

WHAT LURKS BEHIND: DIETROLOGIA AND THE ITALIAN STATE

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This paper concerns an oft-overlooked concept in Italian public discourse, *la dietrologia*, which can be translated as “the study of what lurks behind.” It refers to the practice of conspiracy theorizing in general and, more specifically, to a culture of conspiracy theories that emerged during the “years of lead” (*anni di piombo*), a troubled era of political violence in Italy stretching from 1969 to the mid 1980s.

While conspiracy theories are common to most cultures, they rarely receive much coverage in the mainstream media. In Italy, however, conspiracy theories appeal to dominant segments of the political and intellectual establishment and continue to play a major role in public debate. This paper centers on one of the most controversial episodes of the years of lead—the 1978 kidnapping and assassination of politician Aldo Moro.

The first half of this paper is concerned with theorizing *dietrologia*. By examining the conspiracy literature on the Moro affair, it will consider how widespread belief in the essential duplicity of the state translates into a methodology by which “unexplained” data is seen as indicative of forces manipulating the situation from behind the scenes. These lacunae are then connected, often arbitrarily, to reveal the nature and scope of the conspiracy. This self-referential system of logic causes the conspiracy to expand indefinitely. Ultimately, this paper will demonstrate how the culture of *dietrologia* has resulted in a profound sense of uncertainty among Italians regarding their own history.

The second half of this paper provides a more comprehensive explanation for the phenomenon of *dietrologia*. It argues that

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postwar political divisions brought about degeneration in public discourse, which allowed sensationalism to replace nuanced historical research. With the absence of “public history” in Italy, journalists and politicians have appropriated the writing of history for themselves, and *dietrologia* is simply a part of this trend. This paper further asserts that the perceived illegitimacy of the Italian state has created underlying cynicism toward power structures. Heavy-handed attempts at rectifying this perception have only exacerbated the problem, reinforcing the image of the state as a coercive entity. This has solidified the culture of *dietrologia* and weakened the state’s ability to impose its own version of the truth.

To examine *dietrologia* is to explore Italy’s complex relationship with its own past and question the absence of a stable, commonly accepted core of facts. It is to consider the trend Tobias Jones described as “an ongoing, rolling revisionism” in which the “facts of postwar history slip and slither about disconcertingly” (“Diary”). Through analysis of the peculiarities of Italian public discourse and historical inquiry, this paper will examine *dietrologia* as a consequence of the state’s ineffective attempts at manipulating perceptions, the outcome of a failed or incomplete nation-building project.

BACKGROUND

The phrase *dietrologia* was coined in the 1970s (Ginzburg 65) as a broad, pejorative term describing the “obsessive study or invention of *fantapolitica*, “fantastic, scandalous, usually paranoid accounts of what is going on in political life” (Jones “Diary”). *Dietrologia* was used to describe the tendency of many commentators to invoke convoluted conspiracy theories to explain troubling events. Such theories purported that a series of covert elements collaborated to control Italy and advance self-serving agendas. The culture of *dietrologia* is firmly rooted in the notion of the *doppio stato*, or “double state,” the idea that contemporary Italian history has run on two levels: “that which is knowable (and irrelevant) and that which is mysterious (and significant)” (Ajello).

Dietrologia is a subculture of what Frank P. Mintz defined as conspiracism, the “belief in the primacy of conspiracies in the unfolding of history,” commonplace in most countries (4). Although such a subculture generally differs from mainstream or “official” opinion, *dietrologia* “appeals to dominant segments of the political and intellectual establishment” and has played a prominent role in Italian public discourse (Drake “Intellectual” 64). Public discourse is an interactive process in which “movements, parties, media, governments, and state apparatuses engage in a struggle to have certain meanings and understandings gain ascendance over others, or at least move up some existing hierarchy of credibility” (Snow and Oliver 587). This process takes place in the “public sphere, the network for communicating information and points of view [in which] the streams of communication are filtered and synthesized so that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions” (Habermas “Discourse” 360). This paper employs Negt and Kluge’s definition of the public sphere as “specific institutions, agencies, practices, ... [and] professionals” (1–2). Thus the network in question consists of books, newspapers, magazines, television, and radio—the distributors of political and intellectual content. The culture of *dietrologia* has developed through these media, which are traditionally seen as authoritative sources of information. By contrast, a subculture of conspiracism in other countries is typically perpetuated by non-authoritative sources, such as on the Internet.

