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## Unmaking the nation? Uses and abuses of Garibaldi in contemporary Italy

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This essay examines the presence of Garibaldi in the politics of contemporary Italy by focusing in particular on the publications released on or around the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the birth of the hero in the milieu that oppose the Italian state and contest the idea of an Italian nation. After a brief review of previous political appropriations (and rejections) of Garibaldi in the course of modern Italian history, the essay examines the ideological ingredients and rhetorical strategies of the representations of Garibaldi produced by Northern League and neo-Bourbon ideologues, which also surface in extreme neo-fascist and ultra-Catholic groups. It shows that while some ‘anti-myth’ ingredients are shared across this politically diverse constellation, others are more specific to their individual components. In particular Northern League ideologues use some of the clichés of the discourse of Italian character (in the negative) to claim their own difference (in the positive). The essay also points out that the visibility enjoyed by these versions of Italian history is greatly enhanced by the availability of new media technologies such as the internet (with the related effect of ‘group polarisation’), as well as by the presence of the Northern League in the ruling right-wing coalition led by media mogul Berlusconi, who has an inordinate degree of control over the national media.

**Keywords:** Political use of history; Northern League; ultra-Catholicism; neo-Bourbons; national character discourse; new media

‘Garibaldi a l’ha dosent agn’ (‘Garibaldi is two hundred years old’) is the title of the lead article in the December 2006 issue of *ALP. Vos ëd l’arvira piemontèisa* (Voices of the Piedmontese Revolt), the journal of the Associazione Liber Piemont, based in the town of Cossato, near Biella, in north-eastern Piedmont. The article, on the front page of the journal, is illustrated with a picture of a funeral of partisans from a local Garibaldi Brigade in 1945 (Sautabachëtta 2006) (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> In the foreground of the picture, on the cart carrying the coffins of the partisans, stands an effigy of Garibaldi. The area around Cossato, known as the Biellese (from the town of Biella, the center of an old textile district), was an important site of antifascist resistance (Poma 1972) and the memory of the partisans fighting in the Garibaldi brigades is still quite alive, as are some of the actual members. Today it is a place where the Northern League gets almost 20% of the vote and the right is solidly in power. In spite of their passion for dialect, however, the members

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# ALP

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## GARIBALDI A L'HA DOSENT AGN

Giusep Garibaldi a l'é nà a Nissa 'l 4 èd luj dèl 1807: l'ann ch'a ven, donca, a-i sarà nen mach l'aniversari dèl martiri 'd fra Dossin e Margrita, dèscarnà a brusà, com ch'i savoma, dèl 1307, ma 'dcò a taran 200 agn da la nàssita 'd Garibaldi. I speroma franch ch'a sarà arcordà com ch'as dev. Tutun se, fin-a a nen vaire agn fa, a l'era nè scàndol "parlé mal èd Garibaldi", adess ch'a son a la mòda le "revision", già a s'ancamin-a a publiché 'd còse motobin critiche. Gilberto Oneto, ideblogh èd la "Padania", a l'ha scrivù un liber: *L'iperitaliano: eroe o cialtrone? Biografia senza censura di Giuseppe Garibaldi* (ed. "Il Cerchio", Rimini 2006). E a la dèl giovo Garibaldi un personagi "piuttosto ganassa, una sorta di bullo da bar ante litteram, spavaldo e lesto di parola, gradasso", e via fòrt. A la fin èd la letura, la domanda butà ant èl titol a treuva rispòsta: Garibaldi, tut somà, a l'era un Gianfotre, un biforchin. Già che noi d'ALP i l'oma nòstri dubi sl'Italia unia, e pi che tut èsla manera ch'a l'ha portane... an cost èstat; ancheuj i soma federalista, con le ideje dèl Carlo Cattaneo e ch'a l'han avù an Piemont èl prim partisan con èl vèrsleis Gioan Tòni Ranza.

Tutun, ant j'agn dèl Rissorgiment, s'i fusso stàit giovo scolà (chè ij montagnin e ij campagnin, d'Unità d'Italia as na fasio un fotre...), miraco i sarìo stàit èdcò noi 'd cola compania 'd giovo universitari scaudà pèr Garibaldi, che a

Turin a fasio 'l giornalèt "Ateneo" ispirà da Àngel Broferi e che chiel-sì, ant una litra dèl 1860 a l'amis Guerrazzi, a ciamava "dèl parti ross"; pèr dila con èl Calvo, antlora i l'avrio sentù che cola a l'era "l'ora ch'i l'oma tant sospirà, l'ora dila prima aurora de la nòstra libertà... dess l'é temp 'd mostré ch'i avoma un cheur liber italian"... ansoma, i sarìo stàit èdcò noi garibaldin; coma che a lo son èstàit fin-a ij povròm dèl mesdi, ch'a son andà con Garibaldi pèr fé na neuva società e che, disinganà, parèj 'd Còsimo d'Oria, boscarin, e Giuseppe Valente, "Nenna-Nenna", paisan l'un e l'otr, garibaldin, a son peui dventà brigant borbònich èd la banda dèl sergent Roman. I l'avrio nen podù pensé che an Sicilia, a Broni, Francesco Nullo, uffissial èd Garibaldi, a l'avria fusiilà ij campagnin ch'a volo n'avira social; e che 'l Mesdi d'Italia a sarìa dventà na colònia, ant l'anteresse metropolitan dèl triàngol andustrial Turin-Milan-Génova... bon, ma tornoma a Garibaldi. Dal liber d'Oneto a seurt un bulo ch'a vagnava le bataje "quasi senza combatterle grazie alla vigliaccheria e alla corruzione degli avversari". Ma noi i l'oma dèdnans a j'eu j' Garibaldi corù a la difèisa dila Repùblica Roman-a, quand che, ant le strajòle 'ntorn a Vila Spada, baracà da le bombe fransèise, sota la pieuva, da sol, a l'ha fàit un mes masel batense a colp èd sàber ambrancà a doe man, cantand autaganassa na canson popolar, e a mesdi a l'é presentasse a

la ciambrea an Campidoglio, antè ch'as dèscùta la capitolassion al nemis, tut mòjà 'd sudor, la camisa rossa s-ciancà e cuverta 'd sangh e 'd pàuta, lè spadon stortà ch'a intrava mach pèr mià ant èl feuder... èl Garibaldi che su na garopera (un barcon da pèscà) con mach 12 òmni, a dèstidava l'imperi dèl Brasil, pèr butesse da la part dij farrajos (jè strasson arvirà dila repùblica dèl Rio Grand do Sul).

