

International Workshop - First Edition

Perspectives on Italy

The Unfinished Modernization 1950-1973

Pisa, 17-18 September 2026

Aula Magna Department of Political Science



From 1950, with the onset of accelerated modernization, through 1973 - a turning point marked by the oil crisis that brought the expansionary cycle to a halt and ushered in a period of austerity, following the end of the center-left's reformist agenda, the upheaval of 1968, and the season of tension - Italy experienced the country's reconstruction through agonizing political, migratory, and urban developments.

The birth of the Republic saw an anthropological transformation unfold over the course of two decades. Under the leadership of Alcide De Gasperi's Christian Democratic Party, Italy resolutely chose its place within the Western world, aligning itself with NATO and the early stages of European integration. While the government attempted, through the Land Reform and the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno, to heal the historic wound of a South left on the margins of modernity, the true engine of change turned out to be the massive migration of millions of people, generating an almost feverish transition from a rural way of life to an industrial vanguard.

It was an unprecedented internal migration: farmhands leaving the fields to become factory workers in the "Industrial Triangle," transforming Turin, Milan, and Genoa into the new centers of gravity for a nation on the move. This momentum fueled the "Economic Miracle" that, between 1958 and 1963, propelled Italy into the ranks of the world's major powers. It was the era of "metallic dreams," where the Fiat 600 and 500 and the Vespa were not just means of transportation, but symbols of a freedom finally accessible to the masses, while RAI performed the miracle of unifying a people still divided by dialects through the television screen.

However, this remarkable growth came at a cost: cities expanded haphazardly, and old social structures began to creak under the weight of new consumption patterns. In the 1960s, politicians sought to address these tensions by reaching out to the Socialist Party, ushering in the era of the center-left led by Aldo Moro and Pietro Nenni. It was a period of great hope and structural reforms, such as the nationalization of the electricity sector and the establishment of a unified middle school system, aimed at democratizing prosperity and education.

Yet the pace of institutional change failed to keep up with the transformations. On the one hand, the center-left's ambition was to "steer development" through economic planning (embodied by Ugo La Malfa's Supplementary Note and the Pieraccini Plan); the clash with bureaucratic reality was brutal. The attempt to transform the state from a formal legal apparatus into an efficient engine of the economy clashed with the resistance of the "mandarins" - the high-ranking ministerial bureaucracy tied to old power structures - and with the political establishment's inability to separate administrative management from electoral consensus.

On the other hand, in 1968, the outbreak of student protests challenged patriarchal authoritarianism, marking a generational rupture. This spirit of revolt spread the following year to the factories with the "Hot Autumn," a season of labor struggles that led to the adoption of the Workers' Statute in 1970, the year in which Italy also passed the divorce law, a sign of a society that was becoming secularized.

But the climate of social progress was marred by the bloodshed of the Piazza Fontana massacre in 1969, the opening act of the "Strategy of Tension".

The emergency became the norm. With the explosion of social conflicts and the onset of the "strategy of tension," the government's priority shifted from "rationalization" to "maintaining the political system." Public spending ceased to be a planned investment and became an instrument of immediate mediation to appease the streets and the productive sectors. The dream of unstoppable growth was shattered for good in 1973 when, due to the oil crisis, Italy discovered the vulnerability of its economic model. The Sundays of "austerity" - spent on foot and by candlelight - marked not only the end of an economic cycle but also the awakening of a more modern, secular, and self-aware country, yet one scarred by political violence that would define the decade to come.

Amid this interplay of impulses and contradictions, the rebirth of Italian sociology between the 1950s and 1970s represented not merely an academic expansion but, as highlighted by Filippo Barbano's historiographical studies, emerged as the essential tool for deciphering the transition to modernity. Having overcome the eclipse imposed by idealism, sociology reclaimed its "enlightening function," positioning itself as a bridge between scientific knowledge and political action.

Italian sociology did not limit itself to empirical research, but sought to provide a theoretical foundation for the "new Italy," interpreting change not as a technical fact but as a complex redefinition of values and power. The public role of sociology diverged into two crucial directions, which it nevertheless failed to fully realize. On the one hand, sociologists positioned themselves as "technicians" capable of translating social needs into intervention models for public administration policies: urban planning, the South, and economic planning. On the other hand, the discipline sought to position itself as the driving force behind organizational modernization in both public and private

enterprises, striving to resolve conflicts between capital and labor, and in some pioneering initiatives, to achieve a synthesis between productive efficiency and democratic participation.

