

Displacing Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies. On the *Coloniality* of the Southern Italian Archive

Abstract: Since Italian unification in 1861, the Italian South has been persistently marginalized from the national narrative of progress and development. The aim of this article is to verify the validity of decolonial and postcolonial tools to deconstruct the Eurocentric premises of the discourse on southern backwardness. In this regard, I aim at exposing the coloniality of the longstanding concepts of ‘southern question’ and ‘southernism’. Then, I offer a critique of three different epistemological reactions (*Southern thought*, neo-Bourbon movement, *Meridiana*) born in the 1990s as a reaction against the exacerbation of the dualist interpretation of the Southern Question. Finally, I propose a Gramscian-decolonial method to pursue the decolonization of the southern Italian archive. The adoption of the Italian South as a privileged point of observation provides here an interesting move to displace both postcolonial studies and decolonial studies.

Keywords: *southern question, southernism, postcolonial studies, decolonial studies, coloniality, Gramsci*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the circulation of postcolonial and decolonial studies in the humanities and social sciences have contributed to a disruption of the universality of the Western European narrative of modernity and progress. For both fields of study, colonialism has been constitutive for the Western way of understanding the world; modern Europe, in this regard, owes its cultural, economic, geopolitical, and epistemological centrality to the colonial experience. Nevertheless, while postcolonial studies have generally dated the beginning of colonial modernity to somewhere between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with primary reference to the British and French colonies in Asia and Africa, decolonial studies have set it back as far as the fifteenth century, i.e. to the conquest of the Americas.¹

In this paper, I elect to avoid the diatribe that has arisen between postcolonial and decolonial studies.² Rather, ignoring the widespread tendency to think of decolonial and postcolonial studies as opposing fields of study, I have found it productive for the purposes of this article to consider the idea that the two may be viewed as complementary tools for understanding power relations in the modern world. I would thus take into account Madina Tlostanova’s position, for whom postcoloniality is a condition, and decoloniality an option. According to Tlostanova, if the former reflects a “certain human existential situation which we often have no power of choosing”, the latter is “a political, ethical, and epistemic positionality and an entry point into agency”.³ In other words, in describing colonial continuity after the end of the historical experience of colonialism, postcoloniality would seem akin to Aníbal Quijano’s

¹ Enrique Dussel, “Europe, Modernity and Eurocentrism”, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1.3 (2000), 465-478.

² In recent years, a huge debate has concerned the different potentialities of postcolonial and decolonial studies in the pursuit of the decolonization of knowledge. According to Grosfoguel, while decolonial studies are born in close connection with the World-System Theory by Immanuel Wallerstein and by taking seriously in consideration the epistemic insights of thinkers from the Global South, relationship with postmodernism and poststructuralism critique reproduces the impossibility of their advancing beyond the Eurocentric foundation of the Western canon. It is worth mentioning this view even though I do not completely agree with the author. See Ramón Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality”, *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1.1 (2011).

³ Madina Tlostanova, “The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option and the Postsocialist Intervention”, in Monika Albrecht, ed., *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present* (London: Routledge, 2019), 165.

idea of a coloniality of power that permeates the realms of knowledge and being.⁴ On the other hand, pursuing the decolonial option means ‘delinking’ global knowledge from the Western colonial Eurocentric model that still pervades it.⁵ In fact, if there is one certainty following the postcolonial and decolonial turn taken by the humanities, it is that it would be naïve to ignore, erase, or negate the constitutive impact that the historical experience of colonialism has had and continues to have on our epistemological categories of knowing, naming, and ordering society.⁶

