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## Where Is Institutional History Heading?

A Survey of Recent Literature (2018-2023)

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# Where Is Institutional History Heading?

## A Survey of Recent Literature (2018-2023)

Lorenzo Coccoli \*

*Drafting a comprehensive survey of recent literature in any given disciplinary field is always a daunting task, especially since academic globalisation, the prevalence of English as the lingua franca in scientific-academic contexts, and the increasing digitization of scholarly content have provided access to an almost unlimited number of works published in all four corners of the world. To these general difficulties, the specific case of institutional history adds its own set of problems. They all essentially revolve around one question: what exactly is institutional history? Which, of course, boils down to finding a satisfactory definition of its particular object, i.e., institutions. For this survey, I have chosen to concentrate on new books, published in the last five years, and to confine myself to Western—and specifically English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish—scholarship.*



**D**RAFTING A COMPREHENSIVE SURVEY of recent literature in any given disciplinary field is always a daunting task, especially since academic globalisation, the prevalence of English as the lingua franca in scientific-academic contexts, and the increasing digitization of scholarly content have provided access to an almost unlimited number of works published in all four corners of the world. In order to reduce this number to a manageable size, some limitations, both chronological and geographical, are necessary, which inevitably

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involve an element of discretion and partiality. I have chosen to concentrate on new books<sup>1</sup> published in the last five years, and to confine myself to Western – and specifically English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish – scholarship. While the former choice, though obviously arbitrary, is also suitable for the purpose of providing a quick overview of the latest research trends – five years being a short but not entirely insignificant period in the evolution of a discipline –, the latter is mainly due to the range of languages I am somehow able to master, rather than reflecting any implicit judgement of their absolute scientific importance.

To these general difficulties, the specific case of institutional history adds its own set of problems. They all essentially revolve around one question: what exactly is institutional history? Which, of course, boils down to finding a satisfactory definition of its particular object, i.e., institutions. Clearly, depending on the breadth of this definition, the number of works to be included under the umbrella of institutional history will be greater or smaller. Narrowing its scope too much can be reductive, but broadening it too much risks rendering it almost useless. Until the last quarter of the last century, this conundrum was resolved by focusing exclusively on *political* institutions, and especially on what was then considered as the political institution *par excellence*: the modern State, with its representative, judicial, and administrative apparatuses. This had the advantage not only of clearly defining the boundaries of possible research topics, but also of limiting the discipline's chronological scope to modern and contemporary times, going back at most to the late Middle Ages. Different academic milieus might differ in their respective value judgments of the State-building process – with French and British scholars, for example, tending to emphasise its overall positive impact on society, while their Italian counterparts, at the end of a divergent historical trajectory, exalted the tradition of local autonomy over State centralism<sup>2</sup> – but its primacy was never in doubt.

<sup>1</sup> This excludes individual papers, special issues of journals, conferences, and other academic events, which is, of course, another subjective choice necessary to keep the number of publications within controllable limits.

<sup>2</sup> This was particularly true of the school of institutional history that developed in the 1960s around the Milan-based *Istituto per la scienza dell'amministrazione pubblica* (ISAP), and that set the course of the discipline for the following decades. See Guido Melis, *La storia delle istituzioni: Una chiave di lettura* (Roma: Carocci, 2020), 13-21.

The downside of this focus on statehood, however, was that too much attention was paid to public law and legal elements in general, based on the misleading assumption of an almost complete identification of power with State law. This is precisely what has been increasingly questioned since the 1960s and 1970s. Thanks largely to the work of French theorists and sociologists such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, the dispersed and pervasive nature of power dynamics has been repeatedly highlighted, challenging its reduction to (mainly repressive) State apparatuses. Ultimately, this led to a “broadening of the subject of the history of political institutions to include all social mechanisms that condition behaviour”.<sup>1</sup> More recently, historical institutionalism – one of the main branches of the neo-institutionalist tree – has contributed significantly to extending the notion of institutions beyond the purely formal domain. The major influence of Nobel Laureate Douglass C. North’s analyses of the crucial role of customary and informal restraints in economic development has sparked a renewed interest in those institutions that are not the direct emanation of any public authority.<sup>2</sup> His well-known definition of institutions as “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, the humanly devised constraints that shape human interactions”,<sup>3</sup> a definition that can be found as a premise in many publications on institutional history, is generic enough to encompass almost any set of organised norms, whether public or private, formal or informal, State-sanctioned or peer-enforced. To adhere to it, therefore, means a veritable explosion of the discipline, not only in terms of a broadening of its thematic horizons, but also of a vital methodological enrichment by opening up to the contributions of other disciplines.

