

**'Victims of the Same Destiny':**

**Italy in the Postcolonial, the Postcolonial in Italy**

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## Abstract

This thesis concentrates on a series of canonical Italian anti-Fascist writers, and argues that their work is informed and underpinned by an engagement with colonialism. Working between Italian and English, the thesis establishes an original framework for comparative reading, in which it traces neglected lines of literary influence and networks of intellectual and political dialogue between Italian and Indian writers in the inter-war and post-war periods.

The first chapter explores the contours of the 'anti-colonial imagination' underpinning the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Focusing particularly on his lesser-known and often un-translated pre-prison writings, it suggests that the critical terminology for which he has become best known in postcolonial studies emerges as part of his gradual elaboration of an anti-colonial position. The second chapter looks at the ways in which Ignazio Silone's novel *Fontamara* represents Fascism as a form of internal colonialism, before moving on to think about the significance of its influence on Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and what the implications of this line of influence might be for our understanding of what defines postcolonial writing. The third chapter turns to the work of Carlo Levi, and argues that his lifelong commitment to exposing the internal colonization of the Italian South forms part of a broader anti-colonial commitment that carries him to India and brings him into dialogue with writers like Mulk Raj Anand. Finally, the fourth chapter charts the remarkably pervasive yet critically neglected textual relationship between Italo Calvino and Salman Rushdie, and argues that Rushdie's postcolonial aesthetics emerge partly through his readings and re-workings of Calvino.

Taken together, these four cases tell us much about how a certain trajectory of Italian anti-Fascist writing laboured towards what we might think of as forms of anti-colonial and postcolonial thought. Simultaneously, they invite us to ask questions about the unseen role that these writers have played in shaping our sense of what it means for writing to be 'postcolonial'.



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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	v
Table of Contents .....	1
List of Abbreviations.....	5
Introduction: Italy in the Postcolonial, The Postcolonial in Italy.....	7
Chapter 1. The Anti-Colonial Gramsci: International Political Life .....	24
Note on the Texts .....	24
1.1 Introduction: Gramsci's Unique Anti-Colonialism.....	25
1.1.1 Southern Questions.....	33
1.2 Anti-Colonial Positionings .....	43
1.2.1 Killing (and Eating) a Chinese Mandarin: The Vertical Axis of Colonialism.43	
1.2.2 Italians and Chinese: New World Orders.....	55
1.2.3 Mandarins, Caste, and the Intellectuals: the Horizontal Axis of Colonial Power.....	63
1.3 Gramsci's Kipling: A Great and Terrible World .....	71
1.4 Conclusions: Anti-colonialisms and Anti-Fascisms in Theory and Practice ....	82
Chapter 2. 'A Village Like So Many Others': From <i>Fontamara</i> to <i>Kanthapura</i> .....	87
Note on the Texts .....	87
2.1 Introduction .....	88
2.1.1 Lines of Comparison: 'An Italy of the Asiatic' .....	90
2.1.2 Ignazio Silone's <i>Fontamara</i> as 'World Literature' .....	98
2.1.3 'Colonial Regimes' .....	102
2.2.1 Fascism as the Highest Stage of Internal Colonialism.....	111
2.2.2 <i>Fontamara</i> in the World: 'A Village Like So Many Others' .....	118
2.3 <i>Fontamara</i> and <i>Kanthapura</i> : Influence and Anxieties .....	123

2.3.1 The Right to Narrate: Orality and Translation.....	129
2.4 Postcolonial Blind Spots: Confluences and Convergences .....	135
Chapter 3. Carlo Levi: ‘Victims of the Same Destiny’.....	139
3.1 Introduction: Passive Fraternities.....	139
3.1.1 <i>Christ Stopped at Eboli</i> : Closed Rooms .....	142
3.1.2 Christians and Contadini: History or Mythology? .....	145
3.2 The Lucania in every corner of the world. ....	155
3.2.1 The Lucania within us: <i>Fear of Freedom</i> .....	158
3.2.3 <i>The Watch</i> : ‘Contadini’ and ‘Luigini’ .....	162
3.2.4 ‘L’arte luigina e L’arte contadina’: Modernism, Poetry, and ‘Realismo Contadino’ .....	171
3.3 A Planet without Borders: Lucania, India, China, Vietnam .....	176
Chapter 4. Calvino and Rushdie: ‘Make Them Endure, Give Them Space’.....	184
Note on the Texts.....	184
4.1 Introduction: In Search of Rushdie and Calvino .....	184
4.1.2 Existing Studies .....	189
4.1.3 Calvino in Rushdie’s Non-Fiction.....	192
4.2 Calvino in <i>The Satanic Verses</i> .....	196
4.2.1 Rushdie’s Ancestors .....	197
4.2.2 Rushdie’s Invisible Cities: The Web of Influence.....	206
4.2.3 Jahilia and Other Invisible Cities.....	209
4.2.4 A City Visible but Unseen .....	213
4.3 Labyrinths, Lions, and Whales.....	219
4.3.1 Gramsci, Turin, and the Birth of the New.....	223
4.3.2 Oceans, Trees, and Streams of Influence: Italy and India.....	227
4.4 Coda: Rushdie’s Re-orientation in <i>The Enchantress of Florence</i> . ....	232
Conclusion .....	241
Bibliography .....	246





## List of Abbreviations

For the sake of clarity, I provide below a list of abbreviations that will be used for Antonio Gramsci's texts.

### The Prison Notebooks:

*Quaderni* Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. by Valentino Gerratana (Torino: Einaudi, 1975 [2007]).

### The Prison Letters:

*Letters, vol. 1* Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison: Volume 1*, ed. Frank Rosengarten, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

*Letters, vol. 2* Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison: Volume 2*, ed. Frank Rosengarten, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

### The Pre-Prison Writings:

*SG* Antonio Gramsci, *Scritti giovanili: 1914-1918* (Torino: Einaudi, 1958).

*SM* Antonio Gramsci, *Sotto la mole: 1916-1920* (Torino: Einaudi, 1960).

*ON* Antonio Gramsci, *L'Ordine Nuovo: 1919-1920*, ed. Valentino Gerratana and Antonio A. Stantucci (Torino: Einaudi, 1987).

*SF* Antonio Gramsci, *Socialismo e Fascismo: L'Ordine Nuovo 1921-1922* (Torino: Einaudi, 1966).

*NM*

Antonio Gramsci, *Il nostro Marx: 1918-1919*, ed. Sergio Caprioglio (Torino: Einaudi, 1984).

*CdPC* Antonio Gramsci, *La Costruzione del Partito Comunista* (Torino: Einaudi, 1971).

## **Introduction: Italy in the Postcolonial, The Postcolonial in Italy**

This thesis is interested in recovering and recounting a series of neglected, forgotten, or underexplored stories about lines of influence and exchange between certain Italian writers and thinkers of the twentieth century and writers who we might now describe as 'postcolonial'. Separately the moments examined in this thesis might seem surprising, novel, or even anomalous. Taken together, however, they acquire a cumulative weight; collectively they tell a new story about Italy's relationship with the postcolonial. What we learn from them is that a certain trajectory of anti-Fascist and post-Fascist Italian writing positioned and understood itself in terms of wider networks of colonial oppression and broader solidarities of anti-colonial struggle. In turn, this moment of Italian 'anti-colonial' writing has helped, in surprising and often unacknowledged ways, to shape postcolonial writing and theory, even to shape our understanding of what it means for a text to be 'postcolonial'.

Conceiving of Italy as a postcolonial entity, I suggest, involves two simultaneous interventions. On the one hand, it requires us to reimagine Italy, to acknowledge its liminal location in relationship to European modernity, to investigate its ambiguous position as a colonial power created through resistance to occupation by imperial powers, and as a nation riven by internal divisions, racisms, and colonialisms. At the same time, however, reintegrating Italy into the intellectual history of postcolonial studies also offers an occasion to think about what its previous absence might tell us about the imaginative geographies operational in the field, and to redefine what we mean by the term 'postcolonial'.

This attempt to bring Italy (or Italian studies) and postcolonial studies into dialogue is one part of a wider critical trajectory. Over the last few decades there has been increasing attention paid to Italy's colonial history, and the last ten years in particular have witnessed a growth in the study of this colonial history and its contemporary implications, legacies, and repercussions. This scholarly attention to Italian colonialism has emerged from multiple locations, but for the most part it has been prompted by an attempt to address two critical lacunae.

The first is what the foremost historian of Italian colonialism, Angelo Del Boca, has referred to as the 'myths, suppressions, denials and defaults of Italian colonialism'.<sup>1</sup> Until recently, Italy's colonial expansion into North Africa and elsewhere had been almost totally ignored in narratives of Italian history, and much of the ground-breaking work in the early years of Italian colonial studies has been engaged in filling in this gap. In particular, historians like Del Boca, Giorgio Rochat, and Nicola Labanca have done a huge amount to make visible the grim realities of the brutal nature of Italian colonialism in the face of official denials and public amnesia.<sup>2</sup> These historical investigations have been facilitated by new access to archival material, previously kept under lock and key, which has made clear the scale of Italian war crimes in its colonies. Indeed it was not until 1996, more than sixty years after the invasion of Ethiopia, that the Italian government finally admitted to the use of gas weapons.<sup>3</sup> To this day 'no one knows exactly how many gas bombs were dropped in Ethiopia', though Alberto Sbacchi estimates on the basis of the figures available that during the relatively short period of the Italian occupation 'the Ethiopians thus endured roughly 2,100 poison gas bombs, conservatively equivalent to five hundred tons of poison gas'.<sup>4</sup> The recovery of this suppressed narrative of Italy's colonialism is not only an academic project, but also an activist one of vital contemporary importance to the Italian political landscape, as discussions surrounding the recent attempts to erect a monument to the Italian general and war criminal Rodolfo Graziani clearly illustrate.<sup>5</sup> In a historical period in which Italy has become a major centre for immigration, a place where migrants' precarious existence and sense of belonging are being carved out in the face of determined racisms,

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<sup>1</sup> Angelo Del Boca, 'The Myths, Suppressions, Denials and Defaults of Italian Colonialism', in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. by Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 17-36.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Angelo Del Boca's definitive study of Italian colonialism in four volumes, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale* (1992); Nicola Labanca's *Oltremare: Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (2002); and Giorgio Rochat's *Le guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia dal 1896 al 1939* (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory* (London: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Sbacchi, 'Poison Gas and Atrocities in the Italo-Ethiopian War', in *Italian Colonialism*, ed. by Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, pp. 49-52 (p. 50).

<sup>5</sup> Gaia Pianigiani, 'Village's Tribute Reignites a Debate About Italy's Fascist Past', *The New York Times*, 28 August 2012, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/29/world/europe/village-reignites-debate-over-italys-fascist-past.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/29/world/europe/village-reignites-debate-over-italys-fascist-past.html?_r=0)> [Accessed 24 September 2015].



this debate about the history of Italy's colonialism and racism could not be more significant.

The second intellectual lacuna that has lent impetus to the rapid growth of Italian postcolonial studies and postcolonial Italy studies has been within the field of postcolonial studies itself. Until fairly recently, postcolonial studies has, for the most part, made its home in Anglo-American humanities departments, and its conceptual focus has been on British and French colonialism. In English Literature departments it has, to a large extent, consolidated itself as a necessary corrective to a largely white-washed canon. While it is perhaps slightly less common now, it is important to remember that much of the early ground-breaking work in the field (Edward Said's *Orientalism*, for example) was concerned with analysing the various ways in which this canon itself was a product of colonialism, and the various canonical texts of which it was made up in various ways depend upon and produce forms of colonial discourse. In any case, postcolonial studies elaborated and consolidated itself largely in relation to Anglophone and Francophone colonial histories and Anglophone and (to a lesser extent) Francophone literatures. Recently, there have been attempts to extend the scope of the field's vision to include other colonialisms and imperialisms (Dutch, Portuguese, Japanese, German), and other geographical locations (in particular Eastern Europe).<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, the field has begun to carve out a niche outside of the Anglo-American academy. The rapid growth of Italian postcolonial studies must be seen in the context of this trajectory, and it is in this sense that its potential significance becomes most apparent. Italian colonial and postcolonial studies provide an invaluable corrective to the Anglocentrism that has arguably underpinned much of postcolonial theory. As Sandra Ponzanesi has recently suggested, 'the geopolitical and cultural specificity of Italian postcolonialism helps readdress and requalify the precepts and principles of postcolonial theorizing by including the history of a different European south'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Sandra Ponzanesi and Bolette B. Blaagaard, *Deconstructing Europe: Postcolonial Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2012), in which the authors argue for the importance of other European colonial legacies. Another interesting example from recent years is Elleke Boehmer, *The Postcolonial Low Countries: Literature, Colonialism, and Multiculturalism* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Sandra Ponzanesi, 'The Postcolonial Turn in Italian Studies: European Perspectives', in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 51-70 (p. 57).

This convergence between postcolonial studies and Italy has produced a striking amount of original and exciting research over the last few decades, and increasingly we are beginning to see postcolonial Italy studies emerge as a clearly defined sub-field with regular conferences and publications. This has been made possible, in great part, by a number of field-defining edited collections that have helped to bring together scholars working on related material and to map out the nexus of theoretical, historical, and political issues that the study of Italy as a postcolonial context raises.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the vast majority of work published so far has taken the form of edited collections and journal issues, and in some ways this form is emblematic of the way in which the field has come into being largely as a result of collaborative efforts across disciplines, institutions, and countries, and allowing it to cover a quite striking amount of material. This has meant, however, that there have been relatively few monographs and extended studies afforded luxury of space in which to explore alternative readings of Italy as a postcolonial entity.<sup>9</sup> It is partly for this reason that I hope this thesis has something new to offer: the image of postcolonial Italy that I try to elaborate in the following chapters is cumulative, and only comes into view in the context of an extended investigation of multiple authors. This thesis would not have been possible to write without the foundations laid by some of these edited collections, and I would like to see my work as building on these very solid

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<sup>8</sup> A brief list of some of the most significant would include: Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Jane Schneider, *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country* (Berg: Oxford, 1998); Patrizia Palumbo, *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture From Post-unification to the Present* (University of California Press, 2003); Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory* (London: Peter Lang, 2005); Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Fabrizio De Donno and Neelam Srivastava, 'Colonial and Postcolonial Italy', *Interventions: Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 8: 3 (2006), pp. 371-379; Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (eds), *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (London: Peter Lang, 2010); and the most recent, Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> There are a few exceptions to this trend: Iain Chambers ed., *Esercizi di potere: Gramsci, Said, e il postcoloniale* (Roma: Meltemi editore, 2006); Sandra Ponzanesi, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004); Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities, and Italian Imperialism*, (London: Routledge, 2007); Pasquale Verdicchio, *Bound by Distance: Rethinking Nationalism through the Italian Diaspora* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997).

foundations. At the same time, however, it is also defined in response to what I see as a series of blind spots and absences in the existing critical landscape. These blind spots are problematic, I would argue, in that these collections have understandably tended to present themselves as comprehensive, as mapping out the terrain of study in its entirety. As the field becomes increasingly rigidly defined, the danger is that alternative readings and trajectories become harder to see.

The first of these absences has to do with periodization. The emphasis in the field has tended to be divided between two periods. There have been, as I mentioned before, a series of historical investigations recovering the realities and representations of Italian colonialism in the period between the 1890s and the later 1930s. Literary and cultural studies, on the other hand, have often tended to focus on the period after the 1990s, which saw Italy become a centre for immigration. These are by no means separate endeavours: ‘in the Italian context’, Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo observe, ‘the term [postcolonial] is beginning to be employed to explore the historical continuum and cultural genealogy that link the colonial past to contemporary Italy’.<sup>10</sup> The struggles of generations of migrants to make a home in Italy over the last few decades has prompted investigations of constructions of racial, religious, and cultural differences in Italy, but it has at the same time lent new urgency to the historical investigation of the brutal facts of Italy’s colonial past in the face of public amnesia and revisionist presentations of Italy’s colonialism as ‘not as bad’ as others (what Del Boca refers to as the myth of Italians as ‘brava gente’, or ‘good-hearted people’).<sup>11</sup> ‘The period that I am interested in here falls roughly between these two historical moments: starting with Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s and continuing through to Italo Calvino and Salman Rushdie in the 1980s. Although I am not writing about either Italian colonialism as such or contemporary debates about Italy’s contested multiculturalism, nevertheless I argue that this study is no less relevant to the same intellectual and activist effort.

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<sup>10</sup> Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, ‘Paradigms of Postcoloniality in Contemporary Italy’, in in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, pp. 1-30 (p. 2).

<sup>11</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?: Un mito duro a morire* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005).

The second absence is related to the selection of authors that has been the focus of existing work in the field. Literary criticism in the field has often confined itself to the study of literary texts written by migrant authors writing in Italy and in Italian, or to the few literary texts that are explicitly set against the backdrop of the Italian colonial expansion (Ennio Flaiano's novel *Tempo di Uccidere*, published in 1947, is the most obvious example). There has not yet been the kind of critical engagement with the Italian literary canon that Edward Said, for example, performed with the British and French canons in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). This re-reading of an established 'English' literary canon was in many ways the defining gesture that united very diverse scholars working in what was then 'colonial discourse analysis'. If postcolonial studies has gradually become more interested in creating and recreating its own canon of postcolonial authors, it still in many ways rests upon that initial engagement with the mainstream canon. As postcolonial studies has expanded into Italy, it has seemed reluctant to repeat this gesture. An engagement with the Italian literary canon is essential, not only because it might reproduce the readings of colonial discourse analysis from the Anglophone and Francophone contexts and reveal much about the ways in which this canon has formed in relation to colonialism, but more importantly because the specificities of Italian writing and culture might offer alternative trajectories and possibilities that could be useful for postcolonial theory more broadly. I am suggesting that a fuller engagement with the Italian canon might offer us different narratives that hinge not just on discursive complicity but also represent genuine attempts to forge solidarities. This is, I think, particularly urgent given the way that migrants in Italy are often required to negotiate their right to remain in the country through a familiarity with this canon.<sup>12</sup> The existence of an anti-colonial trajectory in already canonical Italian writing might create new space in which this negotiation can take place.

Both of these absences tell us much about the way in which the encounter between Italy and the postcolonial has taken place. 'Postcoloniality', it seems, is something that comes from outside Italy: something that is located outside of its borders or in the racial/cultural otherness of the migrant writer. The irony is that this has the unintended

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<sup>12</sup> Applicants for Italian citizenship will be expected to complete a multiple-choice exam requiring a knowledge of a variety of canonical Italian authors.

effect of maintaining an image of an Italy as not postcolonial, as more straightforwardly European than it really has been, and occludes the ways in which as a nation it has been crisscrossed by lines of colonial power.

Postcolonial theory, too, has seemed to be something that comes from outside, that has to be imported wholesale from Anglo-American academia. This is no doubt determined by institutional factors. Postcolonial studies, as Robert Young points out in a recent article, has never been a single, easily definable entity: 'it represents a field of debate, not a single project'.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, by the time it arrived in Italian studies the contours of these disagreements had hardened somewhat, and postcolonial theory had developed an albeit contested pantheon of leading thinkers, recognisable theoretical camps and positions, and an incredibly popular and seemingly endlessly applicable lexicon of critical terminology. As a result there has sometimes been a tendency to 'apply' existing ideas and terminologies from Anglophone postcolonial studies to Italian material. Arguably the best example of this is Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan's edited collection *National Belongings: Hybridity and Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*, which explicitly invites its contributors to use Homi Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity' to unravel the various ways in which experiences and memories of Italian colonial experience are complicated and multivalent. Similarly, Pasquale Verdicchio appropriates the terminology of postcolonial studies when he suggests that (particularly Southern) Italian migrants in North America exist as 'decontextualized subalterns', which is to say that their subalternity is defined by their position within their country of origin rather than the one in which they actually reside.<sup>14</sup>

The problem here is not with the application of ideas arising from one socio-historical context to another; in fact, one of the central themes of this thesis is that ideas can and do transcend their places of origin in often surprising ways.<sup>15</sup> Nor is it that 'hybridity' or

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<sup>13</sup> Robert J C Young, 'Bayart's Broken Kettle', *Public Culture*, 23:1 (2011) 167-75 (p. 170).

<sup>14</sup> Verdicchio, *Bound by Distance: Rethinking Nationalism through the Italian Diaspora*, p. 90.

<sup>15</sup> In many ways, this is in opposition to the prevailing wind of postcolonial theory. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, asks in the preface to the most recent edition of *Provincializing Europe*: 'Can thought transcend places of their origin? Or do places leave their imprint on thought in such a way as to call into question the idea of purely abstract categories?' The implication seems to be that thought is either universal or specific, and

'subalternity' are inapplicable to Italian contexts and experiences: in both of the cases mentioned above the result is some extremely suggestive and nuanced scholarship providing new and original readings of Italian history and culture. Rather, the issue is with the implicit division of labour at work here: postcolonial theory is seen as something that is already established and which needs only to be imported from the Anglo-American academy, and Italy provides an opportunity for the utility of this body of theory to be retrospectively reaffirmed. The 'theory' has already been done, is already given. This is problematic in that it obscures the ways in which Italy might provide opportunities for the elaboration and recuperation of alternative theoretical trajectories and traditions, and overlooks the fact that Italian thinkers (Gramsci in particular) have been central theoretical reference points of postcolonial theory. What is at stake here, in other words, is the possibility that Italy might have produced its own varieties of postcolonial thought.

It is also, I think, worth asking questions about the ways in which this importation of postcolonial theory has taken place: about which texts have been translated and which have not, and the implications that this might have had for the development of Italian postcolonial studies. Italian readers have had access to canonical works of postcolonial theory in translation largely through the editorial house Meltemi. Meltemi has been responsible for the translations of the works of three thinkers in particular: Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Robert Young. The works selected all emerge from what was the heyday of postcolonial studies in the Anglo-American English departments, and are no doubt intended to constitute a canon of sorts. Although, for the most part, scholars using postcolonial theory in Italian studies have approached postcolonial theory in English rather than being dependent upon the Italian translation, it tends to still be these same three figures who are taken as representative of postcolonial thought. In other words, the postcolonial theory that has arrived at the shores of Italian studies could be seen as a ghostly repetition of a certain moment in

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this is a logic that seems pervasive in postcolonial studies. This is a dichotomy that I would like to oppose here: all of the examples of exchange and influence I trace in this thesis demonstrate that thought moves between Italy and India precisely because of these specificities. In all of these cases, thought transcends its place of origin precisely because of the way it is imprinted by that place. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. xiii.

Anglo-American postcolonial studies, a kind of theoretical afterlife that is taking place precisely as the Anglo-American academy has started to move in different directions. In a recent article written in response to the declaration of ‘the end of postcolonial studies’, Young suggests that ‘in a sense, postcolonial studies has always been about the ongoing life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies’.<sup>16</sup> There is a danger, in the Italian context, that the lingering legacy of postcolonial studies as an institutional force might overwhelm the kinds of living remains and residues that Young is speaking of here, and that I am interested in recovering.

While building on the existing field of postcolonial Italy studies, then, this thesis also seeks to explore what is at risk of being left out of that field. In it, I explore forgotten and underprivileged narratives that illuminate the ways in which a certain trajectory of anti-Fascist writing and thinking was shaped by an engagement with contemporary networks of colonial domination and resistance to that domination. These are stories that, despite the canonical stature of the authors involved, have not yet been explored in postcolonial Italy studies, and which seem difficult to locate within the field as it currently defines itself.

Yet, despite the fact that this is (in part) a thesis on Italian literature and culture, I am not an Italianist and am instead writing from the institutional context of English studies. This disciplinary location further serves to separate this thesis from existing work. While much has been done to examine what is postcolonial about Italy, less attention has been dedicated to thinking about what is Italian about postcolonial studies. What has generally been overlooked in recent attempts to ‘postcolonialize’ Italy or re-imagine the country through the intellectual apparatuses of postcolonial theory is the way in which such a maneuver is tautological. This is to say that many of what we would think of as the defining concepts of postcolonial theory and the defining strategies of postcolonial writing are already present in this moment of anti-colonialism, as I will show in the four chapters of this thesis. Ultimately, what draws me to the study of this material is the possibility that recovering this trajectory of anti-colonial writing and

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<sup>16</sup> Robert J C Young, ‘Postcolonial Remains’, *New Literary History*, 43:1 (2012) 19-42 (p. 21).

thought in the Italian canon might help us to rethink postcolonial studies itself in a series of ways, and to recover alternative ways of thinking the postcolonial.

It is worth addressing, at this point, the choice to remain within the territory of the 'postcolonial' in this thesis, even at the very moment in which postcolonial studies seems to be losing theoretical currency and institutional force in the Anglo-American academy. The last few years in particular have witnessed postcolonial studies cede ground (both in terms of theoretical vogue and the institutional politics of academic hiring) to various conceptions of 'world literary studies'. The critical and theoretical terrain surrounding this thesis has significantly shifted since its initial conception less than five years ago, and it seems necessary to take stock of this shift. In a sense, the kinds of narrative of exchange and influence across national borders and continents in which this thesis is interested could be more readily explored under the aegis of world literature. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, I want to hold to an idea of the postcolonial as heuristically valuable for this project, at least for the moment.

The idea of world literature, as a theorized intellectual project rather than as a product for consumption, has gathered impetus over the last fifteen years, and its various recent incarnations have gathered impetus from three particularly influential publications: Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, Franco Moretti's 'Conjectures on World Literature', and David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?*.<sup>17</sup> Both Moretti and Damrosch take as their points of departure the notion of *Weltliteratur* as it is found in Goethe and Marx as an unrealized and perhaps unattainable goal. This was a critical conversation that initially appeared as an internal critique within the field of comparative literature. Moretti, whose contribution has been arguably the most influential, opens with the judgement that 'comparative literature has not lived up to these beginnings'.<sup>18</sup> To offer an alternative model, Moretti turns to the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, and world-systems theory, in order to conceptualize world literature, like international capitalism, as 'a system that is simultaneously *one*, and

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<sup>17</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2007); David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), 54-68.

<sup>18</sup> Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', p. 54.



