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The ‘Southern Question’ … Again

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PART I

Old and new tensions in contemporary Italian society
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The 'Southern Question'... again

Iain Chambers

Viewed from London, Los Angeles, New York, Berlin, Paris and Milan, the south of the world is invariably considered in terms of lacks and absences. It is not yet modern; it has still to catch up. It remains, as Dipesh Chakrabarty would put it, an inadequate place (Chakrabarty, 2000). The south is spatially and temporally located elsewhere, at the edge of the map. Of course, as we know from Edward Said, and through him from Antonio Gramsci, this is a geography of power. It is about being placed and systematised in a manner not of your own choosing. It is about being rendered subordinate and subaltern to other forces, and being exploited, not only economically, but also politically and culturally, in order for that subalternity to be reproduced and reinforced. The south of the world is framed, not only conceptually enclosed, but also falsely accused of failing to respect a modernity being triumphantly pursued elsewhere. To return to the south as a critical, political and historical problem is, ultimately, to return to the north and its hegemonic management of the planet. The ills, failures and breakdowns that are located down there, across the border, are precisely the products of a northern will to make the world over in its image and interests. This is the political economy of location. Here the south, of Italy, of Europe, of the Mediterranean, of the world, is rendered both marginal but paradoxically central to the reproduction of that economy. If the whole world were equally modern, then modernity as we know it would collapse. The cancellation of the inequalities, property and differences that drive the planetary machinery of capitalist accumulation would render what we today call modernity superfluous. The subversion of linearity and the lateral redistribution of ‘progress’ and development would undo historical time as it is currently understood. The ‘south’ is a political question and also a historical one; in both cases, it is about the power and the exploitation of those held in its definitions.

Brigands, lazy peasants, mafia and corruption

If by the end of the nineteenth century a stereotypical image of southern Italy had already been established as a land inhabited by brigands, lazy peasants and corruption, we need, as a minimum, to understand the historical processes that led to this state of affairs. But then history provides us with an ambiguous archive. Irreducible to simple causality and a transparent rationality, the ‘south’ emerges as a category, a construction, an invention (Petrusewicz, 1998). Its definition reveals the semiotics of power. The ‘south’ is always destined to experience that combination
of repression and refusal that is the foreclosure of hegemony seeking to negate the trauma of its violent affirmation (Mellino and Curcio, 2012).

It is within this matrix that we might turn to the unification and the creation of the modern nation of Italy, engineered on the back of the conquest of one sovereign state (the Bourbon kingdom of the Two Sicilies) by another (the Piedmont monarchy of the House of Savoy). Behind the offensive labelling of its inhabitants, and the reduction of rebellion against, resistance to and refusal of that conquest as ‘brigandage’, there existed an altogether more complex social and political world. This was characterised by the brutal exercise of feudal powers, whose representatives willing allied themselves with the new national Parliament and political order in order to continue their rule over the land and its peasantry. In brokering hegemonic interests, agricultural reform was deliberately avoided by the new unitary state. This recycling of change in order to sustain the status quo, what the Neapolitan historian Vincenzo Cuoco and Antonio Gramsci referred to as ‘passive revolution’, might be considered one of the central subtexts of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s Il Gattopardo, also well caught in Luchino Visconti’s film of the novel. It is really only after the conclusion of the Second World War that a certain degree of post-feudal land reform occurs in Italy. In the terrible conditions of agricultural life and labour, the fact that the ‘bosses’ live in Naples or Turin, and state authority shifts from Naples to Rome, makes little difference. Reading Carlo Levi’s Cristo si è fermato a Eboli (Christ Stopped at Eboli), published in 1955, and registering the nuanced critique of Italian unification in Mario Martone’s recent film Noi Credevamo (based on Anna Banti’s beautiful novel of 1967), one stumbles across the persistent repression and exclusion of a subaltern peasantry from the national narrative. This, of course, is the key motif in Gramsci’s analysis of the ‘failure’ of Italian unification.

