

# History of Psychology

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Online First Publication, June 2, 2014. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0036547>

### CITATION

Cimino, G., & Foschi, R. (2014, June 2). NORTHERNERS VERSUS SOUTHERNERS: Italian Anthropology and Psychology Faced With the “Southern Question”. *History of Psychology*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0036547>

# NORTHERNERS VERSUS SOUTHERNERS: Italian Anthropology and Psychology Faced With the “Southern Question”

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Following the Unification of Italy (1861), when confronted with the underdevelopment problems of the south that had given rise to the so-called “southern question,” some Italian anthropologists and psychologists began to study the populations of the south from the psycho-anthropological point of view. These scientists, at times subject to preconceived ideas toward the southerners, conveyed observations and descriptions of the southern character traits that, in general, were considered different, in a negative sense, with respect to those of the northern peoples. To explain such diversity in the “psychological” characteristics between the north and south of the country (presumed cause also of the south’s backwardness), various hypotheses were advanced related to the kind of heredity theory adopted, which could be of, more or less, an “innatist” or “transformist” or “environmentalist” kind. The distinction proposed in this article between at least 2 different “hereditarian” theories formulated by the Italian scientists, and the confrontation of these theories with the hypotheses expressed by the “southernist” sociologists, contrary to the idea of “racial varieties” present in the Italian population, allows one to understand in what way and in what sense, at the threshold of the 20th century, there arose the ideology of “Nordicism” and the roots of racism were planted.

*Keywords:* southern question, innatism, transformism, Nordicism, racism

Recent historical studies have clarified that between the 19th and 20th centuries, at least two foundations of contemporary racism were laid: (a) the idea that physical and psychological traits were stable and unchangeable, and that they were necessarily transmitted from one generation to another; and (b) the conviction that there existed different human racial varieties ordered in a hierarchical way, and that, among these, those of northern Europe were superior (“Nordicism”; Jackson & Weidman, 2006; see also Hacking, 2005). This latter idea—for

which the Mediterranean Basin and the south of Europe was the place whose populations were more backward with respect to those of the north and of the Anglo-Saxon area—then traversed all of the 20th century up until our days, and also took root in Italy, such that in the second half of the 19th century, a debate ensued concerning a presumed inferiority of southerners compared with northerners.

Following the Unification of Italy (1861), the backwardness and difficulties of the Italian Mezzogiorno (Southern Italy) became accentuated, with the resulting increase of many serious economic and social problems. The differences between the north and south of the country—although they already existed—increased almost to the end of the century, as a result of the scarce resources assigned to the south by the new postunification governments, impoverished both by the independence wars of the Risorgimento and by the fight against the brigandage. The latter was a phenomenon typical of the Mezzogiorno, and it was protracted for a decade during the 1860s as the result of a sort of alliance established between gangs of common

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outlaws and groups that were nostalgic for the old Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (see Molfese, 1966, and Pédio, 1998; for an anthropological-cultural analysis of the brigandage, see Padiglione, 2006).

This situation of serious difficulty and underdevelopment of the south of Italy gave rise to the so-called “southern question,” that is to say, the problem of identifying the causes for the backwardness and of proposing possible solutions for overcoming it. The question was initially raised by several politicians of the liberal right<sup>1</sup> and was discussed at length, both then and the following years into the 20th century, with various approaches and perspectives offered (see Moe, 1998; Perrotta & Sunna, 2012; Salvadori, 1963; Schneider, 1998; Villari, 1978). The whole southern question, accompanied by the dramatic and ferocious events of the fight against banditry, already by itself created a prejudice—a negative image of the southern population (Teti, 1993/2011). According to a popular stereotype, the people of the south were perceived as individualist, asocial, rebellious, apathetic, and idle, with aggressive and, at times, criminal tendencies, while being incapable of adapting to modern liberal and capitalist society. This image was accredited, amplified, and propagated, especially by the conservative newspapers of the Kingdom of Italy, which reported the news of the fight against brigandage, and spoke of a “barbaric Italy” and of an ineradicable criminality intrinsic to an inferior and primitive race, while considering the south as the “Italian Africa.”<sup>2</sup> In any case, in those years, there became the widespread idea of “two Italies, two races, and two psychologies”—that of the north and that of the south and the islands—profoundly different for the psychophysical nature of the populations and for the level of civilization (Petracone, 2000; Teti, 1993/2011).

With the closing of the Risorgimento period, there originated in Italy an anthropology and psychology that were considered “scientific,”<sup>3</sup> and were founded upon the theoretical and methodological approach of a positivist and evolutionist kind. In particular, these two new “human sciences” proposed to investigate the somatic and mental character traits of people by means of quantitative measurements, that is, with anthropometry (and craniometry), as also with psychometrics, and to relate them to each

other so as to create “bio-psycho-typologies.” There arose, in this way, a program of psycho-anthropological research that, especially with the criminal anthropology of Cesare Lombroso (see Gibson, 2002), focused primarily on the so-called “degenerates” (criminals and the insane) and the “marginalized” (asocial individuals of various kinds: alcoholics, drug addicts, thieves, prostitutes, tramps, etc.), as well as on political radicals (the anarchists), with the aim of identifying their typical psychological and morphological features, thus making it possible to recognize them and activate measures of defense, prevention, and social protection.

