

Home » Publications » E-seminars in history

## Voluntary Societies and Urban Elites in 19th Century Italy

Daniela L. Caglioti, University of Essex  
1997

The study of voluntary societies in the urban context is very fashionable nowadays in Italy. In fact, many articles and books on this subject have been published in the last few years. This could be considered as the outcome and natural development of the research into the emergence of the bourgeoisie and of the role it played in the process of Italy's unification and nationalization, which engaged and still engages many scholars. The studies on Milan, Turin, Florence, Naples, and the research published on other Italian towns like Piacenza, Forlì or Catania, have added another important brick to the history of the Italian bourgeoisie. The research on voluntary societies has in fact contributed to draw a clearer picture of relationships among social groups, in particular aristocracy and bourgeoisie, in nineteenth-century Italian urban society. As Marco Meriggi and Alberto Banti underlined nineteenth-century Italian voluntary societies were "uno degli scenari, forse il piu' importante, in cui ebbe a realizzarsi [il] processo di ricostruzione degli idiomi di stratificazione" [1]. They were also: "palestra di democrazia", "momento di costruzione di un'opinione pubblica", "centro di diffusione di notizie e di aggiornamento culturale" [2].

The research on voluntary societies has been affected by two historiographical traditions. A large part has been influenced by the German historiography which dealt with the studies of the bourgeoisie and its social practices, and the German *Sonderweg* (I think in particular about the research of J. Kocka and the *Neuesozialgeschichte* in general; and about the studies of Thomas Nipperdey and Otto Dann) [3]. One could also recognise the influence of Maurice Agulhon's works on confraternities, freemasons and clubs [4], as well as the French approach to the study of sociability, in particular of the informal sociability of salons, cafs, collective rites, feasts and public ceremonies. Even if both historiographical traditions share the same subject of analysis, their approaches differ, as Marco Meriggi remarked [5]. I do not intend to present here these different traditions nor their implications and developments. I retain, however, that it is important to mention them, even if briefly, in order to better assess the conceptual framework of the research I am presenting and discussing.

The research on voluntary societies has been generated also by a revival of a new political history revitalised by its contact with social history. The research has shown that in many respects, at least until the 1880s, clubs, and associations were extremely important to the process of political literacy of the Italian elites.

In this paper I will pay attention only to the studies which have been affected mainly by the German "school", that is, those studies which dealt with voluntary societies formally constituted in order to explain the crucial shift from a corporate- aristocratic society to an individualistic and bourgeois one, and to analyze the process of formation of both public opinion and the bourgeois public sphere. Needless to say, at the basis of a large part of the Italian research in this field is the important book of Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, which was translated into Italian in 1972.

I use the term voluntary society as defined by David Sills, that is an organised group of people which "1)[...] is formed in order to further some common intents of its members; 2) in which membership is voluntary in the sense that it is neither mandatory nor acquired through birth; and 3) that exists independently of the state" [6]. Some years later the German historian Thomas Nipperdey used a very similar definition stressing the term "voluntary" [7]. He put the accent on the freedom to join and leave, on the fact that a voluntary association is independent from the social status of its members and, above all, that the participation in a voluntary society does not affect the social status of its members. Nipperdey linked the spread of voluntary associations, mainly reading and patriotic societies, in the first part of the nineteenth century to the shift from a bureaucratic-authoritarian political system to a constitutional-liberal one and to the emergence of a new bourgeois society no longer based on orders and guilds, but more individualistic, and more differentiated.

As Germany, Italy was characterized "by the slow and late public emergence of the bourgeois politics and by an accentuated localism both in the collective expectations and social relationships" [8]. This explains one of the main characteristics of voluntary societies throughout Italy, their strong and exclusive local orientation and the large fragmentariness of associative networks. Every town and city, with a different chronology, but mainly since the 1840s, had its own clubs and societies, but they were all concentrated on local activities. Voluntary societies in Italy were not, as in the British case brilliantly illustrated by Robert Morris, "part of the process of creating class, sectarian and other forms of group consciousness on a national basis" [9]. They were not "a means of co- ordinating class action" [10].