Garibaldi mes brigant e mes pirata? Già che la gent da bin, ai "leghista" bin pensant, a jè stà sle bale nen mach la gusaja foresterà, ma 'dcò 'l «costume italiano il quale spesso e volentieri trasforma briganti in leggende, mezz'uomini in figure di primo piano. Beatifica i delinquenti e si accanisce sugli oppressi...» (Francesco Borgonuovo, *Il lato oscuro dell'eroe dei due mondi*. "Libero" dèl 30 IX. 06). Darmagi che ij bandi a sio franch l'espression cagnin-a 'd coj "crasà"! E noi, ch'i soma franch èd coj ch'a l'han portà a l'onor dèl mond, erètich, bandi e arvirà dèsmèntià, parèj 'd Dossin, Valsesian, 'd Carlin Gastaldi, ovriè bielèis partisan dèl Mesdi o 'l Farinèt valdostan... a noi, che da fiolin j'ero appassionà pèr *Sandokan* e pèr èl *Corsaro Nero*, a noi col Garibaldi-là, ch'a fà rissé 'l nas ai bin pensant, an pias, contact! franch perchè ch'a l'é parèj. Le gasètte dèl 1882, quand che Garibaldi a l'é mòrt, a l'han escrivù, giusta, che Garibaldi, campion socialista, pacifista e democrat, "a l'era



Figure 1. Title page of the December 2006 issue of the journal of the Associazione Liber Piemont. Source: By kind permission of Piero Delmastro.

of *ALP* are not leghisti, but a democratic-leftist group bent on preserving the Piedmontese language. The Association Free Piedmont was first established in 1973, at a time when many in the Italian left began their love affair with local folk cultures and languages, and a few years before the advocacy of local culture was appropriated by quite different types of political movements (Poggio 1993, 31).<sup>2</sup>

The article on Garibaldi in *ALP* is less a commemoration of the Risorgimento hero (although it does a bit of that too) than an attack on the representation of Garibaldi offered in a new book by one of the most prolific ideologues of the Northern League, Gilberto Oneto, who also happens to be originally from Biella.<sup>3</sup> A journalist on the dailies *La Padania* and *Libero*, and director of the periodical *Quaderni Padani*, Oneto is the author of various publications on the landscape, symbols and identity of so-called Padania, the imaginary land in northern Italy whose 'liberation' the Northern League has been advocating for the past 20 years.<sup>4</sup> The book in question is a biography of Garibaldi entitled *L'iperitaliano: eroe o cialtrone? Biografia senza censure di Giuseppe Garibaldi* (The hyper-Italian: Hero or charlatan? Biography without censorship of Giuseppe Garibaldi) (Oneto 2006). This volume is the latest in a series of history books with which Northern League ideologues and other critics and enemies of the Italian state have been attacking what they call the myths and lies of the so-called 'official' national historiography over the past few years.

While the leghista Oneto labels Garibaldi a charlatan, the leftist members of *ALP* depict him as an authentic popular hero, a rebel fighting for a good cause, even though one that was hijacked by the interests of a conservative leadership.<sup>5</sup> This battle of images and interpretations is the latest instalment in a conflict over the nature and, in fact, the very existence of the national state that can be traced back to its very origins in the nineteenth century. For most of the history of the Italian state, however, the conflict was confined to the margins of political debate: never before had a party that contested this unity been as long lasting and strong as the Northern League, and, more to the point, never before had a party of this kind been part of the national government. Thus by radically contesting national unity from a position of power *within* the central government, the Northern League has not only greatly rekindled this conflict in the past two decades, but it has also challenged the nation to an unprecedented degree. The official celebrations of the bicentenary of the birth of Garibaldi were thus bound to unleash a major confrontation over the meaning of Garibaldi and of the whole Risorgimento. While a host of new publications, academic and non-academic, came out in 2006 and 2007, to revisit and commemorate the hero of the two worlds,<sup>6</sup> opponents and critics of the national state mobilised in a variety of ways to spread their own version of history, or, to borrow their words, to tell the 'truth' about Garibaldi against the alleged lies of the so-called *vulgata* (standard view) about the Risorgimento hero.

In the following pages, after a brief review of the presence of Garibaldi in the politics and public memory of modern Italy, I will focus on the most recent development of this history and in particular on the rhetorical strategies and on the ingredients, both old and new, that go into the attempt to unmake the 'myth' of this central figure of the Risorgimento in the galaxy of movements that criticise and oppose not just the Italian state but the very idea of an Italian nation. I will argue that the unprecedented visibility of these attempts derives not only from the major ideological and political reconfiguration that has followed the crumbling of the old party system in the early 1990s, but, even more importantly, from the new media environment in which this reconfiguration

has taken place. This is an environment characterised, on the one hand, by the innovation of the internet, and on the other, by the existence of a concentration of the media in the hands of a single individual that has no parallel in any other democratic state.

### **A man for all seasons? Political appropriations (and rejections) since unification**

Garibaldi's larger-than-life figure as man of action, combined with his political pragmatism, has lent itself easily, almost naturally one could say, to a great variety of interpretations, uses as well as abuses, and to the making of myths and anti-myths.<sup>7</sup> The construction of a myth around his figure began while he was still alive and he himself, along with his supporters, consciously contributed to it, as Lucy Riall has effectively shown in her recent book (Riall 2007). Throughout the course of modern Italian history, different political actors have appropriated the larger-than-life figure of Garibaldi to legitimise quite different projects. At the same time, from the outset the enemies of the Risorgimento, above all the Roman Catholic Church led by Pius IX, alongside the Jesuit order with its periodical *Civiltà Cattolica*, targeted Garibaldi with particular vehemence because of his anti-clericalism and his links to freemasonry.<sup>8</sup> Catholic apologists depicted him as a criminal or attempted to deny his heroism by making him into a clownish figure and a pawn of the Savoy dynasty and Piedmontese politicians.

In the early years of the liberal state, Garibaldi's democratic and republican views and his virulent polemics against the political class in power after 1861 made him a rather 'inconvenient' figure for the governing elites, but very popular in democratic and even socialist milieux. However, after his death in 1882, with the Historic Left in power, Garibaldi's memory was not confined to his cult in those milieux, but was soon incorporated into the official pantheon of the founding fathers. As the most famous fighter for the cause of Italian unification who, in contrast to his fellow republican Mazzini, placed the achievement of unification before his political preferences by joining the Italian National Society and by fighting under the slogan of 'Italy and Victor Emmanuel', Garibaldi was portrayed as a 'disciplined revolutionary' by prime minister Agostino Depretis (Isnenghi 2007). The imposing monument to Garibaldi on the Janiculum hill inaugurated by Francesco Crispi in 1895, on the 25th anniversary of the taking of Rome, definitively crowned Garibaldi's status as a founding father of the liberal state.

