OUTLINES - CRITICAL PRACTICE STUDIES

• No. 2 • 2010 • (138-153) •
http://www.outlines.dk

Italians, the "Good People": Reflections on National Self-Representation in Contemporary Italian Debates on Xenophobia and War

Paolo Favero

Centro Em Rede De Investigação Em Antropologia (CRIA)

ISCTE/Instituto Universitario Lisboa

Av. Forças Armadas, s/n - Ed. ISCTE

Salas 2N7 e 2N9 / Cacifo 237

1600-083 Lisboa, PORTUGAL

Abstract

Moving among historical material and contemporary debates on xenophobia and war, this paper is an exploration of the self-representation "Italiani Brava Gente", an image claiming the intrinsic goodness of the Italian people. Originated during the first Italian colonial enterprises, it has been used also for overcoming the horrors of Fascism and is evoked in contemporary Italy too for justifying traumatic and violent events. Functioning as an ideological laundry for reformulating and then setting aside disquieting moments of national shame, "Italiani Brava Gente" is central to the construction of a modern Italian identity.

Event 1: Ponticelli [1]

Ponticelli, outskirts of Naples, Italy, May 13th 2008. After allegations that a 16 year old Roma girl had tried to kidnap the baby of a local family2, an entire locality (supported, it will show later on, also by the local mafia-connected landowners) unleashes its anger against the local "nomad camp" (the Italian name for a camp occupied by or institutionally given to Roma people). Gangs of young men drive around in their scooters throwing molotov bombs and shouting "se ne hanno a j" ("they must leave"), while others wave metal bars and bolts in the air. Women, young and old, join the choir shouting "out out out!" "they've been here for too long these bastards" "let's set everything on fire". People smiling, people laughing. Big applauds fill the air when the hordes spot the first smoke climbing towards the sky. A folkloric feast, with, as shown later on by both national television and independent internet channels, the police standing next to the crowd passively looking at what is going on. During a television reportage, broadcasted on Italian television RAI 2 the same evening and containing interviews with women of the neighbourhood, one lady in her late 40s intervenes. As if she was attempting to reassure the audience, she said: "it wasn't a great violence after all, we first made them come out of their houses shacks or whatever they had built and only then we set them on fire, so that they would not come back". Neither the interviewer nor the journalists in the studio commented upon the cruel content of this sentence.

Event 2: Kabul

Kabul, Afghanistan, September 17th 2009. On the road to the airport of the Afghani capital, a car explodes against two Italian armoured trucks. In the explosion 6 soldiers, belonging to the parachuting troops of the Folgore and involved in the ISAF force operations, die (along with 10 civilians). As the heaviest attack against Italian troops since the 2003 attack at the base camp in Nassiriya (Iraq), the Kabul explosion reaches all main news. "Italy will stay in Afghanistan" is Defence Minister La Russa's first reply to the journalists, "these heinous and coward people will not be able to stop us". And Foreign Minister Frattini: "We must remain there, to show that the pride of Italy is still high". On September 21st, day of the official state funerals, the morning program Uno Mattina (on national television RAI1) offers a tribute to the newly named "heroes of war". Under the title "*Beati i costruttori di pace*" ("Blessed be the peace builders") and with James Blunt singing "Good bye my lover, good bye my friend" in the background, we are offered portraits of the soldiers who died along with images of smiling Italian troopers playing with local kids and talking to Iraqi elderly. The reportage closes with the image of a large hand painted banner displayed during the funeral outside the church saying: "May the angels of the Lord smile to you as they escort you to the lights of Paradise. Long Live Italy!".

[1] This article is dedicated to Navtej Singh Sidhu who was brutally set on fire by three young men while sleeping outside a station in the suburbs of Rome. He survived, but was rapidly forgotten…

[2] The accusation was soon proved to be false and taken back.

Italian Forgetfulness…

Italy is often portrayed and experienced (by foreigners and Italians alike) as an entertaining, funny, paradoxical, romantic and probably innocuous country. A smiling Roberto Benigni jumping on top of the chairs during the Academy Award ceremony; a romantic Captain Corelli making women fall in love with his mandolin in the middle of the most cruel bombardments of World War II; a smart Marcello Mastroianni adorable betrayer in "La Dolce Vita". This is the Italy that we know and like to see, a country of funny unthreatening people. "*Brava Gente*", a good people.

This apparently flattering, undangerous, and romantic representation is however far from a neutral image. Rather it is the result of a strategic and cruel re-writing of history. A public memory built on structured forgetfulness. Appearing for the first time during Italy's first colonizing enterprise (at the end of the 19th century) in order to justify the imperial defeat, the image of the "Good Italian" became with time a proper pillar of Italian popular culture. It proved fundamental for overcoming the shame of Fascism at the end of WWII. And far from a buried image, it has powerfully re-emerged, in recent times too, to occupy a key ideological function in a changing Italy, a country becoming a more and more attractive goal for migrants, an active participant in the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and also a nation facing an increasing growth in patriotism, in instance of revisionism (eventually allowing Fascism to intake again a key role in national political matters) and open expressions of xenophobia and homophobia. The representation of the "Good Italian" has functioned (and still functions) as an ideological platform useful for addressing situations of crisis and trauma; a kind of laundry for reformulating and then setting aside disquieting moments of national shame. Under this representation, crimes get banalized and eventually forgotten, and history allows itself to be re-written. Bringing a Catholic sense of "*Pietas*" in touch with colonial/imperial/Fascist cruelty and offering a window onto an Italian sense of cultural continuity, "*Italiani Brava Gente*", I suggest, is central to the construction of a modern Italian identity.

