

The Construction “from Below” of the Citizenship in Rural Society of Liberal Italy: Ordinary People and Peasant Community in Correspondence with the MP Michele Capozzi (1836-1917)

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Abstract

This article focuses on the “democratization from below” of rural societies in Italy during the transition from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth century. With the aim of better understand the social dynamics and the ways in which Italian rural society changed through the complex networks of patronage, the research examined the private correspondence of the MP from Avellino Michele Capozzi (1836-1917) with ordinary people and peasants in 1901. The research highlights how by recovering the concept of peasant community and marginalized voices in the archives and documents, it is possible to overcome the traditional separation between political institutions and society, to study the relationship between rural community and social change during the liberal age, the construction of the electorate and its transformation into individuals and citizen-voters.

Keywords: Peasant Community; Elites; Patronage; Citizenship; Franchise; Liberal Italy; Micro history; History from Below

1. From Elites to Ordinary People through the Private Correspondence

The concept of community, and specifically that of peasant society, has been studied over time from different perspectives in the social sciences. Anthropologists, sociologists, and historians have interpreted it in different ways and have often producing opposing theories on changes in peasant communities. Despite has been growing the interest about studies on the socio-political area related to elites and political patronage networks, there are not studies about direct interactions between unorganized citizens and MPs in the rural and peasant society in Southern Italy during Liberal age. But precisely because the peasant world is crossed by many types of inequality, ranging from social class to gender, it is worth trying to understand the moments when the rural community either becomes a protagonist of change or resists it (Díaz-Geada, Cañón Voirín 2021, pp. 7-8).

This article is the first result of an ongoing research project focused on the “democratization from below” of rural societies, in the transition from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth century. The research aims to study social dynamics to highlight the process of the “construction” of the citizenship in the Italian case, since the fall of the “Destra Storica” in 1876, by recovering «marginalized memories, voices and experiences» (Samuel, 1994, p. 3).

Particular attention has been paid to investigating the forms of mediation that regulated the relations between the centre and the periphery in the Italian case, and these forms of mediation always refer *in primis* to the to the importance of localism. In Italy the notable is the hinge element of the system, a synthesis between the interests of localism and the national dimension. In fact, if it is true that political liberal system was designed to work from the top downwards and from the centre to the periphery, however a whole series of mediations emerge between the centre and local realities, in both directions. Hence the figure of the provincial notable is fundamental not only to explain the Italian political system in XIX but also to approach the subordinate classes and understand the mechanisms that governed them and their path towards democracy.

In a bottom-up research perspective, focused on local realities, it seemed useful, in order not to lose relevant specificities, turning the attention to the lives and struggles of ordinary people in correspondence with the MP Michele Capozzi (1836-1917), one of the leaders of the political scene in Irpina (Avellino) from 1867-1904 and president of the Provincial Council for more than two decades (Barra, 2020).

From a methodological point of view, efforts were made to capture and highlight as much as possible the elements that constitute the "double movement", the reciprocal conditioning and dialectical circularity between the two levels, local and national.

The aim was to bring ordinary people out of the background into which they are relegated and often ignored, to focus on the preliminary process of building politics and citizenship in the territorial and social dimension considered, on a micro-historical level: the province of Avellino, in Southern Italy, characterized in the years between the 19th and 20th centuries by a difficult abandonment of the demographic and social structure of the old regime and by an economy centred on traditional agriculture and small industry.

The basic source is the private correspondence of Capozzi: by reducing the scale of the historical investigation and focusing on social relations at the grass roots, it was possible to pay a great deal of attention to single individual and to the small peasant community in Avellino, until now completely unobserved.

Through the great wealth of this private correspondence, which shows the hidden face of politics, the study sought to identify and track the ways in which the demand coming from civil society was channelled to meet the institutions. Since «a focus on formal power relations, institutions, and high-level policy often fails to comprehend or explain how and why things developed as they did on the ground – often in ways not intended by authorities and elites» (Port, 2015), the analysis of life documents such as letters, related to individuals and their lives, allowed the reconstruction of a series of relationships and networks around Capozzi, that helped to overcome the traditional distinction and separation between political institutions and society, often a limitation of historiography.

The precious archive of the Capozzi family was donated in 1984 by Cristina Di Marzo Capozzi (1909-1996) to the municipal library of Atripalda, the former electoral college of Michele Capozzi. Only recently has been published its inventory of the archive (Barra F., Barra. V. & Ricciardi, 2009), which consists of several tens of thousands of documents ranging from the 16th century to the 20th century. The part relating to Michele Capozzi is made up of 103 envelopes, through which it is possible to follow both political and administrative national and local events from the Unification to the end of the liberal State.