The Italian anthropologists and psychologists also interested themselves in the populations of the Mezzogiorno, which public opinion perceived to be diverse and basically inferior. They made an effort to distinguish the southern anthropological characteristics from those of the northerners, with the aim of helping to resolve the social problems that came to light with the Unification of Italy (e.g., illiteracy, poverty, criminality, underdevelopment). A research program of this kind had also been formulated in the mission undertaken by the Italian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology—founded in 1871 by Paolo Mantegazza (1831–1910) and Felice Finzi (1847–1872)—to study the regional ethnic differences of the new and united Kingdom of Italy (see Puccini, 1998).

The backwardness of the Mezzogiorno and the widespread stereotypes sometimes led the Italian scientists—who, paradoxically, were often of southern origin—to compare the physical, temperamental, and behavioral features of southern people to those of the marginalized or degenerated, thus expressing “the horror of a largely northern Italian medical and scientific intelligentsia in the face of a fragmented and ‘backward’ countryside” (Pick, 1989, p. 4; see also Dickie, 1999, and Melossi, 2008). This reinforced the prejudice of a “racial variety”<sup>4</sup> different from the northern one, and marked by the “negative” characteristics of aggressiveness, arrogance, and irascibility. It was, above all, Lombroso and his followers who considered southerners to be the representatives of an inferior race. The negative reputation also followed them when they emigrated to the United States, where the myth was spread of the two Italies, inhabited by populations that were different from each other both for their race and for their

civilization (Covello, 1967, pp. 29–32; Deschamps, 2000, p. 68).

The positivist scientists had, moreover, also posed the problem of the causes of anthropological differences between the north and south of the country, and had expressed differentiated opinions. They were, in general, divided, with various approaches and nuances, between those who had attributed a prevalent weight to the populations' genetic factors, that is, to biological and mental characters of a hereditary nature ("hereditists"), and those who instead had given greater importance to historical and environmental factors, as well as to social and cultural traditions ("environmentalists"). In so doing, the problem of the Mezzogiorno, in the decades bridging the 19th and 20th centuries, was related to the purely scientific problem of the biological heritability and transmission of physical and mental characteristics.

Concerning the group of the hereditists, it is perhaps possible to affirm that, on this matter, at least two orientations competed with each other. On the one hand, the orientation of those who held that the physical and mental characters were determined by a stable genetic patrimony that could not be modified by the environment, while admitting changes only by means of "sexual selection," that is to say, by the crossbreeding of genes in the reproductive process (and thus the possibility of bettering or worsening the race only in such a way). We could, in a conventional way, refer to this trend as "innatism." On the other hand, the orientation of those who, although accepting the principle of the heredity of characters, maintained that it was not so rigid and automatic, but that each morphological and mental characteristic could become transformed from generation to generation, according to the principle of "inheritance of acquired characters." They considered this possible not only as a result of the mingling of the populations that blended their genetic heritage but also, and above all, on account of the influence of environmental factors (according to the Lamarckism inherent in the theory of pangenesis), due to the exchanges among different cultures and to education. We could define this tendency as "transformism." It is then understandable how, with regard to the southern question, the scientists at that time could have had diverse ideas and attitudes, justified by the kind of heritability theory they adopted.

The theme of the diversity of psycho-anthropological characters between the populations of the north and of the south dealt with by the positivist scientists thus presented various aspects that were tied to the more general problem of 19th-century racism and to its variation represented by the so-called Nordicism. Some recent studies, for the most part centered on the history of racism in the 20th century, with particular regard to the Fascist period, have identified in the analyses of these late 19th-century scientists some roots of the racist ideology (Burgio, 1999; Cassata, 2008, 2011; Israel, 2010). In general, however, the research of the Italian positivists interested in the southern question have found little space in the historiography of contemporary science.<sup>5</sup> Our intention is thus that of scrutinizing the whole set of problems by exploring the hypotheses, theories, and initial empirical research of anthropologists, psychologists, and intellectuals of various kinds, and of comparing their different positions.

In this way, in rereading their works from a historical perspective, we intend to illustrate: (a) the ideas and images they had formed regarding the populations of the south with their physical, mental, and cultural features, and also the origin and modifiability of the same; (b) how their theories were more complex and articulated with respect to the generic distinction, formulated by the secondary literature on the subject, between those who attributed the causes of the diversity (and of the backwardness) to genetic-hereditary factors and those who identified them in sociohistorical factors; and (c) how, and in what sense, it can be affirmed that there originated, in that period, the idea of an "inferior" southern racial type, and, consequently, that the foundations of Italian Nordicism were laid—a precursor of the biological racism that exploded in the 1930s.

### **Southerners in the Theories of the "Innatists"**

Cesare Lombroso, the founder of criminal anthropology, sustained the thesis that the tendency to commit crime is an innate character trait that is inherited—a sign of "atavism" enclosed in a phylogenetic line that leads from the animal to the human being. Following this assertion, he argued that the "real" criminals or habitual delinquents—which he distinguishes

from the occasional delinquents—do not commit crimes because of a conscious and free act of ill will, but because they have innate evil tendencies. These tendencies originate from a physical and mental organization that is different from the normal one and can be recognized by certain somatic and mental characteristics of a “criminal type” (Lombroso, 1876–1897/2006; 1911; see also Bulferetti, 1975; Gibson, 2002; Villa, 1985).

Lombroso tried to demonstrate this theory especially with the analysis of various cases of southern brigands, among which the presumed Calabrian outlaw Giuseppe Villella, who became in the eyes of his contemporaries a kind of “scientific myth.” In analyzing Villella’s skull after his death, Lombroso thought that he had in fact identified, as a distinctive physical characteristic of the “born delinquent,” a particular “occipital fossetta or indentation,” which he considered to be hereditary and interpreted as a sign of involution in the evolutionary scale (on the discovery of the *fossetta*, cf. Lombroso, 1911; see also Baima Bollone, 2009; Villa, 1985).

