

BOOK REVIEW

Il Rovescio della Nazione: La Costruzione Coloniale dell'Idea di Mezzogiorno

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Trained as an anthropologist, Carmine Conelli gives us a theoretical ethnography and intellectual history of the construction of the Italian South that demonstrates in-depth knowledge of the main scholarly debates around decoloniality and creates an original lens on transnational dialogues among global souths. Conelli is both insider and outsider: he has the epistemic authority of a Southern Italian and the ability to be critical of the different revisionist mythologies that have glorified this region. In *Il Rovescio della Nazione*, the South is not a colony, but is densely shaped by coloniality and, as such, is part of the decolonial global south. Drawing on Latin American decolonial theorists, Conelli states: 'the hierarchies created by colonialism have assumed an original form in the context of southern Italy' (p. 8). An example of such hierarchies is when 'we burst out with our dialects or accents, which more than other regional dialects are automatically traced back to a subaltern and retrograde culture' (p.15). He ultimately warns us, 'we must recognise the coloniality of the categories of thought that are used – and that we often unconsciously replicate – to explain the South' (p. 204).

Conelli embraces a gender inclusive language, much needed in the Italian context. Furthermore, he effectively borrows the US-based feminist critique of so-called mansplaining, which he applies to the Italian north/south '*minchiamento*' (pp. 188–189) – the common dynamic, in Italy and abroad, of offering unsolicited resolutions for the Southern 'question'. Arguably he chose the term '*rovescio*' ('the contrary') for his title because his provocative and excellently written monograph discusses the South of Italy as the internal other to Italian nation-building, an area simultaneously part of a whole but also constantly rejected. The book, divided into six chapters and with an afterword by Ian Chambers, is published by Tamu, an intellectual and physical space in Naples dedicated to decolonial texts.

As shown in the chapters of the book, inserting the construction of the idea of Italian South within the history of global colonialism, explains how the binary of colonial/underdeveloped/victim South and coloniser/developed/perpetrator North has obfuscated the social stratification of the South. Chapter 1 discusses Antonio Gramsci and the challenges of defining the South as a Northern colony (p. 36). Chapter 2 provides an effective explanation of how the language of coloniality can work to insert the South of Italy within the context of global colonialism (pp. 50, 55, and 58); in this chapter, Conelli applies Ann Laura Stoler's theory of the watermark in the colonial archive to the discourses surrounding the South (p. 51). In Chapter 3, Conelli traces the historical roots of the construction of

the South as antithetic to modernity, a convenient operation for different groups at different times. He effectively applies Gayatri Spivak's question of the subaltern's speech to the notorious Southern bandits of the Risorgimento era. In Chapter 4, he widens the scope of the analysis to show how narratives around the South contribute to rigid social hierarchies. The visual elements of this chapter are stunning, especially the anonymous 2021 installation in Naples in favour of bandits (p. 141). In Chapter 5, Conelli shows how Gramsci's reflection in placing subalterns under the leadership of the industrial proletariat, still confines them within the discourse of modernity, relegating Southern peasants to the margins of history (pp. 157, 171, and 173). Ultimately, Chapter 6 warns us against the current operations that want the Italian South to be 'an immense holiday resort to be handed over to multinationals, invited to invest in the South through a substantial tax exemption, so that they attract tourists to "one of the most beautiful places in the world", in exchange for the hiring of young Italians and using exclusively Made-in-Italy products' (p. 190).

Il Rovescio della Nazione, therefore, challenges prevailing narratives that oversimplify the Italian South as merely the non-North. Conelli warns readers about the limitations of his book and criticises attempts to romanticise the South, cautioning against revisionist efforts benefitting the Southern dominant classes. His critique of the neo-Bourbon movement starts with a story of the restitution of a Southern *brigante's* skull exhibited at a new museum dedicated to Cesare Lombroso's work. The anecdote highlights not only the constructed mythology around bandits but, expanding further, the problematic existence of such a museum (p.12). Operations like this, 'instead of moving towards a restorative justice that compensates for the wrongs suffered by Southern populations, cancels out the social differences present within the South, placing itself in support of the status quo' (p. 13). Conelli is very convincing in discouraging the theory of internal colonialism. As he effectively argues, the narrative of the colonisation of the South, while rhetorically captivating, creates a Manichean understanding of two monoliths, the oppressor North on one hand, and the oppressed South on the other: in this sense, it is a dangerous label because it ignores colonialism as a historical phenomenon and as an order of discourse (p. 13).

The book also engages with the history of the present, noting that 'today, at a time when Italy appears reunified in the name of hatred for migrants, it may seem out of place to draw attention to the subordination of southerners' (p. 15). At a deeper level, the Southern Question defies one of the great promises of political modernity, namely the right to citizenship (p. 15). The history of the construction of the South concerns the space of nationality, testifying to the existence of a historically formed model of selective inclusion and exclusion (p. 15).

Conelli's work initiates a new historical framework that unites souths in a global resistance to coloniality. Most of all, he challenges the use of legality as the framework that contributes to the constant abjection of the Southern lumpen. His dialogue with the Neapolitan Vincenzo Russo – the father of Ugo Russo, a victim of police brutality (no relation to the author) – provides a concrete example of how to be in the field not as a separate observer but as a co-creator of a common history. Conelli's interpretation of the Italian South in its global context provides a new, original, and compelling interpretation for Italian studies, postcolonial studies, and southern/border studies.