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(North) South by North West. The Italian Mezzogiorno seen through Anglo-Saxon Lenses.

Alfred Hitchcock's celebrated *North by North West* (translated into Italian as *Intrigo internazionale*) provides the pun for illustrating here some aspects of the northern –and more specific - trans-Atlantic, Anglo-Saxon perspective on the Italian South, its rhetoric, and symbolic geography. As a matter of fact, the last thirty years have seen the Italian Southern Question stimulate a strong, lively and lasting interest among historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and, more recently, cultural historians, in both Great Britain and the United States. The first, well known reason for this is that the most tenacious stereotypes of Italy, from patriarchal gender relations to various forms of organized crime, up to an entrenched style of clientelistic politics, have been notoriously considered rooted in the provinces south of Rome.¹ A further reason, inspired by the pioneering work of Edward Said and other theorists of literary theory and geopolitics, lies in the fact that this “recent criticism has explored the ideological bias behind the regional and national stereotypes ascribed to Italians at home and abroad”.

Therefore, scholars have been especially active in examining the marginal position of the Italian south vis à vis the north, a situation that has been described as ‘orientalism in one country’.² It is my contention that we are currently witnessing the emergence of the Italian Southern Question as a worldwide recognizable watershed

¹ Jane Schneider, “The Dynamics of Neo-orientalism in Italy (1848-1995)” in J.Schneider (ed.), *Italy's Southern Question. Orientalism in one Country*, Oxford, Berg 1998, p. 1.

² Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghosts of Italy*, New Haven, Yale 2008, p.53.

for the North-South global divide, as a consequence of a debate which exceeds academic circles and emerges as a confrontation between two antagonistic, ethically motivated and embattled models of social development. Moreover, these Anglo-Saxon “new meridionalists” and their Italian counterpart have challenged the frozen image of the Mezzogiorno, questioning the very idea “as a social construction”³ beyond the cliché of its immobility and addressing problems related to the civil rights of citizens.

In actual fact, the modern re-discovery of the Southern Question did not take place in the US or in Britain, but far away in India, which of course is still another part of the Angloworld. 1980 saw the issue of the first volume of the *Subaltern Studies* series by the Indian historian Ranajit Guha and his group. Guha and his colleagues - later to be known as the “Subaltern historians” – had become dissatisfied with the failure of post-independent Indian historiography - which they labelled as “elitist”- to come into its own and tackle the issues of domination and subordination, passivity and resistance, which they deemed as central to an understanding of modern India.

Guha found analogies with India in Gramsci’s study on *The Southern Question* (*La Quistione meridionale*), and also the theory he needed to frame his argument.⁴ In his only extensive work published during his lifetime, Gramsci links the Southern Question to the failure of an effectively democratic Risorgimento. In his view, unification came about only through the diplomatic and military power of the Piedmontese state. The middle classes, especially those Gramsci calls the Action Party headed by Mazzini and Garibaldi, failed to fulfil their historical (‘Jacobin’) role of aligning with the peasantry against the old feudal ruling classes and thereby establishing their hegemony over the subaltern classes. Instead, the middle class intellectuals trailed behind the Piedmontese diplomats and generals, whilst the

³ Marta Petrusiewicz, “Before the Southern Question: Native Ideas on Backwardness and Remedies in the Kingdom of Two Sicilies, 1815-1849” in Schneider 1998, pp.27-49.

⁴ However, since Guha used the 1971 translation of Gramsci’s writings, *Selections of the Prison Notebooks*, he constantly refers to the section erroneously translated as “Subaltern Studies”, which actually deals with the *Mezzogiorno*.

peasantry either, as in Lombardy and Venetia, fought for the occupying Austrians against the nationalists or, as in Sicily, were crushed when they rose in support of Garibaldi's invasion. Gramsci characterized the outcome as 'a passive revolution', a superficial transformation that, in the absence of mass involvement and effective bourgeois leadership, had merely succeeded in establishing coercive domination over an imperfectly integrated society. Gramsci identified one of the root causes of the subsequent rise of fascism in this failure to create a genuine people nation.⁵

The Indian bourgeoisie's shortcomings in uniting with the peasantry and effecting a more radical a more radical transformation offer – as Guha or Partha Chatterjee contend- suggestive parallels with Gramsci's analysis of the unequal Italian unification. Seen in this comparative context, Gramsci's use of the term 'subaltern' is of paramount importance. "At a minimal evaluation it can be regarded as little more than convenient shorthand for a variety of subordinate classes- industrial workers, labourers, artisans and so forth", but, on closer inspection, it emphasizes the centrality of the relationship of power between social groups. When he deals with peasants and other groups in underdeveloped areas or countries that had not become wholly capitalistic, Gramsci's South of Italy epitomizes a radical change in social theory: the language of the subaltern has substituted that of class.