The speculation surrounding the 1978 kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro, a former Prime Minister of Italy, is the quintessential example of *dietrologia*. The episode continues to be “the place where the country’s ability to settle its accounts with its own history faces the most difficult test” (“Misteri” La Repubblica). According to the official report by the judiciary and a parliamentary commission, Aldo Moro was kidnapped by a Marxist-Leninist urban terrorist group, the Red Brigades (BR), held for 55 days, and then assassinated because the government refused to negotiate. The BR hoped to cause an uprising through an attack on one of the government’s most recognizable representatives. In spite of these acknowledged motives, “conspiracy camps” turn to a variety of sus-

picious details for alternative explanations. A common fixation is Moro's role as architect of the National Solidarity Project, which aimed to bring the Italian Communist Party (PCI) into a government coalition. This provoked suspicions that his death was the result of Cold War conflicts. The Moro affair has generated one of the most extensive and diverse samples of conspiracy literature, and the basic facts of the events remain hugely controversial. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the term *dietrologia* was coined only shortly after the haunting kidnapping and assassination (Ginzburg 65).

THEORIZING DIETROLOGIA

Literature

Two of the landmark contributions to the conspiracy school on the Moro affair are *L'affaire Moro* ("The Moro Affair") by Sicilian novelist and politician Leonardo Sciascia; and *La tela del ragno* ("The Web of the Spider") by a former senator of the PCI, Sergio Flamigni. These works reveal how the driving assumption of state duplicity translates into methodological choices.

In contrast to many of the fanciful hypotheses that emerged during and shortly after the Moro affair, *L'affaire Moro* takes the form of a scathing but ultimately nonspecific body of accusations. Much of *L'affaire Moro* consists of an analysis of Moro's correspondence from the BR's makeshift "People's Prison," written in order to prolong the affair, allowing the police more time to find him. Sciascia argues that the police subsequently "wasted this time beyond what Moro could even imagine" (43). Why was the police manhunt so incompetent? Why did the government reject Moro's requests for negotiation? Why did they justify this refusal to negotiate with terrorists by suddenly invoking abstract, outdated, and discredited notions of the state (Sciascia 58)? In short, Sciascia built on what Moro implied in his correspondence from the BR's prison: that the ruling Christian Democrat party, closely allied with the United States, had decided his death sentence (Drake "Murder" 97). By asking the Italian public the fundamental question of why

the government failed to save Moro, Sciascia laid the foundations for *dietrologia* in the Moro affair.

Cicero's maxim, "*a cui bono?*" or "who will benefit?" is a central component of *dietrologia*, expressed in even the earliest definitions of the term (Tornabuoni). Theorists speculate that whoever might have benefited from an event must logically have had a hand in it. To what extent this idea informed *L'affaire Moro* and other theories is impossible to determine. However, shortly after the Moro kidnapping, while the country was in a state of emergency, Sciascia was asked to describe his view of the events unfolding. He replied, "The question that Italians asked themselves some years ago and regrettably no longer continue to ask is: who stands to gain?" (Stabile). The potential for the governing party to benefit, coupled with the myriad failures of the police manhunt and the government's suspicious behavior during the affair, aroused Sciascia's suspicions. *L'affaire Moro* focuses solely on the government's behavior and refers to the BR only once, strongly insinuating that hidden truth lies within power structures.

This shift in focus is the cornerstone of the methodology of *dietrologia*. Italian historian Agostino Giovagnoli observed that the literature on the Moro affair focuses exclusively on the invisible actors, pushing the visible actors into second place—that is, almost ignoring the role of the major (known) protagonists (10). While it is legitimate to ask why the government failed to save Moro, Sciascia disregarded the responsibility of the visible protagonists, the BR, unequivocally turning the focus of the investigation to undefined forces within the government or to other invisible actors. Thus, Sciascia's vague accusations still sent out a clear message, namely that the government had a hand in Moro's death. While the idea of the innate duplicity of power did not begin with *L'affaire Moro*, Sciascia's book encouraged the Italian public to view the Moro case through this lens.