After the turn of the twentieth century, First World War interventionists and later the fascists used Garibaldi as the symbol par excellence of the man of action who put an end to the debates and conflicts among the politicians and single-handedly brought about the unification of the country, the man who placed the *patria* above everything else. This is Garibaldi 'the saviour of Italy' represented in the film by Alessandro Blasetti *1860* (1934). Here Garibaldi was an almost God-like figure constructed to create an analogy with the new self-appointed saviour of the country, namely Mussolini. The original version of Blasetti's film included a final shot of a parade in fascist Italy where the red shirt veterans marched along with black shirts later cut from the post-Second World War version (Forgacs 2001). The linkage between the two men of action served to stress the narrative of fascism as the real culmination and conclusion of the Risorgimento. Mussolini further distorted the historical record when he claimed, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the hero's death in 1932, that Garibaldi looked with contempt at 'men, sects, parties,



ideologies and declamations of assemblies' and proclaimed instead 'dictatorships with no limitations whatsoever [*illimitatissime dittature*], in difficult times' (Mussolini 1951, 60).<sup>9</sup>

But the fascist appropriation of Garibaldi did not go uncontested. His red shirts could not be turned into black shirts without difficulties and the 'hero of the two worlds', a militant patriot of an internationalist bent who fought around the world to support the cause of peoples' emancipation, was not left for long in the embrace of the fascists. In the mid-1930s, the anti-fascist opposition re-appropriated the figure of Garibaldi: in the International Brigades that fought in Spain on the side of the republican army, Italians were organised in the Garibaldi Battalion. Even more important for understanding today's resonance of Garibaldi in the ranks of the left, the figure of the hero was also seized by the communist Resistance in the Second World War: to stress the patriotic nature of their struggle and reclaim the heritage of the Risorgimento for the left, the communist formations called themselves the Garibaldi Brigades. And in the crucial elections of 1948 Garibaldi also became the symbol of the leftist Popular Democratic Front, the electoral alliance between the Italian Socialist and Communist Parties. In those elections the Christian Democratic Party mercilessly attacked this use of Garibaldi, claiming that the hero had been chosen to hide the true nature of the Popular Front as a stand-in for Stalin.

The communist appropriation of Garibaldi happened before Gramsci's rather critical views about him in the *Prison Notebooks* (which began to be published in 1949) became known: although he still seemed to prefer Garibaldi over Mazzini, Gramsci did not think much of the phenomenon of Risorgimento volunteerism, which he saw as a 'poor substitute' for the real popular participation that the Risorgimento, in his view, sorely missed (Gramsci 1977, 79). Drawing on Gramsci's reading of the Risorgimento as a 'passive revolution' that stifled the true revolutionary potential of the peasant masses, the historiography of the post-1945 period often focused on the limitations of the Risorgimento process and its conservative outcomes under the hegemony of the moderates. After the elections of 1948, indeed, Garibaldi dropped almost entirely out of Italian politics: the students' and workers' movements of the 1960s and 1970s were strongly class oriented and patriotism was out of the picture. To be sure, politicians such as the republican Giovanni Spadolini and the socialist Bettino Craxi (who attempted to drape his idea of socialism in the mantle of patriotism) paid Garibaldi some attention in the 1980s, but it was only when the unity of the national state, and in fact the unity of the Italian nation itself, came under attack by the Northern League in the 1990s, that the history of the Risorgimento and its protagonists ceased being a purely academic subject and acquired a new public importance and urgency.

### **The ironies of 'counter-history': makers and ingredients of the 'anti-myth'**

It may seem ironic that advocates for the rights of local languages and cultures such as the members of Associazione Liber Piemont, with whom I opened this essay, are today's defenders of Garibaldi, who after all fought in the name of a united Italy and was certainly not interested in the issue of local cultures. The irony goes beyond this one association's endorsement: indeed, it is the left as a whole that, from the 1990s onwards, has picked up the cause of the defence of the Risorgimento and the national state as a whole<sup>10</sup> as these have become the targets of the unrelenting attacks of the Northern League. Of course,

as I mentioned, claims over the legacy of Garibaldi have a long history in progressive milieux and on the occasion of the bicentenary of his birth the statesmen of the Centre-Left coalition – which happened to be in power at the time – offered a set of representations of Garibaldi that reflected the interpretations connected to that long history, from the ‘disciplined revolutionary’ – evoked by the centrist president of the Senate Franco Marini – to the ‘champion of oppressed peoples’ evoked by the president of the Chamber of Deputies and leader of the Party of Communist Refoundation, Fausto Bertinotti.<sup>11</sup>

It is also somewhat ironic that the radical criticism of the process of unification, which used to be practised mainly on the left after 1945, has become a favourite practice of the right-wing ideologues of the Northern League, as well as of other groups that are in conflict with the national state and with its (albeit limited) secularist orientation. To be sure, the nature and purposes of these criticisms are radically different from those of the post-1945 left, which, even when critical, never questioned the unity of the national state and the core value of national unity. By contrast, in their rewriting of Italian history the ideologues of the Northern League aim to provide the movement’s militants with an anti-Italian culture and a version of history that can legitimise their advocacy for the autonomy or independence (if we have to believe the full name of the movement) of so-called ‘Padania’, an area including northern and most of central Italy, with the exclusion of Rome and Lazio.<sup>12</sup>

This legitimising activity is performed in two main ways: the first is ‘constructive’ and it mainly consists of the production of various accounts on the originality and greatness of the inhabitants of Padania since antiquity in order to claim that they really are a people. Here Celtic mythology figures quite prominently. The previously mentioned Gilberto Oneto, openly calls this project the ‘invention [which the author uses to mean ‘discovery’] of Padania’, an indispensable undertaking for any process of nation-building (Oneto n.d.). Hence, a considerable number of publications on the civilisation and history of the Celts, as well as the Lombards, have appeared in the 1980s and 1990s. This is of course a classic nationalist strategy which is openly proclaimed by people like Oneto.