*unequal*: with a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality'.<sup>19</sup>

The triumphalism present in some of these visions of world literature has been undercut by critiques coming from the field of translation studies. Emily Apter, in her *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, has been the most prominent voice of dissent, declaring herself 'uneasy in the face of the entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world's cultural resources', and expressing reservations about the embryonic field's tendency to 'zoom over the speed bumps of untranslatability'.<sup>20</sup> This response is prompted, in part, by Moretti's espousal of a technique of 'distant reading', the idea that the ambition of the world literature project 'is now directly proportional to the distance from the text'.<sup>21</sup>

These conversations about world literature as the future direction of comparative literature coexisted with what was perhaps postcolonial studies' most secure period within the academy; a period in which it could be reasonably expected that any major English department would offer courses in postcolonial literature, in which field-defining volumes emerged and academic journals proliferated, and in which it spread confidently beyond the boundaries of the discipline that had been its traditional home. It is only in the last few years that these two fields have begun to occupy overlapping theoretical and pedagogical terrain, and have come into direct competition. The direct opposition of a version of 'world literature' to postcolonial literary studies, as opposed to comparative literature, has its sharpest expression in the work of scholars orbiting around the Warwick Research Collective (WREC), which has been building towards the forthcoming collectively-authored volume *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature*. Many of these figures – Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus and Pablo Mukherjee in particular – had previously been among the most prominent voices of dissent operating *within* the institutional boundaries of postcolonial studies. They follow Moretti in his turn towards Wallerstein and the model of a world literary system that is unified but unequal, though they ground this more firmly in Leon Trotsky's

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', p. 57.

concept of 'combined and uneven development' to work towards an interpretive framework through which to approach texts (eschewing, it seems, the idea of 'distant reading').

The idea that this model of world literary systems might displace postcolonial studies seemed to crystalize around the publication of Neil Lazarus's 2011 *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. While Lazarus's work had previously been articulated from a position of opposition within postcolonial studies (directed primarily against the work of poststructuralist postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha), this volume was positioned as a kind of obituary for the field, and an attempt to mark out a new territory for debate. In an interview with Sorcha Gunne that was published at the same time as *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Lazarus is asked whether postcolonial studies took a wrong turn at an early stage. He replies: 'no, the field didn't take a wrong turn; it *is* a wrong turn'.<sup>22</sup> It is at this moment that world literature, in its particular incarnation as the study of world literary systems, is offered as an alternative conception of the world that is inherently *opposed* to postcolonial studies rather than operating alongside of it.

My intention here is not to offer any definitive judgement about the value of either framework for the study of literary texts, but to negotiate a position for this thesis between and across them. In more than one way, this thesis seems to slip between the cracks of this divide.

At the simplest level, this thesis has been researched and written in precisely the period in which this critique of postcolonial studies (from outside, rather than from within) has consolidated itself, and the prevailing winds of theory (as discernable in the key words of conferences and calls for papers) has shifted towards the investigation of the world literary system. Yet my own intellectual and academic formation has taken place within postcolonial studies, during what has been perhaps its heyday. In the introduction to a special issue organized around the concept of the 'parapostcolonial', the editors write of the ways in which they and many of their contributors felt as though they occupied a

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<sup>22</sup> Sorcha Gunne, 'Mind the Gap: An Interview with Neil Lazarus', *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2012) 1-15 (p. 9).

different relation to the field to that of their immediate predecessors: 'as children of the late 1970s and early 1980s,' they point out 'we quite literally grew up alongside postcolonial studies'.<sup>23</sup> The same is true, I would add, for those of us born in the late nineteen eighties: postcolonial studies defined the interpretive horizons within which this thesis took shape. That is not to say, of course, that it is impossible to think outside of the dominant paradigm at any given moment, nor that it is impossible to theoretically resituate readings of texts in productive ways. It would, however, be intellectually false to deny the ways in which this thesis has been made possible by postcolonial studies, not just as a body of ideas to be subscribed to or contended with, but also as an institutional reality.

Similarly, the last decade has also been the same moment in which postcolonial studies, and a particular understanding of postcolonial theory, has acquired a new lease of life outside of English departments. In particular, we have seen the sudden growth of Italian Postcolonial Studies (or Postcolonial Italy Studies), in which Italy and Italian Studies department have received, digested, and began to radically rework a certain selection of postcolonial theory. This redeployment, or perhaps it would be better to say appropriation, of postcolonial theory has enabled the production of a whole series of promising re-readings of Italian literature, culture, and politics, and this thesis has only been made possible by the foundation that work has provided. It would make little sense, in this moment, to move away from the term 'postcolonial' just as it is opening new interpretive horizons and inspiring new ways of understanding Italy. To remain in dialogue with this body of work necessarily entails the retention of the terminology of the postcolonial.

To refer to Italy as 'postcolonial' is simultaneously problematic and productive. In the same 'Mind the Gap' interview, Lazarus calls into question the validity of extending the term postcolonial beyond its original parameters (though of course these parameters have themselves never been fixed or agreed upon). He registers that there has been 'a

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<sup>23</sup> Anna Bocking-Welch, Isabelle Hesse, and Sarah Pett, 'The Parapostcolonial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and New Approaches', *Postcolonial Text*, 9: 4 (2014) 1-8 (p. 2). The concept of the 'parapostcolonial', which the authors deploy in order to cover the 'idiosyncrasies of contexts that fall not so much outside, as at an angle to' postcolonial studies, seems to me to be a useful one in thinking through Italy's complex relationship with the postcolonial.

push [...] towards a more expanded field', a field that would be able to speak to the existence of United States of America, Scotland, Latin American, and Post-Soviet states as postcolonial formations. 'Why would one describe Ukrainian or Estonian literature as "postcolonial"', he asks? 'It would make more sense, surely, to dissolve the category of the postcolonial [...]'.<sup>24</sup> The same might be said of the attempt to describe Italian literature, particularly the kinds of texts I am interested in in this thesis, which are for the most part not set explicitly against an imperial backdrop, as 'postcolonial'. Might it not make more sense to move away from the term completely, and to figure the exchanges between Italian and Indian writers that I trace in this thesis as occurring within the space of a world literary system?

Yet the moments of exchange that interest me in the chapters that follow, and the ways in which they have been forgotten or occluded, assume a particular significance partly in relation to the narrative of postcolonial studies, as a hidden part of the field's becoming. Gramsci's engagements with anti-colonial struggle, and with India as a point of inspiration, take on a new significance when we think of his centrality to the Subaltern Studies school of historiography and its massive influence on postcolonial theory. The influence that Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* (1933) exerted on Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is particularly significant given the ways in which Rao's novel has been taken, in its attempts to introduce the rhythms of an oral tale in the vernacular into written English, as paradigmatic of the Indian novel in English, and perhaps of the postcolonial novel more generally. Similarly, the pervasive but critically ignored echoes of Italo Calvino's work in the writing of Salman Rushdie are particularly fascinating, because it is often these moments of Rushdie's work that have energized and inspired the theorization of what postcolonial writing *is*. All of these are disavowed or occluded narratives in the intellectual history of postcolonial studies, and it is only by continuing to place them in relation to postcolonial studies that we can unearth the ways in which they came to be buried.

Chapter One develops a reading of Antonio Gramsci as an anti-colonial writer. I establish continuities across the corpus of Gramsci's writings, and trace some the most famous moments of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, from which postcolonial theory has borrowed

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<sup>24</sup> Gunne, 'Mind the Gap', p. 12.

heavily, back to their origins in his largely un-translated and still little known pre-prison writings. In doing so, I demonstrate that Gramsci is always intensely interested in questions of colonial and imperial power and the resistance it engenders. More specifically, I argue that an act of anti-colonial positioning is central to the elaboration of Gramsci's thought. That is to say not simply that Gramsci adopts an anti-colonial position in his work, but rather that his writing is characterized by a consistent attempt to imaginatively situate Italy and its terrain of political struggle in relation to broader contours of colonial exploitation and anti-colonial resistance. I suggest that some of the central Gramscian concepts that have been put to use in postcolonial theory emerge from his engagement with the ways in which Italy as a national entity crisscrossed by lines of imperial and colonial power. At the same time, this anti-colonial positioning leads Gramsci to look for analogies and solidarities with those resisting imperialism on different fronts, particularly in India and China. Ultimately, what I want to present in this chapter is the first attempt at a comprehensive mapping of the various and often surprising manifestations of Gramsci's anti-colonial imagination.

While the following chapters move on to examine different authors and moments of exchange, Gramsci remains a guiding presence and a source of inspiration throughout the thesis. Chapter Two continues to explore the resonances between Italian anti-Fascism and Indian anti-colonialism that we find in Gramsci's work. I first establish a historical and theoretical framework for 'cross-national' comparative readings of Italian and Indian resistance literature. These two regions have tended to be placed in a shared representational economy of exoticism and misery, and there has been an extensive and on-going intellectual, political, and artistic dialogue between them. I argue that the internationalism of the 1920s and 1930s represented a new phase in this dialogue, with many Italian and Indian writers coming into direct contact and participating in the same political projects. I then move on to examine Ignazio Silone's novel *Fontamara*, and look at the way he presents Fascism as the highest stage of Italy's internal colonialism, and attempts to imagine a kind of authentic anti-colonial resistance emerging from the village. Finally, I trace the influence this text had on Raja Rao's classic Indian novel *Kanthapura*, a central text in the canon of Indian writing in English. Although it has largely been forgotten in recent scholarship, Rao made it clear that his novel was in fact based on a reading of *Fontamara*, and is in a sense a re-writing of Silone's novel. Many of the aspects of *Kanthapura* that have since come to be seen as paradigmatic of

postcolonial writing – particularly the way in which the novel is staged as an event of oral narration – can in fact be traced back to Silone’s influence. Placing the two back into dialogue with each other allows us to read *Fontamara* as a postcolonial novel, and to see how specific political and historical parallels caused anti-Fascist and anti-colonial literary projects to converge in the 1930s.

The third chapter moves on to look at the work of Carlo Levi, who was directly influenced by both Gramsci and Silone, and argues that his literary, philosophical, journalistic and political careers are animated by an anti-colonial commitment. I start by arguing that in his most celebrated work, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*) Levi uses the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia as a way of highlighting the ‘internal colonization’ of the Italian South. Like Silone and Gramsci, Levi positions Fascism as the latest in a series of internal colonialisms that divide Italy in two. At the same time, and just as we saw in the previous two chapters, this analysis of the subjugation of the Italian South as part of a broader canvas of imperial domination and exploitation opens up new avenues of solidarity. We see this best, perhaps, in his collection of *Essays on India*, in which he sees India not as a ‘foreign country or a distant time’, but as a ‘giant mirror’ reflecting the history and contemporary reality of Levi’s Italy.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Chapter Four is dedicated to the extraordinary influence that Italo Calvino has had on the work of Salman Rushdie, an influence that Rushdie has been at pains to point out on multiple occasions and yet has still not received any sustained scholarly attention. I first reconstruct the narrative of Rushdie’s relationship with Calvino as a friend, but more importantly as a reader, and chart the ways in which Rushdie lovingly reads and re-reads Calvino’s works over a period spanning three decades. I then examine in detail the traces of Calvino in Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which I suggest draws particularly heavily on *Invisible Cities* (1972) for its sense of the urban as the site of the marvellous. Finally, I go on to look at the very obvious acts of homage Rushdie pays to Calvino in his most recent novel, *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), and argue that we might read this as Rushdie’s attempt to ‘re-orient’ himself by re-engaging with the author whose works had most shaped his own.

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<sup>25</sup> Carlo Levi, *Essays on India*, trans. by Antony Shugaar (London: Hersperus, 2007), p. 5.

Re-establishing the literary dialogue between these two authors in the broader context of the thesis allows us to read them both in a remarkably different light. If one of the things it might mean to be a 'postcolonial' writer is to be writing in the wake of the disillusionment with the failures of the actual post-independence state, then it is something these two writers share (and we might equally think of, for example, Ayi Kwei Armah, or Ngugi Wa Thiong'o). I read both Calvino and Rushdie's formal innovations as responses to narrowing political horizons, and as attempts to hold these horizons open in their work. Reading Calvino and Rushdie together allows us to simultaneously think about Calvino as a postcolonial author and to read Rushdie's 'magical realism' not as postmodern experimentalism but as the continuation of an anti-colonial dialogue between Italian and Indian writers.

Placed alongside each other, the four case studies that make up the chapters of this thesis offer us an entirely new narrative of a 'postcolonial Italy'. These writers and texts are postcolonial in the sense that they seek consistently to position the terrain of struggle in Italy in relation to broader contours of colonial power, drawing insistently on the language and tropes of colonialism to analyse and criticise Fascism and the subjugation of the Italian South. We might think of them as postcolonial because they form part of, and were formed by, networks of intellectual and political dialogue between Italian and Indian writers in the inter-war and post-war periods. But we might equally think of them as postcolonial because they have helped, in ways that have often been forgotten or occluded, to shape and influence what we think of as postcolonial writing and theory.

## Chapter 1. The Anti-Colonial Gramsci: International Political Life

### Note on the Texts

The simple act of reading Gramsci presents a number of unique challenges. Gramsci's texts, particularly the *Quaderni del carcere*, his *Prison Notebooks*, have been presented in a remarkable number of different editions and an even larger number of English language translations. While Gramsci has been best known in Anglophone criticism through the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, many of the passages that I investigate here do not feature in that volume, and although a complete translation of *The Prison Notebooks* is currently being prepared by Joseph A. Buttigieg, only the first eight notebooks are as yet available. At the same time a major focus of this chapter is on Gramsci's pre-prison journalism, and while a wide selection of these pieces has been translated in a variety of volumes and selections, the vast majority remain un-translated. To avoid confusion, and to allow for continuities between the pre-prison and prison writings to emerge without being masked by the decisions of different translations, I have therefore provided my own translations of all of the material drawn from the *Quaderni* and the pre-prison political writings.

In the case of the *Quaderni*, all quotations are drawn from what remains the standard Italian edition: Valentino Gerratana's 1975 *Einaudi* edition. I have followed the citation convention established there for citing the notebooks, whereby 'Q' indicates the notebook, and 'S' the entry in that notebook, though I have also chosen to provide page numbers (i.e. Q1§2 indicates the second entry in the first notebook). Readers seeking English translations in various editions (where they exist) can find them easily by following the concordance tables maintained online by the *International Gramsci Society*.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of the pre-prison journalism I refer to the individual volumes in which Einaudi published these writings, but I also provide the title and date of the original

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus E. Green, 'Concordance Table of Gramsci's Prison Notebooks', *International Gramsci Society*  
[http://www.internationalgramscisociety.org/resources/concordance\\_table/index.html](http://www.internationalgramscisociety.org/resources/concordance_table/index.html)  
[Accessed 24/09/2015]



article, in the hope that this might help to establish for the reader a clear timeline for these writings. Again, all translations from the pre-prison writings are my own.

In the case of Gramsci's prison correspondence, where there is less potential for confusion, I use Rosenthal's excellent two-volume 1994 translation.

### **1.1 Introduction: Gramsci's Unique Anti-Colonialism**

Few thinkers have been as central to the theorization of the postcolonial world as Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). A string of Gramscian terms and concepts – hegemony, the national-popular, common sense, wars of position and movement, and, of course, the idea of subalternity – have been lifted from the *Quaderni del Carcere* (*Prison Notebooks*) and put to work in a dizzying array of historical, geographical, and political contexts. As Timothy Brennan observes, 'it is difficult to find work in postcolonial studies which does *not* cite Gramsci'.<sup>2</sup>

The incredible mobility that Gramsci's work has enjoyed in its postcolonial afterlife is perhaps best emblemized by the journey of the 'subaltern', one of Italy's most famous emigrants, who has travelled from the rural zones of Southern Italy to the Indian subcontinent, and beyond to almost any context of oppression or domination. Recent years have seen the emergence of a number of studies in English and Italian explicitly seeking to explore and expand the horizons of Gramscian-inspired postcolonial thought. This includes Iain Chambers' edited collection *Esercizi di potere: Gramsci, Said, e il postcoloniale* (2006), Giuseppe Vacca, Paolo Capuzzo and Giancarlo Schirru's *Studi Gramsciani nel mondo* (2009), Giancarlo Schirru's *Gramsci, le culture e il mondo* (2009), Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya's *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (2012), and, most recently, Cosimo Zene's *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B. R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of Dalits and subalterns* (2013). These volumes inventory the traces that Gramsci has left and continues to leave on postcolonial studies, and search out new

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 234.

possibilities for Gramscian readings in the postcolonial world. Collectively, they bear witness to the astonishing and enduring relevance of Gramsci's work: postcolonial studies has been quite simply unthinkable without the intellectual contributions of Antonio Gramsci.

It is not normally imagined, however, that Gramsci himself produced an analysis of colonialism. Stuart Hall, in an influential essay, once asserted that Gramsci did not talk about issues of race as such, but that his thought could be brought to bear on these questions by thinking about them in a Gramscian way: 'Gramsci did not write about race, ethnicity or racism in their contemporary meanings or manifestations', Hall claims, '[n]or did he analyse in depth the colonial experience or imperialism, out of which so many of the characteristic "racist" experiences and relationships in the modern world have developed'.<sup>3</sup> This seems to some extent to be typical of the prevailing view of Gramsci in cultural and postcolonial studies: a first-world Marxist who created a critical toolbox which, through the ingenuity and mental elasticity of the postcolonial critic, can be put to work on these more modern questions. The truth is, of course, that Gramsci was intensely interested in colonial and racial domination, and that an analysis of colonialism was central to the internationalism of the generation of Marxists to which he belonged. As Brennan eloquently puts it, he 'embodies his era's anti-colonial energies'.<sup>4</sup> Colonialism was quite simply unavoidable for Gramsci, something with which he had to wrangle in almost every aspect of his writing. Ultimately, my aim in this chapter is to argue that questions of colonial domination and anti-colonial resistance lie at the very heart of Gramsci's work and inform the development of some key strands of this thought. What I want to present here is the first attempt at a comprehensive mapping of the various manifestations of Gramsci's anti-colonial and postcolonial imagination, an inventory of the traces that colonialism and imperialism left upon his work. This mapping forms the cornerstone of my exploration of anti-colonialism in the other Italian authors covered in this thesis, namely Ignazio Silone, Carlo Levi, and Italo Calvino, who all, in different measures, bear the imprint of Gramsci's intellectual lineage.

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10: 5 (1986) 1-27 (p. 8).

<sup>4</sup> Brennan, *Wars of Position*, p. 233.

In order to do this I situate the *Prison Notebooks* in relation to the wider body of Gramsci's writing and correspondence. In particular, I focus on his pre-prison writings, the vast majority of which have not been translated into English, in an attempt to map the evolution of his thought from 1916 onwards, and establish lines of continuity between these pieces and some of his more famous meditations in the *Prison Notebooks* and the essay on *The Southern Question*. The pre-prison journalism has started to receive more critical attention, and Gramsci's works have recently started to be presented in ways that emphasize their continuities with the *Notebooks*. My approach here is philological, in the sense Gramsci himself famously defines: 'exposition of all of the works, even the most insignificant, in chronological order' in order to establish the 'leitmotifs, the rhythm of thought, which is more important than individual disconnected quotations'.<sup>5</sup> As such, this work forms part of what Marcus E. Green has recently referred to as a new 'historical-philological season of Gramscian studies', much of which has focussed on precisely those aspects of his thought that have been seized upon in postcolonial theory.

I would, however, like to sound a note of caution here. The exhortation of the need for a 'philological' approach to Gramsci's work has been a perennial feature in Anglophone Gramsci criticism, and has typically functioned as a cautionary note directed at postcolonial scholars approaching his work in translation and through the *Selections* rather than the (almost) complete Italian language edition edited by Gerratana. The history of this gesture goes back at least to Perry Anderson, who insisted that a philological approach, one that would aim to recover 'the true, obliterated text of his thought', was the only remedy to 'facile or complacent readings of Gramsci': 'he is still,' Anderson warned in 1976, 'largely an unknown author to us'.<sup>6</sup> While this insistence on philological care is intended largely as a call for informed and nuanced readings of Gramsci's texts, rooting this principle so deeply in his own work might also serve to fetishize Gramsci's own practice of reading, and in turn blind us to the moments in which he is a surprisingly promiscuous reader, willing to read texts against the grain and even occasionally to re-invent them to suit his needs. The point here is, of course, not to take Gramsci to task for a lack of textual respect, or to undermine the need to

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<sup>5</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q4§1, p. 419.

<sup>6</sup> Perry Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review*, 100, (1976) 5-78 (p. 6).

treat his own works with such critical attention, but rather to recognize that his own practice of reading was often inventive. As we shall see in this chapter, such moments of creative reading and writing play an important role in the development of his analysis of colonialism: among other things, his was a *literary* anti-colonialism.

There is a huge wealth of material to discuss: Gramsci's entanglements with colonialism and anti-colonial resistance are multiple, varied, and sometimes contradictory. In recent discussions of Gramsci's postcolonial legacy, one of the points of contention has been the 'uniqueness' of Gramsci's anti-colonial insight. In their introduction to *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya write that 'Gramsci's own reflections on colonialism and empire were sophisticated and forward-looking, more progressive than most Marxist and socialist thinkers of his generation'.<sup>7</sup> It is hard, reading the vast archive of Gramsci's written engagements with questions of imperialism, to disagree with this assessment of the sophistication and perspicacity of his thought. Nevertheless, in his review of the collection Brennan takes issue with this claim about Gramsci's 'uniqueness', and argues that it serves to sever Gramsci from other inter-war Marxist intellectuals (for example M N Roy, Ho Chi Min, Rosa Luxemburg and César Vallejo) and occlude the ways in which the positions he adopted were in line with the general thrust of inter-war communisms. 'It cannot really be denied', he writes, 'that these influences *created* Gramsci. They formed the intellectual and political environment that shaped all of his thinking'.<sup>8</sup>

Yet if the danger in celebrating, from a postcolonial perspective, the uniqueness of Gramsci's thought is that it isolates him as a solitary genius and masks the ways in which his ideas were shared with and owed to a wider culture of political belief, there is an equal danger in overlooking the ways in which his anti-colonialism was unique: the product of unique political, social and personal coordinates, something that he did not simply adopt ready-made but laboured towards gradually, and something that varied and changed over time. If Gramsci was not unique among inter-war Marxists in occupying an anti-colonial position, the exact nature of this anti-coloniality certainly is,

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<sup>7</sup> Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya, *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Brennan, 'Joining the Party', *Postcolonial Studies*, 16:1, (2013) pp. 68-78 (p. 71).

as is the manner in which he negotiates his way towards it in his writings. Gramsci's ideas on colonialism were not drawn from any of the thinkers Brennan lists, even if he shared much of his world-view with them. Nor did they emerge directly from the policy documents of the Comintern. Instead, Gramsci often turns to surprising sources to elaborate these ideas. In this chapter we see Gramsci's ideas about colonialism and resistance shaped by, among other things, childhood stories from Sardinia, a bizarre love-affair with the works of the arch-imperialist Rudyard Kipling, strange mis-readings of Balzac, his prison life which for a moment positioned him on the fringes of the Italian imperial system and brought him into contact with those fighting against it, and the racist rhetoric of the Italian liberal press. It is to the recovery of this unique and often startling anti-colonialism, which he shared with many, and which is not merely a political position but an imaginative act, that this chapter is dedicated.

I start by thinking about the ways in which we might think of Gramsci as writing from an anti-colonial position, or from a position that would foster sympathy and solidarity with those suffering under and struggling against the weight of imperialisms across the globe. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which Gramsci intentionally draws upon a metaphor of imperialist oppression to describe his own personal and political life-world. There are two key aspects I dwell on here. The first is Gramsci as someone writing from Europe's periphery, and from the Italian South: as we shall see, Gramsci consistently and insistently calls upon the language of imperialism to describe the formation and functioning of the Italian State in his pre-prison writings. He clearly conceptualizes Italy as existing under, or being, a colonial regime within its own borders.

In the second section of the chapter, I argue that Gramsci is constantly interested in locating the political struggles taking place in Italy within broader networks of imperial power. I suggest that he positions Italy along two distinct *axes* of colonialism. The first of these, the 'vertical axis', is that of imperialist capital: the unification of disparate territories and markets into a global hierarchy of exploitation. I trace Gramsci's distinctive theorisation of this axis, and the way in which locating Italy along it revealed the ways in which it was internally riven, through his curious and inventive reading of Honoré de Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*. Following this line of thought from one of his earliest and most obscure articles through to some of the most celebrated moments of the *Prison*

*Notebooks* allows us to establish that his formulation of the 'Southern Question' initially took place within a wider framework of imperial exploitation.

I then continue to trace the complex and often contradictory ways in which Gramsci locates Italy along this vertical axis in the years of intense political change that followed the Russian revolution and the end of the First World War. This is a period in which Gramsci sees the world spin on the edge of a coin: old imperial orders dissolve, new economic imperialisms grow in their place, and vast surges of anti-colonial rebellion seem poised to reshape the globe. In this context, Gramsci consistently sees the interests of the radical proletariat in Italy as being in harmony with these anti-colonial forces, and as needing to learn from them. At the same time, he depicts the rise of Fascism as the domestic front of a new global imperialism, and the struggle against it as being consonant with the struggles of all those resisting imperialism. If, by the time he came to write the *Notebooks*, the political structure of the world seemed to have hardened and Fascism had tightened its grip on the Italian State, it is nevertheless important to remember the way in which Gramsci wrote, with intense optimism, in this moment of imperialism's intense crisis.

At the same time, we find throughout Gramsci's work a consistent desire to *compare*, to establish a global comparativism that takes little or no notice of the hierarchies of global imperialism or the geographies of particular imperial formations. This is what I term the 'horizontal axis' of colonialism in Gramsci's writings, along which he searches out transnational comparisons of the uneven social terrain over which this imperialist capitalism had settled. Along this line Britain shares more in common with Japan than it does with France, and Italy seems closest to China or India. I trace this comparison between Italy, China, and India through his pre-prison writings, and argue that it is through this act of comparativism that he develops a concept of caste that later becomes central to his famous investigation of the function of the intellectuals.

The point is not simply that we can discern an anti-colonial 'position' in Gramsci's work, but rather that the act of imaginatively positioning Italy and its political struggles along one or both of these axes of colonialism is a central and recurrent gesture in his writings, and one that is integral to the development of his thought. This act of anti-colonial positioning, I suggest, lies at the heart of many of his most celebrated theoretical

innovations in the *Prison Notebooks*, and particularly those that have been most fruitfully adapted by postcolonial theory.

In the third section of the chapter, I continue to think through the ways in which Gramsci's theoretical innovations are coloured by his imaginative engagements with colonialism and imperialism by focusing on his surprising love affair with the works of Rudyard Kipling. As with Balzac, Gramsci shows himself to be a capricious reader of Kipling, willing to read his works back upon themselves, or to depend on seemingly half-remembered versions of his fiction. Reconstructing various trajectories within Gramsci's writings on Kipling from the earliest years of his pre-prison journalism allows us to see quite how fertile Gramsci found these texts, or his own versions of them, as sources of theoretical and political insight. Gramsci draws heavily on Kipling to formulate an understanding of Fascism as an aggressively bourgeois political phenomenon. Kipling seems to provide Gramsci with a means of thinking about Italy as a kind of field of anti-colonial struggle. I suggest that his engagements with Kipling's texts inflect the development of key theoretical terms in the Gramscian lexicon, in particular the ideas of 'subalternity' and political hegemony.

