European Modernity and the Passionate South

*Gender and Nation in Spain and Italy in
the Long Nineteenth Century*

Edited by

Xavier Andreu and Mónica Bolufer

BRILL

Contents

A Growing Distrust of Southern Italy: Images and Theories about National Backwardness in Liberal Italy, 1876–1914

Antonino De Francesco

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a referendum, held on June 2, 1946, sealed the end of the monarchy established in 1861. On that occasion, the republic received 54.6% of the vote, though geographic distribution of the vote made it clear that there were two Italies: the North backed the republic, the South opposed it. The highest number approving the monarchy were to be found in Naples and in Sicily and such data encouraged criticism from left-wing parties towards Southern Italian society, which seemed to put the brakes on Italy's process of democratisation (De Francesco 2012, 191–4).

Truth be said, accusing the South of representing that part of the country that was the most backward, socially and politically, was nothing new, since similar accusations had started circulating soon after the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, at a time when the provinces of the South were teeming with brigands and seemed to be opposing the establishment of a unitary state (Pinto 2019). And yet, the turning point that would suggest the existence of two Italies – socially and politically at cross purposes – was still some time away. It would not come about until 1874 and 1876, when elections marked the end of long-running right-wing governments and the rise to power of the Left (Mascilli Migliorini 1979). Within the new majority, whose aim was a democratisation of political life, virtually all the ranks were filled by representatives from the South and the Right, which had just been removed from governing, straightaway lamented that the country's precariously held unity was being put in jeopardy now that it was precisely its most backward part – that South which had until then been a national predicament – that had finally reached power (Giarrizzo 1992). Such concerns were confirmed by the inquiries published just at that juncture by Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino, both from Tuscany and both close to right-wing circles: their remarks, the result of an ardently felt journey through the regions of the South, suggested that the South was quite different from the rest of Italy, since violence, cronyism and crime held the ground there. The recipe they proposed was as simple as it was

radical: only a prompt intervention from central government, to deal with and solve the problems lying at the heart of the backwardness of Southern society, would be able to help those regions to bridge the gap that separated them from the rest of Italy. Franchetti and Sonnino's words would be used to throw a sinister light on the new political course started by the Left and marked the official opening of the so-called "Southern question," something which, having started as a political concern, later morphed into an issue for social-economic analysis (Lupo 2015). As a result, Naples came under particular scrutiny, and the following years saw the publication of many studies aimed at illustrating a situation that now ranked among national issues.

1 Two Very Different Peoples

Among visitors to the city who immediately put to print their impressions can be found the English Radical Jessie White Mario – who had been in the ranks of Garibaldi's army when it had reached Naples in 1860 –, Cesira Pozzolini Siciliani, a Florentine noblewoman of liberal outlook, as well as two journalists from Tuscany, Pietro Ferrigni and Renato Fucini, both close to political circles of the Right.

It is important to preface this by saying that the above-mentioned observers had nothing in common, that each had his or her own political opinions and social origins and that, as such, each of them showed different approaches to the city's problems. Nevertheless, apart from the different sensibilities and their respective judgments, it is worth remarking that they all started from the consideration that Neapolitan society was split into two very different peoples, living side by side and constituting two inseparable units, being too different to ever be able to turn into a single and homogeneous community (Civile 2005, 47–9; Mozzillo 1995).

White Mario, for example, had deeply-felt words in that respect and it was precisely her democratic principles that moved her to denounce the existence within Naples of veritable Indian-like castes leading the landowners – the *galantuomini* – to dominate the common people. Such concerns would accompany her through the many places of moral and human misery characterising the city and which would prompt her to highlight the fact that the very physiognomy, the very somatic features of its people proved the existence of an anthropological difference: while the inhabitants of middle-class districts appeared proportioned and well shaped, those from the working-class ghettos displayed rickety bodies and were virtually cripples (White Mario 1877, 48–9).

While such a presentation added weight to White Mario's social denunciations, it also risked backfiring against her humanitarian position, since it unintentionally brought grist to the mill of those who, within the city's elite, drew attention to the risks posed by the Neapolitan populace and insisted on maintaining power in order to prevent the city, and the South as a whole, from sliding into a violent social confrontation. Their concerns were echoed by Pietro Ferrigni, who, while visiting the city, was at times led by the mayor of Naples himself and whose descriptions of the city's misery, apparently similar to those of White Mario, actually carried a totally different meaning. His denunciation of plebeian desolation had nothing in common with White Mario's heart-rending solidarity and in his pages the description of lower-class districts appears to be an overt opportunity to induce in the reader repulsion for a barbaric and backward world (Ferrigni 1877, 296–9).

While a chasm separated Ferrigni from White Mario, the fact that both the Right and the Left insisted on the distinction between the two peoples, helped to establish the allegory of a different world: a world which one might fend for or mistrust, to be assimilated or to be dominated, but still a world that was inexorably different and far away. In the writings of Cesira Pozzolini Siciliani, such ambivalence was often present: on one hand, the writer indulged in the traditional descriptions of a ragged and slothful populace, made docile and harmless, though, by the climate and the carefree nature of Neapolitans; on the other, the scenes following the liquefaction of Saint Januarius' blood led her to consider that "in no other country is the rabble as ignorant and prejudiced, believing and superstitious" (Pozzolini Siciliani 1880, 113). Such a twofold approach led to a precarious balance between praise for a traditional world impervious to the failures of modernity and proof of the profound moral inferiority on which it was founded.