In fact, if one relates Gramsci's idea of a passive revolution to Vincenzo Cuoco's diagnosis of the 1799 Neapolitan revolution, there is no stark dichotomy between proletarian and peasant, between revolutionary and reactionary, as appears in Marx's writings on nineteenth century history and politics. On the contrary, the Southern Question shows differences in degrees of consciousness and solidarity among the social actors, and the central problematic lies in the persistent division of society between the subordinate and the groups –often Northern capitalists allied to Southern landowners- that exercise economic and political domination over them.

However, the Southern question has not been a source of inspiration for Indian historians alone: American historians of nineteenth century Italy and America, such

⁵ David Arnold, "Gramsci and the Peasant Subalternity in India", in Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, London Verso, 2000, p. 45.

as Lucy Riall⁶, Rick Halpern⁷ and Don Doyle⁸, have likewise chosen the Italian *Mezzogiorno* to sort out the parallel and contrasting experiences of two nations which, despite the obvious differences, have shared common problems in defining nationhood. Just as American nationalism emerged within an independence movement in search of an ideology, charismatic leaders such as Garibaldi and Mazzini at first, followed by the reunified Italian state, were also very assertive in their various attempts to stimulate national identity. And yet, both of those newborn nations had to grapple with severe problems of cultural diversity: given its short history, its polyglot population, its weak central government and vast, expanding boundaries, the United States was challenged more than most nations in forging a national community. America's self image as God's chosen people transcended its religious origins to become a hallmark of nineteenth century nationalist thought, but this was not enough to eradicate Southern racism: in the aftermath of the Civil War, in the South the Fourth of July became a day for joyous celebration of freedom for blacks but one that was shunned by most whites.⁹

In contrast to the United States, Italy had a celebrated past, a well-defined geographical place, and a long settled people. Notwithstanding the myth of the Risorgimento which held that the new nation reawakened a dormant *Italianità*, Piedmontese political leaders were painfully aware of the great diversity of language, customs, and identities that persisted in Italy. "United Italy was the king's and not the people's achievement" maintains Lucy Riall.¹⁰ To substantiate Riall's view, Massimo D'Azeglio's memoirs confirm that he was decidedly pessimistic about the prospect of creating an integrated Italian nation, and he went to his grave regretting the annexation of the South. Just as happened in the American Cotton Belt, it was racism that eventually reinforced and justified the position held by a hegemonic North in controlling and directing a subaltern South.

⁶ Lucy Riall, *The Italian Risorgimento*, 2007.

⁷ Rick Halpern and Enrico Dal Lago, *The American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno*, 2001.

⁸ Don Doyle, *Nations Divided. America, Italy and the Southern Question*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2002.

⁹ Doyle 2002, p. 40, p. 44.

¹⁰ Lucy Riall, *Il Risorgimento. Storia e interpretazioni*, Roma Donzelli, 2007, p. 153.

What is worse, the racism behind this stance in Italy was shared by those very members of the state apparatus, intellectuals or functionaries alike, such as Pasquale Villari, Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino. Their writings articulated for the very first time the specificity of the social and political condition of the South, thus inaugurating the field of *meridionalismo*. In analysing the phenomenon against an international backdrop, Anglo Saxon scholars must be credited with having identified in the Southern Question “the tendency for northern and national élites their anxieties about belonging to Europe onto that part of the country that is geographically and, in their minds, culturally most distant from the European core”.¹¹ Nelson Moe¹², who has written extensively on the origin of the Southern Question, defines the *lettere meridionali* by Villari as the work of an “agitator”, who, by describing the shocking living conditions of his homeland hoped to change the prevailing orientation of the ruling liberal elite. In the same breath, however, it was Villari, according to Moe, who assigned Italy the function of a “moral geography” of Italy, concentrating all the social evils of the nation in a single region, and emphasizing above all crime, banditry and an absent ruling class. Thus, Villari’s candid *j’accuse* eventually vouched for Leopoldo Franchetti’s outspoken discriminating attitude towards Southern peasants, who reminded him of the American “savages” (*selvaggi*), and who were not, in his opinion, worth any kind of improvement. Ryall, Schneider, Moe, and, more in general, this generation of historians, show a keen sensibility for the rhetoric of these reports, which is strongly reminiscent of foucauldian attention to Enlightenment metaphors. Franchetti’s stance is telling in this sense: like a superior outsider who is surprised and disgusted by the degradation of a foreign territory, he adopts the role of a doctor “with all the authority commonly associated with a doctor, while Sicily is reduced to the figure of the sick patient ... unable to make decisions on its own behalf”. In this racist, evolutionary paradigm, North versus South became not only a binary geography, but a geography that was not relational. The ideas of the

¹¹ Schneider 1998, p.8.

