

CONTEXTS AND DEBATES

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Modern Italian History Conference: a summary of the papers and discussion. Milan, 11–12 December 2025

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Abstract

This summary presents the proceedings of the two-day conference held in December 2025 as part of the preparatory work for *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Modern Italian History*. Conceived as a collective intellectual workshop, the conference brought together scholars working across chronological, thematic, and methodological boundaries to reflect on how modern Italy’s history can be narrated and rethought in handbook form. Over two days, participants discussed the construction of Italian identity, from the eighteenth century to the present, foregrounding the interaction between political cultures, social structures, and cultural representations. The eight panels explored national identity before and after unification; the role of media, Catholicism, and war; gender, sexuality, and race; crime and deviance; colonialism; urban development and environmental inequality; labour, industrialisation, and economic crises; Fascism and antifascism; and the architectural, cultural, and mnemonic legacies of the twentieth century. The conference functioned not merely as a presentation of individual chapters, but as a forum in which contributors tested interpretative frameworks, identified historiographical gaps, and refined their arguments. In doing so, it played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual coherence of *The Bloomsbury Handbook*, ensuring that it reflects current debates while offering a critical and inclusive account of modern Italian history.

Keywords: modern Italian history; national identity; Fascism and antifascism; social and cultural history; economic history; public uses of history

On 11–12 December 2025, the Bloomsbury Handbook of Modern Italian History Conference took place at the University of Milan ‘La Statale’. The event was conceived as a mid-production meeting in preparation for *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Modern Italian History* and brought together contributors and editors, as well as several other scholars in the roles of chairs and discussants to reflect collectively on the structure, coherence, and aims of the volume. The conference was hybrid, with participants both in person and online. To facilitate thematic discussion and allow for remote participation of authors from different time zones, the organisation of the conference panels did not follow that of the handbook, which will be generally chronological, with sections for the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Handbook of Modern Italian History intends to offer a thorough examination of the field's key methodologies, historiographical debates, and thematic developments, exploring topics such as the formation of Italian identity, political transformations, economic, social and cultural developments, women's agency, migration, urbanisation, memory studies, and the evolution of Italian Studies as a discipline. Its intended audience is scholars, postgraduate and undergraduate students, who will benefit from foundational knowledge and insights into advanced cutting-edge research.

At the beginning of the conference, the organisers and volume's curators Claudia Baldoli, Diana Moore and Gianluca Fantoni offered greetings and briefly restated the purpose of the meeting. The central objective was to ensure that individual chapters connect with one another conceptually, thematically, and through mutual citation, so that the handbook develops a coherent overall structure. The conference was designed as an opportunity to situate each contribution within the larger framework of the volume and to shape the handbook as a unified work rather than a collection of isolated essays. For this reason, discussion was a core component of the conference. Panel chairs and discussants were encouraged to reserve substantial time at the end of each session for questions and comments.

The organisers also reiterated the intended audience of the handbook. The primary readership consists of undergraduate and postgraduate students, which requires clear and accessible prose, engagement with major historical questions, and themes capable of stimulating intellectual curiosity. At the same time, the handbook aims to support lecturers teaching outside their immediate areas of expertise. Contributors were therefore encouraged to provide sufficient material to support teaching, including methodological guidance, bibliographical references, literature reviews, and clear outlines of key debates.

Finally, the organisers expressed their gratitude to the conference sponsors: the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Milan, the Association for the Study of Modern Italy and its journal *Modern Italy*, the Società Italiana delle Storiche, and the Ragusa Foundation for the Humanities in New York.

Across the two days, the conference developed as a sustained collective reflection on how to narrate modern Italian history without falling into exceptionalism, while still accounting for specificity, contradiction, and contingency. Contributors repeatedly returned to the tension between national narratives and transnational processes, between institutional histories and lived experience, and between continuity and rupture.

Panel I: the genesis of Italian identity

The opening session on the genesis of Italian identity, co-chaired by Giacomo Girardi and Claudia Baldoli, with contributions by Milena Sabato, John Davis, and Diana Moore, established a foundational argument that Italian identity must be understood as a long, plural, and contested process rather than a teleological prelude to unification.

Milena Sabato (in person) opened the session by revisiting the Italian eighteenth century, a period often marginalised or treated merely as a prelude to the Risorgimento. She argued forcefully that the *Settecento* should instead be understood as a decisive century in its own right, characterised by reformist projects, administrative experimentation, and intellectual exchange. Sabato focused on southern Italy, challenging narratives that position it solely as a space of backwardness or inertia, and demonstrated how southern intellectuals, administrators, and reformers were actively engaged in debates circulating across Europe and the Mediterranean, contributing to shared political languages and reformist imaginaries. Adopting a transnational perspective that highlights mobility, circulation, and exchange, Sabato argued that ideas about governance, economy, and society travelled across borders through texts, correspondence, and individuals, and shaped intellectual history, while also drawing attention to representation and memory. She noted that later

historiography and cultural representations, including cinema and literature, have retrospectively shaped perceptions of the eighteenth century, often flattening its complexity. Her intervention encouraged contributors to avoid linear narratives and to emphasise continuity as well as rupture.

John Davis (online) followed by directly interrogating the question ‘What is Italy?’ through the historiography of the Risorgimento. He warned against narratives that retrospectively impose coherence and inevitability on nineteenth-century developments. Davis emphasised that during the Risorgimento period, ‘Italy’ existed as a contested idea rather than a political reality, and that multiple, often competing, visions of the nation coexisted. These included federalist, republican, monarchical, and regional projects, none of which can be understood as preordained to prevail. Davis also highlighted the importance of regional diversity and local political cultures, arguing that unification was shaped by negotiation, compromise, and conflict. He stressed that students should be encouraged to see the Risorgimento not as a straightforward march toward unity, but as a process marked by uncertainty, contingency, and unintended consequences. Methodologically, Davis called for close engagement with political language, concepts, and debates, emphasising how terms such as ‘nation’, ‘people’, and ‘Italy’ were used and redefined over time.