The dominant forms of social life in early nineteenth-century Italy were the Accademia, the salon and the noble casino. So it is not possible to affirm, as Maurice Agulhon did for the French case, that the clubs were the typical form of bourgeois sociability in early nineteenth-century Italy. The Italian bourgeoisie rather showed in many parts of the country a flattering deference to aristocratic social and cultural forms and tried to be assimilated into the associative models of the aristocracy, to create a niche inside the noble societies, to imitate and reproduce the behaviour of the nobility. All the published studies on the associative life of the Italian elites clearly prove that the pattern of aristocratic sociability was homogeneous and widespread throughout the peninsula. The salons and, with a more public but not more open dimension, the casino nobiliare were the two structures which provided nobility and part of the bourgeoisie with opportunities to meet and exchange experience and information. Since the second half of the XVIIIth century in almost every Italian city there was a casino nobiliare. A casino nobiliare was a place in which men and women met in several occasions to chat and to dance. Many of these associations had separate rooms for men who wanted to read newspapers, play cards and smoke, but in general the casino was not a gendered space. Women were admitted with almost the same rights of men. It was, as Raffaele Romanelli wrote in an article on Florentine voluntary societies, the "luogo di definizione 'pubblica' della nobilita'" [11]

From the napoleonic period onwards voluntary societies appeared in increasing numbers in many Italian cities and towns, especially in Northern Italy. In Southern Italy the rapid increase of voluntary society happened mainly after Unification. In Naples, as in the entire Mezzogiorno, a very restricted legislation prevented, during the Restoration, the spread of the "spirito d'associazione", while in other parts of Italy a less severe and tough legislation permitted the emergence of voluntary societies. The shortage of voluntary associations was even worst in Rome and in general in the Stato Pontificio [12]. We do not have a map of the associative life in all the Italian cities, but according to the research which has been done until now it is possible to draw a line between capitals and provinces. Excepting Milan, which was not a capital but where a voluntary associative life began very early compared to the rest of Italy, voluntary associations were apparently more widespread in the small provincial towns than in the big cities and in the state capitals. As Maurice Agulhon suggested for France in his book on the cercles, even in Italy the process of development started in the provinces and gradually affected the capitals

of the various Italian states. As the works on Catania, Bologna, Piacenza, and Forlì [13] demonstrate, in small towns the spread of associations and the meetings and melting of nobles and bourgeois began earlier than in Naples, or in Rome, or in Turin. The distance from the courts, and a more relaxed police control probably encouraged the relationships between social groups divided by the ownership of a title but united by the ownership of the land.

In central and northern Italy the spread of voluntary societies with a stronger bourgeois character began in the '40s. The distribution of associations in the country was uneven and also the timescale was different, but there are some common features valid throughout Italy. The chief characteristic of Italian voluntary societies, as I have already remarked, was their strong local orientation and the broadly fragmentary nature of associative networks. A complete lack of national coordination characterized recreational clubs as well as societies founded to pursue a specific programme. The fragmentation of associative networks mirrored in many respects the great variety of Italian urban elites. Another common peculiarity was their exclusion of women. The settlement of a bourgeois public sphere involved everywhere in Italy the exclusion of women. They remained the chief characters of the salon society. The exclusion of women from the new, bourgeois- male-dominated public sphere was a phenomenon common to other parts of Europe, as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's study on England [14], and Ute Frevert's on Germany have demonstrated: "At the very time when bourgeois men were becoming increasingly oriented towards the world outside the home both in their professional capacities and in their leisure time, they clung to the belief that it was not fitting for a woman to appear alone in public. Whereas they themselves gradually bade farewell to the old order, its conventions, restrictions, traditions and customs were to remain in force for their wives" [15].

The spread of voluntary societies concerned essentially the elites and only gradually involved other social groups. Workers, artisans, private and public clerks founded or better joined, in the same years, the *Società di mutuo soccorso* (mutual aid societies very similar to the British Friendly Societies) which, by 1880, constituted a very important and dense network especially in northern and central Italy. This form of association has been widely studied in Italy, particularly in connection with the formation of the republican and socialist parties and trade unions. I do not want to face the problem of mutual aid societies today, but I'd like to say, very briefly, that in many cases and in some parts of Italy, these societies could be classified as "patronage societies", that is societies in which, and I use the definition given by Robert Morris, "the urban elite or a fraction of that elite used the voluntary society to transfer resources to another social group, or to sponsor through approval, support or material aid, activities, of which that elite approved, amongst another social group" [16].

The clubs and the voluntary societies in general, as I already said, represented everywhere in Italy one of the places where that small part of the population who had the privilege to vote and choose its representatives in municipal council and parliament learnt the rules of politics. In cities like Milan or Naples, and even more in towns like Piacenza or Forlì, clubs worked very frequently as electoral committees; as meeting places to discuss politics and local affairs, even if many statutes established that discussion on politics was forbidden inside the clubs; they worked as political machines for candidate selection and as crossroad of information and favours. As the case of Piacenza, studied by Severina Fontana and Paola Subacchi [17], proves, the associations played a particularly important role in the change of regime, helping the town elite to preserve its leadership in the new political context of the Italian kingdom. As Banti and Meriggi pointed out, clubs worked as a sort of pre-political-party organisations, a places in which the opinions and political orientations of local 'notabili' took shape [18].

