

# THE 'OTHER' IN ITALY

*In June 2010, the British School at Rome held a conference on 'Language, space and otherness in Italy since 1861'. The conference organiser, Professor David Forgacs, explains how defining 'the other' has helped shape the Italian identity.*

## Narratives of Italy

In 2011 Italy commemorates the 150th anniversary of Unification. In the run-up, historians and others have been reflecting on the story so far of its development as a modern nation-state. As historians well know, this story, like that of any nation, can be told in different and conflicting ways. Some accounts draw attention to the relative weakness and failures of Italian state-formation since 1861. They emphasise the persistence of strong local and regional identities, the failures of successive national governments to tackle inequalities between regions or to incorporate the interests of particular social groups. The rise of Fascism in the 1920s, supported by some of Italy's most powerful landowners and industrialists after a wave of strikes and occupations, or the rise in the 1980s of the Lega Nord (Northern League), which subsequently called for the secession of the more prosperous north from the rest of Italy, have been seen as two important pieces of evidence of this. Persistent organised crime and political corruption up to the present have been seen as symptoms of the failures of the state to engage its citizens fully or to acquire real democratic legitimacy.

Other accounts argue, by contrast, that, despite these limitations, the dominant trend in Italy, particularly since 1945, has been towards a fairly well consolidated popular national identity and increased democracy. Massimo d'Azeglio allegedly declared after Unification 'We have made Italy; now we must make Italians.' Since then, it has been maintained, the nation's internal divisions and differences – religious, cultural, political, linguistic – have indeed been largely overcome, and traditional rituals of local belonging, such as celebrations of local patron saints, have been flanked by rituals of belonging to a wider national community, such as voting in general elections or tuning in to the same radio or television programmes at the same time. As this suggests, the development of mass political parties and the

rise of the mass media, as well as the emergence of national sports teams and nationally recognisable public figures, have been important causes of national aggregation. Nation-building has been, according to this view, a story of coming together and overcoming of difference, one of modernisation and improvement, increased internal movement and networking, consolidation of frontiers and shared identifications.



Figure 1. *Man asleep on a bench, Ponte Sant'Angelo, Rome, c. 1890. Late 19th-century photographs of lower-class people were often governed by a picturesque representation of poverty. Beggars and homeless people were either captured unawares, often in 'characteristic' settings (beggars outside church doors, homeless men asleep on benches), or were posed full-face to the camera. They were generally included in photographic collections depicting the variety of social life. Nonetheless these photographs retain a unique documentary value as sources of information about how the poor looked and dressed and about streets and houses in Rome at this time. Photo: Giuseppe Primoli, reproduced with permission of Fondazione Primoli, Rome.*

There is, however, a third way that the story of the Italian nation, like that of other nations, can be told: neither as a narrative of impediments to its full development, nor as one of successful integration but as a history of exclusions. The latter is a story of the nation defined by what and who it cuts out, relegates to the edges and tries to forget, in order to form itself as a modern community. It is a narrative of the creation of 'others' to the collective self-image of the nation. According to this narrative, whole groups of citizens are omitted from the legitimate nation or at any rate not fully admitted to it. One is not talking here

about the regional minorities, like the Sardinians, or about localities and their traditions, all of which have often been quite vocal over the last century and a half in expressing their own interests. One is talking, rather, about less obviously recognisable 'others', those who have not always had the collective power or the access to means of public communication necessary to advocate for themselves.

## 'Others'

One early example of such a collective 'other' was the urban poor. The growth after Unification of poor districts and slum areas in the larger cities, such as Milan, Turin and Rome, was the result of the rapid expansion of an urban labour market, a low-wage economy and uncontrolled private housing. By the 1880s the existence of poor urban areas had come to be treated as a serious social problem. The urban poor were seen either as an occasion for charitable intervention or as a threat to the rest of society. Slums were seen as breeding grounds of disease and crime. The plight of the poor



Figure 2. The daughter of a Bosnian Roma family carries wood to take to her mother for cooking in the Roma camp at Casilino 900, Rome, 2009. Since the 1990s the poorest areas of informal housing on the peripheries of Rome have been inhabited mainly by migrants from eastern and central Europe. Casilino 900 was, until its demolition by order of the mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno, in January-February 2010, the largest informal settlement of Romani people in Europe. Located on Via Casilina near the junction with Viale Palmiro Togliatti, on part of the site of the disused former airport of Centocelle, the area was originally inhabited by migrants from Sicily engaged in selling fruit. When the latter moved into regular housing in the early 1960s, Roma and Sinti families took their place. The number of inhabitants expanded considerably in the 1990s with the arrival in Italy of thousands of Roma from former Yugoslavia. The main groups in Casilino 900 were from Montenegro, Kosovo, Bosnia and Macedonia, with a smaller number from Serbia. Photo: Maria Stefanek.

and the working classes was taken up in Italy, as elsewhere, by the labour movement and by the churches. As Leo XIII wrote in his encyclical of 1891, 'Rerum novarum' ('Concerning new things'), in effect also an anti-socialist manifesto, 'some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class'.

Five other historical examples of less visible and less vocal 'others' have been: the indigeneous inhabitants of Italy's overseas colonies, acquired at successive moments from the 1880s to the 1930s, who were generally denied the rights enjoyed by their colonisers and turned into a social underclass in their own countries; poor peasants in the more 'remote' rural areas, notably in the South, whose beliefs and traditions came to be seen, as Italy began to modernise, as rooted in the past and as an embarrassment to the self-image of a modern nation; sexual minorities, that is to say lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals, who only began to acquire a strong collective voice in the

1970s; persons with a disability; and the mentally ill. The last of these groups, up till Italy's mental health reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, were generally confined, particularly when they were also poor, in long-stay institutions or asylums (*manicomi*), and were among the least vocal, marginalised and forgotten groups in society.

