Chapter Three
The Contemporary Relevance of Gramsci’s Views on the Italian ‘Southern Question’

Antonio Gramsci’s writings from 1916 to the 1930s on Italy’s ‘Southern question’ remain relevant in the twenty-first century not only to the relations of force in postwar and contemporary Italy, but also to a larger set of issues having to do with the history of colonialism and postcolonialism.

Gramsci’s writings on the Southern question from 1916 to 1924

When addressing themselves to Italy’s ‘Southern question’, Italian politicians and demographers often speak of ‘the Italian South and the islands’ as a way of acknowledging the particular history and economy of Sicily and Sardinia while at the same time insinuating the notion that the two islands are part of a wider Southern Italian backwardness. The inferior political status of Sardinia in the minds of self-satisfied ‘continental’ was an attitude that the young Gramsci bitterly resented.¹ In his teenage years he became an ardent Sardinian patriot² with a mission to struggle for the autonomy – even for the complete independence, if necessary – of his native island. He reacted indignantly to

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¹. In an autobiographical note of 1933, Gramsci spoke of his ‘continuous attempt to go beyond a backward way of living and thinking typical of a Sardinian at the beginning of the century who wanted to appropriate a way of living and thinking no longer regional and village-like but national’, to which he added that ‘if it is true that one of the most prominent needs of Italian culture was to deprovincialise itself even in the most advanced and modern urban centers, this process should appear all the more evident as experienced by a triple or quadruple provincial such as a young Sardinian certainly was at the beginning of the century.’ Gramsci 1975, Vol. III, p. 1776.
². Gramsci 1990, p. xi.
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theories of genetically transmitted racial and ethnic traits that were rife in Europe at the turn of the century and that still have many adepts today. By the time he began his university studies in Turin in 1911, he was aware, as Mary Gibson has pointed out, that by the 1890s racist theories had ceased being exclusively based on biology and skin colour and had slipped over into the realm of social class, with especially dire implications for how the Italian peasantry was perceived in polite society and by many members of the intelligentsia. ‘Race’, Gibson explains, ‘was used in Italy...to explain persistent differences within the nation, especially divergences between North and South’. Indeed, it is precisely this notion that implicitly underlies the politics of the Northern League today, with its regionally based network of groups claiming identification with the civilisation of ‘Padania’, (an allusion to the relatively prosperous regions of the Po Valley, la valle padana), which obviously draws a prejudicial dividing line between North and South.

In an article of 1 April 1916, entitled ‘The South and the War’, Gramsci emphasised an historical perspective on the Southern question that he had first evinced in a school essay of 1910 or 1911, entitled ‘Oppressed and Oppressors’. Specifically, he pointed up what he regarded as the fatal tendency of Italy’s conservative politicians in the 1860s and 1870s to conceive of national unification as possible only under ‘a single centralised régime’, which for the South had had disastrous consequences. Instead of recognising and validating the particular needs and problems of the South, the new Italian ruling class, in slavish imitation of the French model of state formation, had moved immediately to centralise all major state functions, and by so doing, ironically, had created a new united Italy that was in reality more divided than ever into two trunks, Southern and Northern, ‘in absolutely antithetical conditions’.

Gramsci was not only concerned about the political inequities built into the North-South relationship. He spoke also of the economic imbalances resulting from the huge flow of liquid capital from the South to the North, which reflected government policy that encouraged wealthy landowning Southerners to invest their capital in Northern industries rather than in initiatives designed to improve Southern agriculture and give a boost to nascent industries in the South. These investment practices, Gramsci argued, went hand in hand with a recalcitrant industrial protectionism, which was not counterbalanced by an agricultural protectionism that would have benefited the producing class in the South. Furthermore, such policies had negated the otherwise beneficial effects of emigration. It made no sense, Gramsci continued, to blame Southern miseries on a Southern lack of initiative. The fact was that capital would always seek its most profitable outlets and means of employment, unless those responsible for guiding social and

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3. Gibson in Schneider (ed.) 1998, p. 100. This aspect of Italian social history has been exhaustively studied by Moe 2006.