

## ARTICLE

# 'Like Romans Becoming Italians': Italy as the Negative Paradigm for British Decline in the Language of the Press and Denis Healey

Ettore Costa

University of Rome, IT  
ettore.costa@hotmail.it

The article explores the views of Denis Healey about Italy, and demonstrates that his rhetoric on the Italian national character is connected to British socialism and the British relationship with Europe. Healey's opinions about Italy have been informed by the idea – very common among British and European socialists – that European people do not share a common nature. In 2013, he spoke of an 'olive line' separating the North – defined by pragmatism and responsibility – and the South – defined by abstraction and fiscal laxity. Healey adopted a discourse grounded in essentialism. Social and economic factors, contingency and agency are not important in shaping the behavior of a group of people. Political action is a derivative of the 'national character', a mixture of cultural and geographical determinism, which is hard to define and impossible to modify. This was used by Healey to explain the failure of democratic socialism in southern Europe. During the 1970s and 1980s, Italy played a part in Healey's reflections, and past experiences were reworked to validate his political positions. His argument about the national character formed the basis for his skeptical position regarding European unification, which in the 1970s had divided the Labour party, and worked against international socialist cooperation as well. Speaking about the 'national character' of the Italians was a rhetorical choice by Healey, which gained strength from pre-existing political positions from the early twentieth century, but could also be revitalised to deal with contemporary issues like the European Union and Britain's role in the world as late as 2013.

## British decline

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, Italy was a major presence in the British political debate, especially in connection with the theme of national decline. Although there were serious attempts to analyse the Italian economy, society and culture or even a specific phenomenon like Eurocommunism, they are not the subject of this article, which instead focuses on the people who made reference to Italy but propounded insights that were weak and badly informed. When these people talked about Italy, they were actually talking about Britain; they wanted to make a point about the ills of British society and to present a cure. Italy was never analysed in depth, even when it was the apparent subject; Italy existed as a paradigm, the second term of a comparison or an analogy, a short-hand to say something else. A good way

to study assumptions and preconceptions about Italy is through the examination of what meaning commentators were trying to convey through the use of the sign 'Italy'.

Specifically, the references to Italy under investigation are those made in conjunction with the theme of British decline, as they show the importance of national character and international comparison in the debate. Gamble (2000: 1–5) and Tomlinson (2000: 21–6) agree that declinism was a discourse developed and circulated by the intellectual classes to shape the political debate. The most influential opinion-formers on declinism were Andrew Shonfield, Michael Shanks, C.P. Snow in the late 1950s; and Peter Jenkins, Peter Jay, Samuel Brittan, Correlli Barnett, Martin Wiener, Sidney Pollard from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. The employment of Italy as a negative paradigm was a common feature. While the following pages are going to concentrate on the latter period, when the debate was at its peak, the long-term perspective is also taken into consideration. As will be shown, the debate was dependent on ideas and images that had become entrenched in British culture decades before it commenced; indeed, they still shape the public perception of Italy and the British political debate in the twenty-first century.

While opinion-formers who constructed the arguments are the focus of this article more than the politicians who borrowed them, Denis Healey is an exception.<sup>1</sup> Not only was he in a position to influence the public debate – both in government and in opposition – he also possessed greater knowledge on the subject than most, thanks to his wartime experience in Italy, his direct involvement in Italian politics as International Secretary of the Labour Party from 1946 to 1951 and his enduring interest in the country for the rest of his political and private life. Therefore, on one hand he could make reflections about Italy with a greater insight than other public figures, while on the other he was in a position to take advantage of crude generalisations. The appraisals that he made reveal the way in which references to Italy were constructed and applied.

*British decline* has been a major theme in the British political debate and historiography. It would be a mistake to say that declinism is simply perceptions and opinions about a neutral fact – the loss of Britain's global role and the closing of the gap between the British economy and the rest of western Europe. Andrew Gamble states: 'Decline is a politically constructed concept and needs to be understood through the political debates which have taken place on its dimensions, causes and remedies' (2000: 5). He has shown how perceptions and opinions on British decline developed independently from external events. British opinion-formers were successful in shaping the perception of the public towards the loss of the Empire, presenting it as a beneficial event. On the other hand, in the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, politicians indulged in apocalyptic warnings about the health of the British nation and called for drastic measures to escape doom. According to Ian Budge, decline was often used as a cover for other political projects (1993: 1–23), while Tomlinson argues that declinism is a self-contained ideology (2000: 1–6). What is interesting is that declinism was constructed by people from opposing ideologies and it shaped the priorities and perceptions of the entire political spectrum:

The British malady has been used by politicians as a stick with which to beat their opponents for implementing measures that temporarily disconnect the nation from its steady progression towards modernity; as a means of identifying the enemies within – amateurish industrialists, imperious trade unions, or whatever – who must be dealt with if Britain is to do as well in the future as in the past; as a way of spotlight-

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<sup>1</sup> Jay was close to Callaghan, Brittan to Thatcher, and Jenkins to the Labour moderates and the Social Democratic Party (SDP). For an appraisal of the role of declinism in shaping Thatcherism see Vinen (2009: 186–99).