I want to end the chapter by looking at the concrete manifestations of this kind of anti-colonial solidarity that emerge from and accompany his work. While I speak often of Gramsci's 'literary anti-colonialism' as something that is frequently worked out through acts of reading and writing, I do not mean to imply that it rests on the page. Rather, I argue that Gramsci's work is intimately connected to a positive and pragmatic anti-colonial Marxism in a way that has not previously been imagined. I examine the ways in which Gramsci's anti-colonial spirit seems to be reflected in the broader aims and ambitions of the inter-war Italian Communist Party (PCd'I). Examining one particular document from the archives of the *Istituto Fondazione Gramsci* in Rome, I reconstruct the party's embryonic programme for anti-colonial activism and agitation in the late 1920s. Written in 1928 by Gramsci's comrade Ruggiero Grieco, this document displays a surprisingly perceptive analysis of the contemporary crisis of European imperialisms, and identifies Ethiopia as a nodal point upon which the party could concentrate their energies. This analysis, and the spirit that underpins it, shares much with Gramsci's anti-colonial writings, either because Gramsci acted as a source of inspiration or because the ideas that found expression in his work were simply in tune with a broader culture of

belief. Recovering this allows us to see the potential that Gramsci's work (and that of his contemporaries and comrades) had for generating not only ideas and concepts that might be useful for the analysis of colonialism, but also a genuine anti-colonial Marxist praxis.

This thesis is interested in tracing a trajectory of anti-colonial thought in Italian anti-Fascist and post-Fascist writing, and in the rich intellectual, political, and literary exchanges that this trajectory both contributed to and was itself a product of. Gramsci's writing seems the most productive point of departure in this endeavour: it has served as an inspiration to a generation of Italian writers struggling with the complex legacies of Fascism, and in turn to other generations of intellectuals attempting to come to terms with the contested legacies of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism. My intention here is to recover the persistent anti-colonial dimension of his thought; the product of an internationalism that does not separate East from West, a conception of the world as criss-crossed by intersecting lines of imperial power, and a nuanced sense of how the struggles of the Italian labouring classes operated alongside, and always in relation to, a rising tide of anti-colonial energy.

While I aim to be comprehensive and thorough in this recovery, what follows by no means exhausts the available material: I do not discuss, for example, Gramsci's fascinating conversations with his sister-in-law Tatiana regarding racism and his own identity as a Sardinian of Albanian descent in his prison letters.<sup>9</sup> Nor do I discuss Gramsci's experiences of prison (although this is something to which I will return in Chapter 3 of this thesis). Gramsci writes movingly, and at length, in his prison correspondence of the effect that the news that he was due to be transferred to a penal colony in Somalia had had on him. This would be 'a voyage of almost two months in chains, which included crossing the equator', and which Gramsci did not expect to survive.<sup>10</sup> This transfer never took place; instead Gramsci was sent for a brief period to the Sicilian island of Ustica, where he was interned alongside several hundred political prisoners from Libya: anti-colonial activists or those who had resisted Italian colonial

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<sup>9</sup> This conversation takes place across September and October of 1931. See *Letters*, vol. 2, pages 71-72, 79, 82-83, and 87.

<sup>10</sup> Gramsci, *Letters* vol. 2, pp. 4-5



occupation in Cyrenaica.<sup>11</sup> Gramsci became fascinated by these 'beduini', and in particular developed a friendship with a man named Haussiet, of whom he speaks fondly in several letters.<sup>12</sup> If Gramsci's anti-colonialism was framed in part by his sense of the structural injustices at the heart of the Italian State, it must also have been galvanized and shaped in its later years by his experiences of incarcerations, which brought him into a new relationship with that State.

This account of Gramsci's anti-colonialism is intended to be comprehensive and thorough, but not definitive or exhaustive. Rather, I hope that it will be a productive starting point in a conversation that still needs to be had. At this moment in time, in which Italy is developing its own fresh incarnation of postcolonial theory and criticism that must grapple with the nation's ambivalent position, and in which postcolonial studies as an academic institution seems elsewhere to be drifting apart and giving way to alternative critical paradigms of world, world-systems, and global literatures, Gramsci's conception of the world might once more be useful to us in getting our bearings.

### **1.1.1 Southern Questions**

If Gramsci's work has been so productive for postcolonial theory, the explanation is most commonly sought in Gramsci's status as a Southerner, which is to say both in terms of his origins in the South of Italy and in Italy's own liminal position in the structures of global economic power. As Tom Nairn put it, Gramsci was 'a product of the West's most remote periphery, and of conditions which, half a century later, it became fashionable to call "Third World".'<sup>13</sup> V. G. Kiernan observed that 'Gramsci's impressions of the world outside Europe were coloured by his being an Italian, and a Sardinian, which from some points of view made it easier for him than for socialists in more advanced Western

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<sup>11</sup> Labanca points out, 'by January 1912, at least 3,425 Libyans had already been deported to Italy, 349 to Favignana, 635 to Gaeta, more than 834 to Ustica, and 1,080 to the Tremiti Islands'. Nicola Labanca, 'Italian Colonial Internment', in Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (eds), *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 27-26 (p. 28).

<sup>12</sup> See Gramsci, *Letters vol. 1*, pp 20, 66, 264-65, 368.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Nairn, 'Antoniu Su Gobu', in Anne Showstack Sassoon (ed.) *Approaches to Gramsci* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society, 1982), pp. 129-79 (p. 161).

countries to enter into the human condition in “undeveloped” lands’.<sup>14</sup> Gramsci’s southern status has similarly been emphasized by Brennan, who reminds us that Southern Italy and the islands in particular ‘bore many of the marks of dependency familiar in the third world’.<sup>15</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, in his essay on ‘Reading Gramsci in the Days of Hindutva’, stresses that ‘the alienating divide between North and South in Italy was not merely economic [...] it was often felt, on both sides, as a racial difference’.<sup>16</sup> More recently Robert Young has offered an incredibly detailed and sustained investigation of the way in which Gramsci’s work is inflected by his Southernness: ‘a native of the islands,’ he writes, ‘Gramsci was an intellectual from the peripheries, and in every sense “Southern”’.<sup>17</sup> These moments tell us much about why Gramsci might have been, and continues to be, a promising intellectual resource for postcolonial theorists and scholars to draw upon, but relatively little about how Gramsci’s own writings were shaped by these factors, or the ways in which he actively thinks through his own position in these terms. In what follows I want to shift the emphasis away from how *we*, as modern-day readers of Gramsci, might see him as emerging from a space that shares something with the colonized world, and instead focus on how Gramsci’s own awareness of this analogy manifests itself in his work, particularly in his pre-prison writings and his letters.

Gramsci’s use of the language and register of colonialism in his analysis of the subjugation of the Italian South and the islands in the *Southern Question* essay and the *Prison Notebooks* is well known. In his terms, the Italian South had been ‘reduced to a semi-colonial market, a source of savings and tax money’.<sup>18</sup> This demonstrable economic exploitation of the South was not, however, widely accepted by the Northern population:

The ‘misery’ of the South was ‘inexplicable’ in historical terms for the popular masses of the North; they did not understand that national unity had not arrived on the basis of equality, but as a hegemony of the North over the South in the territorial city-country relationship, which is to say that the North was concretely an ‘octopus’ that enriched itself at the expense of the

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<sup>14</sup> V. G. Kiernan, *Imperialism and Its Contradictions* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 174.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Brennan, ‘Literary Criticism and the Southern Question’, *Cultural Critique*, No. 11 (Winter, 1988-1989), pp. 87-114 (p. 88).

<sup>16</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> Robert J. C. Young, ‘Il Gramsci Meridionale’, in Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya (eds), *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 17-33 (p.18).

<sup>18</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q19§26, p. 2037.

South and whose economic-industrial growth was directly linked to the impoverishment of the economy and agriculture of the South.<sup>19</sup>

In order to obscure the ways in which the relative prosperity of the industrial cities of the North was based on this act of leeching off of the South, the ways in which it appears as almost vampiric (an image to which I would like to return later), there arise what Gramsci refers to as certain kinds of 'ideology [...] disseminated by the propagandists of the bourgeoisie among the masses of the North'.<sup>20</sup> This 'ideology' amounted to a kind of biological and cultural racism directed against the labouring classes of the South:

The population of Northern Italy believe instead that if the Mezzogiorno has not flourished after being liberated [. . .], this means that the causes of their misery were not external, to be found in the objective politico-economic conditions, but internal, innate in the Southern population, so much so that the conviction has taken root of the fertility of the Southern lands: there remained just one explanation, the organic incapability of the people, their barbarism, their racial inferiority.<sup>21</sup>

These moments are well known in narrative of Gramscian thought present in Anglophone postcolonial studies. Yet these ideas have a longer history in Gramsci's pre-prison writings than is normally acknowledged. Much of this history unfolds in the lesser-known pre-prison articles, many of which have yet to be translated. The description of the position of the Italian South in terms of colonialism here is part of a sustained and concerted analysis of the subjugation of the South, and Gramsci's own Sardinia in particular, which unfolds over more than a decade and in the pages of dozens of articles. What I would like to do now is to spend some time tracing the various ways in which Gramsci articulates this subjugation in the pre-prison writings, and to explore the way in which the idea of internal colonialism is consistently the cornerstone of his analysis of the Italian State and the position of the working classes within it during this period. I argue that Gramsci sees the Italian South as colonized in four distinct yet overlapping ways: territorially, economically, discursively, and ecologically.

The southern question first appears in Gramsci's writings a decade before the famous essay, in an article entitled 'Il mezzogiorno e la guerra' written in June of 1916. Referring

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<sup>19</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q19§24, pp. 2019-20

<sup>20</sup> Gramsci, *Alcuni temi della questione meridionale*, 1926. (CdPC, p. 140).

<sup>21</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q19§24, p. 2022.

to a financial report written five years earlier by Francesco Coletti, Gramsci notes already that ‘the unification of the Italian regions under a single centralized regime had had disastrous consequences for the Italian South’.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, in another article written for *Avanti!*, Gramsci attempted his first thorough critique of the formation of the Italian State. Here, Gramsci anticipates his later analysis of the *Risorgimento* in the *Prison Notebooks* as a failed project of nation building, an analysis that has been so productive and inspiring for the Subaltern Studies historians among others.<sup>23</sup> Here, he writes that Italy does not have what he refers to as a ‘class State’, in which great political parties representing the interests of particular economic classes alternate in power and engage in a continuous dialectical struggle. Instead, he writes, ‘there existed the dictatorship of one man [Giovanni Giolitti], the exponent of the restricted political interests of the Piedmont region, who, in order to keep Italy united, has imposed on Italy a centralized and despotic system of colonial domination.’<sup>24</sup> Shortly afterwards, he repeats this idea of ‘the political dictatorship of Piedmont over the Italian *colony*’ in another article– and it is worth noting here that the word *colony* is italicized in the original version of the article.<sup>25</sup>

This is the first sense in which Gramsci calls upon the language of colonialism in his analysis of the Italian State: in the description of the unification of Italy as a kind of Piedmontese dictatorship that reduced *all* of the rest of Italy to a kind of colonial status. In order to understand the position of the islands, he argues, ‘it is necessary to remember that the Italian State constituted and developed itself imperialistically’.<sup>26</sup> In 1920, he once again describes the Italian State, in the period in which suffrage was restricted to the land-owning classes, as ‘a ferocious dictatorship that put Southern Italy and the islands to the sword, crucifying them, quartering them, burying alive the

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<sup>22</sup> Gramsci, ‘Il Mezzogiorno e la Guerra’, *Il Grido del Popolo*, 1st April 1916. (*SG*, pp. 30-31).

<sup>23</sup> See Ranajit Guha, ‘Historiography of Colonial India’, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 37-43 (p. 43). Guha famously speaks, in Gramscian tones, of the ‘historic failure of the nation to come to its own’.

<sup>24</sup> Gramsci, ‘L’Intransigenza di Classe e la Storia Italiana’, *Il Grido del Popolo*, 18th May 1918. (*SG*, p.232).

<sup>25</sup> Gramsci, ‘Uomini, Idee, Giornali e Quattrini’, *Avanti!*, ediz. Piemontese, 23rd October 1918. (*SG*, p.333).

<sup>26</sup> Gramsci, ‘La Sardegna e la Classe Operaia’, *Avanti!*, ediz. Piemontese, 17th February 1920. (*ON*, p.418).

impoverished peasantry that the salaried writers of the North defame with the label of 'brigands'.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, Gramsci calls upon this terminology to expose inequalities of power in the parliamentary system and the democratic life of the State, but he is also interested in the ways in which the attempts to disguise the inherent injustice of the Italian State gives rise to forms of racism, of which the stereotype of the 'brigand' that he discusses here is one. Similarly, he complains that 'the dominant class in Italy does not even have the hypocrisy to mask its dictatorship: they have considered the working population to be a population of an inferior race, which can be governed without compliments like an African colony'.<sup>28</sup> The moments that I have quoted above are typical in their use of the language of colonialism and imperialism to speak of the Italian unification, but they by no means exhaust the articles to which I could have referred.<sup>29</sup>

Yet increasingly, this analysis of the Piedmontese territorial dictatorship as colonial, which is associated for the most part with the figure of Giolitti, is accompanied and gradually displaced by an *economic* analysis of the exploitation of the Italian South and the islands that is associated with Crispi.<sup>30</sup> This version of the narrative of Italy's internal colonialism tends to place greater emphasis on Gramsci's own Sardinia. In this sense, 'the Northern bourgeoisie subjugated the Italian South and the Islands and has reduced them to colonies to be exploited'.<sup>31</sup> This analysis of Sardinia's economic exploitation also places it in relation to other economic imperialisms, particularly the British Empire. The Sardinian workers and peasantry were triply exploited, he writes: England exploited the mines, Rome exploited its agriculture, and the Italian State extorted taxes and levies.<sup>32</sup> This is the second version of Italy's internal colonialism at work in the pre-prison writings: the economic exploitation of the South as a function of the imperialistic development of the Italian State.

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<sup>27</sup> Gramsci, 'Il Lanzo Ubriaco', *Avanti!*, ediz. Piemontese, 18th February 1920. (*ON*, p. 422).

<sup>28</sup> Gramsci, 'Lo Stato Italiano', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 7th February 1920. (*ON*, p. 405).

<sup>29</sup> See, for example: *SF*, p. 66, and *ON*, p. 136.

<sup>30</sup> Francesco Crispi was prime minister of Italy for most of the period between 1887 and 1896, and was a central protagonist in the unification of Italy. For Gramsci, his 'unitary obsession' went hand in hand with his imperialist politics. See Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q19§24, pp. 2018-19.

<sup>31</sup> Gramsci, 'Operai e Contadini', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 3rd January 1920. (*ON*, p. 377).

<sup>32</sup> Gramsci, 'La Sardengia e la Classe Operaia'. (*ON*, pp. 417-18).

A third sense in which Gramsci identifies the coloniality of the Italian South and Sardinia in particular is *discursively*, in the ways in which the South is 'orientalized' in the imagination of the industrial North.<sup>33</sup> This comes through particularly strongly in an early article he wrote in 1916 entitled 'The Explorers' [*Gli Scopritori*]. Gramsci is writing here in response to a piece published in *La Stampa* by a journalist called Mascagni, in which he wrote about a month-long visit to Sardinia. Gramsci's response is cutting and acerbic, as he describes 'the illustrious Italian returned to *terra ferma* who behaves as though he were Christopher Columbus and discovers something, if only to prove that he has not wasted his time'.<sup>34</sup> This 'illustrious Italian' is a man of many talents, he writes:

So much so that he is able to judge the terrain, "splendid, boundless" (look at a geography textbook: 24,000 km squared), "the people are sound and wise" (they applauded then...), "good costumes, beautiful and robust inhabitants", who have the sin of being so few, in a land that is so fertile, while the most imbecile sociologist knows that two thirds of Sardinians emigrate because the land (or at least as the government, with its 'doganal legislation', demand that it be cultivated) is not so fertile after all.<sup>35</sup>

This kind of exoticist and orientalist depiction of Sardinia and the South more generally is, for Gramsci, the other side of the coin of scientific racism. He ends the article by referring to the racial scientist Giuseppe Sergi, who 'in fifteen days gorged himself on a quantity of buffets [earlier he notes that these visitors are often treated to great hospitality in Sardinia], measured fifteen or so skulls, and concludes the psychological infirmity of the wretched [*sciagurati*] Sardinians'.<sup>36</sup> Alongside the ways in which the South had been subjugated territorially, by Piedmontese expansion, and economically, by the protectionist policies of the industrial North, Gramsci is also keenly attuned to the way in which it is discursively controlled, the way in which these other forms of domination and exploitation were legitimated in the political imaginary of the Northern

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<sup>33</sup> There is of course something tautological about using the language of Edward Said to speak about Gramsci's world and work: Said had been reading Gramsci with an astonishing degree of care in the period in which he wrote *Orientalism*, and in many ways that work seems to emerge from his engagement with the *Prison Notebooks*. What we find in this article, then, is a kind of postcolonial criticism half a century before its time.

<sup>34</sup> Gramsci, 'Gli Scopritori', 24th May 1916. (*SM*, p. 148).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 149.

bourgeoisie, and any forms of resistance were already robbed of their political content by a pernicious racism and presented as mere 'brigandage'.

The final sense in which Gramsci thinks through the internal colonization of the Italian South, and of his native Sardinia in particular, is *ecologically*.<sup>37</sup> It is, perhaps, the emphasis that he places on the ways in which the Sardinian landscape has been despoiled and its ecosystem and agricultural balances radically disrupted that makes Gramsci's account of his island's colonial subjugation most resonant today.<sup>38</sup>

As early as 1916, in an article written for *Avanti!*, Gramsci argues for the necessity of an alliance between Northern proletariat and agricultural labourers in Sardinia and Calabria in the specific context of protests against the increase in the price of basic necessities like bread in the Northern cities. As he does elsewhere many times, he argues that capitalist protectionism in Italy had been able to set the interests of the city against those of the country, and in so doing disguise the ways in which it oppressed the labouring classes of both equally. In this instance, those profiting from the speculation on daily bread in the North were also propping up an outmoded and inefficient agricultural system in the South, one that functioned only on the basis of the horrendous exploitation of agricultural workers. As a result, to demonstrate in Turin against the high price of bread was not to steal bread from the mouths of the exploited peasantry of the South, but rather the only possible way to act in solidarity with them. He goes on, however, to suggest that such a demonstration would also be in solidarity with Calabria and Sardinia themselves, not as regions or geographical locations of human populations, but also as *territories*, as lands:

E non è paradossale l'affermazione che uno sciopero a Torino per un minacciato aumento di prezzo del pane, può servire anche a salvare la

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<sup>37</sup> Though this has been a largely neglected angle of enquiry, exciting work on ecology in Gramsci's writings is just starting to be carried out. See Michael Ekers, Gillian Hart, Stefan Kipfer, Alex Loftus, *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), which features a particularly suggestive opening by John Berger.

<sup>38</sup> The last few years has seen what might be described as an 'ecological turn' in postcolonial studies, to which a startling number of new publications have borne witness. We might think, for example, of the works of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, Rob Nixon, Jennifer Wenzel, Elizabeth DeLoughry, Sharae Deckard (among many others).

Sardegna e la Calabria dalla mania disastrosa di tagliare gli alberi per seminare il grano, nella sicurezza fallace che gli alti prezzi rendano immediatamente redditizie le terre dove solo l'albero trova alimento nelle acque del sottosuolo e può diventare in un futuro assestamento economico la vera e più redditizia fonte di ricchezza.

And it is not paradoxical to affirm that a strike in Turin against a threatened increase in the price of bread might also help to save Sardinia and Calabria from the disastrous mania of cutting down trees to sow grain, in the mistaken certainty that the high prices immediately render profitable land in the soil of which only trees find nutrients, and in future economic arrangements might become the true and more profitable source of riches.<sup>39</sup>

Two years later, he writes of the horrifying impact that the 'tariff wars' between Italy and France has had on Southern Italy and the islands. In particular, he writes movingly of their impact on his own Sardinia, suggesting that the recent crisis has left the same mark on the population that the famine of 1812 did:

L'isola di Sardegna fu letteralmente rasa al suolo come per invasione barbarica; caddero le foreste – che ne regolavano il clima e le media delle precipitazioni atmosferiche – per trovare merce facile che ridesse credito, e piovvero invece gli spogliatori di cadaveri, che corrupero i costumi politici e la vita morale. Nel viaggiare degli Aranci a Cagliari qualche vecchio pastore mostra ancora i monti di nudo granito scintillanti al sole torrido e ricorda che un tempo erano ricoperti di foreste e di pascoli; le piogge torrenziali, dopo lo sboschimento, hanno portato al piano e al mare tutto lo strato di terra utile.<sup>40</sup>

The island of Sardinia was literally razed [shaved/shorn] to the ground as if by a barbaric invasion: the forests – which regulated the climate and the average atmospheric precipitation – fell to find easy commodities for credit, and instead there rained down the grave robbers, who corrupted political customs and moral life. In the travels of the Aranci in Cagliari, some old shepherd still shows us the mountains of naked granite glittering in the sultry sun and remembers that once they were covered by forests and pastures; the torrential rains, after the deforestation, carried away to the plain and to the sea all of the useful layer of soil.

Again, what is striking here is the way in which Gramsci is as carefully attuned to the ecological dimensions of Sardinia's subjugation as he is to the economic. The view that he offers us here, aligned with the distressed gaze of aged shepherds, emphasizes the ways in which ways of life and means of inhabiting the terrain have been eroded, and

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<sup>39</sup> Gramsci, 'Il Congresso di Livorno'. (SG, p. 42).

<sup>40</sup> Gramsci, 'Uomini, Idee, Giornali e Quattrini'. (SG, p. 331).



simultaneously clears a space for the reader to contemplate what we would now think of as the effects of man-made climate change. There is a genuine horror expressed in the glint of the exposed granite baking in the hostile sun, from which the fertile soil has been stripped.

This same bank of imagery returns in a letter that Gramsci wrote while in prison to his wife Julca Schucht in 1931, more than a decade later. In this letter, he narrates what he describes as ‘a tale from my town that seems interesting to me’, which he asks Julca to relay to their son Delio. This story follows the travails of a mouse, who in order to replace some milk that he stole from a child must come to terms with the devastation of the environment and its agricultural system. His quest takes him from the goat who has no grass to eat, to the fields that are parched of water, to the fountain that has been ruined by war and needs to be repaired, to the master mason who has no stone to repair it with, and finally to the mountain itself, ‘which has been deforested by speculators and reveals everywhere its bones stripped of earth’. It is only by promising that the child whose milk he stole will grow up to reforest the island that the mouse is able to acquire the stone from the mountain to put things to rights. The child makes good on this promise, and as a result ‘everything changes; the mountain’s bones disappear under new humus, atmospheric precipitation once more becomes regular because the trees absorb the vapours and prevent the torrents from devastating the plain, etc.’. It is, Gramsci ends by saying, ‘a story typical of a country ruined by deforestation’.<sup>41</sup>

Gramsci’s narration of this ‘tale from his town’ seems in part to be woven from the fabric of the two articles that I quoted above. The same ‘speculators’ are to blame here as in the 1916 article, and the bones of the mountain that have been ‘stripped’ of earth and laid bare by deforestation brings to mind the glimpse of ‘naked’ granite from the 1918 piece. This ‘tale’ is worth dwelling on, and I want to return to it later when we think about Gramsci’s anti-colonialism as a *literary* anti-colonialism, elaborated through acts of creative writing and reading. In, particular, it is worth bearing in mind when we come to look at Gramsci’s love affair with Kipling’s *Jungle Book* stories, which is the only text he is adamant that Delio should read as part of his moral education: Gramsci’s mouse would not look out of place alongside Kipling’s white seal Kotick or the valiant

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<sup>41</sup> Gramsci, *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 38-39.

mongoose Rikki-Tikki-Tavi. It is telling that this is the story he chooses to relay to his son, perhaps to pass on a sense of his island consciousness. Certainly, of all of the various ways in which he describes Sardinia and the Italian South as the victim of an aggressive economic imperialism, it is perhaps this account of the ecological devastation this domination has wrought and the forms of inhabiting the land that it has disrupted that is most resonant today.

Eventually, Gramsci would come to use the formula that later dominates in the *Prison Notebooks* – the idea of the city/country relationship as a political hegemony – as a shorthand for all of these various forms of internal colonization (territorial, economic, discursive, and ecological). Italian capitalism, he wrote in 1921, had ‘conquered power following this line of development’:

It subjugated the country to the industrial city and subjugated Central and Southern Italy to the North. The question of the relationship between city and country presents itself in the Italian bourgeois State not only as the relationship between the large agricultural city and the countryside immediate surrounding it in the same region, but as a question of the relationship between a part of the national territory and another part which is absolutely distinct and characterized by its own notable particularities.<sup>42</sup>

This is the prototype of the formula that we later find in the *Prison Notebooks*, and which is well known to scholars working in postcolonial studies: the ‘hegemony of the North over the South in the territorial city-country relationship’.<sup>43</sup> It is this notion of hegemony that has been incredibly productive in an astonishingly wide variety of postcolonial critical contexts, and among Subaltern Studies historians in particular. What it is vital to recognize, however, and what has not been fully appreciated, is that this formula has a long pre-history in Gramsci’s pre-prison writings. It emerges from over a decade of Gramsci’s persistent and deliberate analysis of the colonization of the Italian South and the Islands. The concept of hegemony and the city-country relationship, in Gramsci’s early writings, is a way of speaking of a colonial relationship. The Southern question, throughout his work, is always a question of colonial domination.

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<sup>42</sup> Gramsci, ‘Il Congresso di Livorno’, *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 13rd January 1921. (*SF*, p. 40).

<sup>43</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q19§24, pp. 2019-20

## 1.2 Anti-Colonial Positionings

Thus far, my intention has been to shift the focus away from how we, as modern day readers of Gramsci, might read him as writing from a context analogous to the colonized world, and instead register the ways in which Gramsci himself presents Italy as a colonial context. In the following section, I move on to think about the ways in which this analysis of Italy as an entity defined and marked by diverse forms of internal colonialism simultaneously *emerges from* and *feeds into* an understanding of imperialism on a global scale. That is to say, Gramsci's interest in imperialism is in part rooted in his interest in Italy's Southern Question, but at the same time the ways in which the Italian South had been internally subjugated only come into focus as part of a broader analysis of imperialism and colonialism as global formations.

