



The Risorgimento Rec(h)anted

Historical Revisionism of the Italian Unification in Songs from Southern Italy

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Introduction

It has been acknowledged that the recent celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the Italian Unification have triggered a renewed urge for clarification of national history (MONSAGRATI, 2014), where historical chronicles became, in a way, the allegory of present power relations and the discussion of the past served to open up a debate about the present (cf. SLEMON, 1988). In this context, a number of diverse subaltern narratives have been identified in the Italian South [Mezzogiorno], aimed at the renegotiation of the position of Southern people within Italian society and within recent and past national and international history (PUGLIESE, 2008).

In fact, these phenomena can be understood as cultural reactions to the ever-present representation of the Mezzogiorno as an Other, instrumental to the legitimisation and construction of a shared Italian identity, based on a Northern and “white” ethnocentricity, which exists in opposition to an “oriental” and “backward” South (DICKIE, 1994; GRIBAUDI, 1997; PUGLIESE, 2008). As subaltern responses to this ethnocentricity, partial or total rejections of Italian-ness[†] have been observed and evaluated by a number of different authors: for instance, when looking at Palermo as a case study, Pardalis argues that Sicilians resort to the assertion of their own, separate identity as a means to renegotiate their position within Italian society (2009:233-234); Joseph Pugliese goes a bit further, and identifies Southern practices of resistance described as “a tactical blackening of Italy in the face of a virulent and violent caucacentrism” (2008:2), furthermore, he talks of «Provisional Street

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† I have elsewhere proposed to describe this rejections as part of a general cultural trend that I have called “Post-Italianism”.

Justice» when describing the graffiti that disfigure the statue of Dante Alighieri in Naples – these manifestations, perceived as incomprehensible and vandalistic by the dominant social groups, are on the contrary attempts to propose alternative political discourses, capable of reorienting the “caucacentric, monoglossic nation-state space into a place that is coextensive with southern community histories, politics and cultural practices” (PUGLIESE, 2008:13); Pugliese’s analysis resonates in Festa’s claims about an inclination for a constructive antagonism against the state, diffused in Neapolitan and Southern Italian subalterns (2014); other authors have acknowledged and documented a revival of discourses aimed at the attainment of forms of political independence or strong autonomy, reflected in the emergence of new local parties, movements and cultural associations (PATRUNO, 2011; FEDERICO, 2011)

Historical Narratives, Revisionist Literatures, Autonomist Movements

In terms of historical accounts, the revisionist narratives are set against the official narrative on the Italian Unification: by official here it is meant the narratives that can be evinced from national celebrations, national media, and the school. On one hand the official narratives propose the glorified act of liberation of a chunk of Italy from a foreign sovereign, on the other hand revisionist narratives focus on the violence exerted on Southern people, the politico-economic interests behind the Unification, the plunder of Southern resources and the progressive impoverishment of the South, among other things. This revisionist tradition has led to the production of a myriad of works attempting at proposing alternatives to the traditional historiography: among the most notable examples, cf. Alianello (1982), Ciano (1996), Izzo (1999), Di Fiore (2010) and Guerri (2010).

The most influential of these works, at least in terms of mass culture, is Pino Aprile’s *Terroni* (2010), which condenses most of these topics and makes them accessible to the general public. This book has often been criticised by academics, either for alleged overstatements (cf. FELICE, 2012), or for methodological weaknesses (cf. CASSINO, 2013), or for having sold as shocking new discoveries facts that were long time known in academia (cf. TINTORI, 2012). Discussing these positions is not among the purposes of this paper, suffice it to say

that Aprile's work is considered here in relation to its significance in the present, as a phenomenon related to 2010 and to the 2011 Celebrations, rather than a history book. Among other things, *Terroni* was taken as primary source of inspiration for at least 2 albums, namely Fiorella Mannoia's *Sud* and Mimmo Cavallo's *Quando saremo fratelli uniti*, and has in general inspired many of the songs that will be presented in this work.