Another “famous” delinquent studied by Lombroso was the Calabrian soldier Salvatore Misdea, recognized as guilty of having killed some northern fellow soldiers, and condemned to death on the basis of a Lombrosian appraisal that, in diagnosing the accused as having epilepsy and other pathologies present in the family (atavism), depicted him as a born criminal, irrecoverable and dangerous (Lombroso, 1911). One of the last cases investigated by Lombroso was that of the Calabrian brigand Giuseppe Musolino, who, for the people of the south had become a sort of legend, an antihero who makes justice on his own, but who was regarded as a delinquent predisposed to crime in that (a) he suffered from epilepsy, and (b) he originated from a population that, as a result of the Greek and Albanian influence, “had become barbarized and with an inferior moral sense” (Lombroso, 1902, p. 513). With Musolino, the search for the innate biological causes of criminal behavior had been perfected, and epilepsy had become the principal distinguishing sign of the born delinquent—the “objective” and neurological proof of the hereditability of the criminal act.

In reality, in the course of the years, Lombroso had given an always-greater importance

to the social factors of criminality (cf. Gibson & Rafter, 2006). Even in his model, the “occasion” and the environment had their role to play, but it was held to be secondary. Thus, for Lombroso, the individuals biologically predisposed toward crime could be identified and segregated by means of an attentive anthropological and psychological analysis extended also to their parents and ancestors—an analysis directed at identifying the so-called “degenerative stigmata” present within the sphere of the same family. By means of a eugenic practice, then, the “criminal type” needed to be segregated (or eliminated if guilty), not only as a preventive measure against the committing of crimes, but also in order to avoid reproduction that would transmit and propagate the degenerated genes, which Lombroso saw to be more present in the southerners and Mediterranean peoples.

In 1862, in effect, as a young medical official, he had passed three months precisely in Calabria, participating in the campaign to repress the brigandage. In that period he wrote a text, republished in 1898, in which, in addition to denouncing the miserable conditions of the south, he developed some anthropological and psychological considerations concerning southerners, which led him to propose a typological differentiation of Italians, and to relate to racial factors the delinquency observed in Calabria (Lombroso, 1862/2009). His differential-ethnographic approach, though attentive also toward the social and cultural aspects, was, however, founded upon a guiding idea that combined in a synthesis innatism, fatalism, and predestination. Although from the political point of view, Lombroso considered himself a moderate socialist and strove to modernize Italy and eliminate all the factors that obstructed its progress (on Lombroso’s socialism, see Gervasoni, 1997), he was, however, inclined to believe that innate mental traits could not be modified by means of education.

In Lombroso, moreover, there seems to be clearly present the idea of the existence of superior and inferior races with innate and hereditary characteristics that determine their behavior (cf. Teti, 1993/2011; Melossi, 2008). His books are disseminated with this kind of consideration, and for him, the southerners and Mediterranean peoples presented psychophysical characters that exposed them to greater risk of criminality with respect to the people of the



north: this being an anthropological trait that the Italian southerners shared with the American Negroes. In addition, for Lombroso, the inferior races more easily gave rise to criminal associations such as the camorra or the mafia. In all the editions of his book *Criminal Man*, we find, in fact, a chapter dedicated to the influence of race and heredity on organized crime, in which it is maintained that:

Race shapes criminal organizations. Both Bedouins and Gypsies can be considered races of organized criminals. The same seems to apply to Negroes in the United States (according to A. Maury), and to Albanians, Greeks, and sometimes the indigenous people of southern Italy. . . . The inhabitants of Palermo, which is the center of Mafia, are descendent from the ancient bodyguards of the nobles (according to Villari) and, even further back, from the rapacious Arab conquerors of Sicily who were related to Bedouins. (Lombroso, 1876–1897/2006, p. 90)

Based on the Lombrosian doctrine, there then arose the “positive school of criminal law,” whose principal representative was Enrico Ferri (1856–1929). This approach sustained the right of society to imprison the delinquent because he was dangerous as a result of an innate tendency toward crime. This “school” thus affirmed the principle that incarceration is not an expiatory act, but a means of eliminating the social danger of criminals.<sup>6</sup> In his work *L’omicidio nell’Antropologia criminale* (Homicide in Criminal Anthropology, 1895), Ferri sustained that the delinquents of the southern regions (Neapolitans, Calabrians, and Sicilians) had consistently “inferior” encephalic measurements with respect to those of normal people (soldiers with whom they were compared) in both northern and southern Italy. More generally, he affirmed that it was possible to identify racial varieties present in different regions, on the basis of certain characteristics of the skull that were held to be typical of superior or inferior populations; and the craniological characteristics that indicated inferiority were naturally attributed by him to the people of the south and, in particular, in an obvious way to those guilty of homicide (Ferri, 1895, p. 206). Like Lombroso, Ferri also thought that the southerners had been subjected to the genetic influence of the Phoenecian, Arab, and Albanian populations, which were considered inferior with respect to the Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic ones,

which instead would have biologically conditioned the north of Italy (Ferri, 1895, p. 258).