La tela del ragno was written almost a decade after *L'affaire Moro*, when an abundance of new details emerged. Although Sciascia may have convinced the public that certain covert mechanisms had been at work, his indirect accusations demanded further

explanation. Flamigni supplies it. For this study, Flamigni's book is invaluable not only because of its prominence, but also because it provides the most complete sample of the conspiracy theories on the Moro affair (Drake "Retrospect" 117). Flamigni writes in great detail, proposing the most "ambitious" of the conspiracy theories (Drake "Murder" 250). The methodological tendencies that emerge throughout his reconstruction affirm his reputation as the captain of *dietrologia* (Mantovani).

Unlike Sciascia, who examines actions directly attributable to those he considers the true protagonists of the affair, Flamigni sees things in a far more presumptive manner. Without empirical evidence to establish any association, he assumes that any event that could benefit an institution of power occurred precisely for that reason. *Dietrologia* thus becomes a process of identifying and collating various unrelated phenomena as manifestations of invisible actors. These actors are implicitly presumed to be powerful people and institutions.

Sins of Omission

Pitzer College philosophy professor Brian Keeley uses the term "errant data" to describe the gaps and omissions conspiracy theorists obsess over. Essentially, errant data are phenomena that either contradict or were not explained in the official version of events, e.g. official silences (Keeley 118). The silence of the BR leader, the architect of the Moro kidnapping, has long been the subject of conspiratorial fantasies (Galli della Loggia "*Sequestro*"). Flamigni exemplifies this approach, highlighting errant data such as missing telephone conversations and a missing film from the site of the kidnapping as evidence of a conspiracy.

When errant data are treated as evidence, empirical analysis turns into a far more subjective approach, which can quickly descend into pure conjecture or fantasy. The theorist can simply fill a silence or a gap in the evidence with whichever conspiracy theory captures his or her fancy. Flamigni's argument that "to fill in the blanks is to shed light upon the acts of complicity committed

within the apparatus of the state and upon the indirect supporters of the Moro operation” illustrates the closed system of belief that defines *dietrologia* (“Tela” 280). Yet rather than damaging their appeal, such methodological fallacies facilitate the success of *dietrologia*-inspired theories.

Errant data often includes more than literal omissions, concrete gaps in evidence, and silences. Through efforts to unearth errant data, the theorist is forced to expand the investigation. A host of perceived mysteries are added to what could be considered objective mysteries. Consequently, the objective account appears flimsy under the weight of so many unaccounted-for mysteries. This is the virtue of conspiracy theories; they hold what Keeley has termed “explanatory reach” (Keely 119). By alleging a conspiracy, the theorist is capable of accounting for all of the unexplained data and creating a unified hypothesis that the official version cannot match. Flamigni, for example, goes to great lengths to unearth what he considers errant data inconsistent with the official account in another recent book, *La sfinge delle brigate rosse*, a detailed analysis of the character and history of Mario Moretti, a Communist revolutionary. Accordingly, Moretti’s reputation as a womanizer and his Catholic marriage are described as antithetical to his role as a revolutionary and therefore indicative of his role as an anti-communist infiltrator.

The Moro case, like other *dietrologia* mysteries, has only produced negative certainties—no one knows who was responsible for the missing tape, who wrote the false BR communiqué, or why the police hunt failed so miserably (“Misteri” La Repubblica). Quite simply, no conspiracy theory has been able to overcome the insuperable problem of evidence. The crucial problem with *dietrologia* is that it fosters profound skepticism toward the official version but fails to offer any concrete evidence for its competing explanation.

Everything Is Connected

Flamigni’s account is also useful in exploring the theme of “association,” the methodological tendency to establish arbitrary

causal relationships between unrelated phenomena. Association is the process by which data is processed and the mechanisms and character of the conspiracy are constructed. The book *Il misterioso intermediario* by Giovanni Fansella and Guiseppe Rocca provides a striking example of association. Famously, a number of Bolognese professors held a séance during the Moro kidnapping to try to divine the location of the BR's prison, ending up with the letters GRADOLI. Rocca and Fasanella propose that GRADOLI could be read as *grado li*, "level 51" in Latin. This prompted them to make a series of expansive associations, eventually concluding that the legendary seventeenth century Rosicrucian Order still existed and was involved in Moro's death (Willan).