The second way is ‘destructive’ and it mainly consists of harsh attacks against the process of national unification, its goals, methods and results. As Martina Avanza has noted, the League’s ‘destructive’ approach to Italian history can rely on various critical accounts of the Risorgimento that have characterised post-1945 Italian historiography, both academic and non-academic (Avanza 2003).<sup>13</sup> Albeit unwittingly (since it did not question the goal of national unity, but only its modalities and conservative outcome), this historiography has provided critical weapons for the anti-national discourse of the Northern League by insisting on the limitations – particularly in terms of popular participation and in terms of outcomes – of the process that led to the creation of the national state. A list of recommended readings on a website of the Libera Compagnia Padana, a cultural association established by leghisti and their sympathisers in Milan in 1993, contains a few titles of this critical historiography including some recent and very respectable histories of the annexation of the south, which shed light on the violence perpetrated by the Piedmontese against the soldiers of the Bourbon army who refused to enlist in the Italian army.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the League has been quite willing to appropriate anything that can contribute to de-legitimising the state born of the Risorgimento. As they have borrowed from the critique of the unification process elaborated by historians with quite different agendas and interests, even those in open

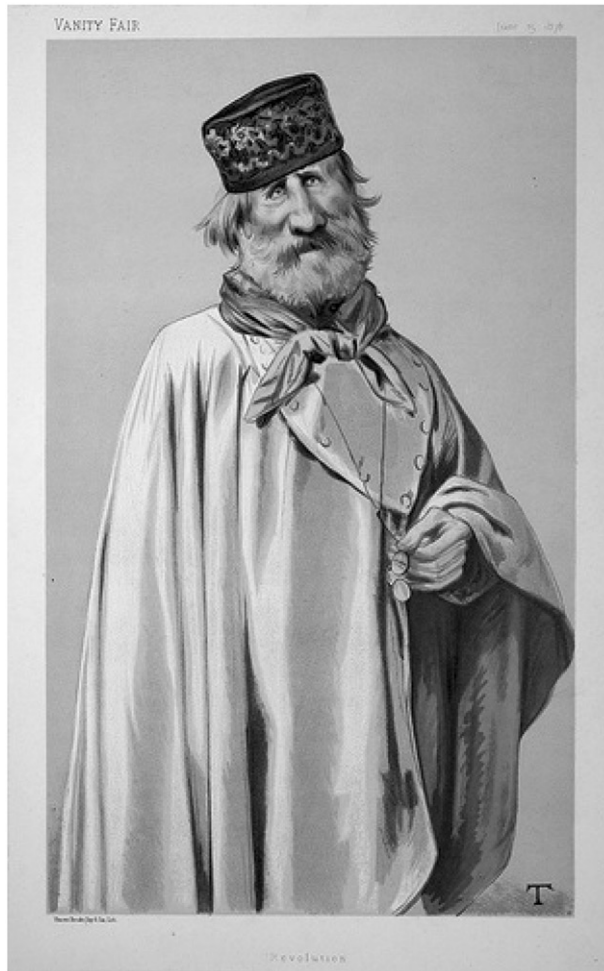


Figure 2. The caricature of Garibaldi by Theobald Chartran (from *Vanity Fair*, 1878) used on the cover of *L'iperitaliano*.

Source: By kind permission of Mary Evans Picture Library.

conflict with the League's own, at times this appropriation has led to paradoxical and even comical results.

This is where Oneto's book on Garibaldi comes in. In a volume displaying a large number of footnotes and quotations (often underlined in their entirety just to make the point clear), Oneto calls Garibaldi the 'invented hero of an invented fatherland' (here the term 'invented' is of course used in its more common meaning of 'fabricated') (Oneto 2006, 310). The very cover of the book says it all: it is a most unflattering portrait of the old general (Figure 2). Garibaldi looks very old, worried and not particularly intelligent,<sup>15</sup> a far cry from the common portraits of the hero. In the introduction, Oneto claims that his only aim is to provide a 'true' picture of the Risorgimento figure and that the truth is usually neither black nor white. In fact, his book tries to perform a character assassination



of Garibaldi, as well as of his volunteers and relatives. No aspect of the hero is spared: humanly, he was a vain ladies' man, shrewd and simple-minded at the same time; ideologically, he was confused; politically, he was never in control, but was the instrument of others' plans; militarily, his success did not depend on his bravery, but on favourable circumstances and especially the self-interested help of foreigners. Drawing almost exclusively on secondary sources, both academic and non-academic, both respectable and completely amateurish, the book essentially portrays Garibaldi as an adventurer/womanizer who, after being involved in military-criminal actions with his armed bands (made up mainly of common criminals and thieves) in South America, returned to Italy for reasons that had to do more with the necessity of leaving that continent, than in order to fight on the side of the 1848 revolutionaries. Later, according to Oneto, his expedition to the South in 1860 succeeded mainly because of the support that England and international freemasonry gave to the cause of Italian unification, and because Cavour bought off the officers of the Bourbon army. Garibaldi never really had to fight in a serious manner. In fact he also benefited from the support he found among local politicians such as Liborio Romano (an old liberal whom the last Bourbon king, Francesco II, had just appointed minister of interior) who promised help from local crime figures from the camorra. The new Italian state was thus born in a fraudulent and violent manner, without any authentic popular consent.

To be sure, Oneto is not making up all of his facts: many of them are well established in respectable historical works, or the 'historiography of the regime', as the leghisti prefer to call it.<sup>16</sup> Serious historians have certainly never tried to hide them. That the activities of Garibaldi in South America did not differ much from those of an adventurer is well known, and so are his numerous love affairs, as well as the dubious connections of Liborio Romano. What Oneto does, however, is to give all these facts a completely negative spin by caricaturing the protagonists and reducing what was a complex historical process into the outcome of the activities of a band of rascals led by a questionable character manipulated by some powerful (and foreign) interests. This negative spin, however, is not particularly new, or original. As a matter of fact, Oneto uses some of the topoi of at least two other traditions of anti-Garibaldi writings: the first one is the ultra-Catholic, whose roots go back to the rejection of the Italian national state by Pius IX and to the propaganda of the main organ of the Roman Catholic Church, the Jesuit monthly *Civiltà cattolica*.<sup>17</sup> As we have mentioned before, reactionary Catholics detested the (at times rabidly) anti-clerical Garibaldi: for them he was the instrument of wicked Masonic plots intent not only on destroying the Catholic Church, but on subverting the 'true' identity of the Italian people by 'imposing' a secular orientation on them. The absurdity of these views is self-evident.