2. The Province of Avellino in Liberal Age

Avellino and its province, the Irpinia, constitute an inland territory of Campania, in the South of Italy. The province was born in 1860 on the territory of what had been the "Principato Ultra" in the kingdom of Naples, with some territorial adjustments due to the birth of the province of Benevento after the Unification.

To the very small electoral body, that in post-unification Irpinia constituted little more than 1% of the population, was reserved the direct election of municipal administrators (excluding, however, the

Mayors, until 1889 of royal appointment), provincial councilors (but until 1888 the prefect presided over the Deputation: the council of the provincial administration), and deputies to Parliament.

The province of Avellino was divided into six uninominal districts: Avellino, Atripalda, Ariano, Mirabella, Sant'Angelo dei Lombardi, Lacedonia.

The participation of the rural masses in political and administrative life was very low. Illiterate people - who in 1861 constituted 88.6% of the population of Irpinia, decreasing to 65% in 1911 - did not have the right to vote, while craftsmen, tenants and farmers could not become voters if they did not have their own property or did not reach a certain amount of wealth. Political voters only represented a small minority, which went from 1.50% of the population in the period of the Right (1861-1876) to about 7% with the electoral reform of 1882 and only rose to 24% in 1913, when Giovanni Giolitti granted universal male suffrage. Under these conditions, the basic nucleus of the electoral body was made up of the proprietary and professional bourgeoisie, but also of small landowners, whose mentality and social background made them politically close to the small bourgeoisie.

With the enlargement of the suffrage in 1882, however, there was a strong increase in the processes of political manipulation carried out by the ruling groups, due to the abrupt admission to political life of new and substantial groups of voters. Paradoxically, the change took place in the sphere of continuity and the transition to political modernization was very problematic. Even more paradoxically, the enlargement of the suffrage led to inappropriate and even degenerative phenomena like electoral corruption, because it promoted the individuals and power groups that were best able to organize interests – personal, familiar, and factional.

A similar process had taken place in Spain, except for the necessary proportions, where the introduction of universal suffrage in 1898 had led to an increase in electoral fraud and had not changed the political balance of the elites nor promoted a broader democratisation of the masses. (Dardé, 2007, p. 205).

The enlargement of the electoral body exacerbated and accentuated the mechanism of clientelist power based on transformism. One of the consequences was the consolidation of notable's groups, the inability to adequately represent general and collective interests and the exasperation of personal, and factional antagonisms.

3. The “King Michele”

The power of Michele Capozzi, nicknamed “King Michele”, dominated the political life of the province of Avellino for many decades, so much so that an authentic “black legend” was created by his political opponents around him. Capozzi had inherited a great wealth of land and relations with the ruling class of the Bourbon kingdom first and then of liberal Italy, belonging to an old family of the provincial civil class. Having graduated in law, he devoted himself to managing the family fortune and to politics. He had been a Member of Parliament since 1867, but his participation in the work of the Parliament was always very rare, because Capozzi's political horizon was clearly that of provincial politics, and all his efforts aimed first at building and then at defending his political and administrative hegemony in Irpinia.

In fact, the national deputation gave him the prestige and influence that was essential to keep up the network of interests and friendships that allowed him to dominate not only his electoral district but the whole province.

The essential keystone of the institutional structure and of the political-administrative balance was represented also in Avellino, as in the whole kingdom of Italy, by the Provincial administration (Romanelli, 1998): the only territorial body having a certain spending capacity, from roads building to education and health assistance, and therefore destined to become immediately after the Unity the place of political battle between the personalities and the most representative political currents expressed by Irpinia. With the Unification, in fact, and especially since 1865, the Provincial Council was called to perform new and important functions, quite different from those merely consultative of the Bourbon period. The modernization and creation of infrastructures, especially in the field of roads, the control of local authorities and charitable institutions, secondary education and assistance to the needy were the main tasks of the provincial administration, and in the general absence of other institutions, the provincial administration played an important political role as a link between the centre and the periphery.

