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Black (or) Italians? The Construction of Blackness in the Italian Context – Past & Present

In the last thirty years critical race theory has revealed the cultural origin of race and has pointed out the importance of using this category in the theoretical and critical analysis in order to identify the material effects that it produces. Race does not exist as a biological category, but it has been created and built up as a category of social differentiation, which is eminently concrete in terms of its political, social and cultural consequences. It determines the way in which specific groups are considered insiders or outsiders, it produces hierarchies, exclusions and belogings, it affects the possibility of obtaining employment, habitation, of having access to healthcare. Race grants the respect of human rights only to specific groups of people, while it makes other subjects or groups undesirable and perceived as socially dangerous. Despite the deconstruction of the biological category of race, it keeps operating and produces symbolic, material and psychological effects in the social fabric. Both the construction of racial categories and the resultant racism are processes strictly bound to the social, geographic and cultural context in which they develope. And also within the same geographic space, race and racism change shape in time, adapting to social and cultural changes.

Keeping in mind that the construction of whiteness and blackness is the expression of the intersection of race with gender, class, nationality, religion, citizenship and other axes of domination, racial categories need to be analysed in close connection with the racial history of the framework we are referring to, in this case the Italian one.

Analysing the construction of blackness in Italy means taking into account several historical and social events connected to Italian emigration and the construction of racial categories inside and outside Italy. In this paper, I focus on three historical phenomena, separate but connected to each

other: the construction of the subalternity of Southern Italy, Italian emigration to the United States and Italian colonialism. These events are key moments in the Italian racial histoy, because they present the intersection of several processes: the definition of Italian identity, the racialization of Italians by US society, the racialization of colonized people by Italian society.

As Gaia Giuliani points out, at the beginning of the 20th century, the work involved in the establishment of a single and unified Italy was unfinished, even if, in terms of legislation, Italy's unification was declared forty years earlier. This fact was caused not only by a lack of political organization of the regions included in the new State or by a lack of linguistic unity, but mostly by the absence of a sense of national belonging and of an Italian national identity, aknowledged by all the citizens. Although the multiple local identities and the political, cultural, economic and social differences among different regions prevailed, these differences were interpreted in accordance with a binary discourse based on the opposition between an advanced North in terms of politics and economy and a backward South, which appeared reluctant to the political and industrial progress that mimicked the steps of colonial invasion. In fact, we can refer to internal colonialism implying what Giuliani defines "la prima esperienza […] di addomesticamente coloniale – discorsivo e materiale – del Sud e di molte zone rurali e dei loro abitanti al Nord e al Centro"[1] (27). This process was intended to assimilate the internal differences in order to obtain political legitimacy both in a national and an international context. The discourse about the opposition between North and South or the so-called 'southern question' presented aspects similar to the colonial discourse and it has been structured in accordance to the paternalistic rhetoric of the civilizing mission. Southern inhabitants were considered rebels, unmanageable, eccentric, uncivilized and, therefore, people who required instruction and education, in order to assist the creation of a coherent social body that classified "Italy". The exclusion of the South was constructed on the basis of a racial categorization, following a corpus of pseudo-scientific theories produced in the 19th century by Italian positivist scientists, such as Cesare Lombroso, Alfredo Niceforo and Giuseppe Sergi, among

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[1] "The first experience […] of material and discursive colonial domestication of the South, of many rural areas and their inhabitants in the North and in the Centre".

others. Lombroso, rapresentative of positivistic anthropology and founder of modern criminology, developed the theory of moral and psychological inferiority of Southern Italians. He illustrated southern inhabitants' habits and behaviors relying on the concepts of race and breed. The racial characteristics of southern people -especially Calabrians – were defined based on physical and somatic attributes such as the shape of the skull and the nose, eye color, skin and hair and were directly connected to moral, psychological and cultural features. In the work *In Calabria,* published in 1898, Lombroso describes calabrians as violent, lazy, passionate and dirty. As Vito Teti noticed, Lombroso applied to Calabrians the notions of the 'southern people's psychology' drawn up by Sergi, Niceforo and others. According to Teti, Lombroso's theories about Calabrians were subsequently imposed onto southern people in general, confirming that the racial theory produced by positivist anthropologists reworked prejudices and stereotypes already established. In 1898 was published *Arii e Italici. Attorno all'Italia preistorica,* written by Giuseppe Sergi, anthropologist follower of evolutionist theories. In this work Sergi theorized the existence of two Italian races: the Aryan race, characterised by a predisposition for order, education and discipline and which spread throughout northern Italy, and the primitive Mediterranean race, dispersed throughout the South and associated with people more prone to be characterized as rebellious, insubordinate and incapable of receiving an education. Beginning with Lombroso, the discursive construction of southern inferiority has been built up by means of racial degeneration. According to this theory, in the past the Roman Empire and Latin race presented Nordic and Aryan origins (which means white), but later the mixture of African and middle-eastern populations caused the racial degeneration of the Latin race. In southern Italy this process had a stronger impact due to the arrival of Arabs and north African people after the fall of Western Roman Empire. Therefore, this construction made southern people unsuitable to the new state's belief system and encouraged the emigration of southern inhabitants mostly to the United States and South America, where Italian immigrants underwent another process of racialization in the context of the receiving societies, which considered them violent, unreliable and dirty. Following Lombroso's conviction that the only way to fix the racial

degeneration of the South was to separate 'good' people from 'bad' people, the Italians' mass exodus was perceived positively by the Italian governement, because it relieved the demographic pressure, brought economic and social benefits and bleached the Italian race. During this period the definition of Italian racial identity as white had been set up through the hetero-referent racialization, a process in which the white, urbanized and industrialized part of the Italian society constructed itself through the creation of and opposition to an internal otherness, that was geographically situated in the South.

