

GEOGRAPHICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE IDENTITY OF SOUTHERN ITALY

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1. Locations and space

If it ever really existed, the notion of the South of Italy as a cultural landscape indistinct and primitive in its atavistic and dense backwardness was an imaginary vision of distant lands on the outskirts of Europe. A "paradise populated by devils" where the aforementioned backwardness consisted of violence, individualism, familism, fatalism and so on. Or even worse, a space where atavistic customs and modes of behavior are practiced and pursued with modern instruments. The question would for the most part be one of "*passive modernization*" (Cafagna, 1994), which with the homologation of consumption has merely recast ancestral modes of behavior which are still present and largely still active.

Even so, the entire "Southern question" in the last fifty years has centered on a primitive space (the South) with locations and territories defined in terms of economic as well as social expansion. Places and territories are differentiated, giving citizenship to "many Souths" as opposed to just one¹. Therefore, today more than ever, as Giuseppe Galasso reminds us, citing Max Sorre, "*the empirical knowledge of the habitat ties together all of the economic, social and religious notions of the inhabitants. ...*". He adds that it is "*inside each single habitat that one can see the concrete development of the social life, the formation and development of mentality and behavior, the accumulation of experience, the conservation and the innovation of customs, and the birth and decline of traditions.*" It is furthermore a question of a range of studies and investigations which, "*both taken up and neglected by sociologists and geographers, anthropologists and students of city planning, ecologists and economists, has concluded with the formation of a no man's land rather than a territory of frontiers, and a superimposition, if not a confusion, of notions and techniques, rather than the drawing up of conceptions and scientific methods*" (Galasso, 1997, p. 21).

If the unity of the South as a homogenous cultural landscape, supposing that it did exist in the first place, was shattered, and therefore its cultural space is a sum of diverse and different locations, the question is how and why, even if only synthetically, such differences were created, or rather, accentuated. Obviously, one cannot and one must not exclude that which remains of the common ever more tenuous identity traits, which in the past fifty years have undergone a real evolution.

From the end of the second world war to today the per capita revenue of the South in real terms has quadrupled. This is much greater, to give one example, than the fifteen new countries which are about to enter Europe and not too far removed from other Mediterranean Basin states such as Spain, Greece and Portugal. An economic growth, both in terms of duration and size, without precedent in the history of the ancient kingdom. This has allowed two regions (Abruzzo and Molise) to leave the "historical South" and another two (Puglia and Basilicata) to draw closer to its threshold. It has also caused not only economic but in certain places social development, breaking down the old stereotypes of the South and its citizens. One example is Matera and part of its province, which is typical of the most extreme "rural society" and the most primitive urban conditions. In his introduction to an investigation by Censis from midway through the 80s, the sociologist Giuseppe De Rita notes how forty years previously, "*the native of Matera imposed his ancient culture: his sense of time without apparent scansion, his capacity for prolonged silence, his necessary patience, his slow rumination, the primacy of his sparse language, the importance of seeing with the eyes, the primordial appendages of the family, the local neighborhood, the church*". If to this description of a cultural landscape immersed in an agrarian landscape, product of baronial and rustic estates, one can add that of the infernal Dantesque landscape, of Levian memory, of the

¹ The group of sociologists at Censis have long insisted on this point. More recent theses by historians and sociologists who congregate around "Meridiana" magazine.

Matera of the “stones”, and if it is true (to return to Giuseppe di Rita) that the sociologist discovers anthropological traces of that archetypal world, it can also be said that *“the South continued to develop and today the inhabitants of Matera tend to integrate in non-unified and non-homogenous terms: the city has reconnected itself with the dynamic and rather ambitious aspect of Bari, a kind of non-bureaucratic expansion of the service industry; Metapontino has an ever more capitalistic agriculture, tending to gravitate towards Taranto and again Bari; the mountains remain mournful testimony to the ancient culture of the interior.”* (De Rita, 1986)

Here the mountains represent the “internal zone” of the Southern Apennines and of Sicily, where emigration has hit hardest, and the ancient cultural landscape seems a continuity of the rural culture. But it is a question of ever smaller locations: Benevento's and Molise's Fortore, the mountains of Daunia in Puglia, but no longer of Salento and to a much lesser degree the Murge, and so on for the roughest parts of Calabria and the deepest parts of Sicily.

