

Fulvio Cammarano

State, Individual and Political Culture 1870-1890: A Proposal for Periodization

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State, individual and political culture

Fulvio Cammarano

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Abstract

The papers aim to provide an initial, concrete examination of the period between 1870 and 1890, proposed as a watershed in the periodizing hypothesis. This analysis focuses on the intellectual output within twelve national realities that are emblematic of the political culture of the period. Specifically, by examining the sources that reflect the academic and cultural landscapes of this era, the goal is to understand whether, and in what ways, intellectuals during these two decades recognized and anticipated the transformations in public perception regarding the relationship between the State and the individual.

Keywords: *Periodization, 19th-20th Centuries, State, Individual, Society, 1870-1890.*

The papers included in this Special Issue of RSP aim to provide an initial, concrete examination of the period between 1870 and 1890, proposed as a watershed in the periodizing hypothesis. This analysis focuses on the intellectual production within twelve national realities that are emblematic of the political culture of the period. Specifically, by examining the sources that reflect the academic and cultural landscapes of this era, the goal is to understand whether, and in what ways, intellectuals during these two decades recognized and anticipated the transformations in public perception regarding the relationship between the state and the individual. Did they serve as interpreters and disseminators of these changes, or, at times, as challengers? It is from «high» culture that a significant, albeit not exclusive, part of the collective imagination regarding the dynamics between public and private spheres emerges, particularly in light of the expanding role of the state in public life. In addition to analysing major European nations, the research also encompasses the United States, Argentina, Chile, Japan, and the Vatican. Notably, while the Vatican ceased to function as a state after 1870, it managed to maintain and express its own autonomous political and cultural viewpoint. As well as assessing the extent to which intellectuals comprehended the evolving relationship between the state and individual-society, this discussion will provide insights into how this discourse redefined political affiliations and potentially gave rise to new ideological alignments. Furthermore, it will highlight the ten-

sions between the expansion and centralization of state powers and imperial dynamics that often contrasted with the traditional roles of a «protector» or «rebalancing» state.

Periodization has been a contentious issue in discussions of historiographic methodology for many years and more particularly of the process of the «temporalization of history». As Koselleck writes «if we, the historians, want to develop a genuine theory that is to be distinct from the theory of the social sciences in general, it obviously has to be a theory that makes it possible to accommodate the changes in temporal experience»¹. As is well understood, historians do not employ periodization merely to describe events or to organize temporal frameworks in isolation. Instead, it emphasizes the critical characteristics that are deemed capable of defining and characterizing a temporal phase based on examining empirical events within specific contexts. The duration of such phases can only be gauged by the relative stability or permanence of those defining characteristics. Edward Carr says of periodization «The division of history into periods is not a fact, but a necessary hypothesis or tool of thought, valid in so far as it is illuminating, and dependent for its validity on interpretation»².

The historian seeks to interpret the era at hand, typically centred on the symbolic aspects of the century. Utilizing the interpretive lens they have selected, they aim to discern the enduring «background noise» that defines the underlying structure of a historical period, while avoiding distractions from the fluctuating phenomena that may arise.

Characterization is, fundamentally, an interpretive phenomenon that positions the hypothesis of periodization as an intellectual exercise utilized by historians. They engage in this process to describe individual facts and contextualize them within a broader interpretive framework, thereby clarifying their conceptual references. As noted, «even if periodization itself cannot be theorized, its manner of execution nevertheless depends on historical and social theory. In other words, though periodization ‘in the abstract’ may lead to sterile discussion, doing periodization well still requires historians to reflect on their most basic assumptions and concepts»³.

Periodization calls for an examination of historical relevance. As Charles Maier notes, «To propose a given periodization is to argue for the relevance of certain historical phenomena: such an operation forces one to consider the emergence of events, trends or institutions, and to argue, first, that they were important; second, that they emerged at a certain date [...]; and, finally, that at a given later time they ceased to direct historical action or identification. This is a curious mental exercise, but it is fundamental to the work of historians»⁴.

¹ R. Koselleck, T.S. Pressner, *The practice of conceptual history: Timing history, spacing concepts*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 121.

² E.H. Carr, *What is history? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge, January-March 1961*, London, MacMillan, 1961, pp. 54-55.