Yet, however absurd, the Masonic conspiracy theory concerning the Risorgimento is not dead, but has been recently resurrected by some Catholic apologists such as Angela Pellicciari, who claims that the Risorgimento brought about a 'forgotten war of religion' in which a strongly anti-clerical leadership tried to destroy the Church (Pellicciari 1993 and 2000), and Francesco Pappalardo, who has denounced Garibaldi as someone who wants to undo the Italians, namely to destroy their 'true', that is Catholic, identity and culture (Pappalardo 2002).<sup>18</sup> The revival of these unfounded theories is part of the renewed assault on Italian secularism by the conservative leadership of the Catholic Church that has been taking place at least since the 1980s, as well as by the Catholic fundamentalist movement *Comunione e liberazione* and by Catholic politicians who, paradoxically, have

strengthened their power in the country in the wake of the collapse of the Christian Democratic party in 1993.<sup>19</sup> Ultra-Catholicism has also found very attentive ears among the leghisti and generally right-wing and xenophobic politicians intent on exploiting fear of the Muslim ‘other’, fear which has increased with the growth of immigration from non-European countries and after Al-Qaeda’s attacks. Initially anti-southern and anti-Roman, over the years the Northern League has accentuated its message against foreign (read non-white) immigration and this has been accompanied by a greater stress on the cultural identity of the so-called Padanians and on Catholicism as a major component of this cultural identity.

The second anti-Garibaldi tradition from which Oneto borrows (quite paradoxically for a movement that has always had a strong anti-southern component) is that of *meridionalismo* (southernism), particularly in its pro- or neo-Bourbon guise. Since the early 1990s southernism has had a revival in reaction to the initially anti-Southern message of the League. An association called Associazione Culturale Movimento Neoborbonico was founded in 1993 to strengthen southern historical memory and southern pride.<sup>20</sup> There are of course various southernist traditions which, since the late nineteenth century, have criticised and still criticise – at times very radically – the conservative outcomes of Italian unification and the policies of the national state, without, however, defending the Bourbon state.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to these types of pro-southern discourse, neo-Bourbon *meridionalismo* tries to rehabilitate the memory of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies along with that of its rulers against the ‘black legend’ built by their enemies. Members of the Movimento Neoborbonico are keen to stress that the Bourbons were not as backward as they have been portrayed – they built the first railway line in Italy, after all – and they want to give dignity back to the peoples of the south for too long misrepresented. They too had been preparing in their own way for the celebrations of Garibaldi. In 2006 the founder of the Movimento Neoborbonico, the Neapolitan Gennaro De Crescenzo, published *Contro Garibaldi. Appunti per demolire un nemico del Sud* (De Crescenzo 2006), and from the pen of Luciano Salera, another member of the association, came *Garibaldi, Fauché e i predatori del Regno del Sud*, issued by the ultra-Catholic publisher Il Giglio (Salera 2006). These books claim that Garibaldi was at the centre of an international plot hatched by England, France and Piedmont, besides of course the freemasons, to bring down the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, an act of international piracy with no legitimate basis whatsoever.

As it shares the anti-myth ingredients common to these two other traditions, the Oneto book has fans not only among the supporters of the anti-Italian Northern League but also among ultra-Catholics and pro-Bourbon *meridionalisti*. Among the former there are the bishop emeritus of Isernia, Andrea Gemma,<sup>22</sup> and the neo-Fascist and ultra-Catholic movement called Forza Nuova, founded in 1997 by two militants of the Movimento Sociale-Fiamma tricolore, Roberto Fiore and Massimo Morsello. These two have just reappeared after some years in hiding abroad because they were suspected of having participated in the bombing of Bologna station in 1980 (Roversi 2008, 32). On its website Forza Nuova has a section called ‘Counter-History’ (*Controstoria*)<sup>23</sup> with three entries on Garibaldi entitled: ‘Garibaldi? A slave trader’, ‘Garibaldi, the first radical-chic myth of Italy’, ‘Giuseppe Garibaldi: He was really a man with a golden heart!’<sup>24</sup> The story that books take many words to tell is here conveniently reduced to its true nuggets, i.e. slander and political attack.

Thanks to their common enemy and the shared ultra-Catholic element, leghisti and the new southernists have become de facto allies in spreading the ‘true’ story about Garibaldi:

and the main thrust of this story is that it was all a conspiracy. Leghisti, who used to equate anything southern with corruption, can now be heard denouncing the wicked northerners who went to steal the land of the southerners and destroyed their economy. The convergence between these unlikely bedfellows became visible and dramatised on a more public level on the occasion of the Italian Senate's solemn commemoration of the bicentenary anniversary of Garibaldi on 4 July 2007: a handful of leghisti and a few exponents of the Sicily-based Movimento per le Autonomie – a new political formation which claims to have the south at heart – made the news by loudly contesting the ceremony.<sup>25</sup> Later in the year, a conference organised by the Chamber of Deputies in November 2007 was disrupted by leghisti who denounced Garibaldi as a thief, freemason, betrayer of the south, and so on.<sup>26</sup> Never missing an opportunity for vulgar abuse, the leader of the League, Umberto Bossi, went so far as to call Garibaldi a '*cretino*' (idiot).<sup>27</sup>

### The very Italian anti-Italianism of the Northern League

As we have seen, Oneto is much less laconic than Bossi. Beside the ingredients analysed earlier, his book also contains something new and different from the anti-Garibaldi clichés of ultra-Catholics and neo-Bourbons. To understand the choice of the title – 'hyper-Italian' – one has to go back to the language and the clichés of Italy's discourse on national character. The idea that Italians as a people have a character is a very strong topos in Italian culture and public discourse, both left and right.<sup>28</sup> To be sure, national character is also a commonplace in other countries: many peoples have stereotypical images of themselves, some more positive, others more negative, or more often a mixture of both. Outside Italy, Italians tend to be seen as either masters of good living or *mafiosi*, and more often both. In Italy the term Italian-style (as in the expression *all'italiana*) is often used to denote something crooked and poorly done. Indeed many Italians share the idea that their national character has quite a few flaws and defects – this idea seems to pop up every time someone is trying to explain problems in Italian politics and society – from Berlusconi to the riots at football games. To be sure, the negative self-stereotype coexists with a more positive, and no less problematic idea, which has also become popular in post-1945 Italy: the notion of *Italiani brava gente*, namely of the Italians as a good-hearted people. However, all these ideas are not simply innocuous age-old stereotypes, but have also ideological underpinnings and political implications. They have a long history that can be traced back to the original structuring of the discourse of Italian national patriotism and to its transformations over time, and they have become a solid component of the Italians' common sense, or everyday discourse.