The first theories to surface from the Moro affair, which have remained staples in conspiracy literature, are all examples of association. Theorists note anti-communist sentiments within national and international power structures, Moro's role as architect of the National Solidarity Project designed to bring the Communists into a government coalition, the fact that Moro's kidnapping coincided with the day the project launched, and a host of other mysterious and unexplained lacunae. This is association at its most simple: a natural human tendency to see such parallels as beyond coincidence and, therefore, as suspicious.

However, a blanket acceptance of association as a valid method of revealing hidden truth can lead to arbitrary parallels between varied and disparate phenomena. Although the substance of Flamigni's argument took the form of a persuasive and well-researched elaboration of widespread suspicions, the peripheral areas of his reconstruction illustrate the extent to which Flamigni stretched his commitment to association as a means of corroborating his hypotheses or uncovering new leads. For instance, he underlines with heavy irony one "extravagant coincidence." Through his research, he discovered that the name the "the firm" was used by members of the so-called "superclan," a group of left-wing militants who aspired to take over the BR from within. Individuals implicated in an attempted Fascist coup in 1970 also used the term, as did Mario Moretti in reference to the BR (Flamigni "*Tela*" 205). On

the basis of this shared nickname, Flamigni implies that all three groups must have been linked in some unspecified way. He then uses the link to justify his broad thesis that the BR killed Moro because anti-communist reactionaries had infiltrated the group. As this example shows, there is no such thing as a coincidence in the world of *dietrologia*.

Given the foundational assumption that invisible actors are at work and leave only the most imperceptible traces, such seemingly arbitrary assertions are justifiable within *dietrologia's* system of logic. The criteria by which parallels between phenomena are deemed relevant are less stringent, since esoteric content justifies an esoteric reading of the message (Willan). At its most intense, *dietrologia* becomes the obsessive study of latent symbolism. This explains why so many reconstructions of the Moro affair take the form of “a deductive clues-based labor” that distances itself from any analysis of the original documentation’ (Clementi 27).¹

The Stragi Commission and *Dietrologia* in the 1990s

The combined conclusions of five court cases and the parliamentary commission pointed to the BR as the sole culprits behind the Moro affair and heralded a period of embryonic consensus in public discourse (Satta “Odissea” xxxiii). In the mid 1990s, however, this fragile consensus was shattered as various intellectual and political figures engaged in heated debates over the identity of Moro’s killers. A paradox of the investigations of the Moro case is that the 30 years following the kidnapping “produced greater knowledge of the events but less consensus about their interpretation” (Moss “Witchcraft” 3). From 1994 onward, a rash of new hypotheses emerged, and a dozen books on the Moro affair were published between 2002 and 2004, exceeding the number published in the three years after the kidnapping and assassination (Moss “Witchcraft” 3). What is more, a number of long-abandoned theories were

¹ Clementi defines the original documentation as Moro’s letters, the BR’s own documents, the memories of politicians and ex-BR members, and the findings of the two parliamentary commissions and the judiciary.

resurrected without new evidence. Some returned to the hypothesis that an international Cold War coalition including the United States and Soviet Union had conspired against Moro. The theory was first proposed in 1978 but was soon abandoned due to the complete lack of evidence (Satta "Odisea" 19).

In his explanation of these events, Australian historian David Moss emphasized the role of the parliamentary Stragi Commission (CPS) and its president, Giovanni Pellegrino (Moss "Witchcraft" 19–25). Founded in 1988, the CPS was a multi-party parliamentary commission created to investigate why a series of massacres, including the Moro affair, had gone largely unpunished. "Unrealistic deadlines" led to the extension of the Commission several times before its conclusion in 2001. It proceeded with investigations with the same powers and limitations as the judiciary but also enjoyed "supra-judicial access to confidential state documents" (14). Throughout its existence, but especially under Pellegrino from 1994 onward, the CPS took the leading role in the interpretative debate over the Moro affair. The CPS provided information to the media and published commentary on new findings, often acting as a platform for members of the commission to form hypotheses outside of their official capacities. The commission eventually produced a deluge of new material concerning the years of lead, amassing 1.6 million documents and 65 oral testimonies. Nevertheless, it failed to reach any definitive conclusions. Its last act was to approve "19 separate reports along party lines by its members, three of which dealt specifically with the Moro case" (22).