This process of expanding the boundaries of the discipline, which has developed over the last thirty years or so, has also had its drawbacks. While it has

<sup>1</sup> Antonio M. Hespanha, *Storia delle istituzioni politiche*, trans. Adelina Aletti (Milano: Jaca Book, 1993), 22.

<sup>2</sup> However, the distinction between the formal and the informal is not always clear in North’s elaboration. See Geoffrey M. Hodgson, “What Are Institutions?”, *Journal of Economic Issues* 40, 1 (2006): 8-13.

<sup>3</sup> Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3. On the relevance of North’s work to institutional history, see Sonia Scognamiglio, “Dall’impatto economico alla civilizzazione istituzionale: L’itinerario serendipitario di un grande visionario delle scienze sociali”, *Le Carte e la Storia* 2 (2016): 24-30.

certainly strengthened the original interdisciplinary vocation of institutional history, it has also exacerbated one of its major problems, namely, in the words of one of its most distinguished representatives, “the absence of an identifying balance, of a central axis that could characterise and give self-consciousness to the recent tradition of the history of institutions”.<sup>1</sup> Once the exclusive reference to the State as the organising focus of the discourse is abandoned, all anchorages are shaken, and the boundaries of the discipline blur. If also religious institutions or private companies are to be included in its list of legitimate topics, what is to distinguish institutional history from, say, ecclesiastical or economic history? And why not extend its timeframe to antiquity and the early Middle Ages?

In Italy, the problem can be easily circumvented (though not definitively solved) thanks to the peculiar system of academic organisation, which is divided into different “academic disciplines” (*settori scientifico-disciplinari*, or *ssd*) defined by ministerial decree. The “History of Political Institutions” is one of them, identified by the code “SPS/03”. Its official (if not cultural) contours are thus somewhat recognisable: roughly speaking, an institutional historian is someone who belongs to this particular academic discipline. Like almost every other *ssd*, the history of political institutions has its own scholarly associations, journals, and academic schools. This configuration is reflected in the large number of *Festschriften* that have been published recently. In the last five years alone, seven edited volumes have been dedicated (usually by their closest pupils) to retired academics who have made a major contribution to the discipline, or to the memory of those of them who have died.<sup>2</sup> They signal the will to honour

<sup>1</sup> Melis, *La storia*, 111. Melis suggests that it is precisely in its “polymorphic” and “pluralistic” nature that the specificity of the discipline should be seen, as a kind of paradoxical “identity in reverse” (113). This is in line with his final proposal for the history of institutions as an “all-round” history, with no predetermined chronological or thematic limits, open to all kinds of sources and methodologies (see 130-131).

<sup>2</sup> See Guido D’Agostino, Mario Di Napoli, Sandro Guerrieri and Francesco Soddu, eds., *Il tempo e le istituzioni: Scritti in onore di Maria Sofia Corciulo* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2017); Stefano Levati and Simona Mori, eds., *Una storia di rigore e di passione: Saggi per Livio Antonielli* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2018); Vittoria Calabrò and Andrea Romano, eds., *Donne, politica, istituzioni, diritto e società: Studi dedicati a M. Antonella Cocchiara* (Canterano: Aracne, 2019); Francesco Di Donato, in collaboration with Sonia Scognamiglio and Giancarlo Vallone, eds., *Il diritto utile: Teorie e storiografie del dissenso in una vita per la critica, in onore di Raffaele Ajello* (Napoli: Editoriale

the leaders and pioneers of Italian institutional history, but they also indicate that a changing of the guard is underway, with younger generations of scholars taking the place of their academic masters at the head of their schools.

The history of political institutions also appears as a university course in the syllabuses of Italian departments (especially, but not only, those of political science and law). Recently, a considerable number of manuals and textbooks have been written as teaching aids for these courses. They may provide an overview of the history of the discipline, as in the case of the book by Guido Melis mentioned above;<sup>1</sup> or they may offer an introduction to its main themes, either from a global perspective – as in the case of the volume edited by Marco Meriggi and Leonida Tedoldi, in which each chapter analyses the evolution of a different set of institutions, from those of the *ancien régime* to contemporary international ones<sup>2</sup> – or at the national level, as in the case of Giuseppe Astuto’s book on Italian political institutions from unification to the early decades of the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps because of the officially recognised status of the discipline, none of these works contains any preliminary consideration of what an institution in general and the history of institutions in particular are: the defining boundaries can simply be taken as given. It is interesting to note, however, that a rich reflection on the concept of institution itself has been developing among Italian political philosophers in recent years. With three books on the subject since 2020, Roberto Esposito has certainly led the way,<sup>4</sup> but his contribution reaps the fruits of a wider and still ongoing debate.<sup>5</sup> He mobilises vari-

