

Another Map, Another History, Another Modernity

Iain Michael Chambers

“The inner meaning of history ... involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanation of the causes and origins of existing things, and deep knowledge of the how and why of events. History, therefore is firmly rooted in philosophy.”

Ibn Khaldûn¹

“What is strange is that Marxists consider ‘rationality’ superior to ‘politics.’”
Antonio Gramsci²

These speculative considerations on Italy in the Mediterranean commence with Ibn Khaldûn, the famous fourteenth-century Mediterranean philosopher of history who quintessentially came from the Maghreb, was a judge in Cairo, but whose family was originally from Seville. The second epigraph comes from Antonio Gramsci’s momentous critique of the formation of modern Italy (and Europe) elaborated through the thousands of pages that constitute the *Quaderni del carcere*. Moving between Mediterranean *métissage* and radical critique, the following observations seek to transport the usual coordinates deployed in understanding Italian culture on to a wider and less stable map. To break a persistent mould and consider present-day Italy in its relationship to its historical, cultural, and geopolitical location in the Mediterranean is immediately to run up against a profound native resistance to interdisciplinary and intercultural studies. Yet frontiers, both national and disciplinary, are invariably spurious historical confines. Borders are inevitably more thresholds of juridical authority, not to speak of zones of cultural translation and historical transit, than of precise physical closure.³ “Border machinery is an interactive architecture.”⁴ And then those “borders,” as the lessons of the modern, “globalized” metropolis teach us, are not out there in the marches, the *limes*, far from the center, and beyond the pale, but run through the very heartlands of metropolitan life: felt, heard, tasted, and experienced in its literatures, musics, arts, food.

To pay attention to these languages, and adopt a more fluid and flexible map, permits the possibility of simultaneously opening up a critical dialogue with both the European and the Mediterranean formation of modern Italy. Inherited understanding of historical, cultural, and political belonging, invariably congealed in the stasis of an institutional nationalism – disseminated in legislation, textbooks, the mass media, customs, and social ties – is here exposed to unexpected and unauthorized interrogations. Forced to reply, invariably in self defense, but also eventually, in order to live on and survive, in terms of renovation and renewal, there emerges an unsuspected dynamic at work behind the ideological façade of political and pedagogical rhetoric and the assurance of national identity. Of course, it goes without saying, that if it is Italy that is being held up to the critical eye here, these arguments and perspectives invest, in diverse tones and differing hues, the whole corpus of occidental modernity.

¹ Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

² Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 134.

³ Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); but also see “Citizenship, War, Class. A Dialogue with Étienne Balibar and Sandro Mezzadra,” along with my response to their discussion in “Borders and the Boundaries of Democracy,” *New Formations*, 58 (2008).

⁴ Alessandro Petti, *Arcipelaghi e enclave. Architettura dell’ordinamento spaziale* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007), 6.

Further, to take the “in-betweenness” of the Mediterranean (from *mediterraneu*, composed of the Latin *medius* and *tërra*: “in the middle of the earth”) seriously, is not only to hear a suggestive resonance with the postcolonial reasoning of Homi Bhabha and the cultural and conceptual innovation of a translated “third space” that undermines appeals to the stable uniqueness of “origins,” but is also to shift understandings from the apparent stability of terrestrial locations to the fluidity of shifting marine coordinates.⁵ This is to set “Italy” as a cultural and historical formation adrift, and to engage with forces, affects, and conceptual maps that tend to be excluded, if not, more simply, altogether ignored.

Between the Mediterranean and modernity

One simple characterization of modern Italy is that of the repudiation of its “southern” elements: the cyclical rhythms of its agrarian, rural, and marine dimensions become colorful accessories to the productive, urban organization of industrial and post-industrial time. In this repudiation of the South as apparently backward and underdeveloped, contrasted to the developed industrial world of northern Italy (much of it historically financed through the transfer from the South of wealth appropriated by the new central government after 1860), there is also a general turning away from the Mediterranean Sea.⁶ Part of a longer historical process already in play with the deterioration of the maritime republics of Genoa and Venice from the seventeenth century onwards, this particular decline was not only the result of the noted shift of the axis of maritime power to the Atlantic seaboard, but also of British mercantile ascendancy in the Mediterranean itself. In a double sense, the making of the “southern question” is also intricately bound up with the making of the modern Atlantic world (and subsequent struggles for global hegemony), all of which had consequences on the relegation of the Italian mosaic to an economic, political, and cultural backwater until the mid-nineteenth century and the emergence of the new nation-state. In turn, Italy becomes a modern nation that, as throughout Europe, will be accompanied by the aggrandizing themes and missionary zeal of colonial undertakings in Africa, most immediately on the southern shores of the Mediterranean and subsequently all across the continent.