Milan was probably the city which displayed the most varied associative life, especially after the unification when elite associations cohabited with petite bourgeois and working-class ones. Milan was also the city in which the dialogue between the nobility and the bourgeoisie within the associations began earlier than in other Italian cities like Turin, Naples or Florence. As Marco Meriggi has demonstrated in his book [19], the nobility gradually withdrew from the social arena leaving the social space to a bourgeoisie composed not only of landowners and professional men but also by the productive bourgeoisie deeply involved in scientific experimentation and cultural debate. If the milanese aristocracy revealed itself to be open and interested to dialogue with the bourgeoisie, very different was the behaviour of Turin's aristocracy. There, as Anthony Cardoza shows [20], the aristocracy maintained a strongly exclusive attitude. This was the response of the aristocracy to its identity crisis, an extreme reaction to the loss of power which affected a group no longer able to add wealth and economic power to its unsteady legal and social status. The Turinese nobility chose isolation, closing ranks and caste identity to face the increasing political and economic power of the new business and entrepreneurial bourgeoisie [21]. Between the elitist attitude in Turin and the relatively open nature of Milan there are the cases of Florence, or Bologna, Piacenza, Pisa or Forlì which reproduce to different degrees the extreme variety of the Italian urban elites.

Now I would like to face more closely the case-study I know best: that of Naples [22]. In the study of Naples I tried to reconstruct the entire network of formal and legal associations in the period starting with the restoration and ending with the beginning of the first world war. My research dealt essentially with clubs, sports, cultural, reading and philanthropic societies and with all those societies which the city elites set up and promoted and in which they used to meet. I decided not to introduce in my research the secret societies like the Carboneria, or Freemasonry because I think that they deserve a completely different treatment and because I was interested in the emergence of the bourgeoisie as an active participant in Neapolitan public life.

My work on voluntary associations in Naples is based on many and different sources: the documents of the Ministero di Polizia and of Ministero dell'Interno; the documents of Questura and of Prefettura, the official statistics on associations, especially those on the *Società di Mutuo Soccorso*, and the city directories so as to reconstruct the number and the quality of associations. Then I used the rules, and the lists of members in order to analyze the morphology of the voluntary societies, their social basis, and their activities; finally I used the printed reports and budgets of the various societies, and the news on their life appeared in to the newspapers.

The first thing that emerges from my study is a different chronology between Naples and other important cities of Europe, like London or Paris, and a difference between Naples and other Italian cities like Milan, Turin and partly Florence. According to the data I collected I can draw a quite precise chronology of the emergence and settlement of voluntary societies in nineteenth century Naples. The years between 1815 and 1860, except the short season of the 30s, were characterised by a complete lack of voluntary and bourgeois societies. The picture changed completely after unification. From 1860 onwards the increase in the number of voluntary associations was constant. The '60s witnessed the spontaneous constitution of the early elite clubs and early working-class and employees mutual aid societies. The '70s and the '80s saw a "boom" in mutual aid societies and the distribution of the elite pattern of social life between groups of middle and petite bourgeoisie. The '80s and '90s confirm that the participation in the life and activities of the voluntary associations is enormously increased. Now a very wide audience has been reached and people belonging to different social strata are concerned with voluntary societies of the most varied kinds.

During the first half of the century the social life of the Neapolitan elites was, in many respect, very frantic. Naples, like London or Paris, had its own "Season" lasting from November till Easter with its peak during Carnival. The different sectors of the aristocracy and of the bourgeoisie met informally in the salons of private houses, during their stroll on via Toledo or in the Riviera di Chiaia, and at the races, but all the institutionalised social life of these groups were organised by the State. Nobles and upper-bourgeois met also at the theatre (the San Carlo was opened almost every night and the families of the aristocracy and of the upper bourgeoisie owned the boxes and used them as a drawing room). They met in the cafs, in the cultural academies and in a sort of recreational circle called *Accademia di Musica e Ballo*, which was similar to the *casini nobiliari* of other Italian cities. During this period, ascription remained the standard which regulated the Neapolitan associative life. In the scientific and humanistic academies, and in the so called *Società economiche*, or in the commerce Chamber, co-option was the main recruitment system. In recreational societies, the freedom to join and to leave was more widespread,

