

editorial

COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL ITALY

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1 The most recent volumes to appear are two edited collections: J. Andall and D. Duncan's *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory* (2005) and R. Ben-Ghiat and M. Fuller's *Italian Colonialism* (2005).

This issue aims to examine the history and continuing effects of the colonial experience in contemporary Italy, and to link this exploration to the field of postcolonialism. Up until now, analyses of Italian postcoloniality have been primarily limited to Italian studies.¹ In Italy itself, historical and cultural studies of its colonial past were slow to take off after the end of the Second World War, and progressed mainly through the work of a few isolated, pioneering historians such as Giorgio Rochat and Angelo Del Boca. This was also due to the impossibility of access to official colonial records for several decades after 1945, and to the general refusal of the Italian governing class to engage in a sustained and public debate around colonialism, as had occurred in other European ex-colonial nations. Colonialism is still a significantly under-studied area in the Italian academy when compared to fascism, the Resistance and the workers' movement, on which there is a wealth of scholarship. It is only very recently that scholars have begun integrating 'the history of Italian colonialism into larger narratives of Italian national experience' (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005: 1). Italy's noted reluctance to

confront its colonial legacy has meant that scholars who wish to do so have often had to rely on theoretical and historical paradigms elaborated in other colonial contexts. But why this move to reclaim Italy's colonial past and its present/future for postcolonial studies?

There are several reasons for this. First, we believe that the development of a colonial discourse specifically in the *Italian* context offers an important corrective and contribution to the ways in which colonial discourse has been analysed in postcolonial studies. It is undeniable that present analyses of colonial discourse, and indeed studies of colonialism as an international phenomenon, have focused for the most part on British and French imperialism, and on anglophone/francophone writing emerging from these ex-colonial territories. Postcolonialism as a scholarly field now needs to extend its scope of enquiry beyond the Anglo–French models of the colonial (and postcolonial) relationship, which to some extent determine the theoretical directions taken by critics. As we aim to show in this issue, Italian postcoloniality shakes up these paradigms very significantly, given the particular nature of its colonial history and its difficult, often obscured legacy in the present.

Italian thought and postcolonialism

A key contribution of Italy to postcolonial studies has been its role in the formation of postcolonial theory, if such a heterogeneous and wildly divergent array of critical writings can be bracketed under a unifying term. Italian radical philosophers emerging from both a Marxist and a post-structuralist tradition of thought, such as Antonio Gramsci, Antonio Negri and Giorgio Agamben, have been instrumental in shaping the directions of postcolonial scholarship, although the specificities of the Italian context in the formation of their ideas have not always been duly recognized. At the same time, despite the fact that Italian theorists have contributed so much to the field, postcolonial studies has had a difficult reception in Italy, mainly due to the Italian academy's reluctance to engage with postcolonial theory or see its relevance to the contemporary Italian context, as is discussed by Miguel Mellino in his contribution to this issue. While the essays in this issue do not explicitly address the influence of Italian thought on postcolonial theory, it might be appropriate here to briefly situate these authors within the history and politics of modern Italy, given their widespread use in the field.

Most prominent among these thinkers is of course Antonio Gramsci. As regards Gramsci, his theoretical formulations for understanding the global South, with their fertility and enduring applicability, emerge out of the economic and social diversity of Italy, the coexistence of an

emerging industrialized sector in the north with the most entrenched feudalism in the south, and of course the omnipresence of a powerful Church. His brilliant empirical observations of Italian subaltern politics are especially relevant to his way of thinking; he always proclaims the importance of reality and concrete applicability in the formulation of political thought, an approach which he inherits from Machiavelli. One of Gramsci's most quoted passages in postcolonial historiography, and specifically by the Subaltern Studies collective of historians, is his discussion of the alleged 'spontaneity' of popular revolt, which is far from being 'instinctive' and inchoate. Subaltern feelings are spontaneous in the sense that

they are not the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group, but have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by 'common sense', i.e. by the traditional popular conception of the world – which is unimaginatively called 'instinct', although it too is in fact a primitive and elementary historical acquisition. (Gramsci 2005 [1971]: 198–9)