A common phrase used in colloquial situations too, "*Italiani Brava Gente*" entails, to put it bluntly, that, differently from other people, "we", the Italians, are an intrinsically good folk. We never really harm other people and our history (at least as "we" know it) is supposedly a proof of that. Indeed, "bad events" have happened (and happen) here too, but they are simply the result of accidents while other people and nations have actually always done much worse things than we. "We", the Italians, never really did any harm on other people willingly. Not even during Fascism. We are intrinsically generous, charitable, sociable, convivial and friendly. Neither xenophobic nor homophobic. Our doors are open to anyone and we would never hurt the stranger knocking at our door. Fundamentally, "we" are a good people, "*brava gente*".

Most of the people in my generation have actually grown up nurtured by such self-representations. We were, for instance, taught that while having colonized, "we" have actually never been real colonizers. The people of Somalia still love us today, I remember my grandmother telling me, because we did bring civilization over there. Our schoolbooks taught us how the Italian colonizing enterprise was actually the result of a purchase and not of the use of violence and even an accredited liberal journalist such as Enzo Biagi in his cartoon history of Italy spoke of the Italian attempts at creating an empire in Africa as the "African Adventure" (cf. Biagi 1980). I will later on briefly describe the cruelty that was central to this so-called "adventure", but for the moment let us just acknowledge the

evident banalisation that filters the present memories of such events. Similarly the history of Fascism too has been re-written to fit this image. At elementary school, while being indeed taught about the cruelty of Nazism, my peers and me were also taught that Mussolini never really persecuted the Jews (or at least that he did not really aim at doing that). No one in Italy, so we were told, actually "really" believed in the racial laws, and the Jews were never "really" persecuted in our country. The millions of Italians who subscribed to Mussolini's party too were not representative of the will of the people. Just an accident. And it is on the basis of such popular discourse that Prime Minister Berlusconi, a few years back, could state in public that Italy never really hosted concentration camps but only "*campi di villeggiatura*" (i.e. "holiday resorts", cf. also Corvisieri 2004). Basically, my generation grew up with the notion that Italy has been a nation of mandolin-playing captain Corellis. And following this same logic, we are today told that our participation at the contemporary "wars on terror" (and more) is actually a "mission of peace", and that our soldiers, being known across the world for being "Good People", are never really exposed to threats (I will get back to the tragic consequences of this stance in a little while). And similarly we are taught that xenophobia and homophobia reside somewhere else, not in "our" country.

From the South Asian Community in Rome to "Italiani Brava Gente"

While the historical role played by the representation "*Italiani Brava Gente*" has been successfully addressed by historians (among them Angelo Del Boca, Gianni Oliva, Giorgio Rochat, Nicola Labanca, etc.), my work aims at analysing the presence of this, according to Battista (2004) "self-consolatory myth" in present times, and look at the way in which it still functions today as a cultural justification ensuring the removal of crimes and injustices (such as those committed in Ponticelli above) from public consciousness. This paper is the first in a series of explorations regarding this self-representation (in my other writings I am exploring the presence of this image in cinema, school books, in the "re-birth" of Fascism and in the experiences of migrants). In this article, however, I will primarily focus on its appearance in media debates regarding xenophobic crimes and Italy's participation at foreign missions of war. Doing this, I will however also aim to offer the reader an introduction to the history of this self-representation. As this article has been awarded the pleasure of closing this issue, I will actually allow myself a certain degree of freedom of expression and allow the text to become in moments an exercise in "partisan anthropology", hoping to provoke a reflection upon the encounter between politics, popular culture and "Otherness" in contemporary Italy.

The material on which I base my analysis is primarily made up by media reports but also by observations made during fieldwork in Rome between 2005 and 2007.[3] Inspiration for this work came, in fact, during my research in Piazza Vittorio, a neighbourhood in central Rome (the Esquilino) located near Rome's central station and known for its large presence of migrants. Labelled as a multicultural laboratory, Piazza Vittorio has been the object of strong debating and also of direct political interventions. With statistics reporting only 33

[3] Funding for this fieldwork was granted by the Swedish Research Council.