It is precisely in this area that Renato Fucini would show his best work, with remarks on the deleterious aspects of Neapolitan social life accompanied by an admiration for the natural surroundings of the city such as had long since been made popular by travel narratives. Thus, the main thoroughfares of Naples seemed to him to have a European look, while all the other streets, as a result of the shameful conditions in which they were, reminded him of the Orient. Similar references to the South seen as a different reality, in no way a European one, comparable to a world largely regarded as inferior, jump out from all his pages: it is true that the writer showed understanding for the problems of Naples' populace and denounced the inevitable link between poverty and criminality, but his description of the destitute districts of Naples ran under the banner of stereotypes and platitudes intended to highlight folkloric

themes and to fix in the reader the idea of a South as a magical and wondrous place, whose horrific social contradictions were, however, made tolerable by its particularly mild climate (Fucini 1878, 184–5).

There had been precedents, all of which could be found in a form of travel literature, dating from the Eighteenth century, that had presented the South of Italy as a distinct and mysterious place, where one could find usages and customs that had long since disappeared from the rest of Europe (Mozzillo 1992). However, such images were not original in the least, since portraying Naples on a par with an Oriental city was a trope coming from within the city itself, namely from the very same local potentates whose interest it was to present their city as a backward world in order to find legitimacy as the only possible leaders of an uncivilized people that had to be constantly kept in line.

This was the view given in 1882 by Fanny Zampini-Salazaro, a lady from Naples' well-to-do bourgeoisie, who portrayed the life of the city's lower classes in enthusiastic terms:

> [...] the deafening popular dances, the songs at times full of brio, at times lugubrious and melancholic, depending on the state of their timeless inspiration, that is, love; the processions, the festivities, the shrieks of peddlers and vendors, and all other outward manifestations, help to distinguish this people from all the others, a people that is always gay, loud, smiling and carefree even in wretchedness and affliction. (Zampini-Salazaro 1882, LXXXV)

For the noblewoman the lack of progress was to be thanked somehow, since it had made it possible to safeguard an age-old order, whose cast-iron hierarchy guaranteed a clear social balance, and because it ranked with painstaking precision the city's groups and trades in accordance with a traditional range of values with which everybody still identified. Her suggestions, behind a heart-rending nostalgia for a well-ordered world which modernity risked destroying, were evidence of how backward the balancing of interests was in Southern society, aiming as they did at turning the mass of platitudes piled on the anthropology of Southern Italy into the identitarian particularity of the city of Naples.

On closer inspection, such an approach should have worried the leading class of newly formed Italy, since magnifying backwardness as a safeguard of social order was a demonstration of the reactionary nature of the elites in power and made the South a bastion of political conservatism. On the contrary, it was precisely the fact that leading citizens of the South were part of the government majority that lent legitimacy to that image, which became a sort of official representation of the South within the new national setting.

2 A View from the North

At first the consequences of such a view went unremarked and the stereotype of a backward though well-ordered South soon gained ground as an explicit way of supporting the work of creating a national character. In Angelo Stoppani's *Bel Paese* [Beautiful Country] (1883), facile generalizations on the character of Southern people were, for example, considered a significant part of the country's anthropological identity (Stoppani 1883, 478), while Carlo Collodi, the author of the well-received *Pinocchio*, went back to the same themes in 1886, openly revealing the superstition and the barbarity of the Southern populace, to conclude, however, that patriotism itself would lead it to rapid progress (Collodi 1886, 19).

Such civic-minded literature, which was intended for young students, aimed at giving expression to a nation-wide plan that could unify, under the banner of patriotism, the pluralistic character of Italy which had been forged by centuries of history (Fiorelli 2012). The goal of giving expression to the myriad small fatherlands making up the larger one by collecting all of them within the framework of a shared national plan was to fail early on, since the cultural context which inspired it – a multifarious Italy that was at the same time a participant in a shared national destiny – had been shattered against the rocks of a differentiating process that had turned the country into a visibly discordant patchwork.

Such a view was confirmed by the cholera epidemic that reached Naples in 1884 (Snowden 1995). At the time, many had highlighted the connection between poverty and disease, and all the main newspapers in Italy had printed detailed reports of the horrific living conditions in Naples, while lining words of sympathy side by side with denunciations of the serious cultural deficiencies to be found among the city's population. The *Corriere della Sera* [Daily Courier], which by then had already become Northern Italy's most authoritative daily, repeatedly denounced popular superstition and the collective hysteria of the urban populace, which it saw as the persistent heritage of a past that would stubbornly not give way. The newspaper repeatedly called for action against religious processions, which the people of Naples saw as a way of gaining divine intercession, but which, for the paper, were only a dangerous opportunity for the spread of disease ("A Napoli dal 23 al 24," *Corriere della Sera,* September 25–26 1884).

