileged over those of the latter, rather than vice versa, as had appeared to be the case to traders in the post-war era.

Consequently, while the petit-bourgeois associations presented traders' concern with the city as 'apolitical' – respecting the variety of 'political' identities that individual proprietors might assume – it could also become 'supra-political' in that the defence of the city as an economic resource (and with it the interests of its 'citizens') was implicitly privileged over respect for the democratically expressed wishes of its residents. Through their desire to reclaim the city in the post-war era, traders associations' contributed, wittingly or otherwise, to the highly 'political' projects that served to destabilise the Italian state.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I use lower middle classes to denote both the 'old' or 'independent' lower middle classes or petite bourgeoisie, and the 'new' lower middle classes of white collar private and public employees who did not perform manual labour, but lacked professional qualifications. As with most historians, I take the petite bourgeoisie to be that group of society which works its own capital i.e. supplies the principal labour component within its own enterprise, using other labour as an extension, rather than a substitute for its own, following the definition first proposed by Frank Bechhoffer and Brian Elliot, 'Persistence and Change: the Petite Bourgeoisie in Industrial Society', Archives européennes de sociologie, 17, 1, 1976, pp.76-9.

<sup>2</sup> The Milanese case is covered extensively in Jonathan Morris, The Political Economy of Shopkeeping in Milan 1886-1922, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Società Generale tra Negozianti e Industriali di Roma, L'organizzazione commerciale romana nazionale, Rome, 1933, p.20. This institutional history is the main source of information available on the Società Generale, along with frequent references to its activities in retailer journals and contemporary conference publications.

<sup>4</sup> Avv. Guelfo Pasetti, I negozianti di Roma contro le Società cooperative di consumo fra gli impiegati in Roma, Rome, 1889, p.6 (held in the Biblioteca Capitolino, Roma).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp.4-5.

<sup>6</sup> On Unione Militare see L'Unione Militare, Il primo decennio di vita della Unione Militare 1890-1900, Rome, 1900. The store's subsequent history can be traced via entries in the annual commercial guide to Rome, Guida Monaci. Guida Commerciale di Roma e Lazio, Monaci, Rome, various years.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the national campaign against cooperatives and the growth of city traders' associations in Italy, Jonathan Morris, 'Les Associations de détaillants en Italie à la fin du XIX siècle', Histoire, Economie et Société, 16, 2, 1997, pp. 237-57.

<sup>8</sup> 'Interessi degli esercenti' L'Esercente, Milan, 27 April 1902.

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- <sup>9</sup> On Unione Cooperativa see C. Mellini, Storia dell'Unione Cooperativa, Milan, 1905; and Anna Caroleo, 'L'Unione Cooperativa di Luigi Buffoli' in Giulio Sapelli, Maurizio Degl'Innocenti, ed.s, Cooperative in Lombardia dal 1886, Unicopli, Renate (MI), 1986 pp.199-215.
- <sup>10</sup> 'I grandi magazzini e le cooperative' L'Esercente, Milan, 15 December 1892
- <sup>11</sup> 'L'agitazione contro le cooperative di consumo' ibid., 23 March 1902.
- <sup>12</sup> On Candiani see Giorgio Fiocca, 'Il terzo partito: un aspetto della "milanesità" in età giolittiana', Passato e Presente, n.36, 1995, pp.33-54.
- <sup>13</sup> These can be found in the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Milan.
- <sup>14</sup> On the decline of the guild system in Lombardy see the essays in Cesare Mozzarelli ed., Economia e Corporazione. Il governo degli interessi nella storia d'Italia dal medioevo all'età contemporanea, Giuffrè, Milan, 1988, especially Cesare Mozzarelli, 'La riforma politica del 1786 e la nascita delle camere di commercio in Lombardia' pp.163-86.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Elezione amministrativa pel Comune di Monza', Bollettino del consorzio esercenti dazio consumo del Comune di Monza, I, 3, 1884
- <sup>16</sup> 'Cos'è il Consorzio', ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Può o non può il Consorzio mandare a tariffa?', ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> 'Altro Consorzio d'Esercenti', ibid., I, 6, 1884.
- <sup>19</sup> Giuseppe Carcano, 'Elezioni amministrative a Varese alla fine dell'Ottocento', Storia in Lombardia, IX, 1, 1990, pp. 62-5.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.92.
- <sup>21</sup> 'Otto giorni dopo', Il Commercio. Giornale commerciale industriale agricolo, Pavia, 28 Feb 1891.
- <sup>22</sup> 'Consorzio che cessa onorevolmente', Bollettino del consorzio esercenti dazio consumo del Comune di Monza, II, 6, 1885.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Quello che siamo e ciò che desideriamo' Il Commercio. Organo Ufficiale della Federazione Commercianti Industriali di Cremona, 22 June 1910.
- <sup>24</sup> 'Pantalone' ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Il Cittadino, Brescia, 22 January 1881 cited in Giovanni Spinelli, 'Treni e potere politico in periferia: progressisti, moderati e cattolici bresciani di fronte alla questione ferroviaria', Storia in Lombardia, VI, 1 (1987), p.28