Here it would be hypocrisy to talk in terms of historical progress directly attributable to the transit to the modern nation. The military occupation and juridical enforcement of unification in southern Italy, in the wake of military operations that witnessed the deployment of 120,000 troops and resulted in at least 30,000 dead, was followed by mass migration from rural poverty to the Americas. Subsequent colonial adventures in east Africa and Libya (home at one time to 150,000 Italians) were also considered a potential safety valve for relieving the pressure of southern destitution. There is no linear progress here but rather a contorted spiral of development in which the resources of southern Italy often fuelled northern interests and advancement. If the feudal regime of the Bourbons was suppressed and forcefully incorporated into the modern Italian state, the latter tended to govern this southern acquisition through the biopolitical grammar of alterity. The Mezzogiorno was inferiorised as the racialised object of anthropological and biological categories. It was considered closer to Africa and the Arab world in its customs and culture than to Europe (Moe, 2002). Forms of social opposition, political resistance and alternative modalities of government were reduced to questions of criminality, public order and corrupt practices inherited from the ancien régime. These were persistently contrasted with the industrious modernity of the north.

The responsibilities that a centralised national government should have exercised in economic and cultural, and not just political, terms were both conceptually and structurally evaded. This inferiorisation of the south affirms that its subordination to northern concerns was not a historical accident but a power relationship. It was justified in the languages of colonialism and racism, and it rendered the south inferior, less European, inherently underdeveloped. This, of course, was a particular instance of the far wider appropriation of the Mediterranean and the south of Europe (Spain, Italy, Greece and the Balkans), not to speak of the extra-European world, when viewed and framed from London, Paris, Berlin, Turin and, later, Rome. The south is relegated to the margins of the national epic; its existing conditions are considered an impediment to the
realisation of ‘progress’; its history is yet to come. In this sense, Carlo Levi’s *Christ Stopped at Eboli* becomes a profoundly instructive political text.

The long national debate on the ‘Southern Question’ that accompanies the history of modern Italy and the incorporation of the ex-kingdom of the two Sicilies into the new nation constantly veers between outcries against an aggressive northern act of deliberate colonisation and the more academic discussion of national and international cycles and rhythms evidencing uneven development. If, on the one hand, the north apparently robbed the south of its financial assets in order to establish its industrial base, and in the process waged a war on the population in order to exercise this right, this was counterbalanced by a liberal paternalism that saw its task of dragging the south out of decadent government and feudal inefficiency in order to make it modern. If the colonising imperative that saw in the south an exotic world of disturbing alterity still remains very much in play today in internal racisms (and the Northern League is symptomatic of that virulent syntax), the liberal insistence on educating the south through a programmed ‘progress’ also continued to dominate the state policy of post-1945 Italy. The clearest manifestation of the latter approach was the creation in 1950 of a national fund – Cassa del Mezzogiorno – for financing the development of southern Italy. This was to launch the era of the notorious ‘cathedrals in the desert’: industrial plant parachuted into rural southern Italy that was supposed to kick-start the local economy. Despite the massive amounts of money involved it was a historical failure; or, rather, its economic and social aims were largely side-tracked into the machinery of sustaining and reproducing political power. In this sense, it was by no means an exclusively ‘Southern Question’, but rather a component in the composition and management of a national mosaic of powers, interests and political groups.

One of the more obvious examples of this mechanism is that of the complex interweaving of national and local powers which witnessed political party machinery and organised crime allied in the creation and reproduction of political and cultural hegemony. This had already been encouraged by the Allied war authorities in their conquest of Sicily and southern Italy from Fascism after 1943. Such an alliance stretched from the maintenance of everyday local consensus through political patronage and organised crime to domestic Cold War containment of political unrest and the subsequent crisis management of national emergencies and disasters (the 1980 earthquake in Campania is here emblematic: massive state funding simultaneously consolidated and extended political power and organised crime, both locally and nationally). The details, of course, are complicated, but I think that it is once again clear that the seemingly separate specificity of the ‘Southern Question’ has consistently played a fundamental role in the political and economic arrangements that compose the national (and international) picture.