Elsewhere, but maybe here also, the ancient culture has turned at its worst to folklore, at its best to cultural asset, and to the use and consumption of tourism which stretches from the coast to the interior. If therefore the Southern identity, in the sense of belonging to a specific socio-anthropological dimension, has changed little by little and differentiated the historical-geographical context, we need to ask ourselves if and where traces of antiquity remain and conversely where the lines of fracture are most accentuated.

2. From rural culture to urban culture

Such a scientific-cum-cultural operation appears much more important since, from the discovery or rediscovery of the increasingly sadder traces of the antique culture (in Materano as in many other inland locations in the South) there seems to have emerged almost a regret, tied to a mythical vision, on the part of sociologists and anthropologists, for an identity-culture in which traditional life-styles are on the one hand “another world” and on the other hand, and on the contrary, permanent signs of Southern backwardness. Such an attitude reminds us of the bitter, ironic thoughts of Ignazio Silone when “Fontamara” was left without electricity:

“The young people don't know the story, but we old people do. Seventy years of innovations from the people of Piedmont come down to just two things: electricity and cigarettes. They took away the electricity. And the cigarettes? You smoke them just once, they can suffocate you. A pipe was always good enough for us” (Silone, 1930, p. 21).

Despite Ignazio Silone, Southern society has disintegrated, but it has also subdivided and, in a certain way, come back together larger than it was before. An urban culture, or urbanization in the broadest sense of the word, inclusive of rural urbanization, has become diffused. The close-knit “rural cities” of Puglia and Sicily are not the only physical testimony of classes of people who no longer exist, but also province capitals have taken on the administrative rank of regional centers (Pescara, Campobasso, Potenza), and public services, and not uncommonly private services, are present in the smaller centers. They are “micro cities”, socially divided and differentiated. The same Gramscian definition of Southern society, which was widely accepted until the 1970s, *“a large agrarian block constituted of three social strata: an amorphous mass of dispersed farmers, intellectuals of the small to medium rural bourgeoisie, and the powerful landowners and intellectuals”*, (Gramsci, 1931), may be consigned to the history of Southern Italy thought. Similarly, but with careful attention and critical analysis, Gaetano Salvemini's ferocious criticism of the petit bourgeoisie and intellectuals of the South can be largely reassessed. When comparing the conditions of Molfetta at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the 1950s, Salvemini wrote, *“if I close my eyes and recall the conditions of seventy years ago, and I compare them with those of today, it feels like living in another world... the material progress – that is, the passage from an almost bestial life to a human one – has for most of the population been immense”* (Salvemini, 1897, 1954).

We said with careful attention and critical analysis because we can ask ourselves, another fifty years having passed, about the cultural landscape of Molfetta today, and more generally of other Southern cities. In this case we are referring to medium-sized cities, province capitals and towns above a certain demographic threshold which are not included in the metropolitan areas or close to the big cities. The question is one of investigating and understanding whether

they aren't more "rural cities", still largely "buropoli", or on the contrary, like Matera, exhibit a private tertiary system and an economic base in which small and medium enterprises and services have more modern functions.