As we shall see, Gramsci was intensely interested in positioning Italy and its terrains of political struggle within wider networks of imperialism and colonialism and in relation to the resistances they engendered across the world. I suggest that we might discern two distinct axes along which Gramsci attempts this positioning. The first is a vertical axis that represents the hierarchical connection and unification of markets within imperialist capitalism. The second is a horizontal axis that ignores both this hierarchy and the geographies of distinct imperialisms, and looks to establish transnational comparisons of the uneven social terrain over which this imperialist capitalism settled. In what follows, I trace some of the ways he places Italy along both of these axes, some of the ways in which he takes a position. The imaginative act of locating Italy on this grid, I argue, lies at the heart of his work: it informs and inflects some of his most famous theoretical interventions.

### 1.2.1 Killing (and Eating) a Chinese Mandarin: The Vertical Axis of Colonialism

In this section, I examine Gramsci's explicit attempts to theorize imperialism as a system in his early journalism, and look at the ways in which he gradually elaborates an explicitly anti-colonial position. That Gramsci would need to think in these terms is unsurprising: imperialism, both as a term and as a concept, was unavoidable for any Marxist intellectual at that historical juncture. Young notes that the Russian Revolution marked the first moment in which a major state was anti-imperialist, and that this had a

profound impact on the global political landscape. 'In its own way', he observes, 'the Russian Revolution itself had emerged from a context of anti-imperialist resistance', and both Lenin and Stalin presented the revolution in this light.<sup>44</sup> Gramsci is clearly sensitive to this; a year after the revolution he would write that:

L'Impero russo era una mostruosa necessità del mondo moderno: per vivere, per svilupparsi, per assicurarsi le vie dell'attività, 10 razze, 170 milioni di uomini dovevano sottostare a una disciplina statale feroce, dovevano rinunciare all'umanità ed essere puro strumento del potere.

The Russian Empire was a monstrous necessity of the modern world: to live, to develop, to assure itself of the means of its activity, 10 races, 170 million men had to submit to a ferocious state discipline, had to give up their humanity and become a pure instrument of power.<sup>45</sup>

The Russian revolution is thus understood not as a purely European affair. It is figured as a revolution against imperialism not merely as an abstract category, but as a lived experience of the subjugation of diverse cultures and races to an imperial power. Soon after, Gramsci republished and commented on an article by Radek which states: 'we are convinced that the Russian revolution begins the era of the revolution of the proletariat against imperialism'.<sup>46</sup> Over the coming years, Gramsci would continue to write in various places of the 'colonial conditions of exploitation' that existed at the heart of Czarist Russia, and to position the Russian revolution as the prelude to a wider drive for autonomy throughout the colonized world.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps his clearest expression of this sentiment comes in an article he wrote in 1920: the Russian revolution 'embodies the insurrection of the colonies bled dry by the metropolises' (and it is worth keeping in mind this motif of 'bleeding dry' for what follows).<sup>48</sup> Thinking through the relationship between the struggles of the Italian proletariat and the Russian Revolution also meant getting to grips with imperialism as a concept. Yet that does not mean that Gramsci

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<sup>44</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001) p. 120.

<sup>45</sup> Gramsci, 'Un Anno di Storia', *Il Grido del Popolo*, 16<sup>th</sup> March 1918. (*SG*, p. 195).

<sup>46</sup> Gramsci, 'Per Conoscere la Rivoluzione Russa', *Il Grido del Popolo*, 19<sup>th</sup> October 1918. (*SG*, p. 264).

<sup>47</sup> Gramsci, 'Le Popolazioni Coloniali', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1920. (*ON*, p. 563-64).

<sup>48</sup> Gramsci, 'La Russia, Potenza Mondiale', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1920. (*ON*, p. 618).

simply adopted a ready-made anti-colonial position: it was something towards which he worked through his writing.

Gramsci's first significant engagement with imperialism as a system, and as a system operating on an international scale, comes in an early article entitled 'The War and the Colonies', written for *Il Grido del Popolo* in 1916. The article is inspired by an interview with Charles Dumas, printed in the newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino* the week before, about the failure of European colonialism and the inevitability of emancipation after the war. This article is hesitant: for the most part, Gramsci admits to simply paraphrasing Dumas's words, and the position at which he arrives is ambivalent, not to say problematic. While prophesying its imminent downfall, Gramsci maintains here that 'colonialism can have a moral justification' (though he argues that British, French, and German colonialisms were conducted in a manner that was not), in much the same sense that Marx once infamously claimed that the British colonization of India: colonization puts two populations into dialogue with one another and opens the way towards a future proletarian revolution.<sup>49</sup> There are, the article suggests, 'ways and ways in colonial methods', and the problem was that British, French, and German colonialisms had not genuinely been informed by an educational and instructional mission, but rather had 'weighed enormously on the indigenous', and deformed the colonial economies to fit their own needs.<sup>50</sup> The problem, in other words, was not imperialism, but an inadequate imperialism.

There is a strange tension at the heart of this article, between this position and its ultimate conclusion that 'we Europeans, and particularly the French, have a tendency towards *egocentrism* [...] we imagine ourselves to be the centre of the universe and [do not] imagine that immediately outside of us, outside our old continental sphere, there are great movements of human activity, where things are taking place that could have decisive repercussions for our own destiny'.<sup>51</sup> There is something uncomfortably egocentric about its focus on European egocentrism, or Eurocentrism, as we might call it today. What lies at the heart of this tension, and what facilitates the troubling idea of

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<sup>49</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Nel mondo grande e terribile*, edited by Giuseppe Vacca (Torino: Einaudi, 2007), p. 14. 'La Guerra nelle Colonie', *Il Grido del Popolo*, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1916.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.14-15.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16. Emphasis in the original.

unrealized 'good colonialisms', is the position that Gramsci/Dumas writes from here: from *inside* a comfortably delineated Europe, and from outside of colonialism as a concrete socio-economic reality.

I want to read this alongside, or rather against, one of Gramsci's most obscure articles from the same early period of his journalism, a short piece he also wrote for *Il Grido del Popolo* a month earlier in 1916, about the genocide of Armenians in Turkey. What is striking about Gramsci's writing, even at this early stage, is his genuine commitment to thinking on an international scale and his constant attempts to resist a Eurocentric focus that detaches Western Europe from the rest of the world. He opens by remarking that it seems as though, in order for something to matter to us, for it to enter into our interior lives, it must be in some way close to us 'close' to us. He asks his readers whether the news that hundreds of thousands of Armenians had been massacred in Turkey had provoked the same almost physical shock as the news of the German invasion of Belgium. What Gramsci is clearly attuned to here is the way in which the imaginative geographies of Eurocentrism can establish emotional distances between peoples, and these distances can be used to disavow atrocity, tragedy, and outrage. In order to think through this idea of distance and closeness, he turns to an example drawn from a novel by Honoré de Balzac:

Nel Père Goriot, Balzac fa domandare a Rastignac: «se tu sapessi che ogni volta che mangi un arancio, deve morire un cinese, smetteresti di mangiare aranci?», e Rastignac risponde press'a poco: «Gli aranci ed io siamo vicini e li conosco, e i cinesi sono così lontani, e non sono certo neppure che esistano».

In *Le Père Goriot*, Balzac poses a question to Rastignac: 'If you knew that every time you ate an orange, a Chinese person would die, would you stop eating oranges?' Rastignac's response is roughly: 'I am very close with oranges and I know them well, and the Chinese are so far away, I'm not even certain that they exist'.<sup>52</sup>

This relatively unknown passage might have, I suggest, a potentially significant impact on our understanding of Gramsci's burgeoning anti-colonialism in these years. As we shall see, this early article on Armenia, though not hugely significant in and of itself, anticipates a number of concerns and rhetorical techniques that emerge elsewhere

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<sup>52</sup> Gramsci, 'Armenia', *Il Grido del Popolo*, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1916. (SG, p. 29).

Gramsci's pre-prison writings. These questions of closeness and distance, of the relationship between metropolitan consumption and distant suffering, return again and again. In many ways, what Gramsci is starting to think through is how to work beyond European egocentrism, how to acknowledge the ways in which this egocentrism is designed precisely to disguise complicity and culpability: in this regard, the story of Rastignac's dilemma seems to offer him something promising.

In 1919, Gramsci wrote a new article entitled 'The War of the Colonies' for his paper *L'Ordine Nuovo* as a part of his regular column, 'International Political Life'. This article is radically different from its predecessor (as the change in title from 'The War in the Colonies' to 'The War of the Colonies' suggests). By this time, there is no sense that colonialism might have been a positive force in the world, that imperialism might have a moral justification. There is no longer any ambiguity: Gramsci's position here is firmly anti-colonial, and the register is passionate and inflamed. 'It has not taken long', Gramsci wrote, 'for the war between capitalist imperialisms to be succeeded by the revolt of the colonies against the triumphant imperialisms':

During the war the colonies had been exploited to an unheard of degree, with an inflexible and inhuman method that can only be conceived of in periods of miraculous civilization like that of capitalism. The indigenous people of the colonies were not left even with eyes with which to cry: produce, primary materials, everything was raked from the colonies to sustain the resistance of the metropolitan population at war. The capitalist machine has worked perfectly efficiently: millions and millions of Indians, of Egyptians, of Algerians, of Tunisians, of Tonkinese, died from hunger and epidemics as a result of the devastation of the wretched colonial economies by European competition.<sup>53</sup>

Gramsci goes on to speak of the consequences of inflated prices of rice and grain that left the colonial peasantry to subsist on 'grass and roots', and of the insatiable European demand for supplies in the war that had condemned them to a hideous slavery. This is a primarily economic understanding of imperialism, one that does not stray too far from the Leninist conception of imperialism as the highest stage of capital, as a process driven by the market of the metropolis.

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<sup>53</sup> Gramsci, 'La Guerra delle Colonie', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 7<sup>th</sup> June 1919. (*ON*, pp. 68-69).

Italy's position in this picture is not immediately clear. On the one hand, as we have seen, Gramsci was keen in this period to draw upon the language of colonial oppression to describe the plight of the Italian South. Yet Gramsci seems less interested here in drawing parallels than he is in unravelling complicity. When he comes to the end of the article, he begins to think through how 'we Europeans' (and presumably his readers in Turin) might fit into this picture:

For years now we Europeans have lived off the death of men of colour: unwitting vampires, we have nourished ourselves on their innocent blood. Just as in Balzac's novel, the bowl of rice that steamed before our privileged mouths carried with it the death warrant of a distant brother in humanity.<sup>54</sup>

The reference to Balzac here is not unpicked any further in the article; the novel in question is not named, nor are we given any more details about the text in question. In fact, the passage Gramsci has in mind here is almost certainly the same one as in the 1916 'Armenia' article: Rastignac's dilemma with the oranges. It is only by connecting this moment with the earlier article, something that has not previously been done, that we can begin to understand the significance of this seemingly offhand textual reference to the development of Gramsci's anti-colonial thought. As I argue throughout this chapter, Gramsci's anti-colonialism is at least in part a literary phenomenon, the product of a process of imaginative reading and writing.

The immediately striking thing is that Gramsci's use of Balzac both here and in the earlier article about Armenia is based on a complete misremembering or misrepresentation of *Père Goriot*. This act of misreading (intentional or otherwise) is worth unpicking in some detail, and indeed the mechanics of Gramsci's analysis of colonialism here remain obscure to us unless we connect these two moments. In Balzac's novel, Rastignac is tempted by Vautrin, who offers to arrange the death of Victorine's brother so as to clear the way for Rastignac to woo her and inherit her family estate. Sorely troubled by the temptation to give in to the plot, Rastignac turns to his friend Bianchon and asks him:

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<sup>54</sup> Gramsci, 'La Guerra delle Colonie'. (ON, p. 69).



“Have you read Rousseau?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember that he asks the reader somewhere what he would do if he could make a fortune by killing an old mandarin somewhere in China by mere force of wishing it, and without stirring from Paris?”<sup>55</sup>

Interestingly, Balzac’s own passage is *itself* based upon an act of misreading: Rousseau never wrote anything of the sort, the example comes instead from Chateaubriand.<sup>56</sup> We are situated in a chain of fabrications: Gramsci invents a text, and an author for it, that suits his story in much the same way that Rastignac does.

In Balzac’s text, it is the bourgeois social-climbing Rastignac who poses the question as a way of thinking through the morality of indirectly causing someone’s death for profit. In the Armenia piece, Gramsci clearly misreads ‘mandarino’ as the small citrus fruit, and reconstructs the dialogue around this misprision so that Rastignac’s dilemma becomes: ‘If you knew that every time you ate an orange, a Chinese person would die, would you stop eating oranges?’ There is a lot at stake in this slippage: where Balzac’s Rastignac is thinking through the morality of actively undertaking an abhorrent and illegal action that would profit him directly (and which he ultimately does not undertake), Gramsci’s Rastignac is confronted with a scenario in which his quotidian consumption is revealed to have lethal consequences for an unknown Chinese person, someone who is no longer necessarily a member of the governing class (that is to say, a mandarin). The entirely invented response that Gramsci’s Rastignac gives (that while he feels close to oranges, the Chinese are remote and possibly do not even exist) is thus designed to reveal the disavowals at work in our daily negotiation of the global exchange or raw materials, produce, and capital. The lesson that the reader of Gramsci’s ‘Armenia’ article is invited to draw is that, to borrow a phrase from Carlo Ginzburg’s discussion of Balzac, ‘The chain of relations in which we are all involved can make us at least indirectly responsible for a crime’.<sup>57</sup> Indifference to genocide in Armenia is a form of complicity. As

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<sup>55</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Père Goriot*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 92.

<sup>56</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Killing a Chinese Mandarin: The Moral Implications of Distance’, *New Left Review*, I, 208, (1994), pp. 107-19 (p. 114).

<sup>57</sup> Ginzburg, ‘Killing a Mandarin’, p. 115.

such, Gramsci's version of the dilemma shares more with a different moment of Balzac's writing that Ginzburg directs us towards:

Some years later, in *Modeste Mignon*, Balzac again used a mandarin to make a similar point: 'If at this moment,' the poet Canalis says, 'the most important mandarin in China is closing his eyes and putting the Empire into mourning, does that grieve you deeply? In India the English are killing thousands of men as good as we are; and at this moment, as I speak, the most charming woman is there being burnt - but you have had coffee for breakfast all the same?' In a world dominated by the cruelties of backwardness and the cruelties of imperialism, moral indifference already implies a form of complicity.<sup>58</sup>

It may also perhaps be that Gramsci has in mind Balzac's address to the reader in the opening pages of *Père Goriot*: 'And you, too, will do the like; you who with this book in your white hand will sink back among the cushions of your armchair, and say to yourself "Perhaps this will amuse me." You will read the story of Father Goriot's secret woes, and, dining thereafter with an unspoiled appetite, will lay the blame of your insensibility on the writer, and accuse him of exaggeration, of writing romances'.<sup>59</sup> The imagery of the 'white hand' of the reader, whose appetite is unaffected by the distant woe related by the text, seems to resonate with the context in which Gramsci seeks to deploy the story of the mandarin. The difference, of course, is that in Gramsci's version of the dilemma it is not simply that Rastignac's appetite is unaffected by the knowledge of distant tragedy, but that there is a causal relationship between his act of consumption and this distant tragedy that he is unwilling to acknowledge. It is important to note that in this version the fact that the unfortunate Chinese victim might easily be an agricultural labourer rather than the 'most important mandarin in China', leaving open the possibility of a very literal connection between consumption and suffering.

In a sense Gramsci's reworking of the anecdote is in perfect keeping with the wider contours of the novel. The text is deeply invested in this same imagery of financial parasitism; its central figure, Father Goriot, makes his fortune manufacturing and selling vermicelli during 'the Scarcity' in Paris, speculating on famine. He in turn is bled dry by the financial demands of his daughters. At the same time, in the very moment that

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<sup>58</sup> Ginzburg, 'Killing a Mandarin', p. 115.

<sup>59</sup> Balzac, *Père Goriot*, p. 3.

Vautrin presents him with the murderous scheme, Rastignac is assailed with guilt at having convinced his mother and sisters to send him money, 'fearing that he was draining their very life-blood'.<sup>60</sup> Vautrin immediately homes in on this preoccupation at the start of their conversation by observing 'Mamma has been bled white'.<sup>61</sup> In laying out the plot Vautrin reveals that he wants money in order to set himself up as a plantation owner in the American deep South, and requires two hundred thousand francs in order to buy the 'two hundred niggers' required to support his new life. This 'black capital', he expects, will soon make him a millionaire.<sup>62</sup> Rastignac's meditations on the morality of killing a distant Chinese mandarin for profit are haunted by these disavowed relationships. Gramsci's reworking of Rastignac's dilemma as a way of arriving at the parasitic figure of the imperialist vampire thus activates the hidden logic of economic exploitation in the text.

A few years later, by the time we reach the 'War of the Colonies' article, this association appears to have hardened in Gramsci's mind, so that he no longer feels the need to paraphrase the novel directly. Here, Gramsci literalizes the dilemma of his earlier version Rastignac: the bowl of rice (which is substituted for the orange in a further slippage) that sustained the metropolitan population during the years of the war is now directly connected to the famine and destitution of colonial populations in a chain of supply and demand. If the problem in the Armenia article was how to collapse the 'distance' that isolates us from the geographically, socially, or culturally remote atrocity in which we are complicit, then the way to collapse this distance in the case of the continuing exploitation of the colonies was to force an acknowledgement of the ways in which imperialist capitalism hierarchically connected and unified disparate markets. Only by acknowledging the way in which the metropolitan proletariat existed as 'unwitting vampires' (and this language of parasitism, as we shall see, remains important for Gramsci's analysis of Italy's internal colonialism) could a genuinely anti-colonial and anti-capitalist politics emerge in Europe.

In other words, it is at least in part through these mis-readings or re-imaginings of Balzac's text that Gramsci works his way towards an analysis of imperialism as an

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<sup>60</sup> Balzac, *Père Goriot*, p. 63.

<sup>61</sup> Balzac, *Père Goriot*, p. 67.

<sup>62</sup> Balzac, *Père Goriot*, p. 131.

economic system that renders the quotidian complicities of 'us Europeans'. The difference between his position in the 1916 and 1919 articles on colonialism is partly the result of the slow gestation of this reading. It is at least in part this re-reading of Balzac that allows Gramsci to move on from writing with Dumas's words about colonialism, and to develop his own position. At the heart of this position was an acknowledgement of the ways in which the European reality of himself and his readers existed only on the basis of the exploitation of the colonies.

This recognition of complicity was not merely an exercise in hand-wringing. Instead, it functions as the necessary precursor to a call to take sides. Gramsci sensed already that if there was a great motor for social change in the wake of the First World War, it was located in this 'tidal wave of revolution' emanating from the colonized world.

Oggi la rivolta fiammeggia nel mondo coloniale: è la lotta di classe degli uomini di colore contro i bianchi sfruttatori e caini. È una spinta immensa e irresistibile di tutto un mondo ricco di spiritualità verso l'autonomia e l'indipendenza.

Today rebellion flames in the colonial world: it is the class struggle of men of colour against the fratricidal and exploitative Whites. It is an immense and irresistible push of an entire world, rich in spirituality, towards autonomy and independence.<sup>63</sup>

The relationship that Gramsci establishes here between anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle is more complex than might initially be imagined: they are neither completely distinct nor simply collapsed into one another. Anti-colonial struggle is figured here as a class war that is defined in racial terms: a 'class struggle of men of colour' against the 'exploitative Whites'. Here and elsewhere in Gramsci's work the tidal wave of resistance coming from the colonies is seen as both existing autonomously from, and being at times substantially ahead of, class struggle in the metropolis. The European proletariat seems to occupy a potentially ambiguous position of solidarity and complicity: they are among the 'exploitative Whites', yet they have possibility of fraternity with the insurgent colonial populations, who appear here as significantly more advanced and organized in their resistance. He ends the piece by again turning to the imagery of the parasitic consumer (originally embodied by Rastignac and his fatal oranges) in the figure of the

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<sup>63</sup> Gramsci, 'La Guerra delle Colonie'. (*ON*, p. 69).

vampire that offers his audience the possibility to move from acknowledging their complicity to imagining their solidarity:

E gli insonnoliti uomini di colore sfidano aeroplani, mitragliatrici e tanks per conquistarsi l'autonomia, per strozzare l'atroce vampiro che si nutre del loro sangue e della loro carne.

And the unsleeping men of colour brave airplanes, machine guns and tanks to conquer their autonomy, to throttle the appalling vampire that nourishes itself on their flesh and blood. <sup>64</sup>

The figure of the 'brave man of colour' emerges here as the obverse of the white vampire of imperialism. The choice that Gramsci's reader is being offered here is, in a sense, Black and White: the reader in Turin can either identify with the appalling vampire of colonialism, or with the bravery of those resisting it.

Gramsci would more explicitly think through the ways in which the struggles of the Italian proletariat might dovetail with struggles against colonialism elsewhere in a later instalment of the 'International Political Life' column entitled 'The Colonial Populations'. This is the second of Gramsci's extended engagements with the questions of colonial exploitation and resistance, and it is worth quoting in some detail:

La gerarchia di sfruttamento capitalistico sulle classi costrette al lavoro servile si era venuta consolidando in questo modo: l'operaio, trasformando nella fabbrica le materie prime razziate nelle colonie e nutrendosi coi viveri prodotti dalla classe contadina asservita ai bisogni della città, elabora il profitto del capitale; il contadino è ridotto alla fame endemica, perché deve produrre la rendita per il proprietario terriero; la popolazione coloniale è soggiogata agli interessi della madre patria; deve produrre materie prime a basso prezzo per l'industria, cioè deve lasciare impoverire il suolo e il sottosuolo del suo paese a vantaggio della civiltà europea; deve produrre viveri a basso prezzo per colmare i deficit di produzione agricola determinati nella madrepatria dal passaggio continuo di masse rurali nella città, al servizio diretto del capitale. Le popolazioni coloniali diventano così il piedistallo di tutto l'apparecchio di sfruttamento capitalistico; esse devono dar tutta la loro vita per lo sviluppo della civiltà industriale, senza ottenere nessun beneficio, anzi vedendo il loro territorio nazione spogliato sistematicamente delle ricchezze naturali, vedendosi spogliate cioè delle condizioni necessarie per uno sviluppo proprio autonomo.

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<sup>64</sup> Gramsci, 'La Guerra delle Colonie'. (*ON*, p. 70)

The hierarchy of capitalist exploitation of the classes constrained to servile labour has consolidated itself in this manner: the worker, transforming in the factory the primary materials torn from the colonies and nourishing himself with the provisions produced by the peasant class which is subordinated to the needs of the city, produces [elabora] the profit of capital; the peasant is reduced to endemic hunger, because he must provide the income for the landowner; the colonial population is subject to the interests of the metropolis; that is to say it must produce provisions at a low price to make up for the deficit of agricultural production caused in the colonizing country by the continual passage of rural masses to the city, in the direct service of capital. The colonial populations thus become the foundation of the entire apparatus of capitalist exploitation; they must give all of their lives for the development of industrial civilization without obtaining any benefit from it, in fact seeing their own national territory systematically despoiled of natural riches, seeing themselves robbed, that is, of the conditions necessary for their own autonomous development.<sup>65</sup>

In a later version of this same structure that Gramsci would present in collaboration with Tasca in a policy document adopted by the PCd'I at its second national congress in 1922, it becomes major industry that is the foundation of this structure, and thus the struggle of the metropolitan proletariat that becomes the 'fulcrum' of the international struggle. Even in that case, however, Gramsci is keen to emphasize that 'without the organized and systematic solidarity of the peasant classes and colonial peoples, the proletariat cannot permanently carry out its liberating function'.<sup>66</sup> In this first version, however, it is the colonial populations that are 'the foundation of the entire apparatus of capitalist exploitation', and thus anti-colonial struggle that is at the heart of Gramsci's analysis. In either case, it is important to remember that the war in the colonies was never merely a footnote to a European struggle, but rather something that went alongside and perhaps even before it.

This is what I would like to refer to as the vertical axis of imperial power at work in Gramsci's writings. It is along this axis, I suggest, that Gramsci's analysis of the 'Southern question' in the famous essay and in the *Prison Notebooks* is first directed. In all of the instances that I referred to at the very start of this chapter, then, the description of the subjugation of the Italian South in terms of colonialism is not simply a rhetorical flourish, but a genuine attempt to situate the internal rift at the heart of Italy's national and capitalist development in the context of this larger international hierarchy of

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<sup>65</sup> Gramsci, 'Le Popolazioni Coloniali'. (*ON*, p. 562).

<sup>66</sup> Gramsci, 'Il Partito Comunista e i Sindacati'. (*SF*, pp. 499-500).

capitalist exploitation. The system of protectionist trade tariffs that had served to devastate the South represented, for Gramsci, the 'typical phenomenon of modern imperialism: it represents the enslavement of the peasant classes in the national arena, and the enslavement of the colonial populations in the international arena'.<sup>67</sup>

If the colonial and imperial foundations of this hierarchy do not feature in Gramsci's later writings, the particular formulas he famously deployed to analyse the Southern question maintain a memory of them. We can see this if we return, for example, to the famous passage from the *Prison Notebooks* in which Gramsci describes the formation of the Italian State as a 'hegemony of the North over the South in the territorial city-country relationship, which is to say that the North was concretely an 'octopus' that enriched itself at the expense of the South and whose economic-industrial growth was directly linked to the impoverishment of the economy and agriculture of the South'.<sup>68</sup> Gramsci's description of the subjugation of the South clearly emerges from his earlier hierarchy of exploitation. The parasitic Northern 'octopus' that enriched itself at the expense of the South is a direct descendent of both the imperialist vampire and Gramsci's Rastignac: a thought-figure designed to overcome the conceptual limits of 'distance' by making visible the concrete economic relationships of exploitation that connect disparate economies. It is through Gramsci's analysis of this vertical axis of imperialism that Italy's internal colonialism comes into view: the Southern question was always, for Gramsci, a question of imperialism.

### **1.2.2 Italians and Chinese: New World Orders**

During the same chronological period in which he began engaging seriously with questions of imperialism (1919-1921), this vertical line of imperial power also presented itself in a different form in Gramsci's writings, one that would connect the political struggles of the Italian proletariat and the colonized world in an entirely different imaginative geography. In the aftermath of the First World War and the Russian revolution, Gramsci initially (in the first instalment of the 'International Political Life' column in *L'Ordine Nuovo*) announces triumphantly that 'a world has collapsed':

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<sup>67</sup> Gramsci, 'Un Asino Bardato', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 9<sup>th</sup> February 1921. (*SF*, pp. 65-66).