The continuing twentieth mass migration of the reserve army of labour of southern Italians to northern Italy and northern Europe, on the back of migration to the Americas and North Africa, also alerts us to this structural reality. It touches the essential dimension of alterity and the periphery in composing and reaffirming the ‘centre’. This needs to be consistently borne in mind if we want to avoid being dragged into an endless and fruitless debate overdetermined by stereotypical language, racialising prejudices, and a biopolitics passing for common sense. Migration also reminds us of the shifting conditions of international labour. While migration from the south of the world has serviced the north, the Italian south itself is today clearly destined never to be industrialised – today that nineteenth-century model of ‘progress’ has literally migrated elsewhere, to be charted in the megapolicies of China, India and Brazil. The labour pool has been outsourced along global networks that draw upon capital gains and infrastructures that the Mezzogiorno will never have. It is now necessary to change perspective and seek to reformulate the ‘Southern Question’. To do this, I suggest we need to adopt another series of coordinates and maps.
I believe that Antonio Gramsci helps us to identify a series of elements that pull the question out of its immediate historical and critical coordinates in post-unification Italy and allows us to better consider its contemporary implications. Here we will discover that it is no longer possible to talk of a ‘Southern Question’ within the boundaries of the Italian nation state, and perhaps, despite all the immediate peculiarities of the ‘Mezzogiorno’, it never was. Without anticipating the argument, there lies here the suggestion that the ‘Southern Question’, identified as a political problem, and as a historical and cultural question, was not external to the modernity that it was presumed could resolve it. It was, and is, internal to modern Europe and the formation of its nation states. In an important sense, seeking to respond to the ‘Southern Question’ ultimately implies replying to the structural inequalities and distribution of power that accompany the formation of nation building and Occidental modernity. I feel, as Gramsci himself once put it, that this ‘thinking globally’ is of significance in casting what seems an almost unresolvable historical, cultural and political dilemma into an altogether more extensive critical space that throws a suggestive critical light back into the specificities of the Italian case.

So, it seems to me imperative to acknowledge wider landmarks when referencing the ‘Southern Question’. To avoid remaining trapped in a tangle of historical and cultural debate that reconstructs and deconstructs the question, it is perhaps time to apply a critical cut. A local inheritance can never be cancelled, but it can be exposed to other questions, examined with new critical coordinates. To step beyond the south’s location in existing knowledge–power relationships, and follow Edward Said’s proposal to de-orientalise the logic that reconfirms subordination in a self-perpetuating discourse, is to adopt a postcolonial approach that insists that the colonisation and construction of the ‘periphery’ is essential for the sustenance and extension of metropolitan power. The rest of the world is not simply an accessory and witness to Occidental progress but is deeply stitched into its fabric of production and reproduction. It does not simply absorb and consume modernity; in its labour power, cultural forces and political antagonisms, it produces modernity. It is not simply where modernity recycles and dumps the refuse of ‘progress’; it provides the very matrix of a modernity that requires the world, and not simply the West, in order to extract, circulate and accumulate its riches and authority (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

Beyond the pertinent provocation of Franco Cassano’s ‘southern thought’ refusing a subaltern status, a postcolonial engagement allows us to promote an understanding of the Southern Question from the south itself (Cassano, 2011). This is not simply to overturn prevailing accounts that tend to reduce the Mezzogiorno of Italy to a stable and homogeneous object of analysis, robbing it of subjective agency. It also permits a wider exercise in challenging the premises and protocols of the critical machinery that believes that its version of ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’ is unique and hence universal. At the same time, this also allows us to relocate the Italian ‘Southern Question’ on a wider map, beginning in immediate terms with the Mediterranean. Here we are forced to annotate the annexation of southern Italy and subsequent national unification within the same temporal frame of the French conquest of Algeria and the British takeover of Egypt. Modalities of appropriation were different, the combination of histories never the same, although there was always the constancy of military might, death and destruction to back up and enforce the enterprise. In the extension of one rule and law over another we find ourselves in the common nineteenth-century matrix of colonialism that extends, without request, the civilising mission of the west to the rest. As a minimum, this establishes the Italian ‘Southern Question’ in a colonial framework, not too dissimilar to the experiences of Scotland and Ireland and their political, administrative, cultural and military subordination to London and the unification of Great Britain.
In *The Southern Question* (1926), the Sardinian intellectual Antonio Gramsci offered a lucid analysis of the structural impoverishment of southern Italy in terms of existing economic, political and cultural forces. He spoke of stagnation characterised by the mass of peasantry in the economic and political clutches of large, often absentee, landowners. He also spoke of southern intellectuals supplying the administrative personnel of the Italian state, both locally and nationally, and of the role of such intellectuals (he was referring in particular to Benedetto Croce) in reproducing the status quo. Ten years later, incarcerated in a Fascist prison, he was to observe:

> The poverty of the Mezzogiorno was historically incomprehensible for the popular masses of the North; they could not comprehend that national unity was not achieved on the basis of equality, but as the result of the hegemony of the North on the Mezzogiorno and the territorial relationship of the city to the countryside; the North was an ‘octopus’ that enriched itself at the cost of the South, its industrial and economic progress was in a direct relationship to the impoverishment of southern industry and agriculture.