The newspapers also played a fundamental role in Capozzi's system of territorial control (Alifano & Valentino, 1982). Capozzi could count on the support of the “Eco dell'Irpinia”, founded in 1866 and the main organ of Capozzi's party. Much of its success, which lasted until its closure in 1872, was because Capozzi made it the official organ of the Provincial Administration. The 'Gazzetta di Avellino' took its place on the occasion of the 1874 elections. The organ of the anti-Capozzi minority in the Provincial Council was instead “L'Elettore”, with which the polemics were frequent and lively. In general, the press in favour of Capozzi benefited from provincial subsidies and, in fact, had a much longer life than the opposition's press organs.

The press had a not secondary role in the electoral control of the Irpinian electoral districts, together with the private and public favour (Weingrod, 1968, p. 379; Scott, 1972, p. 92), and the personalistic use of the Province's resources to support and feed the network of supporters and agents articulated in the province, with links in every rural village of Irpinia. In this system, the management of the provincial budget became functional to the sustenance of a clientelistic system so complex and articulated that it lasted for forty years (Barra, 2017).

4. Ordinary People and Peasant Community in Correspondence with Michele Capozzi

Capozzi's constituency, that of Atripalda, included the districts of Atripalda, Serino, Volturara, Chiusano and Montemiletto, in the valley of the Sabato river, and had 1243 voters in 1882. Geographically heterogeneous, it was also heterogeneous in terms of composition, characterized as it was by both urban and rural populations, and by productive structures. In fact, agricultural activities coexisted, dominated by small intensively farmed estates, with manufacturing activities: mills, ironworks, paper mills, linked to the exploitation of the waters of the Sabato river.

The documentation in the Capozzi archives shows the heterogeneity of the relationships in which selective benefits were exchanged for political support, both vertically and horizontally. The complex, multifunctional (Clapham, 1982) and adaptive (Kern, 1974, p. 115) nature of Capozzi's clientelism emerges by letters. In addition to the importance of ties of a purely political nature, can be also verified the relevance of the affective and emotional ties between patron and client, which often intersect with the religious dimension, institutionalized with the assumption of the role of godfather.

In this context, however, it is necessary to briefly specify the very concept of clientelism, which can be synthetically defined as «a form of personal, dyadic exchange usually characterised by a sense of obligation and unequal balance of power» (Hopkin,2006). In the clientelar relationship, therefore, the dimension of proximity between patron and client is fundamental. In other words, it is a personal relationship on a level of social and economic inequality: «direct reciprocity, unequal reciprocity, face-to-face reciprocity» (Graziano, 1976). Political patronage, however, should be distinguished from the campanilism or the simple recommendation, but should be understood as the exchange of favours for votes, with the aim of consolidating the political power of the subject who uses his position of economic power and social influence to build a loyal following (Piattoni, 2007). In this context, through the specific cases we have examined, we have gone down from the *macro* level, i.e. clientelism as a political system in its own right, to the *micro* level, i.e. to the particular strategies concerning each patron-client relationship (Alexander, Munch,& Smelser,1987).

From the letters examined, related to the year 1901, emerges the hinge role, the two-faced role of the deputy (Musella,1994) played in the relationship between local and national interests, between general and particular, and the mediation between the state and the voters. The aim of the research, however, was to focus not on Capozzi but on the other side of the clientelar relationship, to bring to light the ordinary people and the peasant society, over which he exerted his influence.

Some data emerged:

4.1 In the Capozzi Archive there are countless letters requesting a job or a transfer, in the public administration, and both in the army or the navy; requests for hospital and health care for all kinds of illnesses; applications for government decorations and subsidies from the various ministries and from the Province and municipalities; there are also letters from mayors who, privately, ask for support in submitting their requests to the Prefect, the government official at provincial level; there are also letters by students asking for help in paying their university fees; requests for protection in court cases or even in favour of people who have already been sentenced or imprisoned; there are generally many requests for financial help from the poor and sick.

Capozzi personally managed each personal relation with several local notables and ordinary people, who often became his referents in the various towns in the province and in his constituency. It was through these trusted men, his intermediaries, that the requests for favours from both the voters and the humblest peasants mostly arrived. Direct dealings with Capozzi, on the other hand, i.e. without mediation, took place in cases of family relations or in the case of Capozzi's farmers and compatriots. Instead, many of the charity requests were received by Capozzi through letters addressed to his wife.

4.2. For the voters, it becomes important to point out their profession of political faith, their membership of the Capozzi clientele and their loyalty and commitment during the elections, while for the other individuals, the humblest and poorest stratum, reference is always made to religious feelings, to charity and to divine reward. For all, however, acts of submission and gratitude are always present.