From the French expedition of Bonaparte in Egypt, the seizure and colonization of Algeria, the opening of the Suez Canal, to the English occupation of Egypt and the Italian occupation of Libya, the Mediterranean is violently transformed into a European lake in the course of the nineteenth century. The African and Asian shores, from Morocco to the Lebanon (and then stretching eastwards into Syria, Iraq, and Iran and on to India) were a fully colonized space. Modern, planned imperialism, as opposed to the haphazard accumulation of overseas territories, begins in the Mediterranean with Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt in 1798-1799. This systematic, imperial control of territory also concludes in the Mediterranean with the withdrawal of France from Algeria in 1962 (although Israel remains as a complex, colonial reminder that is seemingly impossible to confront or discuss in those terms). The southern and eastern shores are ravaged by European warfare for over two hundred years: Egypt, Algiers, Libya, Mesopotamia, El-Alamein, Suez, Palestine.

It is in this far wider, ultimately planetary context that Italian colonialism needs to be inserted. Frequently consigned to a minor chapter in the national narrative, and invariably confined to the dark pages of Fascism, this colonialism, as elsewhere in Europe, became central to the making of the modern liberal nation-state in the last decades before 1900: the

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993). I have sought to put this maritime style of critical navigation to work in *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁶ Franco Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1996); Paolo Frascani, *Il mare* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2008).

urban spaces of London, Paris, Rome, and Berlin were equally and simultaneously colonial spaces. The colonial pursuit was the very stuff of metropolitan modernity. Here “scientific” theories of eugenics, race, social Darwinism, and Lombroso’s classification of criminal types, subsequently distilled into a generic and popular racism, were developed. Despite the belligerent defeat, and subsequent amnesia, of the attempted Italian revival of “*mare nostrum*” under the colonial auspices of the liberal and Fascist state and the imperial pursuit in Albania, Rhodes, Libya, and further afield in east Africa, a sense of “superiority” continues to course in a “colonial unconscious” that sustains contemporary responses to ethnic and racialized diversity.⁷ As the Haitian intellectual Michel-Rolph Trouillot has forcefully argued, in this “silencing the past” the colonial construction of a European ontology continues to be reproduced.⁸ It leads to a resulting “*order of discourse and silences*” which, as the expression of precise relations of force and power, organize the historical archive.”⁹

In this period of rampant nationalism and European expansion, the distinction between Italy as an emerging modern European state and the bucolic backwardness of its Mediterranean inheritance was inevitably reinforced. The insistence on an autochthonous language, literature, history, and identity that can be claimed to be exclusively “Italian,” only deepens the difficulty of connecting the composite making of a linguistic, cultural, and historical community to the far more heterogeneous and unfinished business of also being at the same time a Mediterranean country. Coupled to the racialized and ethnic confinement of modern nationalism is the imposition of an “ethnic cleansing” of the altogether more complex, open-ended, and creolized processes of a cultural formation that might be Italian *and* Mediterranean *and* European, where multiple cultures and histories incessantly overlap and intertwine as Edward Said justly put it.¹⁰

A composite modernity, another history

This would suggest a diverse trajectory in which to think of Italy less as a late-comer to European modernity, always desperately seeking to catch up, and more in terms of its composite Mediterranean (and European) specificities, which in turn underline the critical importance of re-opening its “archive.” An even deeper significance is acquired within a cultural formation whose past (hence present and future potentialities) has been persistently explained by a seemingly incessant historical continuity. Although frequently invaded from the fifth century of the Christian era onwards by Huns, Lombards, Arabs, Normans, Germans, French, Catalans, and Austrians, the Italian landscape, dotted with innumerable Greco-Roman ruins, churches, cathedrals, and Renaissance and Baroque art works, seemingly bears witness to an uninterrupted heritage. History itself seems to be immediate and insistent, suggesting in its lived materiality a superior mode of knowledge in which reality, what counts and continues, is somehow sealed by its spirit. To cut that chain is, of course, to challenge the intellectual core of a cultural formation. To insist that history is discontinuous and uneven is to challenge a philosophy that has remained fundamentally attached to the linear teleology of the “spirit” of historical progress: itself the expression of an abstract and fundamentally élitist concept that considers culture a stable language of recognition, rather than one of inconclusive social and anthropological complexity.

⁷ Sandra Ponzanesi, “Il postcoloniale italiano,” *Quaderni del '900*, 4 (2004).

⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

⁹ Sandro Mezzadra, *La condizione postcoloniale. Storia e politica nel presente globale* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2008), 62.