but none of these societies were founded by private individuals, as they were all organised by the state. The state promoted, organized, managed and financed the leisure activities, the *civile conversazione*, the cultural debate and the scientific experimentation. Notwithstanding, a closer analysis shows that in the '30s there was more than one attempt to break the general frame and to modify the associative practices, and the rites of the nobility and of the bourgeoisie. However, the '40s and especially the '50s, after the failed constitutional experience of '48, brought a new wave of authoritarianism and censorship: the police control increased, the creation of new associations came to a standstill, and the liberal elites withdrew from the public arena returning to more informal and private meetings and social gatherings. So, partly because of very repressive and strict legislation, in the first part of the century, in Naples there was a complete shortage of voluntary associations. Circles and clubs did not exist: the very words were unknown. The foreign communities of English, Swiss and German merchants and entrepreneurs made some attempts to start up clubs, but gave up at the first difficulty preferring to cultivate a separate sociability [23]. The public sphere was dominated by two groups intertwined with each other: the aristocracy, and in particular, that part of the aristocracy which was very close to the court and to the king, and the bureaucracy, the high ranks of the civil service, who very frequently belonged to the feudal nobility. Under the Bourbons there was not any possibility to express political and religious ideas different from those of the state; the censorship was very tough and severe and exercised a strict control on books and newspapers published in the *regno delle Due Sicilie* and introduced by foreigners and travellers. The atmosphere was frequently unbearable especially in the periods which followed the revolutionary uprisings of the 1820s, 1830s and 1848, but the king and his secretaries and advisors knew that the best way to control and dominate the high levels of the aristocracy and of the bourgeoisie, and to prevent them from defecting and conspiring was to allow these groups to meet and to share almost the same opportunities shared by similar groups in other Italian states. The Bourbons tried to prevent the foundation of freely organized voluntary associations both in the capital and in the provinces, offering the local elite a range of associations submitted to their control. All the associations we find in this period do not fit in with the definition of voluntary societies I quoted at the beginning of my presentation. They were societies with written rules, members, subscriptions and entrance fees etc., but they were not voluntary. People were not free to join and leave. People did not join because of a programme or to support a particular objective. Membership was limited and admission was decided after many complicated bureaucratic stages involving the Home secretary, the Police secretary and eventually the king himself. People joined because they belonged to a specific social group, because they were selected by the king, because they were co-opted. The participation in this kind of society was a sort of reward they were granted; a means of confirming loyalty to the king and to the Bourbon monarchy as an institution. It was a way to increase the links between the monarchy and the elite, but it was, above all, a concrete tool to point out and to reaffirm the boundaries of this elite. According to Thomas Nipperdey's definition, the organisations founded during the restoration in Naples and in the entire kingdom were "Korporation" more than "Association" and that because the membership was not voluntary but determined by birth and status [24]. Birth and social status were the principles upon which almost all the associations in the restoration period were based: the *Accademia delle dame e dei cavalieri*, the *Accademia di Musica e Ballo*, the *Societa' Filarmonica*. The written rules of these associations show very clearly that the monarchy and the nobility in general were obsessively concerned with the problem of access to their ranks. The entire documentation for this period displays that the issues of inclusion and exclusion were the dominant ones. The closer the end of the regime, the greater was the concern with a strict and precise definition of the boundaries of the nobility. All that did not prevent the increase of applicants belonging to the high ranks of the bourgeoisie or to the provincial nobility, who were desperately eager to gain access to the circles close to the court. The Neapolitan elite, who gave the many foreign travellers, even those without titles and honours, who flocked into early nineteenth-century Naples, charming hospitality, perceived the raising of applications as a threat to its privileges and to its life-style. For that reason the *Accademia delle dame e dei cavalieri* was refounded in 1834 and its statute rewritten. While the *casini nobiliari* of other Italian cities like Pisa or Milan were becoming more open to the upper ranks of the bourgeoisie, while the other Italian cities were beginning to try out forms of sociability more bourgeois and voluntary, the Neapolitan society remained attached to a very exclusive social life. The necessary qualifications to enter the *Accademia* were increased, reducing the possibilities of joining for the lower ranks of the Neapolitan and provincial nobility and upper strata of the bourgeoisie. A further demonstration of the fact that Naples remained attached to a very exclusive sociability is the quick failure of the only experiment with melting social classes, that of the *Societa' Filarmonica*. The *Societa' Filarmonica*, like the society of the same name founded in Turin, was the first semi-voluntary society which promoted the cohabitation between nobility and bourgeoisie, giving great importance to wealth and, for that reason, welcoming merchants and entrepreneurs as members alongside more traditional representatives of the educated, landed, and professional bourgeoisie.