(Gramsci 1975: 2021–2)

Much of what Gramsci had to say then continues to echo within the existing political economy of the south and in its one-time capital, Naples. Yet the ‘sources’ of this malaise perhaps lie not only in local coordinates, but also in a deep-seated inheritance that today would be considered part and parcel of the processes of ‘globalization’ (Chambers, 2008).

Naples, unlike Genoa and Venice, was never a major port and commercial centre in the manner of its northern cousins. Up to the end of the sixteenth century Venice and Genoa were ‘world ports’, central to a trading system that stretched from Beijing to Lima. The port of Naples served mainly for the importation of foodstuffs from Sicily and Puglia to feed its metropolitan population and immediate hinterland. In 1615 Naples was buying pepper from Livorno that had arrived from London. By then it was no longer the Mediterranean that sold spices to England and northern Europe, but spices arriving from London and Amsterdam that were now sold to the Mediterranean in the ports of Livorno, Naples and Istanbul. By the end of the seventeenth century virtually all of the seaborne commercial traffic of the Kingdom of Naples was transported on English merchant ships. In the second half of the century the hegemony of English commerce in the Mediterranean, reinforced by the regular presence of the Royal Navy, supervised the structural undoing of the relationship between a commercial and industrial northern Italy and its complementary relationship to the agricultural south (Pagano de Divitiis, 1997). Both the north, with its own commerce, cloth and silk industries subordinated to the needs of London and the emerging English textile industry, and the agricultural south were equally transformed into sources for primary materials for the markets and merchandising of northern Europe and the Atlantic seaboard. By 1680 the conditions of the ‘Southern Question’ – economic underdevelopment, social backwardness and cultural isolation from northern Italy – had been established, not so much through Spanish domination of the Kingdom of Naples, or northern Italian ‘progress’, where capital once invested in seagoing ventures was now conserved in the security of land and revenue, as by English mercantile hegemony in the Mediterranean.

These historical observations might provide one way to reopen the ‘Southern Question’. They serve, above all, to insist on the critical necessity of adopting a diverse cartography in order to step out of the straightjacket of a debate, overwhelmingly shaped by regional and national concerns, that urgently needs to be ‘provincialized’ (Chakrabarty, 2000). The pauperisation of the peasantry in the rural fringes of an emerging modern Europe – both in Calabria and in the Highlands of Scotland – are as interconnected as the price of pepper on the London Stock
Exchange and in the markets of Naples and Istanbul. In the following century, the nascent
Neapolitan Republic, directly inspired by the French Revolution, will be crushed in May 1799
by a peasant army overseen by the presence of the British fleet in the Bay of Naples. Part of
that fleet, together with its commander Admiral Horatio Nelson, had the previous year
destroyed French naval forces in Egyptian waters in the Battle of Aboukir Bay. In the very
same period, republican France was refusing the demands of the slaves in revolt to extend the
terms of the French Revolution to its Caribbean colony Saint-Dominique. Freedom, equality
and brotherhood were denied until the ‘Black Jacobins’ successfully expunged French control
and established the black republic of Haiti in 1804.

These wider coordinates are not intended to stifle the local narrative. If anything they serve
to deepen and extend that account in the belief that they help us to grasp the historical and
cultural density of the question in the context of the ‘global colonial archive’ (Conelli, 2013).
What holds this particular picture together in the first instance is the struggle for world
hegemony between Britain and France, waged in the many corners of Europe from Spain and
Italy to the steppes of Russia, as well as across the seas and islands of the world. This exercise
of power, its administrative, military, economic and cultural organisation – frequently outsourced
to non-nationals (Polish troops deployed in the unsuccessful French attempts to reconquer Saint-
Dominique, black African sailors in the British fleet) – was in the last instance about the control
of resources, riches and markets required in order to command the world and ensure the planetary
reproduction of its political economy.