Diana Moore (in person) concluded the session by focusing on Italian women’s agency within patriotic discourse and nation-building processes. She challenged narratives that treat women primarily as symbolic figures or passive supporters of male political actors and demonstrated how women actively participated in networks of sociability, communication, and mobilisation, contributing to the circulation of ideas and the construction of patriotic cultures. Moore highlighted the role of salons, correspondence, education, and print culture in enabling women to shape political discourse and traced the development of an organised feminist movement in Italy. She argued that incorporating women’s experiences complicates linear political narratives and reveals alternative forms of participation and agency. In pedagogical terms, Moore emphasised the importance of presenting gender history as central to political history, particularly for student audiences.

The discussion that followed addressed several key issues. Participants reflected on the importance of continuity between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, questioning rigid periodisation. The chair highlighted common themes across the three papers, such as the complexity of the forces of modernity, the relationship between events, myths and perceptions, and the debated question of popular participation. There was broad agreement on the need to avoid exceptionalist narratives and to situate Italian developments within wider European and global contexts. Pedagogical challenges were also discussed, particularly how to present early identity formation and abstract political concepts to anglophone students unfamiliar with Italian history.

Panel 2: Shaping the Italians – media, Catholicism, and war

The second session, chaired by Emanuela Scarpellini, brought together Stephen Gundle, Daniela Saresella, and Nicola Labanca to reflect on three major forces that shaped Italians in the modern period: mass media, the Catholic Church, and war. The tone of the panel was explicitly ‘handbook-oriented’: each speaker framed their intervention as a proposal for how to compress vast topics into a concise chapter while remaining accessible to student readers and useful for non-specialist lecturers.

Stephen Gundle (in person) began by explaining that he had initially found it difficult to conceptualise his chapter, despite longstanding work on cinema, television, and mass culture. He proposed to address the problem through the concept of ‘mediatisation’, a flexible sociological term that allows historians to capture not only the growth of modern mass media but also how media reshape political life, everyday practices, and imaginaries of

national belonging. He also indicated that he would revisit his earlier work, including his co-authored book with David Forgacs (*Mass Culture in Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War*, 2007), whose key aim had been to ‘antedate’ mass cultural change by showing that developments often attributed to the economic boom of the 1950s–1960s were already visible in the 1930s (radio, sound cinema, illustrated magazines, postcards and other ‘supporting’ media). The project also challenged a political periodisation that treated Fascism and the postwar era as sharply separate, emphasising instead continuities in cultural industries and practices across the divide.

Moreover, Gundle stressed that a history of Italian media cannot be written as a history of Italian products alone: it must account for flows, exchanges, and foreign presence, particularly American cinema. In this respect, two core insights will structure the chapter. First, mass media had an integrating function: they made society visible to itself, created shared national reference points, enabled mass participation at a distance, and contributed to a national political sphere that cut across regional divisions. Second, mass media were also disintegrating: international flows weakened the nation by fuelling aspirations and imaginaries not contained by national frameworks. He proposed to revisit Americanisation and Italianisation (or nationalisation) as interacting processes: American products and ideas were not simply absorbed, but engaged, resisted, adapted, and filtered through domestic contexts, institutions, and political cultures. He illustrated this with examples such as Italy’s domestic star system (partly modelled on Hollywood but also shaped by regional tastes), the adaptation of imported entertainment formats, and the Italian reinvention of the Western as the ‘spaghetti Western’. Gundle then proposed a third section on ‘iconographies of mediation’, i.e. exportable images that function as nation branding. His key case study was *La dolce vita*, presented as a cultural product whose darker dimensions are often stripped out when the title becomes a marketable shorthand for ‘Italianness’ abroad. He suggested he might also address either spaghetti Westerns or the global circulation of mafia iconography as a durable external lens through which Italy is imagined.

Daniela Saresella (in person) then presented a framework for her chapter on the Catholic Church, first noting that the handbook’s draft structure left the nineteenth-century Catholic question underrepresented, despite its centrality to Italian state formation and political culture. She therefore proposed a ‘longue durée’ approach organised around the Church’s relationship with modernity, rather than an exhaustive institutional narrative. She identified the French Revolution as a decisive turning point, establishing laicism and a separation between political and religious spheres, followed by major nineteenth-century condemnations of modernity: the anti-liberal encyclicals (from 1832) and especially *Quanta cura* and the Syllabus of Errors (1864), which rejected rationalism, socialism, and liberal political thought. Saresella argued that this anti-modern stance shaped Catholic hostility to the liberal Italian state and underpinned the negative Catholic judgement on the Risorgimento, not only as territorial ‘usurpation’ but as a clash of values. She connected this to the *Non expedit* (1874), which discouraged Catholic participation in elections to avoid legitimising the liberal state.

She traced subsequent shifts and tensions: the cautious opening under Leo XIII (notably *Rerum Novarum*), followed by the reaction under Pius X and the condemnation of modernism, which in Italy intersected with debates about Catholic democracy and the possibility of a Catholic party. She then highlighted the Partito Popolare’s internal tension between more secular political visions and more confessional orientations and introduced the longer-running ‘Italian specificity’ of Catholic political unity. On Fascism, she drew on interpretations associated with scholars such as Miccoli and Menozzi, presenting the Church’s accommodation to Fascism as an opportunity to reverse liberal secularisation and ‘re-Catholicise’ society, with the Lateran Pacts marking a crucial point in the Church’s institutional and cultural repositioning. Saresella’s narrative culminated in the Second

Vatican Council as a major turning point in Catholic engagement with modernity: acceptance of the world 'as it is', new emphases on rights, peace, religious liberty, ecumenism, and global concerns (including decolonisation and racial discrimination). She linked these shifts to political consequences, notably the changed conditions enabling centre-left openings in the early 1960s and the weakening of older forms of Catholic political 'collateralism'. She also pointed to post-conciliar transformations in Catholic associations (Azione Cattolica, ACLI), Catholic labour culture, periodicals promoting evangelical radicalism, and the emergence of movements like Christians for Socialism. She ended by noting conservative reactions and longer-term reconfigurations after the crisis of the DC, including Ruini's assertive moral politics and Martini's alternative, more conciliar vision.