We must ask ourselves for whom we are investigating the single habitats in which the predominantly urban South is divided, if we talk of a "passive modernization" in which as we have seen, "tests on the possibility of changing the *ethos* of a population based on a predetermined plan do not exist."²

Moving with difficulty to the treacherous terrain between anthropology and sociology, we could maintain that the condition of "passive modernization" brings with it certain value judgements, which is to say judgements of the principles which regulate human actions – that wish is healthy or unhealthy for us, useful or damaging, good or bad. In these non-historical disciplines – drawn up in buildings where "historical progress" is concentrated and must be of value to everyone, even for those at the margins of the "historical progress" – the fact that the thing was removed is not important, for example the extraordinary intervention of the Southern Italy Development Fund, particular ecological conditions (malaria, land reclamation), economic conditions (geographic isolation, shortage of resources), or social conditions (property distribution, exploitation of certain classes). There is an *ethos* which does not undergo modifications: asocial and negative behavior returns, beyond that which appears, even in the modernization and the transformation of the agricultural society to the urban society. In other words, between *ethos* and *nomos*, between behavior and norms, between general laws and individual interests, there is, almost like a defect transmitted from one generation to the next in perpetuity, an incompatibility which will never give way to unity. And there is a widespread and accepted conviction that economic development has not corresponded, even in part, to social development. "To properly clarify this point," writes Sylos Labini, "if an investigation was carried out in the poorer quarters of Naples or Palermo into the income of the inhabitants, you would arrive, I believe, at the conclusion that there is no great difference between the income of a city with a good reputation such as, for example, Siena. Nevertheless you would notice great differences in the ways in which income is obtained: in the poorer quarters you would find that often income comes from activities which are either illicit or at the edges of legality: contraband, prostitution, often petty crimes and maybe drug dealing. Also the semiliterate are able to earn a lot of money", (Sylos Labini, 2001).

Sylos Labini's remarks can be extended and broadened to include the four metropolitan areas of the South (Naples, Palermo, Catania and Bari) and not only the poorer areas, but also to the wide-ranging suburban fringes, where a uniformly close-knit cultural landscape takes in all of the contours and the contents of a "new identity" which is neither rural nor urban. Rather a mix of the two, with large traces of that aforementioned "passive modernization". And we can extend the same considerations, perhaps, to cities where the effects of industrialization have been powerful (Taranto and Brindisi) as well as to other cities (the conurbation of Stretto, Foggia). Therefore it is not difficult to agree with Luciano Cafagna when, against today's fashionable sociological revisionism which holds that the same "deviance" of the South is a manifestation of modernization, he observes that "*one thing is the attention paid to the variety of locations, the specific dynamism behind which one can conceal (and this is not unimportant) significant future sensitivity for a movement in desired directions; another the exaltation (explicit and implicit) of any variety as such, or a declaration of methodological indifference: this is perhaps legitimate for the anthropologist, not for the economist*" (Cafagna, 1994, p. 84).

And we may add from our own perspective, for the geographer who would also "contaminate" economy and sociology. Furthermore, we may add, still aware of value judgements, dwelling upon stereotypes of the cultural landscape of the South, if not in a Crocean sense. "*It is of little worth to find out how far the proverb (a paradise populated by devils) is true, it is useful to believe it is completely true in order to remind ourselves that it is always less so*" (Croce, 1944). Otherwise, one falls into the trap of returning to a form of both

² The reference is to the noted essay by Banfield E.C., 1961, which, as De Masi states in his presentation, is by far the most wide-reaching and persistent sociological research in this field. See also Putnam, 1993 and Cerase, 1992.

environmental and sociological determinism, if one pours out of a new historical and ethical-political vision. Therefore, to stay with Croce, “*climate, fertility and avarice of the land, health and poor health, geographic position, ethnic disposition, streets and the lack of streets, the shifting of commercial ventures and so on are all important things if considered as conditions or materials or instruments between which and upon which spiritual effort is expended, and which must always form the central point of the considerations; but all is devoid of importance taken for oneself, away from the center, inert and incapable of coming to any conclusion*”. The same climate, Croce concludes, citing Hegel, “*indifferently gave us the works of the Greeks and the indolence of the Turks.*” (Corce, 1944, p. 289) In this cultural context of a sociological anthropology which seems to ignore the rationality of history and which absolves or condemns according to an *ethos* which cannot be removed and which produces its effects and reproduces them autonomously, indifferent to the conditions of place, one can oppose the reasons of geography, or rather the reasons of Southern geographers, both the most notable geographers and those who merely dabble. In modern times, without wanting to go back to Neapolitan Enlightenment – even if, as Gabriele De Rosa suggests, from Galanti to Fortunato the classic Southern Italian idiom takes “its form from historical experience, from the study of the city and the territory, from the place of man and the economic classes of society”, (De Rosa, 1991, p. 12) – there have been “dabbling” geographers who did not bring the South from nature to history, from the description of a landscape steeped in its natural aspects – suspended between myth and aestheticism – to a landscape animated by its actual physical and material conditions (Musacchio, 1991). Indeed there is an ideal continuity, in their Enlightenment inspiration, between Cattaneo and Salvemini and to Isnardi, Zanotti Bianco, Maranelli, Tommaso Fiore, Francesco Compagna and above all Manlio Rossi Doria, a continuity hinging upon the voluntary transformation of the territory, the governing role of the cities, and therefore the necessity of promoting without delay and with high hopes the entry of the South into industrial civilization.