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- <sup>26</sup> Carcano, 'Elezioni amministrative a Varese' p.92.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.72.
- <sup>28</sup> 'Elezione amministrativa pel Comune di Monza', Bollettino del consorzio esercenti dazio consumo del Comune di Monza, I, 3, 1884.
- <sup>29</sup> 'Dazio consumo ed Appalti', ibid., II, 5, 1886.
- <sup>30</sup> Carcano, 'Elezioni amministrative a Varese', p. 62.
- <sup>31</sup> Spinelli, 'Treni e potere politico in periferia' p.75.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Cucine economiche in Monza', Bollettino del consorzio esercenti dazio consumo del Comune di Monza, I, 5, 1885.
- <sup>33</sup> For an account of this administration and its impact on shopkeeper politics in the city see Morris, The Political Economy, pp.238-64.
- <sup>34</sup> 'Il Pantalone', Il Commercio. Organo Ufficiale della Federazione Commercianti Industriali di Cremona, 22 June 1910.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Quello che siamo e ciò che desideriamo', ibid., 19 July 1910.
- <sup>36</sup> 'Abassa la politica!', ibid., 23 July 1910
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> 'Il Pantalone', ibid., 22 June 1910
- <sup>39</sup> For an attempt to do this see Jonathan Morris, 'Retailers, Fascism and the Origins of the Social Protection of Shopkeepers in Italy', Contemporary European History, 5, 3, 1996.
- <sup>40</sup> On the wartime provisioning economy see Maria Concetta Dentoni, Annona e consenso in Italia 1914-1919, Angeli, Milan, 1995.
- <sup>41</sup> The latest analysis of the riots is Roberto Bianchi, Bocci-Bocci. I tumulti annonari nella toscana del 1919, Olschki, Florence, 2001. See also John Foot, 'Eliminated as a class? Milanese socialism, consumers, and shopkeepers during the period of the cost-of-living riots, June-July 1919', The Italianist, 18, 1998.
- <sup>42</sup> Maurizio Punzo, La giunta Caldara. L'amministrazione comunale di Milano negli anni 1914-1920, Laterza, Bari, 1986, p.122.
- <sup>43</sup> On retailer associationism in this period see Morris, 'Retailers, Fascism and the Origins of the Social Protection ..', esp. pp. 297-301.

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- <sup>44</sup> 'Primo Congresso Nazionale', Piccolo Esercente, Rome, 12 October 1922 (copies in Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence).
- <sup>45</sup> 'Da Trieste' Ibid., 9 March 1922.
- <sup>46</sup> 'Primo Congresso Nazionale', Ibid., 12 October 1922
- <sup>47</sup> On post-war Milan see Morris, The Political Economy, pp.272-84. The paragraphs in this article are based on an analysis of the journals L'Esercente, L'Esercente Lombardo, Il Commercio Zootecnico and La Panificazione, all published in Milan and available in the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense.
- <sup>48</sup> 'Ciò che si è fatto e ciò che si può fare', L'Esercente, Milan, 21 November 1920.
- <sup>49</sup> 'L'Assemblea generale dell'Associazione Esercenti', L'Esercente Trevigliese, 1, 4 (April 1920).
- <sup>50</sup> 'Domanda la parola', ibid., 1, 7 (October 1920).
- <sup>51</sup> 'Assemblea generale dei soci del 4 febbraio 1923', ibid., 4, 1 (February 1923).
- <sup>52</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome), Pubblica Sicurezza 1922, b.61, Bergamo.
- <sup>53</sup> 'Assemblea generale dei soci del 4 febbraio 1923', L'Esercente Trevigliese, 4, 1 (February 1923).