The insistence of Milan's daily on popular superstition in Naples should not surprise, as readers in the North of Italy had long been used, since the early years of the unified State, to seeing the South through the prism of stereotyped categories. The reports by [Northern Italian] correspondents from the South

met the expectations of a public that felt sure that it already knew that faraway part of Italy, whose savage violence and barbarity had been brought to light by news of the brigands there. This explains the enormous emphasis given, in 1884, to the story of Calabrian recruit Salvatore Misdea, who, in a barracks in Naples, had killed eight of his fellow recruits as retaliation of the jokes of which he had been the butt (Berré 2012). Another reason why this event hit the national headlines was the presence of Cesare Lombroso among the defence counsel at the trial. Lombroso was the most celebrated scientist at the time and took this opportunity to illustrate his theories on the incidence of atavism in the make-up of criminals (Frigessi 2003, 359–61). In his opinion, the brutal act of violence by Misdea, soon to be sentenced to death by execution, could be understood by looking through the culprit's genealogical tree for those forms of short temper and idiocy, madness and criminality repeatedly shown by the soldier. This story, which would soon dominate the pages of Italy's main dailies, confirmed among public opinion the existence of a barbarous world that had survived the progressive policies started by the unified State, and that still prevailed in whole areas of the South and represented therefore a formidable obstacle on the way to modernity (Scarfoglio 2003, 188).

Adolfo Rossi, a correspondent for Rome's *Messaggero* [Messenger], climbed his way through Calabria as far as the recruit's birthplace to meet his family and for a close examination, in accordance with Lombroso's directions, of the environment in which Misdea had lived. His travel notes are in this respect exemplary of the fact that the journalist intended to stir the reader's attention through the description of a world that was thoroughly foreign to that of the new Italy. The correspondent thought that the recruit's birthplace looked

> like an ugly Tunisian village; wretched-looking ramshackle houses, streets that are nothing but cesspools. A number of urchins in shirtsleeves, gaunt and soot-black, were rummaging in the company of pigs and hens; a few women went up and down carrying their *gozze*, water pots, balanced on their heads; a daughter was lovingly and publicly delousing her aged father sitting in the middle of the yard … And yet how fascinating would these women be in their artistic costumes, wearing those headbands, with those jugs on their head – which give them an Arabian, Oriental air – if only they were cleaner! (Rossi 1893, 44–52)

This pairing of the South of Italy with nearby Tunisia – aimed at excluding that part of Italy from the ranks of civilized countries – was skilfully made up on the basis of a specific image that had been around for quite some time, both drama and literature having equally contributed to its creation, since each had so heavily insisted on the topics of brigandage and the Southern populace.

At first, interest in popular violence in the South had been kept alive by
works of fiction such as novels sold in instalments having brigands as their protagonists. This theme had appeared relatively frequently since the early days
of the unified State. In 1867, for example, a lawyer from Lombardy, Antonio
Vismara, had published a novel which made short work of the South, painting
it as a society quite distinct from, and totally foreign to, the civilized world.
In the introduction, he revealed to the reader that the facts depicted had not
taken place "in Oceania, in Africa, in savage lands, but rather in Italian territory! These events did not take place in times of ignorance, superstition, religious fanaticism, but in 1861..." (Vismara 1866, III–IV).

As a lawyer, Vismara had worked in the military courts convened to try those
arrested for brigandage. His aim was, in all honesty, to highlight the long way
on the road to progress that the South still had to go, though there is no doubt
that the reader might get the opposite impression and would leave the book
convinced that all the way across Italy stood a world hopelessly lost in superstition and violence.

The same trick turned up in the following years in the works of Francesco
Mastriani, a torrential writer from Naples, whose *Misteri di Napoli* [Mysteries of Naples] had been published in Milan in 1877. Set in a different cultural
context, his writings protesting against the new social order (Guardiani 2013)
had stirred reactions that went totally counter to what the author intended: in
the regions of the North, images of a ragged and vagrant rabble transformed
the denunciation of a dramatic social situation into confirmation of a backwardness that was fated to be branded with the marks of an anthropological
difference.

A better-known writer from the South, Luigi Capuana, would denounce this
attitude in the early 1890s. He imputed to himself, to Federico De Roberto, and
especially to his own friend Giovanni Verga – the main exponent of Italian
verismo – the serious fault of having encouraged, through their respective literary works, the spread of unacceptable clichés about Sicily. The rampant prejudices held by the Nation's public opinion with regard to the island appeared
to Capuana to be the direct result of a warped interest in a literary genre that
had put the South under the spotlight within a few decades of the country's
unity (Capuana 1892, 7–10). The writer was no doubt painting a lurid picture of
the situation, but it is a fact that throughout Italy the public felt it had a solid
knowledge of the South, which had by then become a literary place of indubitable fascination for readers.

