

Italy's Long Decolonization.

Republican Nationhood, African Narratives and Postcolonial Sociability in the Peninsular Central-West Countryside, 1956-ongoing

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Project description

The dismantling of the Italian dominions in Africa has been regarded until recently as a 'non-event' by many historians due to its temporal precocity, since Italy lost African colonies during World War II, and because of the lack of dramatic confrontation between Italian colonial forces and the independence ones.¹ According to this position, decolonization would not have produced any traumatic results for Italy and, consequently, any cultural memories,² ultimately leading to amnesia of its facts and colonial past in the peninsula.³ Inspired by a more recent historiographical debate which is instead questioning temporal and spatial limits of decolonization,⁴ as well as the idea of a quick and unproblematic Italian decolonization,⁵ my research aims to detect the actual experiences of this phenomenon and its long-term memorial and narrative results in the Republican Italy by looking at the return and resettlement in the peninsula of the Italians from Africa.

The repatriation to Italy of many citizens from the former colonies and of other Italian communities in Africa during the 1950s up to the late 1970s followed the independence and the implementation of nationalization processes in Africa and had a relevant impact on the peninsula. These returns required Italian institutions to deal with large-scale problems of reception and resettlement; also, social reabsorption of returnees implied a rethinking about inclusion criteria for the national community. Thus, this research focuses on two groups of Italian repatriates who resettled *en masse* in peripheral but significant areas of the central-west side of the peninsula and who were extremely visible in these settings because of their ethnic and cultural characteristics and their groups' organization as well. The

¹ K. Pinkus, 'Empty Spaces: Decolonization in Italy', in P. Palumbo, ed., *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* (London 2003), 299-320.

² C. Seton-Watson, 'Italy's Imperial Hangover', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15 (1980).

³ N. Labanca, 'Postcolonial Italy: The Case of a Small and Belated Empire: From Strong Emotions to Bigger Problems', in Rothermund, ed., *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations: The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945-2013* (Delhi 2015), 120-49.

⁴ See M. Thomas, B. Moore and L. Butler, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States* (London 2015); M. Shipway, *Decolonization and Its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empire* (Oxford 2008); T. Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (New York 2006); E. Buettner, *Europe After Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge 2016).

⁵ A.M. Morone, 'Quando è stato archiviato il colonialismo italiano?', *From the European South*, 1 (2016); Morone, 'La fine del colonialismo italiano tra storia e memoria', *Storicamente. Laboratorio di Storia*, 12 (2016); P. Ballinger, 'Borders of the Nation, Borders of Citizenship: Italian Repatriation and the Redefinition of National Identity after World War II', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49, 3 (2007); Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made: Decolonization and the Foundation of Postwar Italy* (London 2020).

first case is that of Italian settlers' mixed-descent children who returned from former colonies on the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia) during the 1960s and 1970s and resettled in the Neapolitan rural outskirts, more precisely in Aversa. The other group returned from Tunisia between the early 1950s and the mid-1960s and settled in the province of Latina—near the Lazio coast. With this research, I am especially trying to detect social conflicts which emerged between natives' and repatriates' communities, both as an immediate consequence of the return of Italians from Africa and their resettlement and also as a legacy that re-emerged over a longer period based on shared local memories about those events. Basically, I am looking at a historical crucial phenomenon which affected Aversa and Latina and their composite communities from repatriation until recent times. The aim is to ascertain whether it was in these very moments of social turmoil that Italy's colonial past and the memories on decolonization manifested in those narratives that draw a distinction between natives and repatriates, in order to validate the existence of different roles within the larger local community, thus, presumably, within the Italian post-colonial nationhood.