This article aims to verify the validity of the premises of decolonial and postcolonial studies for a territory on the periphery of modern Europe that is not formally considered a former European imperial colony: the Italian *Mezzogiorno*, the South of Italy. What I argue here is the urgency of ‘defamiliarizing’⁷ ourselves from the traditional way of understanding the South by giving serious consideration to a dialogue with other ‘epistemologies of the South’.⁸ Such an approach would follow in the footsteps of the authors of *Postcolonial Italy*, an intellectual project addressing the postcolonial condition in Italy today – including racialization and gendering processes – in the light of the legacy of colonialism, emigration, and global migrations.⁹ Moreover, it would also answer the early invitation by Pasquale Verdicchio¹⁰ to adopt a postcolonial approach to the study of Southern Italian history and society; an invitation that, with a few worthy exceptions,¹¹ has been largely ignored in the Italian social sciences. In this regard, the work of Antonio Gramsci, a cornerstone both for the study of the southern question, and for the development of postcolonial studies,¹² is a common denominator for the construction of my argument. Also, in this article, I will ask how the common ground to be found between decolonial and postcolonial studies can be used to understand the archive of the southern question in Italy.

To do so, I have divided my essay into three sections. The first distinguishes between the concepts of *questione meridionale* (southern question) and *meridionalismo* (southernism) and tackles the birth of the latter in the aftermath of unification as a discourse on Southern Italian backwardness. In the second section, I intend to analyse the 1990s as the moment in which the discourse on ‘southernism’ has collapsed as a result of the electoral rise of the Northern League party. I aim to do so by analysing three epistemological options born in reaction to its exacerbation of dualist and racist discourse on the South. In the third and last section, I propose a Gramscian-decolonial method for exposing and delinking the highly Eurocentric premises that lurk beneath the southern question.

2. *Questione Meridionale, Meridionalismo* or Domestic Colonialism?

In his essay *Una breve storia dell'Italia meridionale*, Piero Bevilacqua brilliantly argues that

la rappresentazione dell'Italia meridionale in età contemporanea ha finito spesso col ridursi a una sorta di non storia: la frustrante vicenda di ciò che essa non aveva potuto essere, il mero risultato di uno squilibrio

⁴ Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America”, *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 1.3 (2000), 533-580.

⁵ See Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking”, *Cultural Studies*, 21.2 (2007), 449-514.

⁶ See Gennaro Ascione, “Decolonizing the ‘Global’: The Coloniality of Method and the Problem of the Unit of Analysis”, *Cultural Sociology*, 10.3 (2016), 317-334.

⁷ I borrow this definition from Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui’s Sociology of image. See Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Sociología de la imagen. Miradas chi'xi desde la historia andina* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2015), 21.

⁸ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2014).

⁹ Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, eds., *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). Among the essays of the collection, Roberto Derobertis’ contribution, concerning a postcolonial perspective on Carlo Levi’s *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (157-171), highlights the relation of colonialism, migration and southern question in tracing a genealogy of postcolonial Italy.

¹⁰ Pasquale Verdicchio, “The Preclusion of Postcolonial Discourse in Southern Italy”, in Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, eds., *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

¹¹ See Orizzonti Meridiani, ed., *Briganti o emigranti. Sud e movimenti tra conricerca e studi subalterni* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2014), Luigi Cazzato, *Sguardo inglese e mediterraneo italiano. Alle radici del meridionalismo* (Milan: Mimesis, 2017), Francescomaria Tedesco, *Mediterraneismo. Il pensiero antimeridiano* (Milan: Meltemi, 2017), 77-117.

¹² See Baidik Bhattacharya and Neelam Srivastava, eds., *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (London: Routledge, 2012).

costante e inalterato nel tempo e perciò quasi un derivato, un residuo della storia degli altri, incarnata dalle realtà più avanzate dello sviluppo economico, vale a dire dal Nord.¹³