The cohabitation between educated-landed elite and nobility was instead an acquired fact of the cultural academies. As for the academies Naples had a strong and long tradition dating back to XVth century. 26 new academies were founded in the first half of the century. Many of them were just private meetings between intellectuals which in general had a very short life, others were private schools, but others, the most important, were the places through which the state promoted its cultural politics. For that reason the life of some of these academies were deeply affected by the changes of regime. The French created a certain amount of academies, the Bourbons closed and reopened the same academies changing some of their rules and their membership; the new ruling class of the postunification period changed rules, names and members again. The real nature and structure of these academies remained, however, the same throughout the century. These academies failed to fulfil the scientific and cultural objectives they had fixed in their written statutes. Actually, their functions was first of all the legitimization of a social group made up of by intellectuals, professionals and high rank civil servants to which the Bourbons granted the possibility of mingling with the nobility; secondly these academies had the task of offering the professional and educated bourgeoisie a controlled place to discuss, away from conspiracies, and finally they aimed to secure the loyalty and allegiance of a crucial group.

After Italian Unification the Neapolitan elite's associative life changed completely. The *Statuto albertino*, the piedmontese constitution, was granted to the entire kingdom. It introduced, albeit in a very cautious form, the principle of associative liberty. It also introduced, even if for a very small minority, the right to vote and to choose the parliamentary and municipal representatives. These two elements provoked an immediate excitement in the upper social strata, especially in the liberal bourgeoisie and aristocracy, which participate in the *Risorgimento*. One of the sign of this excitement was the abrupt and fast increase in the number of voluntary societies. In Naples, as in Italy in general, the '60s witnessed the birth of numbers of clubs, philanthropic, musical, leisure and mutual aid societies. The Neapolitan elites suddenly discovered the club. In the 1861 the old *Accademia di Musica e Ballo* was compelled to abandon the great salons of the *San Carlo's* foyer, which it had occupied for fortyfive years, and to handed them over to the newly constituted *Circolo dell'Unione*, a reunion of liberal, noble and bourgeois men. In the same year a group of liberal aristocrats founded the *Circolo Nazionale*. Few years later other three clubs were founded: the *Societa' di Tiro*, the *Circolo del Whist* and the *Circolo dell'Accademia*. Both the *Whist* and the *Accademia* gathered that part of the Neapolitan aristocracy which remained loyal to the Bourbons. All these societies were voluntary. They were all based on the principle of freedom of joining and leaving. But the most important innovation of the period was the fact that the main character of the associative life was no longer the state but the individuals. The state continued of course to supervise and exercise a strict control in particular on political associations by means of the police and *prefetti*, but it stopped to organise societies, clubs and academies. The birth and rapid increase of voluntary societies in Naples is in many respects astonishing if compared to the traditional apathy of the Neapolitans towards the participation in public life. As we already know, the first decades after the unification were characterized, but not only in Naples, by a very low participation in the general and local elections. As Paolo Macry has demonstrated the elites and the middle classes of the former capital were unwilling to face their responsibilities; they tried to avoid tasks such as the participation in the *Guardia Nazionale* or into the courts as jurors, claiming, at the same time help and support from the state [25].

At the end of the '60s the city elite was no longer represented by only one association as during the restoration. Now it was split up into different groups and into different associations. There were some, mainly aristocrats, who held cards of different clubs at the same time, and who played a crucial role acting as brokers between the different political areas in which Neapolitan society was divided. The boom of voluntary societies of the '60s was mainly a bourgeois phenomenon, but the aristocracy still played a very important role: members of the aristocracy were the 41 per cent of all the members of the associations I

took into consideration. And the percentage raises at 55.8 if we look at the four main clubs. The middle classes and the petite bourgeoisie remained completely excluded and unconcerned. The novelty of the '60 was the end of the segregation of classes, and the beginning of the segregation of sexes. In the new constituted voluntary associations the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie started to meet and to discover that there was more than an interest in common. But the emergence of a public sphere in which the bourgeoisie had a very visible and active role involved the exclusion of women.

The public world of nineteenth century Naples became more and more organized in gendered ways. In the new associative life there was little space for women. The women were confined at home and very rarely were admitted as members in the associations. Sometimes they participated in some of the activities of the societies not as individuals but as wives or daughters of a member. The women of the nobility who could join as members, even if without full rights, the *Accademia delle dame e dei cavalieri* or the *Accademia di Musica e Ballo* in the first part of the century, were now excluded from the clubs which were organized after the English fashion. Women maintained a very important role in the informal sociability, in particular they continued to lead the social life of the salons, which constituted a parallel and subsidiary structure to that of the clubs and associations. If clubs were the triumph of male sociability, salons were the arena of female sociability. In nineteenth century Naples autonomous female associations found it hard to establish themselves. As in other parts of Europe, Neapolitan women were more engaged in religious and philanthropic associations, but they failed to organize that close and thick network peculiar to countries like Britain. They promoted boarding schools for girls, hospitals and charitable institutions for fallen girls and orphans, but even in these organizations they had a diminished and subordinate role because management and direction remained firmly in male hands. Women were very few even in the mutual aid societies. In the 1878 only three out of twelve societies admitted women and they were only the 3 per cent of the all members. The women started to participate from the end of the '70s onwards, or better they began to be formally admitted as members with full rights after this period. In the '70s in fact another change in the associative life took place. Alongside the clubs which continued their life becoming important places of political discussion and activity, a new kind of society began to emerge: the "società di programma" as Marco Meriggi called it [26]. The "società di programma" were associations which pursued specific programmes and objectives. They were formed as a response to shared interest and experience and not only as a response to a vague wish of sociability. Societies like the Red cross, like the Society for the protection of animals, the Alpine Club, the rowing club, the various musical and theatrical societies, the local history society etc. belong to this category. All these associations were less exclusive if compared to the clubs. They were in general more open to the middle classes and women. They were less hierarchical structured. They also tried to be less locally oriented seeking to connect themselves to similar societies established in other parts of Italy.