³ L. George, *Introduction. Periodization challenges and challenging. Periodization: interdisciplinary reflections*, in *Rethinking Period Boundaries*, ed. by L. George, J. McGlynn, Berlin, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022, p. 6; see A. Gangatharan, *The problem of periodization in history*, in «Proceedings of the Indian History Congress», 29, 2008, p. 864.

⁴ C.S. Maier, *Secolo corto o epoca lunga? L'unità storica dell'età industriale e le trasformazioni della territorialità, in '900. I tempi della storia*, ed. by C. Pavone, Roma, Donzelli, 1997, p. 29 (My translation).

This is why the diverse periodization hypotheses proposed by historians do not inherently contradict one another.⁵ Such hypotheses serve as actual units of measurement or ideal types, constructed according to interpretations of historical phenomena. Scholars employ such frameworks to identify and understand the underlying themes that characterize specific epochs. This allows them to establish a clear and well-defined chronological or symbolic profile that distinguishes one period from another.

This Special Issue does not aim to explore the extensive topic of periodization; instead, it seeks to present readers with a specific timeframe - the two decades from 1870 to 1890. The purpose is to examine whether, and in what ways, this period serves as a pivotal turning point for a significant portion of countries that can identify themselves as part of the West. Specifically, we want to consider if these years can be defined as the actual conclusion of the 19th century, and the onset, from a political, cultural, and social perspective, of the 20th century.

The copious literature on the periodization of human history includes a dynamic area of historiographic reflection concerning the contemporary era, especially the 19th and 20th centuries. Cemil Aydin's recent research introduces a regional geopolitical perspective to define the «long nineteenth century», «the period between 1770 and the early 1920s»⁶.

The conclusion of the Great War, marked by the Peace of Versailles (whose provisions took effect in 1920), remains an unavoidable point of reference in the periodization established by Eric Hobsbawm. He argues that the years of World War I, viewed as the crucible for Bolshevism and the commencement of a concrete and challenging communist state project, signify the beginning of a short century destined to conclude in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet system of power.

This hypothesis highlights the clash between two predominant ideological blocs, each representing fundamentally opposed political and cultural models through which an entire era can be understood and interpreted. In both instances, however, the perspective on periodization – considered the endpoint in the former case and the starting point in the latter – centres around the First World War. Many historians favour this interpretation, and it is particularly comprehensible when viewed through the lens of historical events. The Great War resulted in unprecedented human and material devastation and ushered in a major geopolitical, social, and cultural transformation.

Charles Maier has challenged the conventional perspective by proposing «an alternative approach» that emphasizes the historical significance of a prolonged era, rather than a brief century: «an era that began in the late 1850s and ended roughly in the late 1960s and early 1980s. [...] This long century constituted the culmination of humankind's territorial organization». He argues that the 20th century should be defined by the rise and fall «of territoriality between 1860 and 1980 as a fundamental variable in the organization of human societies. [...]

⁵ See D. Blackbourn, «*The Horologe of Time*». *Periodization in History*, in PMLA, March 2012, vol. 127, n. 2, p. 302.

⁶ C. Aydin, *Regions and Empires in political History on the long Nineteenth Century in A History of the World*, ed. by S. Conrad, J. Osterhammel, Vol. 4: *An emerging modern world: 1750-1870*, Cambridge, MA – London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 35-250.

I use the term territoriality to refer to the concept of a politically organized circumscribed territory that necessarily presupposes a plurality of often rival bounded spaces. Territoriality implies an instance of the domination of space within boundaries, and the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century is characterized by a considerable collective effort aimed at establishing boundaries». Maier posits that this long era came to a close as the economic crisis and new technology of the 1980s gradually undermined «the territorial premises of political and economic organization»⁷. Similarly, Scipione Guarracino underscores the financial aspect by locating the twentieth century «between 1870/80 and 1970/80. After the century of the first industrial revolution (coal, cast iron, the steam engine, and the synthesis represented by the train), this twentieth century is the age of the second industrial revolution and its protagonists: steel, produced on a large scale since the 1870s; electricity, since the 1880s and '90s; oil, whose weight in world energy production went from 5 percent in 1910 to 16 percent in 1930; and the new symbolic synthesis constituted by the automobile»⁸. Even Giovanni Arrighi's «long twentieth century» seems to be starting «in the last quarter of the nineteenth century» when, thanks to a new form of internalization of costs, «the strategies and structures of capital accumulation that have shaped our times first came into existence»⁹.