per cent of the population being mother tongue Italian speakers and with its proximity to the station (in Italy a marker of low status) Piazza Vittorio has received a bad reputation, as an area of crime and danger, an area loosing its "Italian character". Anyway, while I was working with the local South Asian community, I got attracted by the ever-growing amount of explicitly xenophobic and homophobic messages exposed in public in the shape of writings on the walls or posters (see Photo 1). I also got exposed to the protests of neighbourhood organization (often supported by rightist organizations) declaring their intent to "clean up" the area. Parallel to this, in the street where I settled down, a group of extreme right activists opened up a shop selling books and mementoes celebrating the greatness of Fascism (despite an Italian law forbidding any use in public of symbols belonging to Fascism). Suddenly I saw my whole street transforming. The tobacco vendor started selling lighters with Mussolini's profile on, the newspaper shop put on display calendars displaying Fascist symbols, toy stores selling miniatures of Nazi and Fascist soldiers, etc. The local barber too started wearing a Celtic Cross (in Italy symbol of the union of Fascism and Christianity) around his neck. I remember how one day I spoke with the owner of the bar where I usually went for my coffee asking him who these people were. "You can see it by yourself" he said staring in my eyes. "Why? What's wrong with them?" he added sensing my perplexity. I remained in silence or must have humbled something strange being taken a bit aback. "They are good guys, Paolo, good guys, what's wrong with it?".

Photo 1

Finding myself buried in this re-writing of history I got increasingly interested in Italian politics and Italian national identity-making and embarked also on a rethinking of my own memories of the country that I left eighteen years before. I noticed that whenever I would address issues of racism and xenophobia or for that matter of Fascism and colonisation, the motto "*Italiani Brava Gente*" would always pop up. So the idea for this project was born.

Making The Italians

Before I go any further I need to devote a few lines to the problematic notions of Italian nationhood, since these lie at the core of the transformations that are taking place in contemporary Italy and of the history of the image "*Italiani Brava Gente*". In the 19th century, Massimo d'Azeglio, one of the founding fathers of unified Italy, wrote "we have made Italy, now we have to make the Italians". Almost a curse, this quote would, in the coming ages, become a banner of the failure of Italian politics and the best way of defining Italianness, i.e. in terms of its absence. A recent nation-state (founded in 1861) composed by areas that had been for centuries under the control of different rulers, Italy, was (and still is) characterized, indeed like many other countries, by great social, cultural and economic differences. Nurturing alternative and small-scale identifications (the extended family, the city, the region, the political party, the football team) the "Italians" are considered to have always had a critical relationship to the nation-state and its symbols (cf. Ginsborg 1998, Carandini 1995, Cassano 1998).

Indeed, the attempts at changing this have been many. The most famous one is Mussolini's, who attempted at boosting nationalist feelings by forcibly inserting Roman symbols and the national flag in public culture, by abolishing the use of foreign words, by "producing" national heroes and by signing (in 1926) the Concordat with the Catholic Church, sanctioning its role as a "religion of state". Confirming the popularity of the self-representation of the "Good Italian", Mussolini too believed that the lack of a sense of nationhood depended upon the intrinsic "moral weakness" of what he defined a "race of sheep" (Gallo 1967:249). For him the Italian people were indeed a "Good People" and in order to emerge they had to develop the cruelty that in his eyes characterized the Germans. In 1938, after the cruel bombing of Barcelona, Mussolini expressed his happiness regarding the fact that Italians could generate "horror for their aggressiveness rather than enjoyment as mandolin-players" (quoted in Del Boca 2005:46).

With the end of the war and with the disillusionment with, and public detachment from, Fascism, such forcible attempts at creating a strong sense of national identity lost momentum. Therefore, the Italians born after the war never fully identified with the "*Patria*" (the homeland). In childhood, we all knew we were Italians, but we would not celebrate that belonging nor its symbols. Only exceptions were the raising of national flags during football cups or, for some of us, the celebration of April 25th, the day of liberation from Fascism. In recent years, however, in the confluence of national agendas and global transformations, this has changed. I left Italy in 1991 and when I was able to go back more continuously (in 2001/2002) I noticed a boost in the public display of flags, anthems, etc. The apotheosis of this was indeed during the 2002 Football World Cup. The national media were during those days obsessed with the fact that the Italian players did not know the lyrics of their own anthem. Things were to change, politicians declared. And

it was so that most Italian dailies started publishing the lyrics of the anthem and some also distributed complimentary CDs containing various versions of "*Fratelli d'Italia*" ("Italian Brothers").

Such changing attitudes towards the nation and its key symbols were, however, taking place in a tense period of time characterized by debates regarding the growing migration flow from non-western European countries, by an increasing medialized production of fear for terrorist attacks and hence, in a bizarre and dangerous equation, by the idea of having (as during the end of the Roman Empire) an "enemy" both within and outside. This was also the time in which Italy eagerly participated at the US-lead war against terror sending troops to occupied Iraq and Afghanistan attempting at defending what Mr. Berlusconi called the "superiority of the Western civilization". Besides raising a wave of debates, such presence also contributed in boosting, in particular at the occurrence of the death of soldiers, great patriotic fervour. The 2003 bomb attack against the Italian military base in Nassiryia and the 2009 attack against two Italian armoured trucks in Kabul lead to great celebrations of patriotism (I will discuss these events in further detail below). Even more emblematic was the handing over in 2003 of a golden medal of honour to the family of Fabrizio Quattrocchi, a contractor kidnapped and executed by local activists in Iraq. Allegedly working without official permit from Italian authorities Quattrocchi became overnight a "martyr of war" for having allegedly pronounced the words: "I will show you how an Italian dies" right before his execution. So, suddenly the nation had its heroes again, people who sacrificed their lives for the "*Patria*" and who would be cherished in majestic funerals at the Basilica of Saint Paul in Rome with speeches bringing in close touch the Homeland with "God". In likelihood with the past, a nation was being shaped again under the blessings of the Catholic Church (in these days receiving greater and greater public visibility, cf. Favero 2007).

