

Claudio Fogu *The Fishing Net and The Spider Web: Mediterranean Imaginaries and the Making of Italians*

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If I should condense Claudio Fogu's *The Fishing Net and The Spider Web: Mediterranean Imaginaries and the Making of Italians* in one sentence, I would say that it sheds a 'definitive' light on the building of Italianness in relation to the Mediterranean imaginaries and in the context of the "Southern Question". And it does so by audaciously taking into account an amazingly long lapse of time: from the first sea crossings related to the ancient ships of Greek colonists up to contemporary crossings related to the chronicles of present-day cruisers. The scope of cultural products analysed is amazing as well: from archeological artefacts to folklore costumes, from literature to music, from history to news-story, from politics to economy.

In the author's words, the book

explores the preeminent trope of Italian cultural history, namely, the "making of Italians," from a postcolonial perspective that looks beyond the confines of the nation as an "imagined community" and identifies Mediterranean imaginaries as the principal



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source from which ideas of Italian-ness have been constructed, challenged, and even internally deconstructed. (4)

So, the main idea of the book is that the making of the Italians and the discursive construction of Italy's 'South' are two interrelated processes dominated by coloniality (Quijano 2010) and the Meridionist gaze (Cazzato 2017), because of which

what was formed by the Risorgimento was not a nation-state but an Empire State, created through the occupation of a southern kingdom that was generally conceived as African soil. (5)

This endogenous/exogenous trope - (Southern) Italy as Africa - is as old as early 19th century, when Europe would begin ending at Naples; recently it has been appropriated by (Northern) League party supporters, according to whom "Garibaldi did not unite Italy; he divided Africa". Indeed, this *image* dominated the unification process of Italy and afterwards corresponded to a *reality*: the stern reality of the 'scramble for Africa' (when the European occupation of the African continent was completed) and the construction of the idea of 'South' as racially inferior and evolutionary backward. Both processes, Fogu reminds us, were enabled by the colonial matrix of power ruling Modernity since 1492. Moreover, what he intensely contends is that the process of the Italian unification not only meant the polarization of north versus south but also

the extraction of the ex-Kingdom of the Two Sicilies from the imagined community of the Mediterranean continent to which it had belonged for centuries. (4)

That is why to Fogu the "Southern Question" is also a "Mediterranean Question" (6).

But what does Mediterranean "imagined community" mean to the author? Basically, it means the liquid oscillation, as the book title already announces, between the fishing net (the *emporium*) and the spider web (the *Imperium*): an oscillation between the Mediterranean as *mare nostrum* (the territorialised idea of a liquid continent) and as "sea of others" (the de-territorialised idea of a sea belonging to all and then to none).

The second chapter is devoted to the suppression of (southern) Italian maritime history, which apparently started with the Risorgimento, when either the Mediterranean was ignored or deemed an obstacle. Not even the epic *spedizione dei mille* - Fogu points out - gave the Italian nation under construction a maritime imaginary:

despite being raised as a sailor, spending most of his military life as a ship's captain, and achieving fame as 'the Hero of the Two Worlds' thanks to his daring maritime exploits, Garibaldi is represented as a General on a horse... (25)

What about the newly born national literature? In *Pinocchio* the sea becomes an ocean populated by sharks or whales, while in Verga it is the site of fatal events. Moreover, in the Sicilian Capuana, the Neapolitan De Roberto and the Sardinian Deledda, the Mediterranean is more or less absent, nor is it present in the *meridionalisti's* debate around the Question. This absence, Fogu concludes, illuminates "the intersection between the territorialisation of the Italian 'South' and the *poiesis* of the making of the Italy/Italians" (30).

The third chapter lays the ground for the main postulation, according to which the Mediterranean imaginaries oscillate between the *emporium* and the *Imperium*, as said. Following Horden and Purcell, Fogu speaks of oscillation rather than of dialectics probably because the latter presupposes a synthesis that the maritime condition does not consent.

He starts from the very first Greek colony, called Pythekoussai and founded on one of the islands of the Phlegrean archipelagos (modern-day Ischia), where the colonists arriving from another island, Euboea, would trade with the Etruscan island of Elba, rich with iron. The author's conclusion is that the West did not begin with "the Greeks" but with the *connections* among these three Mediterranean islands. Hence, the founding matrix has operated outside "the arborist logic of 'rooted-ness' in territory, language, traditions, and self-sameness" (38) and within "the technology that has guaranteed the survival and prosperity of island communities everywhere: the fishing net" (38). Thus, ancient Mediterranean was born out of a widespread condition of "connectivity" (Horden and Purcell) or "small world" (Malkin), i.e.: a multidirectional, decentralised, nonhierarchical, interactive, fractal system. Then, the Phlegrean fishing net system was transformed into a spider web by the Romans:

Spider-Rome literally territorialised the Mediterranean Sea by replacing *emporium* with *municipia*, urban nodes that had the purpose of facilitating military control. (41)