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

Now this perspective produces a potential criticism, and it is highly important to insist on this point, *both* of an internal and an external hegemony. It obliges us to consider *both* an internal, native understanding that frequently reduces Italian culture to be the self-evident expression of its own implacable “historicism,” *and* an externalized configuration that persistently places Italy in a subaltern position with respect to a homogeneously and unilaterally conceived modernity. In other words, what emerges from a critical understanding of this situation does not simply propose an adjustment of the Italian picture but simultaneously evokes a revision of the “modernity” that has provided the basis for critical evaluation. Seeking to undo an Italian inheritance in order to allow it to find its bearings in a wider sea means also to unwind a modernity that has tended to proffer only one set of directions.¹¹

Prizing open the national archive, spilling its contents over a wider and altogether more unstable map, brings us into proximity with unsuspected encounters: for example, in the light of Black Atlantic histories and the centrality of racialized slavery to the political economy of occidental modernity, and hence its unacknowledged pertinence to the conditions of existence of Enlightenment thought and subsequent calls for democratic rights and political “freedom.”¹² Touching the unsung connections between Hegel and Haiti, between European idealist philosophy and slave revolt, as Susan Buck-Morss has so brilliantly done, permits us to revise the critical language with which we renew our representations of the past.¹³ Here, setting Haiti in proximity to Algeria, or the Caribbean and India alongside North Africa and the Middle East, we could turn from the lessons of the Black Atlantic to consider, for example, the largely untold history of the structural significance of slavery in the medieval and early modern Mediterranean.¹⁴ We could, for example, return to the maritime republic of medieval Genoa and also consider it as a slaving port: a city whose fortunes were made in the traffic of precious materials that, apart from spices and rare textiles, also included human bodies. This is a story that Europeans tend to consign to the margins. Slavery is nearly always part of someone else’s history; it belongs to the world of Muslim pirates and Ottoman despotism or else to the rude plantations of the New World. The medieval Mediterranean world, as we know only too well from Goitein and Braudel, was an extensive one in which goods, including slaves, were “worlded” over wide tracts of sea and territory, connecting Africa, Europe, and Asia.¹⁵ It was, after all, as Janet Abu-Lughod has amply demonstrated and Amitav Ghosh poetically explored, already a “world system” in the thirteenth century.¹⁶

¹¹ See Tim Mason, “Italy and Modernization,” *History Workshop Journal*, 25 (1988), and John Agnew, “The Myth of Backward Italy in Modern Europe,” in *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, ed. Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

¹² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2001).

¹³ Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008); see also Paola Di Cori, “Slittamenti di Hegel. Brevi considerazioni su antidisciplina in lingua inglese,” *Post-filosofie*, Anno 3 (Gennaio-Dicembre 2007).

¹⁴ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 388-91. On the systemic nature of slavery see Steven Epstein, *Speaking of Slavery: Color, Ethnicity and Human Bondage in Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), and in particular reference to the formation of the modern state (Venice), see Robert Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast and Italy, 1500-1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2004).

¹⁵ Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

¹⁶ Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Amitav Ghosh, *Living in an Antique Land* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

To repeat, this is a history *within* the making of Europe and the modern Mediterranean. It is a history that remains literally unthinkable.¹⁷ To insist that there were Christian pirates and raids on Muslim shipping and cities, and that not only Istanbul, Tunis, and Cairo were host to slave markets, but also Genoa, Venice, Cagliari, Naples, Barcelona, and Seville, is to reintroduce once extraneous matter back into the folds of a European and Italian formation.¹⁸ It is also to undo the implicit racism that consigns to the non-European world the historical burden, and implicit guilt, of representing the inconceivable. For the market, both medieval and modern, knows no ethical compassion. Goods are goods, whether their intrinsic qualities are composed of finely wrought silk or enslaved bodies. Once fetishized as commodities, all are rendered equivalent.

Slavery was integral to the life of the Mediterranean; it was not only a New World phenomenon nor solely African in its raw material. In Spain, the tables of the great houses of Valladolid in 1555 were waited upon by Turkish and Slavic as well as African slaves. In fifteenth-century Genoa, all the patrician class had Arab slaves, the women performing the domestic duties of cooking, cleaning, fetching, and satisfying the sexual appetite of the master of the house.¹⁹

Slavery was present in equal measure on both the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean: the awkward query is why and how the question has been completely transferred elsewhere, to the Arab, Turkish and Islamic world.

The insistence on this type of historical disturbance reintroduces what has been structurally excluded from the “unity” of a national account. It is also to disrupt the predictable desire for linear narration in which each and every element of the past, once safely certified and explained, apparently contributes to the inevitable “progress” of the present. The seemingly transparent reflection of a national, European ascendancy is here clouded, dirtied, and stained by precisely what it refuses to acknowledge or is willing to explain. The presence of Muslim slaves in baroque Naples or the explicit racism encountered and encouraged in the colonial search for a “place in the sun,” are not incidental footnotes in an altogether more significant national narrative. They are the symptoms, which even the most banal Freudianism alerts us to, of another, deeper, unconscious language playing over the unfolding surfaces of a modernity that does not necessarily move to a single melody.²⁰

So, to follow the history of slavery in the Mediterranean, or that of banking practices and modern mathematics, or of food and agronomy, or of musics and textiles, pulls us away from the security of specialized concerns and the narrow confines of a national or even more local archive and propels us into a more turbulent set of intercultural currents that, in turn, can only be glimpsed through the lenses of interdisciplinary studies. The circulation and calculation of goods and credit, for example, are invariably intercultural and, as far as occidental modernity

¹⁷ Just as the slave revolt in Haiti, directly inspired by the French Revolution, remained unthinkable to its European contemporaries; see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) and Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed. Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Salvatore Bono, “La schiavitù nel Mediterraneo moderno,” *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 65; also Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* (London, Faber & Faber), 1997.

