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***MEMORY AND NARRATION OF HISTORY AS WEAPONS TO RESIST THE  
CANCELLATION OF SICILY FROM THE POLITICAL AND CULTURAL  
CONTEXT OF ITALY***

ABSTRACT The hypothesis that I intend to put forward as one of the possible explanations of such territorial recognition and identification is linked to the historical-political need to resist the process of cancellation of the Sicilian identity and its entity from the official map of national power and of European socio-cultural geography. It is as if it had become necessary to give life to a narrative to counter this process of cancellation, caused and wanted by the Italian Unification, a political operation created in northern Italy and dispatched to Sicily with all the connotations of the colonial operation.

My object will be to reconstruct the confrontation between local narration and the narration of “others” as a conflict. Conflict that manifests itself as a different vision of things, but which over time becomes a political and economic conflict, very concrete conflicting interests on development policies and the placement of the workforce. Suffice it to recall that the narrative of peasant, illiterate and backward Sicily served in the fifties and sixties to encourage mass emigration and to move labor from the south to the northern Italy of the economic miracle.

### **Political and cultural role of affirming the identity**

This article is built upon participant observation and documentary materials that I have collected from political-administrative activity of the Sicilian Region in the period from 2008 to the present, since the Department of Cultural Heritage has become an organ of the Sicilian Government that safeguards and promotes the cultural identity of the region.

Furthermore, it presents all the cultural elaboration and social significance of this particular vision of Sicily as a special place, where everything is considered immutable.

This work aims to shed lights on memory as a device for selecting the historical past, from the classical world to the contemporary age, to emphasize every aspect of the identity process as resistance to the marginalization of Sicily from economic, social and politician participation in Italy and Europe. Basically, heritage and memory play a political and cultural role of affirming the identity - real or presumed - which today serves to support the assimilation (de facto, cancellation) of Sicily as an integral part of the Italian nation.

Many scholars have wondered why Sicily, an island of about five million inhabitants in the center of the Mediterranean Sea, is internationally famous for its extraordinary literary production. Especially after the unification with the rest of Italy, which took place in 1860, Sicily has produced novelists, playwrights and poets

who have crossed regional and national borders to become beloved even abroad. Luigi Pirandello was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1934; Federico De Roberto, Giovanni Verga, Vitaliano Brancati have been translated into many languages and are known in many countries; Leonardo Sciascia has provided very copious material to the cinema and Andrea Camilleri to the television drama; Gesualdo Bufalino, Vincenzo Consolo and Stefano D'Arrigo have constituted important "literary cases". This list of many other Sicilian intellectuals who have made the history of Italian and European literature can go on and on. More recently, this extraordinary literary production which Sicily gave birth to during the twentieth century has also included more female writers.

The question about why such a vast and profound successful literary movement has developed arises from the fact that in the national and European scenery Sicilian writers are neither more numerous nor better. They are certainly recognizable and are markedly "Sicilian", in the sense that they write by choosing places, characters, historical cues, cultural elements that are undoubtedly placed by the writer to the reader within a geographical, historical, cultural "Sicilian" context. This is also true for other individual cases of writers from other regions, but it cannot assume the typical connotation of Sicilian literature which praises its own collective and markedly local identity.

### **Systematic operation of marginalization and memorization**

The hypothesis that I intend to put forward as one of the possible explanations of such territorial recognition and identification is linked to the historical-political need to resist the process of cancellation of the Sicilian identity and its entity from the official map of national power and of European socio-cultural geography. It is as if it had become necessary to give life to a narrative to counter this process of cancellation, caused and wanted by the Italian Unification, a political operation created in northern Italy and dispatched to Sicily with all the connotations of the colonial operation. This issue implies the topic of identification and legitimation as a historical, political and ideological process, as Italo Pardo and Giuliana Prato argue: “to reflect on processes of legitimacy and legitimation in urban settings and engage with the attendant theoretical insights”<sup>1</sup>.