Even if Italian immigrants were considered a homogeneous category, from the last years of 19th century to the end of WWI Italians in the United States showed a sense of belonging to the Italian region of origin rather then to the white Italian race. The delay to finalising Italian unification ensured that Italians arrived in United States bringing with them a sense of belonging more tied more to the region of origin than to the entire Italian country. The reunification of these disjointed identities became the key point of the fascist political program: the main aim was to anthropologically reunify the society. In fact, Fascism aimed to create a new model of the Italian citizen and a new sense of belonging to the Italian race and nation, based on, quoting Giuliani, "un'idea di mascolinità 'unificante', virile e patriarcale, che coniugava l'obbedienza e la fedeltà alla nazione e alla famiglia con quelle verso il Regime"[2] (38). Therefore, Mussolini symbolically reversed the image of the South in order to include it into the nation. Moreover, during Fascism the new model of Italian society had been strictly tied to the symbolism and belief system of the rural southern context that had been reconciled in the public discourse during this period with elements such as war, industrial development and colonial expansionism. The association of South with traditionalism had been naturalized, valued and presented as the remedy to the distortion of social order, expressed for example in the confusion of gender roles - but first it was first crucial to bleach the 'internal blacks' in order to integrate them into the national social body. If during the liberal period, the line of color was located inside the nation and it assigned different racial categories

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[2] "An idea of unifying, virile and patriarchal masculinty, which combined the obedience and the loyalty to the nation, to the family and to the Regime".

among Italians, in the Fascist period the line of color had been shifted outside the Italian borders, in order to place blackness outside of Italy and specifically in the colonies. The fascist colonial aggression and the creation of Italian East Africa in 1936 (which included Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia), was also functional to the creation of Italian racial identity as white in opposition to the blackness of colonized people. While thousands of Italians were sent to the colonies in order to populate new lands, inside the colonies a system of subordination and inferiority of the native population was established on the basis of race, gender, citizenship. Nevertheless, in Italy the spread of a colonial imaginary as exotic and erotic, populated by sensual and over-sexualized women available to the Italian male conquest, contributed to a high incidence of sexual relations between colonizing men and colonized women. These relations, that in most cases were examples of sexual slavery and actual rapes, were obstacles to the construction of an Italian whiteness, which turned out to be contaminated. To avoid another racial degeneration of Italians, the Fascist government issued a number of laws in 1937 formally instituting an apartheid regime, after which point a strong dinstinction between races was imposed within the colonies. The native population was not allowed to live in the same neighborhoods, to attend the same schools or to go to the same public spaces as whites. Interracial relations were prohibited and miscegenation was highly regulated. Children of interracial unions automatically took the legal status of their native parent, which established the coincidence between blackness and subordination. Blackness has been created as a biological difference and consequently as a cultural, behavioral and psychological one. The imaginary and racist stereotypes relating to blackness constructed during Italian colonialism - which identified black men as wild, violent, irrational and dirty, and women as sensual, animal and with an unbridled sexuality - persist today in the Italian postcolonial society. The racist legacy of colonialism, even if today it takes different forms from the past, deeply shapes the relationship with migrants and African-Italian people. Migrations from the African continent to Italy and the massive presence of Black Italians shift once again shifts the line of color to within the italian borders, forcing Italy to deal with a "problem" rooted in its history.

Although the racialization of southern Italian people, Italian emigration to United States and the colonialism have been key moments in the construction of blackness and whiteness in Italy, the erasure of these events from public memory and a lack of cultural decolonization have left the Italian racial question unresolved. Not only has Italian colonialism been represented for decades as benevolent and compassionate, while its violence, genocides and brutalities have been totally ignored, but the construction of an Italian racial identity has never been analyzed. Today the assumption of Italian whiteness makes the intersection of "Italianness" and "Blackness" unfathomable and unrepresentable. This fact conceals the existence of about one million children and young boys and girls born of and/or raised by immigrant parents in Italy, who are perceived as foreigners, not abiding to what Caterina Romeo defines as the "chromatic norm" (211) and, therefore, as outsiders within the national social body. They face racism and discrimination in both the social and legal context, because in Italy the acquisition of citizenship is still based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, according to which foreign children born in Italy automatically take their parents' citizenship and request Italian citizenship only between their eighteenth and nineteenth birthday. Hence, they are foreigners by law. The emergence of the so-called 'second generations' calls into question the definition of Italian identity as uniformly white. Even if they identify mainly with the Italian cultural system and even if they feel they belong to the Italian national space, they are socially and legally recognized as non-Italians, which means exclusion, discrimination and the guarantee of a number of unsecured civil rights. Nonetheless, second generations are characterized by a stronger activism than their parents: they fight for their rights and strongly oppose their being considered as second-class citizens; they denounce episodes of everyday racism in Italian society; they represent themselves outside of stereotypes. During the last few months many second generation associations such as "L'Italia sono anche io", "Italiani senza cittadinanza", "Rete G2", have been demanding a reform of the law on citizenship based on the principle of tempered *jus soli*, which would make it possible for children born in Italy of foreign parents to have Italian citizenship at birth if one of the parents has a residence permit. The fact that the second generations

increasingly take the floor forces Italian society to think that national identity is not a static concept and it makes urgent a cultural and political change that embraces a wider, multiple and more inclusive notion of Italian identity.

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