scientifica, 2019); Daniela Novarese, Enza Pelleriti, Vittoria Calabrò, Patrizia De Salvo and Carmen Trimarchi, eds., *Oltre l’università: Storia, istituzioni, diritto e società, studi per Andrea Romano* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020); Marcella Aglietti and Marco Cini, *Il giurista e lo storico delle istituzioni politiche: In ricordo di Danilo Marrara, con un’antologia di scritti* (Pisa: ETS, 2021); and Elisabetta Colombo, ed., *Le istituzioni e le idee: Studi indisciplinati offerti a Fabio Rugge per il suo settantesimo compleanno* (Milano: Giuffrè, 2022).

<sup>1</sup> See note 1 above.

<sup>2</sup> Marco Meriggi and Leonida Tedoldi, eds., *Storia delle istituzioni politiche: Dall’antico regime all’era globale* (Roma: Carocci, 2014). In 2022, the book was reissued for the tenth time.

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Astuto, *Le istituzioni politiche italiane. Da Cavour al dibattito contemporaneo* (Roma: Carocci, 2016). A new edition was published in 2022.

<sup>4</sup> See Roberto Esposito, *Pensiero istituyente: Tre paradigmi di ontologia politica* (Torino: Einaudi, 2020); Id., *Istituzione* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021); and Id., *Vitam instituere: Genealogia dell’istituzione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> The first results of which can be found in several edited volumes and special issues of journals.

ous definitions from different disciplines (revisiting in particular the lessons of twentieth-century sociology and legal institutionalism<sup>1</sup>) to formulate a notion of institution as an artificial form that articulates and gives substance to social reality, capable of holding together change and continuity, mutability and permanence, tradition and innovation.

In France, the situation is in some ways similar to that in Italy. The history of institutions, although paired with the history of law, is there both one of the disciplinary fields defined by the *Conseil national des universités* (CNU), the body responsible for managing academic qualification and recruitment procedures, and a basic university course in the curricula of the *licence de droit*, where institutional history has been present since its reform in 1954. It is not surprising, therefore, to find a wide choice of handbooks on the *histoire du droit et des institutions*, following a tradition of almost seventy years. In the five-year period under review, at least nine manuals of different titles and covering different chronological spans have been re-edited or republished, many of them several times. The oldest, Pierre-Clément Timbal's *Histoire des institutions publiques et des faits sociaux*, was first published in 1957.<sup>2</sup> Many of them chose 1789 as a threshold, most as a *terminus ad quem*,<sup>3</sup> but some others as a *terminus a quo*.<sup>4</sup> Unlike their Italian counterparts, they sometimes include also antiquity in their account,<sup>5</sup> and they occasionally offer an introductory demarcation of

For the period considered here, see the essays collected in *Discipline Filosofiche* 29, 2 (2019): "Il problema dell'istituzione. Prospettive ontologiche, antropologiche e giuridico-politiche", edited by Enrica Lisciani-Petrini and Massimo Adinolfi; and *Almanacco di Filosofia e Politica* 2 (2020): "Istituzione: Filosofia, politica, storia", edited by Mattia Di Piero, Francesco Marchesi, and Elia Zaru.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the initiative of Michele Spanò and some other scholars, Quodlibet has recently re-edited the major works of Italian and French institutionalists such as Widar Cesarini Sforza, Santi Romano and Maurice Hauriou, bringing them back to the attention of the academic public.

<sup>2</sup> Its thirteenth edition, thoroughly revised by André Castaldo and Yves Mauten, was published by Dalloz in 2020.

<sup>3</sup> As in the case of François Saint-Bonnet and Yves Sassier, *Histoire des institutions avant 1789*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Issy-les-Moulineaux: LGDJ, 2022); and Albert Rigaudière, *Histoire du droit et des institutions dans la France médiévale et moderne*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Economica, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Pierre Villard and Louis-Augustin Barrière, *Histoire des institutions publiques de la France: De 1789 à nos jours*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Dalloz, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> In at least one case, the ancient world is even the sole subject of the handbook. See Claude Mossé, *Les institutions grecques à l'époque classique: V<sup>e</sup>-IV<sup>e</sup> siècles av. J.-C.*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2022).

their disciplinary field, as in the case of Éric Gasparini and Éric Gojosso's *Cours d'Introduction historique au droit et d'Histoire des institutions*, which draws on Gérard Cornu's legalistic definition of institutions as "all the legal mechanisms and structures that frame behaviour within a given community" to delimit its subject and bridge it to the history of law.<sup>1</sup> However, despite this and other similarly broad characterisations, most French handbooks continue to focus mainly on political institutions in general and the development of the State and its administrative apparatus in particular.