Another prominent historian of the Italian South, Salvatore Lupo, proposes a difference between the ‘southern question’ and ‘southernism’, whereby the two words, often used as synonyms, describe, respectively, a debate focused on the idea of radical alterity between North and South in the case of the former; and a project aimed at either eliminating dualism, or mitigating its negative effects in the South’s favour, in the case of the latter.¹⁴ Looking at it through this lens, I agree with the author when he affirms that the southern question has had the effect of obscuring southernism, the reason for this perhaps residing in the appeal that the dualistic interpretation of the two Italies has had within the fabric of Italian society. Indeed, since Italian unification in 1861, the *Mezzogiorno* has been persistently pushed to the margins of the Italian national narrative on progress and modernity. Described from a northern viewpoint, the South has come to constitute an archive¹⁵ of representations and stereotypes, embodying all the negative characteristics arising from its binary juxtaposition with the developed and advanced regions of the North. Though I cannot in this article address the long history of the construction of the otherization of southern culture, it is nonetheless worthwhile to at least sketch out the fundamental steps in this historical process.

In the opinion of many historians, the starting point dates to the end of the eighteenth century, when in the mind of many Europeans, Southern Italy was already seen as a ‘paradise inhabited by devils’. It was a definition that exalted the contrasting images of the beautiful natural environment, climate, and fertility of the South on the one hand, and the terrible vices of the impoverished people who lived there on the other.¹⁶ As Michele Nani has shown, southern alterity was not imposed by means of a linear process, but ‘traveled’ through the interaction of several agents, including Neapolitan élites, in a continuous circulation of stereotypes.¹⁷ The birth of the southern question within this process is usually associated with Italian unification in 1861. Marta Petrusiewicz, however, has argued that the South emerges as a construction when the birth of the southern question is dated to 1848 and the settlement of liberal exiles in England and Piedmont following the uprisings against the Bourbon monarchy.¹⁸ The nationalist patriots in question used a consistent ‘orientalistic’ cultural archive of representations and prejudices about the South in supporting their demands for the unification of Italy.¹⁹ In 1861, the annexation of the South to the new-born Italian state and the war against brigandage, a massive peasant insurgency that had arisen in the southern countryside, made it possible to recompose their long series of essentialist pronouncements on the South into a brand of racial discourse that, in most cases, identified

¹³ “[T]he representation of southern Italy in the contemporary age has often ended up being reduced to a sort of non-history: ... the mere result of a constant and unaltered imbalance over time, and therefore almost a remnant of the history of others, embodied by the most advanced realities of economic development, namely the North”. Piero Bevilacqua, *Breve storia dell’Italia meridionale* [1993], trans. by the present author (Rome: Donzelli, 2005), 8.

¹⁴ Salvatore Lupo, *La questione. Come liberare la storia del Mezzogiorno dagli stereotipi* (Rome: Donzelli, 2015), xviii.

¹⁵ I mean here the ‘archive’ in its figurative dimension, based on Foucault’s well-known expression as “the law of what can be said”. In this sense, the archive represents a cultural artefact of production of facts, narrative and identity. See Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and Other Discourses on Language* [1969], trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 129; Carolyn Hamilton et al., eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002).

¹⁶ Benedetto Croce, *Un paradiso abitato da diavoli* (Milan: Adelphi, 2006).

¹⁷ Michele Nani, *Ai confini della nazione. Stampa e razzismo nell’Italia di fine Ottocento* (Rome: Carocci, 2006).

¹⁸ Marta Petrusiewicz, *Come il Meridione divenne una questione. Rappresentazioni del Sud prima e dopo il Quarantotto* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 1998).

¹⁹ The exiles developed an anti-southern stance that was articulated on two fronts: the first aimed at delegitimizing the Bourbon governmental system, while the latter was directed at the core of the southern subalterns’ ancestral traditions, considered too backward to desire unification and progress. See, from different perspectives, Antonino De Francesco, *La palla al piede. Storia del pregiudizio antimeridionale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2012); Petrusiewicz, *Come il Meridione divenne una questione*; Nelson C. Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

the modern and civil Northern Italy with Europe, and the backward and savage Southern Italy with Africa.²⁰