ing some cultural impediment – habits of dependency, a two-nations mentality, and so forth – to the harnessing of national energies; and not least as a pretext for ditching former policies, usually statist, of their own parties. (Eccleshall 2000: 157)

By the beginning of the 1970s, the main parties had accepted a declinist narrative. Stagflation and the rise of commodity prices – exogenous phenomena – were taken as evidence:

Together these issues generated what can only be described as a panic about the British economy, and indeed the health of British society generally. This panic was in turn a major cause of the radicalisation of the politics of the British Right, and a large reinforcement of the already existing shift to the Left in the Labour party. (Tomlinson 2000: 84–5)

International comparison is the foundation of declinism. According to this vision, economic performance does not serve to produce optimal results for the populace, but it is a way to measure differentials of power between nations. British power and self-sufficiency were asserted against other nations – to which Britain had traditionally regarded itself as superior (Gamble 2000: 1–5).

Few Britons old enough to recollect the postwar decades can really, in their heart of hearts, comfortably accept that the per caput income of the French, let alone the Italians, exceeds theirs. The real hurt is to have been top dog (or at least a leading dog) in a fairly recent period which can be painfully contrasted with an inferior contemporary status. (Supple 1997: 16)

According to Stuart Hall, decline was perceived as an assault on British identity, which had been closely linked to the idea of empire, the concept of capital race and the perception of power (2000: 104–16). Declinist arguments were indissolubly connected to the identity struggle over race and nationhood. Political and economic power had been perceived as a consequence of righteousness and superiority in the hierarchy of nations and races. Economic inertia was not a problem in itself, but a by-product of cultural malaise; economic reform was part of a general moral reform (Eccleshall 2000: 174).

Comparing Britain to another nation was never a mere econometric operation – indeed, comparison on industry level would have made more sense. Each nation Britain was compared to conveyed meanings – implicitly or explicitly through its national character – and by analogy or contrast said something about British identity. Comparing Britain with Germany evoked the efficiency of its management and the discipline of its workforce; more subtly, it evoked the weakening of the British organism in front of its traditional enemy in the Darwinian struggle of the nation-states.

If Germany was usually seen as a positive example – what Britain ought to be – Italy was the negative example, the paradigm of a once great nation fallen into decadence. It was a warning of what Britain could become if the British stayed the course of decline. Paul Theroux put forward a simple image – which sums up the feeling of an era and the opinion on Italy – to describe the decline of the British: 'But they did not know that they were dying, like Romans becoming Italians' (Theroux 1982: 29).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> One year later, Theroux published a novel entirely dedicated to the description of the decadence of Europe (1983: 5).

## Italianness

In 1951, John Pilcher, a British diplomat in Rome, produced a description of the Italian character to help the policy-makers in Whitehall better understand Italian politics. As he summed it up:

Indeed the conclusion forged on the Anglo-Saxon is that the chief feature of the Italian character is the absence of those Nordic virtues of grit, staying power in adversity and steadfastness in unpopularity, which the English understand by the very world character.<sup>3</sup>

Catholic Europe, particularly Italy, had long been the Other on which the British identity was built (Black 1992: 235). Since the eighteenth century, British culture had associated the Continent with absolutism, revolution, corruption and Catholicism, while the British saw themselves as reliable, fair, honest and democratic (Piers Ludlow 2002: 101–24; Spiering 2015: 48–60). Which traits were ascribed to the Italian character? In the classic description of *Italianness*, Barzini lists which adjectives the foreigners did *not* use to describe the Italians: 'reliable, honest, obedient, disciplined, brave, and capable of self-sacrifices' (1996: 194).<sup>4</sup> According to Michael Herzfeld, the category of the Mediterranean – no less an imperialist construct that the Orient – has been interiorised by its inhabitants (2005: 45–63). Bouchard and Ferne argue that 'The peninsula's history [is] a southern land "othered" by the Orientalizing gaze and colonial ambitions of physical and metaphorical invaders' (2013: 226).

The travels of young British aristocrats on the Grand Tour were important in shaping the image of Italy in British culture. The main influence was anti-Catholicism, the most important feature of British political culture in the eighteenth century. Catholicism was equated with autocracy, religious credulity, misery, poverty and clerical rule. Instead of gaining new experiences, the journey reinforced the prejudices of the travellers: 'it would not be unfair to claim that many returned to Britain as better-informed xenophobes' (Black 1992: 235). The British traveller Adam Walker describes the decline of Venice, with people 'too soft, luxurious, and indolent to cut any figure in trade', a cradle of corruption and effeminacy (Black 1992: 228). Social mores were reflected in the political situation: 'Aside from specific issues, the general view was that British society was more free, less constrained by social distinctions and the privileges of rank' (Black 1992: 234). The tale that economic backwardness came from moral failings and that the prosperity of northern Protestant peoples was the external manifestation of their virtue and vigour had been well rehearsed with the Irish. Also popular was the Malthusian theory that the populations unable to save and accumulate capital were profligate and sexually incontinent (Stedman Jones 2016: 380). Charles Dickens repeated this argument to explain the poverty of Lombardy in 1859:

Every suggestion for work, requiring great exertion, but sure to yield the largest returns, is invariably met by the Italian by his chilling wet blanket – 'There is no money.' Good strength of will and energy, and the habit of thrift and labour, are also wanting, nevertheless. Not much can be expected, when we behold the cafes of a dingy, dirty, poverty-stricken, dilapidated old town, crowded with a tall, hale, and muscular, but listless, languid, lazy youth, busy doing nothing, or at most playing cards and discussing Wallachia or the Danubian Principalities. (Dickens 1859: 467)

<sup>3</sup> The National Archives, Kew (TNA), FO 371/96226-WT1015/2, John Pilcher, 'Friends, Romans, and Countrymen? (A Study of the Italian outlook)', 8 January 1951.