¹² Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius. Italian Culture and the Southern Question*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002.

English Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer, for example, inspired a group of Northern Italians, from Cesare Lombroso (his prejudices hit Sardinians badly) to Giuseppe Ferri and others, considered the founders of the science of criminology. These theorists put forward a racial analysis of the regional differences and their mode of analysis assumed a gendered dimension. Thus, Southern Italian men were sexually precocious and wasted their lives in the pursuit and “enslavement of women”, furthering a “congenital Latin decadence” which took over as an explanatory framework for southern crime rates¹³.

Italian born Roberto Dainotto, now professor at Duke, draws a comparison between the racism implicit in this nowadays discredited Social Darwinism and “the origins of Europe, which, as an idea, was first formed as an antithesis to that which is not Europe... that is to say, the Orient”.¹⁴ When, with the onset of the sixteenth century religious wars, the unifying force of Christendom began to fade, some of its moral and political signification was translated and relocated into the idea of a secular Europe. The humanist Silvio Piccolomini, elected Pope Pious II, had already encouraged the kings and the emperor to recapture the Holy Places and “to drive the Turks out of Europe”. Dainotto maintains that “the importance of this pope in the promotion of the concept of Europe, which had been previously eclipsed by the linguistic hegemony of Latin and of his own faith, should not be underestimated”.¹⁵ In a sense, Montesquieu, as a secular intellectual, follows in Pious’s footsteps with his 1748 *Esprit de Lois*. On this point Dainotto elucidates how Montesquieu’s science of politics referred to Aristotle’s climatology and produced the distinctions, later adopted by Madame de Staël in the year 1800, between two European cultures: one ‘that comes from the south’ versus ‘that which descends from the north’. In Dainotto’s historical and ideological reconstruction, Montesquieu’s modernity was the attempt to theorize a moment in which European hegemony was extended all over the world. At the same time the French thinker conceives the idea of Europe as

¹³ Mary Gibson, “Biology or Environment? Race and Southern Deviancy in the Writings of Italian Criminologists, 1880-1920” in Schneider 1988, pp. 99-117.

¹⁴ Roberto Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)*, Durham, Duke U.P. 2007, p.52.

¹⁵ Dainotto 2007, p. 34.

having a complete knowledge of itself – think of the experiment of the *Lettres Persanes*- in which no Other is needed. Instead, “a rhetoric of antithesis must be organized, in which difference has to be translated from the radical Other onto a negative part, or moment, of the European self (...) the Orient was the South: the atavism of the south was thus largely translated by the anthropology of Lombroso and his descendants for whom the Orient comprehended the European countries of the Mediterranean: Europe’s Other had to be found, as in a nightmare, within Europe’s borders”.¹⁶

This is one of the ways in which the Southern Question, with its dichotomy between a progressive North and a barbarous South, is replicated and amplified on a world stage: in the nineteenth century history is spatialized, and time converted into place: “Asia, Africa, and also America represented old, prehistoric moments in the geography of universal history. They were assigned a place ‘elsewhere’ of the present, as the not-yet of the European ‘structure of time’. It was in Europe, and in Europe only, that the historical passage from barbarity to the ‘laws of today’ (Montesquieu’s laws) could be finally be observed”.¹⁷

Given the authority that these texts have enjoyed within European and world culture throughout the twentieth century, it is easy to understand why Edward Said wished that anthropologists [and pseudo-anthropologists alike] would “spend more time thinking of textuality and less of matrilineal descent, or that issues relating to cultural poetics take a more central role in their research”¹⁸. Seen in a world perspective, the Southern Question has much in common with orientalism, in the sense that Southerners have been treated as colonized, rhetorically and economically subjugated, at best treated like national minorities: the vocabulary used to construct their narrative therefore must be investigated as the first step in a long term emancipation. Hence, Said’s praise for “Gramsci’s terminology [in which] hegemony, social territory, ensembles of relationship, intellectuals, civil and political

¹⁶ Dainotto 2007, p.55.

¹⁷ Dainotto 2007, p. 77.

¹⁸ Edward Said, Representing the Colonized in E.S. , *Reflections on Exile*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard U.P., 2000, p.296.

society, emergent and traditional classes, territories, regions, domains, historical blocks [form] what I would call a critical and geographical rather than an encyclopaedic or totalizingly systematic terminology”.¹⁹

In the eighties, a body of revisionist interpretations of Southern Italy began to emerge in the work of scholars grouped around the Istituto Meridionale di Storia e Scienze Sociali founded by Augusto Placanica and Piero Bevilacqua in 1986. Their interventions were articulated in a research agenda that wished to break with the prevailing view that saw Southern Italy as a homogeneous periphery within a framework of historical and social backwardness and stagnation.