In the other linguistic areas considered here, the situation is more fluid, and there are no official disciplinary fences. In order to include them in the review, it is necessary to adopt a thematic approach, opting for a rule-of-thumb selection that inevitably involves a further degree of partiality on the part of the reviewer. I will therefore organise what follows around a number of thematic cores, starting with the one that has traditionally attracted the most attention from institutional historians.



**1** THE STATE AND THE STATES. Given its long and enduring preeminence as the main focus of political history and political science more generally, it is not surprising that much of the recent output in what can be broadly defined as institutional history has been devoted to the State, State-building processes, and State-related institutions. This is not to say, however, that there have not been some innovative contributions in this field, as well as a diversity of themes and perspectives that the very breadth of the subject matter obviously imposes.

<sup>1</sup> Éric Gasparini and Éric Gojosso, *Cours d'Introduction historique au droit et d'Histoire des institutions*, 12<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Gualino, 2022), 21. See also Romain Telliez, *Les institutions de la France médiévale: XI<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2022), 12: "Institutions are defined here as established and enduring forms of collective organisation based on explicit rules – whether legal or customary – that give individuals distinct places and functions, are articulated with each other, and are ordered for the proper functioning of society".

Like any complex historical process, the origins of the modern State are still a hotly debated topic. A well-established tendency seems to trace them convincingly back to medieval roots, but there is no agreement on the path that State-building took from there, the models it followed, or its precise meaning. Two books published within a few years of each other, by Luigi Blanco and Anna Grzymała-Busse, both independently claim that the medieval Catholic Church, at least since the Gregorian reforms of the eleventh century, played a decisive role in European State formation, providing secular rulers with effective institutional templates (Grzymała-Busse) and the very idea of sovereignty (Blanco).<sup>1</sup> Although this thesis is not entirely original, the books have the merit of approaching it from a truly European perspective, not limiting their scope only to the great national monarchies (France, England, and Spain), but looking for institutional experiments throughout the continent. Blanco also goes one step further by adding another, rather counterintuitive, ingredient to the formula, recognising in the dispersion of feudal power not an obstacle to the development of State organisation but, on the contrary, an indispensable means for territorial administration and the establishment of a daily negotiated practice of power that made State authority legally and politically accountable. This is almost exactly the opposite of what is argued in another major recent contribution, Francesco Di Donato's *9871*, where the primary impulse of what the author calls "State civilisation" is attributed to the French monarchy (with the reign of Philip the Fair occupying a central place in this process), which conceived and implemented it precisely as a way of *overcoming* the "asocial" and "compromising" mentality of the feudal world.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Luigi Blanco, *Le origini dello Stato moderno: Secoli XI-XV* (Roma: Carocci, 2020); and Anna Grzymała-Busse, *Sacred Foundations: The Religious and Medieval Roots of the European State* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Francesco Di Donato, *9871: Statualità Civiltà Libertà, Scritti di storia costituzionale* (Napoli: Editoriale scientifica, 2021). For the ground-breaking character and quality of its scientific proposal, Di Donato's book would deserve a paragraph of its own. It brings together thirty essays written over the course of thirty years of academic activity in order to offer the most complete understanding of the institutional and political phenomenon of the modern State and the form of social organisation it has given rise to, going beyond a purely formalistic approach to explore every possible dimension, from the history of mentalities to that of symbolic representations, and mobilising an impressive amount of scholarship across different disciplinary fields. In doing so, it also provides a methodological lesson that may prove very fruitful for the future of the discipline.

Another genre that is still very fertile is that of studies devoted to the reconstruction of the historical trajectory of a particular State, focusing on a single national and chronological context. These may be intended as general syntheses for teaching purposes, but they may nevertheless contain some original insights or introduce new research trends, as in the case of Leonida Tedoldi's history of the Italian State or Manuel Andreu Gálvez's survey of the institutions of the Spanish monarchy in the Americas during the viceregal period, both of which emphasise (for different reasons and with different conclusions) the colonial dimension of State rule and its relationship with the development of metropolitan institutional structures.<sup>1</sup> Other, less comprehensive and more focused analyses aim to present more definite theses, often the result of the author's decades of research experience. Combining the use of novel archival sources and a prosopographical approach, Melis's book on the administrative machinery of the fascist State highlights its seemingly paradoxical continuities with the legal and institutional elements of the previous liberal age, showing how, behind its self-presentation as a monolithic and highly hierarchical organism, its actual functioning resembled more that of "an imperfect system of institutions, made up of old and new materials confusedly assembled together without any linear design".<sup>2</sup>