Lombroso’s theory, in part, also inspired the psychiatrists, such as, for example, Gaspare Virgilio (1836–1908), director of the Aversa Mental Institution (Naples). He considered some forms of madness to be derived from hereditary predispositions that could be ascribed to certain “recessive” physical and mental character traits (Virgilio, 1874/1983). This theory was illustrated by the analysis of the judiciary case of a well-known figure of the political news, Giovanni Passannante (1849–1910), a poor Lucanian cook who, in 1878, was responsible for a naive attempt at the life of the King of Italy. In the resulting trial, both Lombroso and Virgilio insisted upon the fact that he was a crazy criminal with obvious hereditary and family defects (Virgilio, 1888). Following the trial and heavy condemnation, a brother of his was also placed in the insane asylum directed by Virgilio, and the Passannante family was labeled as “degenerate” and “socially dangerous,” forcing some of its members to change their last name (Galzerano, 1997).

Even more oriented in an innatist sense were the description and evaluation of the southern population on the part of a Sicilian follower of Lombroso—Alfredo Niceforo (1876–1960), anthropologist and criminologist. When very young, he wrote three pseudoscientific essays that savored of racism, intending to discriminate southerners for their negative physical and mental characters transmitted hereditarily.

In Niceforo’s (1897) first work, *La delinquenza in Sardegna* (Crime in Sardinia), the Sardinians were described as a criminally inclined population, for the fact that they were considered a Mediterranean lineage with African influences. In his second book, *L’Italia barbara contemporanea* (Contemporary Barbarian Italy) of 1898, Niceforo clearly expressed his Nordicism. He in fact maintained the existence of “two Italies”—that of the north and that of the south and the islands—inhabited by distinct races and developed in different ways: In the north, the evolved Aryans, Germanics of Eurasian origin, and in the south and the islands, the backward Latins, Mediterraneans of Eurafrikan origin. These two racial groups demonstrated their enactment of different behaviors: The former was more modern and refined, and the latter was more brutal and primitive; even the delin-

quency was more refined in the first group (swindling and scams), and primitive in the second group (homicides, robberies, and kidnappings). Niceforo also tried to differentiate the behavior corresponding to various southern areas, and he identified the city of Naples, previously the capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, as the place in which the immaturity and backwardness of the southern people was most evident.

There was no understanding by Niceforo of the historical-cultural processes that had brought about the degraded, traditionalist, and backward reality of the south (Teti, 1993/2011, p. 118). In his opinion, the southerners were much more similar to the Greeks and the Spanish than to the northern Italians—they demonstrated a more individualistic character, whereas the northerners were instead more gregarious and inclined to become socially organized. The southerners, therefore, would have been less adaptable to representative democracies, and more oriented toward trying to find charismatic political leaders—“great men” to whom entrust themselves (Niceforo, 1898).

These theories were revisited in a third book, *Italiani del Nord e Italiani del Sud* (Italians of the north and Italians of the south; Niceforo, 1901), which felt the effects of the criticism received by his first two volumes (cf. Renda, 1900). In this work, in fact, Niceforo analyzed also the environmental factors, but continued to consider them as secondary with respect to the genetic-hereditary ones, and he continued in the defense of his “north versus south” schematization, with its clearly racist accents.

### **Southerners in the Theories of the “Transformists”**

Lombroso’s role in late-19th-century Italian science was not as central as the subsequent criticism has maintained, and many positivist scientists should be recognized for their independent scientific thinking, distinct from that of Lombroso (Guarnieri, 2013). Such is the case of one of the most illustrious Italian anthropologists in the last decades of the 19th century, the Sicilian Giuseppe Sergi (1841–1936). He, too, was a convinced supporter of evolutionist positivism. In the history of anthropology, Sergi is usually remembered for his craniological studies and for having indicated the presence in Italy

of two diverse racial groups—the Aryans and the Italics. They were very intermixed even though each group was prevalent, respectively, in the north and in the south of Italy, and each could be distinguished, above all, for its psychological characters (social sentiment vs. individual sentiment) and its type of civilization (industrial vs. peasant; Sergi, 1898). Sergi, however, was also one of the founders of Italian experimental psychology, and he laid the premises for the development of applied psychology, especially in the form of educational psychology (on Sergi as a psychologist, see Cimino & Foschi, 2012). It is precisely in Sergi’s writings on the psychology of education that we find a conception of the “educability” of a transformist and basically optimistic kind, which, in the 20th century, influenced his pupils and many scholars.<sup>7</sup>

Sergi believed that, in the course of life, character traits could be modified and transmitted from generation to generation, in accordance with the theory of pangenesis. This transformist approach was widespread among many Italian positivists who were distant from the Lombrosian innatism. The anthropologist Paolo Mantegazza, for example, precisely on the basis of the pangenesis theory, opposed the hypothesis of atavism, in maintaining that the environmental variability strongly influenced the possible hereditary determinations (Mantegazza, 1891). In this regard, Sergi wrote:

But the heredity of structures and of functions is not of an absolute uniformity; in the midst of the persistence of forms there takes place the variation of the same physical and functional characters. The variations that are individual derive from the influence of the environment, which is efficacious in its diverse and multiple ways of acting upon the organisms in formation, and especially with regard to the nourishment. And these variations, the deepest and most useful ones, as Darwin admits, are also hereditary together with the persistent fundamental forms. (Sergi, 1895, p. 207; on the Lamarckism of Sergi, see also Volpone, 2011)

Sergi thus belonged to the group of positivist scientists who granted to individuals a possibility of change, as a result of both the mixing of populations with a diverse genetic baggage and the influence of environmental conditions, especially scientific culture and education.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, for example, promoting the instruction of the intellect and the education of character and of feelings, he wrote:

Scientific culture can, therefore, contribute to elevating the civilization, by elevating the feelings, contributing to refine the spirit by disrobing it of prejudices and errors. . . . The slow and tranquil improvement of humanity, without hurry or pressures, depends absolutely upon these conditions. Let us instruct and educate, cultivate intelligence and develop feelings; let us disperse the shadows of ignorance and suffocate the sad inclinations. (Sergi, 1893b, pp. 283–284)

Sergi saw a limit of intervention only in the cases of the most serious criminal and/or insane behavior, which could be little modified by external factors.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, he interested himself in the budding “science” of eugenics, but his science was tempered by a Roman-Latin and Risorgimento culture, which tended to keep him at a distance from the more extreme positions of eugenics as a founding ideology of biological racism (Israel, 2010, p. 146; see also Cassata, 2011).

Sergi was convinced that there existed, at a descriptive level of empirical study, psycho-anthropological differences between the north and the south, and he did not reject Niceforo’s analysis, although he judged it to be too “coarse and harsh.” He believed in the possibility of classifying people in distinct racial groups on the basis of morphological characteristics and craniological measurements, but he held that, from a biological point of view, the Italian populations were already a mixture. He instead recognized that differences in the psychological traits had been, for a large part, determined by “social history,” that is to say, by recent historical events that, in the case of the southerners, had not been able to reawaken the potentialities a glorious past testified to as being present among their populations (Sergi, 1900/2011). In other words, he did not believe so much in differences of a racial kind between the populations of the north and of the south of Italy, as he did in differences of a psychological-cultural kind, even though the latter could have a hereditary base that was, in any case, modifiable.

In the years of the First World War fought against the Germans, Sergi supposed, moreover, that some character traits of the Mediterranean populations, derived from Greek-Roman genetic lineages, were in some circumstances even “superior” to those of the Aryan populations. The typical individualism of the southern people, who were, for example, capable of ingenious achievements, had, in his opinion, shown itself, during the Risorgimento process, to be a

positive and “winning” psychological trait compared with the “gregariousness” of the Austrian oppressors. Thus, Lombrosian innatism characterized the peoples of the Mediterranean Basin (the Greeks, Albanians, Arabs) as having “contaminated and weakened” the population of southern Italy, whereas Sergi’s transformist model characterized them as having been carriers of adaptive and favorable characteristics (Sergi, 1916a, 1916b; see also Pizzato, 2012).

Sergi then sought a solution that could regenerate the Italians of the south, and resolve the problem of the inequalities between north and south. He found it in the proposal of a mixture among the populations by means of “internal emigration.” In such a way, their comingling with the culture and behaviors of the northern people, more active and civilized in that historical period, would provoke the “reawakening” of the southern people by means of imitation and education. These latter, in fact, could elicit the development of all the potentialities of their genetic heredity and even, in a Lamarckian way, modify the genes themselves, thanks to the contact with a more stimulating environment (Sergi, 1900/2011).

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, following an analogous transformist orientation, a significant contribution to the southern question was made by the Calabrian physician and psychologist of socialist ideas, Pasquale Rossi (1867–1905). His social psychology had the purpose of integrating the “crowd psychology” of Scipio Sighele (1868–1913) and the positivist school of criminal law with the idea that the psychological dynamics of the group are not necessarily negative and a cause of criminality, and that the collectivity, as with the individual, can be educated morally and intellectually (cf. Cornacchioli & Spadafora, 2000; see also Van Ginneken, 1992).

In the third chapter of his main book, *L’animo della folla* (The Mind of the Crowd) of 1898, Rossi dealt with the *Carattere del Mezzogiorno d’Italia* (Character of Southern Italy) and brought about an actual reversal of the positions of the innatist anthropologists. He suggested that southerners had mental characteristics that were different, in a negative sense, with respect to those of the northern peoples. However, he argued that these differences and the region’s socioeconomic problems were due to contingent historical-political reasons, which



had suffocated the best genetic potentialities of the population and favored the emergence of the less positive ones. In this way, both Rossi and Sergi seemed to conceptualize race “deprived of racism,” inasmuch as race was understood as a malleable and modifiable theoretical construction, in the sense that the distinctive character traits of a racial group could be transformed by pedagogical and socioeconomic interventions.

In Rossi’s work, one notices an accentuated Risorgimento spirit, whereas the references to criminal anthropology and its innatist view are marginal. The southerners were described as a people that had experienced glorious historical periods, but who, in recent centuries, had been weakened by the domination of people who had never enriched the native populations anthropologically. But, in his opinion, a people could rise again in the presence of new situations, such as crossbreeding with a different population, engaging in external and internal emigration, and through changed sociocultural conditions (Rossi, 1898).

### Criticisms of the “Southernists”

Toward the end of the 19th century, the main critics of the hereditist anthropologists, both innatist and transformist, were several scholars of a heterogeneous formation who constituted the first nucleus of the so-called “southernists” (*meridionalisti*), that is to say, experts on the southern question. An excellent source concerning the debate that arose between the hereditist scientists and these southernists can be found in a volume edited by the Calabrian philosopher Antonio Renda (1875–1959). In the volume, the main Italian scholars of the two sides responded to five questions regarding their individual points of view on the delicate southern question, its causes, and its possible remedies (Renda, 1900).