By asking why those responsible had not been caught, the CPS shifted the focus away from the BR. This indirectly cast doubt on the judiciary's official version, which had affirmed that those responsible had been caught, and opened greater possibilities for speculation as to who the real culprits might be. Moreover, by placing the Moro affair in a broader context with other famous contemporary massacres, the CPS promoted the idea that the episodes were linked in some way. Many of the episodes the CPS dealt with had gone at least partly unpunished, so to ask why those responsible had not been individuated was reasonable and neces-

sary. Nevertheless, investigating the Moro affair in the context of a series of episodes of right-wing terrorism upon which the judiciary had come to no conclusion was profoundly misleading. It tacitly encouraged the members of the commission to seek a common pattern behind different events, some of which were largely resolved, some of which were clearly not. Compounding this was the fact that the CPS demanded an explanation as to “why in each case, investigative goals were not met or adequate prevention was not achieved” (22). This was “in principle and in fact a much harder task than trying to explain why things did happen and certainly unlikely to promote consensus,” and it encouraged the tendency to seek a common pattern and produce a form of unified argument. Such interpretive moves, akin to association in Flamigni’s account, opened interpretive space for the construction of conspiracy theories (22).

Pellegrino severely exacerbated the speculative character of the CPS. He was prone to speculation himself, often proclaiming the “imminence of new discoveries” (21–22) or deciding to “reread the entire event through a new prism” (Satta “*Odisea*” xxiv), rather than offering new evidence. His much-trumpeted Double Hostage theory was partially responsible for the new freedom theorists felt in proposing several potential hypotheses simultaneously. He claimed that there were two hostages—Moro and the dangerous state secrets he held—though no actual evidence existed to substantiate this claim. In his book *Segreto di stato*, Pellegrino does not offer a single comprehensive reconstruction of events, as Flamigni does in *La tela del ragno*, but rather responds to each question with several potential answers and points to several potential culprits.

This study does not seek to condemn the CPS or argue that Pellegrino was no more than a peddler of conspiracies. That judgment does not fit a multi-party commission with heterogeneous opinions that generated such a variety of material, some of it clearly useful in understanding the violence of the years of lead. Nevertheless, though many historians, politicians, and journalists have incorporated data or conclusions from the CPS into their work, “the details of the ways that the Commissions have gathered their

data and the consequences for the content of their conclusions have scarcely been examined," nor has its inability to arrive at any consensus (Moss "Witchcraft" 26).

A Self-Perpetuating Phenomenon

A number of mundane factors helped stoke the controversies over the Moro affair in the 1990s (Moss "Witchcraft" 19–21). This essay argues that tendencies analogous to *dietrologia* have played a vital role in the progressive accumulation and recreation of an abundance of conspiracy theories within the CPS as well as in public discourse. Such dissension of interpretation is the inevitable consequence of *dietrologia*.

There are several obstacles to diminishing the culture of *dietrologia* and restoring the official version to its rightful place. To its theorists, *dietrologia* is immune from criticism. Evidence can simply be sidestepped. Flamigni insisted for years that the unidentified fourth man in the house where Moro was held prisoner was the "link" to the invisible actors. When he was informed that the fourth man was actually Germano Maccari, a well-known member of the BR, he answered, "If he is the fourth man, then there were five of them" (Andriolo). Alternatively, criticism can be subsumed into the conspiracy. Flamigni underlines the fact that one of his critics worked for a newspaper whose owner was affiliated with P2, the secret anti-Communist Masonic Lodge discovered in 1981, implicitly enlarging the conspiracy and de-legitimizing the criticism (Flamigni "Sfinge" 344). In this sense, *dietrologia* is a self-perpetuating phenomenon for those who have accepted its system of logic.

The progressive accumulation of conspiracy hypotheses that the culture of *dietrologia* inspires has had a disorientating effect on Italians. It has inspired a profound sense of uncertainty regarding their own history and severely undermined "official versions" of events. Archivist for the Italian senate Vladimiro Satta speaks of a "shower of parallel truths", which has inspired a gradual and unconscious assimilation of a broad, vague set of ideas ("Odissea" xv). Italian post-war history is seen as opaque, a period of mysteries

during which certain powers worked behind the scenes using unscrupulous methods to further their own interests.