<sup>68</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q19§24, pp. 2019-20.

‘the organization of world civilization, formed with a slow process of clashes and partial crossings of nations and empires, has disintegrated in its entirety’.<sup>69</sup> This disintegration was the result of a dual movement: ‘the liberal metropolitan states tear themselves apart from the inside, and at the same time the system of the colonies and the spheres of influence crumbles’.<sup>70</sup> In particular, the dissolution of the British Empire, which had been ‘shaken irremediably in its fundamental pillars, India, Egypt, and Ireland’ would bring about the ‘irremediable collapse of the international capitalist equilibrium’ and clear the way for the international revolution.<sup>71</sup>

This optimism, it seems, was short lived. Less than a week later, and in the same newspaper (the Piedmontese edition of *Avanti!*), Gramsci would publish an article entitled ‘Italy, the Alliances, and the Colonies’, in which he described the solidification of a new world order, the foundations of which were being laid at the Paris Peace Conference. The military alliance between the United States, Great Britain and France, following the reduction of Germany and Austria, had settled the international power dynamic in an entirely new way ‘insofar as it ensured permanently the hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon bloc in the world’.<sup>72</sup> It is important to note that the idea of a ‘bloc’, which would later be famously deployed in the context of Gramsci’s analysis of the ‘historic bloc’ formed between Northern urban capitalists and Southern landowners in the Italian Risorgimento, was first applied to the analysis of global dispensations of power. Where Italy had previously been able to negotiate its way in the midst of competition between the imperial powers, this newly rigidified monopoly of power spelled the end of Italy’s status as any form of world power, which ‘for a capitalist State means paralysis and inevitable decay’.<sup>73</sup> ‘The world has been “unified”’, Gramsci wrote in another piece:

In the sense that a global hierarchy has been created that authoritatively disciplines and controls the whole world; the maximum concentration of private property has come to pass: the entire world has become a trust in

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<sup>69</sup> Gramsci, ‘Uno sfacelo ed una genesi’, *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1919. (*ON*, pp. 3-4).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Gramsci, ‘L’Italia, Le Alleanze e le Colonie’, *Avanti!* ediz. Piemotese, 10<sup>th</sup> May 1919. (*ON*, p. 11.)

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.



the hands of a few dozens of Anglo-Saxon bankers, arms traders, and industrialists.<sup>74</sup>

The language of the 'trust', borrowed from the vocabulary of the post-war treaties which were busy carving out territorial mandates from the colonies of the defeated European empires, points towards the direction in which Gramsci would carry this analysis.

In the same period, the summer of 1919, the Italian communists were accused by their political adversaries in the press of wanting to transform the Italian working classes into the new 'Chinese' of the Communist International, by which was intended an exploitable labour force subject to external control. Gramsci responds in an article entitled 'Italians and Chinese', which he opens by asking sarcastically: 'do we [the Italian communists] really want to reduce the Italian proletariat to the rank of the Chinese *coolies* that lend the work of their servile shoulders to the toils that the superhuman Whites refuse to carry out?'<sup>75</sup> His response is that:

Sì, il popolo italiano è diventato, dopo la vittoria dell'Intesa e l'instaurazione dell'egemonia mondiale britannica, un popolo di cinesi: l'Italia è diventata un mercato di sfruttamento coloniale, una sfera d'influenza, un dominion, una terra di capitolazioni, tutto fuorché uno Stato indipendente e sovrano.

Yes, the Italian people has become, after the victory of the Alliance and the installation of the global British hegemony, a population of Chinese: Italy has become a colonial market for exploitation, a sphere of influence, a 'dominion', a land of capitulations, everything but an independent and sovereign State.<sup>76</sup>

The racial politics of Gramsci's manoeuvre here are ambiguous and perhaps questionable: for rhetorical purposes he allows the figure of the 'Chinese' to continue to stand for an infinitely exploitable and servile population, and does not seem to adequately challenge the racism carried within this language. At the same time, however, he uses it as an opportunity to align Italy on the other side of the global fracture of imperialism: not as a minor empire brokering alliances with the major imperial powers, but as a participant in anti-colonial struggle via the Communist International:

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<sup>74</sup> Gramsci, 'L'Unità del Mondo', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 15<sup>th</sup> may 1919. (ON, p. 20).

<sup>75</sup> Gramsci, 'Italiani e Cinesi', *Avanti!*, ed. Piemontese, 18<sup>th</sup> July 1919. (ON, p. 142).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Egiziani, indiani, cinesi, irlandesi, come complesso nazionale, tutti i popoli del mondo, come proletariato, vedono nel duello Lenin-Churchill la lotta tra la forza che li tiene soggetti e la forza che può creare le condizioni della loro autonomia.

Egyptians, Indians, Chinese, Irish, as a national complex, all of the peoples of the world, as proletariat, see in the duel between Lenin and Churchill the struggle between the force that will keep them subjugated and the force that will create the conditions of their autonomy.<sup>77</sup>

There is an entirely separate definition of colonialism at work here in Gramsci's thought, one that still exists on the vertical axis of imperial power relationships but is no longer focused purely on economic exploitation and immiseration. Instead, a colony is defined in this context as a nation 'without economic and political autonomy'.<sup>78</sup> According to this understanding of imperialism as a world structure, the struggle of the proletariat in Italy now takes place on the same plane as the struggles against colonialism, united in a common drive for autonomy. Gramsci ends the article by embracing the label of 'Chinese':

Se il proletariato italiano è il «cinese» dell'Internazionale, l'essere cinese non può reputarsi certo una diminuzione di dignità e di prestigio: gli spiriti (!) servili delle redazioni dei grandi giornali «europei» possono imparare molto dai «cinesi»; e lo impareranno.

If the Italian proletariat is the "Chinese" of the International, being Chinese should certainly not imply a loss of dignity or prestige: the servile spirits (!) of the editors of the great "European" newspapers have much to learn from the "Chinese", and they will learn it.<sup>79</sup>

This opposition between the impotent decadence of the European and the vibrancy of the colonized world, and the attempt to align the workers of Italy with the latter rather than the former, continues in later articles. Again, Gramsci turns to the language of vampirism in his description of the new imperialist order, describing the participants of the Paris Peace Conference as 'living corpses'.<sup>80</sup> This undead imperialism now 'finds itself against an enormous front of revolutionary forces that do not want to be and

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>78</sup> Gramsci, 'Russia e Germania', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 10<sup>th</sup> March 1921. (*SF*, p. 100).

<sup>79</sup> Gramsci, 'Italiani e Cinesi'. (*ON*, pp. 144-45).

<sup>80</sup> Gramsci, 'Come le Oche', *Avanti!* ediz. Piemontese, 22 April 1919. (*NM*, pp. 608-09).

cannot be suppressed, because they represent the only *living energy* that exists today in the whole world'.<sup>81</sup> As he puts it in a different article, Europe's moment of innovation seemed to be over, and it was now those in India, Egypt, Tunisia and Tripolitania who were passing through this phase. That is not to say, however, that they were simply repeating a process that Europe had already undergone, rather:

La passione nazionale di questi popoli è caratterizzata da un brivido originale: non è più per una definizione o un ampliamento di confini che si combatte e si muore. La «patria» ha mutato la sua significazione per la gran massa dei popoli; la patria è lo Stato, è la forma dello Stato, è il potere di legiferare, è il potere di inquadrare i rapporti tra gli individui e i rapporti tra gli individui e la ricchezza su nuove basi, è il potere di amministrare la giustizia alla stregua di nuovi principi universali; la patria si è impicciolita e si è allargata; è l'unità economica di produzione ed è il mondo intiero.

The national passion of these peoples is characterized by a shiver of originality: it is no longer for the definition or extension of a border for which one fights and dies. The "patria" has changed its meaning for the great mass of people: the patria is the State, it is the form of the State, it is the power to legislate, it is the power to frame the relationship between individuals and between individuals and wealth in an entirely new way, it is the power to administer justice according to new universal principles; the patria has [...] and it has broadened; it is the economic unity of production and it is the entire world.<sup>82</sup>

Far from being a 'derivative discourse' that obliges the formerly colonized world to simply live out the already defined trajectory of European countries, nationalism here is figured as something that has been radically transformed and reinvigorated in the colonized world.<sup>83</sup> It is now India, Egypt and Tunisia that are the standard bearers for nationalism as a living force, while Britain, France, and the United States preside over an empty charade that still obsesses over boundaries and borderlines. Once again, for Gramsci, the Italian proletariat needed not only to align itself with, but more importantly seek to learn from, the struggles of those resisting colonialism and carving out their own autonomy.

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<sup>81</sup> Gramsci, 'Russia e Germania'. (*SF*, p. 101). Emphasis mine.

<sup>82</sup> Gramsci, 'Come le Oche'. (*NM*, p. 609).

<sup>83</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Tokyo: Zed Books Ltd., 1986).

Two years later, the rise of Fascism in Italy would cause Gramsci to return to thinking about Italy's location within these spheres of influence in slightly different terms. Already in the early days of Fascism, well in advance of the March on Rome that would signal Mussolini's arrival in power, Gramsci was calling upon the language of colonialism to think through what Fascism might represent for the Italian working class, and particularly for the political struggles of the labourers of Turin. We find the first hints of this in an article published in *L'Ordine Nuovo* on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 1921, just two days after a Fascist attack on the Turin headquarters of the Camera del Lavoro that set fire to the building and devastated the offices. 'The Fascist organization, where it has managed to prevail,' Gramsci wrote, 'has become like the occupying force of an enemy country'.<sup>84</sup> 'In Turin', he goes on to say, 'the workers defend not only themselves, their persons, the life of their women and their children, but also a national position, the last scraps of liberty that still exist in our wretched country'.<sup>85</sup> There is already, at this point, the idea of Fascism as something imposed from outside, something that is experienced as a foreign occupation (the 'Fascist invasion', as he would term it elsewhere), and something that is directly opposed to a 'national position' embodied by the Italian working classes.<sup>86</sup> It is this same image of Fascism as a kind of colonial occupation that we later find in the work of Ignazio Silone, as we will see in the following chapter of this thesis.

A few weeks later, in May 1921, Gramsci published another article entitled 'politica fascista', in which he further develops this sense of Fascism as a kind of colonial imposition, and in various ways attempts to place Fascism as a political phenomenon within a wider geo-political context of imperialist capital. Problematically, he starts by complaining that Fascism represented nothing more than 'the reduction of Italian political life to the level of a South American republic and the reduction of its costumes to that of a tribe of black cannibals'.<sup>87</sup> It is difficult to avoid or deny the fact that Gramsci is clearly indulging a racist imaginary here, and one that if it is not unique, is

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<sup>84</sup> Gramsci, 'L'Attacco a Torino', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 28<sup>th</sup> April 1921. (*SF*, p. 153).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>86</sup> Gramsci, 'Insurrezione di Popolo', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1921. (*SF*, p. 249).

<sup>87</sup> Gramsci, 'Politica Fascista', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1921. (*SF*, p. 168.)

nevertheless clearly in tension with the tone of most of his other writings.<sup>88</sup> To a certain extent, however, the problematic nature of this language, and the contradictions that are bound up in it, tells us something about the ways in which Gramsci is not easily adopting a pre-existing position here, but labouring with some difficulty to elaborate one. What he is clearly trying to express here is the way in which the rise of Fascism seems to place the Italian working class in a position in which this kind of imperialist language is appropriate: understanding Fascism seems to necessitate the insertion of Italy into a colonial frame.

He does so, in one sense, by drawing direct comparisons between the lived experience of life under Fascism and life under French imperialism:

I contadini del Polesine e del Ferrarese certamente non vivono oggi nei loro paesi in condizioni migliori di quelle in cui vivono i negri delle regioni da cui la Francia trae il proprio esercito coloniale. Il bastone del fascista non è certo strumento di civiltà superiore allo staffile del mercante di schiavi.

The peasantry of the Ferrarese and the Polesine certainly do not live in their villages in better conditions to those in which the Blacks of the regions from which France draws its own colonial army live. The Fascist club is certainly not a superior instrument of civilization to the whip of the slave market.<sup>89</sup>

As I noted at the start of this chapter, it has been something of a staple of Gramscian criticism in the last few decades to suggest that in order to understand his relevance today we might usefully draw parallels between the Italian context in which Gramsci lived and wrote and parts of the world that have suffered the effects and after-effects of colonialism. Gramsci was, in Tom Nairn's terms, 'a product of the West's remotest periphery, and of conditions which, half a century later, it became fashionable to call "Third World"'. What these moments of Gramsci's pre-prison writings highlight, however, is that this is not simply something that we can retrospectively read into Gramsci's thought, but rather something that is already present in his own work, and is arguably integral to its evolution. Yet Gramsci is not merely interested in making a claim to victimhood on behalf of Italy's rural peasant classes. It is not simply that these

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<sup>88</sup> Cf Gramsci, *Letters: vol. 2*, p. 2, in which Gramsci writes to Tania of the 'ethical principle that one cannot strike a person who has fallen to the ground', saying that 'only black savages refuse to accept it'.

<sup>89</sup> Gramsci, 'Politica Fascista'. (*SF*, p. 168).

situations might be comparable, but that they might be the common products of a single system (one that combines the Fascist club and the colonial whip), that they might be causally related:

Esiste però in Europa chi ha interesse a che l'Italia sia ridotta a tale livello. I senegalesi hanno dimostrato di essere troppo buon strumento nelle mani di chi sappia adoperarli, perché non appaia utile e proficua la trasformazione anche di qualche contrada europea in un Senegal docile e ricco di risorse umane. La politica fascista lavora a questo scopo. Con ciò essa rientra pienamente, senza residuo, nei piani dell'imperialismo francese.

There exists in Europe, however, those whose interests are served by the reduction of Italy to such a level. The Senegalese have proved themselves to be too useful an instrument in the hands of those who have known how to exploit them, why should the transformation of certain European regions into a docile Senegal rich in resources not also appear useful and profitable. The politics of Fascism works to this end. As such it re-enters, fully, without residue, into the program of French imperialism.<sup>90</sup>

Fascism thus appears almost as the domestic front of a new imperial order, as the means by which the Italian proletariat can be rendered profitable for external economic interests. 'Imperialism has need of the starved and enslaved, and so does the Italian bourgeoisie', he goes on to conclude: 'The alliance is natural, and the alliance is complete.' From Fascism's earliest days, even before its arrival in power, Gramsci explicitly understood it as a form of internal colonization that was designed to guarantee the incorporation of the labour of the Italian proletariat into a new imperial order.

In a wide variety of ways, then, the location of Italy along what I have termed the vertical axis of imperialist capital, which is to say the hierarchical ordering of market places and labour forces, is integral to the development of Gramsci's thought in the period of his journalistic writing. It is this act of positioning that renders the rifts at the heart of Italian national identity legible as a form of internal colonialism that was not only comparable to other forms of imperialism but systemically connected to them, and fundamentally a product of them. In so far as the Southern Question was a question of economics, of the Northern octopus nourishing itself at the expense of the South, it appears in Gramsci's writings mapped along this vertical axis which extends beyond the

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<sup>90</sup> Gramsci, 'Politica Fascista'. (*SF*, p. 168).

Italian South to the colonies and beyond the Italian North to the new Anglo-French global orders of imperialist capital that were solidifying themselves in the wake of the First World War. At the same time as providing a useful language to describe the subjugation of the Italian South, it also provides Gramsci with the opportunity to conceptually realign the struggles of the Italian working classes in solidarity with the struggles that were raging against colonialism across the globe. With the advent of Fascism, which Gramsci understood as the domestic ally of global imperialist capital, this conceptual counter alliance of anti-colonial energies would become all the more valuable to him.

### **1.2.3 Mandarins, Caste, and the Intellectuals: the Horizontal Axis of Colonial Power**

This vertical axis of imperial power is accompanied in Gramsci's writings by a horizontal axis that pays little attention to the hierarchical orderings of nations, labour forces and marketplaces, and instead seeks out analogies in social formation and similarities (as well as differences) in the national terrain of struggle over which this hierarchy had settled. In a sense, this line is the same as that which underpins Leon Trotsky's analysis of 'combined and uneven development', which has had a recent revival in the field of world-literary systems analysis, is directed.<sup>91</sup> Combined development, in Trotsky's terms, indicates 'a drawing together of the different stages of the journey [of capitalist industrial development], a combining of separate steps, an amalgamation of archaic with more contemporary forms'.<sup>92</sup> Where Trotsky's concern in *The History of the Russian Revolution* is overwhelmingly with the 'sphere of the economy', and consequently takes as his 'basic criterion' the productivity of labour, Gramsci's horizontal axis focuses far

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<sup>91</sup> The project of world-systems literary analysis is driven in particular by the members of the Warwick Research Collective (WREC): among whom are Neil Lazarus, Nick Lawrence, Pablo Mukherjee, Benita Parry, and Stephen Shapiro. In their forthcoming monograph - *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* - (a working paper from which can be accessed online), they depart from precisely this idea of combined and uneven development in their analysis of 'peripheral modernisms'. Warwick Research Collective, 'Peripheral Modernisms', <[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/research/currentprojects/collective/wrec\\_papers/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/research/currentprojects/collective/wrec_papers/)> [Accessed 24 September 2015]

<sup>92</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution: Vol 1. The Overthrow of Czarism* (New York: Anchor Foundation, 1980) p. 25.

more on what we might think of as the sphere of the social. In particular, Gramsci's interest was, of course, in the role of the intellectuals, which is to say the relationship between those individuals who carry out an organizational function and the political class of whose interests they are notionally an expression. While it is in the *Prison Notebooks* themselves that Gramsci would fully expand upon the cues outlined in the *Southern Question* essay by establishing the vast comparative analysis of the intellectuals across the globe, his pre-prison writings demonstrate that, once again, it is the act of imaginatively positioning Italy in relation to China and India that is central to the elaboration of his later critical language.

In 1921, a few years after Gramsci called upon his reworked version of Rastignac's dilemma to think through the workings of imperialist capitalism, he returns again to the Chinese Mandarinate in his journalistic writing, though this time in an entirely different sense. At this point, Gramsci is writing in the immediate aftermath of the Livorno conference of January 1921, which saw a definitive split in the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and led to the creation of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I). This split was the direct result of the PSI's refusal to expel reformist tendencies within the party, and in the following months these tensions played themselves particularly in the relationship between the PCd'I and the reformist officials within the trade union movement. Gramsci wrote an article in June of 1921 attacking Mario Guarneri, the secretary of the highly influential metallurgical workers' union *Fiom*, for his failure to support the occupation of the Fiat factories earlier in the year by communist workers in Turin. Guarneri had, Gramsci claimed, effectively abandoned these workers to 'the wrath and vengeance' of the industrialists.<sup>93</sup> Guarneri's actions were based, Gramsci argued, on a political conception that he termed 'prezzemolismo', and which he suggested was typical of the cowardice and short-sightedness of the reformist trade union official more generally. These officials he refers to as the 'mandarini sindacali' (union mandarins), and he accuses them of being mentally and conceptually aligned with the industrialists and against the communist workers: while the impulse of the capitalists to recruit armed thugs to violently smash the resistance of the workers appeared to them 'normal, logical, totally natural', they did not feel the day to day suffering of the workers and as a result found their efforts to limit their exploitation (by occupying the Fiat factories) either

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<sup>93</sup> Gramsci, 'Il Prezzemolismo', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 18th June 1921. *SF*, (p. 198).



incomprehensible or anomalous. Gramsci employs the term 'mandarins' here again and again to emphasise this social disconnect, this failure on the part of the reformist trade union officials to feel the privations and struggles of the Turinese working classes as their own.

He returns to explicitly define and explore his use of the term less than a week later in the pages of *L'Ordine Nuovo* in an article entitled simply 'Mandarini'. 'Why', he asks in the opening line, 'do the communists call the reformist trade union officials *mandarins*? Who are the *mandarins*?'

Il mandarinato è una istituzione burocratico-militare cinese, che, su per giù, corrisponde alle prefetture italiane. I mandarini appartengono tutti a una casta particolare, sono indipendente da ogni controllo popolare, e sono persuasi che il buono e misericordioso dio dei cinesi abbia creato apposta la Cina e il popolo cinese perché fosse dominato dai mandarini. Chi fa il bel tempo? I mandarini. Chi rende fertili i campi? I mandarini. Chi dà la fecondità al bestiame? I mandarini. Chi permette all'ingenuo popolo cinese di respirare e di vivere? I mandarini. È dunque naturale che il popolo cinese sia nulla e i mandarini siano tutto. È naturale che solo i mandarini possano deliberare e comandare e il popolo cinese debba solo obbedire, senza recriminazioni, pagar le tasse senza fiatare, dare al mandarino tutto ciò che il mandarino domanda, senza preoccuparsi di sapere il perché e il percome.

The Mandarinate is a Chinese bureaucratic-military institution, which, more or less, corresponds to the Italian prefecture. The mandarins all belong to a particular caste, and are convinced that the great and merciful Chinese God created China and the Chinese people so that they could be dominated by the mandarins. Who brings the good weather? The mandarins. Who renders the fields fertile? The mandarins. Who gives fertility to the livestock? The mandarins. Who allows the simple Chinese people to breathe and to live? The mandarins. It is therefore natural that the Chinese people are nothing and the mandarins are everything. It is natural that only the mandarins may deliberate and that the Chinese population must only obey, without complaints, pay their taxes without sighing, give to the mandarin everything that the mandarin demands, without worrying themselves about the how and the why.<sup>94</sup>

The term 'mandarin', then, allows Gramsci to highlight what is perceived as a total disconnect between the world view, or what he would later refer to in the *Prison Notebooks* as a 'conception of the world', of these trade union officials and the workers whose class interests they were notionally supposed to represent. What Gramsci is

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<sup>94</sup> Gramsci, 'Mandarini', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1921. (*SF*, pp. 206-07).

clearly already starting to think through, in 1921, is the question of the intellectuals, of who gets to 'deliberate', in the language of this article. While the parameters of the question might have changed totally by the time we arrive at the famous history of the intellectuals in Notebook 12 of the *Prison Notebooks*, we might recognize some common themes and concerns. Chief among these is the issue of whether the intellectuals are to be seen, or whether they see themselves, as a distinct group, or as the product of a class, organically tied to a certain mode of production.<sup>95</sup> The misconception that Gramsci takes aim at here is the same as in Notebook 12: that the intellectuals are a class apart, and that their identity as such has something to do with the intrinsic nature of intellectual activity rather than being the expression of a system of social relations. The implied inverse of the 'intrinsic' intellectual both in this article and in the *Notebooks*, is the figure of the non-thinking worker: in the *Notebooks* Gramsci turns to Taylor's image of the 'trained gorilla', while in this article it is the conception of the workers as mere 'beasts'. Though the context of the discussion is different, the basic equation remains the same, and we might easily see Gramsci's explanation of the term 'mandarini' as one possible point of origin for his later writings on the history and function of the intellectuals.

Yet there is another sense in which this article seems to lay the groundwork for the later discussion of the intellectuals in the *Notebooks*. There seems to be something particular about the metaphor of the Chinese Mandarinate that attracts Gramsci, and justifies his decision to spend an entire article unpacking it. Why, he asks, do the communists insist upon this term rather than calling them 'bigwigs [*bonzi*], as they do in Germany, or by some other name that simply indicates absolute dominion, bureaucratic intrigue to keep themselves in power at whatever cost, arrogance, and pomposity?'

Per questa ragione: perché i funzionari sindacali riformisti disprezzano le masse, sono convinti che gli operai sono tante bestie, senza intelligenza, senza carattere, senza principi morali, bestie che si tengono tranquille e mansuete dando loro modo di comprare un litro di vino e di andare all'osteria a ingozzarsi del cibo. I funzionari riformisti disprezzano le masse operaie così come i mandarini, uomini di alta casta, gente uscita dalla corte imperiale cinese, disprezzano i loro sudditi, ignoranti, sporchi, superstitiosi.

For this reason: because the reformist trade union officials abhor the masses, they are convinced that the workers are just so many beasts,

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<sup>95</sup> See Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q12§1, pp. 1513-14.

without intelligence, without character, without moral principles, beasts that are kept calm and subservient by giving them a way to buy a litre of wine and go to the osteria to choke themselves with food. The reformist officials scorn the masses just as the mandarins, men of high caste, people coming from the Imperial Chinese court, scorn their subjects as ignorant, dirty, superstitious.<sup>96</sup>

In other words, while a European term like the Germanic 'Bonzi' simply will not cut it, 'mandarini' seems to be perfectly suited to the Italian situation. In order to convey the sheer mental distance separating the reformist trade union officials from the workers, the absolute disconnect between their worldviews, Gramsci and the Turinese communists find themselves obliged to look further to the East. What Gramsci is ultimately calling upon here, in his analysis of the trade union officials, is the idea of caste.

This idea of a caste separation will remain central to Gramsci's celebrated investigation of the history of the traditional intellectuals in Notebook 12 of the *Quaderni*. These intellectuals, Gramsci argued, were certainly linked to the international and cosmopolitan function of the intellectuals that could be traced back to the Roman Empire. These intellectuals were cut off from the majority of the population by a 'separation not only social, but national, racial', and this separation seems to have perpetuated itself into Gramsci's present.<sup>97</sup> This imagery remains constant even when Gramsci is not directly discussing the 'traditional intellectuals' specifically, but more generally the dynamics of the Italian intellectual landscape. In Notebook 21, dedicated to the idea of popular literature, he would write that 'in Italy the intellectuals are distant from the people, that is to say from the "nation", and are instead tied to a tradition of caste'.<sup>98</sup> 'They do not know and do not feel their [the people's] needs, aspirations, shared sentiments, but, in relation to the people are something detached, abstract, that is to say, a caste'.<sup>99</sup> Or, as he puts it in a description of the tradition of the 'umili' in Italian literature:

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<sup>96</sup> Gramsci, 'Mandarini'. (*SF*, p. 207).

<sup>97</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q12§1, p. 1524.

<sup>98</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q21§5, p. 2116.

<sup>99</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q21§5, p. 2117.

In the Italian intellectual the expression of the 'umili' indicates a protective and patronizing relationship, the 'sufficient' feeling of one's own unstated superiority, the relationship between two races, one held to be inferior and the other inferior, the relationship between an adult and a child in the old pedagogy, or even worse like the relationship of an 'animal protection society', or of the Anglo-Saxon health army towards the cannibals of Papua New Guinea.<sup>100</sup>

Though in the *Notebooks* all of these moments form part of a far more nuanced and complete analysis of the intellectuals in Italy, one not immediately driven by political expediency, the metaphors that he falls back upon to talk about the divide between those allotted the task of thinking and those they are supposed to think for seems indebted to his earlier article on the 'Mandarini' of the Italian trade union movement. These intellectuals exist as a caste, who believe implicitly in their own superiority, separated entirely from those who they see as mere beasts, an inferior race to be oppressed or saved at their whim.