Among the southernists, a figure that stands out is that of the Sicilian, Napoleone Colajanni (1847–1921), an intellectual of great worth in the Italian political and cultural panorama at the end of the 19th century. In the volume *La delinquenza in Sicilia e le sue cause* (Criminality in Sicily and its Causes) of 1894 (Colajanni, 1894), he shifted completely the barycenter of the discussion on delinquency in the Mezzogiorno; in his view, the problems derived from the exploitation of the poorest Sicilian classes

on the part of the landholders and so-called *uomini d’onore* (men of honor).

Colajanni’s criticism was severe and aimed at the legacy of both the Bourbon and Sabaudian monarchies. He also looked beyond the southern question, which he contextualized within the broader economic crisis that became more acute and was felt throughout Italy after the violent riots of popular protest in 1898 and the killing of King Umberto I in 1900 (on the riots of 1898 in Milan, see Colajanni, 1898/1998). Colajanni also bitterly criticized the Italian anthropologists, with the particular objective of combatting the conception of Lombroso and of his follower, Niceforo. In a brief writing entitled, *Per la razza maledetta* (For the Accursed Race, 1898), he pointed out all the inconsistencies in the thinking of Niceforo, who, more Lombrosian than Lombroso himself, schematized and simplified a whole series of contradictory data taken from craniology. Colajanni instead used statistics to point out some socioeconomic indicators, and he highlighted the way in which the illiteracy rates of the south of Italy, correlated with the delinquency and backwardness, were the principal wound to be healed. For him, the post-Lombrosian anthropologists constructed a pseudoscientific mythology, which he called “anthropological novel,” and of which he was a decisive adversary.

We must also point out that Colajanni assumed a viewpoint of transformist evolutionism, explicitly denying in his writings the importance of Weissman’s discoveries concerning the impossibility of transmitting acquired characters. It seemed clear to Colajanni, as it did to a whole series of Italian scholars—sociologists, hygienists, pedagogists—that the education of individuals and political investment were the principal means for resolving the problems of backwardness and delinquency that were widespread in the south and on the Italian islands (Colajanni, 1898).

The other great southernist intellectual who opposed any distinction in Italy between racial groups was the Pugliese historian and politician, Gaetano Salvemini (1873–1957). Salvemini examined the research on the causes and economical-political remedies for the solution of the southern question. In the 1900 essay *Risposta* (Reply) to Renda’s inquiry, he gave no credit to the anthropological investigations on the racial differences between northerners and southern-

ers. In his opinion, using the concept of race in order to explain complex social phenomena is fitting for “idlers and simplicians;” race is formed in history and is a result of history, not one of its causes. Salvemini did not deny the character and behavioral differences between the north and south of Italy, but he was fully convinced that they derived from the diverse history of the Italian regions. In the south, there did not exist an entrepreneurial middle class and a proletariat; social relations were still conditioned by a feudalism that had been preserved by the monarchic and aristocratic dynasties that had governed without concerning themselves with the interests of the south (Salvemini, 1900, 1955).

The southernists, such as Colajanni and the Lucanian politician Francesco Saverio Nitti (1868–1953), were also attentive analysts of the migration phenomenon, which became particularly acute in the decades bridging the two centuries. The poor people of Italy—in particular, those of the south—had chosen the passage of emigration as an extreme solution in order to escape from their misery. The southerners who left tended to be marked by prejudices of various kinds concerning their presumed inferiority and tendency to commit crime. The positivist anthropologists were divided between those (usually the innatists) who saw emigration as liberating Italy of the worst elements of society, and those (such as Sergi and the transformists) who preferred an internal emigration with the purpose of bettering the Italians from the biological and psychological point of view. The southernists, by contrast, noted that the “returned” emigrants—who had usually been fortunate overseas—demonstrated that in other political and cultural environments, they were able to express all the potentialities that were restrained in their homeland (Colajanni, 1903; Nitti, 1888, 1900; see also Teti, 1993/2011, pp. 278–294).

### An Overview and Closing Considerations

Following the Unification of Italy, some positivist scientists, and particularly anthropologists and psychologists, carried out observations and descriptions of the personality traits of the people of the south. These psychological attributes were, in general, considered different in a negative sense with respect to those of the

northern people. The southerners were seen and described as being aggressive and rebellious (and thus potentially more inclined to commit crimes), individualistic and asocial (and thus less able to construct a civil society), and ultimately as more primitive and less evolved. By contrast, northerners were considered more placid, orderly, sociable, and better able to join together and get organized, as well as more gregarious and remissive with regard to political rule. Nevertheless, aside from these negative personality traits, the southerners were usually not attributed as having less intellectual capacity.

Although these observations and descriptions were, in large part, shared, the psychological anthropologists, to explain the differences between the populations of northern and of southern Italy, advanced various hypotheses, tied to the kind of hereditary theory they adopted. A bit schematically, we can say that there were, on the one side, the scientists that we have defined as innatists (Lombroso and the Lombrosians), who sustained that the physical and mental characters were unmodifiable by the environment and thus transmitted almost unvaried from one generation to another. For them, consequently, the southerners constituted a racial variety that was tendentially considered of an inferior kind, due in part to their mixture with more primitive populations such as the Greeks, Albanians, and Arabs. It was this presumed inferiority that was interpreted as the principal reason for the backwardness of the Mezzogiorno. This radical hereditist position also led to the assertion that it was necessary to defend the society from the defective genes of these populations, and thus to actuate eugenic practices such as segregation or even elimination (e.g., the death sentence of the presumed born criminals).