Such growing popularity of instances of patriotism has also been paralleled by repeated attempts at rewriting the history of Italy and in particular of the end of WWII. Great debates have been generated by the publication of journalist Giampaolo Pansa's books "*Il sangue dei Vinti*" ("The blood of the defeated", 2009) and "*La Grande Bugia*" ("The Great Lie", 2006) in which he suggests that partisans and fascists were equally criminal during the events that lead to the end of the war. The re-writing of this historical moment, witnessing to the most decadent and violent fringe of Fascism, i.e. the Social Republic funded by Mussolini after his fall, and the connected re-writing of the meaning of Resistance for the liberation of Italy, indeed constituted the last step towards the reinsertion of Fascism in the Italian public sphere. If everyone committed crimes, so the motto goes, why not allowing the Fascists to commemorate their ideas in public too? Historian del Boca sums up this phase of revisionism in the following way:

> *"This is the vastest and most deceitful attack heading towards the cancellation of historical memory and the total removal of crimes committed in Italy, Africa, Balkan and the Soviet Union. ... [T]his is an attempt to rewrite contemporary Italian and European history, relativising the horrors of Nazism and of the final solution, decriminalizing Fascism and its intelligentsia, delegitimising the Resistance movement and demonising Communism." (2009:9)*

As a consequence of this redefinition, a self-declared fascist, Mr. Gianni Alemanno, could in 2008 get elected as the new mayor of Rome. Celebrated upon election with roman (fascist) salutes and stadium-choirs declaring "*E' rabbia, è amore, è Roma tricolore*" ("it's

rage, it's love, it's tricolour Rome") Alemanno won the elections riding the contemporary wave of xenophobia and more specifically a case of rape that had allegedly been committed by a Romanian citizen at the expenses of an African woman. Promising stricter (xenophobic) measures of control against criminality and in particular on all migrants (with Romanians and Roma people in the spotlight) Alemanno declared, during his inauguration speech, the intent of "removing with hard measures from Rome all those who have violated the law and *who are not Italian citizens*". And on a much more loosely semiotic terrain, mention could also be made of the subtle manner in which Berlusconi re-proposed in public, in the same years, a series of postures and gestures belonging with very little doubt to fascist iconography (see Photo 2). In the 2006 electoral campaign extreme right activists would often respond to his gesture with open roman salutes.

And in the last few years Italy is also witness to a continuous growth of attacks on homosexual couples (emblematic the one committed by a man called "*Svastichino*", "the little swastika") and migrants (among the structured ones Ponticelli 2005, Rosarno 2010, etc.), to the open xenophobic declarations of Italian politicians, intellectuals and football supporters and to new, openly discriminatory, migration laws. All under the newly re-established importance of the national flag (and the cross) and all protected by the idea that after all, all such things are innocuous given that "we", the Italians, are, "*Brava Gente*".

Photo 2

Yesterday's "Good People"

Having delineated this context let me now go back to the history of the representation "*Italiani Brava Gente*". Its origin, as I mentioned above, dates back to the late 19th century when Italy too, latest of the lot, decided to venture out on a colonizing enterprise in Eritrea. With the goal of creating a base on the Red Sea that could function as a harbour for a further expansion into Asia, Italy embarked on this venture with few resources and little experience. Towards the end of the century the Italian Army faced heavy losses and the government was quick in justifying the poor results of the mission by officially stating the intrinsic difference between that and other colonizing missions. The Italian colonization, it was suggested, was a truly uninterested colonizing mission, a way to

spread civilization, through what were defined to be more human, tolerant and open-minded people. Even though the Italians adopted violent methods in order to conquer its new territories, the myth of the "*Good Italian*" started spreading quickly across Italian popular culture. Within literature, in particular, it got its blessing by writer Emilio Salgari who, in one of his short stories, introduced the figure of the "*Italiano Bono*" through a black slave saved from the pirates in Assab by Italian Navy soldiers. Very quickly, as Del Boca reports, "there were no doubts: those ruling upon Eritrea and Somalia were "good people"" (2005:50). Later on too, when Italy invaded Eritrea in order to then take over Ethiopia, this was presented as a generous enterprise of Fascism, which had sent "a whole army of workers to work concretely side by side with the indigenous for common well being" (Rastelli quoted in Del Boca 2005:50).