As Roberto Dainotto suggests, 'when 'caste' emerges in the *Notebooks* to interpret the Italian (or European) situation, it does so by offering an interpretive horizon that goes well beyond the notion of class'.<sup>101</sup> It is clearly the idea of caste as a social division not immediately determined by the modes of production and the dynamics of class struggle, but shaped by the longer history of social divides, that facilitates Gramsci's famous analysis of the intellectuals in the *Prison Notebooks*. I suggest that tracing Gramsci's deployment of the term and the wider bank of imagery of which it is a part back to this earlier article in his pre-prison journalism gives us a clearer sense of his gradual elaboration of the term, and allows us to triangulate it against the other moments we have examined in the pre-prison writings in which Gramsci looks to China and India to illuminate the Italian situation.

In Notebook 12, Gramsci ends his initial attempt to provide an interpretive framework within which we might understand the history and function of the intellectuals by opening up into a broad if tentative comparative analysis that spans the globe. This

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<sup>100</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q21§5, p.2212.

<sup>101</sup> Roberto Dainotto, 'Notes on Q6§32: Gramsci and the Dalits', in *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar*, edited by Cosimo Zene (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 75-86 (83).

comparative analysis takes place along what I have referred to as the horizontal axis of Gramsci's thought: it connects and compares disparate national entities in terms that completely ignore their relative positions within the hierarchy of domination and exploitation that represents imperialist capital, and instead focuses on the social terrain of the nation over which this hierarchy had settled. France, to a certain extent, represented an exemplary case, in which Gramsci saw a 'harmonious development of all national energies and particularly of the intellectual categories'.<sup>102</sup> Russia was characterized in the most recent historical moment by the presence of an intellectual elite that had absorbed all of the culture and historical experience of Western Europe and stood in stark contrast to the inert passivity of the Russian population and tradition, yet was still 'national popular' in the sense that it emerged as a response to this passivity, not in isolation from it. The United States represented an entirely different case, and was marked by the absence of traditional intellectuals. England appears to share most with Japan, in that in both cases a highly developed industry had married itself to a pre-existing aristocratic power base, tying the traditional intellectuals to the new dominant class of industrialists. Germany was similar, except for the unique role of the Junkers. Finally, Gramsci moves through Southern and Central America to India and China, where 'the enormous distance between the intellectuals and the people manifests itself in the field of religion'.<sup>103</sup>

The above is a heavily reductive sketch of what in the *Notebooks* is itself only a tentative outline for further investigation, yet there are two points I want to draw out from it. The first is that the imaginative geography active in Gramsci's work is one that it perhaps remarkably different to those still dominant in postcolonial studies today. This is a global comparativism that is totally uninterested in 'Europe' or 'the West' as homogenous social or cultural formations: in this passage Britain shares more with Japan than it does with France, and Spain has more in common with Brazil than it does with Germany. The second point is that here, as elsewhere in the *Prison Notebooks*, it is only through a comparison with India and China that the specifics of the Italian situation emerge. We see much the same thing in Notebook 22, in the context of his discussion of Americanism and Fordism: Italy's population demographic had, in Gramsci's eyes, been

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<sup>102</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q12§1, p.1524.

<sup>103</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q12§1, p. 1529.

rendered 'unhealthy' by a variety of factors but above all by emigration, unemployment in agricultural zones, and particularly by the existence of a large mass of the population that was 'parasitic' (and by this he intended a surfeit of lawyers, doctors, and other bourgeois officials, those that Carlo Levi would later define 'Luigini', as we shall see in Chapter 3). These socio-economic realities, particularly prevalent in the Italian South, again come in to focus through the act of positioning Italy on this horizontal comparative axis and specifically in relation to Asia: 'This situation exists not only in Italy; to a greater or lesser degree it exists in all of the countries of old Europe, and it exists in a still worse form in India and in China'.<sup>104</sup>

Dainotto has recently commented that 'there is in Gramsci a positive will – to use Derek Boothman's word – of 'translatability' between East and West, between Italy and India'.<sup>105</sup> What I hope to have shown here is that this is a more consistent feature of Gramsci's writing than we might have imagined, and one that stretches back far into the years of his pre-prison journalism. Dainotto refers to the way in which the Indian situation becomes illuminating for Europe in *The Prison Notebooks* as 'a peculiar case of a reverse appropriation model'.<sup>106</sup> While Dainotto is undeniably correct to underline the novelty and originality of this critical manoeuvre, in which Gramsci deploys an analysis of the East to read the West, I argue that tracing the longer textual history of this motif renders it less peculiar. Firstly, the link between Italy and India (and China for that matter) is elaborated as part of the broader development of a global socio-economic comparativism (which I have been referring to in this chapter as the horizontal axis) which pays little attention to East and West, and instead sees multiple lines of similarity and difference between geographically disparate nations and territories. In this sense, the deployment of an image of India in order to facilitate an analysis of Italy is not a 'reverse appropriation', or at least is not conscious of being so; it is a straightforward act of borrowing that is entirely consistent throughout Gramsci's work. India frequently appears as a source of inspiration in Gramsci's writings, and there seems to be no sense that there is anything surprising or counterintuitive about this for him. Secondly, by tracing this analogy with India, and before that with China, back to the 'Mandarini' articles of 1921, we can triangulate this act of borrowing or comparison within the

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<sup>104</sup> See Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q22§2, p. 2145.

<sup>105</sup> Dainotto, 'Notes on Q6§32: Gramsci and the Dalits', p. 85

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* p. 85.

context of the high point of Gramsci's explicit written engagement with questions of colonialism and semi-colonial exploitation. If the similarities that Gramsci perceives between Italy, India, and China appear surprising to modern readers of *The Notebooks*, they make much more sense if we understand them as springing from a political moment that forced Gramsci in his journalism to address the question of the 'Italiani e Cinesi', the same political moment in which he saw the old Empires unravelling and new global imperialisms consolidating themselves.

### 1.3 Gramsci's Kipling: A Great and Terrible World

In the following section I want to deepen the focus on the literary dimensions of Gramsci's anti-colonialism, on the ways in which it is elaborated through acts of reading and writing creatively. As we saw with his reworking of the passage from Balzac's novel, Gramsci could at times be a capricious reader, willing to read the text back upon itself, or even to invent a new text that better suited his purpose. Nowhere is this more the case than in his interactions with the works of Rudyard Kipling.

Despite both its prevalence and its prominence, surprisingly little has been written about the function of Kipling in Gramsci's work, and almost nothing in the context of Anglophone postcolonial studies, in which the connection between these two figures seems to be most suggestive.<sup>107</sup> Yet the influence that Kipling had on Gramsci's work is, I think, far greater than has previously been imagined, in ways that only become visible if it is viewed as one prism of Gramsci's colonial and anti-colonial imagination. In particular, I argue that Gramsci frequently calls upon a certain image of India that he finds in the pages of Kipling's fiction to sharpen his understanding of the political

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<sup>107</sup> Brennan's 1988 article is one of the few to have registered the connection, and though he makes some insightful points about why Kipling was of such interest to Gramsci, he spends only one page investigating it. In *Antonio Gramsci: Architect of a New Politics* (Louisiana State University Press, 1996) Dante Germino spends more time mapping the extent of Kipling's presence in the pre-prison writings, but has less to say about its implications for our reading of Gramsci. In Italian relatively little has been written on the subject until very recently, the most complete investigation being Giulia Pissarello's 'Lingua e letteratura inglese negli scritti del carcere di Antonio Gramsci: "Esercizi di lingua inglese" e riletture di Rudyard Kipling' (2007). In a recent essay on 'Gramsci e Serra' (2008), Antonio Acciani has also spoken of the common influence of Gramsci at work in both thinkers.

situation in Italy. Time and time again, we see him draw on Kipling's words as an intellectual resource, as a means of thinking through the workings of the Italian bourgeois State, and as a way of understanding what exactly Fascism entailed as a political phenomenon. Many of Gramsci's most famous political and theoretical insights (even ideas as central to his work as hegemony and subalternity) are inflected by his readings and re-elaborations of Kipling.

Kipling occupies a surprising position in Gramsci's work; he is, as Brennan points out 'by far the most cherished author' in his writing.<sup>108</sup> There is perhaps no other author who appears as frequently in his work, but there is certainly no other writer that he speaks about with such consistently marked enthusiasm, and to whom he seems to have such a *personal* attachment. Kipling's influence manifests itself in significant moments of Gramsci's life: writing in an early letter to Giulia in 1924 he remembers them parting ways on a walk in the early days of their relationship, and watching her walk away 'all alone on the big road, with [her] wanderer's pack, towards the great and terrible world'.<sup>109</sup> The final line is borrowed, of course, from the lama in *Kim*: 'This is a great and terrible world'.<sup>110</sup> This moment is emblematic, I would suggest, of Kipling's presence in the most intimate recesses of Gramsci's life, and the role that he played in conceptually shaping Gramsci's sense of the world, both personally and politically.

Kipling first appears in an article Gramsci wrote in 1916 in *Sotto la Mole*, in which Gramsci offers the reader a complete translation of Kipling's famous poem 'If –', his ode to British imperialist masculinity. Gramsci was of course intensely interested in literature and the politics of cultural production and under his editorship *L'Ordine Nuovo* included poetry and short pieces of fiction, but this article is striking in that it is the only time in two decades of writing that he reproduces a poem or literary work in one of his own articles. Dante Germino reminds us that 'English was the one major European language Gramsci never learned well, so [...] he quoted the poem in translation'.<sup>111</sup> Pissarello, who performs a more in-depth analysis of Gramsci's translation exercises in the *Notebooks*, similarly concludes that 'Kipling almost certainly

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<sup>108</sup> Brennan, 'Literary Criticism and the Southern Question', p. 107.

<sup>109</sup> 30 giugno 1924, in Gramsci, *Lettere 1908-1926*, (Torino: Einaudi)

<sup>110</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 50.

<sup>111</sup> Germino, Antonio Gramsci: Architect of a New Politics, pp. 49-50.



could not have been read by Gramsci in the original language'.<sup>112</sup> This does not, however, resolve the question of where this translation comes from, as the poem was not, to the best of my knowledge, then available in Italian translation, and Gramsci does not refer to an edition. It seems more likely, and more in keeping with the ways in which Gramsci tended to read Kipling's works, that he came across the poem in French.<sup>113</sup> What we are dealing with here then, may well be Gramsci's own translation, even if it does not directly come from the English original.

At first reading, it is difficult to know what to make of Gramsci's enthusiasm for the poem. For Germino, 'Gramsci's celebration of Kipling's banal poem may be attributed either to an uncharacteristic lapse in taste or to what he perceived to be the poem's resonance of stoicism'.<sup>114</sup> The latter is almost certainly the case, but it is important to note that Gramsci does intervene in his presentation of the poem. Although the translation is fairly literal, with minimal alterations (notably the omission of the final two words of the poem – 'my son!' – which perhaps removes some of the poem's paternalistic and moralistic overtones), Gramsci does not preserve the title, instead entitling the translation 'Breviario per laici' ('Breviary for the Secular'). This is indicative of the spirit in which the poem is offered up to us: 'It is by the English poet Rudyard Kipling, and it pleases us to make our readers familiar with it, as an example of a morality not poisoned by Christianity and that could be accepted by all men'.<sup>115</sup> From the very early moments of his journalistic career, then, Gramsci looks to a kind of oppositional re-reading of Kipling's works to think about how to be a committed socialist in Italy.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Pissarello (2007), p. 154.

<sup>113</sup> As we saw in the letter to Tatiana quoted in the previous section, Gramsci refers to reading 'The Strange Ride' in the French edition of *The Man Who Would be King*. We also know from the notebooks that Gramsci had the French translation of the first *Jungle Book* (*Les plus belles histoires [sic] du monde*) with him in prison. Gramsci, *Quaderni*, p. 2370.

<sup>114</sup> Germino, Antonio Gramsci: Architect of a New Politics, p. 49

<sup>115</sup> Gramsci, 'Breviario per Laici', 17<sup>th</sup> December 1916. (*SM*, pp. 268-69).

<sup>116</sup> Gramsci was not alone in this kind of appropriation of Kipling's works: as we shall see in Chapter 4 of this thesis, Italo Calvino, in the period in which he was a member of the Italian communist party, also turned to Kipling for his *Resistenza* novel *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*. In that work one of the major characters, a partisan who we follow in his meditative journeys, is named after Kim, and the Ligurian hillside seems to blur somehow with the Himalayas.

It is, however, *The Jungle Book* that lies at the heart of Gramsci's love affair with Kipling's works. Perhaps the best evidence we have of the weight he attached to the text comes from his prison correspondence, in which he insists, many times, over a period of many years, that his son Delio should be sent a copy of *The Jungle Book* from him. He writes to his wife, Julca, his sister-in-law, Tatiana, and ultimately to Delio himself about it many times.<sup>117</sup> He even has strong opinions about the particular edition, and ideally wants Delio to have a copy of the Russian translation, complete with original drawings, that he remembers seeing in preparation in the Soviet State Book Store and Publishing House in Moscow in 1922.<sup>118</sup> In particular, he wants his son to read two particular stories from the text: 'the one about the white seal [Kotick], who is able to save the seal people from destruction, the one about Rikki-Tikki-Tavi the young mongoose who victoriously struggles with the snakes in an Indian garden'.<sup>119</sup>

The 'White Seal' tells the tale of Kotick, the only white seal ever born. While the other seals are busy squabbling over their territories on the beaches, the young Kotick stumbles across the horrendous reality of the thousands of baby seals being driven away from the beach by humans to be clubbed and skinned. Dismayed not only by what he has discovered but also the fact that all of the other seals already know and are largely indifferent to it, Kotick sets out on a quest to find a safe beach for the seals, and when he returns is forced to fight the other seals to convince them to go with him (a fight he wins because his endless exploration has trained him to the peak of fitness). Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, on the other hand, is a young mongoose who moves into the garden of a British family in India, and defends himself, the family, and the inhabitants of the garden from the attacks of the deadly cobra Nag and his even more formidable wife Nagaina. From one perspective the first reads as a kind of allegory for redemption through Christ and the second as an allegory for the importance of loyally defending the British Raj. Gramsci obviously has a markedly different reading: in his eyes they become stories of resistance, of how we gain strength through struggle. These are stories through which there runs, in Gramsci's words, 'a moral and volitional energy'. They are also stories about the defence of certain kinds of natural environments from an external threat, and

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<sup>117</sup> See Gramsci, *Letters vol. 2*, pp. 143, 287, 298, 303, 317-18, 319, 346.

<sup>118</sup> Gramsci, *Letters vol. 2*, p. 287.

<sup>119</sup> Gramsci, *Letters vol. 2*, p. 298.

in this sense we might be reminded of Gramsci's story of the mouse in Sardinia that we looked at earlier in this chapter.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, Gramsci's mouse might not look entirely out of place as one of the chapters of the *Jungle Book*. What Gramsci seems to be hoping his son will take from these tales then, is a sense of what we might think of as a spirit of resistance.

This understanding of *The Jungle Book* as a source of anti-imperial and anti-capitalist energies is typical of the way Gramsci tends to read Kipling back upon himself. As Germino points out, 'the irony of invoking the arch-imperialist Rudyard Kipling as a beacon for the dispossessed did not escape Gramsci', as we can see from his observation in the *Notebooks* that:

On the other hand, the moral of Kipling is imperialist only in so far as it is tied to a very particular historical reality: but it is possible to extract images of powerful immediacy for every social group that struggles for political power.<sup>121</sup>

Brennan suggests that 'it is not really what Kipling reveals about India or empire that attracts him [...] but the directness, the clarity, the elimination of poetic delicacy, the frank politics' of his work.<sup>122</sup> In this sense, Kipling's work appears as 'an appeal to take sides' that would certainly have chimed with Gramsci's own preference for political commitment. 'I live, I am partisan', he once wrote, 'and so I hate those who do not participate, I hate the indifferent'.<sup>123</sup>

Yet in another sense, I would argue that it is precisely the particular historical context of Kipling's writing, what he reveals about both India *and* empire in other words, that makes him so interesting for Gramsci, as we can see from one of the most interesting

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<sup>120</sup> Pissarello notes more broadly that 'the creative imagination of Kipling attracts him also for its use of zoological metaphors', and points to the presence in Gramsci's works of a veritable menagerie of 'penguins, parrots, owls, crows, eagles, tigers, jackals, crabs, whales, dolphins, sharks, cats, boars, mice, roaches, hornets, lambs, and so on.' Pissarello, p. 158.

<sup>121</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q3§146, p. 402.

<sup>122</sup> Brennan, 'Literary Criticism and the Southern Question', p. 108.

<sup>123</sup> Gramsci, 'La Disciplina', *La Città Futura*, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1917. (*SG*, p. 80). It is interesting to note that this article, 'Gli Indifferenti', appeared alongside another article about Kipling, 'La Disciplina', which I discuss in what follows.

articles that Gramsci wrote about him. In 1917 he wrote an article for the flagship edition of *La Città Futura*, the paper of the Turinese socialist youth movement designed, entitled 'La Disciplina' ('Discipline'). In this manifesto edition, Gramsci turns not to Marx, Engels, Lenin, or even to Croce to politicize the youth of Turin, but to Kipling. Like the translation of 'If', this article seeks to introduce one of Kipling's works to a wider audience, in this case the short story 'Her Majesty's Servants' from the first *Jungle Book*. Here, however, Kipling is not so much a source of inspiration as an enemy to measure oneself against:

In one of the *Jungle Book* Stories Rudyard Kipling shows the discipline of a strong bourgeois State in action. Everyone obeys in the bourgeois State. The battery mules obey the battery sergeant, the horses the soldiers that ride them. The soldiers obey the lieutenant, the lieutenants obey the colonels of the regiment; the regiments obey a general of the brigade, the brigades obey the Viceroy of India. The Viceroy obeys the Queen (still alive when Kipling was writing). The Queen gives an order and the Viceroy, the generals, the colonels, the lieutenants, the soldiers, the animals – everyone moves in harmony and the move to the conquest. The protagonist of the story says to an indigenous spectator of the military parade: "It's because you don't know how to do this that you are our subjects". The bourgeois discipline is the only force that keeps the bourgeois assembly solid. We must place against it an opposing discipline. But while the bourgeois discipline is a mechanical and authoritative thing, socialist discipline is autonomous and spontaneous.<sup>124</sup>

Gramsci seems slightly hazy on the details of the story: in reality the 'indigenous spectator' is a 'Central Asian chief' who forms part of the contingent of the Amir of Afghanistan, and it is he who asks the protagonist (a native officer) 'in what manner was this wonderful thing [the military precision of the parade] done?'<sup>125</sup> What is so fascinating about this article, however, is that it shows that *Gramsci's model for the bourgeois state is Kipling's fantasy of colonial power in the British Raj*: even as early as 1917 Gramsci seems to be drawing upon a certain vision of India to understand the Italian State. In a move that would later become typical of his prison writings, Gramsci takes his cue from the theorists of the enemy, and Kipling was the best theorist of what the State was really about.

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<sup>124</sup> Gramsci, 'La Disciplina'. (*SG*, pp. 80-81).

<sup>125</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Books*, edited by W. W. Robson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 140.

What Gramsci is clearly interested in here is the question of how State power consolidates and maintains itself in spite of the fact that it is obviously not in the interests its subjects. What is interesting in the story is the way in which Kipling analyses the psychology of each of the camp animals, and reveals their total inability to think outside of the role that they have been given in the forces of the British Raj, which seems somehow to have worked its way into their instinctual drives. This is the miracle, the 'wonderful thing', of bourgeois discipline that is nicely encapsulated in the poem that accompanies the short story in *The Jungle Book*:

While the men that walk beside,  
Dusty, silent, heavy-eyed,  
Cannot tell why we or they  
March and suffer day by day.  
Children of the camp are we,  
Serving each in his degree;  
Children of the yoke and goad,  
Pack and harness, heavy load.<sup>126</sup>

What we are reading in this article, I suggest, is the embryonic form of ideas that would later become the central theoretical concepts in Gramsci's work. This is an early attempt to think through what Gramsci would later call hegemony, which is to say the ways in which the State manages to preserve itself not by force but by indoctrinating and co-opting those that it oppresses. In a recent article looking back at the influence Gramsci has had on his own work, Guha outlines his own understanding of the term: 'hegemony stands for a particular condition of Dominance, such that the organic composition of Dominance enables Persuasion to outweigh Coercion'.<sup>127</sup> This article on the miracle of bourgeois discipline, I suggest, is one of the clearest images of this structure of persuasion outweighing coercion that Gramsci's work provides us with.

This article is also, perhaps, the start of Gramsci beginning to think through the idea of 'subalternity', in so far as subalternity is the necessarily corollary to hegemony, its inverse term. In Notebook 25, the notebook dedicated specifically to the theorisation of the subaltern groups at the margins of history, Gramsci writes that 'the subaltern groups always suffer the influence of the dominant groups[...] only 'permanent' victory can

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<sup>126</sup> Kipling, *The Jungle Books*, p. 143.

<sup>127</sup> Ranajit Guha, 'Gramsci in India: Homage to a Teacher', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 16: 2 (2011) pp. 288-95 (p. 292).

break, and that not immediately, their subordination'.<sup>128</sup> This is to say that Gramsci understands subalternity as a condition that is both *political* and *psychological*, in the sense that it was necessarily impossible for subaltern groups to think outside of their subaltern position. The short story Gramsci is describing here unfolds as an overheard dialogue between a group of animals of the Viceroy's army: none of them is able to think outside of their allotted role, only Two Tails, the elephant, has any sense of the injustice of his position. The question that comes to dominate their conversation is why they have to fight at all, and the answer is simply 'because we are told to'. That is to say, not only because refusing would incur a punishment (though Two Tails does point out that there would be a punishment for disobedience), but because orders are orders. Kipling's story, then, seems to offer Gramsci one possible way of thinking through the ways in which the discipline of the State, which is to stay hegemony, grows within the minds of those it oppresses and co-opts.

That this article on Kipling is one of the points of origin for the terms that have made Gramsci famous in postcolonial studies today might seem a large claim, but it is worth remembering the role that both India and the structures of the military play in the elaboration of theory in the pre-prison writings and the *Notebooks*.<sup>129</sup> 'Discipline' becomes a key term in the lexicon of the early Gramsci, and appears in a wide variety of contexts. The term 'subaltern' was not, as is commonly assumed (in a line that seems to have been popularized by Spivak) invented in the *Prison Notebooks* as a code for 'proletariat' to avoid censorship, but was a term that Gramsci had already been using for a decade before and which slowly develops throughout his writing.<sup>130</sup> Although he would later speak more commonly of 'subaltern classes' in the *Notebooks*, in the early stages of his writing he uses it in a more orthodox sense of someone who occupies a position of relative inferiority within a hierarchy. As early as 1916 we find the term

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<sup>128</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q25§2, p. 2283.

<sup>129</sup> We might think, for example, of the way in which Gramsci points to the British occupation of India and the Gandhian resistance against it in his famous passage on wars of position. Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q1§134, pp. 122-23.

<sup>130</sup> See Marcus E. Green, *Rethinking Gramsci*, for a thorough critique of the censorship thesis and the ways in which it has been used to obscure the actual theoretical content of the term in Gramsci's writings. Marcus E. Green, ed. *Rethinking Gramsci* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

being used to describe junior government officials,<sup>131</sup> lesser teaching staff at the university whose positions are dictated by more senior professors,<sup>132</sup> and factory workers subject to the brutal whims of their overseers.<sup>133</sup> Over time, it develops the broader class sense that we find in the *Notebooks*, but it always retains its connection to the ways in which the bourgeois State gets those it oppresses to *obey*. We see this, for example, in an article written in 1919 at the start of the 'red years' in which the authority of that state seemed to be crumbling, when he asks: 'Does there still exist an authority that effectively manages to obtain obedience from the subalterns?'<sup>134</sup> This connection continues into the *Notebooks* when he first uses the term, in relation to the French military:

The passage from the old discipline to the new one has not demanded a large crisis: the old military leadership was vast enough and elastic enough: the subaltern officials and sub-officials were perhaps the most select in the world, the best trained.<sup>135</sup>

If Gramsci's decision to use the term 'subaltern' has frequently been explained away by the idea of prison censorship, his choice of the term has not. Indeed, although it is typically acknowledged that Gramsci takes the term from the structures of the British military hierarchy, little time has been spent wondering what informed the choice of the term. Indeed the actual origins of the term have sometimes been seen as an unfortunate inconvenience. David Arnold, for example, complains that 'certainly, "subaltern" is not an altogether happy choice, at least in English where it invites an unwelcome confusion with military terminology (and with junior *officers* at that)'.<sup>136</sup> It is strange that Arnold is unaware that Gramsci, as he explicitly states in the *Notebooks*, takes the word from the British military, and in his initial uses of it in the pre-prison writings uses it precisely in the sense of junior officers who are obliged (or trained) to obey a higher authority in a rigid hierarchy. We might question why Gramsci, who did not speak English with any

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<sup>131</sup> Gramsci, 'Oro, Argento e Rame', 12<sup>th</sup> March 1916. (*SM*, p. 71).

<sup>132</sup> Gramsci, 'Vinaj-Einaudi', 16<sup>th</sup> May 1917. (*SM*, p. 314).

<sup>133</sup> Gramsci, 'Veterinario in Film', 4<sup>th</sup> August 1916. (*SM*, pp. 216-17).

<sup>134</sup> Gramsci, 'Il Paese di Pulcinella', *Avanti!* ediz. Piemontese, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1919. (*NM*, p. 514).

<sup>135</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q1§48, p. 60. (emphasis mine).

<sup>136</sup> David Arnold, 'Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India', in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. by Vinayak Chaturvedi (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 24-49 (p. 33).

degree of fluency and was not unusually interested in the British military history, would attach so much importance to the word, or even be familiar with it (although it appears in the *Notebooks* in relation to Churchill's war memoirs, it does so thirteen years after Gramsci first used the term).<sup>137</sup> One possible answer would be the work of Rudyard Kipling, which he loved deeply and knew inside out and drew upon, as we saw above, as a theoretical resource for thinking about the way in which power functions in the bourgeois State. Kipling's works abound with subalterns, most notably Bobbie Wicks in the short story 'Only a Subaltern', but also in *Kim*; for example when Kim first comes across his Father's army regiment and he is presented to the officers: 'The chaplain moved on through the dust and, privates, sergeants, and subalterns called on another's attention to the boy'.<sup>138</sup>

There is, I suggest, the distinct possibility that Gramsci's use of the word 'subaltern' and his development of it as a term to describe a state of political and mental subordination, was inspired or at the very least inflected by his admiration for Kipling. What is lost, in the account that is typically given of the term arising purely in response to prison censorship, is the possibility that it is rooted in a longer history of Gramsci using a vision of India to think through the formation of the Italian State.