¹⁹ Clifford A. Wright, *A Mediterranean Feast* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), 79.

²⁰ The symptomatic traces of hidden, subaltern micro-histories was famously explored by Carlo Ginzburg several decades ago in his celebrated *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), and “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” *History Workshop*, 9 (1980).

is concerned, largely owe their “origins” to Muslim mercantile practices of the medieval period. These, in turn, drew upon principles transmitted from India and China (mathematics, credit, and paper money). The sheer obviousness of cultural transit and transformation must continually confront the obdurate resistance of national narratives. The desired security of locality requires that everything – from language to food, from music to thought – have their origins within its domain, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Such artificial boundaries literally explode in the composition of a musical sound or culinary dish. Here is Clifford Wright with his intercultural reasoning on Mediterranean food:

The origin of macaroni lies not with the Etruscans, Greeks, Romans, or Chinese but apparently with the Arabs. The earliest evidence of a true macaroni occurs at the juncture of medieval Sicilian, Italian, and Arab cultures.²¹

Such apparently marginal details draw us back to the kernel of a central question in considerations of the modern cultural formation of Italy, marked by a pathological aversion to disturbance and a persistent desire for continuity. In the end, this means that difference—I and the political and cultural fallout should here be underlined—cannot be accommodated. Explanation is sought in provincial lineage, in the temporal exposure of accumulative sense, in philological guarantees. Truth, both semantic and ontological, is ultimately secured in the conceptual structure of time itself, in which reality, the spirit and history become one. This is why for Benedetto Croce historical knowledge was superior to all other forms. This is not necessarily dialectical thinking seeking *Aufhebung*, but it certainly remains in the orbit of Hegel and the idea of history as a necessary process for the realization of freedom and the development of “the good towards the better” (Croce).²² Between Croce’s “absolute historicism,” with its insistence that all history is the contemporary history of the present, and the later semiotic drive for synchronic certitude, emerges a persistent avowal of stilled certitude. In both cases, the anthropomorphic passage of the spirit – affirmed in the seemingly opposite concepts of “history” and “structure” – sustains the logical principles of a conscious rationalism through unrepeatable moments of time. The historical judgment that is secured in such structures of thought becomes the unique form of knowledge.²³ My argument is that this idealist, conceptual prison house, in which reason and reality are seemingly one, ultimately blocks a more raggedly complex, hence critically freer and more problematic, understanding of the intercultural Mediterranean composition of Italian history and society.

The history of the discontinuous

In modern Italy a parochial intellectual formation has, with few exceptions, avoided problematizing its premises and procedures. As Giorgio Agamben once pointed out, this is the case in Italy across the whole spectrum of the social and human sciences.²⁴ This has important implications for an understanding of Italy’s past, and present, configuration. Writing and researching under the banner of “science,” a long-standing debate on the epistemological status of writing, historiography, the disciplinary status of “truth” and the critical nature of the “archive” (or “canon”) is avoided. If history is the linear, even teleological, narration of “progress” – subsequently secured in the protocols of nineteenth-century positivism and a generalized scientificity – then the historian’s or literary critic’s task

²¹ Clifford A. Wright, *A Mediterranean Feast* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), 622.

²² Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (Bari: Laterza, 1963), 77; original edition 1917.

²³ Benedetto Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (Bari: Laterza, 1954); original edition 1938.

²⁴ *Alias*, September 9, 2006.

was arduous but obvious: the “truth”, guaranteed by the testimony of time, was there to be possessed. Now it seems to me that this particular intellectual universe is in ruins. Of course, there exist exceptions and explicit dissent, but it remains the case that a critical common sense, deposited in text books, school and university syllabuses, pedagogical practices and recurrent appeals to “scientificity,” continues to reproduce a fundamentally unchallenged cultural consensus.

Without quoting Walter Benjamin’s famous theses on the question, or troubling Derrida or Foucault, the idea that history, nation, identity, canons, and disciplines are constructed, elaborated, reported, and relayed in contemporary configurations of sense and, hence, always involves the temporal act and agonism of articulating not the abstract principles of a rational consciousness but a precise, often unconscious, *cultural* and *political* representation, is hardly shocking news. This is also to underline that historical time is uncanny and discontinuous; it is composed of breaks, accelerations, mutations, catastrophes, and dead ends. History is not merely the mirror of reason. If history is ethically always “now,” it involves, as Antonio Gramsci insisted against the inert idealism of Croce’s historical “spirit,” precisely the idea of a complex and multiple inheritance being critically appropriated, debated, and fought over in the struggle for the direction of the present.