The real change in associative life took place in the last two decades of nineteenth century. Club life was to become a mass phenomenon in Naples as in Milan and in other Italian cities. In the '80s and in the '90s numbers of mutual aid societies, electoral committees, recreational clubs, occupational societies were created. The implementation of the new electoral law greatly contributed to this increase. The new law of 1882 considerably broadening the number of voters, enlarged political debate and participation. Naples had plenty of groups, which assembled to found societies with the most different programmes and objectives, which wrote and printed statutes, which were engaged in frantic activities. Many of these societies formed and run by petite bourgeoisie or professional men, lawyers in particular, had a very short life. In general they imitated the structure and rules of the elite clubs, but lack of motivation and delay in payments of the annual subscription drove them to death very quickly. As in the Paris of the end of the century, the club was becoming the predominant form of sociability in almost all the social classes [27]. It is very difficult to quantify the number of societies and of members. The city directory in 1881 listed 11 charitable institutions, 13 catholic cercles, 22 political and recreational associations, 47 mutual aid societies, 16 cultural societies, 6 musical societies and 5 amateur theatrical companies. Five years later the city directory registered an increase of 40 per cent. In 1884 the Neapolitan committee which was organizing the pilgrimage to Vittorio Emanuele's tomb involved 117 associations which brought to Rome 4.452 persons [28]. According to a document of Prefettura, in 1885 more than 27 thousand persons paid a subscription to the mutual aid societies and more than 18 thousand were involved in political, cultural and recreational associations. Almost the 10 per cent of the Neapolitan adult population joined one or more associations in the '80s, a number similar to that of the people entitled to vote in the general election.

Now I would like to analyze more closely the nature, and the characteristics of these societies. They always had a formal set of written rules defining the aims, the admission procedures, the limits and prohibitions, the behaviour of members. Apparently membership was limited only by the desire and the ability to pay a subscription, to accept the rules of the club or the society, and to support its programme. There were no necessary qualities to enter the clubs or associations except of the legal age. In almost all the societies the only quality required was a good moral record. In comparison to the first part of the century, all the boundaries and limits have disappeared. The clubs and societies of the new era, apparently, did not attach too much importance to the profession, to the wealth, and to the status of its members. In many societies members were divided into two categories - that of the founders and that of the ordinary members - depending on whether or not they pay an extra fee. Frequently the former enjoyed more privileges and rights than the latter. Every society or club was led by a council or committee which was normally elected in the annual general meeting. The council or committee was responsible for the policy of the society, for the admission of new subscribers, for the administration of the budget. The number of members was, with a few exceptions, unlimited. So, formally the associations of the postunification period have given up the aristocratic and exclusive orientation of the early nineteenth-century societies. They are now based on the principles of equality and inclusion. But I used the word apparently and that because if we look more closely at the statutes and at the lists of the members we discover that the enforcement of the same rules produced very different results. In many cases the chief system of admission was still the co-option, so a new kind of disguised exclusiveness was at work. Of course entrance to the most elitist clubs was no longer regulated by birth and blood. The new criteria were various and unwritten and they were put in place according to different considerations. Now admission to the most exclusive clubs was based on a mixture of *qualities* such as political affinity, common economic interests, kinship, and even neighbourhood. It is very important to stress that the more widespread and democratic the system was, the closer and more exclusive the four top clubs of the city became. A comparison between the different drafts of statutes of the *Circolo dell'Unione*, or of the *Whist* reveals very clearly that at the end of the century the rules regulating admission were sometimes less democratic than at the birth of the clubs. There were two instruments that prevented the elite's club from admitting unwanted members: one was the ballot; the other was the amount of the annual subscription. In many cases one vote against an applicant was sufficient to nullify from anything two to ten votes. As for the membership fee, in some clubs and associations it was absolutely prohibitive even for a professional man, such as a lawyer or a doctor, to say nothing of a civil servant or a shopkeeper, to pay the entrance fee and the annual subscription.