With this in mind we could now move back to the ‘Southern Question’ with a further set
of concerns. One of the central features that emerges from the incorporation of the ex-Kingdom
of the Two Sicilies into the new Italian state in 1861 is that of the systematic racialisation of
the south (Moe, 2002). The evidence – drawn from Piedmont officers and government officials
involved in the ‘pacification’ of the Mezzogiorno, to subsequent endorsement by sociologists,
anthropologists and criminologists – is overwhelming. Southern Italy, whether explained in
biological or historical terms, is populated by an inferior ‘race’. As we have already noted, the
racialisation of southern Italy was an essential part of its subordination to colonisation by the
nascent national state that in turn applied verdicts already rehearsed by visitors in English, German
and French. Anthropological generalisations quickly flowed into a more precise institutional
regime of knowledge through the criminalisation of dissent and revolt. It produced a pathology
to be catalogued, studied and defined, and the figure of Cesare Lombroso is central to this project
and its becoming ‘common sense’. Historical and cultural differences were transformed into
arbitrary distinctions. These acquired the legislative force to incorporate, discipline and educate
the captured, subordinated body. Once defined, catalogued and located, that body reconfirmed
the manner and procedures of its objectification. Even if we might want today to consign such
perspectives to the closed chapter of European positivism, such practices seeped down into the
practices of everyday life and cast long historical shadows. In the opening sequences of Luchino
Visconti’s film *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), the arrival from Lucania of the Parondi family in
a Milanese housing estate is simply greeted with the exclamation ‘Africa’.

The transference of landed property to financial gain and commercial profit, of the revenue
of rural estates to industrial and financial capital and urban life styles, accompanied by the passage
from peasantry to the national and international labour market, is a constant rhythm in the
formation of the modern political economy since 1500. In the planetary processes induced
by capitalist accumulation there is obviously much regional differentiation, within the nation
as well as beyond its frontiers. Some would call them time lags and apply the terminology of
backwardness and underdevelopment to explain their presence. Here history is a train called
Progress that carries us into the future. However, when slavery coexists with the foundation of republican democracy, as in the Atlantic world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and feudal land ties with the establishment of modern industrial plant, as in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century, it is perhaps critically more instructive to consider their political interaction and historical complementarity. Rather than assuming that one dimension (modern, democratic and industrial) is separate and superior to the negative survival of the seemingly archaic histories of slavery and feudalism, we need to consider their being coeval. And if we are understanding these to be planetary, and not merely national, conditions and forces, then we are required to recognise this dissonant and heterogeneous history to be integral to modernity, that is, to be the history of modernity itself.

The violent accumulation of capital does not simply lie back there with slave labour, colonialism and racialised hegemony, or with expropriation of the commons, the expulsion of peasantry from the land and its subsequent enclosure by a landowning class seeking to invest its gains elsewhere (in the colonies, in industry, in buildings, transport and cultural goods). It continues. There is no simple passage from an original or primitive accumulation to a subsequently more civil and ordered one. Eighteenth-century Scottish crofters dispatched to Canada after the crushing of the 1745 Rebellion, peasants moving from Lucania to Milan and the Alfa Romeo factory in the 1950s and 1960s (the subject of Visconti’s Rocco and His Brothers) and present-day Chinese labour migrating in millions from rural areas to the high-tech belts of Guangdong, Shaanxi, Qingdao and Shenzhen, are part of a shared temporality. In other words, the creative destruction of territory and time by capital that produces a mobile constellation of effects on a planetary level is not to be explained in terms of the linear succession of circles of development radiating out from a primary centre in Europe. The resources that went into European development, as the history of modern racial slavery so powerfully portrays — both in its labour and in its abolition and compensatory payments — always depended on a planetary network of conquest, exploitation and management (Hall, 2013). Dispossession, expropriation and unilateral control of land, law and political licence are not simply the prerogative of seventeenth-century England and life in the North American colonies; they are very much part of our world today. That ‘original’ violence persists — from seeking to patent medicinal plants to bulldozing villages and towns into dams. It is part, as Kalyan Sanyal has argued, of the very reproduction of capital: it is not a trace of the past, but is a constant and unstable universalism oriented to the future (Sanyal, 2007). Rather than localised transitions to accumulation, registered in the linear fashioning of time, there are transformations that reach through a mosaic of temporal and spatial scales and coordinates, sometimes subtle and with subterfuge, more usually brutal, violent and without redress.