Nicola Labanca (online) concluded with a programmatic intervention on war. He proposed a title adjustment to 'War, Armed Forces and the Italian Experience' to include not only wartime but also the broader military experience of service. He insisted on combating persistent stereotypes – both popular and historiographical – about Italians 'not fighting', and argued for a long-term view spanning the Risorgimento, Liberal Italy, Fascism, the Republic, and the post-Cold War return of military relevance. He challenged the assumptions about war as a primary nationalising force, backing his claims with figures: roughly ten million Italians are estimated to have been involved in wars of the unified state and approximately 33 million experienced military service. Other agencies, such as school, however, played a comparatively more important role in shaping Italian identity. He highlighted the significance of irregular forces (Garibaldini, Guardia Nazionale, Fascist militia, Black Brigades in the RSI, Resistance) and suggested brief attention to mercenarism and recent volunteers in conflicts from southern Africa to Ukraine. Like other authors, he argued that, while it is important to recognise Italian specificities, at the same time it is necessary not to exaggerate exceptionalism. He reminded attendees that the Italian military experience falls within the norm of that of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The discussion included Gianluca Fantoni's question about whether a Communist-aligned star system could be discussed alongside national media dynamics. Gundle responded by stressing the role of the press in constructing stars and noted that Communist publications like *Vie Nuove* effectively promoted many postwar Italian stars and even ran beauty contests feeding into cinema culture. Fantoni also encouraged Saresella to consider twenty-first-century developments and the Church's global turn. Saresella acknowledged the complexity: immigration can revitalise churches but often brings more conservative Catholic cultures, and Pope Francis should be read through his Latin American positionality and critique of Western modernity. Emanuele Felice suggested that Labanca include an industrial dimension when comparing Italy's military 'performance' across the two world wars; Labanca agreed that economic capacity and industrial production are essential context.

Panel 3: Gender, feminism, and postcolonial Italy

The session, chaired by Alessandra Gissi, and dedicated to gender and feminism, brought together contributions that collectively reframed Italian modern and contemporary history through feminist, intersectional, and postcolonial lenses. Rather than treating gender as a marginal or additive category, the speakers demonstrated how gender is constitutive of colonial power, citizenship, political participation, and memory, from Liberal Italy to the present.

The first paper, jointly presented by Beatrice Falcucci and Gianmarco Mancosu (in person), proposed a chapter titled 'Beyond White Masculinity: Unpacking Italian Colonialism from a Gender Perspective'. Their intervention was explicitly methodological. They argued that Italian colonialism – and its postcolonial afterlives – cannot be understood without

challenging the centrality of white masculinity as both an object of analysis and an implicit epistemological standpoint. Drawing on feminist and intersectional theory, they framed colonialism as an extension of Western masculine power, in which sexuality functioned as a key technology of rule. Situating their approach within a broad theoretical genealogy – from Fanon to Spivak, Ann Laura Stoler, Judith Butler, and decolonial feminist thought – the authors stressed that recent decades have seen important advances in gendered analyses of Italian colonialism. Their chapter aims to consolidate this scholarship into a coherent and teachable framework, focusing on cultural history, iconographies, and narratives that reveal both domination and resistance. A central concern is to move beyond binary representations (coloniser/colonised, male/female, metropole/colony) and instead foreground practices of negotiation, hybridity, resistance and agency.

In their section on the Liberal and Fascist periods, Falcucci and Mancosu highlighted how colonial spaces – especially in East Africa – were constructed as sites for the regeneration of Italian masculinity. The near absence of white European women before the conquest of Ethiopia enabled the sexualisation and feminisation of the colonial landscape, with African land and African women portrayed as available, ‘virgin’, and exploitable. Colonial diaries, memoirs, songs, films, and propaganda repeatedly conflated hunting, conquest, and sexual possession. Black women were represented as bodies ‘to use’, whereas white women in Italy remained bodies ‘to love’, reinforcing a racialised and gendered hierarchy. Fascism radicalised these dynamics through racial legislation and biopolitical control. Practices such as *madamato* and regulated prostitution were increasingly framed as threats to racial purity, leading to laws banning interracial unions (1937–40) and to propaganda that depicted colonisers as endangered by ‘contamination’. At the same time, the speakers stressed a crucial ambiguity: the empire also offered spaces of female agency. Italian women could experience greater mobility, professional opportunities, and renegotiation of gender roles in the colonies, revealing contradictions within Fascist gender ideology itself. The presenters also raised a pedagogical question central to a handbook format: whether and how to include violent or sexualised colonial images in teaching, without reproducing the colonial gaze they seek to critique.

Perry Willson (in person) clarified that her chapter, entitled ‘Women and Feminism in Italy’, will focus on the Republican period (1945–1980). She proposed a two-part structure: first, a gendered reading of social change (especially employment, family, and sexuality) during the postwar decades; second, women in politics (from suffrage and parliamentary participation to women’s organisations and second-wave feminism). A key argument was that Italy’s trajectory in women’s employment differed from much of Western Europe during the boom years: women’s paid work stagnated or even declined, often because marriage still triggered exit from employment, reinforcing the housewife norm. She stressed that the ‘glamour’ narrative of the economic miracle obscures continued inequalities, moral anxieties, and the persistence of patriarchal family law until the mid-1970s, even amid major transformations such as urbanisation, the rise of companionate marriage, declining fertility, and widespread clandestine abortion. The chapter will trace women’s enfranchisement, parliamentary participation, and activism within mass organisations such as the UDI and CIF, before turning to second-wave feminism. Here, Willson offered a historiographical reflection: early histories were often written by former activists, producing valuable but partial narratives. More recent scholarship expands geographically, adopts a more critical tone, and incorporates intersectionality, especially around class, race, and sexuality. While maintaining a broadly positive evaluation of the feminist movement, this newer work also interrogates its silences and exclusions.