The two groups of repatriates which will be studied may appear marginal in the Italian colonial experience, since they did not officially take part in the group of Italian settlers, or they were not perceived as being part of this group by nationals in Italy. Indeed, the children of mixed descent were more easily assimilated to the ex-colonial subjects in the peninsula, based on their physical features.⁶ On the other hand, the Italians of Tunisia did not come from a former Italian territory but from a French one, which had been however, presented as a historical Italian place of influence during Fascism.⁷ However, just looking at these two groups I aim to extend my reflection to those figures whose status was more blurred in Africa—somewhere between that of colonials and locals—and then in the peninsula too. These very cases let us focus on decolonization in the peninsula territory rather than on Italian decolonization; even they let us further question this phenomenon's conceptual boundaries.

Looking at Aversa and Latina, it is possible to detect in greater detail the repatriation impact in terms of its social and cultural results. In these places, returnees distinguished themselves from the natives as a cohesive and distinct community. Such a situation was not common in the whole peninsula. The impact of return migration was uneven throughout the country but general: that is, it was an event that affected the entire peninsula to a diversified degree, within the extremes of imperceptibility and "over-visibility." Indeed, the returnees did not distribute equally in the different regions of Italy. They

⁶ S. Patriarca, 'Gli italiani non sono razzisti. Costruzione dell'italianità tra gli anni Cinquanta e il 1968,' in Giuliani (ed.) *Il colore della nazione* (Milano 2015), 32-45; Patriarca, *Il colore della Repubblica* (Torino 2021); S. Lubkemann, 'Unsettling the metropole: Race and Settler Reincorporation in Postcolonial Portugal,' in Elkins, Pedersen (eds.), *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century* (New York-Oxon 2005).

⁷ P. Audenino, *La casa perduta. La memoria dei profughi nell'Europa del Novecento* (Roma 2015).

mainly concentrated in the places of their arrival, where there were refugee camps, or in those areas that, because of the presence of many of the same diaspora, were most frequently chosen for final resettlement.

Italian farmers from Tunisia migrated to Latina from the early 1940s until the mid-1960s. Latina was, actually, a particular social environment of resettlement because of the prolonged lack of a population that could be defined as autochthonous. Due to its recent foundation, which took place in the 1930s, after the fascist reclamation of the Agro Pontino, the city was populated by additions or substitutions of groups of national migrants who maintained strong identity links with their place of origin.⁸ The Italians from Tunisia who settled in the Agro Pontino in the 1950s occupied those farms that had been devastated during the war and had been abandoned by the previous owners, natives of the Northern-East part of Italy. In Latina, they organized into a farming cooperative which highly contributed to the redevelopment of that territory during the 1950s' and 1960s', by introducing new agricultural methods and technologies.⁹ At the same time, the war camp hospital of Aversa was converted into a reception centre during the second half of the Forties to welcome the Giuliano-Dalmatian exiles and the many nationals who repatriated from Africa in the following years, up to the late 1970s. The very nature of the camp, which represented to some extent an independent town within the centre of Aversa (there were elementary schools and a church), made the returnees extremely visible to the local population. Their visibility persisted in the following decades, and it is still true today being the result of the Italian governments' housing policies towards the returnees. The camp demobilization, which was carried out at the end of the 1980s, was made possible by public housing that permitted to move the population of the camp from the old town to the more peripheral and industrial area, really close to the Neapolitan countryside—the Agro Aversano.

The two settings of this research—Agro Pontino, and Agro Aversano—are geographically contiguous; moreover, they constitute a spatial continuity both in terms of landscape and agricultural production. The very boundary between the regions Lazio and Campania that officially divides this consistent countryside stays indeed, as an expanded limit, which has been moved several times before and after World War II.¹⁰ In both these places, repatriates faced hardship in socially integrating because of their ethnic and cultural differences. In fact, while Italians of mixed-descendants in Aversa were recognized as Africans due to their physical appearance, repatriates from Tunisia in Latina had

⁸ O. Gaspari, 'Bonifiche, migrazioni interne, colonizzazioni (1920-1940),' in Bevilacqua, De Clementi, Franzina (ed.), *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*. Vol. I, (Roma 2002).

⁹ S. Mangullo, *Dal fascio allo scudo crociato. Cassa per il mezzogiorno, politica e lotte sociali nell'Agro Pontino (1944-1961)*, (Milano 2015).