<sup>4</sup> For a more objective analysis of the identity of the Italians, see Vidotto (2005). For an overview of the representation of the Italians in British culture see Girelli (2009: 19–26).

References to Italy in British public opinion were not always negative. In the 1860s, the political mobilisation of the British middle and working class took place around the theme of republican transnationalism, linked to the Italian *Risorgimento* and the American Civil War. The politics of virtue, sacrifice and heroism was incarnated by Garibaldi, whom half a million people came to cheer in his visit to London in 1864. This was a major contribution to the expansion of the British trade unions and their greater political involvement in national and international causes, leading to the creation of the International Workingmen Association – the First International – and the Reform League, which in turn helped to achieve the Reform Act of 1867. References to the struggle of Italians and other nationalities against authoritarian regimes were also an indirect attack on the British ruling class for its collusion and a warning against a curtailment of British freedoms by an autocratic government (Stedman Jones 2016: 346–50; 449–59).

However, the dominant Whig interpretation of history was that Britain was better suited for parliament and democracy than the continentals (Spiering 2015: 23–9). The common assessment was that the Italians could not take effective collective action because they were only interested in their family and lacked civic virtues and selflessness. Moderate opinions in politics and the common good were rejected in favour of sentimental appeals, extremism, personal ambitions and abstract ideas.<sup>5</sup> Many agreed with the historian Trevelyan (1923: 16) and former Foreign Secretary Grey that parliament did not suit the Italian genius (Berselli 1971: 120) – something the ultra-nationalist Italian Giovanni Papini agreed with (1915: 1052). For this reason, fascism was generally considered a purely Italian phenomenon, although it carried ambiguous connotations. A fringe politician like Mosley used the fascist example to argue that Britain needed radical reforms, else it would have been left 'a Spain', that is, a decadent former empire (Mosley 1931). The conservative press hailed fascism as an example of the restoration of order and authority. British liberals and socialists saw fascism as a warning against the European reactionary movement – which could soon come to Britain – but also a warning against extremism and revolutionary rhetoric in the left (Berselli 1971: 35–45; 100–2; 112–15).

During and immediately after the war, Labour and progressive commentators made references to Italy and its resistance movement, expressing hope about a democratic revolution – often with encouragement from Italian formal or informal representatives, wanting better terms in the peace treaty.<sup>6</sup> The description of southern Italy by the Labour left journal *Tribune* touched on familiar themes: the squalor and misery of the masses were contrasted with the luxury of the few, unsanitary conditions, popular superstition, sexual promiscuity. Conversely, northern Italians had a clean table, used the lavatory, banished prostitutes, organised partisan bands and co-operatives (Ause 1945; Hyde 1945).<sup>7</sup> Similar themes can be found in Denis Healey's descriptions of his experiences as a tourist before the war and as a soldier during it, particularly insisting on the corruption of the middle classes and the misery of the poor (D. Healey 1989: 59). Imitating the eighteenth-century tourist Lord John Hervey – like him a politician with artistic tastes – Healey included a long poem on the squalor of the country:

<sup>5</sup> On attributing a lack of rationality, pragmatism, and improvisation to 'inferior' cultures, see Obeyesekere (1992: 15–22).

<sup>6</sup> Carandini a Bonomi, Londra 27 novembre 1944, *I documenti diplomatici italiani*, Decima Serie: 1943–1948, Volume I, pp. 627–8. Examples of mentions in parliament debates in Hansard, HC Deb 3 August 1943 vol. 391 cc2233–7. Hansard, HC Deb 28 September 1944 vol. 403 cc561–6. Example in the published material in Ivor Thomas's preface to Luzzatto (1944).

<sup>7</sup> The Italian Socialists embraced this assessment in a self-exculpatory way (An Italian Correspondent, 'Italy – Political battleground,' *Socialist World Sep.–Nov.* 1947).

'Chapels and churches, great to behold,/Each a king's ransom, in glittering gold;/Poverty and want, men craving for food,/Picking thru garbage, practically nude' (D. Healey 1992a: 275).<sup>8</sup>

Collaboration with the reactionary forces in Greece, Italy and Germany engendered in the Labour rank and file a fear about the betrayal of the progressive nature of the people's war and the continuity with conservative policies (Thorpe 2006: 1075–1105). As Denis Healey warned the Labour Annual Conference in 1945, 'Socialist revolution has already begun in Europe' and Britain had to choose the right side; in his experience in Italy he had confirmation that 'The upper classes in every country are selfish, depraved, dissolute, and decadent' (LPACR 1945: 114). In 1946, the *Tribune* warned how continental Europe had seen the return of conservative forces under the guise of Catholicism.<sup>9</sup> This explains why so many MPs, not just the fellow-travellers, signed the telegram to Nenni wishing him victory, despite his alliance with the communists (Morgan 1985: 65–6). In this case, Healey negotiated the support for Saragat's social democrats and the expulsion of Nenni from the Socialist International (Varsori 1988: 194–208).