A myriad of small movements and cultural associations has also emerged, that often associates the revisionism with claims for independence or autonomy, or advocates a restoration of the Bourbon crown (PATRUNO, 2011). Sometimes ensembles, bands and singers-songwriters have been communicating directly with these movements. Direct examples of this trend could be the song *Sicilia patria mia*, written by Carlo Muratori and Massimo Costa on a commission from the cultural/political association L'altra Sicilia (cf. MARGARINO, 2005), or the dialogue between singer-songwriter Nandu Popu with his band Sud Sound System and the Neapolitan political movements Insorgenza Civile and Identità Insorgenti (cf. CONTI & POPU, 2014); the latter movement has more recently started other dialogues with such musicians as 99 Posse, Enzo Avitabile, Jovine, etc.

Popular Music and Revisionism

In general, musicians across different regions, backgrounds and musical traditions have extensively reacted to the spread of these narratives, and an unprecedented number of openly revisionist songs has been released in the months immediately preceding and following the celebrations. It has to be acknowledged, though, that Italian popular music is far from being new to these topics, in that many musicians have explored these issue in different times and circumstances: the 1972 album *L'unità* by Stormy Six, among other things, documents the 1861 massacre of Pontelandolfo (in the song by the same name) and the 1863 massacre of Pietrarsa (in the song *Sciopero!*). Other notable examples comprise the songs by Eugenio Bennato and Carlo D'Angiò for the Nuova Compagnia di Canto Popolare, including *Brigante se more* (1979), and Mimmo Cavallo's 1981 *Uh, mamma*.

The Post-Unification *Brigantaggio*

Many artists seem to resort to historical revision to uphold a partial or total rejection of Italianness: this rejection, in turn, is often asserted by means of the insistence on a number of

recurrent signifiers, so that for example the phenomenon of the post-unification *brigantaggio* becomes an immediate common ground upon which Southern histories and identities are unified and dignified. An example of this trend could be Kalafro's 2009 song *Briganti*, released two years before the 2011 celebrations, but already engaging in a disavowal of the symbols of national unity, condensed in the line that says: «scusate se non canto il vostro Inno di Mameli» (“Sorry for not singing the national Italian anthem”). The defiance of the national anthem is accompanied by an identification in the figure of the *briganti*, the post-unification freedom fighters who fought against the Piedmontese army in the 1860s. In Kalafro's song, the modern *briganti* fight against the mafia, coherently with a positive assessment of the role of post-unitarian *brigantaggio* that is generally accepted among the artists who write revisionist songs: there is in fact a resonance with a revisionist tradition that is epitomised in the quotation of Eugenio Bennato's aforementioned *Brigante se more* in the chorus of the song. Kalafro initially seem to claim a staunch attachment to Calabrian and Southern identity in the chorus, especially when singing “a terra è a nostra e nun s'ha 'dda tuccà” (“the land is ours and nobody should touch it”); however, in the verses they seem willing to negotiate this identity as a means for their militancy to be recognised a more universal status, as opposed to a mere local interest, when singing “non chiamarci calabresi, se a morire è un altro anarchico” (“don't call us Calabrians, as who's dying is an anarchist”) and “Non vengo per portarti la solita retorica terronica, ogni lettera che traccio è come un gancio che ti corica” (“I'm not here to give you the usual Southern rhetoric, every letter I write is like a punch that knocks you down”): here the signifiers “calabrese” and “terrone” are used in opposition to, respectively, an idea of universal anarchy and an efficiently oppositional mode of communication with the audience.

While reaffirming their Calabrian identity and declaring their detachment from the symbols of Italian-ness, Kalafro seem eager to identify themselves with the *briganti* also as a means to obtain a better status in a broader community of Italian anarchists or leftist militants, at the cost of renouncing their same identity as Calabrians and Southern Italians. These attempts seem substantially equivalent to what Pardalis (2009) argues about displays of Sicilian identity, namely that “Sicilian ethnicity serves Sicilians to renegotiate their relationship with

the Italian state anticipating a better agreement” (2009:232); importantly, Pardalis puts this in direct contrast with independentist discourses.