A comparison between the statutes of the Neapolitan associations with the statutes of other western European and Italian cities reveals that the rules were quite the same throughout Europe. In Naples, as in Milan, in Turin or London, Paris, Lyon or Seville the statutes were always the same with very few variations. Different realities were hidden by the same language. At the end of the century the same laws, prescriptions, prohibitions etc. applied to aristocratic clubs as well as to petit bourgeois ones.

Despite the number of associations, actually a very restricted group of Neapolitan population was affected by the phenomenon. Large part of the population remained cut out, while some social areas maintained a very marginal position. There was however a small group which participated intensively in the association game. The city associations map shows that the main characters of the game were the landed and the professional bourgeoisie alongside the aristocracy. Landowners constituted the most numerous group (almost 40 per cent of the members) confirming that land and urban property rent was one of the best quality to participate in the city associative life. The professional bourgeoisie (28.6 per cent) was probably the most active group in the associations game. Lawyers, in particular (62 per cent of the category), entered the elites clubs, promoted electoral committees, and patronage societies like the mutual aid societies and charitable associations. The socio-professional composition of elite clubs is a good snapshot of the Neapolitan society. Businessmen and entrepreneurs accounted only for 12.5 per cent of the members. They had a marginal role in associations as in Neapolitan society. Even more marginal was

the position shared by civil servants, who probably could not afford the subscription due to their low incomes. In general the elite clubs were very homogeneous and not only because of the occupational status of their members but even because political, kinship and neighbourhood relationships worked together to create this homogeneity.

Affirming that the elite club disguised political organizations or perfect working electoral committees would probably be saying too much, but in Naples, as in other Italian cities, especially in the two first decades after the unification, there were many relations between the elite clubs and societies and the local and national political institutions. These associations worked in many respects as interest groups in a period characterized by the lack of organized political parties and by a very restricted franchise. The Circolo dell'Unione, the Whist, the Nazionale, the Societa' Filarmonica and clubs like the Circolo Partenopeo or the Societa' Zoofila worked as meeting places for people who held public offices. They were probably one of the places in which candidates for the general and municipal elections were informally selected and where electoral campaign were organized. They were also a good voting reservoir and a crucial place to exchange information and favours. They were, in my opinion, one of the places in which the new Neapolitan and Italian ruling class, especially that belonging to the Destra Storica, took shape and learnt the language of politics. Clubs like the Circolo dell'Unione or the Nazionale or the Whist were plenty of Mps, senators, mayors, city councillors, prefects, bank managers, directors of hospitals and charitable institutions, editors of newspapers etc.

Another element contributed to reinforce the ascriptive and close character of the clubs I studied: it was their family structure. Family relationships were a key factor in the elite clubs, while they did not affect the genuinely bourgeois ones, like the circolo Partenopeo, where objectives, interests and professional belongings were the glue which kept members tight. Kinship was a very important factor alongside politics and sometimes it was intertwined with politics. Marriage strategies and political power frequently went hand in hand in nineteenth-century Naples. Family links were added to the political and economical ones making the elite stronger and powerful.

At the beginning of the XXth century the elitist phase of associations could be considered completely closed. The political space began to be occupied by the new political mass parties which substituted the various associations and committees, in particular after the 1912 law on the male universal franchise. Elite clubs and societies continued to survive but its role had dried up. The associative activity continued to be very frantic, but at the mean time very frail and slender. Even though the petite bourgeoisie and the middle social strata in general created associations and clubs, the experience of voluntary societies in Naples seems to have been important only for very restricted elite groups.

[E-seminars index](#) | [back to the top](#)