### Italy as a yardstick

Until the 1960s, references to Italy only obliquely expressed concerns about British society and politics. By 1973, comparisons between Italy and Britain had lost all distance and ambiguity, becoming explicit and systematic. The list of the problems affecting Italy published by *The Times* was followed by the comment that they were the same problems affecting Britain. Peter Jenkins for the *Guardian* (1974a) and Samuel Brittan for the *Financial Times* (1977b) would later publish an almost identical list.

Strikes and social unrest, delinquency and violence; bureaucratic bumbling in the administration, faction and fecklessness among the political parties; and now a more pervasive feeling of not being wanted, of alienation from their partners in the European Community. [...]

In Italy, too, people seem to derive positive pleasure from lamenting the national decline, compared with the glory of days gone by.<sup>10</sup>

Italy was the yardstick with which to measure the level Britain had fallen to; even when Italy was compared favourably, such as for its superior growth, it was usually to say that even a Mediterranean country going up could meet Britain going down. For example, Sidney Pollard said that even 'a lop-sided economy, defeated in the war, backward and imitative, beset by insoluble social problems' (Pollard 1982: 4) was matching British performance. Norman Stone – adviser to Margaret Thatcher – used more colourful language:

In 1860, Stone reminded us, one third of the Italian population lived off rotten corn, dressed in goatskins and communicated south of the Arno largely in grunts. Today Italy has overtaken us in output per capita. (Shakespeare 1986)

Corelli Barnett did not develop a coherent argument on Italy, but he did not use the country as an example of a defeated nation that had had a successful postwar economic boom – a significant difference with Germany and Japan. Instead, he employed Italy to show the level to which Britain had declined: 'From being third industrial nation in the world in 1945 she [Britain] has sunk to the level of Italy' (Barnett 1978). *The Times* Italian correspondent Peter

<sup>8</sup> Healey attributed the poem to an anonymous soldier, but he probably wrote it. For Hervey see Black (1992: 225).

<sup>9</sup> 'What's happening,' *Tribune*, 24 May 1946. Leader, 'The Pope steps out.' *Tribune*, 7 Jun. 1946.

<sup>10</sup> 'A vital asset of Europe,' *The Times*, 15 Mar. 1973.

Nichols said that Britain had the same ills as Italy, despite not having the Vatican, a corrupt party permanently in power and a large communist party (Nichols 1976: 511–26). Italy could be 'a warning beacon for the future' – 'I think it was Gore Vidal who said that he lived in a beautiful house to the south of Naples because it was the best place to observe the end of the world' (Nichols 1981).

These dramatic tones are not uncommon. 'Decline, – said Peter Jenkins – however, has remained a meaninglessly abstract concept for the public at large. It is not something people talk about in pubs' (Jenkins 1978a). Every abstract concept needs some sensory form to become perceptible and leave an impression on the public. Evoking 'the spectre of Italy' served this purpose (Brittan 1974). Since the experience of the general populace in the postwar era had been one of growing prosperity, decline was to be presented as a menace to national identity, the adulteration of the British character, a degradation to the Mediterranean level. For example, a *Times* journalist noted that deindustrialisation hurt so much not because there were no jobs but because national manhood was associated with manufacturing, while service jobs were considered suitable for females and immigrants (Brian 1989).

Peter Jenkins in *Mrs Thatcher's Revolution* (1987: 34–45) presented a historical narrative comparing the decline of Britain to the fall of the Roman and Spanish empire. Machiavelli and Gibbon had said that prosperity and boredom made Roman society resistant to change and deprived the Romans of frugality, discipline, freedom and manliness, instead embracing luxury, effeminacy, despotism and military weakness. Recurrent in Jenkins was the description of a society where the majority led a comfortable life, remaining obtuse about stagnancy and decadence. 'The underlying weakness of the British economy, made worse by the international recession, is in striking contrast to the buoyant mood in the country. Britain is a good place to live for most of its inhabitants' (Jenkins 1978b).

It was common to argue that the low level of investments was due to the propensity of people to spend beyond their means and not to save. The spendthrift masses forced the trade unions to ask for higher wages and the government to adopt predatory taxation, slashing the margin of profit.<sup>11</sup> This could be contrasted with the Nordic virtues of wage restraint and a balanced budget. 'All "Good Europeans" must march in step with German economic policy. The Italians, hopeless, and the British, recalcitrant, must put their own houses in order' (Jenkins 1974b).

