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Review Article

Annalisa Oboe, ed.,

'Postcoloniale e revisione dei saperi'

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Abstract

The text that follows is a review of the *aut-aut* special section dedicated to 'The postcolonial and the revision of knowledge' collecting important contributions from the project *PostcolonialItalia*, based in the Department of Linguistic and Literary Studies at the University of Padua (Italy) and led by Annalisa Oboe. The *aut-aut* special section follows the seminar, held in Padua in December 2013, *Gli studi postcoloniali nelle scienze umane: storie, teorie, metodi e pratiche italiane*. The section represents an important contribution to ongoing debates about postcolonial Italy, and the consequences of a re-thinking of epistemologies, identities and approaches within Italian postcolonial scholarship.

Contributor Note

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The *aut-aut* special section dedicated to 'The postcolonial and the revision of knowledge' collects important contributions from the project *PostcolonialItalia*, based in the Department of Linguistic and Literary Studies at the University of Padua (Italy) and led by Annalisa Oboe.¹ It follows the seminar, held in Padua in December 2013, *Gli studi postcoloniali nelle scienze umane: storie, teorie, metodi e pratiche italiane*. The section represents an important contribution to ongoing debates about postcolonial Italy and the consequences of re-thinking epistemologies, identities and approaches within Italian postcolonial scholarship.

It builds on seminal work from Iain Chambers and Sandro Mezzadra whose work took critical frameworks and concepts from postcolonial studies and developed them further within an analysis of Italian 'Mediterranean perspectives' and postcolonial migrations. Many scholars – through both literary and social research – have further contributed to an exploration of the 'postcolonial challenge'. This can be seen as an epistemological approach that radically reconfigures disciplinary structures and their premises, in constant dialogue with cultural studies, political philosophy, and feminisms – I refer to works by Paola Zaccaria, Renate Siebert, Miguel Mellino, Caterina Romeo and Cristina Lombardi-Diop, Franca Sinopoli, a number of historians who are attempting to bridge historiography and postcolonial studies – like Alessandro Pes and Valeria Deplano – and the research group on race and racism, InteRGRace, that brings together methods from cultural studies, political philosophy, semiotics, social sciences and postcolonial studies. This take,

argues Chambers in the section, has allowed scholars to understand 'Western modernity as responsible for the historical, cultural and political formation of the colonial world' (Oboe 2014: 147). This approach called for a positioning of the author in 'processes that precede and exceed his/her authority, deconstructing the idea of a presumed neutral *critical distance* and the ideological premises of the so-called *scientific paradigms* of social sciences and humanities' (148).

The importance of the section for academic and non academic research in and on Italy lies in its commitment to an understanding of the contributions Italian scholars made to postcolonial studies at both local and global levels, and of whether there is an *original* way to elaborate a productive postcolonial approach *from Italy* (138).

In particular, drawing from Edward Said's idea of the world as one made 'of the *connections*, not outside and beyond them' (*Culture and Imperialism*, 1993), Oboe claims the importance of a global gaze as a method, from the Italian context – a precise positionality that needs to inform our theoretical and analytical work.

For those who look at the world from the specific Italian context, Iain Chambers argues it is the Mediterranean, as a place of transit and translation, that is the symbolic and material frame within which postcolonial epistemological practices can be made productive. He calls for a politics of location, in order to enable a reading of both history and the present from *the margins* of national identities, nation-States, and Europe. This minority/marginal perspective on culture, history, and knowledge allows a radical questioning of modern ideologies

¹ See <http://www.postcolonialitalia.it/>

of identity and belonging founded on *the border* and, as such, makes the Mediterranean a postcolonial historical archive.

In Italy, postcolonial studies are still 'marginal' and mostly 'unaware' (REFS needed?)- many scholars from different disciplines use the postcolonial theoretical framework without being aware of it. Thus Oboe argues that postcolonial *tools* can help to unravel the memories and amnesias of the Italian colonial past and, through a Saidian *contrapuntal reading*, she shows elisions, silences, and complicities with the colonial discourse of twentieth-century Italian national culture and identity. This process allows her to trace transnational, diasporic, hybrid, and cosmopolitan trajectories of Italian life, culture and modernity, and to re-read classic and more recent literature in light of them.