Unlike the southern question, the birth of southernism is conventionally dated to 1875, the year of the publication of the *Southern Letters* by positivist intellectual and conservative member of the Historical Right Pasquale Villari. It is impossible to separate the debate on the southern question from the historical causes that originated its birth. At the beginning of the 1870s, in fact, conservative politicians looked at the *Mezzogiorno* with concern, as the electoral success of the left was growing in the southern regions, and the internal menace of political eversion – both by groups of anarchists, and by the last surviving cells of brigands in the southern mountains – fostered echoes of the Paris Commune in the Italian state. Intellectuals such as Villari and his scholars Franchetti and Sonnino wanted to bring to the attention of public opinion – and Italian conservatives specifically – what they called the ‘social question’ in Southern Italy. Thus, rather than viewing it unpretentiously as merely a project in the South’s favour, one might explain the birth of the southern question as an ideological ‘dispositif’ aimed at the accumulation of documentary evidence of the region’s backwardness, characterized by a specific ‘will to know’.²¹ Here, southernism could be interpreted in the same manner as Said’s Orientalism,²² namely, as a branch of the social sciences that seeks to explain the South from an established place within the academic and social fabric. In this way, the South has literally become a career, whereby the behavior of Southernists is characterized by a constant generation of truths about the region. Similarly to Saidian Orientalism, southernism has enabled Italian culture to manage and even produce an ideological South. This attitude in the social sciences has rapidly naturalized a dualistic understanding of both the North-South divide, and the *Mezzogiorno* itself, presenting the latter as a homogenous bloc of territories sharing the characteristics of backwardness and underdevelopment.

At the end of the century, the racial corollary of this dualist theorem was pushed to extremes – with the blessing of the Socialist Party – by the explicitly racist theories of positivist anthropology as espoused by Lombroso and Niceforo.²³ Counter to this racist ideology, Antonio Gramsci, in his famous definition of the southern question, highlighted the relationships of power that set northern industrialists and southern landowners against country workers and peasants, giving birth to a revolutionary interpretation of the southern problem.²⁴ We will discuss the innovativeness of the Gramscian proposal again in the third section of this essay.

In the meantime, I think it is appropriate to mention the role southernism played in imparting ideological cohesion during the post-war period. After World War II, the Southern population and territories became an object of economic intervention. During the 1960s, a new phase of State intervention witnessed the founding of the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*, with the dual aim of engaging in direct public investment in southern industry, while integrating and functionally controlling the mobility of southern populations in fulfilment of northern industrial needs.²⁵ While southernists who engaged in

²⁰ The identification of Southern Italy as Africa and as non-European is expressed overtly in the words written to Cavour by Luigi Carlo Farini, Chief Administrator of the South in the first months of Piedmontese control there: “But my friend, what lands are these, Molise and the South! What barbarism! This is not Italy! This is Africa: compared to these peasants, the Bedouins are the pinnacle of civilization. And what misdeeds!” (cit. in Moe, 165).

²¹ Alfredo Capone, “L’età liberale”, in Giuseppe Galasso and Rosario Romeo, eds., *Storia del Mezzogiorno. Volume XII. Il Mezzogiorno nell’Italia unita* (Naples: Edizioni del Sole, 1991).

²² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* [1978] (London: Penguin, 2003).

²³ See the construction of the southern inferior race at the end of nineteenth century in Vito Teti, *La razza maledetta. Origini del pregiudizio antimeridionale* (Roma: Ilmanifestolibri, 2011) and Aliza Wong, *Race and Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861-1911. Meridionalism, Empire, Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

²⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci: Pre-Prison Writings*, ed. by Richard Bellamy (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1994), 263-264.

²⁵ Luciano Ferrari Bravo and Alessandro Serafini, *Stato e sottosviluppo. Il caso del Mezzogiorno italiano* [1972] (Verona: Ombre corte, 2012).

political economy made their expertise available toward the development of the southern regions,²⁶ in the northern industrialized cities, the massive emigration of peasants for employment in lesser factory jobs was received by local populations with overt racial behaviour.²⁷ In other words, the southernist discourse inextricably bound the destiny of the South to development in the north.