It was not just Jenkins: Italy had an important place in the declinist discourse of two of its most important ideologues: Peter Jay, economics editor of *The Times*, and Samuel Brittan, economics correspondent of the *Financial Times*. During the crisis of 1974, Peter Jay wrote what can be called the most important manifesto for declinism. He described how politicians and the public – unlike far-seeing intellectuals – had been blind to the fact that slowing growth made it impossible to guarantee full employment, stable inflation and free collective bargaining, on which stability and the very survival of democracy rested. The country was following the pattern of Latin America in the present and Germany and Italy in the interwar years (Jay 1974b). Illustrating a hierarchy of nations, he offered a warning:

The timing of political breakdown depends on the interaction of economic failure in political institutions. Countries with bad economic performance and strong political institutions may, therefore, not suffer political collapse before countries with better economic performance and weak political institutions. Countries like Italy which are weak in both ways naturally succumb first. Countries like the United States and perhaps Switzerland which are strong in both ways may never succumb at all, countries

<sup>11</sup> 'A budget for TUC,' *The Times*, 27 Mar. 1974. Also Blake (1976).

like Britain, France, Japan, and West Germany, which are strong in one respect, but weak in the other, come between the first two groups. (Jay 1974a)<sup>12</sup>

Even Samuel Brittan was keen on using Italy as a warning – he linked corporatist policies to Mussolini's Italy (1975) – and as an indicator of low performance – 'the point may yet come where Hungary or Poland may give a better approximation to sensibly managed market economy than Britain or Italy' (1977a):

The sterling exchange rate can go on falling at this rate, or more, without ever reaching zero. The Italian word 'lira' has the same meaning as the French 'livre' and the British 'pound'. All three once denoted a pound of silver. Today there are 1500 lire to the pound sterling. Decline can be protracted over many centuries. (Brittan 1976)

Interestingly, Brittan would later change his mind and praise the Italian economy (1978). He was attracted to the black economy – 'this particular Roman road' to recovery (Brittan 1979) – an entire part of the economy removed from oppressive state regulation and trade unions' tyranny (Brittan 1977b; Brittan 1977c). Later, even after Thatcher's reforms, he openly challenged the idea that comparison with Italy had to be negative:

Did I hear someone say that Britain cannot be compared with Italy? Indeed, it cannot. For Italian growth and inflation performance have been so much better. But even the British can still learn. (Brittan 1990)

Throwaway comments are no less important than elaborated reasoning for studying stereotypes. For example, Margaret Thatcher employed vivid images to say that foreign correspondents came to Britain, no longer Italy, 'following the scent of economic and political decay' (Beloff 1975). The Institute of Economic Affairs warned that the living standards would fall to the level of – in a crescendo – 'Italy, Greece, Spain or Bulgaria' (Harris and Seldon 1979), the Hudson Institute said that 'our standard of living is only marginally better than that of the countries of the Mediterranean and Balkans we think of as poor' (Harford 1974). *The Economist* used Italy and southern Europe in general to show the level Britain had fallen to: 'From America their cases look dangerous and menacing, but not really as depressing as the British disease – because Americans never really expected much of Spain, Italy and Portugal'.<sup>13</sup>

While this overview has shown that the usual reference to Italy in this period was as a negative paradigm, there are two peculiar occurrences that must be considered. The first occurrence is an apparent exception, a situation in which Italy was regularly used as a positive example. In the same period as this debate was taking place in Britain, the Italian Communist Party was developing its strategy of Eurocommunism, showing willingness to defend democracy and to share the responsibilities of government. Italian communists received encouragement and endorsement not only from left-wingers such as Heffer and Benn but also from moderate and conservative commentators. In most cases, it was probably simply the opportunistic chance to say that the Labour Party was to the left of communism – as Tony Benn would lament in 1987, 'the Eurocommunists were being used as a stick to beat us with' (Benn 1994: 525). 'I sometimes wonder – said Margaret Thatcher – whether the Euro-Communists might not find Labour's national executive committee a bit too left-wing for their taste'.<sup>14</sup> The

<sup>12</sup> Before the crisis, he had used Italy as a positive example of efficient management (Jay 1971).

<sup>13</sup> 'Rake's regress?' *The Economist*, 13 Sep. 1975.

<sup>14</sup> 'Thatcher sees Labour trap,' *Observer*, 5 Feb. 1978.

British left was often accused of bearing the main responsibility for decline. Union militancy and resistance to innovation, the ascent of the radical left inside the Labour Party, even the sentimentality and soft hearts of intellectuals – a theme dear to Correlli Barnett – were shown as the cause or effect of decline. These features were absent in Italian communism, it was argued. Both Brittan and Jenkins said that the Italian unions understood responsibility and that the Italian communists, in particular the high-ranking Italian communist Giorgio Napolitano, would have been more at ease in the social democrat Manifesto Group than in the leftist Tribune group (Brittan 1977b). Peter Jenkins argued that the vacuum of social democracy in Italy forced the communists to behave like social democrats, while the Labour Party, as a big-tent party, allowed people who were more extremist than the communists to be elected in the parliament (Jenkins 1975, 1977). Comparison with Italy would serve to legitimise the split of the SDP.

