

# INTRODUCTION

The big question why some areas developed earlier and faster than others is at the core of development studies. Differences in income per capita across country depend on a variety of factors, including physical and human capital accumulation, exogenous or endogenous technological change, and gains in efficiency. However, there is a broad consensus that the previous elements should be considered only proximate causes of growth, which are in turn activated by a complex of highly variable incentives at local level (North and Thomas 1973; Acemoglu 2008; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). In order to understand differences in growth we should then look at the correlation between proximate and fundamental causes, which are broadly gathered in the logical category of institutional change.

The role of institutions in shaping long-run economic performance has been a central concern of economic history since the pioneering work of Douglass North. Institutions – understood as the formal and informal rules that structure political, social, and economic interactions – provide the framework within which markets operate, investments are made, and human capital is formed. According to North (1990, 2005), institutional change may occur incrementally through endogenous evolution, or more abruptly through exogenous shocks that disrupt prevailing equilibria. Such moments of institutional rupture are rare, but when they occur, they can have far-reaching and persistent consequences.

The Napoleonic occupation of large swathes of continental Europe between 1796 and 1815 constitutes one such episode of

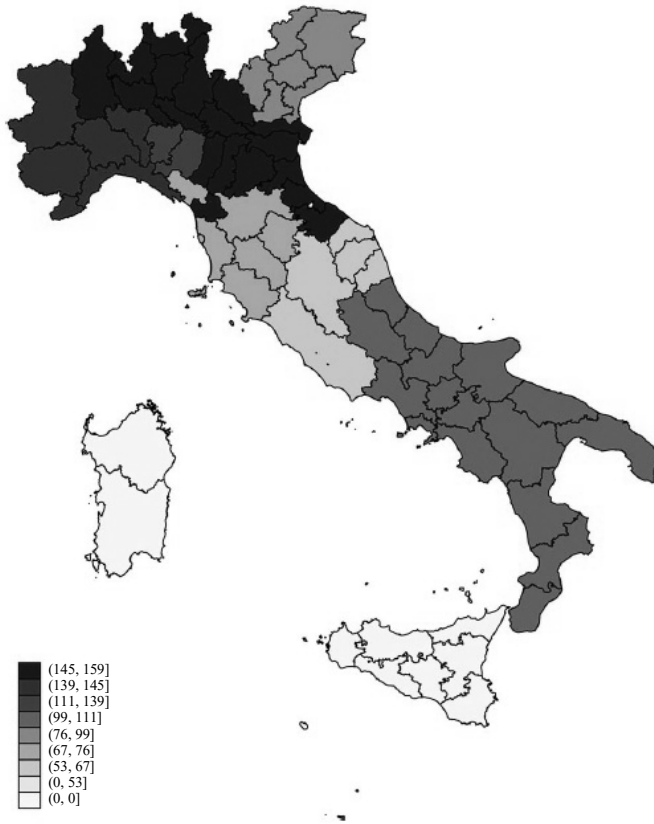
exogenous institutional transformation. Though externally imposed and often met with resistance, the reforms introduced under French rule – particularly in the domains of legal codification, bureaucratic administration, and public education – recast the institutional foundations of the territories they touched. From the abolition of feudal privileges and guilds to the promotion of secular and standardized schooling, Napoleonic reforms sought to replace *Ancien Régime* structures with a rationalized and modern institutional order. While the implementation of these reforms varied across regions and was shaped by local conditions, their legacy proved surprisingly durable. Even after the Restoration, many institutional innovations survived, reinterpreted or adapted by post-Napoleonic regimes.

Recent empirical work has documented the long-run effects of these reforms on economic growth (Acemoglu et al. 2011), human capital accumulation (Squicciarini and Voigtländer 2015), social trust and civic norms (Buggle 2016), and state building (Dincecco and Federico 2022). These studies have shown that the French institutional shock not only altered formal rules but also initiated deeper socio-cultural changes that supported investment in public goods and fostered a new equilibrium of institutional performance. Nevertheless, other scholars have cautioned against overly deterministic interpretations, emphasizing the mediating role of pre-existing institutional arrangements and the selective nature of reform adoption (Kopsidis and Bromley 2016).