## Notes

1. A.M. Banti and M. Meriggi, "Introduzione", in *Quaderni Storici*, XXVI (1991), n. 77, p. 359
2. *Ibid.*, p. 359
3. See in particular E. Franois (ed.), *Sociabilit  et socit  bourgeoise en France, en Allemagne et en Suisse, 1750- 1850*, Paris, 1986.
4. M. Agulhon, *La sociabilit  meridionale. Confr ries et associations dans la vie collective en Provence orientale la fin du XVIIIe sicle*, Aix-en-Provence, 1966 republished as *Pnitents et Franc-Maons de l'ancienne Provence. Essai sur la sociabilit  meridionale*, Paris, 1968; Id., *Le cercle dans la France bourgeoise 1810-1848. Etude d'une mutation de sociabilit *, Paris, 1977.
5. M. Meriggi, "Associazionismo borghese fra '700 e '800. Sonderweg tedesco e caso francese", in *Quaderni Storici*, XXIV (1989), n. 71, pp. 589-627.
6. D.L. Sills, "Voluntary associations: sociological aspects", In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, London, 1968, vol. 16, pp. 362-379.
7. T. Nipperdey, "Verein als soziale Struktur in Deutschland im spaeten 18. und fruehen 19. Jahrhundert. Eine Fallstudie zur Modernisierung", in Id., *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie. Gesammelte Aufsaeetze zur neueren Geschichte*, Goettingen, 1976, pp. 174-205 e pp. 439- 447.
8. Meriggi, "Associazionismo borghese", op. cit., p. 621
9. R.J. Morris, "Voluntary societies and British urban elites, 1780-1850: an analysis", in *The Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), n. 1, p. 104
10. R.J. Morris, "Clubs, societies and associations", in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge social history of Britain 1750-1950*, vol. 3. *Social agencies and institutions*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 409.
11. R. Romanelli, "Il casino, l'accademia e il circolo. Forme e tendenze dell'associazionismo d'elite nella Firenze dell'Ottocento", in P. Macry and A. Massafr  (eds.), *Fra storia e storiografia. Scritti in onore di Pasquale Villani*, Bologna, 1994, p. 813
12. Ph. Boutry, "Societa' urbana e sociabilit  delle lites nella Roma della Restaurazione: prime considerazioni", in *Cheiron*, V (1988), n. 9-10, pp. 58-85.
13. R. Balzani, "Politica e gioco d'azzardo: i circoli privati forlivesi del secondo Ottocento", in *Bollettino del Museo del Risorgimento di Bologna*, XXXII- XXXIII (1987-1988), pp. 55-82; P. Morabito, "Divertimento e lites sociali a Bologna nella prima meta' dell'Ottocento: la Societa' del Casino", in *Cheiron*, V (1988), n. 9-10, pp. 169-191; A. Signorelli, "Socialita' e circolazione di idee: l'associazionismo culturale a Catania nell'Ottocento", in *Meridiana*, 1995, n. 22-23, pp. 39-65.
14. L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and women of the English middle class*, London, 1987.
15. U. Frevert, *Women in German History. From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation*, Oxford-Hamburg-New York, 1989, pp. 33-34.
16. R.J. Morris, *Class, sect and party. The making of the British middle class, Leeds 1820-1850*, Manchester, 1990, p. 191.
17. S. Fontana and P. Subacchi, "Il mutamento guidato. Associazioni, comitati elettorali e formazione delle candidature a Piacenza negli anni sessanta dell'Ottocento", in *Quaderni Storici*, XXVI (1991), n. 77, pp. 491-512.
18. Banti and Meriggi, "Introduzione", op. cit., p. 360.
19. M. Meriggi, *Milano Borghese. Circoli ed lites nell'Ottocento*, Venezia, 1992.
20. A. Cardoza, "Tra casta e classe. Clubs maschili dell'ite torinese, 1840-1914", in *Quaderni Storici*, XXVI (1991), n. 77, pp. 363-388.
21. *Ibid.*
22. D.L. Caglioti, "Circoli, societa' e accademie nella Napoli postunitaria", in *Meridiana. Rivista di Storia e Scienze Sociali*, 1995, nn. 22/23, pp. 19-38 and Id.,

*Associazionismo e sociabilita' d'elite a Napoli nel XIX secolo*, Napoli, 1996.

23. B. Dawes, *La comunita' inglese a Napoli nell'800 e le sue istituzioni*, Napoli, 1988; D.L. Caglioti, "La minoranza imprenditoriale evangelica nel Mezzogiorno dell'Ottocento", in *Archivi e Imprese*, forthcoming.

24. Nipperdey, "Verein als soziale Struktur", op. cit., p. 174.

25. P. Macry, "Borghesie, citta' e Stato. Appunti e impressioni su Napoli (1860- 1880)", in *Quaderni Storici*, XIX (1984), n. 56, pp. 339-383.

26. Meriggi, *Milano borghese*, op. cit., *passim*.

27. B. Lecoq, "Les cercles parisiens au dbut de la Troisime Rpublique: de l'apoge au dclin", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 1985, pp. 591- 616.

28. B. Tobia, "Associazionismo e patriottismo: il caso del pellegrinaggio nazionale a Roma nel 1884", in M. Meriggi and P. Schiera (eds.), *Dalla citta' alla nazione. Borghesie ottocentesche in Italia e in Germania*, Bologna, 1993, pp. 227- 247.

[E-seminars index](#) | [back to the top](#)

The Institute of Historical Research (IHR), Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU  
The IHR is a member of the School of Advanced Study which is part of the University of London