The final paper of this session was ‘Jus Sanguinis: Race, Empire, and Postcolonial Citizenship’, by Cristina Lombardi-Diop (in person). She outlined a *longue durée* chapter that uses citizenship as an ‘entry point’ to show how empire, diaspora, and racial thinking

have shaped Italian modernity and Italianness. Lombardi-Diop's central question was why Italian lawmakers historically privileged descent-based citizenship (*ius sanguinis*) and why it remains dominant today. Structurally, she proposed a three-part arc moving from monarchical subjecthood to diasporic nationality (late nineteenth century to early twentieth), then to citizenship shaped by colonial expansion and racialisation (including how colonial legal categories differentiated 'sudditanza' and 'cittadinanza', and how race became juridically operational), and finally to contemporary postcolonial citizenship debates. She argued that colonial citizenship regimes helped consolidate hierarchies of belonging and that colonial precedents mattered for later racial politics in the peninsula (including the 1938 racial laws). She connected these genealogies to present controversies over reform (*ius soli/ius culturae* debates) and to very recent restrictions to descent-based eligibility, using these developments to show how citizenship continues to function as a mechanism of differential inclusion and exclusion. The discussion that followed centred on three interconnected themes: the specificity of Italian colonialism from a gender perspective, the historical roots of *ius sanguinis*, and the relationship between citizenship, race, and postcolonial memory in contemporary Italy.

Nicola Labanca opened the debate with two closely related interventions. First, addressing Falcucci and Mancosu, he asked whether the gendered profile they outlined reveals a specifically Italian pattern of colonialism or whether it aligns more broadly with other European imperial experiences. He also invited them to clarify whether their analytical emphasis lay primarily on the metropolitan perspective or on colonial contexts, suggesting that this positionality significantly shapes how gender dynamics are interpreted. In response, the speakers acknowledged that while Italian colonial practices largely replicated racialised and gendered structures common to British and French empires, Italy's relative lack of a strong male colonial literary canon produced a distinctive postcolonial legacy, marked instead by the prominence of Afro-descendant women's writing.

Labanca's second intervention, directed at Lombardi-Diop, concerned citizenship. He noted that *ius sanguinis* predates Italy's formal colonial possessions and should therefore be situated within a longer genealogy of nineteenth-century nationalism rather than explained solely through colonial rule. At the same time, he provocatively observed that its continued dominance in the present, long after the end of empire, reveals unresolved tensions in Italy's understanding of national belonging. He suggested that the recent failure of citizenship reform and the June 2025 referendum deserved critical reflection, even if they lie at the margins of conventional historiography. From the floor, this point was expanded by tracing *ius sanguinis* back to Romantic nationalism and Risorgimento culture, emphasising Italy's role as a 'laboratory' of ethnic and blood-based nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe. From this perspective, contemporary resistance to reforming descent-based citizenship appears deeply rooted in long-standing national imaginaries rather than as a mere colonial residue. Subsequent interventions reinforced the pedagogical and methodological implications of these arguments. Questions from the audience highlighted the importance of visual sources, gendered citizenship (especially patrilinearity), and the need to connect colonial histories to postcolonial development discourse and migration. Collectively, the debate underscored the value of integrating gender, race, and long-term historical continuities to illuminate both Italy's colonial past and its unresolved postcolonial present.

Panel 4: Illicit Italians: crime, deviance, and sexuality in Italian history

Chaired by Ombretta Ingrascì, the panel brought together three papers that collectively explored how the Italian nation has been imagined, governed, and contested through categories of deviance. Across race, organised crime, and queer history, the session highlighted

a shared analytical concern: 'illicitness' is never merely a set of practices, but also a shifting field of discourses, institutions, and power relations through which Italian identity has been defined and policed.

The first paper, 'The Boundaries of Belonging: Race, Gender, and Italians on the Margins of the Nation', was presented by Eileen Ryan (online) and Avery McGraw (in person). They opened with a methodological statement: race, gender, and sexuality are historically contingent and mutually constitutive and Italy is best understood through both its regional specificity and its transnational entanglements. Ryan positioned her contribution as a pre-history to twentieth-century codifications of racial belonging, focusing on ambiguity in the foundations of Italian whiteness. She outlined historiographical debates on whether nineteenth-century Romantic-national language of blood, lineage, stock, and race should be read metaphorically or as evidence of early racialisation. Her central point was that older idioms of lineage coexisted uneasily with later positivist racial taxonomies, producing unstable categories that were nonetheless politically useful, especially as Italy entered the era of colonialism and the broader process of making Italians.

McGraw's section moved into sexuality and state-building, drawing on Siobhan Somerville to argue that dominant ideologies of race developed alongside scientific and institutional knowledge about sexual and gender deviance. McGraw proposed tracing how positivist medicine and sexology helped transform 'deviance' into pathology, focusing especially on sex work and homosexuality. A core claim was that liberal Italy often remained ambivalent: it did not consistently translate medical and sexological discourse into direct criminalisation, yet it expanded other regulatory tools (hospitals, asylums, surveillance, administrative policing) that intensified social control. The conclusion looked ahead to later formalisations, linking their groundwork to twentieth-century legal frameworks (including the Rocco Code and Fascist-era regulation), and asked for feedback on whether the chapter should incorporate more explicitly the racialisation and sexualisation of Italians abroad, including as migrants in the Americas.

The second paper, 'The Mafia and Organised Crime in the History of Italy', was delivered by Rossella Merlino (online). Merlino proposed a chapter that avoids a linear organisational history in favour of analysing how 'the mafia' has been defined, debated, denied, folklorised, silenced, and eventually recognised across modern Italian history. Her premise was that mafias cannot be reduced to operational criminality alone: they must also be understood as outcomes of discursive construction shaped by political agendas, intellectual frameworks, judicial tools, and cultural prejudices. She situated her approach within both the established historiography that links mafias to modernisation and state formation and more recent scholarship that treats mafia as a category produced and contested in public arenas, with the state as a major producer of meaning. Her outline followed four phases: the post-unification moment when the mafia entered public debate and its meaning became fiercely contested (including parliamentary inquiries and competing portrayals by the state and Sicilian elites); the Fascist period, when the regime's claim to have eradicated the mafia created a long-lasting narrative of invisibility despite continuities; the early republic, when mafia was often framed as a regional anomaly tied to southern backwardness even as organisations transformed; and the post-1980s period, shaped by the maxi-trial, *pentiti* testimonies, media exposure, and the rise of the 'Ndrangheta as a transnational actor. She also highlighted work on women's roles in mafia organisations, challenging assumptions of exclusively male domains and showing how gender shaped both participation and invisibility.