A similar attention to the richness of archival resources and their unique relevance for the study of institutional history – an attention that extends not only to the content of the documents but also to the contingencies of their material production – characterises Bernard Barbiche's collection of essays (all published between 1960 and 2015) on the French royal State in general and the ministry of Sully in particular. A long-standing institutional historian and palaeographer at the prestigious *École nationale des chartes*, Barbiche emphasises the fundamental role played by the Minister of Finance in the renewal of governmental and administrative instruments under Henry IV, while also tracing the transformation of individual institutions, sometimes through interesting philological

<sup>1</sup> See Leonida Tedoldi, *Storia dello Stato italiano: Dall'Unità al XXI secolo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2018); and Manuel Andreu Gálvez, *Instituciones de la Monarquía Hispánico-Católica en Indias* (Pamplona: EUNSA, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Guido Melis, *La macchina imperfetta: Immagine e realtà dello Stato fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018), 566.

observations (as in the chapter on the denominational change of the *Conseil du roi*, which Barbiche maps on the evolution of the State itself).<sup>1</sup>

Local histories of pre-unitary political institutions are also popular, especially in areas characterised by a high degree of regional differentiation – and where, conversely, State centralisation has struggled to take root. This is obviously the case in Italy, where much attention continues to be paid to individual local contexts, often in an attempt to rethink the centre-periphery dynamic in relation to the unification process. This is, for example, what Astuto, Elena Gaetana Faraci and, separately, Enza Pelleriti have set out to do on Sicily, challenging the stereotype of its passiveness and inactivity before and after the creation of the unified State.<sup>2</sup> It is also not surprising that realities with a long colonial legacy show an interest in the institutional history of former colonies and their relations with the mother country, now read in the light of global and postcolonial approaches.<sup>3</sup>



**2** POLITICAL AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS. At a more “molecular” level, some remarkable research has been carried out in recent years to shed light on the history of individual political institutions and constitutional bodies. On the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the entry into force of the Italian Constitution, two volumes of essays edited by Sabino Cassese, Giuseppe Galasso,

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Barbiche, *Le Roi et l'État: Regards sur quelques institutions de la France moderne (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Paris: Éditions de l'École nationale des chartes, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See Giuseppe Astuto and Elena Gaetana Faraci, *La Sicilia e l'Italia: I protagonisti delle istituzioni tra Ottocento e Novecento* (Acireale: Bonanno, 2018); and Enza Pelleriti, *De' siciliani e dei loro diritti: Percorsi fra lessico e memorie dei protagonisti nella Sicilia costituzionale della prima metà dell'Ottocento* (Roma: Aracne, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Mehenni Akbal, *Archives algériennes de la France coloniale: Contribution à l'évaluation de l'administration centrale* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2022); and Sylvain Mary, *Décoloniser les Antilles? Une histoire de l'État post-colonial (1946-1982)* (Paris, Sorbonne Université Presses, 2021).

and Alberto Melloni have been dedicated to the Presidency of the Republic, with a biographical profile of each of the Presidents and a series of studies on the actual functioning of the institution, highlighting its internal structures and its changing relations with the rest of the political system.<sup>1</sup> Four years later, Cassese, Melloni and Alessandro Pajno have applied a similar template (biographical profiles plus essays on individual topics) to the study of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers during the Republican period.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, these works represent a significant addition to the toolbox of institutional historians, to which should also be added the collection of fifty-five biographies of chefs de cabinet edited by Melis and Giovanna Tosatti, part of a broader research project aimed at exploring this “opaque” but crucial institutional link between the apical position of each ministry and its permanent bureaucratic staff.<sup>3</sup>

Repressive and judicial institutions have been another common theme in recent research. In particular, the history of prisons and the penal system has enjoyed a considerable revival of interest. Mary Gibson’s monograph on Italian prisons between unification and the beginning of the First World War has brought new elements to question the famous Foucauldian paradigm of the “birth of the prison”, showing that in Italy the emergence of the modern penitentiary – which Gibson sees as key to the nation-building project of the liberal State – was more the result of a progressive accumulation and overlapping of penal models originating in very different cultural and historical contexts (Counter-Reformation, Enlightenment, Positivism), rather than a linear transition from “the spectacle of the scaffold” to “the gentle way in punishment”.<sup>4</sup> Some useful insights and interesting material, albeit within a more classical Foucauldian line, can be found in the interdisciplinary essays collected in the proceedings of the second *Congreso Internacional sobre la Historia de la prisión*

