

Railways, land reclamation and the public good

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Cattaneo's interests in Ticino extended far beyond the school. He promoted the reclamation of the Magadino plain, the marshy delta of the Ticino river between Bellinzona and Lake Maggiore, for which he drew up a project and in whose agricultural potential he saw great promise.¹ Above all, he worked with the Ticinese engineer Pasquale Lucchini for the Gotthard route of the planned Alpine railway, against the rival project over the Lukmanier pass favoured by St Gallen and eastern Switzerland. At a time when the supporters of the Gotthard were still few but tenacious, he wrote on behalf of a railway committee in Lugano, presided over by Battaglini, an appeal to the Federal Assembly. He argued that no other line on Swiss territory could compare with the Gotthard, that private enterprise alone could not carry so great an undertaking and that it fell to the federal councils to raise the question to its full international scale, since only a neutral government could speak in the name of all. The Gotthard, he concluded, belonged to the Swiss fatherland as the symbol of three great civilizations.² The canton recognized these services by granting him honorary citizenship in 1858.³

Cattaneo's railway writings belong to the prehistory of the Gotthard railway, which Chapter C.III treats in detail. The point to retain here is the connection between exile and infrastructure. The exile in Castagnola thought about Ticino as a Lombard economist: as a transit territory whose prosperity depended on its links to Milan and to the north, and whose public finances could not by themselves carry an Alpine railway. This view, which saw the canton as part of a larger economic region and asked for public capital where private capital would not go, anticipated the arguments that led to the Gotthard treaties of 1869 and 1871 and, a century and a half later, to the debates on AlpTransit.

1 The federalist who would not take the oath

Politically Cattaneo remained a republican and a federalist. He opposed both the unitary monarchy of the House of Savoy and Mazzini's unitary republic. In the Swiss Confederation he saw the model of a federal Italy. His dispute with Mazzini in 1850 and 1851 over the direction of the democratic movement has been studied by Carlo Moos.⁴ His relationship with the new Kingdom of Italy remained distant. He was elected to the Italian Chamber of Deputies in 1860 and again in 1867, but he never took his seat, because he refused to swear the oath to the monarchy.⁵ In 1860 he revived *Il Politecnico*, which appeared until 1863 and, in a second series, until 1865.

Cattaneo died at Castagnola on 5 February 1869.⁶ He died a citizen of Ticino by honour and a citizen of Italy by law, having lived more than twenty years in a canton that he had first entered as a refugee. His papers are divided between Milan, where the Museo del Risorgimento holds his archive, and Palermo, where the papers of the *Elvetica* and the material for the *Archivio triennale* are kept.⁷ His case shows how quickly, in a small and receptive canton, an exile could move from the margin to the centre of public life, and how a political refuge could turn into a permanent residence without ever requiring the refugee to give up his allegiance to his country of origin.

Common misconception. Cattaneo is often remembered in Ticino as the founder or first rector of the Liceo cantonale of Lugano. In fact the Liceo was created by the cantonal school law of 9 June 1852. Cattaneo gave the inaugural lecture on 16 November 1852 and taught philosophy until 1865, but he declined the post of rector in a letter of 23 October 1852. The first rector was the physicist Giovanni Cantoni, another Milanese exile.

2 Notes

1. Moos, "Cattaneo, Carlo" (above); Mariani (above), who says that he set out "ad avviare uno studio per la bonifica del Piano di Magadino, per il quale vede un'enorme potenzialità"; Sestan, "Cattaneo, Carlo" (above), on his "progetto di bonifica del piano di Magadino presso Locarno". ↩
2. Caizzi, "La fine di una tormentata vicenda ferroviaria e la vittoria del San Gottardo", Scuola ticinese no. 102, PDF, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.102/ST_102_Caizzi_fine_tormentata_vicenda_ferroviaria_e_vittoria_del_S

an_Gottardo.pdf (consulted 4 October 2026); Moos, "Cattaneo, Carlo" (above), on the collaboration with Lucchini. Caizzi quotes the appeal, written "per un Comitato ferroviario luganese (presidente Battaglini)": "Incumbe ai Consigli Federali [...] d'elevare l'argomento a tutta la sua grandezza internazionale; nessun governo che non fosse neutrale potrebbe parlare nel nome di tutti", and "essa appartiene alla patria elvetica come a simbolo di tre grandi civiltà". The PDF gives no exact date or title for the appeal and prints the author's surname only. ↩

3. Moos, "Cattaneo, Carlo" (above); Mariani (above). ↩
4. Moos, "Mazzini, Giuseppe" (above), citing C. Moos, "Cattaneo contro Mazzini 1850–1851", *Il Risorgimento* (1993). ↩
5. Moos, "Cattaneo, Carlo" (above), for the elections of 1860 and 1867; Mariani (above), on his refusal to swear allegiance to the Savoy institutions. ↩
6. Moos, "Cattaneo, Carlo" (above). ↩
7. Moos, "Cattaneo, Carlo" (above), on the archive in the Museo del Risorgimento in Milan; Archivio di Stato di Palermo, Inventario n. 139 (above). ↩

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