3. “Donnarumma” went on the attack. Was he beaten? (Ottieri, 1963).

To understand at which point the South’s entry into industrial civilization showed itself as merely a half-success or if you will, a half-failure, we need to make reference to at least three factors concerning the history of our country, and in part sociological and anthropological factors.

The first of these regards the circumstances in which the industrialization of the South was directed the day before that which was acutely defined by Rosario Romeo as the “industrial counter-revolution” which began in the 1970s and substantiated the indistinct ideology which determined a sterile “environmental revolution”. This was nourished by common places and buzzwords such as “industrialization without development”, “cathedrals in the desert”, “expropriation of the use of the territory” and so on; expressions which while grasping single, and at times existing, aspects of reality, do not seem to take into account more general and profound reasons for the crisis in the use and abuse of the territory of the South (Cavallari, 1966, p. 740).

The second of these factors, which directly relates to the first, is found in the historical, social and cultural margins of the cities of the South. Starting from the regional reform of the 1970s, the weak and inefficient local political-administrative structures were revealed to be incapable of managing the expanding urbanization, neither in the form of metropolitan expansion nor the cementification of the coast. The result was an offence which the historical-environmental or landscape heritage could not put right. And the “social agent” of this “offence” was that class, connected to the land revenue, at the same time the cause and effect of the more recent disintegration of the cultural landscape of the South.

And so to the third reason, the spread of a consumerism without culture, which has further accelerated socio-cultural disintegration. The identity of the South has remained suspended between the old and the new, a hybrid of ancient legacies and a timid affirmation of the processes of modernization. It existed and remained unresolved, next to an attenuating economic dualism and a physical-geographical dualism which had to be overcome. A cultural problem, confronted only as a residual question. Between the various journalistic investigations into the changing South of the 1970s, it seems that Alberto Cavallari hit the nail

on the head when he wrote *“the right thing was done in the worst possible way”* (Cavallari, 1966, p. 749).

Of those socio-economic factors it seems that first and foremost, Hytten and Marchioni justly underlined how between the large plants – in their case the petrochemical plant of Gela, but it could be extended to the iron and steel industry in Taranto or Alfa Romeo in Pomigliano—and the local community, the “areas of contact” would be reduced to a minimum. The local socio-economic and cultural system was taken far outside the company walls, *“the industry is a mere presence for the majority of the population and little more than an opportunity to earn for a minority who were considered privileged”* (Hytten and Marchioni, 1970, p. 67).