What made Italian communism attractive while the rest of Italy was held up as an example of degeneration? The answer lies in the nature of Italian communism. Luciano Cafagna showed that Gramsci and Togliatti defined the identity of the party in a way that would attract intellectuals. What the Communist Party offered intellectuals was not justice – other parties offered justice – but discipline and organisation. Italy was corrupt and weak because the national bourgeoisie was weak. The Leninist party of the proletariat had superior organisation and discipline; its mission was to regenerate Italy. 'Thus it was born a delusion of the micro-climate: outside the party Italy is what it is, but inside the party Italy is different' (Cafagna 1991: 45). The Communist Party presented itself as a negation of the old national character and the harbinger of a new national identity. Giorgio Napolitano was appreciated because he did not look communist and also because he did not look Italian. Paying him a compliment, Denis Healey said that Napolitano was 'the best imitation of a City banker that I know' (Owen 2006). Indeed, condemnation of southern Europe and the Mediterranean character was something the Italians did themselves too. Napolitano said that Italy had to refuse its Mediterranean identity and that the Communist Party felt more kinship with the Nordic Europeans than with the Bulgarians (Jenkins 1976). So, even in this respect, there was a negative connotation in using Italy as a reference: the Labour extremists were becoming less British, the Italian communists less Italian.

The other occurrence, quite the opposite case, was a reference to Italy that had great importance for political events, but it failed to make an impact on the public debate. When a large number of social democrats left the Labour Party to form the SDP in 1981, Denis Healey, then the most important figure of the Labour right, refused to join them and stayed to fight the left inside the party. Healey justified this by mentioning having witnessed first-hand the split of right-wing social democrats from the Italian Socialist Party in 1947:

It was the main reason why I did my best to prevent the Gang of Four from splitting the Labour Party in 1981. I was not surprised by the consequences of that unhappy experiment; right-wing breakaways from left-wing parties have never come to anything. Their only important effect is to weaken the influence of common sense in the party they have deserted and to keep Conservative governments in power. (D. Healey 1989: 83)

This reason – given by Healey with hindsight in 1989 – was consistent with what he said at the time of the split (Keel 1981) and with what he told his wife:

I was persuaded to remain [in the Labour Party] by Denis's arguments. I remembered how, long ago, when he was International Secretary at Labour Party headquarters, he

had watched with despair the disintegration of the Italian Socialist Party, the PSLI into *piselli* – little peas. Now he prophesied that the same would happen to the SDP; and he was right. (E. Healey 2006: 323)

While Edna Healey understood this to be the most important factor in his decision, both Giles Radice (2002: 300) and Peter Jenkins (1987: 142), who at the time were close to Healey, reported his aversion to splits and divisions in vague terms, without a clear reference to the Italian experience. Although it is open to debate which version better reflected the thoughts of Healey at the time, there is more reason to trust Edna Healey's account. Radice and Jenkins glossed over the details and elaborated on Healey's thoughts to describe them in more general terms, whereas Edna Healey reported details that would have been difficult to know without Denis's direct knowledge. In addition, she confused the terms, so it is likely that she was transcribing something Denis understood without the necessary knowledge to elaborate on her own. For example, the PSLI was not the Italian Socialist Party, it was the splinter party. In addition, while the word *piselli* indeed means 'little peas', Edna Healey did not know that it also refers to a part of the male anatomy – while the ex-soldier Denis certainly was aware of this.

The difference between those two comparisons is instructive: while the comparison between Eurocommunism and the Labour left is weak and general, Healey's comparison between the Italian splinters of 1947 and the British splinters of 1981 is on point and correct.<sup>15</sup> However, the first one gained widespread currency, whereas the second was appreciated by Healey alone. The reason for this was that the theme of Italian communism was closely linked with the Italian national character, so it was easier to turn the Italian example into an argument about decline and Britain. Conversely, understanding the importance of the split of Italian socialism in 1947 would have required not just not a passing interest in Italy but the extensive knowledge Healey had. Healey appreciated a valuable lesson – a lesson that proved to be correct – but he also knew it had little rhetorical impact. When Healey tried to make his case, he usually selected positive examples from Norway and Austria, sometimes France and Japan (D. Healey 1981).

This also explains the popularity of Barzini's book *The Italians* – which was later adapted as a documentary – as a description of the Italian character (Barzini 1996: 328–34).<sup>16</sup> Important publications used his arguments to explain Italian events (Robinson 1972) – when not directly employing him (Barzini 1969, 1978).<sup>17</sup> Fifty years later, it was still considered the most important book about Italy (Hooper 2015). Apparently presenting impressionistic and neutral reportage, the book was actually a politically charged moral tale. It posited that the Italians had originally been hard-working, ingenious, capable of accepting untold sacrifices, but, in the sixteenth century, the expansion of the state machinery had deprived them of personal responsibility, kept the population ignorant and increased the squabbling of their leaders. The Italian practice of evading the law, defending family interests, and caring only about appearances was the result of an oppressive state. This explains why the Italian example resonated well with the neoliberal instincts of many British declinists.

### **Geographical arguments and geography as an argument**

Geographical speculation played a central part in the representation of Italy and the debate over British decline, showing how commentators exploited images and ideas that had great longevity in British culture and that had been continuously repurposed. According to this

<sup>15</sup> On the limitations of Eurocommunism, see Cafagna (1991: 111–13).