3. The Rise of the *Lega Nord* and the Collapse of Southernism

At the beginning of the 1990s, the rise of the Northern League party in Italy in the wake of the *tangentopoli* political crisis exacerbated the prevailing anti-southern stance. Politicians of the *Lega Nord* (Northern League) claimed the existence of a *northern question*, whose principles could be summarized in its portrayal of the South as a *ball and chain* for northern productivity and development, and its separatist claim for independence for the region of Padania. The further demonization of the southerners in Italian society had consequences in both the historiographical, and philosophical debates on the *Mezzogiorno*. In this paragraph, I will analyse three epistemological positions born in the 1990s in answer to the continuous deprecation of southern culture, society, and identity by the Northern League: the idea of ‘southern thought’ as coined by the sociologist Franco Cassano; the claims of certain Neoborbonic groups and associations; and the historiographical project of the academic journal *Meridiana*. It is very difficult to identify the characteristics these proposals for rethinking the Italian south might have in common. While neither *southern thought*, nor *Meridiana*, born of an effort on the part of the southern academicians to engage with the southern problem, have crossed the walls of universities, the Neoborbonic claims represent a set of non-scientific, extra-academic divulgations by journalists that have, through written publications and social media, been very popular in southern society. Despite strong differences, all reject the discourse on southern backwardness and hence represent three different manifestations of the collapse of the *meridionalismo*.

In 1996, the ground-breaking essay *Pensiero meridiano (Southern Thought)*, 2012) by the sociologist Franco Cassano was published as an explicit reaction to the continuous delegitimization of southern culture.²⁸ Cassano’s intention is revealed in the prologue: “the strongest motivation for reclaiming the value of the South came from a rebellion against its representations by dominant culture and the inadvertent forms of racism found in many of its variants, even those that are beyond suspicion of being so and politically correct”.²⁹ The interesting theoretical move by Cassano resides in his explicitly seeking a connection between the Italian South and the global South, one that criticizes the methodological nationalism implied in the traditional reading of the southern question. Cassano’s broader aim is a radical subversion of perspective: rather than be thought about by the North, the South must recover its autonomous point of view, “its ancient dignity as subject of thought, to interrupt a long sequence in which it has only been thought by others”.³⁰ How does the Apulian sociologist conceive this autonomous dimension of Southern thought? He proposes a reversal of various stigmas placed on the South by rethinking, for instance, the accusation of laziness towards southerners in terms of the importance to southern lifestyle of a modest pace, or by redefining familism as a manifestation of solidarity among the South’s nuclear villages. In my opinion, the limits of this line of thought stand in the fixed characters it assigns to the idea of South. Cassano subverts the negative traits of the traditional representation of the

²⁶ See Gerardo C. Nicoletta, “Laboratories for Economic Expertise. Lay Perspectives on Italian Disciplinary Economics”, in Jens Maesse et al. (eds.), *Power and Influence of Economists: Contributions to the Social Studies of Economics* (London: Routledge, 2021), 126-143.

²⁷ The theme of the racialization of southerners in the northern industrialized cities in the years of the economic miracle is recalled in Luchino Visconti’s masterpiece *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960). Among the most influential inquiries of that period, see also Goffredo Fofi, *L’immigrazione meridionale a Torino* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976), Franco Alasia and Danilo Montaldi, *Milano, Corea. Inchiesta sugli immigrati* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975).

²⁸ Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean* [1996], trans. by Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme (New York: Fordham U.P., 2012).

²⁹ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, xxxiii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxv.

South through an anti-modern stance that fails to escape the essentialist trap of identity, while also avoiding any actual reflection upon the established internal power relationships of Southern society.