The referent and 'testing ground' for Gramsci's observation is the popular revolt that took place in thirteenth-century Sicily against French domination of the island. Gramsci's acute theoretical observations emerge organically out of his compelling account of Italian industrial workers' struggles and examples of peasant insurgency in the Italian south. As he himself says:

Reality produces a wealth of the most bizarre combinations. It is up to the theoretician to unravel these in order to discover fresh proof of his theory, to 'translate' into theoretical language the elements of historical life. It is not reality that should be expected to conform to the abstract schema. This will never happen, and hence this conception is nothing but an expression of passivity. (Leonardo was able to discern number in all the manifestations of cosmic life, even where profane eyes only saw blind chance and chaos.) (Gramsci 2005 [1971]: 200)

It is precisely Gramsci's flexibility as a thinker and observer that has made him susceptible to appropriation by a variety of differing theoretical/ideological positions, as Timothy Brennan shows in a recent discussion of the 'uses' of Gramsci in post-structuralist and postcolonial theory. Brennan argues that postcolonial studies, and more specifically the Subaltern Studies collective of historians, has tended to privilege the 'counter-hegemonic' strand of Gramscian thinking, with an over-emphasis on the 'autonomous being' of the subaltern at the expense of a more politicized understanding of the complex power relations operating among various forms of subalternity. Brennan's recuperation of the Italian thinker for left cultural politics

2 In a speech made to left-wing workers in Naples during the days of liberation in 1945, Togliatti emphasized how all of Gramsci's political actions prior to his imprisonment had worked towards an idea of unity – the unity of the workers' parties for the defence of democratic institutions, the unity of socialist working masses with the Catholic working masses and the unity of manual labourers and intellectuals – in order to create 'a great block of national forces' to counteract the advance of fascism (Togliatti 2001: 115).

3 Gramsci saw the independence movement headed by Gandhi in India in the 1930s as that of 'many men who consider themselves civilized who are dominated by a few men who are considered less civilized but materially invincible' (Gramsci 2001 [1975]: 748). Gramsci thought Gandhism shed considerable light on the great religious reform movements that swept Italy in the Middle Ages, such as that inspired

includes an account of Gramsci's critique of the southern intellectual, a specifically Italian figure, who most vividly symbolized the lack of communication between the peasant masses of the south and the intellectual class. For Brennan, Gramsci's critique of this 'detached' intellectual should serve as a salutary warning for postcolonial intellectual practice today (Brennan 2006).

Brennan thus relocates Gramsci within the political situation of Italy in the 1920s and 1930s. It is important to recall here Gramsci's fundamental role in the formation of the Italian Communist Party, and his post-war avatar as an *intellettuale di partito* (party intellectual). Palmiro Togliatti, celebrated leader of the PCI and Gramsci's erstwhile political companion, 'used' Gramsci's thought to help consolidate national unity in his political speeches just after the Second World War.² But Brennan's polemic against the postcolonial uses of Gramsci can itself be seen as yet another form of intellectual appropriation to which Gramsci's protean thinking readily lends itself. Why deny the immensely productive influence of the historiographic methodology inaugurated by Gramsci on rethinking Indian subaltern history? Gramsci was always ready to spot historical analogies between Italy and Asia/Africa; and the *Notebooks* yield a series of interesting parallels which reveal both Gramsci's profound rootedness in the Italian context and his flexibility in adapting his theoretical and historical insights to the situation in the colonies. Colonial contexts are drawn upon to illuminate this or that aspect of Italy's complex history.³ Quite early on in the *Notebooks*, Gramsci develops an analogy between political struggle and anti-colonial war, specifically referring to the example of the Indian struggle for independence against the British. A discussion of Gramscian thinking on colonialism would merit a sustained study which it is not possible to develop here more fully for reasons of space.