The third paper, 'Queer Italy Between Legalisation and Silence, Stigma and Pride', was presented by Alessio Ponzio (in person). Drawing on his upcoming monograph, Ponzio proposed examining homosexuality, male sex work, and citizenship in post-Fascist Italy primarily through media sources, given the methodological limits of relying on trials in

a context where homosexuality was decriminalised in 1889. His main teaching point was the distinction between legal status and social stigma: legality did not equal acceptance, and the shift from dictatorship to democracy did not automatically translate into inclusion. He argued for strong continuities in the policing of masculinity before and after 1945: homosexuals were perceived as enemies of the nation not because the state necessarily outlawed same-sex acts, but because gender nonconformity and ‘feminisation’ were treated as threats to social order, youth, and the future of the nation. He stressed the difficulties of writing these histories, including the scarcity of primary written sources on lesbians, the frequent conflation of homosexuality and transgender identities, and uneven chronological coverage (with the 1950s–1960s still understudied). He also underlined the urgency of oral history and the importance of community archives. Conceptually, his intervention emphasised how the postwar growth of anti-homosexual discourse in the media paradoxically produced forms of self-awareness, resistance, and political mobilisation, feeding into the activism of the 1970s and later institutional developments such as Arcigay, as well as debates around trans rights and Law 164/1982.

The discussion drew links across the three papers around periodisation, sources, transnational frames, and concepts. Ryan and McGraw were encouraged to consider the role of Italian Americans, both because of readership and because migration contexts shaped racial and sexual categorisation; there were also comments on how to handle competing nineteenth-century racial paradigms and the reinsertion of southern Italians into broader frameworks of whiteness and ‘*stirpe*’. Merlino was asked to address more directly the left-wing interpretation of mafia in the postwar years, connecting organised crime to class struggle, agrarian conflict, Portella della Ginestra, and repression of peasant mobilisation; she confirmed that this nexus would feature in her chapter and mentioned case studies that could anchor it. Ponzio received multiple prompts: to clarify how he will use terms such as queer, homosexual, and gay, and to attend to regional differences between North and South and to the problem of continuity between Fascism and the post-Fascist republic, especially in models of masculinity. In response, Ponzio emphasised language as a methodological problem requiring explicit framing, defended the necessity of indirect archival strategies, and reiterated that gender performance and youth protection remained central axes of repression and social panic, even as the meaning of same-sex practices shifted toward a more identity-based understanding under the pressure of media discourse.

Overall, the panel demonstrated that ‘illicit Italians’ are not marginal to Italian history but central to it: by following deviance – racial, criminal, sexual – the session illuminated the making of the nation through exclusion, regulation, and contested belonging, while also tracing the emergence of counter-narratives, new archives, and political movements that complicate inherited stories of Italian innocence, normality, or linear progress.

Day 2

Panel 5: Urbanism and public development in Italy

This panel, chaired by Claudia Baldoli, brought together three contributions that explored the shaping of Italian society through urban development, cultural self-representation, and environmental conflict, highlighting how space, culture, and ecology have played a central role in the construction of modern Italy.

Francesco Bartolini’s paper (in person) examined urban modernisation as a nation-building process from Unification to the end of the nineteenth century. He argued that Italian nationalism was profoundly urban in character, rooted in a long-standing discourse that privileged cities over the countryside as engines of political modernity, civic life, and historical legitimacy. Drawing on thinkers such as Sismondi and Cattaneo, Bartolini showed

how the city was imagined both as the cradle of modern political institutions and as the driver of national organisation, despite Italy's predominantly rural and pre-industrial condition at the time of Unification. He stressed the paradox of an 'urban nation' emerging in a country marked by administrative fragmentation, weak inter-city connections, and uneven development. Bartolini also analysed the impact of Unification on urban systems, highlighting how administrative centralisation, railway networks, and demographic growth reshaped hierarchies between cities. Some centres gained prominence through new institutional roles, while others experienced decline. Urban transformation was also cultural and symbolic: monumentalisation, street naming, statues, and public rituals imposed a national geography onto local spaces. The absence of a coherent national architectural style, however, reflected tensions between national homogenisation and local traditions. Case studies such as Rome and Naples will illustrate these dynamics in the chapter. Rome's designation as capital required the reconciliation of its universal and papal past with its new secular national role, producing a slow and contested transformation of the urban landscape. Naples exemplified the rise of sanitary engineering, where urban modernisation combined material interventions with moral and ideological assumptions linking hygiene, order, and citizenship. The final section of Bartolini's paper addressed post-unification polycentrism when industrial and cultural exhibitions allowed cities to assert their specific contributions to the nation, fostering rivalry and competition rather than uniformity. While Unification reduced formal municipal autonomy, it also intensified localism, producing an 'Italy of cities' in which municipal identities remained powerful symbols of political legitimacy and historical continuity.

Catherine Ramsey-Portolano's paper (online) shifted attention to the cultural self-representation of the Italian bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, focusing on literature, opera, and visual arts. She framed Unification as a watershed dividing the century into a Romantic, Risorgimento-driven phase and a post-unification phase shaped by realism, *verismo*, and *scapigliatura*. In the pre-unification period, cultural production by middle- and upper-class actors played a crucial role in forging national consciousness, despite low literacy rates. Literature by Foscolo, Manzoni, and Leopardi, alongside Verdi's operas, articulated themes of oppression, sacrifice, and freedom through both explicit and coded political messages. Opera, in particular, functioned as a mass cultural medium that crossed social boundaries. In the visual arts, Ramsey-Portolano highlighted the symbolic role of works such as Hayez's *Il Bacio* and the political engagement of the Macchiaioli, whose anti-academic style and social realism aligned artistic experimentation with nationalist commitment. After Unification, cultural production increasingly addressed social fractures, regional inequality, and marginalisation. *Verismo* literature, *scapigliatura*, realist opera, and late Macchiaioli paintings exposed the costs of national unity, portraying poverty, trauma, and exclusion rather than heroic myth. Ramsey-Portolano also emphasised the growing presence of women writers, whose work explored gendered constraints within bourgeois society, reinforcing the idea that cultural production both reflected and contested national narratives.