Therefore “Donnarumma” went on the attack at that factory, where “the chief Lombardi pass, tall and clear, a race apart from the locals” and “when they were there, you stayed a little way behind out of respect”. But Donnarumma was blocked by the family, by his own environment, by the environment in general, where there was no powerful cultural intervention and he was therefore expelled from the “de-industrialization” into a labor market dominated and corrupted by the “organized unemployed”, not characterized by the new common identity of the Southern cities, from halfway through the 70s till today. Features of the disintegration are therefore found not only in the retracing of still-existing customs and behavior, but above all – as Giuseppe Galasso suggests in the aforementioned essay on “the other Europe” – in the *“substantial destruction of a social conscience, both at a collective and individual level, in which that which we can authentically define as the final crises of the dissolution of the traditional South was made concrete, and in which the process of the modernization of past ten years appears to be mostly resolved.”* Then, one of the devastating effects of the 1980 earthquake was that industrialization and modernization in the South were suspended and horrific ancient scourges such as the Camorra and the Mafia resurfaced. There was almost a return to antiquity, to the diversity and separation of the South more than 150 years after the unification of Italy. Furthermore, in the same years, the “death of rural civilization” in Veneto (the region which began under not dissimilar conditions of underdevelopment in the 50s) (Muscarà, 2001), which in the face of widespread industrialization required major autonomy in a federal state and showed that major attention needed to be paid to “community identities” as a factor of development. Conversely, re-proposing the idea in the South, from an anthropological point of view, raises the question of the diversity and separation of the land of the ancient kingdom. In this context, new openings were created for the “nephews of Lombroso”³, for a reawakening of anti-Southern justice and prejudice. Together with organizations of various color and political hue, a large number of Southern intellectuals have also fallen into the same trap: in spite of notable transformations, the substratum at the bottom didn’t change, *ethos* and *nomos* continued along pre-destined parallels, and by definition, did not meet. From here, as one used to say, diversity and separation between the South and the rest of Italy.

This diversity had its distant origins in the unchanged centuries-old feudal system from which originated banditry, the Mafia, the Camorra and prevarication, which have slowed down (and in many ways still do) every civil and economic enterprise. Diversity to lead us back, without that which has been tarnished, to the different attitude of the clergy in the country’s two parties, to the unchanged relationship between domestic and public morality.

Separation, in the sense of the South’s “extraneousness” (Cafagna, 1962, 1991) from the civil and cultural history of the rest of Italy, or specifically a “distance” which pays no attention or paid no attention to the “culture of the learned”, but to mentality, habits, widespread beliefs; in a word: a different anthropology. If therefore such anthropological aspects remain in the character of the identity of the cultural landscape of the South, the “pessimist” Giustino Fortunato would have been wrong, or rather he would have committed the sin of excessive optimism when, just a few years after the Unification of Italy, he wrote: “no sooner were the first bandages off, than the North seemed to be accompanied by a dead body, and the South had lost too much in throwing away its independence.” Then things changed dramatically: “today, fortunately so-called regionalism no longer has an anti-unitary character; therefore it is always clearer that there is conflict, not a contradiction of interests,

³ The reference is to Russo’s, 1992 polemical essay.

differences, not oppositions of heredity, of education, of culture” (Fortunato, 1911, pp. 323-324).

4. Further thought on places: not just Mafia and tourism

If we can therefore also agree that in the 80s we saw the exhaustion of the force of Enlightenment which, through industrialization, brought a real change to the rural and urban South, we can also maintain that at the heart of such a progressive weakening the reasons were more historical than anthropological; reasons connected to the change of the economic cycle rather than the social fabric. Which does not mean that we can ignore or conceal the circumstances of the intervention “from on high” which gave no importance to the various cultures and identities of the South. Second generation experts on Southern Italy and state “boyars” had imagined ways and strategies of eating into and removing the local culture. This has been retracted, but has not disappeared; it was scratched, but it wasn’t defeated. Giuseppe De Rita adds that, “*the anthropological culture of the South was able to take on board in its own way all of the stimuli from abroad, generating a blocking effect on the mechanisms which one hoped would become activities of the territory, creating negativity and swamping the processes of development*” (De Rita, 2002).

From here there comes an identity and a cultural landscape which advance and become established in the common imagination: tourism, the South as a space for free time; Mafia, the South as a space denying enterprise, welfare, school, health and sound urban politics.