Italy's tradition of producing thinkers for whom philosophy has a politically interventionist outcome is more than evident in the work of Antonio Negri, the alleged 'theorist' of the Red Brigades who was imprisoned for many years for his purported role in mandating terrorist attacks. Negri's involvement in the Italian left-wing armed struggle of the 1970s on the one hand, and the influence of French post-structuralist theory on the other, have played an important role in shaping his latest work, most relevant to postcolonial studies, on empire in the contemporary context (*Empire* and *Multitude*, co-written with Michael Hardt). A key line of continuity throughout his work has been his concern with the encroachment by the state and the driving forces of production on 'the human work of freedom'. His elaboration of the anti-globalization movement as a post-colonial movement of resistance emerges organically out of his earlier advocacy of the necessity for political resistance – and even armed struggle – in the context of Italian political conflict between extremist groups and the

by St Francis. He saw parallels between Gandhi's methods of non-cooperation and passive resistance and St Francis's refusal to take up an active struggle, a 'primitive evangelical pacifism' (ibid.: 748–9).

4 Negri's work can be seen, in some sense, as a reaction against Gramsci, who was associated with the political orthodoxy of the PCI, especially in the turbulent 1970s. In

state in the post-1968 period.⁴ In recent times, postcolonial studies has drawn more and more on the writings of another Italian radical philosopher, Giorgio Agamben. Achille Mbembe is but one of the many scholars who have found his work particularly productive for postcolonial studies.⁵

Nor is Italy's contribution to anti-colonial thought confined to the movements associated with Marxism or, more recently, post-structuralist philosophy. While Gramsci's reflections on the parallels between anti-colonialism and political struggle were firmly anchored to a Marxist framework, Giuseppe Mazzini, one of Italy's foremost patriots, provided a nationalist alternative to communism or socialism in Europe and beyond (Young 2001: 119). Mazzini's Young Italy movement was influential in various Asian and African countries from the mid nineteenth century to the period of decolonization in the late twentieth century (Borsa and Brocchieri 1984; Srivastava 1982; Young 2001: 229). Mazzini and the Risorgimento (the Italian nationalist movement for independence) represented ideals of freedom and nationality for many European colonies struggling to achieve independence and nationhood.

Nationalism, colonialism and a 'European' identity

the Italian context, unlike in the Anglo-American academy, Gramsci's is seen as a reformist and statist rather than a radical philosophical position.

5 Agamben can be linked to *pensiero debole*, or weak thought, a movement that shares an intellectual genealogy with post-structuralism, and associated with the philosopher Gianni Vattimo. Agamben develops Foucault's notion of biopolitics in relation to the 'state of exception', a concept that he considers to provide the legal basis for the emergence of the

Italy's radical and nationalist traditions, which have had such an evident influence on anti-colonial and postcolonial thought, can perhaps be linked to the peculiarities of Italy's historical evolution as a nation and its ambiguous position as regards Europe and modern European colonialism. A primary ambivalence is given by the fact that the pre-unification Italian states had been colonies of various European empires before united Italy became a European colonial power itself. Moreover, the Roman empire and the medieval empire of Venice had been considered imperial models by Britain and France long before unification (Edwards 1999; Ruskin 1981: 46). The widespread belief that Italy was the cradle of European civilization played a significant part in the nationalist ideology of modern Italy from unification to fascism. This ideology aimed to both create a national identity and defeat internal difference in a country which was socially and culturally diverse and emerging from centuries of foreign domination, and where discontent and unrest – not to mention poverty – were widespread.

Emerging out of the Risorgimento, the new Italian nation, in the eighty-six years following unification in 1861, was to face economic subordination and emigration, a colonial enterprise, fascism and totalitarianism, institutional racism at home and in the empire, the anti-fascist Resistance, defeat in the Second World War and the consequent dispossession of all its colonies. Colonialism constitutes a considerable part of the Italian history of this period, but in ways that differ greatly from the colonial experience in the