The goal of this paper, as previously mentioned, is not to contest existing periodizations¹⁰ – each of which successfully highlights significant factual elements in contemporary history, such as the interactions between empires, nations, and regions, the World Wars, the communist revolution, territorial boundaries, demographic changes, economic transformations, and the prominence of ideologies¹¹. Instead, this paper proposes a different perspective: to situate the periodization of contemporaneity within the public sphere, focusing on relational dimensions rather than merely factual ones.

To truly understand contemporaneity, one should focus not solely on historical events, regardless of their relevance, but on the fundamental hierarchical relationships that define the public sphere's political, social, and economic dimensions. This hinges on the relationship between the state and the individual seen as a political subject, as it has developed from the eighteenth-century revolutions and continues to serve as an essential reference for our current

⁷ C.S. Maier, *Secolo corto o epoca lunga?*, cit., pp. 34-36 and 56. Christopher Bayly identifies a pivotal moment in the affirmation of the State between 1850 and 1870, albeit with numerous limitations and contradictions. He argues that during this period, «the state had to do more for its subject in order to justify itself» (*The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914*, London, Wiley Blackwell, 2004, p. 271. For a broader discussion, refer to pp. 242-290).

⁸ S. Guarracino, *Le età della storia. I concetti di Antico, Medievale, Moderno e Contemporaneo*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2001, p. 283 (My translation).

⁹ G. Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century. Money, Power and the Origins of our Power*, New York, Verso, 1994, p. 239.

¹⁰ According to Hobsbawm, «exact dates are always matters of historical, or pedagogical, or journalistic convenience [...] In short, the choice of a date is not something historians are prepared to fight for: it is a convention» (E.J. Hobsbawm, *Intervista sul nuovo secolo*, ed. by A. Polito, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1999, p. 5, My translation).

¹¹ See G. Galasso, *Prima lezione di storia moderna*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2008, pp. 176-180.

era. In this context, the term «individual» is inextricably linked to «civil society»¹², enabling an exploration of how this evolving relationship is publicly perceived.

Charles Maier has explored a meaningful dichotomy: «The relationship of state and society is a crucial variable for understanding history and politics». However, while the American historian employs the concepts of strength and weakness to characterize this relationship¹³, I find his viewpoint problematic. The intensity of force is inherently challenging to assess, while it is equally important to consider how historical and cultural reflections shape *perceptions of the roles* of state and society/individual. This perspective transcends the actual strength or weakness of state authority and society. The essays published here aim to address this nuanced perception.

It is not surprising that Maier recognizes that «the relationship of state and society thus remains complex and often paradoxical – nonetheless. the authorities we routinely aggregate as the state did become more ambitious about shaping the everyday attributes of the societies they governed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They envisaged a more encompassing and interventionist agenda, and the results they sought entailed a different sense of mission»¹⁴.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that the defining moment for the beginning of the 20th century should not be identified when, «as states were melted down and formed anew from 1850 to 1880, they seemed to represent civilization and progress»¹⁵, when the concept of nationhood emerged alongside the victorious spread of the principle of nationality. Instead, it is more appropriate to consider the period when those values, still tied to the triumph of individuality¹⁶ – gave way to the emerging demands of «sociality», leading to the inevitable dominance of the state and civil service.

This relational perspective invites us to radically re-examine the traditional chronological frameworks that define the contemporary age¹⁷. It positions the two decades from 1870 to 1890 as a significant watershed in the West. The central hypothesis of this collective work seeks to explore whether, during this period, there emerged a public awareness of the epochal shift in the relationship between the state, the individual, and society, and, consequently, in the public-private dynamic, as reflected in academic and intellectual discourse in several key states around the world.