If proof was needed, this was to be found in the enormous success among
the public – thousands of copies sold throughout Italy in 1887 – of a novel,
Il cappello del prete [The Priest's Hat], which the Milanese writer Emilio De
Marchi had chosen to set in Naples, a place which he had simply imagined and

never visited, providing a portrait of the city that can easily be evinced from the journalism of the time. In particular, the main characters corresponded to a well-worn cliché that was bound to find an audience among the readers of that period: the protagonist was a priest from Naples' lower-class districts whom the Neapolitan populace deemed a sorcerer thanks to his uncanny skill at guessing the numbers drawn on the lottery, while his executioner, the bankrupt baron of Santafusca, in addition to being an inveterate gambler and frequent visitor of low dives of dubious character, is a direct descendant of a brigand. On one hand, De Marchi was portraying the fanaticism and the super-stition of the Neapolitan populace, while providing, on the other, a sketch of the local potentates as backward and lecherous, and accustomed to lording it over in the South. Such a negative understanding of the South, founded on a warped and essentially incongruous use of picturesque news features from the South, found its confirmation in the fact that the very core of the novel – the existence of a priest who is considered a sort of wizard in Naples' underworld thanks to his weird skill at arranging magical numbers – had actually occurred a few years earlier (Adamo 2005).

This image of the South portrayed through the prism of abject poverty and moral degradation, was also haunted by the existence of organised crime, which was ever present in the minds of public opinion. Articles on the camorra, first, and on the mafia, later, had greatly contributed to rein-forcing the idea that the South was rife with lawlessness and that the practice of criminal violence was a dangerous germ ready to infect the whole nation. The term camorra quickly turned into shorthand, in all regions of Northern and Central Italy, to denote situations which, though at times quite different from one another, all came under the common denominator of corruption. Thus, already in 1874, the camorra was a subject for popular drama in Milan's theatres, as the term was being used to illustrate a war among poor wretches trying to gain some unlawful, meagre profit (Villani 1874); in 1876 the term is found in Tuscany, where a local broadsheet was suggesting that the bad exam-ple set by the Southern regions had affected the municipality of Portoferraio, where criminal trafficking and cronyism were legion;[1] sometime later, in 1887,

---

1   "La camorra nel Municipio di Portoferraio," *La Vespa*, March 17, 1876: "This lethal plague also seems to have penetrated several Tuscan municipalities which had once been a model of prudence and uprightness. Many are the facts that we may produce to confirm our claim, and which would show to what extent even the best among our leaders have deviated from the probity of yore, in the wake of the nefarious example of what unfortunately is the staple in other provinces of Italy".

the term was being evoked in connection with multiple thefts perpetrated in Venice against unsuspecting tourists, with the following proviso:

> [...] the word camorra is a provincial term from the South which thanks to evil customs has gained national currency throughout Italy even though it is not to be found in dictionaries. ... Venice has been for years under the weight of the most grievous accusation that may be laid against a city in the North, the accusation of camorra. (Ottolenghi 1887, 5)

However, the portrait of a South ruled by lawlessness was being peddled not so much by news articles on the mafia and the camorra, which were indeed numerous in those years,[2] as by other media, among which drama played a very significant role, as a result of repertory plays devoted to the world of the camorra being constantly on the stage. This period saw the serendipitous rediscovery, in 1884, of a play by the Sicilian author Giuseppe Rossitto, whose comedy of 1863, *Li mafiusi di la Vicaria* [The Mafia of la Vicaria], was – as the title says – the first work to make explicit use of the word *mafia*. This play, which had been a flop at the time, was later reprised on a successful tour. Its reviewer soon turned it into a detailed catalogue of themes from the criminal world which had by now become part of "Italy's moral and intellectual every-day experience" (*I mafiusi* 1885, 9). A few years hence, in 1889, even greater success was to be enjoyed by Salvatore Di Giacomo, the leading interpreter of the Neapolitan "soul". He had studied the city's history and traditions and would soon turn the city's dialect into a versatile instrument for verse and drama. *Assunta Spina*, once again a camorra play, would enjoy huge and lasting success, to such an extent that it was made into an opera and, on the eve of the First World War, also a film (Di Giacomo 1910).

Truth and fiction were to be found so intricately woven into each other in the end that they could hardly be disentangled, if the success of Neapolitan songs on a national scale is any evidence. Here too, we have a catalogue of images that artistic tradition had identified with the city (Stazio 1991, 16–7); at the same time, through the use of dialect and the revival of ancient notions, those images were being translated into a simple and traditional message, since their motifs evoked the unique natural context of the place – the flowers, the sun, the sea – as well as the enclosure of amorous passion, with disappoint-ment and betrayal as the inevitable sidekicks in the final act.

---

2   See for example Umiltà 1878, Alongi 1886 and 1890.

The question one should ask is, however, what form such peculiar turns would assume along the roads of Italy. In this sense, images of barefoot rascals playing musical instruments, or the pictures of everyday life accompanying books of Neapolitan songs, or postcards reproducing the notes of the most popular airs, seem to be saying that the city's melodic genre was enjoying great success, in Italy as well as abroad, precisely because it was harping on the heartrending anthropological difference of the South. Whereas in Naples this was translated into a regret for the loss of the good old days dismantled by the shocks of modernity, elsewhere instead, it took on the hues of a lasting (and, in more ways than one, worrying) preservation of a pernicious traditionalism. This was what photographers from all over Italy were doing, reaching Naples in droves to offer the public a truthful profile of the city's society (Galasso et alii, 1981): the portraits of money grubbers – mostly taken in a studio, in front of fancy backdrops, therefore only apparently fixed in their customary poses and gestures – went hand in hand with photographs describing life in the streets, which was dominated by street brats playing morra, or else the plebs, among whom stood out some boys guzzling maccheroni, captured in their skilful hand and mouth performances (Bertellini 2010, 30–58).