Finally, at certain times, sociology took on the role of shaping public opinion on major ethical and social issues. In a nation engaged in crucial reforms - from family law to the Workers' Statute - sociological reflection, following the path laid out by Barbano, served as a "critique of social reason." It enabled citizens and decision-makers to understand the gap between the legal framework and a now secularized social reality, transforming sociology into the very grammar of modern democracy - indispensable for managing the tensions of a country that, between 1950 and 1973, had changed its face forever.

The workshop aims to investigate Italian modernization as a complex and multi-layered process, structuring its analysis around three dimensions: historical and comparative transformations, the theoretical frameworks through which they have been interpreted, and the material and symbolic forms through which they have been inscribed in space.

PROGRAM

Session 1 - Thursday 17 September | 10:00-13:00

The Modernization of Italy: perspectives from abroad

The session opens the workshop by examining Italy's transformation within its historical and comparative context, between processes of modernization and persistent forms of backwardness.

The focus will be particularly on Italy in transition, in comparison with other EU countries and the United States (experiencing transformation). The contributions of the invited speakers will address social and economic change, accelerated modernization, industrialization, changes in social structures, the economic miracle, late industrialization, internal migration, and rapid urbanization. These processes will also be explored as a transition in the forms of social bonds, from community-based structures to the more complex and differentiated forms characteristic of modern society.

Welcome speech:

- Andrea Borghini (University of Pisa)

Chair:

- Fabrizio Bientinesi (University of Pisa)

Speakers:

- Marco Cini (University of Pisa) - *Development Models, Markets, and Economic Planning in Italy during the Years of Economic Growth (1950-1969)*
- David Fasenfest (York University, Canada) - *Italy's urban development in the period between 1950 and 1973*
- Ricardo A. Dello Buono (Manhattan University, USA) - *Reflections on Modernization Theory and Practice*

Session 2 - Thursday 17 September | 15:00-18:00

How Italian sociology engages with and interprets the country's transformation

This session reexamines transformation from a theoretical perspective, scrutinizing the categories through which Italian sociology has sought to understand and interpret it.

The session focuses on Italian sociology both as a disciplinary field and as an interpretive framework for understanding social change (thinking about transformation). Key themes include the transition from community to society, the construction of the discipline and its analytical categories, the development of a specifically sociological perspective, and the role of sociology in interpreting Italian modernization.

Returning to the concept of social bonds, already introduced in the previous session, the theme is reconsidered here as a theoretical and disciplinary issue: an interpretive category through which Italian sociology has conceptualized and interpreted the processes of modernization.

Chair:

- Carmelo Calabrò (University of Pisa)

Speakers:

- Irene Strazzeri (UniSalento, Italy) - *Sicily as a Metaphor. Leonardo Sciascia and the Multiple Forms of Modernity*
- Luca Corchia (Unichieti, Italy) - *Modernizing Italy, Reinventing Sociology*
- Simon Susen (University of London) - *The (Counter) Hegemonic Power of Gramscian Thought*

Ore 16:30:

- Coffee break

Ore 17:00:

- Discussion

Session 3 - Friday 18 September | 10:00-13:00

Italy: History, Cultures, Landscapes, and the Imaginaries of Italian Modernity

The social transformation examined in the previous sessions is explored here in its material and symbolic dimensions (inhabiting transformation), focusing on how it takes shape in spaces, local landscapes, and cultures.

The session offers a multidisciplinary interpretation of Italy's territorial and urban transformations between the 1950s and the 1970s, focusing on the interplay between economic development, public policies, and material cultures.

Particular attention will be devoted to the relationship between national and local policies; the role of the regions following their institutional implementation in the 1970s; the relationship between planning and democracy; infrastructure as both a driver and a symbol of modernity, including highways, ports, and industrial hubs; the role of religion in Italy's social and economic development; and the role of education and the school system in the modernization of Italian society.

Chair:

- Andrea Salvini (University of Pisa)

Speakers:

- Claudia de Martino (University of Lussemburgo, Lussemburgo) - *Malaguzzi, Democratic Pedagogy and the Aborted Debate on the Introduction of Preschools in the late 1960s and 1970s*
- Fabrizio Fornari (Università di Chieti-Pescara, Italy) - *Beyond the Economic Miracle: Religious Experience, Artistic Avant-Garde, and Protest in Italian Modernization*
- Fabio Mugnaini (UniSiena, Italy) - *Fireflies and the Apogeo. How modernity entered rural Tuscany*

Ore 11:30:

- Coffee break

Ore 12:00:

- Discussion