

Nations at arms. Public institutions, political violence and civil society in the modern and contemporary Mezzogiorno

This research project studies political violence and its institutional governance in Southern Italy from the independence of the Kingdom of Naples, in the first half of the 18th century, to the present day. Historiography has recently revisited the dynamics of political, ideological, and armed conflict fostering institutional and societal change in the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds from the Age of Revolutions to the late 20th century. Building on these developments, the project aims at understanding how violence and its management by the sovereign authorities influenced the rooting of public institutions, rule of law, and representative democracy in late modern and contemporary Mezzogiorno. To do so, the research project will explore the uses and practices of violence; non-state, legal, and illegal actors; the strategies and the techniques of its public governance; the ideological and political devices used to legitimise or de-legitimise violence and its repression; normative instruments adopted by legislators; the social and civic responses to collective threats posed by violence; and connections between political violence and criminal violence. The research group is composed of five Research Units: Salerno, Naples, Palermo, Molise, and Salento. The Research Units will work jointly on three strategic thematic milestones: 1. Violence and Public Institutions in the Mezzogiorno in the Age of Revolutions; 2. State, Rights and Society from Unification to Fascism; 3. Violence and Democracy in the Second Twentieth Century. Two crisscrossing research axes intersect each milestone, dealing respectively with political violence and state coercion; and with discursive practices and codes of legal, ideological, and symbolic legitimisation. More precisely, the project will explore relevant case studies, each reflecting a transformative process in which violence, and its governance, played a key role: agrarian revolts; anti-absolutist uprisings; opposition to foreign armies; liberal insurgencies and monarchical reactions; the repression of brigandage; the maintenance of public order during the Belle Époque, the normalisation of paramilitarism after the First World War; Fascist repression and the Resistance; asymmetrical intelligence, prevention, and espionage operations against terrorism; transnational cooperation against global criminal groups between the 20th and 21st centuries. A broad comparative perspective is adopted, laying the ground for an innovative interpretation of the historical trajectory of the Mezzogiorno. Rather than as a stateless anomaly, this trajectory will be understood as part of a concept of modernity marked by the rise of new urban elites, the strengthening of public institutions and rule of law, the containment of public violence, national aggregation, and the democratisation of society. The dissemination actions include, but are not limited to conferences, collaborative events, workshops, and a web-based platform.