The rapid and chronologically distinct spread of this new perception of the relationship marks a pivotal moment in history: the effective conclusion of the 19th century, which began with the revolutionary upheavals of the 18th century. Those earlier events established a revolutionary hierarchy of values focusing on the emancipation of individuals, both personally

¹² «Society and individual are inseparable; they are necessary and complementary to each other, not opposites» (E.H. Carr, *What is history?*, cit., p. 25) On this topic see P. Costa, *Civitas. Storia della cittadinanza in Europa*, voll. 2-3, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2000-2001.

¹³ See C.S. Maier, *Leviathan 2.0. Inventing Modern Statehood*, Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 157-156.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

¹⁶ See F. Chabod, *L'idea di Nazione*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1961, p. 54 (My translation).

¹⁷ See F. Cammarano, *Il XX secolo*, in *Fare Storia politica. Studi dedicati a Paolo Pombeni*, ed. by R. Brizzi, F. Cammarano, S. Cavazza, G. Guazzaloca, M. Marchi, Roma, Viella, 2018, pp. 9-27.

and politically, from the constraints of absolutist authoritarianism¹⁸. The 1870-1890 transition signals the dawn of a new era, the 20th century. Antonio Labriola articulated this shift clearly when he stated, «With the glorious centenary of 1889, the period of the liberal revolution, which began on April 20, 1789, is now closed. Individualism gives way to sociality»¹⁹.

Beginning in the late 1880s, liberal culture began to assume the role of interpreter, prompting complex reflections on the boundaries of individuality when isolated from community²⁰. The significance of the chronological period starting in the 1870s has long been acknowledged by historians, who recognize it as a time of considerable change, if not outright crisis, within liberal culture and its institutions²¹. Geoffrey Barraclough notes, «the closing decades of the nineteenth century, or more widely perhaps the years between 1870 and 1914, stand out as a watershed, dividing one historical period from another [...] The result was that a new philosophy of state intervention was born. Government in its modern sense of regulation, state control, compulsion on individuals for social ends and ultimately planning, involving the development of an elaborate machinery of administration and enforcement, was a necessary outcome of the new industrial society: it had existed hardly anywhere before 1870, because it was a response to conditions which only reached full-scale development after that date»²².

The government was progressing towards being the «constitutionally legitimate» embodiment of a renewed emphasis on the centrality of the state. This phenomenon, however, did not require the Great War for its establishment. Harold Laski notes that «after 1870 with the advent of universal suffrage the police state became a regulatory state. [...] the main features of modern legislative assemblies: increasing dominance of executive power, a phenomenon accentuated by the war but dating back to prewar times. The assembly has ceased to legislate and merely registers the will of the ruling executive power»²³.

Between 1870 and 1890, a new constitutional understanding emerged decisively within public discourse. For the most part, as we will explore, Western public opinion began to view government not merely as a necessary evil but as an essential instrument for asserting national interests and identity. Let us examine these years through the lens of the complex dynamics

¹⁸ On the need to limit the state and maximize individual freedom also in the context of the American Revolution see G. Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Order*, New York, OUP, 2022, pp. 75-77.

¹⁹ A. Labriola, *Lettera ad Alfredo Baccharini* (1890), in Id., *Scritti politici*, ed. by V. Geratana, Bari, Laterza, 1970, pp. 202-203 (My translation). See also L. Mangoni, *Civiltà della crisi. Cultura e politica in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, Roma, Viella, 2013, p. 14 and P. Craveri, *Appunti inediti dei corsi universitari di Antonio Labriola sulla Rivoluzione francese*, in «Archivio Storico per le province napoletane», 110, 1992, pp. 331-350.

²⁰ See S. Den Otten, «Thinking in Communities»: *Late Nineteenth-Century Liberals, Idealists and the Retrieval of Community*, in E.H.H. Green, *An age of transition. British Politics 1880-1914*, Edinburgh, EUP, 2022, pp. 67-84.

²¹ See R. Vivarelli, *I caratteri dell'età contemporanea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005, esp. pp. 113-144 (My translation). On the periodizing importance of this watershed from a cultural point of view, see L. Mangoni, *Una crisi fine secolo. La cultura italiana e la Francia fra Otto e Novecento*, Torino, Einaudi, 1985, p. VII.

²² G. Barraclough, *An introduction to contemporary history*, London, Watts & Co., 1964, pp. 119-120.