There are a large number of other references to Kipling in Gramsci's pre-prison writings, and several more in the *Notebooks*. Some of these are throwaway lines,<sup>139</sup> on some of them he borrows imagery that seems to have particularly attracted him,<sup>140</sup> and on others he borrows inspiration for the titles for his articles (Acciani points out, for example, that one of Gramsci's earliest essays, 'la luce che si è spenta', is drawn from Kipling's *The Light That Failed*).<sup>141</sup> Before moving on, I would like to sketch out one final arc of Kipling's influence on Gramsci, a trajectory that we see unfold across several years and continue into the *Notebooks* themselves.

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<sup>137</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q1§54, p. 67.

<sup>138</sup> Kipling, *Kim*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>139</sup> Gramsci, *SM*, p. 311; *SM*, p. 445.

<sup>140</sup> Gramsci, *SM*, pp. 417-18; *SF* pp. 9-12; *NM*, pp. 145-146; *NM*; pp. 167-168; *NM*, p. 629.

<sup>141</sup> Antonia Acciani, 'Gramsci e Serra', in *Gramsci nel suo tempo*, ed. Francesco Giasi (Roma: Carocci Editore, 2008), p. 255.



Much of Gramsci's most famous work stems from his analysis of the historical failures of the Italian *Risorgimento*, which he understood as the failure of the middle classes to assimilate the interests of other classes, and particularly the agricultural sector, in the style of the French Jacobins. As Srivastava and Bhattacharya emphasize, it was in large part this analysis of the shortcomings of Italian nationalism that led Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies historians to draw upon Gramsci's work in their analysis of the 'historic failure of the nation to come to its own'.<sup>142</sup> It was particularly urgent to address this failure in the Italian context, because in Gramsci's eyes it was precisely this shortcoming that had paved the way for the advance of Fascism.

When Gramsci first attempted to articulate the particular shortcomings of the Italian bourgeoisie, however, it was to Kipling that he again turned for the necessary imagery. Again, it was in *The Jungle Book* that he found it. In his eyes, the Italian middle classes resembled nothing so much as the 'Bandar Log', the monkey people who kidnap Mowgli. This first occurs in an article entitled 'Vita Nuova', published in *Avanti!* in 1918.<sup>143</sup> The comparison is meant to be biting: the Bandar Log lead an obscene life in the trees, and are constantly desperate to be noticed and admired by the rest of the inhabitants of the jungle, who steadfastly ignore them. They sustain their delusions of grandeur by empty boasting: ('We are great. We are free. We are wonderful. We are the most wonderful people in all the jungle! We all say so, and so it must be true').<sup>144</sup> Later in the story we hear the song of the Bandar Log, which Gramsci claims is also that of the Italian middle classes:

By the rubbish in our wake, and the noble noise we make,  
Be sure, be sure, we're going to do some splendid things!<sup>145</sup>

Gramsci comes back to this analogy more than once,<sup>146</sup> but he returns to it most strikingly three years later, this time with a degree of urgency, in one of the first major articles he wrote about the new and rapidly growing political phenomenon of Fascism.

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<sup>142</sup> Srivastava and Bhattacharya, *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, p. 10. Guha, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', p. 43.

<sup>143</sup> Gramsci, *NM*, pp. 167-168, *SM*, pp. 417-18.

<sup>144</sup> Kipling, *The Jungle Books*, p. 38.

<sup>145</sup> Kipling, *The Jungle Books*, p. 47.

<sup>146</sup> Gramsci, 'La Libertà Individuale', *Avanti!*, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1918. (*NM*, pp. 145-146).

The article was entitled 'Il popolo delle scimmie' ('The Monkey People'), and again drew on a comparison between the bourgeoisie and the Bandar Log.<sup>147</sup> This time, however, he sees Fascism as the petite bourgeoisie's attempt to 'ape' the vibrant protests and strike movements of the working class during the 'red years' by taking to the streets themselves:

This new tactic is carried out in the ways and modes possible for a class of chatterboxes [chiacchieroni], of sceptics, of the corrupt: the trotting out of the events that have taken the name of the "radiant days of May", with all their journalistic, oratorical, theatrical reflexes, is like the projection in reality of one of the Jungle Book stories of Kipling: the story of the Bandar Log, of the monkey people, who believe that they are superior to all of the other people of the jungle, that they possess all of the intelligence, of the historical intuition, of the revolutionary spirit, of the knowledge, etc., etc.. This is what has happened: the petite bourgeoisie, who have helped themselves to governmental power through parliamentary corruption, change the form of their performance, become anti-parliamentary, and seek to corrupt the streets.<sup>148</sup>

Like his analysis of the 'discipline' of the bourgeois State, the first moments in which he articulates the failure of the Italian nation to come into its own due to the limitations of the bourgeoisie and its horrendous outcome in the form of fascism are elaborated in the language of Kipling. What this tells us, ultimately, is something about the way in which Gramsci understood Italy at that point in time: as something very like an occupied territory. Indeed, Gramsci would write soon after that living under Fascism was like living under occupation. Gramsci's use of Kipling tells us much about the way in which Gramsci imaginatively grasped the situation of Italy as a kind of field of anti-colonial struggle.

#### **1.4 Conclusions: Anti-colonialisms and Anti-Fascisms in Theory and Practice**

What I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter is that Gramsci's entanglements with questions of coloniality and anti-coloniality are far more various, run far deeper, and are far more central to his thought, than has previously been imagined. I have attempted to give a thorough and rigorous overview of Gramsci's unique, extensive, and often

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<sup>147</sup> Gramsci, 'Il Popolo delle Scimmie', *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1921. (*SF*, pp. 9-12).

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

surprising engagements with questions of colonial and imperial domination and the points of resistance and possible avenues of solidarity the operations of this imperial power creates. Gramsci's work is marked by his labouring towards an anti-colonial positioning: by this I do not mean simply the adoption of an intellectual or political position that condemns colonialism as a system, but an on-going and constantly renewed act of positioning, whereby Gramsci places himself and his political (and sometimes personal) life-world in relation to broader contours of colonial and imperial power. As we have seen, the elaboration of such an anti-colonial position was central to the growth of Gramsci's thought and the rich bank of terminology and concepts that it has bequeathed to contemporary theory. This was an enabling and invigorating critical manoeuvre for Gramsci: his writing spans a moment of intense optimism and crushing defeat for the Italian left, and in this sense it is perhaps unsurprising that time and time again we see him look to the colonized world, and particularly to India, for inspiration and solidarity.

Returning to the pre-prison writings and tracing lines of continuity with the more famous passages of *The Prison Notebooks* allows us to see that a startling number of the concepts and theoretical innovations for which Gramsci is best known, and particularly those that have most frequently been borrowed and put to use in postcolonial theory, are in some way shaped or inflected by Gramsci's complex and multiple engagements with these questions. His understanding of the Southern Question as an economic phenomenon, whether in terms of protectionism or parasitic exploitation, emerges as part of a larger analysis of the operations of imperialist capital and the way in which it orders disparate markets. His later description of the 'octopus' of the North draining the resources of the South seems to grow organically from his earlier use of Balzac to theorize the operations of colonial exploitation. The concepts of subalternity and hegemony spring from his analysis of what in his eyes was clearly a colonial context, and are both curiously inflected by his complex relationship with the works of Rudyard Kipling, and particularly with *The Jungle Book*. His prescient understanding of Fascism was similarly coloured by his readings of Kipling. His analysis of the Southern Question as a social phenomenon, which is the point of departure for his later investigation into the history of the intellectuals, is also shaped by his deployment of an image of India and China.

My intention in this chapter has been to make a case for Gramsci as an anti-colonial thinker. If Gramsci's anti-colonialism is by no means unique in the history of Marxist thought, in the sense that he was far from the only one to oppose colonial exploitation, it is important not to lose sight of the unique ways in which this anti-colonialism wove its way into so many aspects of his work. While Gramsci seldom offers us a self-contained analysis of colonialism as a system (though he does occasionally do just that), this may paradoxically be precisely because anti-colonialism is so integral to his thought: there are few corners of his thought that are not in some ways coloured by it.

Much of the emphasis in this chapter has been on the literary nature of Gramsci's anti-colonialism: this should not, however, be taken to mean that this was an anti-colonialism that remained solely on the page. Before we leave Gramsci behind (though he will remain a central presence throughout the rest of the thesis) I want to think briefly about the practical manifestations of his anti-colonial energies. If, as I have been suggesting, we have not fully grasped the extent of the anti-colonial spirit that runs through his writings, we know still less about the policies and political acts that this anti-colonial spirit might have inspired in the inter-war Italian Communist Party (PCd'I) had Gramsci not been imprisoned, had he lived. One of the few clues we have is a document from 1928, which to the best of my knowledge has not previously been critically examined or discussed, and has certainly never been read in the context of Gramsci's relationship with colonialism and anti-colonialism. The document comes from the archives of the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci in Rome, and was written not by Gramsci himself, but by 'Compagno Garlandi', a pseudonym for Ruggiero Grieco.<sup>149</sup>

It is a remarkable document that deserves to be studied in its own right: what follows is only a mere sketch.<sup>150</sup> Produced for the sixth annual congress of the party, it represents an in-depth and prescient analysis of Italy's imperial designs in North Africa and a cogent plan of action to resist it. Grieco opens by stating that the party had not undertaken any meaningful action in the Italian colonies, and that the anti-colonial

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<sup>149</sup> Gramsci had a complex relationship with Grieco after his arrest: though they had previously been close Gramsci blamed a letter that Grieco sent to him in jail for the extension of his sentence.

<sup>150</sup> For a sustained analysis of this document that places it in the context of the PCd'I's and PCI's interactions with anti-colonial movements, see Neelam Srivastava, forthcoming.

commitments approved by the third congress had 'remained on paper'.<sup>151</sup> He goes on to state that the coming to power of Fascism signalled a new Italian imperial attitude to North Africa, and to outline what he saw as the Fascist imperial project in Africa. Grieco notes that the existing Empire represented a considerable drain on the Italian economy: it was a paradox, 'an Empire that does not give to the metropolis but is kept on its feet by the metropolis, and by a metropolis of starving wretches'.<sup>152</sup> The only way it might be rendered profitable was as a basis for further imperial expansions. While Libya and Eritrea were both centres from which Fascist Imperialism hoped to expand its sphere of influence, 'it is clear', he writes, 'that it aims to create a single colonial system in order to present it to the Islamic world as a new force of orientation'.<sup>153</sup> In this aim, he writes, 'Fascism naturally forgets that in the Islamic world there is a ferment of liberation, for which reason the games of the imperialists cannot repeat themselves in the same forms as the past'.<sup>154</sup> Central to this unification would be the construction of a railway line that would connect the North African Colonies (Libya) to those on the Red Sea (Somalia and Eritrea). Both the symbolic and infrastructural unification of the Italian Empire would this have to go through one point: 'in the development of single colonial system in Africa, Italy cannot avoid Abyssinia', and this would bring it into confrontation with British and French imperial interests.<sup>155</sup> Abyssinia was, therefore, 'a node of balance in Central Africa', it was 'one of the nerve centres of the African colonial system'.<sup>156</sup> Writing in 1928, Grieco is already able to see far enough ahead to 1935, when Italian Fascism would mount its appalling attack on Ethiopia and declare the unification of the East African Empire.

Grieco is, however, under no illusions about the ability of the Italian left to intervene in the struggle against Italian colonial expansion. The party had suffered political defeat in the metropolis and had been forced into exile, but more fundamentally was hampered by a near total ignorance of the political and social realities of North and East Africa, and

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<sup>151</sup> Rome, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, UA 644, Articoli delle tesi politiche del VI congresso con annotazioni manoscritte di Togliatti; rapporto di Grieco (Garlandi) alla "Commissione dell'Oriente prossimo" sul partito nel lavoro nelle colonie, 1918-07-04, p. 11.

<sup>152</sup> UA 644, p. 13

<sup>153</sup> UA 644, p. 12.

<sup>154</sup> UA 644, p. 13.

<sup>155</sup> UA 644, p. 13.

<sup>156</sup> UA 644, p. 13.

he is under no illusions about the depth of this ignorance. It may well be that the way forward would be to support and sustain movements against Italian imperialism that came from within the colonies, which is to say, not necessarily communist or even socialist in nature, but it was difficult to know where the roots of this resistance might lie. As a result it was important to focus all attentions on one particular point: Ethiopia.

This document, then, is an embryonic anti-colonial policy that positioned the exiled and underground Italian communist party in direct solidarity with those fighting against Fascism's imperial advances across the Mediterranean. While the concrete results of this policy were limited, it is nevertheless a striking archival moment that invites us to reconsider the relationships between European political radicalism and anti-colonial struggle in the 1920s. This was a communism that was eager to learn from the growing anti-colonial movements, which it saw as the next great political force in the world, but was at the same time painstakingly aware of its own ignorance of and marginality to those struggles.

Grieco's document was written while Gramsci was in prison, beginning work on the *Notebooks*, and it is doubtful that he even knew of its existence, yet there is clearly a continuity of spirit between it and his earlier writings on colonialism. There are two ways in which we might understand this continuity: either Grieco is working within theoretical lines established by Gramsci and carrying the anti-colonial thrust of his thought into the language of policy, or the anti-colonial sentiment we find in Gramsci's pre-prison writings were reflective of a broader culture of belief, and these ideas and feelings were simply commonplace in the Italian Communist Party in the 1920s. Certainly, Grieco's analysis of Ethiopia as a central node of future colonial conflict here chimes with Gramsci's own speculation in the *Notebooks* that 'Ethiopia could become the key to world politics in Africa, which is to say a point of collision between the three world powers'.<sup>157</sup> In either case, what it allows us to see is that the moments of Gramsci's writings that have been the focus of this chapter build towards a real and pragmatic anti-colonial politics, and it allows us to glimpse something of what an anti-colonial Gramsci might have looked like had he not been imprisoned, had his party not been exiled.

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<sup>157</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q2§50, p. 205.

Gramsci has been our point of departure in this thesis in part because there are few other thinkers who have been so central to postcolonial theory, and in part because there are few other Italian intellectuals who have engaged so rigorously and so extensively with these questions in their work. I suggest this is no coincidence: if Gramsci's work has been so fruitful for the contemporary investigation of colonialism and postcoloniality, the terms and concepts he elaborated so easily adapted for these purposes, then it is at least in part because these questions were never far from his own mind. The third reason, however, is that he represents or coincides with the beginning of a trajectory of anti-colonial thought in Italian anti-Fascism that I want to continue to follow throughout the remaining chapters. All of the Italian writers who are the focus of what follows in this thesis – Ignazio Silone, Carlo Levi, and Italo Calvino – were to different degrees influenced by the figure of Antonio Gramsci, who loomed large in the intellectual landscape of the Italian left and of the city of Turin. Each of these writers might be seen as part of this anti-colonial trajectory as it continues beyond the fall of Fascism and the Second World War. In various ways their own responses to Fascism, their understandings of Italy, and even the literary forms over which they laboured, were shaped by an act of anti-colonial positioning which placed Italy and its struggles in dialogue with a world that was shaking off the chains of colonialism.

## **Chapter 2. 'A Village Like So Many Others': From *Fontamara* to *Kanthapura***

### **Note on the Texts**

Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* has a complex publication history, part of which is examined in what follows. Written in exile, it was originally published in German translation, before an Italian language edition was released (although in France, not in Italy) in 1934. The novel was republished and re-circulated in a variety of ways during and immediately after the Second World War, and it was not until 1953 that Mondadori published it in book form for the Italian reading public. These two Italian language incarnations of the text, though substantially the same novel, contain significant

differences: Silone rewrote key passages for the 1953 edition in ways that are central to the argument of this chapter. It was, however, in its earlier form that the text would have made its way into the hands of Raja Rao (though almost certainly in an English language translation), and this is primarily an exercise in the study of intertextuality. Due to the need to keep both versions in view, I will be providing my own translations based on editions that represent the 1934<sup>158</sup> and 1953<sup>159</sup> iterations of the novel in Italian. An excellent English-language translation, based upon the 1953 Mondadori edition, is, however, also available as part of his *Abruzzo Trilogy*.<sup>160</sup>

## 2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter was interested in charting some of the ways in which we might think of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci as an anti-colonial writer. Although we now leave his work behind, many of the persistent concerns of his anti-colonialism continue to guide our reading of the work of his contemporary (and sometime comrade) Ignazio Silone in this chapter. In particular, the understanding of Fascism as a form of colonial imposition, the attempt to hitch anti-Fascist activism to the struggles of those resisting colonialism across the globe, and temptation to draw suggestive analogies between resistant nationalisms specifically in Italy and India, are all trajectories of Gramsci's thought that continue across the remainder of this thesis.

The focus of this chapter is on the curious narrative of the inter-textual influence at work between Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* (1933) and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), which was largely inspired by Rao's reading of the Italian novel. While my interest here departs from the specific literary exchange between these two authors, I am simultaneously interested in thinking through both the imaginative geographies of transnational solidarity and the practical and infrastructural networks that facilitated it *and* the ways in which both these have been obscured in postcolonial studies. The

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<sup>158</sup> Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara: Romanzo* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934 [1933]).

<sup>159</sup> Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2011 [1953]).

<sup>160</sup> Ignazio Silone, *The Abruzzo Trilogy*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher (New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 2000).



relationship I trace between Silone and Rao is one part of a broader culture of exchange between radical intellectuals and writers in Italy and India. Ultimately, the overarching concern of this chapter (and this thesis as whole) is to establish a model of comparative reading in which this exchange becomes legible.

As such, this is a reading that takes place on the terrain of the transnational, as an investigation of what Elleke Boehmer has termed 'cross-national intertextuality', or perhaps more promisingly for this study, 'cross-border interdiscursivity'.<sup>161</sup> As Boehmer noted in her 2002 *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial*: 'With few exceptions postcolonial theories of colonial power and anti-colonial resistance have privileged the relationship of European self and other: of colonizer and colonized'.<sup>162</sup> Her intention, instead, is to 'swivel this axis of conventional interaction laterally', and instead emphasise the ways in which inspiration, solidarity, and models of resistance were shared *between* anti-colonial movements and across peripheries.

I want to return to Boehmer later in the chapter in order to think through the tension between postcolonial studies and the study of the transnational. For the moment, I want to note that the critical manoeuvre she makes here, the act of swivelling, resembles the distinction between the vertical and horizontal axes of colonialism that underpinned our reading of Gramsci in the previous chapter, in which the horizontal axis constitutes a line of historical and political comparativism that ignores the hierarchical organisation of markets and territories under imperialist capitalism. There is one crucial difference, however, in that Boehmer's horizontal axis of study seems to only extend within the space made available by the vertical. That is to say, the 'interconnected triangle of Ireland and England, India, and South Africa' that is the locus of her study obviously takes its shape from the structures of the British Empire at the turn of the century.<sup>163</sup> While she convincingly suggests that resistant solidarities often travelled across

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<sup>161</sup> 'Interdiscursivity' is useful here in that it extends beyond literary expression into other forms of written and non-written exchange. Boehmer defines this as a 'transformative transmission of different political vocabularies and cultural discourses between anti-colonial spaces'. Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 8.

<sup>162</sup> Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial*, p. 1.

<sup>163</sup> Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial*, p. 4.

trajectories created by imperial power, that ‘the globalized formations of empire [...] facilitated the rise of cross- or transnational resistances’, what is absent in this model, when compared to Gramsci’s comparativism, is that these solidarities might spill out over the boundaries of distinct empires, or even ignore them entirely.<sup>164</sup> Indeed, this emerges even in the case studies that Boehmer focuses on in the body of the text: the relationship that she details between Irish-born Sister Nivedita and the Bengali intellectual Aurobindo Ghose is based, in part, on a mutual admiration for the spiritualist nationalism of Giuseppe Mazzini.<sup>165</sup> The line that connects Ireland and India, in other words, runs through Italy as much as it does through the infrastructure of the British Empire.

This chapter aims first, to examine the ways in which Silone’s *Fontamara*, directing itself outward to an international readership, presents Fascism as a form of colonialism, and therefore lays the groundwork for an understanding of anti-Fascism as a form of anti-colonial struggle. As I demonstrate, when Silone returned to revise the novel after the Second World War, it was this anti-colonial dimension of the text that he sought to underline and emphasize. Secondly, it aims to reconstruct the narrative of Rao’s borrowings from Silone in *Kanthapura*, with particular focus on how it informs his framing of the novel in the ‘Foreword’ as an act of hybrid narration uniquely suited to the demands and rhythms of Indian life under colonial rule. Thirdly, I think about the ways in which postcolonial studies has drawn upon precisely those moments of *Kanthapura* that are most indebted to *Fontamara*: the way in which the novel deals with the questions of orality and language. There is a deep irony in the fact that it is precisely the moments of *Kanthapura* that have been celebrated as being paradigmatic of the Indian novel in English, moments in which the novel is taken to *exemplify* postcolonial writing more generally, that are most heavily indebted to the literature of European anti-Fascism. Finally, I examine the ways in which, despite this, the connection between Silone and Rao has been forgotten and elided in the context of postcolonial studies. I ask what this elision tells us about the critical blind spots still operational in the field.

### **2.1.1 Lines of Comparison: ‘An Italy of the Asiatic’**

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<sup>164</sup> Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>165</sup> Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial*, p. 48.

Before turning to the novels, I want to give a brief sense of how this moment sits within the broader contours of an intellectual exchange between Italy and India, and the various ways in which, following Gramsci's example, we might be encouraged to draw parallels and analogies between them. This is an operation that to an extent goes against the prevailing winds of postcolonial studies, which has as a whole tended to emphasize historical difference and specificity, and to be suspicious of what is obscured or lost in comparison and equivalence. While it is not my intention to insist on the fundamental similarity of Italy and India as national or proto-national formations, nevertheless I want to acknowledge that the idea that they might share something as social or political formations has been a productive starting point for a wide variety of intellectuals and writers.

In June 1853, Marx wrote an article for the *New York Daily Tribune* on the nature of British rule in India, in which he reached an ambivalent and troubling conclusion: although England was 'actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them', if colonial oppression helped to modernize India and bring into being the oppositional forces of class struggle then, historically speaking, it had served its purpose. 'Whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about [...] revolution'.<sup>166</sup> As a result, this article has attained a degree of notoriety in postcolonial theory. Robert Young, for example, reads it as an 'arrogant and arrogating narrative', one that proves that 'Marxism's universalizing narrative of the unfolding of a rational system of world history is simply a negative form of the history of European imperialism'.<sup>167</sup> Recent scholarship has sought to situate this article in relation to the wider body of Marx's journalist writings on India in a way that nuances our understanding of his position on British Imperialism and calls into question the finality of Young's judgement.<sup>168</sup> For the purposes of this thesis,

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<sup>166</sup> Marx, 'The British Rule in India', *New-York Daily Tribune*, London, Friday, June 10, 1853.

<sup>167</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (Oxon: Routledge, 1990), p. 33.

<sup>168</sup> Iqbal Husain (ed.), *Karl Marx on India: from the "New York Daily" Tribune Correspondence 1853-1862* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2010). See also Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

however, Marx's piece is less interesting for what it reveals about his anti-colonial politics than it is for the precise way in which he depicts India for his English speaking, Anglo-American audience:

Hindustan is an Italy of Asiatic dimensions, the Himalayas for the Alps, the Plains of Bengal for the Plains of Lombardy, the Deccan for the Apennines, and the Isle of Ceylon for the Island of Sicily. The same rich variety in the products of the soil, and the same dismemberment in the political configuration. Just as Italy has, from time to time, been compressed by the conqueror's sword into different national masses, so do we find Hindostan, when not under the pressure of the Mohammedan, or the Mogul, or the Briton, dissolved into as many independent and conflicting States as it numbered towns, or even villages. <sup>169</sup>

Marx is writing here for an Anglophone audience that would, for the most part, have had little concrete knowledge of India, its social organization, or its physical and political topographies. In order to give a sense of India, Marx calls upon an image that might presumably have been more familiar to his readers: Italy.<sup>170</sup> What is striking and suggestive here is the way in which Marx almost bodily transforms Italy into 'Hindustan': each familiar aspect of the Italian peninsula is stretched and reshaped to form the Indian subcontinent.

This comparison, however, seems to be prompted by a specific political moment: at the time that Marx is writing in the 1850s, neither Italy nor India is in any sense an independent or unified nation. Yet there is something that does not quite line up in the last sentence of the paragraph I quoted above: the 'just as' that would lead us to look for similarity actually hides a profound difference. In Marx's account, Italy had been 'compressed by the conqueror's sword into different national masses', while in India it seems to be only the swords of conquerors (whether Moghul emperors or the British Empire) that keeps it from dissolving into smaller units. What seems to unify the two, in Marx's mind however, is precisely being in between these two states: grand ideas of

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<sup>169</sup> Marx, 'The British Rule in India', *New-York Daily Tribune*, London, Friday, June 10, 1853. 'Yet, in a social point of view,' Marx goes on to say, 'Hindustan is not the Italy, but the Ireland of the East. And this strange combination of Italy and of Ireland, of a world of voluptuousness and of a world of woes, is anticipated in the ancient traditions of the religion of Hindostan.'

<sup>170</sup> This is particularly true given Italy's privileged position within the tradition of the 'Grand Tour'.

nations that nevertheless seem liable to dissolve into a collection of villages. The occasion for Marx's article is what he sees as the end of 'the so-called *village system*, which gave to each of these small unions [in India] their independent organisation and distinct life'. This 'village system' was being swept away 'not so much through the brutal interference of the British tax-gatherer and the British soldier, as to the working of English steam and English free trade'.<sup>171</sup> I want to return to this idea of the dissolution of the village system later, since it is the precise political moment in which Silone's *Fontamara* and Rao's *Kanthapura* situate themselves.

Marx's manoeuvre in this article is obviously problematic, and from a certain perspective unquestionably orientalist. Nevertheless, it stands as an invitation to us to think through the ways in which analogies between Italy and India might be drawn and sustained. The first of these is precisely the extent to which both are orientalised here: the images of Italy and India seem equally available for manipulation. Marx places them (along with Ireland) into a shared representational economy of 'voluptuousness and woe' that both continue to inhabit to this day. We might think, for example, of Elizabeth Gilbert's popular 2006 memoir *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (and the film that was later based upon it).