Italy offers a particularly rich case for examining the legacy of Napoleonic reform. Between 1800 and 1815, much of the peninsula fell under direct or indirect French control, though the intensity and duration of occupation varied widely across regions. In the north, Napoleonic rule was both longer and more institutionalized; in the south, it was more transient and often constrained by pre-existing social hierarchies and clerical influence. These asymmetries created a natural laboratory for assessing the effects of institutional transplantation, especially in the field of public education, which was at the center of Napoleonic modernization efforts.

In Italy, the institutional legacy of French rule must be understood in light of its dual-phase structure. The first, republican phase (1796-1799), saw the rapid creation of satellite states such as the Cisalpine and Ligurian Republics in the north, and brief revolutionary episodes in Rome and Naples. Although short-lived, these “Sister Republics” introduced principles of legal equality, political participation, and civic mobilization that left traces in local institutional memory, especially in the domains of education, law, and associational life. The second phase, marked by the establishment of the Napoleonic Empire, brought direct French control over almost the entire peninsula – excluding only Sicily and Sardinia – between 1800 and 1815. During this period, administrative, legal, and fiscal systems were comprehensively restructured according to French models. To capture this variation, we construct a new dataset measuring the duration of French political control across Italian provinces, using precise monthly data to map the timing and territorial reach of effective governance (Postigliola and Rota 2021a). This allows us to examine how the length and intensity of French domination shaped regional institutional trajectories and contributed to Italy’s uneven path toward modernization.

Figure 1. – Duration of French political control across Italian provinces (in months)



The aim of the First Italian Campaign (1796-1797) was to create a distraction frontline for the armies of the *Ancien Régimes* and enable the French regular army to get an advantage in the war scenario of central Europe. On the one hand, the French Directory sought to reduce Italy to a mere French colony to extract fiscal resources.

On the other hand, the French Generals, and Napoleon in particular, seized the opportunity to gain political influence at home by directly taking control over the Italian territories. In doing so, the

necessary step was to republicanize Italy through the participation and consolidation of a local political class whose ideas were to be in line with the republican principles. In practice, Napoleon adopted an accommodating policy towards the local élites and used the argument of Italian national identity to gain their support (Zaghi 1986, 1992; Visconti 2011). In the second period of French domination, although the adoption of the Empire as a form of government contradicted the republican attitude, a progressive and enlightened approach to public government prevailed, with the establishment of predictable rules of law (Lyons 1994, p. 231).

The introduction of the Code Napoléon played a crucial role in the reorganization of the social, economic and political life of the Italian states. The innovative quality characterizing the Code lay in the idea of social equality of citizens before the law, which was to entail greater protection of their property rights. This guarantee served as the basis for the individualistic drive leading to the rise of new social groups which would become the main actors in the nineteenth-century process of reform (Donato et al. 2013, p. 126 e ss.). Indeed, the Napoleonic design was to move quickly towards a new form of society whose basis of stability, achieved with political consent, was guaranteed by a ruling class formed by a part of the old aristocracy and all those who (with merit) had succeeded in emerging in the economic, professional, civil and military world. It was not long before the Code was transplanted to the various kingdoms of the nascent Napoleonic Empire, whose purpose was to bring a final close to the complex legal tradition of the *Ancien Régime*. The old structure of territorial power was dismantled and several reforms were introduced including the abolition of guilds and the last vestiges of feudalism, including the majorat and fedecommissi.

In Piedmont, the Code was effective as from the very moment of its promulgation (1804). Later, it was introduced in the territories of the former Ligurian Republic, in Parma and Piacenza (1805), as well as the Kingdom of Italy (April 1806), the Principality of Lucca (May 1806), the Pontifical State (1809), Tuscany (1807) and the Kingdom of Naples (1809) (Nardi 1989; Lyons 1994). Thanks to the introduction of the new bureaucratic-administrative model, new forms of