²³ H.J. Laski, C. Borgeaud, F. Larnaude, G. Mosca, M.J. Bonn, *L'évolution actuelle du régime représentatif. Cinq réponses à une enquête de l'Union interparlementaire*, Lausanne, Librairie Payot, 1928, p. 9 (My translation).

between citizens (the political subjects inhabiting societies governed by constitutional regimes) and the state. We can see that the events of this two-decade period represented more than just a crisis: it marked a pivotal moment between two interpretations of liberal constitutionalism²⁴ and the transformations of capitalism. It heralded the onset of a profound revolution within the public sphere – a rupture that overshadowed the existing continuities of the time.

As previously noted, the caesura should not be situated within the events and transformations, regardless of their significance, but rather in the relationship between state and society. This relationship must be acknowledged not merely as one among many, but as a defining characteristic of modernity. As Alain Touraine spells out, it should be understood in terms of rationality and «the individual's capacity for resistance to the state»²⁵.

The public perception of location and the relative superiority or subordination of the two subjects in question is crucial for understanding contemporary dynamics. This perspective allows us to move beyond mere phenomenology to grasp the essence of the political and social context that defines the new form of power seen as an institutionalized relationship of command and obedience. Over two decades, the nation underwent rapid and radical transformation. At the end of the 18th century, it was shedding the absolutist and centralizing constraints of the state, redefining itself as a Nation-State where values such as liberty, citizen participation and autonomy, free trade, and entrepreneurial freedom prevailed. However, it ultimately evolved into a Nation-State where the values of citizenship became subordinate to those of the state apparatus, focusing on control and administrative efficiency, particularly in international competition.

Bismarckism is an unquestionable symbol of this transformative epoch, defined as a framework of principles and practices that celebrates the primacy of the state and its military and administrative prowess. In the years following the victory over France²⁶, Bismarckism emerged as a compelling model for a significant portion of the diverse liberal spectrum, which was increasingly apprehensive about the challenges posed by the rising social question, particularly in Europe. As Pasquale Villari noted in the *Contemporary Review*, «The real origin of the present state of affairs dates from 1870 – the year of the Franco-German war, and of our entry into Rome. From that moment everything in Italy began rapidly to change [...]»²⁷. Similarly, German historian Heinrich von Sybel, in the wake of the war, took it upon himself to elucidate to the British the benefits of Prussia's victory over France, claiming: «England has hitherto been the only great empire in the world, in which the parliamentary system of government has permanently stood its ground, and borne good fruit».

²⁴ See F. Cammarano, *Crisi politica e politica della crisi. Italia e Gran Bretagna 1880-1925* in *Crisi, legittimazione, consenso*, ed. by P. Pombeni, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2003, pp. 81-131.

²⁵ Quoted in M. Salvati, *Il Novecento*, in C. Pavone, '900, cit., p. 8 (My translation).

²⁶ It was not one event among others, but non-partisan observers became immediately aware that «whether for good or for evil, the unification of Germany must stand out as the greatest event in the history of the Nineteenth Century» (J. Holland Rose, *The Development of the European Nations 1870-1914*, Constable and Company, 1915, p. 154)

²⁷ P. Villari, *Contemporary Life and Thought Italian Politics*, in «*Contemporary Review*», 43, 1883, p. 592.

This situation arose because, in the past, governance was mainly in the hands of landowners who sat in the House of Lords «and controlled the elections to the House of Commons. But what prudent man in England would now undertake to say what shape the parliamentary will assume in future times, in which the administration of the most important departments will require paid and professional officials, depending on the crown; and in which, on the other hand, the elective franchise will be exercised by ever-increasing numbers of uneducated citizens?». With diminishing influence from the local élite, «the efforts made to construct a parliamentary government have been only blind guesses at the future – a mere gamble. In France, as well as everywhere else, this system has been a continual fiasco. In America, the pattern land of Democracy [...] parliamentary government has never been tried. If these remarks be true, we can hardly prognosticate a brilliant future for parliamentary government in Germany; but we need not see therein any absolute danger to our property or freedom. If this system can only live under certain historical and local conditions, it cannot [...] be the sole gospel of political salvation [...]. To see the Government in strong hands, undisturbed by the waves of popular agitation, seems to us an inestimable blessing when we look at the awful consequences of a contrary state of things in France»²⁸.