A crucial moment in the development of the image of the Good Italian was however WWII partly because of Mussolini's desire to awaken the Italians from their alleged slumber, but partly also because of the way in which this representation became crucial to generate a shared consciousness regarding the tragic events that had lead to the end of the war. Mussolini's plan was, as I already hinted at above, to actually cancel such self-image and generate the idea of a New Italian, stronger, healthier, more aggressive, one ready to make the nation forget the failures of the past and reinsert himself (sic!) into the myth of Romanhood. Indeed such views were widely shared. Among many, well known is the infamous sentence of General Mario Robotti in 1942 on the Slovenian front, when he wrote "Too little killing going on here!" (cf. Oliva 2006:4, cf. Walston 1997). WWII marked a crucial and tragic period for Italy. Italy took part at the invasion of Africa, then of Balkan and Greece, it sent off troops to fight Soviet and to support Franco in Spain. It promoted in 1938, to solidify the alliance with Hitler, the racial laws (openly sanctioning the duty of deportation of all Jews). Yet, with the end of the war great efforts were made, as I will show, to cancel all such events from public consciousness (see below).

It was in the crucial period towards the end of the War, however, that the self-representation "*Italiani Brava Gente*" would grow in popularity. Following the Armistice signed with the Americans on the 8th of September 1943, the Country got progressively split between the areas occupied by the Allied Forces in the South and by the presence of Mussolini's newly founded Social Republic in the North. And in all these places the Resistance played a major role in combating the remnants of Fascism (cf. Paggi 1996). This period was witness to one of the largest bloodsheds in Italian history, with the Nazi and Fascist troops executing large number of civilians across the country. As Oliva (2006) has pointed out, such events were crucial for the refashioning of the role played by Italian soldiers in this period and hence of the very image of the Italian. The massacre of Sant'Anna di Stazzema and that of Marzabotto, among many, where children and women got violently massacred by Nazi troopers, contributed to make the Italian/Fascist crimes look meagre indeed. "In front of Auschwitz, the guilt for the concentration camps of Arbe and Gonars disappear" (Oliva 2006:7).

Italy came therefore out of the war as a "winner", dissociating the responsibilities of the Italian people from those of Mussolini and the Savoy King. Differently from what Nazism had meant for Germany, Fascism for Italy was to be remembered as an unfortunate parenthesis in history. With the good intentions and laboriousness of the partisans proving this point, and with the protection of US and England (who saw Italy as a precious allied against Bolshevism), Italy marched into the post war period as a victim (and not a perpetrator) of the crimes of war. An Italian strategy of forgetfulness and inversion is

particularly visible in the trials against criminals of war. The Italian authorities were very slow in organizing their trials (cf. Oliva 2006). They did not want to bring German criminals of war to the tribunals afraid that this could become a boomerang and lead to the prosecution of Italian citizens (allegedly criminals of war) who had already been incorporated in important political roles in the new Italy. Basically the after-war Italian Government of De Gasperi decided to slow the process down " patiently waiting that the expectations of justice of Italian public opinion would cool down and that the evolution of the international political situation would remove the problem" (Oliva 2006:13). Paradoxically, such re-elaboration of history was shared by all angles of Italian intelligentsia, by Rightists, Liberals, Catholics, Socialists and Communists. In order for Italy to come out of the war with the head high, forgetfulness had to be applied to everything that somehow could connect Italy with the destinies of Nazi Germany. Hence all the crimes, from those committed during the occupation of Balkan and Greece, to the flow of refugees caused by Italy's invasions, and also the destiny of the Italians prisoners at the hands of English, French, Russian and Germans got hidden. Indeed, in my school days too, such stories were never part of the official schoolbooks or of the lectures of our teachers. It was only in 1994 that 695 folders containing the official reports regarding Nazi-Fascist crimes (that seemingly had been hidden away) got discovered in what would be known as the "*armadio della vergogna*" ("the closet of shame") in the offices of the General Attorney of the Army in Rome, that such debate would open up again.

So what actually disappeared with the end of WWII then, was the large number of crimes that had been committed by the Italians during the whole period of Fascism (in Europe as well as in the colonies) and hence the modalities of warfare and occupation of the Italian Army at large. As Gianni Oliva has commented:

> *"From June 1940 to September 1943 Italians fought the same war of aggression as Nazi Germany but, immediately after that, wanted to forget it and have it removed from national consciousness…a political manoeuvre shared by the whole antifascist class, to exculpate the country from any responsibilities and to give back to the Nation a sort of moral virginity" (2006: 5).*

And as a matter of fact Italy had much to hide in these regards. To mention but a few events, Italy was responsible for what has been labelled by some historians as a proper "ethnic cleansing" in Balkan and in Albania enacted in various concentration camps in Gonars, Molat, the island of Rab, Visco etc. (cf. Oliva 2006, Walston 1997).[4] Moreover, Italian Army soldiers massacred 150 civilians in retaliation for the death of nine troopers in Dominikon, Greece. Between 1911 and 1932, during colonization, 100.000 Libyans got exterminated (either in fight or in concentration camps, cf. Del Boca 2005 and 1991, Rochat 1980). The three days of blood in Addis Ababa (where civilians got persecuted by Italian soldiers and civilians alike following the murder attempt against Italy's Viceroy in Ethiopia) caused the death of between 1400 and 30.000 people and later on, the extermination of 2000 priests in Debra Libnos for the suspect of being involved in the coup attempt. And mention could also be made of the extensive use of chemical warfare in Africa, the mass deportations and the confiscations (cf. Del Boca 2007). And we could

[4] Just in the Slovenian territory annexed by Italy, out of a population of 360,000, 67,230 people were deported. In Montenegro there were 26,387 deportees.

also add, moving back in times, the inner cleansing of the "*briganti"* (the bandits of southern Italy), during the very foundation of Italy, and also the 500 people (and 1200 wounded) who died in Italy between 1969 and 1987 during the years of terrorism and why not also today's persecution of the Roma people and other migrants and the attacks on homosexuals? Italians, a "Good People"?