Among contemporary 'others' the most prominent are the migrants from poorer parts of the world, including those from Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as the many Roma who have come into Italy from former Yugoslavia since the early 1990s. If xenophobia has been on the rise in Italy in the last two decades, both in popular attitudes and in the policies of the Lega Nord and the other parties of the right, this seems to give support both to the view that Italian national identity has indeed finally become consolidated and that it has been strengthened by a process of definition and exclusion of 'others' who are considered marginal or peripheral – those who work in the low-wage or informal economy, who

live in substandard housing, who do not have residence permits, or whose permits have expired.

### Space

'Marginal' and 'peripheral' are spatial representations, as is that of the 'group', and are strongly loaded with symbolic connotations. They belong to a way of talking and thinking about places, and indeed about whole societies, as having centres and edges, inner and outer regions, and about people as being bound into collectivities identified with particular places and seen as sharing recognisable physical or behavioural characteristics. However, these spatial representations are not 'merely' metaphorical or symbolic. For one thing, they often correspond to a real physical and social geography. Poor housing areas, including both shanty towns and low-rent apartment blocks, were and are often situated on the edges of cities. Depressed rural areas were for many years disconnected from the main transport networks and hubs and sometimes also cut off from other infrastructure such as a clean water supply or electricity. Colonies were part of a global periphery in the sense that they were physically distant from the metropolitan centres from which they were politically controlled, and they too lacked most of the productive and service infrastructure that was available in the centres. In the second place, insofar as margins and peripheries are metaphorical and symbolic representations, ways of imagining social relations in spatial terms, they are ones backed up by social prestige, real political power, armed force and the law. They carry implicit associations of vertical hierarchy, up/down, more important/less important, overlaid onto their overt horizontal topography of in/out.

### Questions

The aim of the conference, 'Language, space and otherness in Italy since 1861', held at the British School at Rome on 24–25 June 2010, was to identify and investigate the main rhetorical strategies and devices used in Italy since Unification to define 'others' and those used to resist such definitions. How, the delegates at the conference asked, had different types of discourse and media

produced certain 'marked' categories of people – for example the poor, the sexually different, colonised subjects, gypsies, illegal immigrants, persons with disability or with mental illness?

In an extraordinarily rich and varied series of papers and presentations, speakers at the conference examined these questions and considered how some people marked as others had reacted with their own discourses, counter-definitions and actions. One example was the theatre group, *Insania Teatro*, formed by patients of the former mental hospital of Santa Maria Maddalena in Aversa, north of Naples. Another recent

example has been the film-making project developed in Rome by the group *Asinitas Lab*, in which recent migrants who attend Italian language classes are given video cameras and training in filming and editing and encouraged to make films about their own experiences, rather than being, as is more often the case, objects of representations by other filmmakers, or by the mass media.

The conference was accompanied by a large exhibition, called 'Italy's Margins', in the gallery spaces of the British School at Rome, consisting of 100 photographs and 20 film extracts on the same themes. Two of the images illustrate this article.

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David Forgacs has held the established Chair of Italian at University College London since 1999. In 2006–09 he was Research Professor in Modern Studies at the British School at Rome. In 2010 he organised there the conference 'Language, space and otherness in Italy since 1861' (24–25 June) and curated the exhibition 'Italy's Margins' (26 June–9 July).

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## Quests for identity

In May 2010, two British Academy events explored further the complex issue of national and cultural identity.

On 13 May, in his Elie Kedourie Memorial Lecture, **Professor Simon Schama** discussed interpretations of ancient Israel and narratives of 20th-century Jewish history, and the role that each has played in shaping the modern identity of Israel.

On 24 May **Professor Julia Kristeva FBA** (Institut Universitaire de France) asked 'Is there a European culture?' – in a public conversation with Professor Jacqueline Rose FBA and Professor Marian Hobson FBA. Professor Kristeva described Europe as 'the cradle of the identity quest'. The European Union has established itself as 'the first real terrestrial space of universal peace', and a European 'we' is introducing the concept of 'questioning restlessness' to a world that prefers certainty of identity.

For Professor Kristeva, it is multilingualism that is at the heart of Europe's cultural and identity diversity. Europe is the political identity that speaks as many languages as, if not more than, the countries it encompasses. 'Today, European linguistic diversity is in the process of creating what I call "kaleidoscopic individuals", capable of defying not only the bilingualism of the English imposed by globalisation, but also the *Francophonie* steeped in Versailles' gilded dreams', individuals who can act as a carrier wave of tradition and innovation in a cross breeding of languages and cultures. This polyglot citizen is emerging as a new species. 'Will the future European be a singular subject with an intrinsically plural psyche because he or she is trilingual, quadri-lingual, multilingual, or will she be reduced to a global speaker?'

Professor Kristeva said she had noticed that young Europeans in particular, such as her students, are becoming both linguistically and culturally polyphonic: 'More and more young Europeans are going from one country to another, speaking the language of their country with that of the other country.' This creates questions about identity. Professor Kristeva herself long ago left her native Bulgaria to live and work in France: 'At the crossroads of two languages at least, I need an idiom which, under the smooth appearance of the Cartesian French, contains a secret passion for the black gilding of the Orthodox icons.'

Audio recordings of both occasions may be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/)



Professor Simon Schama



Professor Julia Kristeva FBA