From that time on, the oscillation between the *emporium* and the *Imperium* is a constant in (Southern) Italian history, and the history of its capital Naples is no exception. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Naples fell back on the relationship with its agricultural basin for several centuries, until under the Spanish-Aragon rule Naples became the most suitable trade centre between the Levant, Africa, and the West, as his *canzone napolitana* and his *commedia dell'arte*

testify through their recurrent reference to Mediterranean locales such as Constantinople, Mallorca, and Cyprus. Next, with the rise of the Atlantic world (the first modernity, according the decolonial thinking) and at the end of the 18th century with the advent of Meridionist discourse (the second modernity), “the signification of Naples as Italy’s South began to collapse into that of Italy as Europe’s South” (18), where backwardness and savagery were the norm, once past or even within the Bourbon capital. Finally, in the second half of the 19th century, the fishing net matrix was suppressed by the process of ‘colonialist’ birth of the Italian state, whose *Imperium* phase culminated, first, with the racialisation of southerners, then, with the fascist spider web of *Latinità* and *Mare Nostrum*, primarily sung by D’Annunzio. Nevertheless, within the dominant phase of the Mediterranean imaginary of *Imperium*, the emporium side survived in Sergi’s theorisation of *Homo Mediterraneus*, as creator of civilisation and quintessentially transmigrant. It survived even in Futurism, whose rhetoric of virility, *modernolatria*, war as “the world’s sole hygiene” and consequent support of Fascism’s building of an Italian-Mediterranean Empire, were juxtaposed to the drive toward *emporion*

eloquently testified by the unique projection of this movement toward breaking down barriers and opening up the doors between avant-garde aesthetics and mass mediatic communications, high-art and commercial-art expressions. (167-8)

With the fascist *inorientamento* of Italy, the idea of *mediterraneità* lasted until the *Manifesto della razza* (1938), when the Italians were declared mainly Aryan. Until then, the emporium matrix endured in the system of fascist exhibitions, which can be read through the transcolonial perspective (Harrison) and, consequently, through the South-South non-verticalist (Cazzato 2017) connections. Further to the *Fiera di Tripoli* (1927-39), the most important colonial market in the Fascist Empire, the apex of the Mediterranean oscillation between *Imperium* and *emporion* belongs to a trade fair established in 1930 in Bari and tellingly named *Fiera del Levante*. This exhibition, permeated of course by imperial features, reactivated the

ancient form of Mediterranean imaginary that may help to explain the popular and lasting support Fascism enjoyed not only in Bari but throughout the Italian South. (227)

This ancient form of Mediterranean imaginary was also reactivated after World War II, with what Fogu calls ENI’s *emporium* strategy. Indeed, the president Enrico Mattei’s southernist approach aimed at complementing the Atlanticist and Americanisation of Italian culture and economy with the decolonisation of (Southern) Italy from the

yoke of the Anglo-American oil cartel. The author calls ENI's agenda transcolonial, in that the so-called "Mattei formula" was a model of profit-sharing, co-responsibility and mutual advantage applied to all the contracts with Middle East and Mediterranean-region parties.

In 1989 the Berlin wall fell, and the "Mediterranean Quest(ion)" began, as Derrida put it. Predrag Matvejević's *Breviario mediterraneo* (1987) and Franco Cassano's *Pensiero meridiano* (1996) were the major harvest of this quest. It goes without saying that these thinkers tried to underscore and sing the *emporion* matrix of the sea between the lands, its pluriversal dimension. But these courageous and necessary attempts, also encouraged by the so-called "Barcelona Process" or "The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership" were probably hindered by the emerging migration question. In Italy, in 2001 for the first time, Italian political elections were dominated by an anti-immigrant sentiment and overtly racist discourses. Therefore, since then, the Mediterranean was not only a sea from which extricate oneself (according to the post-war period dictum "valicare le Alpi o sprofondare nel Mediterraneo") but also a dangerous sea from which to defend oneself ('porti chiusi' politics). As Fogu reminds us in a footnote:

It is with no small tinge of irony that the major operation of containment of unauthorized landings of migrants by the Italian military in 2013 was named operation *Mare Nostrum*. (241)

It was ironic because meanwhile the territorialised image of *Mare Nostrum* had already revealed its underbelly becoming *mare aliorum* (their sea), that is to say an otherised sea. Once this de-Mediterraneanised image of Europeanness has become hegemonic in Italy and Europe alike, Cassano's Mediterranean is no longer

a transcolonial "sea of others" where the "of" does not stand for threatening territorialization, but for processes of de-territorialized be-longing in a community of others. (261)

It goes without saying that in 2021 we are living the *Imperium* phase at its apex, fully entrenched as we are within Fortress Europe or, even worse, within the fortresses of each national state, heedless of the solidifying of the Mediterranean Sea, which corpse after corpse is becoming a cemetery. Gloomily, the fishing nets now catch corpses as well as fish. What is left, once more, is listening to Cassano, who passed away a few months ago. He left us with a last essay significantly titled "En Attendant Méditerranée", a sort of legacy where he wrote:

Per provare a invertire la rotta sono necessarie qualità che sembrano tirare in direzioni opposte. Bisogna riuscire ad avere un cuo-

re intelligente, una fiducia nell'altro e nel futuro e una sapienza politica concreta, capace di invertire con pazienza tutte le spirali negative. Oggi è difficile tracciare una prospettiva forte e sicura, ma il futurismo dei globalisti e il passatismo dei nazionalisti non sono la soluzione, ma il problema. "Per ogni cosa c'è il suo momento": per tornare a sperare invece di scappare deprecandola davanti alla realtà, bisogna riconoscerla e trovare le vie e gli strumenti per governarla. Per strappare le differenze culturali alle loro patologie occorre inventare qualcosa che è necessario ma ancora non c'è. Perché la realtà apprenda dai sogni è necessario che i sogni abbiano appreso dalla realtà. E viceversa. (Cassano 2017, 27)

I am sure that Fogu, like us all, will strive to learn from (this stern) reality, so that Cassano's Mediterranean utopia of the "sea of others", the Ur-matrix of emporium, will come near to *another* reality, sooner or later.

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