I am not suggesting here that Italy has been a worst criminal state than any other or a much more violent place for that matter. Italy is in these regards just as any other nation-state that has conducted wars and participated at colonial enterprises. However, I do feel that it is important to remember these facts. And also I suggest that we need to understand the modalities through which this structured forgetfulness has been made possible. The notion of the "Good Italian" has, in these regards, been fundamental in ensuring the removal of all such traumas from public consciousness in the past (cf. also Oliva 2006:6, Focardi 2002, Bidussa 1944, Labanca 2002 and 2009) and the fact that the same image is still being activated in the present constitutes indeed a critical issue.

Today's "Good People"

Let us now look more carefully at the examples with which I opened this article, i.e. the persecution of Roma people in Ponticelli and the issue of Italy's participation at foreign missions of war (or "peace" as it is officially said). Starting with the former, in Ponticelli, the days after the burning of the nomad camps were characterized by the continuing aggressive monitoring of the residents (smaller or bigger attacks to these camps have kept taking place almost until now in various areas of Italy). Altogether, during those days, more than 700 Roma people were forced to abandon their camps in the area of Naples. Newspaper articles and television reportages offered us details of what had actually happened showing an even more frightening scenario. Apparently, for instance, all the camps had been attacked in a similar manner. After their inhabitants had been hunted away by kids with bolts, bars and *molotovs*, groups of women would walk inside taking possession of whatever valuables the Roma had left behind during their escape. Only then they would set the camps on fire. The interviews that were offered by the television channels regarding these details were the most astonishing and frightening. Some of the women were using the fact the Roma (that one of them called "barbarians") had some valuables in their camps as a proof of their illegality. Yet, they would not see the paradox in the fact that they themselves stole the valuables of these "new barbarians". In the example with which I opened this article the lady interviewed evokes a notion of goodness in order to redefine the event. As we saw, she suggested that all the individuals involved in attacking the nomad camps were after all good people. Remember her statement: "It wasn't a great violence after all, we first made them come out of their houses shacks or whatever they had built and only *then* we set them on fire". Such explanation was never criticized by the journalists debating the case. Neapolitan elites too defended the local people, generally object of their hatred, saying that after all this was a war amongst the poor and the local ones were after all the real owners of the area. All the parts involved hence promoted a similar way to tone down the events, and the violence enacted against the Roma was easily banalised through the common sharing of the idea that nothing bad had really happened because after all the local people, who had hosted the Roma for so long, were of good nature.

As this text was being written, a similar event occurred in Rosarno, a small city in the area of Gioia Tauro (Calabria). A town hosting 1100 migrants used as cheap (often illegal) labour by local entrepreneurs for picking oranges, Rosarno hit all the main news for what has been labelled by some media as the "revolt of the slaves". The events. One late evening two workers (from Africa) get shot in their legs by some young men driving past in a car (not the first event of this sort). The morning after, the migrant community organizes a protest. A few hundred workers met up in front of the seat of the municipality to speak to the Police Chief. Upon the reaction of some local inhabitants the protest takes to the streets and the whole situation goes out of control. Citizens of Rosarno start shooting in the air in order to scare away what many of them, in the interviews that followed the event, called the "beasts". The migrants take to the streets and start smashing cars and setting tyres and trash bins on fire. After this, squads of men start attacking the migrants. Several among them get shot with rubber bullets, a few get attacked in front of their barracks with bats and metal bars, five men get run over by a car (altogether somewhat around 60 people get injured). Hunted down by the local population around 300 individuals are forced to escape in the night. And in order to settle things down for good the Police decides to forcibly remove all migrants from the village and spread them across a number of various refugee camps in southern Italy. Upon completion of the evacuation the municipality hurries to deliberate the construction of a square on top of the dismissed factory that had been used as a home by the migrants. All soon to be forgotten.

Anyway, many things could be said about this event starting from the fact that the migrants in question are just a few among the allegedly 20000 individuals used by the local entrepreneurs (allegedly connected to mafia organisations) as cheap labour. Also it could be mentioned that, even though the authorities blamed the usual presence of "clandestines" (the Italian term for "non documented migrants") as the cause for this crisis, most of the migrants in Rosarno were in possession of regular permits (yet not of regular job contracts). A tense situation touching upon larger issues of legality in Italy (and not only of migration) the issue of Rosarno a few days later got officially highlighted by the Egyptian Government that complained about the discrimination of migrant communities and about the presence of hatred against migrants and in particular Muslims in Italy. However, let me just focus here again on the comments that followed the event. The morning after the night of guerrilla, "Sky News 24" opens up the reporting from Rosarno with the following sentence recited by a relaxed comforting female voice:

> *"it is a quiet awakening today here in Rosarno after yesterday's urban guerrilla which caused 53 injured. The black migrants, 1100 until yesterday, have gone away now, on board of busses towards "centri di accoglienza" [governmental refugee camps] or on their own in trains and cars. Today in Rosarno, what is left in the city is broken shop-windows, burned tyres and cars…but also the anger of people who do not accept to be labelled as racists."*

Similarly to what happened in Ponticelli, the media recollected also the voices of the inhabitants of Rosarno who promptly pointed out their goodness and how their goodness had been abused by the migrants. "We have always been good with them, we have always helped these people, given them food etc. they lived in a dump just because they wanted too", "We are no racists, but those people are beasts!", "When we were migrants, we the people of Calabria, never did anything wrong like these Bedouins are doing here!" and so on. Indeed the apotheosis of this self-presentation was reached with the statement of Minister of Internal affairs Maroni for whom this whole situation was the result of an

"excess of tolerance" applied by the local population and authorities and by the State towards the "clandestines".

Once again, as in the case of Ponticelli, the comments reported by the journalists generated the feeling of an unbalanced situation where the openness and friendliness of the local population had been betrayed by the migrants. The (physical and symbolical) violence enacted during these events was re-formulated, banalized and justified by the local citizens as well as by the media and authorities through referrals to the self-representation "*Italiani Brava Gente*". The Italian citizens and authorities are undoubtedly good but betrayed by their own goodness.

Let me now move to the issue of war and offer another instance of the public usage of the self-representation "*Italiani Brava Gente*". As I briefly mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in 2003 a car-bomb attack against the Italian army base in Nassiriya, Iraq, took the lives of seventeen Italian soldiers, two Italian civilians, and nine Iraqi civilians. The Italian media and authorities addressed the dramatic event not only with the due sorrow but also with a degree of surprise. It was as if it was unthinkable for them that anyone would want to kill an Italian soldier. However, they should have been surprised by the existence of some other details. For instance, the base in Nassiriya was not arranged for facing a war situation. The building itself was not protected by a defence serpentine and the ammunitions were dangerously stored in the rooms at ground floor. Similarly, the soldiers were not equipped with bullet-proof vans and helicopters. Most of the soldiers in Nassiriya in fact did not die because of the blast of the explosive loaded van that drove at high speed into the base, but because of the "friendly" bullets being shot in all directions by the explosion of the ammunition depot. Aureliano Amadei, one of the survivors to the attack who was in Iraq for the making of a film, told me during an interview: "Nassiriya was a mission of peace and the government was ready to do whatever to justify that." According to him the very fact that he was there with a film crew to shoot a fiction film on location (notice, not a documentary) with the blessings and funding of the Ministry of Culture and of Defence was one of the ways for proving the fact that Italy was in Iraq without actually taking part at the war as such (cf. Amadei and Trento 2005).

The funerals of the victims of Nassiriya was a big display of nationalism with the city of Rome covered with national flags. Speeches were delivered in the Basilica of Saint Paul in Rome celebrating the unity of "God" and "*Patria*". During a special reportage on national television news TG1 images of the funeral were commented by the voice of a small boy from an elementary school:

> *"Dear heroes, we elementary school kids are so sorry that you died, but you made a great gesture of love. You have done so much good to the kids of Iraq and I hope that you are feeling well now in the company of the small angels and that when I die I will be with you for ever".*

With the help of such commentaries the Italian soldiers in Iraq were transformed into Good Samaritans sent to help out the local populations. In a striking resemblance with the Fascist rhetoric this was, let me quote it again, "a whole army of workers to work concretely side by side with the indigenous for common well being" (Rastelli quoted in Del Boca 2005:50). Similar was the handling also of the death, in November 2007, of Daniele Paladini, a 35 year old Marshal of the Italian Army on another so-called peace mission in Afghanistan. His killing got commented on television with reports regarding his warmness and goodness (rather than his skills) and about how he went there, as his

brother said, to "construct peace". The morning program "Uno Mattina" a populist show catering for the wide masses of housewives (and apparently able to direct large share of votes during each election) commented the event with a 5 minutes long documentary displaying images of kids in Afghanistan and soldiers in Iraq and with the commentators saying "when they wake up tomorrow, these kids won't have their friend to play with". And in the case of the attack against two armoured trucks belonging to the battalion Folgore in 2009 (see the opening vignette of this article) similar displays of innocence and inculpability were made. "How would anyone want to kill the good and helpful Italian soldiers?" was the general public reaction to the event. And indeed no mention was ever made to the fact that the same battalion, the Folgore, was at the centre of a (quickly silenced) scandal regarding rapes committed at the expenses of local women during the "peace" mission "Ibis" in Somalia between 1992 and 1994.

Conclusions: Tomorrow's "Good People"?