camp: the colonial concentration camp, the Nazi *Konzentrationslager*, asylum-seekers' detention camps, Guantanamo Bay are all thus seen to be linked by the violence inherent in, and sanctioned by, the laws of the modern state. What is perhaps less often remarked is Agamben's reliance on, and exploration of, the ideas of the Italian author Primo Levi in relation to the boundary between the human and the inhuman in his Holocaust writings *If This Is A Man* and *The Drowned and the Saved*. Agamben's conception of ethics, almost entirely elaborated from Levi's reflections on life in the camp, finds a particularly fertile application in the analysis of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, and is useful for understanding the erosion of the state-citizen relationship in postcolonial Africa and in postcolonial Europe, for example. The status of 'refugee' or 'asylum-seeker' is a form of dehumanization by the state, which more and more equates one's political citizenship with one's 'humanity'; and 'bare

history of France or Britain. Italian colonialism, as a form of nationalist expansionism, began with the hope that the new nation would play an active role in international relations (as opposed to the passive role played before unification), and that this role would contribute to the economic and technological development of an otherwise mainly rural country. Some believed that a colonial enterprise would facilitate Italy's modernization and increase its influence in the world by directing the huge flows of Italian migrants towards overseas Italian territories and avoiding thus the dispersion of Italian energies for the benefit of other countries (Are 1985). Above all, it was hoped that colonial Italy would restore Italy's traditional centrality in Europe and solve the problem of marginality. The advent of fascism exacerbated these preoccupations and ambitions, and Mussolini's proclamation of the Italian empire and his entry in the Second World War were clear attempts to spread Italian and fascist influence in Europe and beyond. Two pieces in this issue deal with the question of nationalism, colonialism and race in the fascist period. Ruth Ben-Ghiat's piece discusses how the idea of empire was central to fascist visions of modernity and how universal fascism sought to create an alternative European identity with Italy at its heart, while Fabrizio De Donno's piece traces the development of racial theory in colonial and fascist Italy with particular regard to the implementation of the racial laws in the Italian empire.

The idea of a national 'regeneration' aimed at Rome's modern rebirth constituted the Italian nationalist ideology from unification to colonialism and fascism (Chabod 1951: 179–324). The notion of a third Rome – the Rome of united Italy after imperial and papal Rome – had been central to Mazzini's doctrine during the Risorgimento, and its legacy of 'universalism' lived through Italian colonialism and fascism (Chabod 1951: 195; Labanca 2002: 155). The idea of Rome functioned as a unifying trope in the context of both national unification and expansionism and was associated with the notion of an Italian 'mission' in Europe and in the world (Chabod 1951: 195). The association between Italy and Europe in Mazzini's doctrine betrays the patriot's Eurocentrism as his conceptions of nationality, freedom and universal brotherhood are peculiarly elaborated with reference to European territories (Chabod 1961a: 70; 1961b: 158).⁶ Already during the Risorgimento, Mazzini's notion of a Roman rebirth involved the idea of an Italian influence in the Mediterranean and Africa (Mazzini 1877 [1857]: 38). On the one hand, such a notion fuelled the ideology of the first decades of colonialism, in which Italians were said to have a 'duty' to bring freedom to the people oppressed by barbarism. On the other, during fascism the same notion of duty in the context of nationality and freedom gave way to a fascist rhetoric of anti-colonialism and anti-racism in support of an anti-British propaganda in the British colonies.

life' is what we are left with outside of this citizen–human bind (see Agamben 1998, 1999, 2005).

6 The Young Europe project was founded on these concepts of European brotherhood.

However, the ideals of nationality and freedom which had nurtured the ideology of the Risorgimento also produced anti-colonial feelings right from the beginning of Italian colonialism. The Italian poet Giosuè Carducci condemned the Italian colonial policy as against the ideals of the 'new Italy' since it denied the right to nationality to Africans in the same way as the Austrians had denied this to the Italians (Rainero 1971: 161). These feelings arose primarily in a small group of intellectuals and developed in concert with an objective assessment of the reality of the socio-economic conditions of Italy. Colonialism, in actual fact, did not prove to be the answer to the economic problems of Italy, its emigration and the 'southern question', as some had expected. In particular, the military defeats in the colonial battles of Dogali and Adwa against the Abyssinian empire created considerable opposition to the Italian colonial campaign (*ibid.*: 13). Interestingly enough, at least up to Adwa, opposition to colonialism had come from both the extreme right and the extreme left, involving Catholics, socialists, republicans, anarchists, radicals and conservatives alike. With the defeat of Dogali and Adwa, when social discontent was at its peak since unification, this opposition came to include also the masses who had previously showed no particular engagement in the colonial question (*ibid.*: 17).