Capozzi is described in the letters as «the man who can do everything», «the man of miracles» (ArchivioCapozzi, Antonio Titomanlio, February 5th, 1901), «idol and protector» (ArchivioCapozzi, Raffaele [?], September 25th, 1901), and a series of stereotyped expressions seem to be used to define the roles of the protector and the client, who assumes the tone of the quester, to clearly define the patronage relationship.

The case of the small rural town of Candida, in the district of Atripalda, Capozzi's electoral district, may be significant. Candida had 1382 residents in 1901 and already in the first months of that year there were numerous requests for recommendations, all from different voters: for a gun licence, for employment as a tax collector, for the remission of a month's imprisonment, for help in a trial, and also to obtain the position of archpriest by a local priest. In one of these cases the applicant, to urge his patron intervention and underline his past loyalty, returns to Capozzi the business card with the autograph signature of Capozzi, which becomes a sort of relic and sign of recognition and belonging, a symbol of material culture, concrete protection and of personal relationship between patron and client (Archivio Capozzi, Giuseppe Romano, February 4th, 1901).

In some cases, however, the formulations used depart from the stereotypical ones, especially when the client feels justly neglected and not considered in his requests and the tones of protest become prevalent or alternate with those of the humble quester. It is only then that the true nature of the patronage relationship is revealed between the lines, in which the client, beyond expressions of formalism and politeness, shows that he considers what he asks from the patron to be almost a sort of acquired right, despite being expressed in the form of a prayer, in the logic of loyalty to the clientelar pact of exchange between votes and favours.

In these cases, the client never fails to emphasise that what is at stake is precisely the credibility of the negligent patron, whose effectiveness risks being publicly questioned. One Candida voter, for example, wrote that he was very sorry to have been neglected by Capozzi and that the inhabitants of the neighboring village of San Potito mocked him, saying: «How come Capozzi, your protector, can't find you a job?» (Archivio Capozzi, Santulli Francesco, January 3rd, 1901.). Another client complained that: «All my prayers so far have had no effect, while those of others have been fully answered». (Archivio Capozzi, Giuseppe Romano, February 4th, 1901)

Moreover, also the excluding and discriminatory nature of the Capozzi patronage system, especially during elections, is also clearly shown in the documents. In a letter still concerning Candida, the mayor's wife asked Capozzi for punitive measures against the archpriest, who was guilty of interfering with her husband's activities (Archivio Capozzi, Concetta Marino [March, 1901]). At the same time, the archpriest wrote to Capozzi asking for help against the mayor's persecution (Archivio Capozzi, DeMagistris Pasquale, March 13th, 1901).

4.3. As highly pragmatic politician, Capozzi knew that in order to demonstrate his political hegemony in the province of Avellino, he had to effectively manage the demands of the humblest strata of society, to use also them as a tool to govern the territory and his power.

Significant in this respect is a letter from one of Capozzi's tenant farmers, a peasant working on his master's land, who in simple and sometimes grammatically incorrect language asks for his master's help in getting his son admitted to hospital, a boy who has been ill for ten months and confined to an unhealthy house. After having exhausted all his economic resources, the farmer, now unable to assist his son, asks for him to be admitted to hospital through the intercession of Capozzi, invoked as a grace: «We have God in Heaven and your excellence [sic] on earth and from you we hope every grace» (Archivio Capozzi, Antonio Cucciniello, October 13th, 1901).

Capozzi's personal relations with the humblest are also significant when not formally framed as a patron-client relationship in the strict sense of the word, but rather as a form of charity. In addition to the funds of the Province of Avellino, in fact, Capozzi personally managed his own charity network with his private funds, characterised by direct personal relationships.

As one example among many, the case of a poor widow from Avellino, with three children and in need of a surgery, writing from her bed to the «Charitable Mr. Commendatore» and asking him to send her some money for the children, as she does not have literally «a single cent» at her disposal (Archivio Capozzi, Concetta Scarpa [without date]).

Behind the formal and literary stereotype of Christian charity and of the good patron who comes to the aid of the unfortunate and the lowest strata of society, it is possible to glimpse Capozzi's need to show that he is capable of an intermediation that also takes on those who do not have the right to vote, just like that widowed woman. The political role and prestige of Capozzi and his network of patronage were also based on the constant demonstration *erga omnes* of being able to meet the demands of those who, whether voters or not, relied on his protection.