¹⁰ A. Caracciolo, 'La regione storica e reale,' in Id. (ed.), *Storia d'Italia. Le regioni dall'Unità a oggi. Il Lazio*, (Torino 1991).

been classified as foreigners by the natives because of their poor Italian language. Also, the two groups maintained their cohesion for a longer time, and until today, as a consequence of their ghettoization in Aversa and of their ability in re-organizing a productive lobby in Latina.

The research suggests that the presence of the returnees in Aversa and Latina proved to be over-visible in some critical moments in which narratives about their colonial past and legacy reappear to emphasize these groups' different allegiance towards those places and Italy as well. In trying to verify this assumption, I am collecting repatriates and natives' memories about those critical moments in which local communities faced divisive social animosity. Also, I am looking at local archives for institutional accounts about those same happenings.

Apart from the moment of repatriates' maximum visibility i.e., their *arrival and resettlement*, I am here considering issues and events related to economic and housing policies, human mobilities, the occurrence of natural events, as well as to the unfolding of economic conjunctures. They are:

- *Funds for the Sothern Italy (Cassa per il Mezzogiorno) (1950s-1960s)*. Part of the economic funding that post-war Italian governments allocated for the industrial and agricultural development of Southern Italy, was used in projects for the economic reconversion of Agro Pontino. The resettlement of Italians from Tunisia in this place intertwined with the development project because of the unique employment opportunities it created in Latina, and because it fostered the aggregation among the repatriates. Returnees from Tunisia organized themselves into an entrepreneurial lobby to compete for the allocation of these funds.
- *Earthquake (1980)*. The earthquake that affected Irpinia in 1980 touched Aversa, too. This event triggered dynamics of appropriation and occupation of public property by the locals that mainly affected the refugee camp, which was at that time still inhabited by the returnees.
- *Social housing (1980s-today)*. Dynamics of appropriation concerned Aversa social housing intended for refugees from the camp. Other than explicating those practices of exclusion and ghettoization that the locals implemented against the repatriates, denying them the recognition of equal rights and equal citizenship, the theme of social housing proposes a central and debated issue in the Republican Italy, i.e. the nationals' right to housing.
- *Immigration (late 1970s-today)*. Despite the returnees' claim for a peculiarity of their mobility, I believe that the flows of foreign immigration that have affected the peninsula since the 1970s, and the most recent arrivals of migrants and refugees from Africa, have forced them in rethinking their identity. Inevitable has been the contiguity with African migrants over the last ten years, given their massive employment as laborers on the campaigns around Latina and Aversa. What has this presence entailed for the group of children of mixed descent

settled in Aversa? How do repatriates from Tunisia position themselves concerning these laborers and the exploitative practices that affect them? Finally, how has the common African origin of the two groups been perceived or rediscovered by native citizenship? My research is trying to answer these questions as well.

Methodology and sources

The research implies the use of different categories of sources and, accordingly, different methodologies, namely: archival research and fieldwork or recollection of oral testimonies. It is believed that the very mixture of these methods will eventually permit to verify the actual impact of repatriation in the two chosen places (Latina and Aversa). These methods are indeed being implemented to localize the research and adopt a micro-historical approach to the analysis of the repatriation event and its many outcomes in the peninsula over the long period.

Documentary research will mainly focus on local archives—i.e. provincial and municipal archives. Rather than identifying the governmental reception and assimilation policies' general ratio (which had already been discussed in previous works)¹¹, such an approach intends to verify its practical application. This is to detect how this process intertwined with social, economic, and environmental local specificities, but also, this approach is proving helpful in reconsidering the repatriates' agency in the phase of their displacement in Italy. Documentary research will also be fundamental in ascertaining the varying degree of visibility of the returnees' groups after their return and integration into Italy. Indeed, this approach is helping in better identifying those moments in which repatriates and natives returned to identify two distinct and juxtaposed groups. In this regard, fieldwork is getting access to repatriates' and natives' memories about those very critical moments in which local communities faced divisive social animosity. But also, oral sources' analysis will be used to unveil the process of African and colonial past memorialization. By using these sources, the research intends to look at how the colonial past has been re-signified over time and passed on through shared narratives among repatriates' and locals' groups.