3   Two Italies

As a result, one should not therefore be too surprised to find that such an insistence on a specific image of Naples – where superstition and corruption join religious bigotry and political traditionalism – would lead to antagonistic attitudes towards the South, especially among Milan's intellectual milieus close to radical democracy. At the time of the cholera, for example, the Milanese daily *Secolo* [Century] started a series of reports from Naples in which the lack of understanding of the moral universe of the city's populace quickly veered from disbelief to contempt. The newspaper's columns were thus besieged by the description of scenes of superstition in the city that seemed to come one after the other in quick succession: from the denunciation of warning signals to the accusations of being a jinx against anyone who might suggest sanitary preventative measures, from the nefarious consequences of lottery wins, which led to incontinent gorging on food, to the fanatical rush towards votive statuettes long since covered in notes asking for intercessions from the saints, to blind faith in processions, from violence against anyone appearing to be a godless infidel to the theft of church money collections, the *Secolo* did not let any opportunity go to waste to demonstrate the backwardness of Naples' plebs in all its glory. The Milanese daily insisted on those features to show the government where its priorities lay:

> The plebs must be enlightened. They must be taught to look danger in the face. Dispel the dangerous prejudices of poisoners. Is it possible that in the middle of the Nineteenth century we should go back to well poisoners, to contamination, to epidemics criminally produced by the government? (*Il Secolo,* September 10–11, 1884)

Still, the frenzied campaign of the *Secolo* against popular fanaticism, though dictated by good intentions, led to the opposite result of antagonising public opinion with regard to the South. In Northern Italy, where socialism was making great strides, impatience with the conditions in which the South seemed to be wallowing, divided between two peoples, one lost in abjection and superstition, with the other, however, in its turn incapable of reforming actions, cajoled as it was by the substantial aid secured for it by central government.

In a nutshell, at the start of the 1890s, it seemed clear that the promotion of specific regional identities – to which history and anthropology, archeology and linguistics had concurred – had gone haywire with regard to political developments, suggesting that in the regions of the South such diversity had a negative impact on society and was the cause of a primitive and backward-looking social equilibrium (De Francesco 2013). In other words, trying to keep the various identities of the country together had led to a lurid picture of the South destined to come into collision with a social frame blighted by backwardness.

All of the above was fostered by the involution of national politics, which had been unable to respond convincingly to the new configuration of Parliament in 1876: in the years immediately following, hopes of a revival of liberalism had been crushed by the practice of political *trasformismo*: the handover of power from the Right to the Left did not lead to a strengthening of bipartisanship, but rather to the fragmentation of the two sides leading to majorities changing from to time depending on agreements and concessions running across the board irrespective of which side was in power (Graziano 2010, 91–7). The prospects for reform would soon be sacrificed in favour of single power groups dominating the social-economic scene of the young Italian state. It was within such a frame that accusations started landing against the South, at the door of whose political class was laid the charge of having encouraged *trasformismo* decisively introducing into parliamentary dynamics their social conservatism in order to look after their parasitical economic interests.

The serious cases of corruption and criminality in Naples and throughout the South of the country were also evidence of how *trasformismo* practices had troubled the waters of national politics, which ran the risk of collusion with organised crime in more than one instance. The revival of the fortunes of the erstwhile member of Garibaldi's corps, Francesco Crispi, whose last government got its start in 1893, exasperated such concerns. His strong-arming

of opposition parties, his policy of rabid colonialism in Africa convinced the radical and socialist opposition, which were particularly strong in the North of the country, that the elderly statesman was by now the bastion of a corrupted power, which, not surprisingly, found its strongholds among the Southern notables. The *fin-de-siècle* crisis – characterised by Milan's political circles fighting against Crispi – thus became the dramatic clash between the North, which considered itself civilized and advanced, and the South, promptly labelled backward and superstitious. The effects of such a clash were soon to be seen in the 1895 elections, lost by Crispi in the Lombard capital, but easily won in the South, though he had to bow out the following year after protests in Milan as a result of the disastrous military losses incurred by his aggressive policies in Africa. The leading city of the North – the driving force of industrial activity – moved to the opposition in the face of a national government that seemed incapable of responding to its expectations. Relations between North and South immediately felt the blow, which soon turned into open confrontation, also via stereotype attacks, between the two parts of Italy (Petraccone 2000, 136–207).

New fuel had been added to this dispute by developments in the social and anthropological sciences. Between 1897 and 1901, Alfredo Niceforo, a Sicilian disciple of socialist criminologist Enrico Ferri, published a number of works dealing head-on with the issue of the South's political and moral deficiencies. In particular, in *Italia barbara contemporanea* [Contemporary Barbarian Italy], which came out in 1898, Niceforo developed the thesis of the anthropological inferiority of the South, around which would revolve, at the turn of the century, the whole debate regarding the two Italies and their strenuous cohabitation under the same roof of a unitary state. The text made great use of the concept of atavism borrowed from the Lombroso school, applying it, though, to the classification of human races such as had been developed in parallel by the anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi: the joining of those two research perspectives which had until then been proceeding side by side in the world of science, enabled him to identify a Mediterranean lineage of distant African origins which had, in line with primeval characteristics of the South alone, crystallised the deep cause of the degradation of Italy's moral life (Teti 2011, 7–47).

