

# H-Net Reviews

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Norma Bouchard, Valerio Ferme. *Italy and the Mediterranean: Words, Sounds, and Images of the Post-Cold War Era*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. 319 pp. \$84.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-137-34345-1.

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In *Italy and the Mediterranean: Words, Sounds, and Images of the Post-Cold War Era*, Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme set out to examine how a host of Italian thinkers, musicians, filmmakers, and writers have addressed and reimagined the nation's relationship with the Mediterranean Sea since the 1980s. Drawing on an impressive selection of books, songs and films—some presented to an Anglophone readership for the first time—the two authors explore the various ways in which intellectuals and artists “revisit a heritage of exchange and plurality that complicates one's understanding of self and other [and] challenge the universalizing assumptions of the Western model seen as the horizon and teleological end point to which so-called premodern or not-yet-modern societies should ultimately aspire” (p. 2). The choice of the post-Cold War time frame is premised on the assertion that with the demise of a bipolar world—which had seen Italy and the surrounding region at the crossroads of East-West tensions—the Mediterranean Sea has acquired new geopolitical importance, particularly as a (deadly) border zone, but at the same time numerous intellectuals and cultural practitioners have interrogated the cultural and political significance of this stretch of water and proposed in its name “alternative models of coexistence” (p. 227). The book is both ambitious and meticulously researched and, insofar as it invites us to rethink the place of Italy in relation not only to the Mediterranean region but also to Europe and the rest of the world, it represents a timely critical contribution to the field of contemporary Italian studies.

The first two chapters provide an overview of the concepts and discourses that have framed historical un-

derstandings about the Mediterranean Sea in Western thought and more specifically in Italy. Chapter 2 includes a reconstruction of the Southern Question from its origins after Italian unification through fascism to post-war debates in anthropology, and concludes by sketching the work of revisionist southern historians such as Piero Bevilacqua, Marta Petrusiewicz, and Salvatore Lupo—the so-called *neomeridionalisti*—who from the 1980s sought to overturn the traditional, dominant image of a homogeneous, static, and economically “backward” southern periphery.

As is clear from the outset, the Italian South plays a prominent part in the authors' analysis and, indeed, it is often used in tandem or interchangeably with the word “Mediterranean.” The reasons for this juxtaposition are sometimes intimated: for instance, the claim is made that “Mediterranean discursiveness took a distinct shape with regard to Italy, especially its southern regions” while stereotypes about the South's underdevelopment and decay over Italian history are “a fundamental point of reference and essential prelude from which to assess contemporary rethinking of the Mediterranean in Italian thought and cultural practices” (p. 43). Most of the time, however, the authors appear to assume that there exists an intimate, meaningful relation between the Mediterranean and the Italian South (rather than the North), and it is this unspoken assumption that ultimately represents a key weakness of an otherwise very interesting book.

In chapter 3, Bouchard and Ferme proceed to examine Italian geophilosophical debates about Europe and the Mediterranean, focusing in particular on the work of

Massimo Cacciari and Franco Cassano since the 1990s. Having already edited the English text of Franco Cassano's *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean* in 2011,[1] the two authors are well placed to chart the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of these contemporary thinkers and to fulfil their stated goal of illustrating how such reflections "transcend identity politics for an intercultural practice that turns religious, ethnic, and cultural divides into the occasion for mutual enrichment and fruitful encounters" (p. 7).

The deliberations developed in chapter 3 on the Mediterranean as a possible site for cultural, religious, and ethnic syncretism set the tone for the authors' subsequent discussions of popular music (chapter 4, "Sounds of Southern Shores"); film (chapter 5, "Screening the Souths through Southern Eyes"); southern fiction, essays, and poetry (chapter 6, "Writing the Mediterraneanity of the Italian Souths"); and recent postcolonial/migrant literature (chapter 7, "The Mediterranean of Migrant, Postcolonial, and Exile Writers"). For instance, the chapter on music considers how certain popular musicians from the 1980s onwards have renegotiated Italy's Mediterranean location and have tapped into the country's history of musical creolization. Featured artists include the folk singer Fabrizio De André (and specifically his 1984 album, *Crêuza de mã*, that uses Genoese dialect to evoke the city's rich seafaring history), the Neapolitan blues bard Pino Daniele, but also groups that emerged out of the national social center scene during the early 1990s, such as Almamegretta and 99 Posse from Naples and Sud Sound System from Salento in Puglia, which often experimented with Western and non-Western musical forms to mount explicitly political critiques of Italian society.