But this fragmentation of thought and practice is only indicative of the multiplicity of elements which converged in the attempt to create an Italian identity. These divisions were intrinsic to the process of nation-building and are a sign of an undefeated internal diversity. If fascism sought to create a new identity by means of the dictatorial sovereign power, Italy's fragmentation re-emerged stronger than ever after fascism's collapse. It is important to note, though, that the Italian failures to achieve 'a place in Europe' contributed to a general oblivion to the various attempts to make of Italy a European power through colonialism. Fascism itself had reached the highest consensus among Italians with the invasion of Ethiopia and the proclamation of the Italian empire. It was during the post-war years that 'Italy deceived itself with the self-absolution of "*brava gente*" [good-hearted people]' (Labanca 2005: 36). Italians now tended to identify with the liberation, just as eighty years before they had identified with national independence.

In the post-war period, the issue of anti-colonialism saw a new development with the support of the Italian left for the Algerian struggle against the French. This manifestation of post-fascist (and postcolonial) Italian anti-colonialism was linked with anti-fascism and the Resistance against Nazi-fascism, as is discussed in Neelam Srivastava's article on anti-colonialism and the Italian left. The myth of the Resistance, in fact, found also a legacy in the armed struggle of radical political groups during the 1970s.

Italy and immigration

In the postcolonial era, Italy has become a member of the G8 and has increasingly dealt with immigration both from the former Italian colonies and from other extra-European countries. This has contributed to a reconsideration of the memory of Italian colonialism. Alessandro Triulzi's piece for this issue explores the issue of 'colonial memory' in Italy, Ethiopia and Somalia, and how differing accounts of the Italian imperial presence led to different and conflictual postcolonial identities in the Horn of Africa. Immigration has also led to the growth of racism against *extra-comunitari*, a uniquely Italian term used to indicate all foreigners of 'Third-World' origin who are not citizens of a European member-state. (The racist connotations of the term are clear from the fact that it is never used to indicate 'white' foreigners, such as Americans.) Meanwhile, anxieties about Italy's place in Europe have continued to exist within the context of the European Union, while Italy has become a major destination for international immigration after producing one of the greatest diasporas of the modern period. Alessandro Portelli's contribution seeks to examine the innovative ways in which Italian migrant literature is fashioning Italian into a 'multicultural' and 'postcolonial' literary language. The Italo-Somali novelist Igiaba Scego has contributed a bibliography of the most recent works of Italian migrant writing. The issue of immigration is continued in this collection by Francesca Orsini whose essay treats contemporary Italian Islamophobia with regard to immigration, global terrorism and the 'clash of civilizations' theory.

Within the present collection, the essays seek to offer revisionary histories of Italy's past, and to reread the archive of the present from a postcolonial perspective. Central to this discussion is the idea of *an Italian colonial and postcolonial identity*. We aim to identify elements of Italian colonial discourse and culture that have shaped the ways in which Italy today perceives itself as a member of the EU and the G8, and as a multi-ethnic and multicultural democracy where hierarchies are still defined by civilizational and racial notions established during the colonial period. At the same time, we wish to focus attention on the particular characteristics of colonial and postcolonial Italy as a result of the peculiar historical evolution of the Italian nation within modern Europe.

This collection aims to be a general introduction to Italian postcolonial studies and we have purposely chosen to interrogate a variety of disciplines and topics, including theory, historiography, literary canons, contemporary racism, colonial memory, and politics, in order to indicate a number of directions in which to pursue further studies fruitfully. We hope that this issue will be of some use to those scholars who are seeking to develop the links between Italy and postcolonialism, and that it may be able to suggest new areas of research to be explored.

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