The second reaction has been expressed by a constellation of writers, groups, and associations, together known as the neo-Bourbon (or Neoborbonic) movement. In the wake of the celebrations held for the 150th anniversary of Italian unification, a whole body of misleading, nostalgic, identitarian literature has proclaimed the magnificence of the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, an entity whose power and importance, in the opinion of these writers, was arrested only by the Piedmontese invasion and consequent Italian colonization of the South. In their opinion, the consequences have been the cultural and economic subalternization within the Italian social fabric of the entire *Mezzogiorno*. Mirroring the anti-Southern dualist narrative, this neo-Bourbon discourse, rather than acting as an alternative to it, shares its premises. I see two main dangers in inventing such a tradition:³¹ a distorted use of public history, and a seizure of radical categories of thought in service of a resentful sovereign aspiration that pushes reflections on the Southern question toward yet another methodologic nationalist fallacy. If in the second case, the decontextualization of Gramsci's pre-prison writings on the *Mezzogiorno* as a domestic colony and the repression of brigandage can provide a fruitful example of such appropriation, in the former, the unsophisticated view promoted by neo-Bourbon writers draws upon nationalistic themes that blame very different historical events, characters, and ideologies for the problems of the South today. In this regard, the simplification of the relationships between conservative and progressive parties during the Risorgimento, all considered responsible for the colonization of the South, could be the first example of how this interpretation of history is misleading. Cavour and Garibaldi, Victor Emmanuel and Mazzini are considered, if indistinctly, enemies of southern identity. Another historiographical example is found in the representation of the brigandage insurgency. The complexity of the peasant revolt in the South in the aftermath of Italian unification is reduced to the idea that brigands are Southern national patriots, partisans of southern identity, and as such, fought courageously against the Piedmontese enemy. This view not only evades several important investigations on the theme of brigandage,³² but also radically invents a southern national identity through a distortion of collective memory.

Finally, the rise, based on anti-southern claims, of the Northern League party in Italian politics has prompted a group of scholars to call into question both the Manichean vision of an Italy divided between North and South, and the representation of the South as a unified, backward bloc. Intellectuals from different disciplines, all associated with the journal *Meridiana*,³³ have deconstructed, de-ideologized, and criticized cultural representations and stereotypes inspired by misleading, abstract uniformities. This refutation of the thesis of southern backwardness in contrast to northern modernity on the part of the scholars of *Meridiana* consisted primarily in highlighting the Italian South as a non-homogenous location of modernity, having regional differences that have been underestimated – if not ignored – by the heretofore dominant dualistic approach. Simultaneously, in the Anglophone Italian studies departments, some scholars have borrowed a new idiom from Said's Orientalism to decode the role played by stereotypes and representations in shaping the image of the *Mezzogiorno* as inferior during the Italian nation-building process.³⁴ Although these efforts look at the question of Italian national

³¹ I am referring here to the seminal work by Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of a Tradition* [1983] (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2018).

³² The massive insurgency of brigandage in post-unification Italy has not been systematically scrutinized until the 1960s, when Marxist authors came out with some important publications. Recently, the debate reopened by neo-Bourbon positions has aroused a new interest in the subject by scholars belonging to the *Meridiana* journal. Among the most important contributions, see Franco Molfese, *Storia del brigantaggio dopo l'unità* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964), Aldo de Jaco, *Il brigantaggio meridionale. Cronaca inedita dell'unità d'Italia* [1969] (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2005), and the recent book by Carmine Pinto, *La guerra per il Mezzogiorno. Italiani, borbonici e briganti 1860-1870* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2019).

³³ "Presentazione", *Meridiana. Rivista di Storia e Scienze Sociali*, 1 (1987), 9-15.

³⁴ See Jane Schneider, ed., *Italy's Southern Question: Orientalism in one Country* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and the Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999), Moe, *The View from Vesuvius*.

identity with different eyes, underlining how the modern Italian identity has grown through the subalternization of southerners in the Italian social fabric, they do not completely grasp the domestic colonial fracture that in my opinion marks the Italian unification process.