So, history is not only discontinuous, it is also *multiple*. As a persistent challenge to the institutional powers that authorize the explanations of the past (and hence the present and its possible futures), such a seemingly extraneous and unruly incursion in existing disciplinary protocols is consistently resisted. The insistence on the factual and interpretative “neutrality” propagated by the social and human sciences is, of course, only the obverse side of reproducing in the seemingly secluded languages of intellectual expertise the *status quo*: what Nietzsche referred to as the abuse of history and Gramsci as the “passive revolution” that secures hegemony. In this invariant structure of knowledge, innovation is dispatched to the margins. Feminism, women’s studies, and cultural and postcolonial studies can all be tepidly registered – invariably as superficially fashionable and foreign in inspiration – without in the least troubling established epistemological principles and practices: a sort of intellectual multiculturalism that leaves the centers of knowledge/power largely untouched. In a similar key, “1968” of course is important, but again the challenge of dissenting from one’s own cultural formation was largely distilled into a precise “political” framing that often left the complexities of culture largely untouched.²⁵ The Italian university, for example, its “structure of feeling,” even its “style,” has experienced little fundamental change: “culture,” “knowledge” and “pedagogy” remain largely uncontested terms.

We here touch the *political* limits of the understanding of Italy’s national formation; limits that continue to be persistently asserted in the canons of its national historiography and literature, but I am sure the criticism can also be applied elsewhere, to its art history, or to its popular music canon and a largely uninterrupted stylistic continuity – with the sonorial, intriguing exception of Lucio Battisti, the intercultural poetics of Fabrizio De André, and the cosmopolitan, Neapolitan “dub” of Almagegretta – that runs from singer-songwriters to the annual San Remo music festival, for example.²⁶ This is to insist that we are in fact at a dead end: inadvertently participating in rhetorical freefall. Against the numbing affects of

²⁵ This is obviously a provocative exaggeration. There are many names and projects – Carla Lonzi, Adriana Cavarero, Luisa Passerini, Alessandro Portelli; feminism, the philosophy of difference, oral and subaltern historical studies – that contest this affirmation. But, once again, it is difficult to register this important, and internationally recognized work, in a local institutional response that has largely continued untroubled in its consensual path.

²⁶ For an interesting discussion of the San Remo festival as a site of cross-cultural musical exchange in the “opening” of the 1960s, see Paolo Prato, “Selling Italy by the Sound: Cross-cultural Interchanges through Cover Records,” *Popular Music*, 26:3 (2007).

disciplinary certitude and cultural conformity, the value of the break, the gap, the discontinuous, asserts itself. This is not to start all over again, but rather to reassemble an inheritance in the interdisciplinary light of interrogations that direct our critical languages—and that means our historical, cultural, and political being and becoming— elsewhere. The historical heterogeneity of the Mediterranean within a reconceived, multilateral modernity proposes precisely a compass that would allow us to exit from the numbing grip of disciplinary narcissism and the accompanying certitude of a sedimented nationalism in which history, literature, and other expressions apparently dance a perpetual waltz: “Italian” history, “English” literature, “Spanish” music...

Unsuspected maps and migrating modernities

We return to the “national question,” not only in the perennial Italian light of the problems of internal unification, but also in the largely unexplored context of languages, histories, and cultures (local, national, and trans-national) that are deterritorialized and reterritorialized on wider, often unsuspected, maps. This is not about the abandonment of detailed specificity for the generic but is rather to see in the detail a historical and narrative web that sets in movement a new, connective critical movement: one that transforms history from the antiquarian’s study of dead artifacts and stilled voices into the vibrant terrain of an unfolding becoming of a past (and, hence, present) *still to come*. Once again, merely a critical injection of theoretical rejuvenation, in this case provided by Deleuze and Guattari, is not what I am proposing – this would only lead to disciplinary renewal in the best of cases.²⁷ It is perhaps the concept and institutional powers of the disciplines themselves that are at stake. If existing historiography and literary studies are certainly not about to be abolished, they can still be exposed and rendered vulnerable. Transposed on to maps they have seemingly not authorized, yet whose coordinates are unconsciously secreted in their very languages, the past invades the present proposing to shape it with other contours and other concerns. Such a movement is, of course, if not anti-, certainly extra-disciplinary. What the discipline expelled as irrelevant or insignificant, returns. The recognition that each and every historical and literary point of “origin” is already contaminated and creolized not only breaches the national narrative and accompanying disciplinary protocols, it also promotes an intercultural and interdisciplinary understanding of their formation.