These considerations throw a very different light onto the ‘Southern Question’. Here we discover not pockets of underdevelopment, inhabited by those who apparently live outside the measured time of modernity and who have not yet been invested by progress, but ‘traces of autonomous initiatives’ as Gramsci referred to them. These signal the multiple contours of the modern world where a hegemonic pulse is folded into local performances, crossed by translation and mixed by tradition, sounded and sourced in the ongoing construction of place and belonging. The blueprint and template are dirtied and deviated, punctuated by the dense grammars of cultural immediacies, by a resistance to a singular will (Chambers, 2013).

What lies ‘south of the border’ in the undisciplined excess of life that seemingly does not respect the rules is clearly a threat to the disciplined productivity of the linear accumulation of a capitalist and cultural redemption. These other, southern, spaces, however, are not merely decadent and unruly peripheries, expelled from the motor of modernity. They propose the
challenge of heterotopia. Although constantly seeking to establish borders, set limits, monitor unrest and patrol confines, modernity is unable to produce a distinct exterior, a not yet modern or still primitive elsewhere. What is maintained at a distance, transformed into a separable ‘other’ and then rendered subaltern and subordinate within the institutions and practices of ‘advanced’ capitalist culture is at the same time structurally integral to the very production and reproduction of dominance and subordination. The negated, feared and despised ‘native’, black, Arab, Muslim, Rom, and migrant other is inside the modernity that seeks to define, discipline and decide his or her place. No matter how objectified and anonymously rendered, the subaltern is nevertheless a historical actor, a subjectivising force within a shared but differentiated modernity (Guha, 2003). It is this negated conviviality that sets the terms for unrecognised communaliies. The chains of power are here tested (and not simply suffered), stretched and sometimes snap. If, then, there is no absolute outside to house the excluded and the damned, there is also no untouched or pure alternative to the historical network and assemblage in which these political and cultural relations are inscribed. It is precisely in this sense, that the ‘Southern Question’ irrupts within the midst of a modernity still to be registered and recognised.

Exemplified in Carlo Levi’s Christ Stopped at Eboli, Ernesto De Martino’s ethnographic field research in the Mezzogiorno of Italy in the 1950s and the cinema of Pier Paolo Pasolini, seemingly pre-modern practices, beliefs and customs are not ‘back there’, in an abjured or primitive past, but are ‘in here’, part of the stratified and subaltern complexities of the present. Through rendering the familiar unhomely and out of joint, the present becomes plural and incomplete, that is, irreducible to a single point of view or manner of narration. Along this critical path lies the injunction to think less of the south and rather with the south. Here, where historical, cultural and structural conditions have been formed in subordination to the needs of the north of the world, the predictable critical frame is decentralised and destabilised. The powerful lessons of the Subaltern Studies group in India, of the lengthy tradition of Black Atlantic intellectuals and artists, of the critical constellation of radical Latin American thought and political practices clearly confirm this point. The abstract universalisms of ‘progress’, ‘humanism’ and ‘democracy’ unwind in the cruel insistence of their being historically embedded in power, exploitation and unjust cultural detail. This observation, most obviously drawn from Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, allows us to register the structural inequalities of economic, political, social and cultural justice that characterise the souths of the planet while at the same time harvesting the specificities of a precise elaboration of space and time that distinguishes one place from another.

**Radical rurality**

To return to the rural south of Italy again also allows us to continue to cultivate further lines of flight from conventional accounts of this region as a political problem. I, personally, have had some involvement in projects that have sought in abandoned mountain areas to encourage a radical revaluation of contemporary rurality in the light of modern memories of migration (Chambers et al., 2007). Associated with this involvement is the ethno-literature and proposed ‘ruralogy’ (paesologia) of the writer Franco Arminio, who poetically reworks a received inheritance into a modality of modern connections (Arminio, 2011). In a form of psychogeography, Armino’s words drift in rural landscapes that actively query their subaltern location in the mappings of modernity. What comes to be registered is an impossible set of roots: village life is neither autonomous nor separated from the modernity that produces it as its alterity. There emerges the awareness that belonging simultaneously draws upon a series of locations: from a high mountain village in Matese to a suburb of New York. It is a process impossible to confine to
a single place. This provides another critical compass with which to navigate the multiple spaces of modernity. Perhaps this is a lesson that was first learnt by rural folk. If their lives were subordinated to the demands of the metropolis, they experienced migration, social upheaval and transformation under the sign of the city long before the inhabitants of the city began querying their own assumed stability. In the same manner, the rest of the world has experienced precarious livelihood, structural unemployment and the violence of capital in a colonial condition for many decades prior to the ingress of these coordinates into the heartlands of the metropolitan West.