Oneto's labelling of Garibaldi as hyper-Italian and the claim that he was a *cialtrone* are thus an instance of the discourse on Italian character. For Oneto the two terms – Italian and charlatan – are virtually synonymous. Although he constructs his own identity as an honest *padano*, immune for some unclear reason to the diseases of other Italians, Oneto participates (and how could he not since he grew up and lives in Italy) in a very Italian discourse on the (negative) essence of Italian character. Hence it becomes understandable how 'hyper-Italian' is a term of denigration.<sup>29</sup> In the *cialtrone* there is also a bit of the *furbo*, an important category of the discourse on Italian character, meaning a shrewd

(usually male) individual, who is able to turn things around in his favour with a touch of dishonesty when needed.

For Oneto, Garibaldi is 'very Italian' in the common (and also very Italian) sense of the term, namely as a conglomerate of rather unflattering traits. To support his claim he quotes one of the most influential sources of clichés concerning the alleged Italian character, Giuseppe Prezzolini, a cultural organiser and journalist of nationalist and conservative orientation whose life spans the whole twentieth century: 'As Prezzolini wrote, *The adventurers, the loafers, the drifters exist in all countries and in all times, but in Italy the adventurer reached the dimension of a true institution* [emphasis in the original]' (Oneto 2006, 309; my translation). Oneto's conclusion is that '[i]n the Risorgimento years, we find the whole repertory of the shoddy Italianness of the following [i.e. postunification] years: a mix of hotheads, patriots, idealists, but also and primarily opportunists, turn-coats and authentic delinquents' (Oneto 2006, 310).

Strangely, it never seems to cross Oneto's mind that Garibaldi and most of his followers were from *northern* Italy, and that if the southerners were mostly victims of a plot by northerners, the scoundrels were thus not generic Italians, but mainly 'northern' Italians. Of course, it would be pointless to examine the contradictions in what is a mostly ideological discourse. But it is worth considering the various strategies Oneto uses in his narrative to make Garibaldi into this unappealing character. We mentioned earlier character assassination; besides that, there is the undermining of any proper sense of historical context by exclusive use of the present tense and by constantly making parallels with present-day phenomena and characters, often borrowed from television programmes and commercial popular culture. With no consideration or respect for the autonomy of the past, the image of Garibaldi that Oneto conveys is completely 'presentist', to the point that it even carries some resemblance – as the author of the article in *ALP* notices – with the image of the 'average Italian' created by actor Alberto Sordi in dozens of his post-1945 films.<sup>30</sup> This equation is an interesting new feature in the body of works committed to denigrating Garibaldi because it brings a more mass-cultural component to the representation. Perhaps this is only to be expected as the leaders and propagandists of the League make a point of emphasising in their discourse all that is most plebeian and never refrain from vulgarity. The portrait of Garibaldi offered by Oneto epitomises these overall tendencies.

Yet, in this respect Oneto too is not entirely original. A biography of Garibaldi by journalists Indro Montanelli and Marco Nozza that first came out in 1962 and has been reprinted many times since may have served as a model for Oneto in the sense that it already began to decontextualise Garibaldi and to make him into a kind of timeless 'Italian' in a timeless Italian society: we read that his mother was a 'typically Italian mum', that a Mazzinian agitator was a 'typical Italian adventurer, with no scruples to the point of cynicism', that Garibaldi himself was 'the most characteristic and picturesque representative of a certain Italian folklore, the "mask" most congenial to the taste of the crowds' (Montanelli and Nozza 1982, 13, 53, 593).<sup>31</sup> In turn the model of this type of statement is again Prezzolini, who was Montanelli's friend and intellectual mentor. Similarly to Prezzolini, Montanelli never considered the Italians worth much as a people and often lashed out at their national character. The rhetoric of the 'typically Italian' inflected in the negative has turned out to play handsomely into the anti-Italian hands of the League.

### Echo chambers: television and the new media

Even if it is doubtful that the readership for books such as *L'ipertaliano* amounts to much,<sup>32</sup> today's media landscape provides an unprecedented echo chamber for the stories of all sorts of anti-Garibaldi and anti-Risorgimento propagandists and gives more strength to 'group polarisation' as people with the same extreme views have more occasions to meet and exchange opinions in virtual space (Sunstein 2007, 60–73). Fragments of the stories told in these publications regularly make their way not only into the press of the Northern League – such as the daily *La Padania* – and other right-wing newspapers such as *Libero*,<sup>33</sup> but also onto a wide variety of websites: from those of the Northern League and its affiliated associations such as the Movimento Giovani Padani (the youth branch of the party)<sup>34</sup> to those of the various pro-southern, ultra-Catholic and neo-fascist associations that have emerged in the past twenty years.<sup>35</sup>

More importantly, people such as Oneto and Salera have been given considerable exposure on one of the public television channels, RAI2, whose news programme (TG2), thanks to the logic of *lottizzazione* (partition of the spoils), fell under the control of the Northern League during the government of the Centre-Right coalition of 2001–2006. In 2007 TG2, still directed by the leghista Antonio Marano, broadcast two programmes on Garibaldi featuring Oneto and Salera as well as other vocal critics of the Risorgimento.<sup>36</sup> The first was a short piece entitled *Garibaldi: Hero or robber?* featuring interviews exclusively with Oneto and Salera: their political affiliations were not provided (they were introduced as generic 'writers') and the programme broadcast only their version of the story as if it were the truth and as if the truth were finally told against the dominant *vulgata risorgimentale* or 'hagiographic chorus'. The second was a 45-minute programme entitled *Garibaldi the two-faced hero*. It was a narration of Garibaldi's enterprises up to 1860 that used excerpts from historical films on the hero, mixed with interviews with journalists and historians. Along with Oneto and Salera, only the critics of the Garibaldi 'legend' were interviewed – with the exception of a brief appearance of one academic historian, Mario Isnenghi, who, however, was not given the opportunity to rebut any of the allegations of the others. The programme asserted that Italian unification was the result of foreign interests, opportunism and deception, resulting in a complete disaster for the south and leading to the current centralised state. In short, both programmes offer a retelling of the Risorgimento in the service of Northern League politics.