It’s mainly true that the South has taken on and takes on foreign *stimuli*, but from here it reinvents ancient stereotypes with new words, such as when certain positive factors are reclaimed “against the monochrome of velocity thousands of colors which can be perceived only when one slows down; against the incontinence of real time, the value of the physical and cultural distance of the other, of the incomprehensibility of its pride, of the difficulty to understand it, of the risk of getting close to it.”

Against these impalpable sociological visions, intellectual constructions and a mirror which does not reflect reality, it is worth opposing again geography; geography which studies and interprets with Salvemian concreteness the real state of locations. Franco Cassano underlines that we’re not talking about returning to simple identities, but to “*the discovery that, post-development, many useful resources return which were thrown contemptuously out of the window*” (Cassano, 1996, pp. 3-9).

Indeed, this seems the crucial point: to investigate and to understand, post-development, the identity values of today’s South which delineate the actual background and the potential of the individual places and their cultural identity. Also, before offering some key or interpretation on this matter, it should be noted that we are keeping a few, perhaps obvious, historical and geographical facts in mind. The South is not an island; it does not have boundaries; it is not an abstract concept; but the sum of individual locations which integrate with and form an albeit marginal part of larger territorial contexts: the rest of Europe, the Mediterranean Basin. Furthermore, its cities and its economy compete with other cities and other economies in a network of economic flows, of information, and of men who in their turn are competing not merely with the Mediterranean Basin but with the rest of the world.

With such a framework of reference we will find, perhaps, in cities such as Naples or Palermo a cultural landscape where there is no cohesion, and identity has been lost. Cities where urban renewal is slower, more tiring, where as in the case of Naples certain cosmetic projects have given the false image of a “renaissance”, almost like the Florence of the Medicis, Cosimo and Lorenzo. On the contrary, both cities offer yet another image, aggravated by unemployment. As for Naples and what Francesco Compagna defined in 1961, following Durkheim, as high physical density which did not correspond to a social density, “*the density which depends on the frequency of exchanges and relationships*” (Compagna, 1961). But we will find that of the vast metropolitan area of Naples, small and medium-sized companies (between Naples and Caserta, between Naples and Salerno) which do not attempt local political mediation, keep themselves distant from the welfare state. The question is of new social and identity figures which research new perspectives and opportunities at the heart of global competitive scenarios. Going deeper into the image of identity we will also find, and

in this case without question, that there is a question of companies more often than not submerged, but “black” is not the prevalent color, rather it is “white” or “gray”.

We will however find locations with a new identity, where there is a force to bring together ethos and nomos. These are the places of the South where 10% of total Italian exports are produced. This may not be such a high percentage, but it still internationalizes its economy. We will also find places without, places which are almost geological archives in which you can clearly read the different strata: from the remains of rural culture to the more recent culture of the welfare state. Places which in sociological language may be defined as “without strategy, characterized as they almost always are by the daily duties of being in the workshop from the proper input of the circuits of business and by the decisions, laboratories of maintenance of endogenous cultural value and at the same time of the innovation of possibility” (De Rita, 2002, p. 19).

It is also worth reaffirming therefore that today the South is fragmented. There are places with new identities and places where antiquity persists. But not always, in fact rather rarely, is there a geographic succession. The question is of a territorial network in which both places “without” and places “with” coexist and share the same geographical space, but with notable differences. We could suggest that all that has happened, to the extent that it has happened, because the cultural landscape of the South went from indistinct to variegated. Independent workers have increased in number, and not just those in the public sector; there has been a massive influx of women into the workplace; school attendance rates have increased; those related to business as well as services related to the family have also expanded. Therefore pieces and fragments of places, sections and compartments of cities are discovered, where the prospect of a generically passive territory that no longer takes on external stimuli is overturned, where individual and collective responsibility grow.

It is difficult to say, in conclusion, if micro-enterprises, new professions, or a diverse articulation of intermediate groups and classes will be able to make a “community” from an anthropological point of view and become districts in economic terms, integrating both with one another as well as with the wider European context in order to stand up to the challenges of globalization. It appears increasingly likely however, that in the identity of the South, anthropological and geographical factors will prevail and continue to play a decisive role in its future.

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