In contemporary Italy in particular, this represents the cultural, historical, and, ultimately, political challenge. At one level, the choice appears clear: whether to turn inwards and seek refuge in the comfortable continuity of existing cultural behavior, disciplinary, social, and national, or to travel abroad in a modernity and a Mediterranean that does not merely reflect one’s self. To adopt the latter approach is to insist on the provocative richness of the borderlands and the interstices that emerge along the provincial edges of a known territory: that being between histories, cultures, and disciplines that forces open inheritance, sets traditions in transit, and consigns the world to an always incomplete translation. Such questions are never simply theoretical or merely of academic interest. Organized crime, as

²⁷ Recent Italian historiography has begun to bear witness to the reworking of the national narrative in an extra-territorial fashion. For example, the presence of the Ottoman Empire in the making of early modern Italy in the work of Giovanni Ricci (*Ossessione turca*, 2002; *I turchi alle porte*, 2007), or the later centrality of the colonial world in Italian self-fashioning in Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2007). Behind this recent activity lies the isolated research and multiple publications of Angelo Del Boca on the Italian colonial empire in Africa, commencing with *La guerra di Abissinia, 1935-1941* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965) and followed by his multi-volumed history: *Gli italiani in Africa*. However, as Labanca points out, there has yet to occur a public and political recognition of the complex ramifications of Italian colonialism in the past and present making of the nation; itself a symptom of the absent debate in postwar Italy of its national past, see Labanca, *op. cit.*, 447.

Roberto Saviano's recent *Gomorra* dramatically illustrates, is a planetary undertaking that requires a charting of financial flows, drug markets, and lines of political corruption that stretch all over the globe, linking the corner deal from the back of a Vespa in a Neapolitan alley to transnational enterprises. Modern-day migration provides another cartography with which to map global modernity. Once again, theoretical concerns and everyday pressures mutually contaminate each other. Migration every day occupies the national headlines of Italian newspapers, accompanied by the photos of abject black bodies squeezed together on tiny boats crossing the Mediterranean, to be abandoned, if they survive, on its northern beaches.²⁸ Yet these "aliens," these foreign bodies are not, of course, foreign; they are intimate partners in the planetary procedures that have made the modern world.

Migration is one of modernity's central chapters. Its violent, but *structural*, and not accidental, history (and this brings us back to the Black Atlantic and the centrality of slavery to its political economy) proposes a largely unacknowledged critical narrative with which to map modernity and the Mediterranean. There exists far more than merely a suggestive connection between the histories of the Black Atlantic and the contemporary counter-geographies of Mediterranean migration: "Counter-geography is where the subversive, informal, and irregular practices of space take place, the ones that happen despite state forces and supranational regulations."²⁹ In the ongoing realization of the subaltern cartographies of power that sustain the passage from the south of the world through modernity, across the Mediterranean, and into Europe, a fundamental reconfiguration is in play. If Africa in the Americas not only economically made, but also culturally reinvented, the "New World," then contemporary migrations, as the implacable symptoms of the planetary reorganization of the labor force of capitalist accumulation, are similarly destined to challenge and refashion the cultural contexts that they traverse and transform. In the words of Alessandro Dal Lago: "[I]mmigration, more than any other phenomenon, is capable of revealing the so-called host society. When we speak of immigrants we speak of ourselves ... It is for this reason that an analysis of immigration which does put itself in question ... is constitutionally amputated and ultimately false."³⁰

Sustained and invariably amplified after 9/11 is the increasing identification of modern migration with a racialized "otherness." The aggressive and fundamentalist languages that seek to defend "civilization" and "European" values invariably lend a potent racism to both individual state and European Union legislation busily identifying and managing the immigrant "emergency," both within and beyond its frontiers. While the European Union willingly extends itself eastward to include other polities, it simultaneously stretches exclusionary legislation southwards. Laws concerning citizenship and the management of the labor market increasingly betray the bio-political powers of national and transnational agencies to organize populations in racialized hierarchies that are rapidly popularized in everyday practices and associated forms of discrimination and apartheid. As the geographer Ali Bensaïd justly notes, the contemporary opening up of economic space is simultaneously accompanied by the brutal closing down of human space. Worldly time is domesticated, disciplined, and differentiated by the political needs of global capital.³¹ The current militarization of the Mediterranean, precisely at the point where the Third World washes up against the overdeveloped one, does not simply recall other barriers – the US/Mexico boundary fence or the wall between Israel and the scattered territories of Palestine (not to

²⁸ Most suggestively portayed in Isaac Julien's recent video installation: *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007).

²⁹ Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes, Introduction to *The Maghreb Connection: Movements of Life Across North Africa* (Barcelona: Actar, 2006), 7.

³⁰ Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-persone* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2008), 13.