Other than the active minority of theorists, there is a larger base of more passive support for *dietrologia*. In the public sphere, high profile figures have been convinced by errant data and negative certainties. For example, President Oscar Luigi Scalfari insisted, “Too many shadows, doubts, acts of reticence remain,” so the investigations must continue (“*Ricordo*” *Corriere della sera*). Such figures may not hold a belief in any one conspiracy theory, but in casting doubt over the official version, they act as a vital base of support for the prolongation of investigations. In 1998, the conspiracy camp interpreted Scalfari’s statement as a message of support that gave their investigations a new impetus (“*Rivincita*” *La Repubblica*). Though the lack of statistical evidence means that analyzing *dietrologia* as a mass phenomenon is impossible, the consumer appetite for conspiracy literature constitutes an equally important base of support.

DIETROLOGIA AND ITALIAN SOCIETY

Despite the tendency of commentators to exasperatedly dismiss *dietrologia* as infantilism, the academic community has posited more sophisticated explanations (Chessa). Most of these have emphasized political causes; however, this paper posits a broader array of external social causes of *dietrologia*.

Selective Memories

From the outset of the Cold War, the divisions within Europe between the Eastern and Western blocs were reproduced in Italian society. Broadly speaking, loyalties were divided between Christian Democrats and Communists, and between American and Soviet supporters (Foot 51). For some, this division was dichotomous to the extent that former President Francesco Cossiga spoke of an “invisible iron curtain” that “ran through populations, classes and minds” (qtd. in Fasanella, Sestieri, Pellegrino 11).

Some theorists characterized this schism in terms of collective memories, memories shared by a common culture and imperative to the formation of a national identity (Renan). Even before the Cold War, Italian national identity followed a troubled path with the Italian nation rarely having “acted on the basis of national collective memories” (Poggiolini 240). Few scholars seriously challenge Antonio Gramsci’s interpretation of Italian unification in the mid nineteenth century as a “passive revolution,” “a revolution from above” that failed to derive its power from establishing its own legitimacy (Foot 58). Creating an Italian collective identity remained, broadly speaking, an unresolved task at least until Mussolini’s fascist regime, whose efforts were the most successful to date (Ventresca 110). However, postwar Italy translated Fascism into a quasi-absolute evil that had no roots in consensus or popular feeling (Miccoli 54), obliterating any former allegiances to prewar conceptions of Italy (Poggiolini 227). Thus, collective memory in Italy was given a “clean slate,” and postwar Italy was “characterized by the formation of different sets of collective memories on the immediate past of the war, and their translation into partisan politics” (Poggiolini 240).

Politics and *Dietrologia*

In their most elementary form, political explanations for *dietrologia* have focused on the fact that *dietrologia* literature has stayed faithful to a broad Cold War model in which Moro was “sacrificed on the altar of Cold War politics” at the bidding of both the eastern and western blocs (Drake “Mythmaking”).² Especially during the 1960s and 1970s, conspiracy theories were generated and embraced along party lines with the Left looking to the CIA and the Right to the KGB (Satta “*Misteri*” 32). Observing the conspiracy literature through a prism of a Cold War dichotomy, one thing immediately becomes clear: those hypotheses accusing the United

² The only exception would be the theory that Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, assassinated Moro, though this too has often been subsumed into the Cold War model, under which Israel operated with American interests in mind.

States have continuously overshadowed those hypotheses accusing the USSR, both in terms of coverage and development (Satta "Odissea" 21). This is a curious imbalance given that the former had even less grounding in hard evidence (Satta "Misteri" 31). This notion has been consistently emphasized in arguments of varying degrees of sophistication, often playing on the fact that during the 1960s and 1970s, a deep-rooted culture of conspiracy theories had formed within the left (Ajello). Thus, it follows that *dietrologia* is essentially an ideology of consolation. The combination of paranoia and almost nihilistic cynicism toward power centers, the sense of fatalism and impotence, and the perceived inability to affect the course of events that pervade dietrological discourse are an expression of the left's failure to attain power, which have led left-wingers to indulge in conspiracy theories as a form of consolation.

Italian historian Giovanni Sabbatucci and American historian Richard Drake have accepted that the responsibility lies with the left, though rather than invoking "consolation," they view the controversies over the Moro affair in terms of trauma and denial, respectively.