The archival research will be mainly devoted to archives in the provinces of Latina and Caserta (where Aversa is located). The files produced by administrative offices charged with matters of public order and security (police headquarters and prefectures) will be especially consulted, along with documentation of state and private or religious agencies of assistance. The recollection of oral testimonies will benefit from previously established contacts with groups of returnees and their

¹¹ A. Vigo, 'Dealing with "Returns": African Decolonization and Repatriation to Italy, 1947-70', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 57, 3 (2022).

associations in the local communities in Aversa and Latina. However, the existing network of contacts will be expanded, as to include repatriates not involved in representative associations, but also to integrate natives' contacts. In this regard, parishes and other Catholic agencies could prove significant because of the social role they had long embedded in local communities in the peninsula. Apart from archival and oral sources, local newspapers will be considered as well as local organizations committed to preserving memorial and historical heritage—for instance, The Museum of Agro Pontino.

The research implies a multi-scale approach. The process of repatriates' re-emplacement and the long-term local dynamics between different social groups will be highlighted by moving back and forth between an institutional scale to that of groups and personal experiences. The comparison between different return flows (from Tunisia in the mid-Fifties and the Horn of Africa in the early Seventies) and different places of resettlement will also entail the ongoing evaluation of the sources. This is especially true regarding oral sources. The testimonies analysis will indeed, develop into the critical of the storytelling act and its identity and social functions. That is the analysis will discuss personal narrative's functions in establishing continuity between the temporally different selves, but also its function in positioning the self in the very social and cultural context in which the narrative is performed.

Expected outcomes

This research aims at disclosing a little-known event of Italian history, the repatriation of Italians from Africa, which proves indeed to be enlightening in detecting the criteria for the construction of Republican citizenship and national belonging after the fascist and colonial experiences. In addition to contributing to the study of the long-neglected history of Italy's African and colonial experiences and its legacy in the long period, this research will also help in better positioning the Italian case within a European contest. Indeed, my research aims to better articulate the picture of European decolonization as a whole.

Starting from the idea of “multiple Italies”—through which scholars have tried to conceptualize the transnational dimension of Italian belonging—,¹² this research will look at how diversified models of Italianess interacted when the political project on an Italian civitas extended beyond the borders of the peninsula, had to be repositioned in a different paradigm than the colonial one. The encounter

¹² E. Franzina, *Una patria straniera: sogni, viaggi e identità degli italiani all'estero attraverso le fonti popolari scritte*, (Verona 1996 D); P. Bevilacqua, A. de Clementi, E. Franzina (eds.), *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana* (Roma 2001); Gabaccia, *Italy's many Diasporas* (New York 2003); R. Ben-Ghiat, S. M. Hom (eds.), *Italian Mobilities* (New York 2016).

between Italian returnees and nationals born in the peninsula entailed a confrontation on the criteria of recognition and inclusion which showed the coincidence in the peninsular model of Italianess (the mainstream model of Italian belonging) between Italian citizenship, place of origin, and ethnicity. That is, Italian returnees underwent a process of exclusion and racialization because of their African origin and their cultural specificities. This study will highlight alternative and marginalized narratives on Italian (but also European) belonging that are no longer acknowledged but were part of an intense discussion in the post-war period.

Repatriation from Africa also represented the moment when Italy turned from being a country of emigration to one of immigration. The fact that the first immigrants that democratic Italy welcomed were citizens of the peninsula can thus be used to revise nowadays dichotomic narrative that juxtaposes two groups, that of Italian hosts and the group of African illegal migrants. This research will try to connect past and present by looking at different mobilities between Africa and Italy. Also, it intends to start reasoning around the persistence and revision of colonial stereotypes on ethnic and gender belonging in post-war and contemporary Italy.