political manoeuvres came into play in the different areas of Italy. Indeed, the civilian and military ruling classes themselves headed the constitutional revolutions that, between 1820 and 1821, led to the partial reversal of restored regimes in the Kingdom of Naples as well as in Piedmont. This ruling class remained on the scene in the following decades, sometimes collaborating with restored governments or engaging in the world of professions, sometimes operating in secret associations but always retaining the mirage of the Revolution. The ideas of this ruling class of the Napoleonic legacy played a decisive role in the wave of revolutions of 1848, starting the process of Italian Unification which ended on 21 September 1870 with the conquest of Rome. After the defeat of Napoleonic aspirations, the process of modernization across Europe was gradual. In Italy, the restored monarchies were influenced by Austrian control. Austrian policy was ambiguous, allowing for reforms in Lombardy and Tuscany but aiming at severe control in the Venetian provinces. Nonetheless, the ideas that spread as a consequence of the French Revolution and Napoleonic domination survived in the local élites, including the Mazzinian organizations, the Learned Societies and Freemasonries. When the élites that had emerged and grown under the influence of the principles of the Enlightenment took over political power the democratic and liberal ideals were translated into institutional reforms with a view to modernization. A long process of modernization in Piedmont began with the Commercial Law of 1837 and culminated in the new Constitution of 1848, the Statuto Albertino. In Tuscany and Milan, the governments were also progressive. The Papal State and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies were far less oriented towards modernisation. Although some seeds of modernization emerged (Davis 2009), the south of the peninsula lagged in terms of reforms until Unification. Sperber (2005) and Lyons (2006) share the view that the period after 1850 was a post-revolutionary age whose changes were set by the French Revolution. Although the bureaucratic reforms and the Code Napoléon were in force for a relatively short period (not exceeding ten years), they had sufficient weight to inspire the new Civil Code in the years of the Restoration and the Italian Civil Code promulgated in 1865. One sign of the

strength of French reforms towards modernization can be detected in the French reforms' stimulus on the diffusion of literacy in pre-unification Italy (Postigliola and Rota 2021a). Broadly speaking, the chronology and intensity of reforms in post-restoration Italy followed the path set out during French domination. Thus, during the Restoration, the monarchies had to consider the political consensus that stemmed from the revolutionary principles, including economic freedom and social equality (Lyons 2006, p. 2). This book explores how the uneven diffusion of French educational reforms contributed to regional disparities in human capital formation and state development in nineteenth-century Italy. In addition, it also engages with the long-standing debate on the origins of the North-South divide. As Emanuele Felice (2013) has argued, the gap in economic performance between northern and southern Italy can be traced back to the formation of inclusive institutions in the North and extractive institutions in the South prior to national unification in 1861. While we concur with the broad thrust of this argument, we contend that a key determinant of these institutional differences was the unequal exposure to Napoleonic rule during the early nineteenth century. Provinces that experienced longer and more intensive French control were more likely to adopt modern educational institutions, build effective local bureaucracies, and accumulate human capital conditions that laid the groundwork for future development. Conversely, provinces with limited or no French presence failed to benefit from this institutional shock, reinforcing patterns of elite dominance and administrative weakness.

The chapters that follow explore how this hybrid legacy of Napoleonic reform – neither fully preserved nor entirely dismantled after 1815 – shaped the institutional evolution of Italian states throughout the Restoration and up to national unification. A close analysis of post-Napoleonic governance reveals significant regional variation in the persistence, adaptation, or reversal of French-inspired institutions. While in the South the Bourbons embraced a strategy of administrative amalgamation, preserving much of the Napoleonic bureaucratic and legal infrastructure, central and northern states such as Tuscany and the Papal States oscillated between reactionary

retrenchment and selective modernization. The Kingdom of Sardinia, initially hostile to the French legacy, would later come to appropriate many of its administrative innovations, especially during the reform cycles of the 1840s. This institutional heterogeneity did not arise solely from differing ideological commitments, but also reflected the duration and depth of French control, the degree of bureaucratic entrenchment, and the interplay between reformist and conservative forces within each polity. These dynamics of post-imperial institutional selection set the stage for Italy's uneven pathways to modernization and help explain why the long-term effects of the Napoleonic legacy were not uniform but regionally differentiated.

Drawing on both recent quantitative research and original archival evidence, this study offers a reassessment of the Napoleonic legacy in Italy. It situates the Italian case within the broader European experience of French institutional imposition, while offering a focused empirical investigation of how exogenous reforms interacted with local conditions to produce divergent development trajectories. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how external institutional shocks – especially in education – can shape long-term patterns of state formation, economic modernization, and regional inequality.