Sabbatucci emphasizes the trauma of the collapse of the National Solidarity Project, whose failure was frequently, if mistakenly, seen as the result of the death of its major architect. It takes only a small leap of reasoning to infer that the forces opposing the project would have murdered Moro. Moreover, Sabbatucci argues that the tendency to attribute Moro's death to geopolitical forces is a way to settle the vicious political debates over the legitimacy of negotiating with the BR that took place during Moro's incarceration. If Moro's release was impossible, the motive for that conflict disappears (Moss "Witchcraft" 5).

According to Drake, a number of ex-Communists or participants in the extra-parliamentary Left have indulged in conspiracy theories in order to satisfy "an urgent need to repress the memory of their own involvement in the larger revolutionary culture from which the BR sprang" (Drake "Murder" 252). The Left refuses to accept that, in fomenting a Marxist-Leninist cult of revolution, it bears responsibility for the violence of left-wing terrorism. More-

over, following “the reduction of formal Communist culture in Italy,” this denial has been aggravated by nostalgia for what these commentators see as an era of moral grandeur, which they refuse to see reduced to the inspiration for terrorism (Drake “Trials” 370). Though Drake judiciously acknowledges that “many Italians from very different segments of the political spectrum continue to think of the Moro case in terms of these secret powers” (Drake “Myth-making”) and offers some explanations for right-wing conspiracies (Drake “Trials” 370), he endorses the idea that the Left bears the brunt of the responsibility for conspiracy literature.

To borrow David Moss’s pithy evaluation of the two commentators, both Sabbatucci and Drake make arguments that are “hardly less speculative than the conspiracy theories they are intended to dispose of.” Given the sheer diversity of participants in the controversies and transformations of the political landscape in the early 1990s, Moss shows that to stretch this kind of “political explanation” to *dietrologia* is to claim a tenuous and unfeasible continuity. Most importantly, both theories fail to address the curious way in which disputes have “died down and then revived” (Moss “Witchcraft” 5).

This study does not ignore “political factors” but seeks to distance itself from the notion of *dietrologia* as the consequence of any one political conviction. The intention is to evaluate some of the broader factors that allowed *dietrologia* to flourish, drawing inspiration from Moss and Drake.

Approaching the Moro case as “a problem in political and intellectual history,” Drake focuses on degenerative tendencies in public discourse and traditions of historiography in Italy. Given this study’s emphasis on the unique role of *dietrologia* in the public sphere, this is an important interpretative move. However, his insistence on seeing the issue through a lens of left-wing responsibility for *dietrologia* renders his explanation rather belabored. Accordingly, he links the “conformities of Italian public discourse” to a definitively left-wing character (Drake “Trials” 370).

In contrast to Drake’s work, this study suggests that this degeneration should be understood as one of the repercussions of a

schism between postwar political forces rather than the result of one political force dominating the debate.

A Failed Nation-Building Project

The explanation offered so far demonstrates how difficult it has been for Italian public discourse to transcend the legacy of the Cold War. This has continued to foster *dietrologia* even though the political ideologies and parties that defined the period have been largely abandoned. This study has examined how *dietrologia* managed to infiltrate public discourse and why the state has not been strong enough to impose its version of the facts.

In examining this question, one must address the cynicism toward the state and its institutions inherent to *dietrologia*. Since unification in the mid nineteenth century, the Italian state has “found legitimation extremely difficult to obtain” (Foot 55). A political system, writes Habermas, “requires an input of mass loyalty that is as diffuse as possible” (Habermas “Legitimation” 46). At the time of unification, there were multiple obstacles to achieving mass loyalty, including the linguistic and cultural diversity of Italians, the perception in many regions that unification had been no more than the Piedmontese conquest of Italy (Doumanis 86), and the fact that Pope Pius IX, whose power had been undermined by the new Italian state, encouraged Catholics to abstain from national politics (Duggan 138). Consequently, the Parliament was “frequently depicted as corrupt and irrelevant” (Corner 29). A deeply embedded culture of patronage did little to change this sentiment (Foot 58). According to some commentators, the word “state” remains a pejorative term in Italy even today (Jones “Heart” 12). This political climate provided the necessary conditions for popular support of *dietrologia*, which is simply a measure of the perceived illegitimacy of the state and its institutions in Italy.