Italians were seen by Niceforo as the imperfect mix of two different races: the Aryan race, which had arrived in a far distant epoch from North Europe, ruling over the Northern regions, and the Mediterranean race, having, indeed, African origins, which had forever been trapped within the enclosure of the South. *Italia barbara contemporanea* entered the cultural debate of the time with explosive force, since not only did Niceforo vouchsafe a scientific way of explaining the mystery of the unbridgeable fissure between the two Italies,

he also had no qualms about the political implications that his argument was
opening up. It was anthropological inferiority that led the people of the South
to look askance at modernity and that ensured that they would be ever ready
to stand in the way of any aspiration to freedom and progress. According to
Niceforo, recent Italian history was but confirmation, after all, of his case, since
the population of the South

> [...] after Garibaldi had captured Naples, rushed to gorges in the moun-
> tains and to the forests to spread terror as brigands, assailing whole villages
> and massacring our troops because it neither wanted nor understood a
> government that was new, free and far more civilised than the previous
> one ... that same people, hostile to any idea of progress crystallised in still
> primitive forms of social life ... has been unable to do anything new and
> advanced ... It has always stayed with its arms akimbo because of its noto-
> rious, damned hostility towards any innovative idea. (Niceforo 1898, 267–9)

In those pages, Niceforo, his eye looking in favour upon the republican and
socialist oppositions, came to suggest the end of centralised government for
the regions of the North, while demanding – obviously on behalf of a new lead-
ing class that did not have to depend on the consensus of Southern plebs –
the most extensive control for the regions of the South (Niceforo 1898, 291–9).
Niceforo's pages would therefore provide great scientific support to the con-
current political discourse of the radical and socialist Left, which his teacher
Enrico Ferri outlined during a parliamentary debate in 1901, when he drew
the South as a backward world dominated by criminality, against which the
regions of the North could be set apart from their perspective of progress and
freedom (Petraccone 2000, 219–24).

It was to no avail that, likewise on the left, republican Napoleone Colajanni
and at that time socialist Gaetano Salvemini spoke words of caution against
a political line that made it impossible to gain consensus in the Southern
regions. What prevailed instead, in the discourse of the Italian Left at the start
of the century, was precisely the stereotype of a ragged and backward South,
morally uneducated and politically illiterate, cleaving through mostly sordid
interests to its own leading class, of which it was, appropriately, the inexhaust-
ible electoral reservoir.

Thus, it was that the early Twentieth century saw the waning of the age-old
idea that two distinct peoples lived in the Southern regions, merely juxtaposed,
when not opposed, to each other. In fact, in Northern Italy, the political ideas
of left-wing forces helped promote the notion that in the South the populace
and the local notables shared some kind of repugnant harmony, arising from

the intricate web of interests leading to an unmentionable common ground, which resulted in a social equilibrium on the cheap destined to decant into a clear political deal: the elites would use the uncouth masses as leverage to maintain their firm control of the institutional structure, dispensing favours to their respective electoral blocks, which, in turn, also by means of criminal associations, were able to control the activity of their superiors along the way.

4   Conclusion

Shortly afterwards, this understanding of reality seemed to be confirmed by the case of the Sicilian Member of Parliament Nunzio Nasi, who had been declared unfit to stand as a result of financial misconduct and was later convicted, in 1906, even though he had been re-elected by his constituents in the meantime. On hearing the news that their MP had been convicted, people in Trapani, Western Sicily, broke into riots which were promptly denounced by all the newspapers in the North.

The *Secolo* meticulously listed all the excesses of that "collective madness," to remind its readership that only the drawing of lottery numbers – namely 5 and 26, on which "the whole of Trapani's plebs" were constantly betting – could have appeased them (*Il Secolo,* June 10, 1906). The *Corriere della Sera* was even more heavy-handed:

> The people of Trapani have a lot in common with Muslim people. The rule of the Arabs was felt more strongly there than elsewhere; … the character of the people of Trapani has a lot in common with that of the Arabs; exaggeration is in the temperament of these people who have for centuries held in adoration a modest picture of the Virgin rescuing survivors of shipwrecks while immoderately worshiping the statue of the Madonna of Trapani, covered and even buried under the weight of countless silver votive objects left there by all those who have been in any danger whatsoever. In recent years, worship of Mr Nasi has partially replaced that of the miraculous Madonna; his portrait, adorned with flowers, can be found in all homes in Trapani. Villa Nasi has been turned into a sort of temple, consecrated to the devotion of citizens. (*Corriere della Sera,* June 6, 1906)

Last in this list of news media comparing the people of Trapani to the remnant of a long-gone age was the socialist daily itself *Avanti!,* which denounced that the crowd

> [...] infringed all rights. It covered in spit, insults, hard blows workers, soldiers, policemen [...] All night long a shrill, constant, unending ringing of bells summoned the whole population. The churches were invaded by the tearful crowd calling for the most dreadful divine punishment. For an entire day the country was at the mercy of this mob, inspired and ignorant, credulous, and savage, ardent and wild. (*Avanti!,* June 13, 1906)

