MAKING ITALY POSTCOLONIAL, CHALLENGING REGIONAL STEREOTYPES

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Italy is understood as knowing mainly internal and regional diversity. A person from Sicily is said to have scant in common with her counterpart in Milan. It remains difficult for Italians to conceive of their colonial experiences as having been as significant as those of internal differences. But if Italy is defined by regional diversity, then it will never be thought of as cosmopolitan nor critiqued as postcolonial. Regional stereotypes provide a good alibi and a firm obstacle to it. This is true in spite of the many researchers who have shown that colonial and internal differences were constituted as parallel discourses (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012; Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013; Dickie, 2016).

Italian Southerners were linked with representations of the primitive, atavistic, and uncivilised because concomitant to the unification of Italy, European colonial discourses established Africans as primitive, atavistic, and uncivilised. As the saying went, 'Africa begins in Naples'. The elites, politicians, and generals who championed the unification of Italy saw their mission as one of 'civilising' Southerners. When resistance and civil war in the South revealed the failures of such a project for ethnic and national homogeneity, these same elites took their liberal-democratic ideals of the nation-state for export to Africa and South America (Bonvini & Jacobson, 2022).

This complex history of colonialism and its interconnectedness with national fissures are still not taught within secondary education. New works of research continue to seek to reverse this picture by demonstrating how deep and vast the overseas projects were, but reception often foregrounds the 'discovery' of Italian colonialism. By now it is well known that Italy did have an empire, and yet the society at large is still not compelled to consider the moral stakes of it for the

present. One is tempted to supply a psychological explanation: would thinking about the violence of Italy's colonial state mean a reckoning with the violent history of its own nation-state, one too bitter and close-to-home to address? (Riall, 1998)

In my book on the Italian state in the Aegean (Dodecanese islands), I explore such a premise. Stereotypes about the Mediterranean region have long serviced a disregard for the topic. The popular film *Mediterraneo* (1990) exemplifies this attitude. Gabriele Salvatores, the director, shot the film on location in the tiny, postage-stamp sized island of Kastellorizo; he carried out research for the film in the photographic archive of the Touring Club Italiano in Milan; he worked with locals during shooting supposedly to affect some historical veracity. But the film's narrative traffics in clichés about a universal Mediterranean brotherhood and presents the pleasure-filled Greek setting in shades reminiscent of a Gabriele D'Annunzio novel. Instead of challenging the idea that Italy was never a colonial nation, it reassures viewers that they need not feel compelled to examine it: Italy's 'Mediterraneanness' made its imperial project soft and nonviolent (Clò, 2009). But where else did these stereotypes originate if not in discourses of Italy, from the ancient Roman era to the present, as a Mediterranean country? (Fogu, 2020).

These same regional stereotypes command a powerful currency in the Dodecanese as well. 'Can there be that much to research?' Or I heard 'With a subject like that, your thesis won't be very long'. Such reactions came from residents of Rhodes when I was there for fieldwork. Most locals I met maintained one of two extremes, either that the Greeks had fiercely resisted a fascist state or that the Italians had been soft-hearted 'good people', and 'nothing like the Germans'. They often held comfortably both viewpoints. It boiled down to the fact that fascism was bad, but Italians were good – or put differently: good people sometimes do bad things. The myth that Italians and Greeks had traded claims that they were 'one face and one race', lives on without much, if any, critical awareness of how such a stereotype is a relic of the colonial era.

Regionalism and regional stereotypes were fundamentally embedded into Italian colonial governance in the Aegean. The liberal state that invaded the Aegean in 1912 positioned itself as a 'protector' and a safeguard of Greek culture, an eminently 'liberal' position at that

time[1]. Right away, the government saw the islands as an opportunity to lay claims to 'colonies' of 'Italians' living in the Orient (e.g., migrants in Egypt, Turkey and the Middle East) and to put a stake on the idea of a 'Mediterranean' expansion into the Levant.

A fascist state had no more trouble aligning an imperial mission in the islands with its ideology. The Aegean did not have material resources and was not a boon to the 'empire of work', or program to use colonies to mitigate Italy's surplus labour problem. But new economies, such as tourism, tobacco, wine production, and artisanal crafts justified the expense of maintaining a quasi 'colony' in the Aegean. State building in the Aegean looked much like state building at home, in the South especially. This created a problem: the local population could never be viewed as Italian, as to do so would defy the logic of nationalism and the 'natural' ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of Italians. Enter the stereotype of a 'Mediterranean' region and culture. An elaborate system of citizenship and nationality was developed to both include and exclude this 'white' colony in a discourse of Mediterranean regionalism that originated with the project of unitary Italy itself (McGuire, 2020).

Any researcher of the colonial Italy cannot help but remark over the irony that Antonio Gramsci, with his geographical and spatial approach to political power, his interest in *questione meridionale*, and his eventual reception and appropriation by Edward Said, has been a key thinker for the development of postcolonial studies globally, while Italy has proved one of the last nations in Europe to be reexamined through the lens of such postcolonial critique. Blinding Italians to their postcolonial present have been the very same regional stereotypes as those that inhabited their colonial past.

References

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