Far from being an *imperialist* (Anglo-American) approach to the Italian literary archive, Zinato argues that the use of Said and postcolonial theory helps to map familiarity and unfamiliarity of literary texts within the hegemonic culture of their time. What he proposes is thus an analytical frame that stems from the intersections between Neolatin and Romance philology, Saidian postcolonial gaze, and Vico's idea of history: this allows us to unpack postcolonial tendencies from classic to most recent Italian literature (from Tasso and Ariosto to Luigi Di Ruscio and Eugenio de Signoribus).

Most notably, the importance and originality of the section lies in the productive challenge of the understanding of postcolonial studies as a political engagement with the Italian *postcolonial condition*. This condition is

marked by inequality and violence - both material and symbolic - towards postcolonial migrants coming to and living in the country, and is addressed in the section/issue by Roberto Derobertis. In his contribution, he refers to a number of recent literary works reflecting on Italian colonial past and postcolonial present (including *Timira* by Wu Ming; *Razza partigiana* by Carlo Costa and Lorenzo Teodonio; *La mia casa è dove sono* and *Roma negata* by Igiaba Scego; *Uomini e caporali* by Alessandro Leogrande; and *Ama il tuo sogno* by Yvan Sagnet): these works call for a *positioned and embodied* research, able to capture the legacies and rearticulations of colonial Italy, in order to radically challenge nationalism and racism in culture as well as in the national and international organisation of migrant labour.

Farah Polato's contribution brings a focus on migration and the Italian *postcolonial condition*, as well as on radical changes in narratives of the migrant's condition produced in Italian cinema. These narratives radically changed not only rigid distinctions between genres, but also the way movies are produced, distributed and watched, and their relations with digital technologies and social media. The same term *Italian* sounds limiting and disrespectful for all the historical, cultural and political contradictions postcolonial cinema in Italy foregrounds. The same category of *national* cinema implodes (Zagarrio) when confronted with the interviews and visual research projects involving migrants and their lived experiences (2004-2011) collected by the Archivio delle Memorie Migranti. *Come un uomo sulla terra* (2008) by Dagmawi Yimer and Andrea Segre, *Soltanto il mare* (2011) and *Va pensiero* (2013) by Dagmawi Yiver. These

represent a 'contrapunctual cinema' that subverts Italian traditional cinema; where fiction, documentary, personal lived experiences and choral narrative all collapse in a single movie. This is also the case of two very different productions: *Terraferma* (2011) by Emanuele Crialese and *18 Jus soli* by Fred Kuwornu. In the first case, the director tells 'a story (of immigration and survival) from the margins of Italian society (Lampedusa); in the second, the director amplifies the unheard voices of second generation immigrants born in Italy and deprived of Italian citizenship.

This approach 'from the margins' has important consequences also in micropractices in education and health care. As Davide Zoletto shows, the uses of postcolonial theoretical framework and epistemologies – especially those established by Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and Achille Mbembe – in educational contexts can help to find a 'critical humanism' based on 'a common participation to what makes us different' (Mbembe, 2008). As Roberto Beneduce shows, they can also help to uncover the dangerous legacies of colonial discourse and categories in Italian anthropology.

Zoletto, in particular, claims for a postcolonial revision of textbooks, able to uncover legacies of colonial racism and belittling discourses, and a postcolonial educational practice able to 'acknowledge all differences (not just cultural differences) that characterize everyone, within and outside educational contexts' (p. 170). The erasure of the distinction between *in* and *out* made by

postcolonial theory compels us, Zoletto maintains, to look also at social contexts outside formal educational institutions, like playgrounds in Italian urban areas where highly diverse people regularly meet. Places are crucial in educational practices: Zoletto's essay ends mentioning streets' toponymy in Italian cities with recurring colonial names. 'As a metaphor for the present, more than a painful reminder of the past', these names need to be revisited through a postcolonial gaze.

Beneduce stresses the importance of a postcolonial anthropological practice to go beyond the mere revision of terminology – he mentions the case of the term *race* that many Italian anthropologists want to erase from the Italian Republican Constitution and from anthropological literature – and provide a radical change in the way *diversity* is studied. A postcolonial take would enable anthropologists, Beneduce argues, to acknowledge the psychological as well as political purport of the 'beliefs of the oppressed' – like ghost-children at the core of ethnopsychiatry and African anthropology – as both the metaphor for the '(colonial) past that doesn't want to pass' (p. 188) and the lived experience as a psychic disease of the embodied legacy of colonial violence. The main aim of a postcolonial anthropology is that of making the invisible visible through the 'observing participation' (Bourdieu date) of local knowledge and practices around disease and cure, violence and desire, life and death.

References

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