The violent protests in Trapani against the Nasi trial had thus allowed the national press to reopen, by way of an attack on cronyism, the voluminous file on the traditionalist and reactionary character of the Southern population. Nasi, however, did not remain silent: he soon left prison and went on the attack: "Southern Italy looks to the eyes of Northerners like a Vendée of absentee landlords, ignorant plebs and corrupt politicians" (Blando 2017). At the same time, back in Trapani, he was the subject of scenes of collective hysteria and demonstrations of extraordinary and rash affection. After all, the list of his achievements in politics was impressive: Nasi had been elected an MP in 1886 with 47,7% the vote, rising to 76,2% in 1890, finally reaching 96,6% in 1892 and hovering around 90% in 1897 and in 1900. It was only in 1904 that electoral consensus for him had gone down slightly, plateauing at around 80%, but the legal drama that had led to the loss of his seat allowed him to scoop up in triumph virtually all the votes in the eight by-elections that followed, all of them declared invalid, held between 1905 and 1909 to assign his officially vacant seat. Such triumphs were repeated in the general election of 1909 (99,1%) and in the by-elections that followed, and again in 1913, after Nasi had in the meantime been declared once again fit to stand for elections, his ratings, though now down to around 60%, did not prevent him from controlling local political life for a long time to come.

As a result, indignant, if not sarcastic, comments were to be heard, again from the Left, regarding proposals aimed at introducing universal suffrage; the same attitude led to a revolutionary all-or-nothing tendency with its eyes firmly fixed on the proletariat of the North which dismissed as obsolete the suggestions of those who, in the perspective of a democratisation of political life throughout the nation, were asking for concrete actions to solve the many problems of the South.[3]

Openly flaunted criticism of Southern society was destined, at the other end of Italy, to strengthen the hold of the local elites, all set to line up under the

---

3   It is from within this framework, on the other hand, that the debate on the inferiority of Southerners drew its strength; the voices of the main protagonists may be read in Teti 2011, 127–217. As to that great age of debates on the Southern question, see Galasso 1981, 51–75.

banner of the government while lamenting the existence of unacceptable prejudices. Against those who pointed out the inferiority of the South, resulting from a pernicious psychological universe, would stand those who highlighted the glories of the Southern fatherland at the same time as they complained about the many wrongs they suffered.

The early years of the twentieth century saw a contentious duel between the advocates of the two civilizations: this clash was destined only apparently to empty itself into the collective patriotic effort of the Great War. In the aftermath of the First World War, it was not by accident that early Fascism – omnium gatherum of many revolutionary trade unionists – should show in its turn many a misgiving relative to the South and pointed at its political class as the main culprit of the many shortcomings of the Liberal state.

Acknowledgments

References

Adamo, Sergio. 2005. "Il cappello del prete: il romanzo giudiziario e il racconto della giustizia." In *Emilio De Marchi un secolo dopo*, edited by Renzo Cremante. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura.

Alongi, Giuseppe. 1886. *La mafia nei suoi fattori e nelle sue manifestazioni. Studio sulle classi pericolose della Sicilia.* Turin: Bocca.

Alongi, Giuseppe. 1890. *La camorra. Studio di sociologia criminale*. Turin: Bocca.

Berré, Alessio. 2012. "Diritto, scienza e letteratura nell'Italia post-unitaria: il caso Misdea." *Between*, II (3). http://www.Between-journal.it/.

Bertellini, Giorgio. 2010. *Italy in Early American Cinema. Race, Landscape and the Picturesque.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Blando, Antonino. 2017. "Corti e lunghi circuiti politici. Il caso Nunzio Nasi." *Meridiana* 90: 171–97.

Caglioti, Angelo Matteo. 2017. "Race, Statistics and Italian Eugenics: Alfredo Niceforo's Trajectory from Lombroso to Fascism (1876–1960)." *European History Quaterly,* 47 (3): 461–89.

Capuana, Luigi. 1892. *La Sicilia e il brigantaggio*. Rome: Stabilimento tipografico italiano.

Civile, Giuseppe. 2005. *Fare opinione. Rocco De Zerbi e Napoli nell'Italia postunitaria*. Naples: Libreria Dante & Descartes.

Collodi, Carlo. 1886. *Il viaggio per l'Italia di Giannettino. III: Italia meridionale*. Florence: Paggi.

Dal Lago, Enrico. 2014. "Italian National Unification and the Mezzogiorno: Colonialism in One Country?" In *The Shadow of Colonialism on Europe's Modern Past*, edited by Enrico Dal Lago and Róisin Healy, 12–57. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Daniele, Vittorio. 2015. "Two Italies? Genes, intelligence and the Italian north–south economic divide." *Intelligence,* 49: 44–56.

De Francesco, Antonino. 2012. *La palla al piede. Una storia del pregiudizio antimeridionale*. Milan: Feltrinelli.

De Francesco, Antonino. 2013. *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation. The Cultural origins of a Political Myth in Modern Italy, 1796–1943*. Oxford: OUP.

Di Giacomo, Salvatore. 1910. *Teatro*. Lanciano: Carabba.

Ferrari Zumbini, Romani. 1983. *L'"Incidente" Nasi: Cronaca di una vicenda dell'Italia politica d'altri tempi, 1903–1908*. Padua: CEDAM.