This new approach to interpreting the spirit of the times, which called for scepticism towards the values of liberal representation, permeated political and cultural discourse. It sparked a major reconfiguration of the prevailing image of modernity, which had traditionally been closely associated with the ideals and values of liberal culture and rights. Those ideals celebrated individual agency and the free market, positioning Parliament as the institutional nexus where state and society converged. This shift was a phenomenon that more or less directly affected political cultures across Europe and beyond. It is therefore not surprising that two decades in the 19th century saw widespread challenges to parliamentary institutions alongside a concurrent push to bolster executive power. As an influential commentator noted in the «Nuova Antologia» in 1882, «In most European states parliamentarianism is being modified. Almost everywhere there is a tendency to strengthen executive power, to make it less unstable, to free it from the despotism of the assemblies. In England itself it is, in our opinion, evident, this slow change taking place not only in the forms, but in the substance of the parliamentary regime»²⁹.

Thus, between 1870 and 1890, there commenced a political and cultural upheaval so widespread and participatory that it can be considered the dawn of a new perspective on public life, marking from every standpoint, the actual starting point of the political sphere in the 20th century. During this period, the state embraced and internalized the national principle, thereby granting itself public legitimacy, even within international relations, and embarked on a mission to «reconquer» society and subjugate individual citizens. This effort was legitimized by developing a new legal framework called «public» law, which was deliberately crafted to be distinct from private law. The rise of the German Empire and the success of Bismarckian *realpolitik* signaled the actual inception of that transformation. They confirmed that the values that had

²⁸ H. von Sybel, *The German Empire*, in «The Fortnightly Review», 49, 1, 1871, p. 14.

²⁹ *Gli italiani alle urne*, in «Nuova Antologia», 35, 1882, pp. 521-522 (My translation).

defined the 19th century had lost their appeal. Concerns regarding the security of property rights – its inherent and unavoidable foundation – led many within liberal circles to adopt what Foucault termed fundamental security strategies that transcended mere defence of freedom.

This transition was less disruptive in Italy due to a significant aspect of liberal culture, particularly the post-unitary Hegelian influence, which more readily embraced establishing a centralized state. This acceptance often came at the expense of liberal ideals, as it prioritized stability against armed conflicts like brigandage and the efforts of figures such as Garibaldi. Unsurprisingly, as early as 1867, following the setback at Mentana, the Democrat Agostino Bertani proclaimed the conclusion of Garibaldianism, marking the end of an era characterized by armed voluntarism that had defined the century³⁰. During the two decades in question, a new sensibility emerged, one less focused on constituent planning and more committed to reinforcing state structures to safeguard liberty and property from rising popular pressures.

The anxieties that arose in 1848 were confirmed and intensified by the Paris Commune in 1871, which eroded many liberals' confidence in the beneficial nature of legal liberties. Once, they had viewed Gladstone as the epitome of effective liberal governance – sober and efficient. However, they now witnessed a shift in power dynamics: the state was asserting control over the nation by prioritizing the executive apparatus and administration as the new focal points of authority.

The concept of «Prussianism», accompanied by its focus on statehood founded on science, economic strength, military capability, and effective administration, began to generate an unexpected allure even among some traditional liberals. Such individuals viewed Gladstone's «liberty, retrenchment, and reform» principles as exemplifying proper liberal governance. The key themes that defined Gladstone's political character from the 1860s onward – pluralism in church-state relations, liberalism, a minimal state, reduced military expenditure, and a flexible administrative apparatus - had long served as the ideological underpinning (albeit not always put into practice)³¹ for liberal elites across Europe. This included those in countries like Italy, who doubted the feasibility of replicating such a model, particularly regarding the critical aspect of self-government.

Closely tied to this transformation was a burgeoning demand for societal «governance» across Europe during those two decades, driven by a sudden and intense acceleration of social and economic changes and shifts in international relations. This demand reflected a tendency to reconceptualize the political landscape regarding «executive» authority rather than «plural confrontation of interests». Whereas the cultural hegemony stemming from the distinctive British model remained strong, by 1870 «Great Britain had already passed the zenith both of her economic and [...] international primacy»³². It was increasingly apparent that «national

³⁰ See «*Men in arms*». *Insorgenza e controinsorgenza nel mondo moderno*, ed. by A. Bonvini, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2022.