Sicilian society and culture have been wiped out, from the Unification to date, with a systematic operation of marginalization and memorization, through the administrative reorganization of the state, the choices of industrial policy, even some declarations of a state of emergency, perhaps justified by the fight against banditry and mafia organization. Sicilian intellectuals almost felt the obligation to “memorize” what had once been and now had been or was about to be cancelled. For instance,

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<sup>1</sup> I. Pardo, G. B. Prato, *Introduction: The Ethnography of Legitimacy and its Theoretical Ramifications*, in I. Pardo, G. B. Prato (eds.), “Urban Ethnographers Debate Legitimacy”, *Urbanities. Journal of Urban Ethnography*, special issue, Volume 8, supplement 1, April 2018, p. 1

Federico De Roberto and Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa had perceived that a political-cultural operation was carried out by the national and regional ruling classes aimed at wiping out the entire history of the island. In particular, archivization of the peasant civilization, traditional beliefs and rituals, the moral norms of a culture of the past that were badly reconciled with the industrialization and modernization of the Italian nation. These writers thus gave voice to that tradition, as an element of resistance to change.

The case of other writers, on the other hand, is different, such as those of Luigi Pirandello, Vitaliano Brancati, Leonardo Sciascia, who saw in the Sicilian memory the only possibility of narrating the universal. Starting from the concrete of being Sicilian to grasp the universal; starting from the particular to reach the universal. For example, the Sicilian man was an excellent transference towards the universal Man precisely because he was on the verge of extinction. Being precarious and overtaken by history gave a sort of passepartout to grasp the essence of humanity in the Sicilian culture. For instance, Pirandello's reflection on individual identity in works such as *Uno, nessuno, centomila* (*One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*) or *Come tu mi vuoi* (*As you desire me*), transfers specific elements of events to a universal scene that the narrative places in local contexts. Others, such as Gesualdo Bufalino, Andrea Camilleri and many contemporary authors have followed this path: literally inventing a possible, probable, graspable Sicily in place of that Sicily which had been annihilated and was no longer available.

### **“Sicilianism” as an ideology**

I must specify that the authors I have cited are probably the most representative ones, but also those who interpret the feelings and aspirations of the Sicilians at a high level, both in terms of ideas and in terms of literary capacity. However, there is also a large group of local historians, provincial scholars, intellectuals at the service of local potentates, who elaborate an idea of “Sicilianity” that we have more correctly defined “Sicilianism”. By Sicilianism we mean a degenerative ideology that tends to exalt the positive qualities of Sicilian identity beyond all limits, also forcing and even distorting the ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary history of Sicily. A story made of successes, excellences, primates that are exalted and assumed as symbolic of a land that could very well live autarchically (in the sense that “we have got everything”). Even nature and biodiversity are disturbed to demonstrate Sicilian superiority. I cannot here, for reasons of space and time, examine this degenerative ideology in an exhaustive way, but I can testify that it is a vast editorial production of numerous studies that are welcomed in scientific conferences and congresses, without arousing particular reproach, indeed often gathering unexpected consents. It must be said that it finds an easy alliance in local political movements that aim at a stronger autonomy from the Italian state system.

In Sicily, for example, the debate on the Special Statute of the Regional Government, approved in 1946 to counter and prevent the independence drive created

after the Second World War, is still alive. At that time, the autonomist movement served to combat the secessionist independence of those who wanted to make Sicily a state of the United States. Today, forgetting those dramatic phases, autonomy is returning under the guise of the claim of what the leader of autonomy, Raffaele Lombardo, has called “African Italy”. The hypothesis that I will develop in this article is that the literary vein is the mirror of narration and the cultivation of memory to recover something that is believed to be lost. This seems to be supported by the field work that I am conducting. In fact, in some interviews I have made with institutional figures of the present and the past, the need and urgency to give life to the processes of constructing the narrative and memory of Sicilian history clearly emerges. Processes that are able to give life to an alternative history different from that imposed from above. For example, two politicians who held the role of regional councilor for cultural heritage and Sicilian identity identified the issue as a need to remain within the global dynamics of dialogue between different cultures, both in the local context and in the European context. In some way, they have updated the vision of Sicilian identity, no longer as exclusive and autonomous, but as inclusive and cross-cultural.

### **The so-called centrality of Sicily in the Mediterranean region**

In my research I will also provide a critical re-reading of the scientific literature on the concept of identity, as developed by the ethno-anthropological sciences and other human sciences. In fact, this theoretical and methodological work is essential to set better the case of my research. The result is a concept of identity as a changing phenomenon, of adaptation throughout history, functional and strategies of political, economic and social power<sup>2</sup>. However, the concept of identity also changes depending on the scholar who deals with it, and therefore on his personal experiences, but also on the national contexts in which it is elaborated. For instance, the perception of the problem in colonial environments is different from situations extraneous to this experience.

