The history of street names has become fashionable in Italy in recent years. When Daniel Milo’s work on *Nom des rues* \(^1\) appeared in 1986 in the *Lieux de mémoire* edited by Pierre Nora, Italian historiography had yet to produce anything significant on the subject. Almost twenty years later, as a result of an enlargement of the traditional sources of political and diplomatic history, the scenario is enhanced by different, interesting contributions, especially at a local level. \(^2\) Interest in urban toponymy has been sustained by the fact that it is a pleasant subject, usually interdisciplinary, political and diplomatic in a general sense, yet still fairly light. It is appropriate for brilliant research as well as dissemination. It should be treated with caution, however. I believe toponymy *per se* cannot aspire to complex interpretations. It is useful in comparisons, and above all in supporting a pre-established research project. But if proposed by itself, it risks being too obvious or tautological. It is clear that the political use of street names, in particular in transition phases between one regime and another, or in the wake of dramatic events such as the World Wars, springs from a process of nationalism and serves as an instrument of political mass


communication. However, it is also true that studying the removal of certain names, the greater frequency of some or the local use of others, does not appear to further real progress in historiography other than providing entertaining anecdotes.

The situation changes when toponymy is used as a penetrating source capable of revealing profound attitudes to culture and identity, which a search based on traditional testimony misses. An example is the extensive literature on Italian municipal history around the turn of the twentieth century. The pioneering studies of Ernesto Ragioni show us that initially it was mostly reconstructed around biased representations provided by the political groups directly involved, through newspapers and leaflets, in which the contents of archives were used as control documents. Research was later fine-tuned, and through documents from municipal offices and prefectures, it has been possible to reveal many details of a world which is much more complex and ambiguous than political factions, bound to simplify and polarize positions, are willing to admit.

Beyond any personal considerations, it is clear that democratic administrations addressed the public in fairly consistent ways with regard to symbolic references (Garibaldi, Mazzini, attitudes towards the Unification of Italy, etc.), and all that pertaining to planned objectives (higher land taxes, broader access to education, and later, extension of municipal services and control). Toponymy, apparently homogeneous in such contexts, can probe to find deeper, less obvious information. Why? Because, if we consider the change in street names in this period, we realize that cultural ramifications were often separated from purely nationalistic dynamics and tended to modify different forms of patriotism through underlying structures of memory or literary/erudite models created prior to unification and left hidden, overwhelmed by the invasiveness and power of the issue of independence.

3 An emblematic case is Ernesto Ragionieri, Un comune socialista: Sesto Fiorentino (Rome: Rinascita, 1953).