Roberta Biasillo's contribution (online) examined Italian environmental history through the lenses of disaster, memory, and environmental justice. She traced the evolution of the field over the past 40 years, emphasising a shift from nature-society interaction to interdisciplinary approaches grounded in political ecology, ethics, and positionality. Biasillo proposed disasters as a key analytical entry point, highlighting how industrial contamination and technological catastrophes reveal the uneven geography of Italian development. Central to her argument was the concept of 'memorial landscapes of disaster', illustrated through comparative cases such as Casale Monferrato and Broni (asbestos), Vajont, Seveso, and Manfredonia. These examples demonstrated how similar events generated divergent trajectories of memory, silence, stigma, and mobilisation. Biasillo stressed the importance

of oral testimony, sensory experience, and gendered activism, particularly the prominent role of women in environmental struggles. In the second part of the chapter, she introduced the framework of working-class environmentalism to analyse conflicts such as ILVA in Taranto, nuclear energy protests, and waste crises, situating the Italian case within transnational environmental justice movements.

Nick Carter, author of the last paper in this panel, could not participate, but his chapter will be included in the handbook and will provide a contribution on 'The Transnational Construction of Italy and Italianness'.

The discussion reinforced and refined these arguments. Participants praised Bartolini's emphasis on the tension between pan-Italian nation-building and municipal traditions, suggesting deeper engagement with contemporary Risorgimento debates and the long-term legacy of urban rivalries. Questions also addressed the limits of urban dominance, noting the continued reliance on rural populations, especially through military conscription. Ramsey-Portolano was encouraged to integrate lesser-known cultural figures and to reflect more explicitly on the gap between authorial intention and popular reception. Biasillo was advised to streamline methodological discussion in favour of expanded case studies, while retaining her innovative integration of memory and environmental justice. Collectively, the panel underscored the handbook's ambition to link space, culture, and conflict as central dimensions of modern Italian history.

Panel 6: The economy and Italian workers

This panel, chaired by Marco Rota, brought together three contributions addressing labour, socialism, political economy, and crisis in modern Italy, followed by an extensive discussion that focused on historiographical framing, pedagogical clarity, and the overall coherence of the handbook.

The first paper, by Marco Manfredi and Elena Papadia (in person), examined workers, peasants, socialism, and migration in Liberal Italy. Manfredi opened by outlining the chapter's methodological positioning within recent historiography on labour and socialism. He argued that Italian scholarship on the labour movement had long been shaped by the crisis of twentieth-century Marxism and by the collapse of mass parties after 1989 and Tangentopoli. This, he suggested, had isolated Italian historiography from broader international renewals influenced by cultural history, linguistic analysis, visual culture, and the history of emotions. Their chapter seeks to reconnect Italian socialism to these approaches by analysing politics not primarily as doctrine, but as ritual, symbolism, and political imagination. Manfredi stressed the cultural overlaps between anarchists, socialists, and syndicalists, arguing that an excessive focus on doctrinal divisions had obscured a shared political culture. Early Italian socialism, he suggested, was shaped less by orthodox Marxism than by emotional mobilisation, voluntarism, and the legacy of Risorgimento radicalism. Figures such as Garibaldi functioned as oppositional symbols across the revolutionary left, while activists like Pietro Gori exemplified a form of charismatic, emotional political communication that drew on poetry, music, and theatre rather than abstract theory. Emigration was presented as a crucial experience for socialist and anarchist militants, reinforcing the transnational character of Italian radicalism and linking political activism to migrant trajectories.

Papadia's section shifted the focus to the Italian Socialist Party and its relationship with the rural world. She argued that liberal Italy was overwhelmingly rural and that socialism developed as a response to structural poverty, surplus labour, and politicisation in the countryside. While Marxist frameworks were imported from industrialised countries, the party was profoundly shaped by peasant struggles, from the *Fasci siciliani* to agricultural labour mobilisation in the Giolittian era. Papadia highlighted four key features of early

Italian socialism: the primacy of ethical commitment over ideological orthodoxy; its generational character, driven by young intellectuals and students; the adaptation of propaganda to rural audiences; and the emergence of charismatic leadership. She showed how socialist activists drew on religious language and symbols to communicate with peasants, presenting socialism as a moral and almost evangelical project. Charismatic leaders such as Giuseppe De Felice and Nicola Barbato inspired forms of devotion that bordered on the religious, not because of claims to authority from above, but because they empowered peasants to articulate their own demands. At the same time, Papadia noted that party leaders were often uneasy with such personal cults, reflecting tensions between grassroots mobilisation and organisational discipline.

The second paper, by Emanuele Felice (online), addressed industrialisation and modernisation from the Giolittian era to the economic miracle. Felice proposed a long-term, comparative framework centred on GDP growth and related indicators such as demography, education, life expectancy, and regional inequality. He identified three main phases: the Giolittian take-off, Fascism, and the postwar economic miracle. Giolittian Italy, he argued, marked the country's first successful integration into global markets, supported by state intervention, banking reform, and export-led growth. Fascism, by contrast, was divided into an initial phase of continuity and a later phase marked by autarky, stagnation, and rising inequality. The economic miracle represented a renewed, though exceptional, period of convergence driven by openness, public intervention, and institutional continuity.

Felice emphasised the importance of institutions, particularly the credit system and state-owned enterprises, and offered a broadly positive assessment of liberal and republican elites, contrasting this with a negative judgement of Fascist economic leadership. He also stressed long-term continuities across regime changes, especially in public intervention and technocratic expertise.