<sup>1</sup> Sabino Cassese, Giuseppe Galasso, and Alberto Melloni, eds., *I presidenti della Repubblica: Il capo dello Stato e il Quirinale nella storia della democrazia italiana*, 2 vols. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Sabino Cassese, Alberto Melloni, and Alessandro Pajno, eds., *I presidenti e la presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri nell’Italia repubblicana: Storia, politica, istituzioni*, 2 vols. (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Guido Melis and Giovanna Tosatti, eds., *Il potere opaco: I gabinetti ministeriali nella storia d’Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Gibson, *Italian Prisons in the Age of Positivism: 1861-1914* (London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

*y las instituciones punitivas*, held in 2019 in Albacete. They adopt a *longue durée* approach, covering a period from early modernity to democratic Spain, with a particular focus on the gendered dimension of penal institutions (also prominent in Gibson) and the concrete experience of their inmates.<sup>1</sup> Much more limited in its chronological scope, Annelie Ramsbrock's book on German prisons in the fledgling Federal Republic tells the story of the failed attempts to humanise the prison system in keeping with the general process of democratisation after the fall of Nazism. It also offers food for thought on the resistance that the insulation and inertia of long-established institutional complexes can oppose to social transformation.<sup>2</sup>

An analogous reflection on institutional resilience and the coexistence of continuity and change (sometimes more apparent than real) can also be prompted by analyses of the judicial system in the transition from one political regime to another. Both Antonella Meniconi and Guido Neppi Modona's edited volume on the Italian judiciary during the shift from Fascism to the Republic and Jean-Paul Jean's on the career trajectories of French judges before and after Vichy present a strikingly similar picture of a "failed purge" of judicial personnel who had compromised themselves with the previous regime. This was partly due to the need to continue to guarantee the judicial functions of the renewed State, but it also had to do with the *esprit de corps* of the institution and its corporative defence against transformative efforts from outside.<sup>3</sup>

**3** SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS. The history of health institutions and the welfare State, which had already been the subject of new research in the last twenty years, was given a further boost by the pandemic crisis of 2020. Several general works have been devoted to describing the origins and development of national social protection systems, with particular attention to the healthcare sector. Many of them adopt a "warfare-welfare" explanatory

<sup>1</sup> Pedro Oliver Olmo and Maria del Carmen Cubero Izquierdo, eds., *De los controles disciplinarios a los controles securitarios* (Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Annelie Ramsbrock, *Geschlossene Gesellschaft: Das Gefängnis als Sozialversuch – eine bundesdeutsche Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> See Antonella Meniconi and Guido Neppi Modona, eds., *L'epurazione mancata: La magistratura tra fascismo e Repubblica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022); and Jean-Paul Jean, ed., *Juger sous Vichy, juger Vichy* (Paris: La Documentation française, 2018).

scheme, in which the economic and social consequences of war act as an incentive for governments to implement universal social security plans. This is the case of Chiara Giorgi and Ilaria Pavan's book on the history of the Italian welfare State, which sees the Great War as a determining factor in its creation (although the most decisive turning point is placed in the 1970s, with the birth of the National Healthcare Service); or Léna Korma's monograph on the beginnings of the Greek health system, which she credits to the influence of the scientific and organisational methods introduced in Greece by the presence of French troops during the second decade of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Although not the most common approach in this area of research, a comparative historiographical perspective between welfare institutions in different countries can prove fruitful. Michela Minesso's edited volume on *Welfare Policies in Switzerland and Italy*, for example, offers some stimulating observations on how different institutional frameworks respond to similar social problems.<sup>2</sup>

Under the same general umbrella of welfare history, the study of medieval and early modern poor relief institutions can also be included. There are many works on local charities in the period under consideration, but although they can be interesting in themselves, they do not seem to contain any particularly innovative elements.<sup>3</sup> Two publications, however, make original use of the archival sources of charitable institutions as a means of answering research questions that go beyond the institutions themselves. The collection of essays edited by Artur Dirmeier and Mark Spoerer represents a methodological investigation into how administrative documents produced by early modern hospitals can be used as valuable sources for social, cultural and economic historical