The discussion of the selected musicians and the common threads that exist between them provides for an enticing and original perspective on Italian cultural production in recent decades. It is important to note that Bouchard and Ferme are expressly interested in the intellectually and politically engaged "high end" of music, literature and film. Hence, in the first case, no space is devoted to those perhaps less refined ways in which Mediterranean influences have been reworked into different pop genres. One such example is *neomelodica* music originating in the low-income neighborhoods of Naples, which, as Jason Pine's excellent ethnography illustrates, draws on a mixture of traditional and commercial sounds from across the Mediterranean and beyond, also as a means to make subaltern claims to the city and carve out limited economic opportunities.[2] Instead, the underlying sense here is that the sorts of engagements

with Italy's Mediterranean identity that Bouchard and Ferme are interested in are not simply delimited to particular examples of cultural production, but are also implicitly construed as signs of cultural distinction.

To their credit, the authors are swift to highlight the various essentialisms (e.g., Cassano's mythologizing of a "premodern, precapitalist Greece," p. 89), contradictions (e.g., the fact that the *neomeridionalista* critique of southern stereotypes remained anchored to "hegemonic Western concepts of Modernization Theory and its correlates of progress and development," p. 69), and general hyperbole (such as De André's claim to have predated "world music," p. 97) that have cut across the representations of Italy's connections with the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, Bouchard and Ferme stop short of critically considering their own choice of artists/thinkers or the power relations that have underpinned the production of new Mediterraneanisms in recent decades. It is difficult to overlook the fact that nearly all the main protagonists in their study, with the notable exception of a couple of postcolonial authors in the last chapter, are male. Most likely the authors did not intentionally exclude the voices of women, but some reflection about this gaping absence and what this might say about Mediterranean intellectualism in Italy (i.e., is it a typically male pursuit?) would have been welcome.

These last points bring me in a roundabout way back to the issue mentioned above regarding the conflation between the South and the Mediterranean. As someone who has spent the last two decades researching and grappling with misconceptions about the *Mezzogiorno*, the popular truism that there is some indelible and exegetic relationship between southern Italy and the Mediterranean Sea is something that has increasingly nagged me over the years. In fact, it might be argued that Bouchard and Verme's study effectively captures the ways in which this truism has resounded across certain cultural and intellectual circles in the last forty years. Nevertheless, I would have also welcomed a greater critical distance on the part of the authors. On occasions, it appears that some musicians, directors, and authors have been selected not for any conspicuous encounter with the Mediterranean, but because they are from the Italian South and/or contribute to redressing its historically marginal and denigrated status. Indeed, some of the featured artists do not actually deal with the Mediterranean at all, either as a location or as a metaphor.

A corollary of the conflation between the South and the Mediterranean as part of the same (potentially) eman-

ciptory imaginary is that the two authors tend to adopt an overly deferential view about the cultural questions at stake, and so are not inclined to contemplate more cacophonous or irreverent renditions of the Mediterranean Sea. What would Bouchard and Ferme's overall argument look like if they had included, say, Pier Vittorio Tondelli's novel *Rimini* (1985)? This multi-plotted depiction of 1980s life in the northern Adriatic resort wrestles with the Mediterranean Sea equally if not more so than some of the cases examined in *Italy and the Mediterranean*. Here the themes include international mass tourism, casual sex, beach life, and unfettered hedonism—themes that clearly deviate from the two authors' cultural and intellectual agenda. And yet *Rimini* also represents an example of an attempt to rescript Italy's relationship with the Mediterranean and to take on board questions of cultural hybridity and new senses of belonging, even

if this is carried out through a more profane and eminently northern approach. Without wanting to diminish Bouchard and Ferme's achievements in producing a highly readable and informative analysis of some of Italy's critical cultural production since the 1980s, the lingering sense at the end that there is, indeed, no room in their book for the likes of Tondelli or the *neomelodici* ultimately points to the cultural and political limits of Mediterraneanist thought in Italy of the last forty years.

#### Notes

[1]. Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, ed. and trans. Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

[2]. Jason Pine, *The Art of Making Do in Naples* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

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