

Dizionario biografico dei presidenti delle Camere di commercio italiane (1862-1944)

Edited by Giuseppe Paletta, Unione italiana delle Camere di commercio, Rome;

Rubbettino Editore, Soveria Mannelli, 2005

Review by Donato Barbone

The Italian Union of the Chambers of Commerce has shown outstanding commitment in its long-standing pursuit of the preservation and valorization of its own record heritage and its support of research on historical events of the chamber system. Although the IUCC is not alone in striving towards these aims, it stands out for continuity, dimension and quality. The *Dizionario biografico dei presidenti delle Camere di commercio italiane (1862-1944)* (Biographical Dictionary of the Chairmen of the Italian Chambers of Commerce) recently brought out by Rubbettino Publishers, takes a further step on the coherent path already traced by two significant historical accounts of the Italian chamber system and its connections abroad, published in 1997 and 2000 respectively. Unlike the first two surveys, this dictionary is a “seminal” work, a set of information (in two volumes of 1240 pages in total) on about 1100 leaders of the Chambers throughout Italy covering the period from the Unification to 1944: a considerably large collection of data put together for the first time “on the spot”. The arrangement of the information opens the way to further research thanks to the archival and bibliographical references listed under each biographical entry.

The corpus of the biographies of the elected chairpersons is integrated, at the end of the second volume, with simplified curricula of the prefectorial personnel who appeared on the scene, first with the creation of commissaries (1924-1926) and then with the transformation of the Chambers into Provincial Councils for the Economy (from 1927 to the end of the Fascist Regime). Finally, in the appendix, there is a list of the delegates assigned by the Chambers to managing positions of the Italian Union from its creation to its liquidation (1901-1928). Further light is thus shed on the composition of the Chambers leaderships since these delegates were frequently other than the chairmen.

On presenting this amount of data – indeed, the dictionary has the features of a reference work of permanent value – the author of the two previously cited histories of the Union, Giulio Sapelli, draws the reader’s attention to the importance of the historical essay with which Giuseppe Paletta introduces the Dictionary: “a fundamental stage – says Sapelli – in the study of the elites of the Italian economy and the structure of their role and functions”

The essay, written by the editor of the dictionary (Director of the Centro per la cultura d’impresa in Milan) has a double value. On one hand, it prepares the user of the work to correctly interpret the data given by the biographies, listing all the institutional events of the Chambers of commerce. This serves to outline the evolution of the laws which, between the period following the Risorgimento and Fascism, regulated both their structure and operation. On the other hand, through this reconstruction, the reader has an overview, on a functional level, of the chamber system. Within the context of the national entrepreneurial system, from the point of view of the relations between entrepreneurship and politics, as well as economy and State. Paletta concludes his recollection asking “if, in a crucial period of the Italian history, the Chambers of Commerce weren’t the

incubator of new managerial elites for whom the advent of Fascism precluded all the chances of creating independent forms of political expression". The transformation of the Chambers in Provincial Councils for the Economy, far from giving the entrepreneurs the leadership of the corporative State, simply "ensured that Fascism occupied this field through its own organizational oligarchy". A thoughtful question, from Sapelli's point of view, with which "Paletta introduces us to the understanding of the real changes that Italy faced with the decline of the Liberal State and the birth of the Fascist one" which is "the profound breakdown in the entrepreneurial political participation determined by the coming of the Fascist Regime".

There are no doubts about the value of both the historical reconstruction and the final judgment. Nevertheless, one may wonder whether analytical works of this kind might not lead to a richer vision of the subject, to significant close-ups of economically important facts. Through the biographies and details of the selection of local leaders mightn't we discover fragments of knowledge showing points in common and points of conflict under the apparent monopoly where conformism should have predominated? The "methodical" doubt inspired by these files (taken from sources developed in a period in which conformism was obligatory) stems from the fact that in many cases they show fixed daguerreotypes rather than moving films. A doubt which is reinforced by several inputs given by other studies carried out over the last twenty years on local systems and significantly mentioned by Paletta in his essay.

The research condensed in the two volumes of the Dictionary ends at the end of the Fascist Regime. The Chairman of Unioncamere, Carlo Sangalli, in his Preface to the work assures the reader that this "systematic biographical analysis of the Chambers' leadership...will be extended from the period after the Second World War to the present", since it is "a fundamental means to understand if and how the Chambers of Commerce have represented the respective business communities, the relations and the degree of political affinity of the chairmen with the local and national administrations."

A commitment to continuity and a positive sign of quality research for which we can only be glad.