On the other side, there were the scientists defined as transformists (Sergi, Rossi, etc.), who, in general, shared—albeit with more veiled and attenuated emphasis—the description of the negative psychological traits of the southern people; but these scientists did not, on the one hand, consider them expressions of a racial group that was different and in some way inferior, nor, on the other hand, did they consider these traits unmodifiable, even though they were inscribed in the genetic patrimony. The transformists believed that such characters,

by virtue of the Lamarckian principle contained in the pangenetic theory of heredity, were present—and possibly inscribed in the genes—as a result of historical circumstances, and that they could, for the same principle, be removed in the presence of an environment with favorable socioeconomic conditions, and of an educational action. The value of the Greek-Latin culture had already demonstrated it historically.

These theories of the hereditarist (innatist or transformist) anthropologists and psychologists, who, with diverse accentuations and nuances, had introduced genetic factors in order to explain the fracture between the north and the south of Italy, met with the opposition of the so-called southernists (Colajanni, Salvemini, Nitti, etc.), who did not believe in hereditary differences, but only in those related to cultural, linguistic, organizational, and lifestyle traditions that history could easily explain. In these authors there was, consequently, no idea of a presumed racial inferiority of the southern people; and the southern question could be understood and resolved in terms of political, socioeconomic, and educational factors.

This distinction and subdivision of ours between innatist and transformist scientists, aside from accounting for some differences existing among the Italian anthropologists and psychologists, allows a better understanding of the sense in which it can be affirmed that, at the threshold of the 20th century, the roots of racism and Nordicism were planted.

During the second half of the 19th century, in the Western world, racism appeared as a pseudoscientific doctrine—anchored to the positivist philosophy, to the theory of evolution, and to the new anthropological science with its craniometric and psychometric methods—that was founded upon several basic guidelines: (a) the differentiation and classification of diverse “human races” (usually five) on the basis of superficial morphological and physical characters; (b) the existence of a hierarchy among the races, considered superior or inferior according to the “intellective and moral” level and the degree of civilization achieved, whereas, naturally, the White race was placed on the highest level, inasmuch as it was held to be the most suitable to take on the fight for life and natural selection; (c) the heritability of the particular and distinctive characters of each race, considered an expression of a stable genetic patrimony, not

modifiable by the environment; and (d) the eugenic practice of the separation and segregation of the populations (racial discrimination) in order to limit the crossbreeding among diverse racial groups, and preserve, by means of sexual selection, the best characters, so as to favor the purity of the White race (cf. Hacking, 2005; Jackson & Weidman, 2006; West, 1982, pp. 47–65). An expression and variation of the racist ideology was the Nordicism, which distinguished as racial varieties within the White race, the peoples of northern Europe (Teutons or Aryans) from those of the south (the Mediterraneans), and considered the former superior because gifted with intellectual, character, and behavioral traits more suited to an elevated degree of civilization and social order (Jackson & Weidman, 2006, pp. 105–109).<sup>10</sup>

The southern question exploded in Italy at a historical moment in which the Nordicism in Europe was planting its roots, and those who sustained the superiority of the northern peoples of Europe and of America counterposed a hegemonic and winning “Aryan and Anglo-Saxon” civilization to the “Mediterranean” one (Greek-Roman, with Arab influences), which, in their eyes, had by then become decadent and subjugated. So if we examine with attention the position of the Italian psychological anthropologists, we can see that, on the one hand, the innatists reconnected with, and contributed to, the ideology of Nordicism, and, in fact, enriched it with their criminal anthropology, in attributing to southerners the hereditary character of a greater aggressivity and “tendency toward crime.” This orientation can then be correctly considered as the precursor of the most virulent racism against Jews that was manifested in the Fascist period, and was founded on more sophisticated and specious biological, psychological, and cultural classifications,<sup>11</sup> as well as on a more incisive eugenics supported by the “racial laws” of 1938, and even extended, with Nazism, to sterilization, the elimination of the “different,” and genocide (Cassata, 2008, 2011, Israel, 2010).

On the other hand, however, with the transformists, the distinction between northern and southern populations did *not* become transformed—even on the strength of a heredity theory with a Lamarckian background—in an evaluation of superiority or inferiority genetically rooted, but, if anything, only in the recog-

dition of different mental characteristics and cultural aspects, even though sometimes considered negative for historical and environmental reasons. And the eugenics, from separatist and segregationist, was, if anything, transformed into its contrary, in hoping for the remixturing of the populations and their betterment by means of education.

If, in the descriptions of the Lombrosians, there is an evident conceptualization that is a prelude to racism and to segregationist eugenics, nothing likewise emerges from the theses of the other scientists. It thus becomes clear that between the 19th and 20th centuries, the Lombrosians were a minority, and the Italian scientists and intellectuals, despite the attempts to identify the southerners' "recessive" features and to wish for a politics of prevention and of racial improvement, did not, in general, up until the 1930s, promote doctrines or programs with a racist background.

This interpretation seems to be shared by some contemporary anthropologists, who have masterfully analyzed the "differentialist" and "gerarchicizing" attitude of many scholars (both past and present) of the southern question, and have concluded that the distinction between the populations of the north and of the south of Italy from being a racial one then became a cultural one (but not any less discriminatory; cf. Teti, 1993/2011). Schneider (1998), moreover, has drawn a comparison between the process of cultural assimilation carried out by the north with regard to the Mezzogiorno, and that operated by the West toward the Orient. Moving along this same interpretative line, for Melossi (2008, p. 54) also the northern Italians cast upon those of the south, above all, a "civilizing gaze," which they then transferred toward the African peoples (of Somalia, Eritrea, Libya) in the brief season of Italian colonialism.