[Ferrigni, Pietro] Yorick. 1877. *Vedi Napoli e poi... .* Naples: Marghieri.

Fiorelli, Vittoria. ed. 2012. *La nazione tra i banchi. Il contributo della scuola alla formazione degli Italiani tra Otto e Novecento*. Soveria: Mannelli Rubbettino.

Frigessi, Delia. 2003. *Cesare Lombroso*. Turin: Einaudi.

Fucini, Renato. 1878. *Napoli a occhio nudo. Lettere a un amico*. Florence: Le Monnier.

Galasso, Giuseppe. ed. 1981. *Napoli nelle collezioni Alinari e nei fotografi napoletani fra Ottocento e Novecento*. Naples: Macchiaroli.

Giarrizzo, Giuseppe. 1992. *Mezzogiorno senza meridionalismo. La Sicilia, lo sviluppo, il potere*. Venice: Marsilio.

Giuliani, Gaia. 2011. "Il bianco negro. La «bianchezza» in Italia dall'Unità al fascismo." *il Mulino* 60 (4): 615–21.

Graziano, Manlio. 2010. *The Failure of Italian Nationhood: the Geopolitics of a Troubled Identity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Guardiani, Francesco. 2013. "Francesco Mastriani: due capitoli di storia e di letteratura di Napoli e d'Italia." *Revista De Italianística,* 25: 75–97.

I mafiusi di G. Rizzotto. Giudizi della stampa romana, fiorentina e livornese. 1885. Florence: Alessandri.

Lupo, Salvatore. 2015. *La questione. Come liberare la storia del Mezzogiorno dagli stereotipi*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.

Mascilli Migliorini, Luigi. 1979. *La sinistra storica al potere. Sviluppo della democrazia e direzione dello stato, 1876–1878*. Naples: Guida.

Mozzillo, Atanasio. 1992. *La frontiera del Grand Tour. Viaggi e viaggiatori nel Mezzogiorno borbonico*. Naples: Liguori.

Mozzillo, Atanasio. 1995. *Largo settimo cielo. Plebe e popolo a Napoli nel secondo Ottocento*. Naples: Liguori.

Nani, Michele. 2019. "Il popolo dei lombrosiani. Scienze sociali e classi subalterne in Italia fra Otto e Novecento." *Italia Contemporanea-Sezione Open Access* 1.289: 209–234.

Niceforo, Alfredo. 1898. *L'Italia barbara contemporanea*. Milan-Palermo: Sandron.

Ottolenghi, G. 1887. *La camorra nell'industria veneziana*. Venice: Tipografia dell'Ancora.

Patriarca, Silvana. 2020. "How Many Italies? Representing the South." In *Italy's' Southern Question': Orientalism in One Country,* edited by Jane Schneider, 77–98. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Petraccone, Claudia. 2000. *Le due civiltà: settentrionali e meridionali nella storia d'Italia dal 1860 al 1914*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.

Pinto, Carmine. 2019. *La guerra per il Mezzogiorno. Italiani, borbonici e briganti 1860–1870.* Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Pozzolini Siciliani, Cesira. 1880. *Napoli e dintorni. Impressioni e ricordi*. Naples: Morano.

Ridda, Maria. 2017. "The Siren's Children: Rethinking Postcolonial Naples." *Interventions,* 19 (4): 467–86.

Rossi, Adolfo. 1893. *Da Napoli ad Amburgo. Escursioni di un giornalista.* Rome: Stabilimento tipografico La Tribuna.

Scarfoglio, Edoardo. 2003. *Il romanzo di Misdea.* Florence: Polistampa.

Shinn, Christopher A. 2016. "Inside the Italian Empire: Colonial Africa, Race Wars, and the 'Southern Question'." In *Shades of Whiteness,* edited by Ewan Kirkland, 35–51. Oxford: Brill.

Snowden, Frank M. 1995. *Naples in the time of cholera, 1884–1911*. Cambridge: CUP.

Stazio, Marialuisa. 1991. *Osolemio. La canzone napoletana, 1880–1914*. Rome: Bulzoni.

Stoppani, Angelo. 1883. *Il bel paese, conversazioni sulle bellezze naturali, la geologia e la geografia fisica d'Italia*. Milan: Agnelli.

Teti, Vito. 2011. *La razza maledetta. Origini del pregiudizio antimeridionale*. Rome: Manifestolibri.

Umiltà, Angelo. 1878. *Camorra e mafia: notes sur l'Italie*. Neuchâtel: Attinger.

Urban, Maria Bonaria. 2011. "Lo stereotipo del Sud fra Otto e Novecento. Il caso della Sardegna." *Incontri. Rivista europea di studi italiani,* 26 (2): 50–63.

Villani, F. 1874. *Debit no paga debit, ossia la camorra di poveritt.* Milan: Barbini.

Vismara, Antonio. 1866. *Un banchetto di carne umana. Scene dell'Italia meridionale.* Milan: Pagnoni.

White Mario, Jessie. 1877. *La miseria in Napoli*. Florence: Le Monnier.

Zampini-Salazaro, Fanny. 1882. *Memorie di Napoli*. Naples: Bronner. 1882.