The seemingly external rural interruption is, of course, not really external, only repressed and negated, consigned to the margins. Today’s metropolis is the modern world. And if the city does not fully absorb the surrounding world, it does, however, profoundly discipline its horizons of expectancy. In this sense, the rural scene provides one of the places and temporalities of modernity. It is not on the outside. It circulates within as a potential critical seed. It proposes another rurality that lies both beyond the placid Romantic framing of the sublime or the brutal vitalism of imposed economic ‘progress’. Its very hybridity – after all, today hardly anyone simply lives in the countryside, whether in Irpinia in southern Italy or in rural Bangladesh, without the presence of television, mobile phones, computers and the Internet – suggests an altogether more extensive critical cartography. In a truly political and poetical sense this renewed sense of rurality promotes a subaltern and minor history able to challenge and deviate hegemonic versions of a unilateral modernity. Defending seed banks in rural India against Occidental monopolies or contesting economically and ecologically unviable high-speed trains in the Alpine valleys of northern Italy is, in however ragged and unsystematic a fashion, to express local democracies that are witness to a modernity that is not simply authorized by the existing institutions of political and economic power.

Here the rural world is no longer something left over from yesterday, an appendage to today’s urban life, providing foodstuffs, recreation and relics of superseded lifestyles, but rather reveals the potential of a critical interrogation. A seemingly ‘lost’ world actually proposes new points of departure. The elaboration of the ‘loss’ can lead to the proposal of beginnings for those seeking to escape both the claustrophobic localism of blood and soil and the terrible costs of earlier rural life. To elaborate that inheritance and work it through is also to re-elaborate modernity itself. Emigration, exploitation and poverty, both yesterday and today, are woven together along global axes. The abandoned village in the Apennines is not merely the sign of a local drama; it is the also the symptom of the processes of a planetary political economy. The question, then, is how to narrate this complex suturing of time and place, of modernity and rurality, in a manner that leads to a new, critical sense of ‘place’ and temporality that simultaneously exists along multiple scales of belonging: from the local bar to the Internet.

At this point, where do a place, a locality, a village and territory conclude, and something else commence? Perhaps the limited linearity of this reasoning suggests another configuration in which ‘place’ and belonging are simultaneously proposed and lived in multiple sites. These propose other narrative forms. In an altogether more fluid topography, specificities such as poverty, organised crime, structural unemployment, migration and peripheral ‘underdevelopment’ are charted on multiple maps that simultaneously conjoin the local with those wider, transnational conditions that also produce the local. Modernity at this point is opened up to interpretations that challenge a unitary logic. And alterity, as both the past that has never passed and the presence of the extra-European world, radically interrupts the present. Such proximities invite us, as a minimum, not so much to speak for these negated matters, and thereby reproduce our authority, as to speak in their vicinity in a manner that leads precisely to the undoing of that authority (Djebar, 1999).
The south of the world

Borrowing this suggestion from the Algerian writer Assia Djebar, I would like to propose a final perspective that consists in considering the interruption of the structures that produces the ‘south’ as a delimited space (Bhambra, 2007). This obviously extends the Italian ‘Southern Question’ through a geography of powers onto a planetary scale. It also fruitfully intersects a growing intent to rethink modernity outside the geopolitical structures and ethnographic dividends of European colonialism and their installation in the assumed methodological ‘neutrality’ of the social sciences (Connell, 2007). Brought into the multiple folds of a postcolonial revaluation, such a critical configuration permits us to reopen the archive in order to expose the present-day coordinates of a multilayered modernity: the latter now emerges as a global networked formation in historical process, rather than as a conceptual bloc or place (the Occident). If this is to world the west, it is also to re-engage with the ‘Southern Question’, and with it the south of Europe and the south of the world, with a very different set of critical languages and questions.

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