³¹ See H.C.G. Matthew, *Introduction to the Gladstone Diaries*, voll. X-XI, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. xxxiv-xli; E.F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform. Popular Liberalism in the age of Gladstone, 1860-1880*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

³² E.J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State. Early Industrial Britain, 1783-1870*, London, Longman, 1983, p. 359.

governments» had become «the great moving and regulating powers in human life»³³. The growing tension, even among British intellectuals, towards Parliament marked a clear indication of a cultural shift set to reevaluate the state's role, and consequently, the executive as its political representation.

In 1872, a book review published in the *Edinburgh Review* voiced concern regarding the considerable «obstructive power of the House of Commons [...] the Executive Government is constantly held in check to an excessive degree by the difficulty of obtaining the due attention of Parliament [...]». The book being reviewed lauds paternalistic government that «prevents revolution [...]. When government limits itself [...] to the maintenance of order [...] it is not likely to have a very strong hold on the affections of the people». Interestingly, those who lamented «governmental interference» in their affairs were often the first to criticize the government in times of calamity or significant social issues, insisting «that the government ought to have foreseen this – ought to look to that». This illustrates a contradictory desire to expand «the proper functions of government»³⁴.

In a country characterized by a longstanding scepticism towards any form of central authority, National Efficiency emerged as a pressing issue, specifically, the necessity of broadening the state's administrative scope. This evolution spanned various domains, from social legislation to imperialism and New Deal policies to social democracy, as governments progressively assumed control over an increasingly chaotic social sphere and expanded their prerogatives. The relentless transition from legislative dominance to executive authority had become evident across the West, with a unique variation in France³⁵, effectively surmounting all previous barriers. Regardless of political affiliation or national context, all governments sought to enhance their educational roles and functions. When examining these developments from a «relational» perspective, it becomes clear that the First World War did not signal any qualitative changes but rather an extraordinary quantitative intensification of existing trends.

According to Philipp Blom, «the great shift in to the modern age did not spring full-blown out the trenches of the Western Front; rather, many of its elements were already in place well before 1914». The German poet Hugo Ball draws the apocalyptic scenario of a world ending, writes of (how) «a world of abstract demons swallowed individual expression, swallowed individual faces into towering masks, engulfed private expressions, robbed individual things of their names, destroyed the ego [...]». Ball was writing in 1917, and while his poetic analysis appears to fit the interwar period after the alleged rupture of 1918, he is actually describing life before 1914. «Even at the turn of the twentieth century, metropolitan areas had already become

³³ «Pall Mall Gazette», 17.08.1869, quoted *ibidem*.

³⁴ *Thoughts upon Government by Arthur Helps*, in «*Edinburgh Review*», 01.08.1872, pp. 84-93.

³⁵ In France, the moderate republican Paul Deschanel, future President of the Republic, believed it was necessary to reduce the excesses of parliamentarism by restoring strength to the Executive and to institutions less tied to direct representation: «To avoid the absorption of Parliament by the executive, we have fallen into the opposite excess: the absorption of the government by an assembly. Can a continually revocable and often heterogeneous Directory perhaps be called a government?» (P. Deschanel, *La République Nouvelle*, Paris, 1898, My translation).

battlegrounds of modernity»³⁶. José Harris acknowledges that «no one doubts the importance of the war as a cluster of epic events - military, organizational, geopolitical, apocalyptic, and merely human; but whereas some see those events as profoundly changing the structure of social, political, and economic power in Britain, others argue that such shifts had already been occurring over many decades and that the war merely accelerated a less dramatic but more fundamental process of evolutionary change»³⁷.