Conclusions

«The construction of an electorate can be considered as a step in the construction of the modern individual within the new modern nation» (Romanelli, 1998, p. 4). On contrary to what is often considered, however, even in a census-based electoral system, the disenfranchised masses do not seem to be entirely out of the matter of clientelar politics: in some respects they seem to be learning to negotiate their entry into the political sphere, finding their own space in the process of construction of the electoral body itself and of transformation into individuals and citizen-voters: it is time to get rid of the conception of rural and peasant society as a pre-political society (Cabo & Molina, 2020, p. 18). The real challenge is, if anything, to identify in the documents the traces of these excluded and forgotten peasant community and marginalized people, avoiding focusing only on elites and on the election results, which are rather the final stage of a process. Behind the local notables, the magistrates, the public employees, and men of the world of culture, there was in fact a rural community, a complex society on its way to political individualism, whose «path is neither straightforward nor uniform» (Romanelli, 1998, p. 21), but that cannot be ignored. Only by recovering the concept of peasant communities and its footprints from the archives, the interrelationship between rural society, social change and social movements may be more effectively investigated.

Tables

Table 1.

Michele Capozzi (private collection)



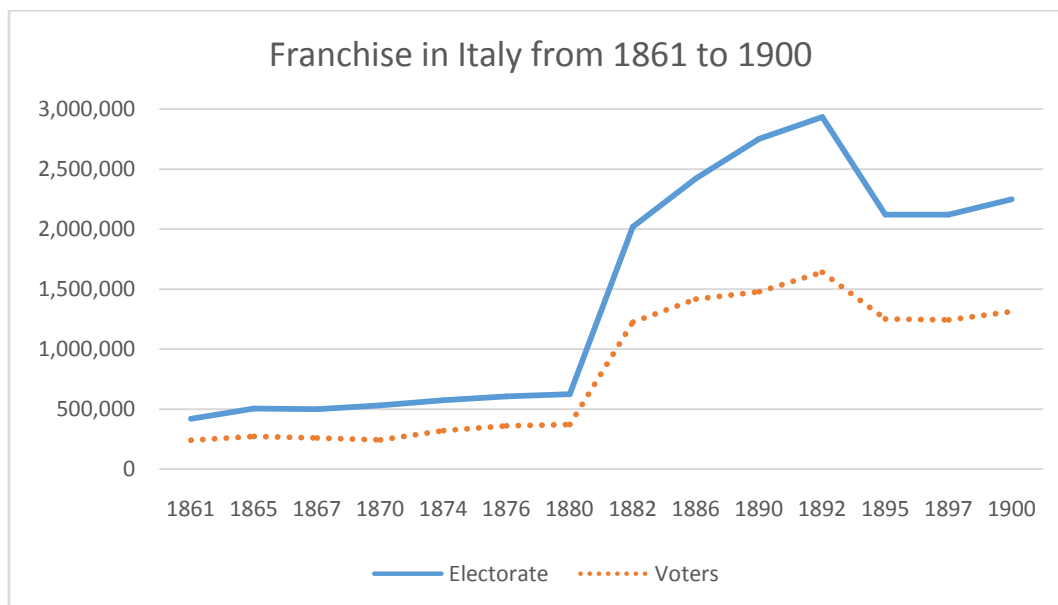
Table 2

Santoro, V. (1969). *Inhabitants of the province of Avellino and its capital city*. In *Campania: aspetti economico-sociali della struttura demografica*. Naples: Giannini, p. 47

	1861	1871	1881
Avellino	19.929	21.500	21.379
Whole Province	343.225	356.344	375.324

Table 3

Ownelaboration of data from Ministero Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio – Direzione generale di Statistica (1900). *Statistica delle elezioni generali politiche 3 e 10 giugno 1900*. Roma: Tipografia Nazionale di G. Bertero



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“Servizi ad amici nella vita privata e pubblica”

Archivio Capozzi, Biblioteca Comunale di Atripalda, Michele Capozzi.C1.178.91.1 “Corrispondenza. Lettere di raccomandazione”:

- Letter by Giuseppe Romano, February 4th, 1901.
Letter by Antonio Cucciniello, «servo e parsonale», October 13th, 1901.
Letter by Antonio Titomanlio, February 5th, 1901.
Letter by Raffaele [?], September 25th, 1901.
Letter by Santulli Francesco, January 3th, 1901.
Letter by Concetta Marino [March, 1901]).
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