Conventionally known to be lacking in a sense of national pride and identification, but rather obsessed by the internal variety and diversity of their own Country (celebrated among other things in Italian cuisine), Italians do, however, seem to share some assumptions regarding who they are. They share the notion of being a uniquely and inherently "Good Folk". While offering us an instance of cultural continuity in a history seemingly characterized by disjuncture, the presence of such reassuring self-representation (which builds upon a capacity to construct memory through forgetfulness) hides, however, the cruelty with which a sense of nationhood has been (and is being) created in Italy. The image of the "Good Italian" is a historically powerful instrument useful for justifying and hiding traumatic and painful events (generally taking place at the expenses of the "Other"), which could have otherwise lead perhaps to a grounded questioning of the role of the State and its relation to the citizens. A key representation eagerly used by individuals to defend their xenophobia and homophobia, by authorities and media to justify the participation to the war on terror, "*Italiani Brava Gente*" has also lent itself to re-insert Fascism in the public sphere. After all, if Italians really are a "Good People" with good intentions, then everything goes. Nomad camps can be set on fire, soldiers can be sent off to die on missions of "peace" and Fascist activists can be re-allowed into government.

Showing the interconnectedness of memory, politics and identity, "*Italiani Brava Gente*" constitutes a pillar in the making of a modern Italian identity. It has become the fundament in the making of the new Italian citizen, one, as Angelo del Boca (2005) has depicted it, who is hard working and productive but also a great consumer, who votes for whomever promises the reduction of taxes and the ban on immigration, who is open to the reincorporation of Italy's Fascist past (not considering it a danger or a crime any longer) yet eager to exclude Communism from public life. A happy Captain Corelli playing his mandolin with his smiling eyes looking proudly towards the shining future of the Country.

References

Amadei, A. and Trento F. (2005). *Venti sigarette a Nassiriya*. Torino: Einaudi.

Battista, P. (2004). Italiani Brava Gente. Un mito cancellato. In: *La Stampa*, 28 August 2004.

Biagi, E. (1980). *Storia d'Italia a Fumetti*. Milano: Mondadori.

Bidussa, D. (1944). *Il Mito del bravo italiano*. Milano: Il Saggiatore

Carandini, G. (1995). *Il disordine italiano: i postumi delle fedi ideologiche*. Roma: Laterza.

Cassano, F. (1998). *Paeninsula: l'Italia da ritrovare*. Roma: Laterza.*

Corvisieri S. (2004). *La Villeggiatura di Mussolini. Il confino da Bocchini a Berlusconi*. Milano: Baldini, Catoldi, Dalai.

Del Boca, A. (1991). *Gli Italiani in Libia. Dal Fascismo a Gheddafi*. Laterza.

Del Boca, A. (2007). *I gas di Mussolini. Il Fascismo e la Guerra d'Etiopia*. Editori Riuniti.

Del Boca, A. (2005). *Italiani Brava Gente?*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore.

Del Boca, A. (ed.) (2009). *La Storia Negata: il revisionismo e il suo uso politico*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore.

Favero, P. (2007). "Celebrity Survivor": Televised Faith and the Rebirth of Patriotism in Post 9/11 Italy". In: *Left Curve*, Okland CA, No.31:106-108.

Focardi, F. (2002). La memoria della Guerra e il mito del "bravo italiano": origine e affermazione di un autoritratto collettivo. In: *Italia Contemporanea* Settembre-Dicembre.

Gallo, M. (1967). *Vita di Mussolini*. Bari: Laterza.

Ginsborg, P. (1998). *L'Italia del tempo presente: famiglia, società civile, Stato (1980-1996)*. Torino: Einaudi.

Labanca, N. (2002). *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale Italiana*. Il Mulino.

Labanca, N. (2009). Perchè ritorna la "brava gente". Revisioni recenti sulla storia dell'espansione coloniale Italiana. In: *La Storia Negata: il revisionismo e il suo uso politico*. Del Boca, A. ed. Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore.

Oliva, G. (2006). *"Si ammazza troppo poco": I crimini di Guerra Italiani 1940-43*. Milano: Mondadori.

Pansa, G. (2006). *La Grande Bugia.* Torino: Sperling and Kupfer.

Pansa, G. (2009). *Il sangue dei vinti*. Torino: Sperling and Kupfer.

Rochat, G. (1980). 'II genocidio cirenaico e la storiografia coloniale'. In: *Belfagor*, (4). Pp. 449-55.

Paggi, L. (1996). Antifascism and the reshaping of democratic consensus in pot-1945 Italy. In: *New German Critique* (67) pp 101-110.

Walston, J. (1997). History and Memory of the Italian Concentration Camps. In: *The Historical Journal*, Vol 40(1) pp. 169-183.

Note: *all translations from Italian are by the author of the article.*

About the author

Paolo Favero completed his Ph.D. in social anthropology in 2005 at Stockholm University, Sweden. With research interests converging on questions of globalization, cultural hybridity, cultural identity, travel, imagination and visuality, Favero has conducted fieldwork in metropolitan India, "touristic" Norway and Italy. Today he works at the University of Lisboa in Portugal.

Contact: Centro Em Rede De Investigação Em Antropologia (CRIA), ISCTE/Instituto Universitario Lisboa, Av. Forças Armadas, s/n - Ed. ISCTE, Salas 2N7 e 2N9 / Cacifo 237, 1600-083 Lisboa, PORTUGAL" Email: paolofavero@gmail.com