Noi vs. Voi, Southern Antagonism and Provisional Street Justice: 99 Posse's Italia S.P.A.

While substantially retaining the same internationalist inspiration of Kalafro's *Briganti*, 99 Posse's *Italia S.P.A.* (2011) focusses on the violence exerted on the South in the Unification process, relating it directly with the situation of geographical inequality that characterises Italy. The lyrics seem to address a precise interlocutor, marked by the continuous use of the Italian pronoun *voi* (“you” second person plural) and its derivatives; the addressed interlocutor is progressively identifiable with the elites that controlled Italy from the Unification to the present day, responsible, in more recent times, of the political phenomenon of the Northern League:

*l'Italia che avete fatto voi l'avete fatta nel modo peggiore,
spacciando fratellanza e seminando rancore,
ignorando lo stupore sul volto dei contadini fucilati,
dei paesi rasi al suolo, delle donne violentate..
Ignorando con dolo le aspirazioni di uguaglianza giustizia e fratellanza
per le quali a milioni sono stati ammazzati,
creando senza pentimento un Paese a misura di ingiustizia,
un patto scellerato tra Savoia e latifondisti..
e ancora nun v'abbasta, mo facite i leghisti
e mentre giù da noi chiudono gli ospedali e i laureati s'abbuscano a jurnata co na
vita interinale
v'amm a sentì pure parlà.di questione settentrionale!?!?*

*(The sort of Italy you 've made,
you 've made it the worst possible way,
selling hatred off as brotherhood,
ignoring the consternation
on the face of massacred peasants,
of entire villages annihilated,
of the raped women,
deliberately ignoring
the aspirations of equality
justice and brotherhood
for which millions of people
were killed,
creating with no remorse
an unjust country,
a shameful deal between the Savoy crown and the landlords...
and still that isn't enough for you,*

*now **you** 've joined the Northern League
and while down South, back in our land, they close down the hospitals,
and people with a degree have to pick temporary jobs to make a living,
do we even need to listen to **you** talking
about northern question?).*

Against the *voi* (in bold in the above quotation), the song sets a *noi* (“we/us”, in bold in the quotation below) that does mainly identify Southern Italian people, although it refers in general the South of the world:

***nui** ccà tenimm' trentamila tonnellate di munnezz' ammontunat'
e pront' pe ne fà tutte quante barricate
e n'ate trentamila v'è buttamm' a catapulta rint'e ville addò campate.*

*(Here **we** have got 30,000 tonnes
of piled rubbish
ready to be made into barricades
and another 30,000 tonnes,
we 'll throw them at you,
in the villas where you live)*

In other words, 99 Posse construct a manifest binary here between their own identity and that of the enemy, they identify themselves with the South and, to a limited extent, associate the enemy with the North, or at least identify the enemy as someone who defends Northern interests: this is an important identitarian statement, which arguably reflects a recent shift in 99 Posse's production, as I will try to demonstrate elsewhere.

As seen above, the *noi* menaces an imminent revolt by using rubbish, the infamous *munnezza* that upsets Naples, and that is associated with the subordination of the South to Northern companies, due to the well-known involvement of the latter in the disposal of industrial waste in Campania (MASSARI, 2004; SEBASTE, 2010). Rubbish is to be used to make barricades and being thrown at the *voi* in line with an understanding of the Italian South as an intrinsically antagonist macro-region, precisely in virtue of an active political use of its own condition of subalternity, as proposed by Francesco Festa (2014).