4. Unmaking the Southern Question: Towards a Gramscian-Decolonial Method

At this point, it appears that two questions arising from the foregoing paragraphs remain unresolved. First, is it possible to interpret the southern question without either subscribing to the Eurocentric narrative, or falling into the essentialist identity trap? And second, how might the Eurocentric premises of the southern question be exposed? In answer, the mobilization of a series of key concepts in postcolonial and decolonial theorization could offer a reading of the South as a racialized and subaltern internal entity in both the Italian, and the European imagination.

Gramsci's *questione meridionale*, a milestone in this process, has inspired a wide variety of global scholars interested in the potential of his interpretation.³⁵ As Iain Chambers has suggested, by exposing the open and dynamic aspects of culture through a redefinition of power relationships, Gramsci has additionally re-defined our understanding of political and cultural struggle – previously understood via the categories of modernity and backwardness – in terms of the critical coordinates of hegemony and subalternity.³⁶ In a famous passage from his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci described the relationships of power between the northern and southern regions of Italy using the metaphor of the North as an 'octopus' that enriched itself at the expense of the South.³⁷ According to Gramsci, a negative identity was imposed on the South through the machinery of imaginative geography in order to hide these asymmetrical relationships of power. To summarize, to unmask existing domestic colonial power relationships, it is necessary to take stock of that brand of public discourse which has constantly racialized the South. It should be noted, however, that despite its potential, the Gramscian intuition on domestic colonialism in Italy can be misunderstood in two different ways. We have already illustrated the seizure of his thought and decontextualization of his writings by neo-Bourbon writers. Furthermore, while the Gramscian shift in the interpretation of the Southern question has inspired a broad historiography on the South, fewer historians agree with the domestic colonial explanation, as a formal colony in the *Mezzogiorno* has never been established.

To avoid such a misinterpretation, the Gramscian model could interact here with the definition of coloniality proposed by Aníbal Quijano. Relating to the cultural logic of colonialism – and thus to the cultural heritage of colonialism after the end of its historical experience – the idea of coloniality of power could fulfil two functions. On the one hand, it could represent a concept less cumbersome than that of internal colonialism in its ability to explain the dynamics of north-south power relations in Italy. On the other, it could illustrate the genealogy of the epistemological categories utilized during the emergence and sedimentation of discourse on the southern question. In fact, Quijano thought that the two principal axes of the coloniality of power were the racial and Eurocentric dimensions of the perspective of knowledge that accompanied it. In particular, this model of knowledge, originating from the encounter between Europeans and Indians in the Americas during the colonial conquest, took on a binary and dualistic character in which the colonies formed a negative pole through which modernity and

³⁵ Among the most important publications: Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's relevance for study of race and ethnicity" (1986), reprinted in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), 411-441; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

³⁶ Iain Chambers, ed., *Esercizi di potere. Gramsci, Said e il postcoloniale* (Rome: Meltemi, 2006), 8. This fundamental insight by Antonio Gramsci provided the Indian collective of Subaltern Studies with a new methodology for decolonizing the historiography of subaltern classes in colonial and postcolonial India. See Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Colonial Insurgency in India* (New Delhi: Oxford U.P., 1983) and *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1998), Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2004).

³⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 71-72.

rationality, produced exclusively in Europe, were compelled to relate. As Quijano has shown, the intersubjective and cultural relations between Western Europe and the rest of the world were codified in a whole range of new categories: East-West, primitive-civilized, magical/mystical-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern: non-European and European.³⁸

In my opinion, the process of the otherization of southern culture that took place during the Italian nation-building process had colonial connotations; namely, it was conceived inside the same colonial culture that forged European modernity. Luigi Cazzato has noticed how coloniality not only affects the relationships between colonizer and colonized, but also pervades the relationships of power established inside the Western world itself. Pursuing the arguments of Walter Mignolo,³⁹ Manfred Pfister,⁴⁰ and Roberto Dainotto,⁴¹ Cazzato draws a distinction between the colonial, and the imperial difference in the case of Mediterranean Europe.⁴² The latter, specifically, works by applying some of the features of the colonial difference to regions, languages, people, and states that cannot be colonized. Both Pfister's idea of 'Meridionism', and Dainotto's concept of 'European southernism' exemplify imperial difference, while revealing another side of *Orientalism* in the construction of a modern European identity: that is, that during the 18th century, modern European identity was defined as such not only in relation to the East (as claimed by Edward Said) or the Americas (as claimed by decolonial studies), but also in relation to its own southern shore.