The manner in which the state has endeavored to remedy its lack of legitimacy is also problematic. The notion of a strong sense of national identity as a positive became almost a “moral imperative,” and led to “the prioritization of state-based strategies for creating

Italians" (Foot 15). It led to the enforcement of a "particularly rigid and mono-cultural form of national identity from above, which did not correspond to the very heterogeneous and regionalist Italian populace" (7). Bombastic architecture, medals, altars, banners, songs, and ceremonies celebrating unification were employed in a vain attempt to create a common history, which the populace internalized with great reluctance. In the face of such policies, many Italians "refused to be 'created'" (15–16), which only seems to have reinforced the original concerns about legitimacy. Indeed the issue, according to historian Ernesto Galli della Loggia, has not been so much with the "the objective gravity" of the problem, but rather the "the way in which such gravity has been perceived" ("*L'identità*" 155–156). The apparent lack of consensus and national sentiment has been the driving concern of all political forces since the *Risorgimento* and has translated into a belief that any solution will necessarily involve a complete and "profound reshaping" of the state (156). This has been one of the principal sources of the militant, fideistic character of the major political ideologies in Italy and the over-politicized political elite, which has brought "centrality of politics" as opposed to "a centrality of the state" into play (158).

In the minds of many Italians, these factors have impeded the growth of national sentiment and have emphasized the perception of the "call to the nation" as being an "entirely exploitative practice" (158). In its enthusiasm to remedy a perceived lack of legitimacy, the state has only reinforced its image as an instrument of coercion. This, in turn, has limited its ability to impose order. The historical weakness of the state has been the underlying source of its inability to regulate public discourse and eliminate *dietrologia* from the mainstream media.

CONCLUSION

In the United States, the debate over conspiracy theories has evolved from the view of a "pathological belief in non-existence phenomena" (Pratt 257) to a nuanced discourse that treats conspiracy theories as indicative of important social, economic, and political

issues. With similar aims in mind, this study has offered a number of considerations on the nature of *dietrologia* and the factors that have enabled it to become so prevalent.

Regrettably, only a small handful of newspaper articles and academic works have examined *dietrologia*, though it offers unique insights into many of the key issues in contemporary Italian history. First, *dietrologia* attests to the detrimental effect that the politicization of the past can have on public discourse and history, while perpetuating the continual legitimacy crisis of the Italian state. Second, it testifies to the paradox of nation building as a process designed to reach hegemony by manufacturing consent, which nonetheless requires the antithetical use of coercion.

Although *dietrologia* is fostered by the degeneration of public discourse, history, and national identity, it continues to make significant contributions to those declines. To reduce the centrality of *dietrologia* would require the cultivation of public history, or concerted efforts to construct national collective memories, yet decades of *dietrologia* have fostered precisely the kind of cynicism, which renders the state incapable of achieving such an end.

For this reason, the current optimism of some commentators seems premature. In the last couple of years, Vladimiro Satta has spoken of “the crisis of *dietrologia*,” citing articles published with titles like “death-bells for the *dietrologia*” and “the crisis of *dietrologia*” (Satta “*Misteri*” 1). Admittedly, the 2007 anniversary of Moro’s death was commemorated with remarkably little conjecture. Though the controversies over the Moro affair are ostensibly subsiding as interpretative combinations are exhausted or the interest of the public wanes, this does not mean that Italy has settled accounts with its own past. The phantom of the years of lead remains. For segments of the political and intellectual establishments, not to mention the public, the Moro affair will remain one of a number of mysterious episodes of an inscrutable period in Italy’s past. Moreover, the cynicism fostered by *dietrologia* will inevitably outlive the controversies and translate into a new wave of conspiracy theories on current or future events.

A series of scandals over the last few years naturally com-

pounded the issue, reinforcing widespread cynicism toward the state and power structures in general and providing ample material for elaborate *dietrologia* hypotheses. The last few years alone have seen the *bancopoli* financial scandals, the *calciopoli* revelations of widespread and lucrative match fixing in soccer, and various corruption probes into controversial Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's financial dealings. Given the amorphous nature of *dietrologia* and its popularity in Italian culture today, the study of *dietrologia* will serve as a valuable entry point through which to understand modern Italian society.

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