Today, at least in Italy, no serious scholar would go so far as to hypothesize significant racial differences between the north and south of the country. The prevailing idea is instead that of recognizing that there have existed, and still do exist, differences, especially of a cultural kind, between northerners and southerners. In particular, there are cultural anthropologists and sociologists who have identified and studied a series of moral and behavioral "values," which would have had negative consequences on the development of the Mezzogiorno, such as, for

example, the "amoral familism" (Banfield, 1958) or a "vassal mentality" and a lack of civic sense typical of people from the south (Putnam, 1993). On this basis, despite the overcoming of biological racism, there has been no lack of forms of "cultural racism" as a result of the presumed superiority of values expressed by northern Italy.

In conclusion, we would, however, like to mention that, in order to explain the differences between the north and the south of our own, as of other countries, the tendency to attribute importance to hereditary-genetic factors of the population has not entirely disappeared. The stereotypes of different national mental characteristics still preserve a certain persuasive influence on the international scientific community today. The problem of possible differences of intelligence and of personality among the populations of different nations, or among groups of people in the same territory, still raises the interest of some researchers, who have difficulty in abandoning the idea of the existence of "national characters,"<sup>12</sup> and of rejecting—as demonstrated by the progress of population biology and of genetics with the DNA analysis—any attempt at racial classification (see Barbutani, 2007).

### Endnotes

1. Among them we can mention especially Pasquale Villari (1826–1917), Pasquale Turiello (1836–1902), Leopoldo Franchetti (1847–1917), Sidney Sonnino (1847–1922), Giustino Fortunato (1848–1932), and Ettore Ciccotti (1863–1939), in addition to the so-called "southernists" about whom we shall speak further.

2. In particular, the newspapers adopted the propagandistic practice of publishing the "horrible" photographs of the southern brigands who had been killed, and of comparing them with the "handsome" portraits of the northern soldiers who were fighting against them (Morello, 1999).

3. Both anthropology and experimental psychology had, in fact, their origin in Italy during the last 30 years of the 19th century, intertwining with each other for various aspects, thanks to the commitment of scientists who carried out research both of an anthropological and of a psychological and psychiatric kind, while often teaching more than one of these disciplines (cf. Cimino & Foschi, 2012).

4. We shall use the term "racial variety" or "race" to designate a population with common *physical* and *mental* characteristics considered genetically inher-



ited and different from those of other populations of the same human species. On the continuity/discontinuity of the concept of race in the history of anthropology and in contemporary biology, see Barbujani (2007).

5. Only Teti's (1993/2011) anthological book conducts an initial overall examination of the theses of the principal psycho-anthropologists who have dealt with the Mezzogiorno; but—in our opinion—with a cultural-anthropological approach that does not distinguish well between them, and that combines them within a single racist and hereditarian orientation.

6. Ferri is often remembered by the historiography as the Lombrosian who, more than others, sustained the environmental causes of crime. In reality, he was the scholar who best defined in his works the notions of “social dangerousness” and of “social defense” in establishing clear and distinct discriminatory borders, which were then adopted by the Fascism in order to legitimate a repressive judiciary system (Melossi, 2008, p. 59). Regarding the growing influence of criminal anthropology on the Italian judiciary system and then on the Fascist “reforms,” see Pick (1986).

7. The optimistic and militant aspect of Sergi's pedagogy is testified to also by his participation in 1908 at the directive committee of the “Liga internacional para la educación racional de la infancia” (International League for the Rational Education of Childhood) organized by the Spanish pedagogist and anarchic Francisco Ferrer (1859–1909) (Avilés Farré, 2006, p. 200).

8. The environmental changes and the education, for Sergi, could modify also the typical feminine characters. In the woman, for example, there could be present the hereditary traits of “geniality,” which however in her, for reasons that are environmental, educational, and sexuality-related, did not succeed in finding expression as they did in men. Sergi's reflection on these themes was still at an initial stage, but soon planted more solid roots when scholars in his school were formed who, like Maria Montessori (1870–1958), elaborated a totally new conception of the woman (cf. Sergi, 1893a; also Babini & Lama, 2000; Foschi, 2008).

9. In 1889, Sergi wrote a book in which he described “human degenerations” of various degrees and, with an excessive severity, considered irredeemable those of a higher level. This conclusion of his aroused Mantegazza's criticisms, which probably influenced Sergi's point of view in such a way as to then make his position more open to a rehabilitation by means of education (Sergi, 1889).

10. In various works of anthropologists of this period—such as, for example, Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882), Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927), and Georges Vacher de Lapouge

(1854–1936)—we find the idea of the superiority of the northern European populations, even though the presumed inferiority of the Mediterranean peoples had already been affirmed by English diplomats and travelers in the beginning of the 19th century, after having encountered, in the south, forms of multiethnic and pluri-confessional cohabitation that was, for them, incomprehensible (Ricotti, 2005, pp. XI–XII).

11. With the “Manifesto of Race” of 1938, some pseudo-scientists who were admittedly racist even sustained that the “racial physiognomy” of *all* the Italians was that of the Longobardi, that is, of an Aryan race, without any significant trace of the Afro-Semitic races.

12. On this question, a passionate discussion has currently developed, raised in particular by the “differentialist” theories of the psychologist Richard Lynn, to which other scholars have objected.

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Received June 8, 2013

Revision received January 29, 2014

Accepted February 13, 2014 ■