<sup>16</sup> 'Witty view of Italy,' *The Times*, 21 June 1968.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Eternal Problem', *The Economist*, 20 March 1971.

vision, the climate and environment had shaped the national character of the people: 'The climate has, of course, moulded many Italian traits. The clarity of the atmosphere banishes nordic gloom.'<sup>18</sup> Geographic determinism – in use since Herodotus (Herodotus 1925: 4:301; Hdt. 9.122.3) – could justify essentialism without the backlash of racist theories. 'Historical speculators from Hegel through Spengler to George Kennan have ascribed regime types to geographic factors' (Maier 1988: 117). With geography came a hierarchy of nations too: the northern climate had given discipline, frugality, rationality and honesty to the Nordic people, which was the reason for their success. Denis Healey devised – or more likely popularised – a synthetic expression to represent the division between northern and southern Europe: the *olive line*.<sup>19</sup> Like olives, southern Europeans could grow only in a certain climate and on certain soil:

It has always seemed to me, with respect to my Italian friends, that the 'olive line' is as important as the Iron Curtain in dividing Europe, because south of the olive line people do not pay their taxes, they do not respect their government, indeed they get on very well without governments altogether. To expect a Sicilian landowner to pay taxes as honestly as a Dutch manufacturer, even in these days, is expecting a bit much. (D. Healey 1987: 78)

As International Secretary of the Labour Party from 1945 to 1952, Healey more than anyone else shaped the arguments to oppose British participation in European unification. A united socialist Europe was impossible, because the people were too different due to a 'variety which springs from differing histories, climates, and social patterns'.<sup>20</sup> Continental Europeans were unfit for socialism, which required 'a level of civic responsibility and administrative competence which scarcely exists outside the Anglo-Saxon world and northern Europe' (D. Healey 1952: 14; also D. Healey 1950: 365). 'Planning in France and Italy has already broken down' and an Italian businessman who did not pay taxes to an Italian finance minister in Rome would refuse to pay taxes to 'a Swedish Finance Minister in Strasbourg' (D. Healey 1951). G.D.H. Cole legitimised this argument by following Trevelyan's pattern and arguing that only the most advanced nations were fit for democratic socialism (Cole 1948).

By the 1970s, assumptions on southern Europe were being turned on their heads. France appeared to be a very successful case of *dirigisme*. Healey himself would often use France – and occasionally Italy – as examples of successful planning (Benn 1990: 38; Pearce 2002: 450; D. Healey 1980). While geography had once been used to explain the immutability of the European ranks, it was reconverted to explain mobility: Britain was experiencing retrocession to southern Europe. As Peter Jenkins argued:

A second possibility is the 'two-tier' Europe. There would be town and country membership, or more likely Nordic and Mediterranean membership. The idea would be that some members could proceed, if they wished or were capable, to closer integration, while others could continue as members of a much looser free-trading and political association. There would be the risk that Britain, for this purpose, might find herself reclassified as a Mediterranean country; certainly there would be no guarantee-

<sup>18</sup> TNA, FO 371/96226-WT1015/2, John Pilcher, 'Friends, Romans, and Countrymen? (A Study of the Italian outlook)', 8 Jan. 1951.

<sup>19</sup> 'On from Nine,' *The Economist*, 19 Feb. 1977.

<sup>20</sup> Labour History Archive & Study Centre, Labour Party, International Department, Minutes & Documents, 1949, Denis Healey, 'Labour Party and the European Union', October 1949.

ing a place in the inner political counsels with France and Germany while failing to fit in with them economically. (Jenkins 1981)

It must be said that it was not the first time this image had been repurposed. Among European reformist socialists – especially Dalton and Vandervelde – geography and national character were the most common explanations for fascism, presented as a product of the backwardness of the southern part of Europe. Nenni denounced invisible lines dividing Europe as early as 1930:

One day, Comrade Vandervelde amused himself drawing a symbolic line dividing Europe in two parts: on one side the Fascist leper, on the other side the flower of democracy. The former part coincided with the countries with an inferior social and political life. The democratic plutocrat Cambo has even written a book to show, statistics at hand, that Fascism is the regime typical of the countries that are poor, illiterate, devoid of hygiene and comfort. (Nenni 1930: 258)

So this handy explanation – the olive line – has already shown twice the capacity to outlive the phenomena that it had been created to explain. What is the point of indicating geography and culture as the causes of political phenomena? It is a way of saying that the differences between human societies are not based exclusively on economic terms. Nenni denounced geographic explanations as anti-Marxist, the same charge made against *Vansittarismus*, that is, the idea of blaming German culture for Nazism instead of the German bourgeoisie (Später 2003). This also explains why Brittan had no problem in making a positive comparison with Italy: his arguments were purely economic – though neoliberal, not Marxist.

At a Köningswinter meeting of the Anglo-German society in 1981, Healey explained to the Germans that the olive line was more divisive than the Iron Curtain, while at the same time protesting against the European Monetary System, which would have increased the gap between rich and poor countries (Palmer 1981). These two criteria for division – geography and economy – provided an intermediate position for Britain. It was a reaction to the German assertion of a simple demotion for Britain. It was also a way to oppose Europe without employing the extreme left's idea of an international capitalist conspiracy.