With this in mind, I would consider the process of Italian unification as reflecting a local translation of global colonial power and examine how the new-born Italian nation-state emerged as a Mediterranean frontier (both literally and metaphorically) between the 'West and the Rest',⁴³ such that its southern regions came to constitute a liminal space between Europe and the Orient or Africa. In other words, these years witnessed the birth of a domestic colonial archive. The discourse that presented the Manichean vision of a modern, civilized North, as part of the European constellation of modernity, and a backward and savage South, could only have emerged because the Italian and Neapolitan élites and intellectuals that led the unification process were part of a European constellation of European intellectuals whose vision of modernity was already inextricably linked to that of coloniality. These binary categories of representation are not, in fact, neutral; the identification of Europe and the West as historical constructs that operate as *silent referents*⁴⁴ within the modern concepts of progress, development, and freedom is due to the intimate associations ascertainable between the ideas of Europe, modernity, and colonialism.

5. Conclusion

By observing the representation of Southern Italy through the lens of postcolonial and decolonial theories, this article has aimed at showing how the discourse of modernity was imposed on the *Mezzogiorno* using categories similar to those employed by the West during its colonial expansion. I have also argued that the emergence and sedimentation of the archive of the southern question coincided with the trivialization, negation, and erasure of the European colonial experience from the Italian national process.

What I want to posit here is the possibility of opening up a decolonial space between the dualistic approach whose interpretation of the southern question is founded on the dichotomy of modernity-backwardness and the parochial neo-Bourbon narrative: a space of resistance, where we can analyse

³⁸ Quijano, *Coloniality of Power*, 542.

³⁹ Mignolo, *Delinking*, 474.

⁴⁰ Manfred Pfister, *The Fatal Gift of Beauty: The Italies of British Travellers* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996).

⁴¹ Roberto Dainotto, *Europe (In Theory)* (Durham and London: Duke U.P., 2007).

⁴² Cazzato, *Sguardo inglese*, 28-30.

⁴³ Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power", in Stuart Hall et al., eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

⁴⁴ This idea is associated with the concept by Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* [2000] (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton U.P., 2008), 28.

how this domestic colonial archive – the first local Italian translation of the global colonial archive established by Western society with the conquest of the Americas – not only affects the archive of discourses, stereotypes, and representation of the South, but also has a material bearing on the lives of the people who live there.

Reopening the domestic colonial archive in Italy implies not only a challenge to mainstream social sciences, but also a displacement of the same decolonial and postcolonial studies. The adoption of the Italian South as a privileged point of observation could be an interesting move toward “decolonizing” postcolonial studies that, from inception, have been inflected by a near-exclusive emphasis on Anglophone and Francophone archives. Simultaneously, a focus on the subalternization of the Italian South could introduce an ‘internal’ variable into the discourse of imperial difference. This also means reducing the risks, sometimes present in some decolonial thinking, of ungenerously labelling all critical thought coming from Europe as Eurocentric, while ignoring several experiences of internal colonialism that have marked European history itself.⁴⁵ Finally, the challenge of Southern Italians today consists in escaping the inherent ‘Northernness’⁴⁶ of Eurocentric and historicist social sciences and establishing fruitful alliances with such thinkers of the “Global South” as are engaged in inventing new epistemologies of resistance and transformation from a southern vantage point.

⁴⁵ Ramón Grosfoguel, for instance, describes Antonio Gramsci as a ‘Eurocentric thinker’ while arguing against postcolonial studies’ relationship with Western critical theory and the post-modernist/structuralist canon. See Grosfoguel, *Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies*, 3.

⁴⁶ Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).