<sup>1</sup> See Chiara Giorgi and Ilaria Pavan, *Storia dello Stato sociale in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021); and Léna Korma, *Combattre pour la santé: L'Armée d'Orient et la construction du système sanitaire grec, 1912-1922* (Athens: École française d'Athènes, 2022). See also, on the British case, Gareth Millward, *Sick Note: A History of the British Welfare State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Michela Minesso, ed., *Welfare Policies in Switzerland and Italy: Institutions, Motherhood, Family and Work in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Just a few examples: Tiffany A. Ziegler, *Medieval Healthcare and the Rise of Charitable Institutions: The History of the Municipal Hospital* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2018), which focuses on the history of the hospital of Saint John in Brussels; María del Rosario Prieto Morera, *El Real Hospicio de León: Un estudio jurídico de beneficencia* (León: Editorial Cultural Norte, 2019); and Sarah L. Guerrero, *Sienese Hospitals Within and Beyond the City Walls: Charity and the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala, 1400-1600* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2023).

research.<sup>1</sup> Even more pioneering is the book by Pedro Sánchez-Prieto Borja and Delfina Vázquez Balonga, which combines linguistics and institutional history in order to reconstruct the dialectal and sociolinguistic characteristics of the Spanish spoken in Madrid between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, going through the archives of some of the most important charitable institutions in search of documents that presumably recorded the common parlance of the time.<sup>2</sup> Both works are good examples of how dialogue between the history of institutions and other disciplines can be mutually beneficial.



Too many books have been published on economic institutions, both national and international, for an acceptable account to be given here. Moreover, to do so would probably be to leave the field of institutional history and enter that of economic and financial history. This does not mean, however, that institutional historians have neglected the study of the social effects of economic institutions or, conversely, the economic effects of institutions in general. On the contrary, as noted above, the abandonment of an exclusive emphasis on the political sphere has made such incursions possible. Let's consider, for example, Cristina Accornero's book on the cultural activities of the Olivetti company, one of the many enlightened policies of corporate welfare implemented by the Italian corporation, analysed through the study of several company magazines and their innovative impact on the broader cultural landscape between the 1920s and the 1990s;<sup>3</sup> or Carlo Taviani's monograph on the *Casa di San Giorgio*, a private institution (albeit with political and territorial powers) created in the 15<sup>th</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Artur Dirmeier and Mark Spoerer, eds., *Spital und Wirtschaft in der Vormoderne: Sozial-karitative Institutionen und ihre Rechnungslegung als Quelle für die Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Pedro Sánchez-Prieto Borja and Delfina Vázquez Balonga, *La beneficencia madrileña: Lengua y discurso en los documentos de los siglos XVI al XIX* (Madrid: Ediciones Complutense, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Cristina Accornero, *L'azienda Olivetti e la cultura: Tra responsabilità e creatività (1919-1992)* (Roma: Donzelli, 2021).

century by the Genoese Republic to manage its public debt, in which Taviani sees the model for future corporations such as the Dutch East India Company or the Bank of England.<sup>1</sup> Research of this kind is useful in reflecting on the current blurring of boundaries between the public and the private, showing that they were never fixed in the first place, but have always been shifting and historically mobile.

**4** NEW RESEARCH TRENDS AND METHODOLOGIES. Finally, some concluding remarks on what can be considered as (relatively) new methodological approaches and areas of interest. Recent political events, from the rise of the so-called populism to the presidency of Donald Trump, seem to have more or less consciously caught the attention of scholars and led many of them to investigate, although from very different angles, the reasons why political institutions come to be distrusted or, on the contrary, manage to maintain the loyalty of their members. The connection to the present is made clear in two books published in 2022: Brian P. Levack's *Distrust of Institutions in Early Modern Britain and America*, which collects a number of cases of institutional crises of confidence from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century to serve as a touchstone for today's political situation (the final chapter concludes with the Trump administration);<sup>2</sup> and the fascinating volume edited by the Center for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute of Berlin on the history of the relationship between institutions and emotions – how modern institutions have continually produced templates to enable or control emotional practices, and how these in turn have affected the stability of institutional settings – with the stated aim of “set[ting] the record straight” and putting the contemporary debate on populism into historical perspective;<sup>3</sup> Other manifestations of a similar conceptual inquiry can be recognised, for example, in Charles Bosvieux-Onyekwelu's book on the development of the notion of “public service” as a means of creating

<sup>1</sup> Carlo Taviani, *The Making of the Modern Corporation: The Casa di San Giorgio and its Legacy (1446-1720)* (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Brian P. Levack, *Distrust of Institutions in Early Modern Britain and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Ute Frevert et al., *Feeling Political: Emotions and Institutions since 1789* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 1.