The atrocities of the First World War may have confirmed that the nation-state, invigorated by the exaltation of a culture oriented towards executive power and bolstered by nationalism and nationalization processes, had not truly taken root on an emotional level. Richard Overy notes that «large-scale industrialization and urbanization in Europe, North America and Japan coincided with and helped to promote an enhanced sense of nationhood. [...] Economic modernization, together with increased education, rapid social mobility, and evolution of a centralizing state apparatus, were means to bind the nation together. These processes also created, even in nations with a much older pedigree, a new sense of national identity and more genuinely national politics»³⁸. The state proudly re-established its presence at the heart of the public sphere, embracing «popular sentiment». «Thus, the lesson of Prussia, combined with the emergence of national passions, resulted in a profound change in the public spirit, according to which the interests of one's own state took priority and, expansion soon presenting itself as a vital condition for states, the will to power prevailed among those interests»³⁹.

During that twenty-year period, the affirmation of the state as a core value appears to have been closely linked to the emergence of nationalist culture. However, it is essential to note that «it took nationalism a few years after 1870 to fully manifest itself and even a few decades to penetrate almost everywhere and become a mass phenomenon. In the immediate term, the most obvious international effect of Bismarck's policy was to marginalize the so-called concert of nations»⁴⁰ Beginning in the 1870s, nations evolved from being revolutionary platforms for dialogue among peoples and avenues for the emancipation and participation of individual citizens to embracing a more robust state dimension. This shift initiated a process of competitive rivalry, fuelled by the scramble for colonies. In addition to addressing the so-called social question, this context of imperialist contention fostered «a mutually reinforcing process of State-level modernization and ever-increasing competition that eventually for the first time became truly global. This process then intensified significantly from the 1880s. Because of the pressure and threats, they perceived on account of the ever more far-reaching international competition, political leaders and state bureaucracies felt compelled to push forward measures to build stronger, more effective states that would allow them to mobilize their demographic and economic resources in order to

³⁶ P. Blom, *Fracture. Life and Culture in the West, 1918-1938*, New York, Basic Books, 2015, pp. 1-3.

³⁷ J. Harris, *A social history of Britain, 1870-1914*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 1. See also pp. 198-201.

³⁸ R. Overy, *Blood and Ruins. The Great Imperial War, 1931-1945*, New York, Penguin, 2021, pp. 2-3.

³⁹ R. Vivarelli, *I caratteri dell'età contemporanea*, cit., pp. 123-124 (My translation).

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

keep up with or preferably surpass other states»⁴¹. From this perspective, state involvement aligns with the new phase of economic globalization and derives strength from it. This phase is characterized by the expansion of markets alongside the implementation of imperial policies which require a concentration of decision-making processes and therefore reinforce the idea of state centrality and its administrative complexity. In this context, political parties and ideologies did not vanish; instead, they were revitalized, becoming essential tools for a civil society that, while embracing diverse and often conflicting expressions of autonomy, sought ever greater protection from state institutions. The Roosevelt administration's reaction to the 1929 crisis demonstrated that, even in the United States, the notion of a regulatory state was gaining traction, moving away from the perception of an intrusive state, once seen primarily as a guarantor and protector. This transformation was evidenced by the expansion of state structures, including ministries, bureaucratic apparatuses, bodies, and agencies that assumed a central role in managing an increasingly managerial form of capitalism and addressing the pressures arising from class movements. Within this framework, even the fascist and Nazi regimes should not be viewed as proper historical breaks but rather as pathological and totalitarian manifestations of the same conflict: that between state and civil society. These regimes sought to mend a fracture perceived as a profound loss of an original and mythical political and social unity, a unity they aimed to restore at all costs. This objective – the enforced redressing of the rift, or at least the distance, between the state and civil society – underscores the importance of that relationship in comprehending our era. It became evident that this relationship served as a conceptual barrier upon which the liberal civilisation that fascism sought to eradicate was built. Even the Soviet revolution, although driven by an opposite and equally mythical vision – the elimination of the state in favour of an egalitarian society – culminated in a model markedly differing from its proclamations: a centralized and totalitarian state capitalism that disregarded the needs and demands of civil society, undermining the initial promises made.

Fulvio Cammarano, Università di Bologna, Dipartimento delle Arti, Via Barberia 4, 40123 Bologna, fulvio.cammarano@unibo.it
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2007-351X>

⁴¹ P.O. Cohrs, *The new Atlantic order. The transformation of international politics 1860-1933*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, p. 66.