The final paper, by Marzia Maccaferri (in person), explored the many faces of the Italian crisis from the early 1990s to the present. She proposed the concept of polycrisis as an analytical framework to capture the intersection of economic, political, institutional, cultural, and demographic crises. Rather than treating Italian history as a seamless succession of emergencies, she argued for a critical historicisation of crisis narratives, while warning against presentism. Her chapter aims to decentre Tangentopoli, situating it within longer trajectories of party transformation, electoral reform, populism, and institutional instability. Maccaferri highlighted Italy's role as a laboratory of European populism and questioned whether the concept of polycrisis clarifies or distorts historical understanding.

The discussion raised several recurring themes. Participants emphasised the need for clarity and accessibility for an international student audience, warning against excessive conceptual density. There were calls to integrate women's experiences more explicitly into accounts of rural socialism, to clarify terminology for non-Italian readers, and to contextualise socialism beyond Cold War associations. Several interventions highlighted gaps in the coverage of the labour movement, political parties, public debt, and the rise of the small and medium enterprises in the 1970s and 1980s, suggesting that some chapters might need to extend their chronological scope.

A contribution by Tommaso Baris, who could not participate but sent a written paper for this panel, on 'A Democracy (Despite Everything): The Italian Republic from Labour Struggles to Tangentopoli', will be included in the handbook.

Panel 7: Fascism and its legacy

This session was devoted to the legacy of Fascism and, more specifically, to the historiography of fascism as a field shaped by political urgency, intellectual conflict, and changing interpretive frameworks. As two authors involved in this panel could not participate (Philip

Cooke, 'Resistance and Antifascism in Postwar Italy' and Paolo Heywood, 'They Live: The Resurgence of Fascism and the Crisis of Antifascism'), the discussion centred on Claudia Baldoli's proposal for a chapter that would approach fascism through the history of its interpretations, from the 1920s to the present.

Baldoli outlined her intention to frame the chapter as a history of fascist historiography, beginning with the earliest attempts to interpret fascism while it was still unfolding. She stressed that these early interpretations were not academic in nature but were produced in conditions of political struggle, often with the explicit aim of defeating fascism rather than analysing it dispassionately. The antifascist press and publishing world of the early 1920s, particularly between 1922 and 1926, was described as remarkably vibrant despite increasing repression. Baldoli emphasised the importance of Piero Gobetti's publishing activity in this period, noting both the diversity of perspectives represented and the shared commitment to antifascism as a unifying principle across ideological divides. She highlighted how these early interpretations already contained analytical elements that would later resurface in postwar historiography.

A central theme of Baldoli's intervention was the widespread underestimation of Fascism by contemporaries. She pointed to the difficulty political actors faced in grasping the autonomy of Fascism from the social forces that initially supported it, as well as the tendency among liberals, socialists, and Catholics to misread Fascism as a temporary phenomenon or as a by-product of agrarian reaction. This misinterpretation, she argued, contributed to strategic paralysis and repeated reversals of judgement among antifascist leaders. Baldoli suggested that Fascism might best be understood as a profound failure of liberal political culture, particularly in its inability to interpret and respond to a novel form of mass politics.

She also reflected on what early observers failed to see, notably the centrality of violence, opportunism, and the social and cultural conditions that enabled Fascism's success. While later historiography, especially after the cultural turn, focused extensively on consensus and mass mobilisation, Baldoli warned against neglecting coercion and structural inequalities. She traced the evolution of fascist historiography through the postwar decades, noting how early interpretations continued to shape scholarship well into the 1960s, when figures such as Federico Chabod systematised earlier insights. Subsequent debates around Renzo De Felice, particularly concerning consensus, foreign policy, and the revolutionary character of fascism, were presented as a crucial turning point that provoked intense polemics but ultimately enriched the field.

Baldoli concluded by raising questions about the present relevance of fascist studies. She asked whether the category of fascism remains useful for understanding contemporary right-wing movements, or whether it risks obscuring their novelty. In a context marked by democratic fragility, social inequality, and renewed geopolitical tensions, she argued that historians must reflect critically on how fascism is mobilised as both an analytical and political concept.

The discussion, led by chair and discussant Irene Piazzoni, strongly endorsed Baldoli's overall approach while suggesting areas for clarification and refinement. Irene emphasised the need to distinguish more clearly between historiography and broader public interpretations of fascism, noting that in the Italian case the two have often been deeply intertwined. She highlighted the role of major public intellectuals and journalists, such as Luigi Albertini, in shaping early understandings of fascism, and argued that their influence complicates any attempt to separate scholarly analysis from political discourse. Piazzoni also encouraged greater attention to key historiographical turning points in the postwar period, particularly the 1970s, and to the role of right-wing and neo-fascist interpretations, which, even when analytically weak, have influenced public debate. She stressed the importance of addressing major analytical binaries – national versus international fascism, revolution versus reaction, continuity versus rupture – and of situating fascism within the broader

crisis of early twentieth-century European culture. Drawing on cultural and intellectual history, she argued that fascism should be understood not simply as a modern political phenomenon but as a product of fin-de-siècle irrationalism, pessimism, and anti-liberal thought.

Further interventions raised the importance of nationhood as a central category in fascist mobilisation. Fascism's success, it was argued, lay in its ability to sacralise the nation, transforming it into an emotional and moral absolute that delegitimised pluralism and justified authoritarian power.

Panel 8: Constructing Italian identity: architecture, culture, and the (ab)uses of history

The panel, chaired by Alice Gussoni, brought together three papers that examined how Italian identity has been constructed, represented, and contested through architecture, design, consumption, and public memory from Fascism to the present. Taken together, the contributions highlighted both continuities and ruptures in the ways the Italian past has been mobilised culturally and politically, while also stressing the importance of transnational perspectives and methodological caution.

Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg (online) opened the panel with a paper focused on Fascist architecture and the construction of the fascist subject. Rather than framing her analysis around the idea of a 'fascist man', she proposed the more flexible concept of the fascist subject, which allowed her to address gender, family structures, and consent-building processes. Her chapter is structured around two apparently paradoxical propositions: first, that architecture under Fascism functioned as a fundamental tool for building consent and shaping new subjects; second, that there was no single, unified 'Fascist architecture'. Drawing on Gianni Biondi's argument that Fascist architecture does not exist as a coherent style, she stressed how many buildings commonly identified as fascist lose their ideological specificity once stripped of their symbolic decorations. This opened a broader discussion on historiographical debates about whether Fascism produced a distinct culture and whether such a culture was imposed from above or negotiated in practice.

Stewart-Steinberg mapped three overlapping architectural currents under Fascism: monumental or Romanità-inspired architecture associated with figures such as Marcello Piacentini; rationalism, linked to Gruppo 7 and architects like Giuseppe Terragni and Adalberto Libera; and a less studied vernacular strand associated above all with Giuseppe Pagano. She argued that this third strand, centred on 'architecture without architects' and rooted in Mediterranean and rural forms, was particularly important for understanding how consent was built. This line of analysis fed into her discussion of the Agro Pontino reclamation, conceptualised by the regime as a *bonifica integrale* that reshaped land, architecture, and human life simultaneously. She interpreted this project as a form of settler colonialism and as a laboratory for later colonial planning, emphasising its biopolitical dimension and its hierarchical yet serial and expandable spatial logic.

Diana Garvin's paper (online) shifted the focus from architecture to design, consumption, and the global trajectory of the 'Made in Italy' brand. She traced the historical roots of Italian design from the late nineteenth century through Fascism, the postwar reconstruction, and the economic miracle, arguing that Italian industrial culture remained closely tied to craft traditions and family-based firms while remaining unusually open to experimentation. Garvin stressed the role of education, particularly institutions such as the Politecnico di Milano, and technical publishing in creating a distinctive design culture. Under Fascism, she highlighted the paradoxical coexistence of repression and innovation, showing how scarcity under autarky encouraged material experimentation that later fed into postwar modernism.

A key argument of her paper was that postwar Italian design functioned as a way of rebranding the nation internationally, partially obscuring the legacy of Fascism and empire while nevertheless drawing on Fascist-era modernism and rationalism. From the Vespa and Olivetti typewriters to the Memphis Group and Alessi, Italian design transformed objects into carriers of national identity, combining functionality with irony, playfulness, and theatricality. Garvin also warned that 'Made in Italy' risks becoming an empty signifier if detached from its material and social bases, pointing to global supply chains and imitation as structural challenges.

Gianluca Fantoni (in person) closed the panel with a paper on the public uses and abuses of history in contemporary Italy, conceived as the concluding chapter of the handbook. He argued that, in the Italian context, the concept of political use of history remains more productive than memory studies alone. Fantoni outlined the methodological features that signal political uses of history, including non-professional authorship, lack of contextualisation, selective use of evidence, and the collapse of historical distance. He traced the intensification of memory conflicts to the post-1989 period and focused on three case studies: the eastern border and the *foibe*, controversies surrounding the Jewish Brigade, and the neo-Bourbon movement. Fantoni presented the eastern border question as a paradigmatic case of right-wing revisionism that gradually became mainstream through institutionalisation, notably with the establishment of the *Giorno del Ricordo*. He stressed how cherry-picking and the myth of silence distorted a complex historical context marked by Italian wars of aggression, occupation, and forced Italianisation. The Jewish Brigade case was analysed as a contemporary memory battleground shaped by accusations of antisemitism, the repositioning of the far right, and unresolved tensions within the left. The neo-Bourbon movement was presented as a more ambiguous phenomenon, politically heterogeneous and socially rooted, yet still illustrative of how historical narratives are mobilised polemically.

The discussion that followed reinforced several key themes. Participants questioned whether political uses of history originate primarily from the right, noting that revisionist narratives around the southern question also have left-wing genealogies. Others emphasised the transnational dimensions of Fascist planning and modernism, drawing comparisons with Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Britain. The debate also returned repeatedly to the problem of monuments and buildings, questioning how to deal with Fascist material legacies without erasing history or legitimising it. Across the panel, there was broad agreement on the importance of disaggregating fascism, resisting simplified narratives, and providing students with analytical tools to understand how identity, culture, and history have been constructed and contested in Italy.

In conclusion, this conference was crucial for the making of the Bloomsbury Handbook of Italian History because it tested draft chapters in a genuinely collective setting, where arguments could be challenged, refined, and repositioned across the volume rather than in isolation. The exchanges clarified what needs stronger framing, where historiographical or methodological distinctions must be sharpened, and how to balance national specificity with transnational comparisons. Just as importantly, the debate identified overlaps and gaps between chapters, helping the editors and authors to coordinate themes, chronology, and key concepts. In short, it transformed individual contributions into a more coherent, dialogic handbook.

Acknowledgement on the use of AI. Artificial Intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this contribution. Specifically, AI was employed to assist in drafting summaries of the individual interventions, based on the complete recordings and transcripts of the papers and discussions delivered during the conference. The recordings and transcripts constituted the sole primary material for this process. All outputs generated with the assistance

of AI were carefully reviewed, edited, and validated by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation, and final wording of the text.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

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Italian summary

Il contributo offre un sommario di quanto emerso durante il convegno di due giorni tenutosi presso l'Università di Milano, La Statale, nel dicembre 2025, come tappa del processo di produzione del *Bloomsbury Handbook of Modern Italian History*. L'incontro ha rappresentato un momento di confronto sullo stato della storiografia italiana contemporanea, toccando temi quali identità nazionale, fascismo e antifascismo, dimensione imperiale e postcoloniale, storia sociale e culturale, genere, economia, consumi e usi pubblici del passato. Il dialogo tra approcci diversi – storiografici, interdisciplinari e transnazionali – ha evidenziato continuità e fratture interpretative, sollecitando una riflessione critica su categorie consolidate. Il confronto tra autori e curatori ha inoltre contribuito a chiarire gli snodi concettuali del volume e a rafforzarne l'impianto complessivo, configurando il convegno come un vero laboratorio collettivo di elaborazione scientifica.

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