The song contains an example of what Pugliese defines Provisional Street Justice, namely a recording of a racist speech by a Lega Nord politician, Mario Borghezio, interrupted by a blown raspberry: this is exactly what Pugliese describes as the political reorientation of a

violently ethnocentric discourse towards more inclusive narratives, obtained through the disfiguration of an object – in this case the speech - which, though outrageously racist, comes from a member of the institutions. Similar disfigurations happen in other revisionist songs, often with more specific attacks to musical signifiers that symbolise the Unification: so, for example, L'Altroparlante's *La storia capovolta* (2011) borrows and mocks the tune from the *Marcia dei Bersaglieri*, whereas Federico Salvatore's *Il monumento* (2009) and *L'inno di Papele* (2013) both parody the Italian national Anthem.

Southern Italian/Neapolitan Nationalism

Among other songs, Eddy Napoli's *Malaunità* (2011) seems to blame both the Unification and the national unity for the current problems of the Mezzogiorno: the song goes as far as declaring indifference towards the Italian flag and questioning the brotherhood of Italians:

*Oè !
... e sì frato tu a mme ?!
E nun dirme che r'è
'sta bandiera, pecchè
nun tengo niente 'a vedè!*

*(Hey!
... are you really my brother?!
And don't tell me
about this flag, as
I haven't got anything to do with it!)*

The song does not declare any direct agenda connected to the attainment of forms of autonomy or independence. In *Fratelli d'Itaglia* (2014), Tueff similarly declares that the Italians are not his brothers, and goes a bit further by claiming that the South is his only nation:

*Ma quali frati d'Italia?
Nun simmu frati pe 'sta nazione [...]
Il meridione è la mia nazione, Napoli capitale [...]*

*(What brothers of Italy are we talking about?
We aren't brothers for this nation [...]
The South is my nation, and Naples is its capital city.)*

Both songs, as many other songs do, contain the declaration of some form of loyalty towards the historical Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and some form of sympathy towards the Bourbon dynasty: this is a very significant point, as there is a number other songs, such as the aforementioned *Italia S.p.a.* by 99 Posse, or for instance, *150 anni* by R&fusion, that declare their distance from any form of monarchist nostalgia.

In terms of both Eddy Napoli's and Tueff's songs, it is also hard to talk about Neo-Bourbonist agendas, as claims for a restoration of the Bourbon crown do not seem to be openly declared, despite the nostalgia of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. For these two songs, as well as for many other similar works, it is perhaps more appropriate to talk about forms of Neapolitan and Southern Italian nationalism, or nationalitarianism.

Neo-Bourbonist songs do exist though, and an example is Valerio Minicillo's *Se tornasse Ferdinando* (2011), which utterly declares the aspiration for a return of the Bourbon crown.

Final Remarks

To summarise, I have shown a number of songs that exist somewhere on a spectrum of different regions, ideologies and musical backgrounds, and a more comprehensive list is projected here. These songs were released from 2009 until last year, around the period of the Celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the Italian Unification, and advocate or propose a revision of the historical narratives on the *Risorgimento*.

Despite the significant differences, especially in terms of ideological background, these songs seem to converge towards similar views on the historical matters. In all cases, history seems to be used as a (more or less direct) allegory of the present, whereby rebalancing a dialogue about the past is instrumental to the renegotiation of current power relations, regardless of whether the present is read through the prism of nationalist or internationalist narratives, or, similarly, whether there is a Bourbonist nostalgia or a hostility towards the Bourbon dynasty. The substantial absence of clear autonomy/independence claims associated to the revision of the Unification denotes perhaps a spread cautiousness about a final pronouncement on the matter, yet this does not prevent many of these songs from embarking in authentic rejections of Italian-ness. In some cases, these same narratives are even suggested by musicians from other parts of Italy, as in Modena City Ramblers' *La guerra d'l barot* (2013), and in the aforementioned album *L'Unità* by Stormy Six (1972).

In conclusion, the promotion of narratives that renegotiate the role of the South in Italian history seems to have become a crucial task for musicians across varied backgrounds in Italy. The focus lies mainly on a dialogue between the South and the rest of the country (or the North) that suffers from a substantial imbalance towards the latter (Gribaudo, 1997). After the 150th Anniversary of the Unification, rebalancing this dialogue remains an urgent priority in Italian culture.

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