The institutional legacy of the Napoleonic Empire has been the subject of sustained scholarly attention across two major strands of literature. On one side, historians – especially those influenced by the so-called “New Napoleonic History” – have sought to reassess the significance of Napoleonic rule across Europe, moving beyond hagiographic or purely biographical portrayals to foreground the administrative, legal, and cultural transformations brought about by imperial expansion. On the other, economic historians – especially within the tradition of New Institutional Economics – have increasingly focused on the consequences of externally imposed institutional reforms for long-term development outcomes, human capital accumulation, and state capacity.

From a historiographical standpoint, the turn inaugurated by Stuart Woolf in *Napoleon's Integration of Europe* (1991) marked a



decisive shift in the interpretation of the Empire. Rather than viewing Napoleon solely through the lens of military campaigns or revolutionary betrayal, this scholarship emphasized the role of Napoleonic governance as a transformative, if contested, institutional project. The French Empire is here seen not as a monolithic apparatus of conquest but as a complex administrative system animated by both reformist aspirations and extractive demands. Emphasis is placed on institutional integration, local adaptation, and the mediating roles of prefects, local elites, and civil servants. Woolf and his followers argued that the Napoleonic Empire, despite its coercive underpinnings, served as a vehicle for the diffusion of Enlightenment-inspired principles such as legal equality, centralized administration, and standardized taxation – elements that would become cornerstones of modern statehood.

A second, more recent wave of Napoleonic historiography – often associated with the work of Michael Broers – has engaged more directly with the concept of *cultural imperialism*, drawing on the legacy of Edward Said (1993). This approach situates the Napoleonic Empire within the broader history of European imperial formations, emphasizing its ideological content, hierarchical structures, and the cultural asymmetries embedded in its administrative practices. While Broers emphasizes the civilizing rhetoric and coercive nature of French rule – particularly in Italy – he also underscores the unintended consequences of reform, including the emergence of local forms of resistance and hybrid institutional adaptations. These interpretations have been nuanced by micro-historical studies, such as those by Bizzocchi (2010), which highlight the agency of local populations and the negotiated nature of reform in provincial contexts.

Italian historiography has played a leading role in this reappraisal. Scholars such as Carlo Capra (1978), Livio Antonielli (1983), and Anna Maria Rao (2016) have shown that the Napoleonic period was crucial in the development of modern administrative and educational institutions on the peninsula. Their work emphasizes the dual legacy of Napoleonic governance: while authoritarian in style, it initiated processes of bureaucratic rationalization and civic inclusion

that many Restoration regimes would retain. In this reading, the French presence acted as a powerful, if contradictory, catalyst for state-building and national identity formation.

In parallel, a growing body of economic history literature – rooted in the institutionalist tradition of North (1990) – has approached the Napoleonic period as a natural experiment in externally imposed reform. In their landmark contribution, Acemoglu, Cantoni, Johnson, and Robinson (2011) argued that Napoleonic rule dismantled feudal structures, introduced civil codes, and established meritocratic bureaucracies across much of continental Europe, producing persistent effects on institutional quality and economic performance. These reforms, by lowering transaction costs and securing property rights, created conditions more conducive to investment and market expansion. Buggle (2016) extended this analysis by demonstrating that the introduction of the *Code Napoléon* fostered civic trust and cooperation in German territories, laying the groundwork for sustained investment in public goods such as education.

However, not all scholars agree on the causal significance of Napoleonic reforms. Kopsidis and Bromley (2016) have warned against overly exogenous explanations, arguing that pre-existing institutional configurations and elite structures played a more decisive role in mediating reform outcomes. In the Netherlands, for example, Hart and Joor (2022) document how French-imposed reforms failed to reverse economic decline or foster modernization in the absence of complementary structural conditions. Similarly, the experience of Portugal and Spain reveals that Napoleonic shock could be institutionally disembedding and economically destructive in the short run, even when it contributed to longer-term liberalization processes.

Italy occupies a central place in this debate. Recent quantitative studies (Dincecco and Federico 2022; Cainelli, Ciccarelli, and Gannau 2023) have documented how Napoleonic rule expanded fiscal capacity and introduced more effective forms of local governance in northern and central regions, paving the way for increased public investment in education and infrastructure. These effects were far from uniform, however. Drawing on variation in the duration and intensity of French occupation, Postigliola and Rota (2021a) show