In turn, such programmes have been given more exposure to the public thanks to their circulation on YouTube, the popular video platform created in 2005. *Garibaldi: Hero or robber?* had been watched by almost 9000 viewers as of 20 June 2009.<sup>37</sup> A short version of *Garibaldi the two-faced hero* featuring excerpts from interviews with the anti-Garibaldi writers (again not identified in terms of their political affiliation) also made it onto YouTube. As of 12 July 2009 it had been viewed by almost 6400 people.<sup>38</sup> The comments posted by the viewers are evidence of the alarming effects of cyberspace when used to propagate extreme views and rumours (Sunstein 2009). The anti-Garibaldi story circulates in several other videos posted on YouTube whose titles promise to make some new and startling revelations. 'Big thief' is probably the gentlest epithet reserved for Garibaldi (as in 'Garibaldi and the Thousand Big Thieves') in this material. Another video announces 'The Crimes of Garibaldi in Sicily', and yet another is entitled 'God forgive the brigand Garibaldi.' Free advertising for anti-Garibaldi books also circulates in the blogosphere. There too, in spite of its right-wing leghista matrix, the Oneto book appears



as recommended reading in all sorts of blogs, even those of the seemingly more democratic *meridionalisti*.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

There are several ironies in this most recent instalment of the story of the uses and abuses of Garibaldi: those who used to be harsh critics of the process of unification and of its protagonists have now become their strongest defenders; former arch-enemies borrow from each other in order to tell the ‘true’ story of Garibaldi; northern leghisti defend the memory of the supposedly very rich southern kingdom which fell to the wicked northerners’ conquest and they engage in the very Italian practice of denouncing the national character. Beyond the ironies, however, there are some serious issues concerning the manipulation of history in the era of the internet and under the current duopolistic regime in the arena of television (the public RAI, on the one hand, and Berlusconi’s Mediaset, on the other), which, as long as the owner of Mediaset is the leader of the centre-right coalition, acts as a virtual monopoly when the latter is in power. Under current arrangements in the public television sector, an inordinate amount of weight is given to the views of the League, a relatively small party, but one holding disproportionate power in the centre-right coalition.

This rewriting of Italian history, moreover, is taking place in the era of the Internet, when both good and bad information spreads much more quickly than it used to and can reach a larger number of people, especially among the young. As the public use and abuse of history has grown considerably, half-truths and lies of all kinds circulate at the touch of a keyboard. Thanks to the internet, proponents of the anti-myth of Garibaldi can get a much larger audience than their publishers – generally small and provincial – could ever dream of. Thus a considerable number of people with often no knowledge of history are being exposed to their myths and historical lies as well as to the baneful effects of group polarisation, which seems to occur with a vengeance in cyberspace.

Will the image of the charlatan Garibaldi be able to dethrone that of the virtuous and self-sacrificing champion of Italian unity? Will it help the cause of those who would like to see the end of the Italian nation as we know it? For now, according to a recent survey, Garibaldi continues to enjoy vast popularity among the Italian public.<sup>40</sup> In any event, the rewriting of the past cannot change social and political identities unaided; for change to occur in the realm of identification there must be other influences creating disaffections and fostering new allegiances. Judging from the battle around the image of Garibaldi that was raging in Italy on the occasions of the bicentenary commemorations of the hero, those who want to unmake Italy did not miss the opportunity to try to damage a popular symbol of Italian unity. They are now renewing their efforts in order to sabotage the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of national unification in 2010–2011.<sup>41</sup> It will be interesting to see whether the residual Italian nationalist component of the right-wing coalition in power has any will to oppose this strategy, or whether it succumbs to the pressures of its incongruent bedfellow, the eminently Italian Northern League.

## Notes

1. Another picture of a group of former Russian prisoners of war belonging to the *garibaldini* and carrying the same effigy is on p. 2. This periodical began publication in 1973 and came out

- erratically until 1977, followed by an interruption until 1984. Since 1984 it has appeared on a regular basis, later helped by a regional law which gives funding for the ‘valorisation of the linguistic patrimony of Piedmont’ (Regione Piemonte, law no. 26 of 10 April 1990).
2. Among the founders of the organisation was also Roberto Gremmo, later the founder of Union Piemonteisa, an autonomist movement which allied itself with the Lega and has similar racist and anticommunist views.
  3. However, according to his biography in Wikipedia ([http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilberto\\_Oneto](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilberto_Oneto), accessed October 28, 2009) Oneto has had some disagreements with the leadership of the movement.
  4. The term refers of course to the basin of the Po, but the League also includes in it the alpine areas and part of central Italy, which are clearly not part of the Po basin. The actual use of the term in other words is completely arbitrary and suits the political project of the organisation.
  5. The bicentenary of the birth of Garibaldi happened to coincide with the 700th anniversary of the death of the main hero of the Associazione Liber Piemont, Fra Dolcino, a local preacher influenced by the millenarian ideas of Gioacchino da Fiore and burned at the stake with several of his followers in 1307. Since the early twentieth century Fra Dolcino has been celebrated as a symbol of popular resistance and true Christianity by the local left: see Vaudano (2004).
  6. Examples of these new initiatives for a non-specialist audience are Villari (2007); Montanelli and Nozza (1982) (reprint of a work first published in 1962 and reprinted several times); Rossi (2008). Scholarly works are Ceccuti and degl’Innocenti (2007); Isnenghi (2007); Cecchinato (2007); Riall (2007). Several writings by Garibaldi were also republished in 2006.
  7. For a general overview on these multiple uses see Isnenghi 1997 and Heyriès (2002).
  8. See Riall (2007), 377–84. On the anti-Garibaldi rhetoric among Catholic apologists before unification see Isnenghi (1990).
  9. Speech given on the 50th anniversary of the death of Garibaldi.
  10. Examples of this historiography are Isnenghi (1998) and Lanaro (1998).
  11. See ‘Il Senato celebra Garibaldi, Lega in lutto’, *Corriere della Sera*, July 4, 2007 (online version).
  12. The full name of the movement is Lega Nord per l’Indipendenza della Padania (see the website of the organisation: <http://www.leganord.org>). According to the statute of the movement, Padania includes all the regions of the north and centre of Italy (except Lazio). But it is the prerogative of the movement’s federal council to admit other ‘nations’, i.e. ethno-geographical communities, into Padania (see [http://www.leganord.org/ilmovimento/storia/01\\_lega\\_nord\\_storia79\\_87.pdf](http://www.leganord.org/ilmovimento/storia/01_lega_nord_storia79_87.pdf), accessed June 12, 2009).
  13. See also Albertazzi (2006).
  14. See for example Martucci (1999). The website of Libera Compagnia Padana contains a bibliography with 242 titles divided into the following categories: history of the original peoples (i.e. the so-called Celtic roots of Padania); ‘Padanian’ history; the history of Venice; the Risorgimento; recent history; recent events (*attualità*); environment and globalisation; ‘Padan’ identity; federalism and autonomy; autonomism (see <http://www.laliberacompania.org/Bibliografia.ph>, accessed February 26, 2007). The list is remarkable for its heterogeneity.
  15. There is no credit or acknowledgement in the book, but the author of the picture was a caricaturist for *Vanity Fair*, the Frenchman Théobard Chartran, and it appeared first in the issue of June 15, 1878. I thank Lucy Riall for giving me this information.
  16. For this language see for example ‘Testi che non possono mancare nelle biblioteche dei veri padanisti’ (<http://www.lapadania.com/editnord/biblioteca/libri.htm>, accessed July 28, 2007).
  17. On the beginnings of this tradition see Isnenghi (1990).
  18. According to the blurb on the author, Pappalardo is parliamentary advisor (consigliere) of the Senate, member of Alleanza Cattolica, and director of the Istituto per la Dottrina e l’Informazione Sociale in Rome; he has published works on brigandage and pro-Bourbon guerrilla action after unification, and anti-Napoleonic insurgencies: see review by Roberto Bonvegna in online version of *Cristianità*, 313 (2002).
  19. In the meeting of Comunione e liberazione of 2000 a whole exhibit presented a revisionist account of the Risorgimento: see Balzani (2001). Not by accident, the exhibit was organized just before the Church beatified Pius IX.