“The strongest motivation for reclaiming the value of the South came from a rebellion against its representations by dominant culture and the inadvertent forms of racism found in many of its variants, even those beyond suspicion of being so”.²⁰

As Jonathan Morris and Robert Lumley show²¹, a fresh image of the South emerged in the work of these *neo-meridionalisti* to demonstrate the region’s vitality or ability to produce a set or rational responses to human and physical factors, as a reaction to changing conditions. Such conditions were - at least in part - dictated by the Lega Nord after its surprising show in the mid-1990s elections. Reminiscent of neo-liberalism in other industrialized countries, the Leghisti challenged national unity by attacking the government for its political economy: their critique was that over-taxing the productive economy of Northern Italy and then, overspending on welfare for services in the South was nonsensical, given that Southerners – all Southerners - were inherently corrupt and inept, and hence a waste of public money.

As a reply to this reiterated mistrust, and following the lead of Franco Venturi, the neo meridionalisti not only reconstructed the entire discourse of geography, climate and biological determinism, as we have just outlined, but also reassessed the dynamism of Southern economy and societies from the nineteenth century right up to

¹⁹ Edward Said, “History, Literature and Geography”, in Said 2000, pp.468- 467.

²⁰ Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and other Essays on the Mediterranean*, New York, Fordham U.P. 2012, p.XXXIII.

²¹ Robert Lumley and Jonathan Morris (eds.), *The New History of the Italian South: the Mezzogiorno Revisited*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1997.

the post-World War II era. The impact of this work paved the way for Franco Cassano's *Southern Thought*. How might one define Southern Thought? It explicitly "claims for itself the connection between a South, the Italian one, and the Souths of the world. This is done not to establish equivocal identifications and assimilations (once again!), but to oppose the tendency to think that the emancipation of the Italian South can be read as a separate question, enclosed within the boundaries of a national or continental state, and blind to its connections with the outside, especially those with the Southern shores of the Mediterranean. (...) The vast majority of so-called Southern vices are not, as some people conveniently believe, a prerogative of the South but are the outcome of a long marginalization from History and of the passivity and cynicism that derive from it".²²

However, Cassano is very aware of the limits of this revisionism. This new southern history to which Anglo Saxon and Italian scholars have all made equal contribution has so far had more success in knocking down stereotypes than in actually exorcising the Southern Problem.²³ Moreover, the difficulty of reformulating the history of the South ex novo is evident in the plurality of proposals and in the slippery character of alternative predicaments. What one can safely assert is that the work of this generation of scholars can be credited with having transformed the forms of the old debate on the South. In this light, many of debates on the analysis of neo-meridionalismo have gained significant impetus from the work of Edward Said and, more in general, from all those who saw the South of Italy as part of a phenomenon of *métissage*.

A South which is in constant flux, and where an endless negotiation of the shifting currents and centres of powers is needed. A south forced to face, also on account of recent tragic events, what is happening on the other shores of the Mediterranean. Under this respect, Iain Chambers, who has studied with Stuart Hall and teaches at Naples University l'Orientale is best equipped to describe the current

²² Cassano 2012, p.XXXVI.

²³ John Davis, "Casting off the Southern Problem: Or, the Peculiarities of the South Reconsidered" In Schneider 1998, p. 220.

conundrum. In *Mediterranean Crossings. The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* he observes that we have to deal with an “uprooted geography in which attention to local detail and local ecologies dislocates a cartography previously secured in the abstract universalism of a discriminatory mapping”.²⁴ So what does the future hold then? Which protocols have to be followed to grasp the sense of the South today? What Chambers deems commendable would be “a stratified multidimensional process of recognition that indicated, without exhausting, differentiated localities. A ‘latter style’ of mapping which registers the limited validity of its representations, acknowledging the margins of repression that permit certain configurations to emerge while others continue to remain outside its reasoning”.²⁵

Paul Ginsborg translates this sophisticated formula into a challenge and a test for modern day Italian international policy: “Italy is a Southern, not a northern European country, and the extensive poverty of much of the Mediterranean world, as well as its cultural diversity, were very close at hand. The eruption of this less privileged world on to the Italian scene would prove one of the major test of the relationship, or lack of it, between economic growth and human development in contemporary Italy”.²⁶

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²⁴ Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings. The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2008, p. 17.

²⁵ Chambers 2007, p. 17.

²⁶ Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and its Discontents 1980-2001*, London, Penguin 2003, p.29.