My object will be to reconstruct the confrontation between local narration and the narration of “others” as a conflict. Conflict that manifests itself as a different vision of things, but which over time becomes a political and economic conflict, very concrete conflicting interests on development policies and the placement of the workforce. Suffice it to recall that the narrative of peasant, illiterate and backward Sicily served in the fifties and sixties to encourage mass emigration and to move labor from the south to the northern Italy of the economic miracle.

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<sup>2</sup> F. Astone, *La sindrome identitaria. Una rassegna problematica della letteratura scientifica sulla costruzione dell'identità culturale*, in “Humanities”, vol. 10, n. 1 (2021), pp. 75-113



For instance, Elio Vittorini, another important Sicilian writer, narrated the journey of migrants with a painful elegance of describing the failures and needs of generations of Sicilians. He transferred his personal experience into literary texts. It gave voice to an alternative history of that of the sociologists who, at the same time, studied southern immigrants in Milan<sup>3</sup>. Migrants represented the heart of the matter: in the cancellation of Sicily, those who left their land were the first to be canceled, even physically. In this sense, it is useful to adopt the methodologies of Urban Anthropology, as indicated by Giuliana Prato and Italo Pardo<sup>4</sup>, especially in the most recent ethnographic research on urban contexts in global contexts. But I will also engage with the vast travel literature or fiction produced by the Anglo-Saxon culture on Sicily. I will start from an English novel of 1905, set in Sicily and centered on the relationship between two different and contrasting cultures, the English and the Sicilian, often portrayed as assimilated into the Greek-Arab Mediterranean and the Middle East. It is interesting to note that the set of prejudices and stereotypes developed by European intellectuals and attributed to Sicilians have over time been incorporated by the Sicilians themselves. Indeed, they have made it almost a kind of flag to be waved to mark their difference, their special being. What was once a

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<sup>3</sup> F. Alberoni-G. Baglioni, *L'integrazione dell'immigrato nella società industriale*, Il Mulino 1965

<sup>4</sup> G. B. Prato and I. Pardo, "Urban Anthropology", in *Urbanities*, Vol. 3 – n. 2, November 2013, pp. 80-110.

stigma, today becomes a banner to be displayed publicly. A sort of “cultural intimacy” in the sense given to this expression by Michael Herzfeld<sup>5</sup>.

I will also address the issue of the so-called centrality of Sicily in the Mediterranean region. Now, it is quite clear that this definition also applies to other realities, for geographical, historical or cultural reasons. However, in the political and intellectual imagination this definition applied to Sicily has met with tremendous success. It derives from factors that I will summarize in a synthetic form: geographical reasons and colonial historical reasons. These two reasons, in fact, can be a solid foundation for this record. The equidistance between east, west, north and south seems to be a convincing argument. Similarly, Greek and Phoenician colonization and Arab and Spanish occupation seem excellent arguments for conferring the status of a center of the Mediterranean. Concurrently, the concept of centrality becomes more complicated when applied to cultural and linguistic questions since the borders are more blurred. In fact, it is not enough to imagine a cultural centrality for the sole reason that numerous and various Mediterranean cultures have held sway and have influenced the island. On the Mediterranean scene, the presence of cultures that are diverse but also close in terms of geography, history, trade relationship, demographic mobility, has produced the notion of the centrality of Sicily, as a crossroads or a meeting point. The Greek and Roman presence in

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<sup>5</sup> M. Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy. Social Poetics and the Real Life of States, Societies, and Institutions*, Routledge 2016

antiquity, followed by the Arabs and Spaniards, who left significant traces, still evident today, on a linguistic, ritualistic, religious and architectural level, have, in various ways, made this centrality fascinating, but also rather illusory.

The narrative texts that I have examined demonstrate the strong conflict between the Sicilian intellectual class and the disenchanted, external gaze of the rest of Italy and Europe. This confirms that conflict and memory are weapons to resist, on the one hand, assimilation and, on the other, cancellation. And it is an assimilation and cancellation desired and planned by the national political-economic power.

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