trust towards French administrative institutions during the Third Republic,<sup>1</sup> or in Meriggi's study of the use of petitions for illiberal and reactionary purposes in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (where conservatives petitioned the King to abolish the Constitution of 1848), an episode that the author places within the broader theme "of the ambivalences of the relationship between politics and anti-politics in the modern age".<sup>2</sup>

As far as the methodological dimension is concerned, a tendency can be observed to broaden the range of sources and research questions beyond the traditional, mostly legalistic ones. This tendency did not originate in the period under review, but it has consolidated and intensified over the last five years. In fact, something like a "symbolic turn" can be said to have taken place in institutional history, with increasing attention being paid to the ways in which institutions represent themselves both internally and, especially, externally, whether for communication or legitimation purposes. This concerns first and foremost their language, and the analysis of the lexical, syntactic, and semantic aspects of institutional discourse throughout history was for example the subject of a conference held at the Tuscia University in 2019, the proceedings of which have been edited by Melis and Tosatti.<sup>3</sup> But it can also involve liturgical and ceremonial practices, as in the beautiful essay by Di Donato and Sonia Scognamiglio on the "self-celebratory expressions" of the French judiciary under the *ancien régime*, or in Julie Stone Peters's book on the "theatrical" performances of law-making from ancient to early modern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Finally, another interesting line of research within the same framework is to approach the self-representation of institutions from an architectural point of view: some fruitful efforts have

<sup>1</sup> Charles Bosvieux-Onyekwelu, *Croire en l'État: Une genèse de l'idée de service public en France (1873-1940)* (Vulaines-sur-Seine: Éditions du Croquant, 2020).

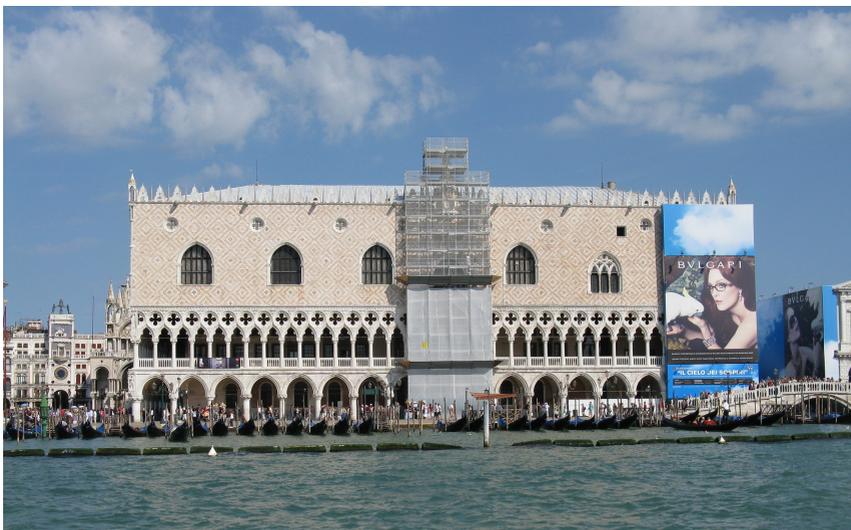
<sup>2</sup> Marco Meriggi, *La nazione populista: Il Mezzogiorno e i Borboni dal 1848 all'Unità* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Guido Melis and Giovanna Tosatti, eds., *Le parole del potere: Il lessico delle istituzioni in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021). In a similar vein, see also Paola Salerni, *Aspects du lexique et du discours de l'administration française au fil des siècles: Le système des charges, des lois, du territoire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> See Francesco Di Donato and Sonia Scognamiglio, "Il rosso e il nero: Le espressioni autocelebrative della magistratura di Antico Regime", in Di Donato, 9871, 489-535; and Julie Stone Peters, *Law as Performance: Theatricality, Spectatorship, and the Making of Law in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

recently been made in this direction, as in the case of Dorothea Steffen's monograph on the reconstruction of administrative buildings in the Federal Republic at the beginning of the 1950s, which relates the history of German democratic institutions to the architectural projects they designed to express their new self-image in a complete break with the Nazi past.<sup>1</sup>

This proliferation of interdisciplinary hybridisations and methodological exchanges has accelerated enormously in recent years, but it is undoubtedly rooted in the original dialogical vocation of the history of institutions, whose very object of study seems to impose an openness and curiosity towards the rest of the humanities and social sciences that is probably the real reason for its vitality.



Michael Day, Palazzo Ducale, Venice (2011), CC BY-NC  
(<https://flic.kr/p/b3e37Z>).

<sup>1</sup> Dorothea Steffen, *Tradierte Institutionen, moderne Gebäude: Verwaltung und Verwaltungsbauten der Bundesrepublik in den frühen 1950er Jahren* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019).