As the debate about British decline exploited ideas, words and images that had a long tradition in British culture, these very same ideas, words and images survived the debate and would be repurposed in the decades to come. At the end of the 1980s, it was the turn of the left to use geographical terms to counter the mood of triumphalism about Thatcher's success, denying that she had reversed decline – something that Peter Jenkins was ready to concede (1989). Bryan Gould, Labour spokesman for the environment, said that Britain was 'in danger of being relegated to the third division of world powers' (Ford 1989). Having already been overtaken by Italy, Spain could have been next, followed by the emerging countries of the Pacific Rim. Indeed, comparison with South-East Asia would become an important element of New Labour's propaganda (Tomlinson 2000: 105–15). Denis Healey said that ten years of conservative government 'left Britain performing worse than Italy in growth, trade, inflation and interest rates' (D. Healey 1990). The *Guardian* evoked a geographical hierarchy once more to say that northern Europe had cities with the best quality of life, but that Britain had a southern European quality of life without Mediterranean scenery and could soon slip into the Third World.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> 'Cities in the swill,' *Guardian*, 15 Jun. 1989.

Black Wednesday in 1992 brought back with force the comparison between Britain and Italy – 'Britaly':

September 16th, 'Black Wednesday', exposed Britain and Italy as Europe's terrible twins: both countries' currencies were aborted from the European exchange-rate mechanism (and their Spanish cousin, the peseta, was devalued by 5%). This was no fluke. The two suffer from the same defect – profligate state spending.<sup>22</sup>

Using language once employed against him, Denis Healey attacked the Conservative government:

The external consequences of Major's bungling will be more difficult to remedy. Far from being 'at the heart of Europe', Britain is now clinging to the fringe, along with the Mediterranean countries. (D. Healey 1992b)

The expression 'olive line' – or 'olive belt' – was born out of ideas of the prewar era, becoming common in the 1970s, but peaking in popularity in the 1990s and 2000s, when *The Economist* and the popular press would often employ it to speak with contempt about the southern European countries with high borrowing, state regulation, rigid job markets and profligate state spending. It was part of polemical attacks on the European Union, but it was also an oblique reference to British politics, as it served as a pre-emptive warning against left-wing policies. Britain had escaped demotion to the Mediterranean in the 1980s thanks to Thatcher; reversing her reforms and rejecting austerity would have brought back decline, relegating Britain to the lower ranks of Europe. Thus, the idea of the eighteenth-century aristocrat Robert Gray that charity organisations in Italy encouraged indolent people (Black 1992: 227) could be revived against the people from southern Europe, but also against welfare 'scroungers' at home, whose character and morals made them more Mediterranean than British:

North is north and south is south. Do not expect the panic to be over soon. Northerners do not want to pay for the mess made by southerners. The olive belt cannot conceive of the harsh and unprotesting adjustment that Baltic countries have endured (with Estonia then leading the way into the euro).<sup>23</sup>

On the other side of the barricade, Denis Healey was still using the 'olive line' in 2013 to make his point. However, by then, the expression had come full circle. It no longer served to create comparisons with Britain and measure its status; it simply stated that the European federation was impossible because southern Europe was not as civilised as northern Europe:

North of the line where olives grow people pay their taxes and control their spending; south of it, they don't and they get very heavily into debt [...] That division makes federation impossible – inconceivable, in my opinion. (Behr 2013)

<sup>22</sup> 'Continental Drift: Welcome to Britaly,' *The Economist*, 12 Dec. 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Charlemagne. 'Europe: The name's Bond. Eurobond,' *The Economist*, 22 Jan. 2011.

Yet, national comparisons to stress the risk of decline and promote radical reforms were still in use. One month later, the same magazine – *New Statesman* – was published with the headline 'Why can't we be more like Germany?'<sup>24</sup>

The debate over British decline and the continuous comparison with continental nations foreshadowed the Brexit debate of 2016, when one of the most important issues was whether Britain should have tried to imitate the continental states in the fields where they were more successful or whether British identity was under threat by becoming more similar to these nations.

This article has shown the implicit assumptions about Italy during the period under discussion and how they were manipulated by the opinion-formers to convey a message fitting their political ends. This peculiar phenomenon – the use of Italy as a negative paradigm in relation to British decline – was produced by the interaction of long-term structures and short-term trends. Associating Italy with decadence and contrasting the virtuous North against the Mediterranean countries have been traditional elements in British culture. Decades-old rhetorical figures were recycled for different ends. Finally, there was the contingent situation that made comparisons plausible: the catching up of Western European countries and the political crisis in Britain and Italy. One has to take into consideration both long-term structures and short-term contingencies, cultural history and political history as competition for power. Images, metaphors, analogies, words and prejudices have a strong presence in culture and are difficult to change. They are always available to the politician and the journalist, but it is politicians and journalists who decide to use them to serve their particular agenda. In different situations, the same person could use the same reference to draft opposing arguments – Denis Healey being the perfect example. He could exploit crude generalisations to refer to Italy as a positive example of planning or to refer to Italy's level as one disgraceful for Britain, but he could also take advantage of his extensive knowledge of Italy to make one of the most important decisions a British politician could in those years.

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<sup>24</sup> *New Statesman*, 3–9 May 2013.

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