³¹ Ali Bensaïd, "The Militarization of Migration: Frontiers in the Mediteranean," in Biemann and Holmes, *The Maghreb Connection*.

speak of all the electronic walls, eyes, and controls that track global movement) – but more precisely dovetails into strategies seeking planetary population management. Mobility, surely the essence of globalization, is here criminalized subsequent to juridical control, containment and being held in infinite custody: inside the “law,” but without rights or redress.³² The pressure increases, the world becomes altogether more dangerous.

It is in this disturbing light that we need to read, hear, taste, and feel the passage of those languages – literary, musical, culinary ... cultural – that perpetually frustrate the desire to curtail their movement and lock them up in uniform and unilateral explanations.³³

The desire to domesticate the world according to one’s own point of view and to exclude the variety and variations not authorized by one’s own historical and cultural needs finds easy confirmation in the political and social paranoia that characterizes the contemporary epoch. Such a conclusive “solution” seeks to deny the linguistic, literary, and cultural evidence of a hybrid inheritance, composed in lengthy processes of creolization that produce a critical constellation of the Mediterranean, which is irreducible to any single national, nationalistic, provincial, or local explanation. Following the waves of diverse languages, we can in fact remap the Mediterranean and with it rethink Italy, Europe, and its modernity in the disquieting doubling of the present by its past. This other Mediterranean emerges in significantly sharp focus in the figure of today’s (illegal) migrant who carries within herself the complex inheritance of a *colonial* past, crossed with the longstanding historical processes that make the modern world the site of perpetual mobility and migration.

Of course, this means to snap the chains of a linear historicism that believes that the past is really past. It is to insist on a Mediterranean that, both yesterday and today, has always been hybrid in its formation. More than simply reactivating a Braudelian synthesis, this argument seeks to interrupt the prevalent historical discourse with the Gramscian and Benjaminian insistence that history, precisely because it is always pertinent, always now, is not simply a matter for the historians. Here, adopting an interdisciplinary cartography, literary, visual, musical, and culinary elaborations become not merely the testimony of “minor” histories and counterexamples, but rather provoke and provide the critical syntax of precisely another history.³⁴

When, today, we talk of “migration,” “culture,” “belonging,” and “integration,” we are inevitably referring to concepts and processes that are planetary in their reach. Here, in the presence of the desperate and the dying in the Mediterranean, we are forced to recognize a contemporary *middle passage*. From the south of the world, from China, Sri Lanka, India, and sub-Saharan Africa, after surviving the North African desert, people take the final trip, seeking the promise of prosperity, or at least a freedom from want, persecution, and poverty. And the sea, yesterday the Atlantic, today the Mediterranean, does not cease to deliver up the dead. Those who survive, along with the thousands and thousands who perish anonymously at sea, provide the prevalent public image of illegal immigration into the citadels of the First World. Precisely in order to grasp the political and journalistic capital that fuels the widespread moral panic on immigration, it is instructive to recall that those attempting this

³² Enrica Rigo, *Europa di confine. Trasformazioni della cittadinanza nell’Unione allargata* (Rome: Meltemi, 2005); also Petti, *Arcipelaghi e enclave*; and Eyal Weisman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007).

³³ In terms of literary, and linguistic, transit and transfigurations, see the important work of Armando Gnisci, *Creolizzare l’Europa, Letteratura e migrazione* (Roma: Meltemi, 2003); Graziella Parati, *Mediterranean Crossroads: Migration Literature in Italy* (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999); and Lidia Curti, *La voce dell’altra. Scritture ibride tra femminismo e postcolonialismo* (Roma: Meltemi, 2006).

³⁴ Again explored in my *Mediterranean Crossings*.

hazardous maritime crossing actually represent only ten percent of those entering Italy in a clandestine manner.³⁵

Faced with contemporary migration, they are really too few willing to acknowledge the ghosts of history and the links in a chain that extends from Africa five hundred years ago to the coasts of southern Italy today: the abusive links of the hidden, but essential, histories of the traffic in bodies – across the Atlantic yesterday, across the Sahara today – in the formation of modernity. The negation of a memory evoked by the questioning presence of the contemporary migrant betrays a critical incapacity to consider one's own past and its role in the realization of the present. Amongst the list of human rights, perhaps the right to migrate in order to improve one's life prospects should be recognized. After all, Europe's poor – including 26 million Italians – have exercised this "right" for several centuries.³⁶ Today, to migrate has for many become a criminal activity.