20. I gather this information from the website of the association (<http://www.neoborbonico.it>, accessed June 12, 2009). On 24 February 2007 the association created an 'anti-Garibaldi committee' to wage the battle against the 'false myths' of Garibaldi.
21. I am thinking of course about the leftist tradition that goes back to Gramsci among others.
22. See his recommendation (<http://www.altromolise.it>, accessed March 3, 2007).
23. Counter-history is another feature borrowed from the leftist counter-culture of the 1970s and put to the service of a conservative cause.
24. See <http://www.forzanuova.org/controstoria.htm> (accessed March 12, 2007). For a recent survey of the galaxy of extreme right-wing sites on the Internet see Roversi (2008).
25. See 'Leghisti e siciliani contro Garibaldi. Lite al Senato per il bicentenario', *La Repubblica*, July 4, 2007 and 'Il Senato celebra Garibaldi, Lega in lutto', *Corriere della Sera*, July 4, 2007. The Movimento per l'Autonomia is a party founded in 2005 by Raffaele Lombardo, a member of a small centrist party. In 2006 it stipulated an electoral agreement with the League (Patto per le autonomie) to push for an autonomist agenda (as of this writing, these two political groups are still members of the Centre-Right government coalition, even though not without tensions, as the fall of the Sicilian regional administration in the Spring of 2009 has shown). In August 2008 the mayor of Capo d'Orlando, a small Sicilian town, acquired notoriety by demolishing with a pickaxe the street-sign in a square that had once been dedicated to Garibaldi, an event immortalised in a video on YouTube.
26. 'La Camera celebra Garibaldi. Blitz leghista: traditore e massone', *Corriere della Sera*, November 7, 2007; 'Blitz leghista contro Garibaldi. È un criminale di guerra', *La Repubblica*, November 6, 2007.
27. A. Statera, 'E il senatùr ci ripensa: "Garibaldi era un cretino"', *La Repubblica*, September 17, 2007.
28. On this subject see Patriarca (2010).
29. Interestingly, he has chosen the term 'iperitaliano' instead of 'arcitaliano' which has an analogous meaning: the latter also has a fascist connotation, and recently right-wing journalist Giuliano Ferrara has reclaimed the term (see his column in the weekly *Panorama*) in order to use it against the alleged 'anti-Italianism' of the left.
30. On Sordi's films see Fava (2003).
31. On this work see also Isnenghi (2009), 48–54.
32. The book is hard to find in regular bookstores and must be ordered from the publisher.
33. See G. Oneto, 'Il lato oscuro dell'eroe dei due mondi', *Liberio*, September 20, 2006, and by the same author 'Colpa di Garibaldi se la malavita la fa da padrone', *Liberio*, November 5, 2006.
34. G. Oneto, 'Risorgimento: dove sta l'imbroglio' (<http://www.giovanipadani.leganord.org/stampa.asp?ID=236>, accessed February 27, 2007).
35. Several of these websites have been mentioned in the previous notes. See also the website of the ultra-Catholic Istituto Storico dell'Insorgenza e per l'Identità Nazionale (<http://www.identita-nazionale.it>, accessed September 21, 2007) which claims that Catholicism is the true ethos and culture of the Italian nation.
36. Both programmes can be accessed through the Catalogo Multimediale of RAI. A third short piece featuring interviews with Mario Isnenghi and Angela Pellicciari was broadcast in the programme *Mizar* on RAI2 on June 15, 2007.
37. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erS9PuBepK> (accessed 4 July, 2009).
38. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjpbDu2sUuM> (accessed October 1, 2009).
39. This seems the case of the blog of a certain Rocco Biondi ([http://roccobiondi.blog.espresso.repubblica.it/weblog\\_di\\_rocco\\_biondi/2007/03/la\\_verit\\_su\\_gar.html](http://roccobiondi.blog.espresso.repubblica.it/weblog_di_rocco_biondi/2007/03/la_verit_su_gar.html), accessed March 4, 2007). Biondi dislikes the 'rhetoric of the hero' Garibaldi and expresses his disagreement with the official celebrations taking place in Italy. While advertising various 'counter-histories' of leghista or ultra-Catholic origins, he stresses, however, the agency of the southerners themselves in bringing down the government of the Bourbons in 1860. Along similar lines see also <http://pablito84.spaces.live.com/blog/cns!FE1BF128D425052D!2221.entry> (accessed June 12, 2008), which borrows heavily from the Biondi blog and refers to the Oneto book as a 'source of truth'.
40. See E. Ambrosi, 'Resta lui l'eroe degl' italiani', *La Repubblica*, May 24, 2008. The article reports the results of a survey realised by Ispo-Istituto per gli Studi sulla Pubblica Opinione in which 76.6% of the sample expresses a favourable opinion on Garibaldi.

41. See S. Fiore, 'Storici contro Bondi: "Idea povera del Risorgimento"', *La Repubblica*, September 17, 2009.

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