Interrupting authority

It is in this spirit that it becomes possible to approach and problematize such widely used concepts as "tolerance" and "integration." Precisely our own historical and cultural amnesia— where for "our" I intend the political, cultural and economic formation of the modern West— permits us to speak uniquely in unilateral terms. Tolerance is seemingly only *ours* to exercise or negate, never that of the other, non-occidental, and, presumably, non-modern. Centuries of intolerance and repression towards other cultures and histories, sustained by the constitutional violence of colonial legislation and the "civilizing mission" of Europe propagated government that frequently culminated in regimes of terror, genocide, and racialized slavery. If yesterday the world was seized in the clutch of colonialism and imperialism, today it is unilaterally decanted into the empty, homogeneous time of the abstract, but very real, powers of capital, labor, state laws, and "progress." The relationships between neighbors and strangers, friends and foe, the familiar and the "foreign," are conducted in contexts completely stripped of the (planetary) historical and cultural processes that produce and sustain such encounters. In this refusal to recognize that the interiors – of our cities and houses, of our histories and culture, of our "freedom" and "democracy," of our language – have been formed and forged for centuries in a coeval dependence on an external that was once colonized and is now "globalized," lies the fundamental disavowal of the disquieting and complex history of modernity itself.³⁷

In Italy in particular, the cultural amnesia over colonialism and empire has further distanced such questions from the national register. This returns us to the specific contours of an Italian modernity. Antonio Gramsci suggestively argued that the heart of the question lies in the complex interplay between the refined language of cultural configuration proposed from above (the "Renaissance") and one roughly activated from "below" (the Reformation).³⁸ This seemingly archaic terminology serves to underline a structural absence in the subsequent constellation of Italian modernity, where the significance of the Reformation lies less in terms of the failed introduction of Protestantism to the nascent cultural formation of Italy and rather more in the symbolic force of the idea of a popular and radical break with a previous

³⁵ The vast majority of "illegal" migrants arrive with tourist visas, and then overstay. The figure of 10% is quoted by Laura Boldrini, spokesperson for the United Nations High Commission of Refugees, in an interview with Sandra Amurri, *L'Unità*, 27 July 2008.

³⁶ See Donna Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000) and Mark Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

³⁷ Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

³⁸ Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, 1293-94.

order of authority. The national formation remains divided and compromised between religion for the popular classes and culture for a refined élite. In Italy, both sixteenth-century science and nineteenth-century nationalism were precise witnesses to this accommodation: Galileo recanted and Mazzini's republicanism was defeated.

The national synthesis that Gramsci sought between the Renaissance and the Reformation, between intellectuals and the subaltern popular classes, has yet to be inaugurated; no major political or cultural movement has ever really challenged the Renaissance ideal. Culture continues to be considered as a largely autonomous sphere, modeled by taste and regulated by aesthetics. In this sense, it remains fundamentally Crocean in spirit. This does not simply mean that the Catholic Church has remained a prodigious political force in Italian society, but also, and more significantly, that the concept of culture remains fundamentally élitist in its elaboration and execution. Culture exists more as an abstraction than a socio-political force able to contest the pedagogical powers of religion and those of uninterrupted authority. Above all, it remains a power for continuity. These paternalistic premises discipline educational practices and social research. It leads to a hierarchy of temporal and institutional authority that blocks an altogether more open and democratic understanding of cultural innovation, critical disavowal, and radical renewal. This is to suggest that the Foucauldian power/knowledge nexus in the question lies not so much with the structure of academic powers as within the structure of knowledge itself. Against the prospect of discontinuity and the contingent realization of cultural possibilities, set out in the very different languages but overlapping perspectives of Vico and Gramsci, it has been the uninterrupted historical "spirit" of Crocean idealism and its patronizing understanding of culture and pedagogy that continues to hegemonize the national cultural agenda. It is no accident that Gramsci called for a work to be entitled *Anti-Croce*.³⁹ Eighty years later that book has still to be written.

As Gramsci himself noted, this structural "weakness manifests itself in the educational question."⁴⁰ Gramsci is actually referring here to the entire history of modern Europe, marked by the relative failure of both the Renaissance and the Reformation to radically transform the worlds they inherited and, in particular, defeat the power of the Catholic Church. Once again, the Italian question is simultaneously a European question. The local outcome – reinforced by the entwining of secular and religious powers sealed in concords between the Vatican and the Italian state – has been the absence of popular intellectual reform and the generalized failure of Italian intellectuals to contest or confront this situation. It results in a preference for an abstract rhetoric of rationalism, rather than an altogether more turbulent cultural politics.⁴¹ This, in turn, translates into a largely unproblematic understanding of pedagogy in which teaching, particular in higher education, is invariably transformed into the unilateral power and transmission of an unaccountable knowledge: the learning experience frequently threatens to become a rhetorical miming of authority.⁴² The widespread refusal to problematize one's own cultural formation today produces the paradoxical situation in which increasingly the most significant critical inquiry into Italian history, culture and literature tends to occur beyond its national boundaries and institutions.⁴³ The journal that hosts these considerations is yet further proof.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 1234.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 1381

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 134

⁴² Extensively documented in Paola Di Cori's justly polemical *Insegnare di storia* (Turin: Trauben, 1999).

⁴³ This provocative assertion naturally requires a study in its own right. Nevertheless, simply a superficial comparison of publications and university course materials proposed by native and foreign *italianisti* makes the point.

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