Outside of the realm of representation we should tread more carefully. Nevertheless, a series of scholars (all of whom are heavily influenced by Gramsci) have found productive analogies. Marxist historian V. G. Kiernan notes that 'some likeness or other can be deciphered between almost any pair of countries, but between Italy and India there is more than most couples so far apart could show'.<sup>172</sup> World historian Peter Gran, similarly sees Italy and India as unusually similar. In his *Beyond Eurocentrism*, Gran starts by redefining 'Eurocentrism' to include the assumption that 'Europe, or the West, is analytically distinguishable from the "rest" of the world [. . .] the differences being "real" ones'.<sup>173</sup> From this perspective, it is the very emphasis that postcolonial theory has tended to place on historical difference and incommensurability that appears as Eurocentric: this is what Nicholas Brown has referred to as the 'paradoxically

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<sup>171</sup> Marx, 'The British Rule in India', p. 125.

<sup>172</sup> V. G. Kiernan, *Imperialism and its Contradictions* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 177.

<sup>173</sup> Peter Gran, *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History* (New York: University Press, 1996), p. 3.

Eurocentric refusal of Eurocentrism'.<sup>174</sup> Instead, Gran argues for an analysis of global history that attempts to discern 'hegemonic roads' functioning in comparable ways in geographically distant nations. His first, and most convincing example, is what he defines as the 'Italian Road', which he sees as a political hegemony at work not just in Italy and India, but also Mexico:

In this hegemony, the ruling class, or at least the part of it that comes from the economically dominant region, not only wants to divide the working classes to weaken them politically but to gain access on favorable terms to the labour force of the weaker region of the country. To achieve this goal, this part of the ruling class is prepared to share power with the ruling class of a weaker region.<sup>175</sup>

Aijaz Ahmad has similarly turned to Gramsci's Italy to think through the rise of the religious Right in India.<sup>176</sup> Finally, the point of departure of the Subaltern Studies Historians was of course the idea of a productive parallel between the failures of Italy and Indian nationalisms to fully realize their emancipatory projects. The entirety of their early appropriation of Gramsci's historical method is based upon the tacit assumption of an analogy between the two politico-historical contexts.

Drawing on the above, while expressing all of the usual trepidation about the totalizing gesture of comparison, we might tentatively compile a list of these parallels. Both had, as Marx points out, frequently suffered domination by an external power. Kiernan points out that in some cases there were even coincidences in imperial personnel: he points to the figure of Lord William Bentinck, who went from being 'virtual ruler' of Sicily between 1816 and 1818 to being Governor General of India a decade later in 1828.<sup>177</sup> Both were split into provinces and regions that had their own distinctive dialects and languages, and which were organized in an economic geography of regional inequality. As a result,

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<sup>174</sup> Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 5.

<sup>175</sup> Gran, *Beyond Eurocentrism*, p. 88.

<sup>176</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 134.

<sup>177</sup> Kiernan, *Imperialism and its Contradictions*, p. 178. See also: John Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck: The Making of a Liberal Imperialist 1774-1839* (London: University of California Press, 1974). Boehmer stresses the significance of the 'transference and promotion of high-ranking officials around the empire', which, she suggests, 'further intensified' cross-national exchanges. Boehmer, *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial*, p. 14.

both possessed a separate language that has served for the functions of the dominant religious structure (Latin and Sanskrit respectively), and a 'national language' which a significant number of people did not speak, or if they did was not their native language, and which was intended to overcome the linguistic divides between communities (Italian and Hindi/English). Both had significant farming peasant communities which made up a large proportion of their economic system, and both were seeing the feudal structures that underpinned these peasant communities come into contact (though not necessarily conflict) with the intrusions of capital. Both are home to ancient and powerful religious institutions (the Catholic Church and Brahminic Hinduism), that have exercised a powerful effect on national politics. Both achieved independence and national unity relatively late, and in both cases the creation of this national unity was the product of a combination of intense cultural effort, armed struggle, and the interventions of imperialist politics. Both have a prestigious ancient history, a 'glorious past', and both have experienced Fascist movements that have founded themselves upon the imagery of that past.

The point is not in any sense to insist that Italy and India are 'the same', that their socio-economic make up is directly comparable, or that the lived experiences of agricultural workers in Calabria and Gujarat are interchangeable. Rather, the point is that there seem to be suggestive parallels to be drawn between Italy and India as national and proto-national entities, and that these perceived similarities have provided an enabling interpretive horizon for intellectual and political exchanges between Italian and Indian intellectuals and activists. The similarities between the two nations upon which Marx remarks has sparked an on-going and incredibly productive dialogue between a dizzying number of interlocutors; a dialogue which has never simply been a form of linear 'borrowing', but has involved multiple exchanges, re-workings, revisions and returns.

In a sense, this is unsurprising: the Italian *Risorgimento* or national unification was one of the last European nationalist movements, and was directed primarily against external imperial powers. As such, it provided an obvious model for Indian nationalists in the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries. As C. A. Bayly points out in an essay on 'Mazzini and Nineteenth-Century Indian Thought', the image of Italy was an important reference point and source of inspiration for Indian political thought throughout the nineteenth

Century. As an example, he points to Surendranath Banerjea's 1876 eulogy for 'Joseph Mazzini', in which:

He implied that Italy, like India, had an ancient civilization that could yet provide the foundations of a vibrant modernity. Its peoples were varied, differing from north to south and east to west, but they were animated by a common culture and sympathy that could be strengthened by political leadership. Italy, like India, was subject to foreign conquerors. As late as 1848, the Austrians ruled in northern Italy, the despotic Bourbons in the south. Yet within a generation Italy had liberated itself. Italy, like India, was thought to be a religious society where religion had become corrupt and worldly. Italy, like India, was also a poor peasant society, but one with reserves of commercial talent which, if nurtured and protected, would create new wealth.<sup>178</sup>

Although Bayly observes that 'the image of Italy was more important than any particular component of Mazzini's thought', nevertheless it was around the figure of Mazzini (and to an extent his counterpart, the 'warrior nationalist Giuseppe Garibaldi') that the analogy with Italy organized itself.<sup>179</sup> As Bayly and others have demonstrated, it is difficult to overestimate the sheer influence Mazzini exerted on a wide range of Indian nationalist thinkers.<sup>180</sup> As early as the 1840s, the Young Bengal movement was taking inspiration from Mazzini's Young Italy movement, and from that point on Mazzinian democratic liberalism provided a promising model for a generation of Indian liberals searching for alternatives to British structures of rule and thought.<sup>181</sup> It was, however, in the course of the Indian struggle for independence in the first half of the twentieth-century that this influence took on a new and more radical form: 'If the Italian had

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<sup>178</sup> C. A. Bayly, 'Liberalism at Large: Mazzini and Nineteenth-century Indian Thought', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 152; *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of Democratic Nationalism 1830-1920*, ed. by C. A. Bayly and Eugenio F. Biagini, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 359.

<sup>179</sup> Bayly, 'Liberalism at Large: Mazzini and Nineteenth-century Indian Thought', p. 359.

<sup>180</sup> For a full account see: Gita Srivastava, *Mazzini and His Impact on the Indian National Movement*, (Allahabad, 1982), and Giuseppe Flora, 'The Changing Perceptions of Mazzini within the Indian National Movement', *Indian Historical Review*, 19 (1992-3), pp. 52-68.

<sup>181</sup> Bayly, 'Liberalism at Large: Mazzini and Nineteenth-century Indian Thought', p. 358.



inspired moderates with his religion of humanity, the extremists [of the anti-colonial movement] found in Mazzini an inspirational guru for the holy war of the oppressed'.<sup>182</sup>

Fabrizio De Donno writes about the invention of a specifically 'Gandhian Mazzini' which steered a course between these two poles, though he is at pains to point out that 'the Gandhian use of Mazzini does not point to a direct influence of the Italian on the Indian, but to a reworking of the Italian's ideas based on the impact they had already had on Indian nationalism prior to Gandhi's appearance'.<sup>183</sup> Gandhi was also not by any means the only member of the new generation of anti-colonial nationalists to look to Mazzini: Lala Lajpat Rai, in particular, wrote popular biographies of both him and Garibaldi in Hindi. Yet for Gandhi in particular, Mazzini clearly represented a model for his own role in the Indian independence movement. For him, Mazzini was one of few 'instances in the world where a single man has brought about the uplift of his country by his strength of mind and his extreme devotion during his own lifetime'.<sup>184</sup>

By the time we come to the 1920s and 1930s, we see an equivalent interest of Italian writers in Indian intellectual figures, particularly Gandhi, and later Nehru, but also writers like Tagore. As we shall see, Silone himself frequently looked to Gandhi for political inspiration, and this relationship was compounded by his marriage to Irish-born Darina Laracy, who was obsessed with Indian culture and was a personal friend of Indira Gandhi.<sup>185</sup> The literary exchange between Ignazio Silone and Raja Rao that is our focus in this chapter, then, does not take place in a vacuum. Rather, it occurs as part of an on-going and long-standing intellectual dialogue between Italy and India, and is facilitated by the same socio-historic sympathies. This is a dialogue that, for reasons we will return to think about towards the end of this chapter, has been all but invisible in

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<sup>182</sup> Fabrizio De Donno, 'The Gandhian Mazzini: Democratic Nationalism, Self-rule, and Non-violence', *Proceedings of the British Academy, 152: Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of Democratic Nationalism 1830-1920*, ed. C. A. Bayly and Eugenio F. Biagini, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 397.

<sup>183</sup> Fabrizio De Donno, 'The Gandhian Mazzini: Democratic Nationalism, Self-rule, and Non-violence', p. 375.

<sup>184</sup> Gandhi, 'Joseph Mazzini', quoted in Fabrizio De Donno, *The Gandhian Mazzini: Democratic Nationalism, Self-rule, and Non-violence*, p. 378.

<sup>185</sup> Stanislao G. Pugliese, *Bitter Spring: A Life of Ignazio Silone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), p. 179.

postcolonial studies, but was indispensable for shaping a generation of anti-colonial thought in Italy and India.

### 2.1.2 Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* as 'World Literature'

Ignazio Silone was the pen name of Italian political activist and intellectual Secondino Tranquilli, and is the name by which he was known even in an intimate capacity for the majority of his life. Silone was born in the Italian region of Abruzzo, which is also the locus of his most celebrated literary works, and was one of the founding youth members of the Partito Comunista d'Italia, the inter-war party of which Gramsci would later become leader. Silone was a prominent and dedicated member of the PCd'I, and worked closely alongside Gramsci prior to the latter's arrest and incarceration in 1926. In May 1927 he left Italy, alongside Togliatti, to represent the party in Moscow at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Communist International. It was at this meeting that the delegates were asked to expel Leon Trotsky from the party for having authored a seditious document, which the delegates were not, however, allowed to read. Silone and Togliatti refused to condemn him without evidence, and the vote was withdrawn.<sup>186</sup> Subsequently, it was reported in the press that the committee had voted 'unanimously' to expel Trotsky. This moment was the start of Silone's rupture with the PCd'I, which finally culminated in his own formal expulsion from the party in 1931. In the meantime, Silone had settled in exile in Switzerland in 1929, where he would remain until his return to Italy in 1944. It was in Switzerland, whilst living between Zurich and a sanatorium in Davos, that he wrote *Fontamara*.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Silone speaks about this experience at length in his essay 'Uscita di sicurezza', published in Richard Crossman (ed.), *The God that Failed* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950). It is worth noting that one of the other contributors to the infamous collection was the African-American writer and intellectual Richard Wright, with whom Silone was to become friends.

<sup>187</sup> This narrative of Silone's life has been somewhat complicated in recent years by the emergence of the latest 'caso Silone'. Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali unearthed archival materials suggesting that Silone had been acting as a Fascist spy, operating under the code name 'Silvestri', in the late 1920s. The facts of the case remain ambiguous and the reality behind them obscure: it may well be that Silone was prompted to cooperate with Fascist authorities following the arrest of his brother, Romolo Tranquilli, in 1928 (although 'Silvestri' appears to have been active well before this point). Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali "*L'Informatore. Silone, i comunisti e la polizia*", (Milano: Luni 2000). See

*Fontamara*, Silone's first and best-known novel, tells the story of the coming to political consciousness of a fictional village (the Fontamara of the title) in his native region of Abruzzo, a village in the grip of a grinding and seemingly eternal poverty. The novel is set during the rise to power of the Italian Fascist Party, though the villagers are unaware of this, believing the country to still be under the rule of Queen Margherita. They are, however, profoundly aware of the way in which the regime change has added a new and intolerable layer of exploitation over the existing feudal structures. At the hands of the new *podestà*, or fascist mayor, the fontamaresi are barred from accessing the previously communal grazing grounds on the plain, and have the stream that irrigates their crops diverted away from their barren fields. Initially, the villagers are lost in their attempts to negotiate these new power networks, and their ignorance is interpreted by the authorities as intransigence and punished obscenely with the rape of many of the female inhabitants. As the novel progresses, however, the villagers do elaborate an anti-fascist resistance which clusters around the figure of Berardo, a young peasant farmer. Towards the end of the novel Berardo goes to Rome in an attempt to earn enough money to buy himself some land and marry the village beauty Elvira. After hearing of Elvira's death while in prison on suspicion of distributing communist propaganda, Berardo sacrifices himself by assuming the identity of his cellmate, the communist agitator 'il Solito Sconosciuto' (the 'usual stranger'), so that he can continue the resistance against Fascism. Il Solito Sconosciuto, provides the fontamaresi with a basic printing press, with which they start their own newspaper, the title of which, *Che Fare?*, echoes both Lenin's *What is to be Done?* and Tolstoy's *What then Must We Do?*. In response, the fascist forces descend upon the village, destroying it completely, leaving the escaping villagers and the reader with one persistent question: 'che fare?'

Written in exile in Switzerland, *Fontamara* was originally published in German in 1933 before an Italian language edition was released by Jonathan Cape (though in France and Switzerland, not in Italy) the following year. It was not until after the Second World War that *Fontamara* was published in Italy as a book until 1949, and the definitive edition, complete with Silone's modifications, was not published until 1953 by Mondadori.

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also Biocca's more recent biography of Silone: Dario Biocca, *Ignazio Silone, La doppia vita di un italiano* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2005).

Penguin released an English language translation in 1934 (it was almost certainly in this incarnation that Raja Rao would first have read the text), and this translation served a useful ideological function for the Allies during the Second World War. Penguin Books included this English translation in the second installation of their 'Forces Book Club' series, a special scheme designed to provide appropriate reading material at a low cost subscription to members of the armed forces. The British authorities arranged for a dramatized version of the novel to be broadcast to Italian audiences by the BBC in 1942, and the Allied forces distributed unauthorized copies of an Italian translation to prisoners of war, and arranged for copies to be dropped on German-occupied areas of Italy after 1943.<sup>188</sup>

The statistic that is most frequently quoted as a metric of *Fontamara's* literary success is the fact that it has been translated into twenty-seven languages.<sup>189</sup> This included translations in Slovene, Serbian, Polish, Greek, Catalan, and, significantly for our purposes, two Indian language translations: in Bengali and Kannada (Rao's native language, which, as we will see, is the basis of his hybridized English in *Kanthapura*). David Damrosch suggests that 'a work only has *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture'.<sup>190</sup> In this sense, *Fontamara* appears at its heart as a 'world' novel: it has enjoyed as much success abroad as in Italy, and has been read at least as often, if not more, in translation than in Italian.

Yet it is not simply an accident of circulation in the global literary marketplace (or more accurately marketplaces) that makes *Fontamara* a 'world' text. This success itself rests on the fact that it is a novel written in exile, and written outwards, directing itself towards a world audience. The novel presents itself as a form of historical testimony: 'the facts that I am about to narrate took place in the summer of last year, in Fontamara', the preface to the original Italian begins, and it ends by insisting that it is urgent that

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<sup>188</sup> Michael Hanne, *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1994), p. 124.

<sup>189</sup> Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara* (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 2011), p. xi.

<sup>190</sup> David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 4.

everyone should know ‘the truth of the events [fatti] in Fontamara’.<sup>191</sup> This insistence on the facts is of course a novelistic technique: Fontamara is not, in fact, a real place, nor did any of these events happen. The portrait that Silone offers of Italian Fascism here is not a historically accurate one, and not one that would have resonated with Italian readers coming to the text after the end of the Second World War. The Fascist destruction of dissident villages never actually took place, although Silone’s description of it does contain ghostly echoes of real events during the Italian *Risorgimento*, and particularly of the infamous murder of the anti-Fascist intellectual and activist Giacomo Matteotti in 1924. Nor did Abruzzo see manifestations of popular anti-Fascist sentiment on the scale described in the novel. ‘What Silone had done, in part,’ Michael Hanne suggests, ‘was transfer to the more backward and conservative hill villages of that Southern region an exaggerated version of events which had actually taken place over several years in a few villages and small towns in the North’.<sup>192</sup>

Silone was later apparently embarrassed that an international readership had taken the novel’s claims to historical authenticity at face value, complaining to Salvemini that ‘Fontamara corresponds to the most backward village of the Marisca [...] it is not my fault if some foreign, and even Italian, readers take it as the average Italian village’.<sup>193</sup> Yet the reader, whether Italian or foreign, appears to be actively encouraged in this direction by the text, which presents itself as something between oral testimony and cutting edge journalism. ‘The press did not immediately occupy itself with these facts,’ the reader is told, ‘only after some months did some rumour of them begin to seep out, in Italy and abroad’.<sup>194</sup> When these rumours did get out, the preface goes on to suggest, they had a profound effect:

Fontamara, un villaggio che nessuna carta geografica menziona, divenne presto oggetto di molte discussioni, e da alcuni fu assunto a simbolo attuale di una gran parte d’Italia, della parte meridionale.

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<sup>191</sup> Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1942 [1933]), p.5, p. 11.

<sup>192</sup> Hanne, *The Power of the Story*, p. 127.

<sup>193</sup> Quoted in Hanne, *The Power of the Story*, pp. 138-39. My translation.

<sup>194</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 8.

Fontamara, a village not mentioned on any geographical chart, soon became the object of much discussion, and by some was taken as a current symbol for a great part of Italy, for the Italian South.<sup>195</sup>

That is to say, the text directs itself at precisely the foreign and Italian readers for whose credulity Silone takes no responsibility, anticipating and seemingly endorsing the transformation of Fontamara into a symbol for the state of a 'large part of Italy' under Fascism. That is to say, Silone's narrator already positions the text as an exercise in 'world literature' that aims to intervene in political imaginations not just in Italy but also abroad.

If Fascism is not depicted historically accurately in *Fontamara* for this foreign audience, the question that immediately arises is: *how* is it depicted, and *why*? In the following section I demonstrate that Silone figures Fascism as a form of colonial domination, an intensification of previous forms of exploitation of the rural South. At the same time, he represents the inhabitants of Fontamara as both ante- and anti-Fascist (the latter as a result of the former). In ways that are similar to what we saw in Gramsci's work in the previous chapter (and anticipate what we will later see in Carlo Levi's work in Chapter three), Silone attempts to insert the anti-Fascist struggles of the Italian labouring classes into a broader, internationalist narrative of specifically anti-colonial resistance.

### 2.1.3 'Colonial Regimes'

'Imagine Fontamara', we are instructed by the text, 'as the poorest and most backwards village in the Marsica'.<sup>196</sup> The narrator describes his own youth there as entirely without incident, because it would be impossible for an incident to occur: 'the life of the men and beasts seemed closed off in an immobile circle, cut off from time'.<sup>197</sup> The rhythms of the village are the rhythms of agricultural labour; the passage of time is marked by agricultural labours (sowing and harvesting) that blend together to form an interminable cycle of subsistence and misery from which there is 'no way out'.

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<sup>195</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 8.

<sup>196</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 5.

<sup>197</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 5. In the following chapter, we will see how closely this resembles the opening of Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, in which he describes Gagliano (the fictionalized Southern village to which he was exiled) as a locked room cut off from history.

Fontamara is presented as existing outside of the Italian nation, and, moreover, outside of History itself. As such it is untouched by the spread of Fascist ideology. Its inhabitants, the *fontamaresi*, do not know about Fascism's rise to power, believing themselves to be the subjects of Queen Margherita. Initially, the *fontamaresi* are not anti-Fascist, but *ante-Fascist*: they live in a world that precedes Fascism, precedes Italian nationalism, and exists in a space that is simultaneously positioned as being outside of the Italian nation, and its original, spiritual, core.

From the very start of the novel, Fontamara is presented as a colonized space. The land that the villagers, all of whom are *cafoni*<sup>198</sup> (peasant farmers) cultivate is 'cramped, dry, stony', and none of them own more than a few acres.<sup>199</sup> The reason for the poor quality of the agricultural space is an ecological disaster: the draining of the Fucino lake, which began in the mid-Nineteenth century. This process was to cause devastating changes to the environment.

Il prosciugamento del lago di Fucino, avvenuto ottant'anni fa, ha provocato una tale elevazione della temperatura su tutta la Marsica, da rovinare le antiche colture delle colline circostanti. Gli uliveti sono andati completamente distrutti. L'uva è infestata dalle malattie e non arriva sempre a completa maturazione; deve essere raccolta alla fine di ottobre, prima che cadano le prime nevi, e dà un vino asprigno, agro, come la limonata. Se lo devono bere, per lo più, gli stessi cafoni che lo producono.

The draining of Fucino lake, which took place eighty years ago, caused a raise in temperature throughout all of Marsica significant enough to ruin the ancient cultivation of the surrounding hillsides. The olive tree groves were completely destroyed. The grape vines were infested with diseases and did not always arrive at complete maturation; they had to be harvested at the end of October, before the first snows fell, and produced a wine that was sour, bitter, like lemonade. It had to be drunk, for the most part, by the same *cafoni* that made it.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> I want to return to Silone's use of the word 'cafone' later in the chapter, for the moment I want simply to note that it is a loaded and pejorative term. I use it here because it is the language that the text employs, and because I wish to avoid obscuring the problematic nature of the word by attempting to find a translation that would not carry the same weight.

<sup>199</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 6.

<sup>200</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 6.

The damage caused by this process to the ecosystem and peasant agricultural economy of the Fucino basin might have been offset by the fact that it resulted in the creation of a vast arable plain that was among the most fertile land in Italy, had the *fontamaresi* been given access to it. Instead, 'the Fucino plain is in fact subjugated to a *colonial* regime', under which 'the enormous riches that it produces annually do not stay put, but *emigrate* towards the metropolis'.<sup>201</sup> The colonial regime in question is that of the Prince Torlonia, who is a banker described as having made his fortune by speculating on a series of wars starting from 1848, and was able to secure it through shrewd political maneuvering during the years leading up to the Italian unification (*Risorgimento*). Originally, he made a pact with the King of Naples giving him the right to exploit the lands of the plain for a period of ninety years, but in exchange for his support of the 'Piedmontese dynasty' this arrangement was made permanent and he was ultimately given the title of 'prince'. As a 'prince', Torlonia had his own armed guard, and 'a canal nearly sixty kilometers long circled his immense fiefdom [*Feudo*]', the plains of the basin.<sup>202</sup> This circular canal simultaneously locks the *fontamaresi* out of the Fucino basin and into an economic periphery, a cycle of subsistence that offers them 'only the possibility to live, but not to progress'.<sup>203</sup>

What is immediately apparent here is the strong resemblance this bears to the analysis of the colonial or imperial development of Italy, and the subjugation of the rural South that it entailed, in Gramsci's early journalism: 'it is necessary to remember that the Italian State constituted and developed itself imperialistically'.<sup>204</sup> We see echoes here of Gramsci's description of the reduction of the Italian South to exploitable colonies, and to the vertical axis of economic imperialism that underpinned this analysis in the description of capital 'emigrating' from the rural South to 'the metropolis'. Perhaps most strikingly, we find the same attention to the ecological effects of Italy's internal imperialisms: the ways in which the demands of the imperial center upon the

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<sup>201</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 6. Emphasis mine.

<sup>202</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 7. While Fontamara is not a real village, and the events of the novel are not matters of historical fact, both the draining of the Fucino basin and the rise to power of Torlonia are.

<sup>203</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 8.

<sup>204</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *L'Ordine Nuovo: 1919-1920*, ed. Valentino Gerratana and Antonio A. Stantucci (Torino: Einaudi, 1987) p. 418.



agricultural system have not just disrupted ecosystems and destroyed livelihoods, but permanently altered microclimates.

This framing of the Fucino basin and its peripheries as colonized space is central to our understanding of the novel, and is absolutely vital to the way in which Silone portrays the arrival of Fascism later. While initially the village seems to exist in an implausibly ahistorical relation to Italy and to the world, what these pages of the preface make clear is that this condition is precisely a product of the internal colonialism that was at the heart of the consolidation of Italy as a nation-state. If 'the life of the men and beasts seemed closed off in an immobile circle, cut off from time', then this immobile circle is a reflection of the vast circular canal that cuts off the peasant farmers from the land and resources that would be the condition of historical progress. The narrative that we are offered here, of the draining of the basin and the development of the Torlonia regime, stands in nicely for the narrative of Italian unification, which, as it created new territory for itself, simultaneously created spaces in the interior that were excluded from it economically and politically. The 'immobile circle' is the figure of internal colonialism, the hidden logic of the Italian unification: Fontamara, fundamentally, takes its form from this circle.

Although Fontamara might not appear on any map, and might be positioned politically at the margins of the Italian state, the village does exist as part of a geography of migration. The lives of the *fontamaresi* are shaped by a daily act of migration to the fields that they are hired to cultivate: 'to get to work, in the Fucino, the *cafoni* are forced to traverse from five to twelve kilometers of road, on foot, every day'.<sup>205</sup> Throughout the novel, we follow them in this act of quotidian migration: for the most part the narrative events of the text take place in transit, on the road. Yet this is part of a larger migratory system that underpins life in Fontamara:

Una volta, almeno, dei cafoni riuscivano ad emigrare in America. Perfino dei Fontamaresi, prima dalla guerra, tentavano la sorte in Argentina o in Brasile. Quelli di essi che facevano fortuna, non tornavano a Fontamara, ma si stabilivano nei comuni vicini, dove avevano qualche possibilità di far fruttare i loro risparmi. Quelli che non facevano fortuna tornavano a

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<sup>205</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 8.

Fontamara e ricadevano nel comune letargo animalesco, conservando come un sogno di paradiso proibito la visione della vita intravista oltremare.

At one time, at least, some of the cafoni managed to emigrate to America. Even some fontamaresi, before the war, tried their fate in Argentina or in Brazil. Those that made their fortune did not return to Fontamara, but settled themselves in neighbouring towns, where they had the possibility to put their savings to use. Those who did not make their fortunes returned to Fontamara, and fell back into the communal animalistic lethargy, preserving like a dream of forbidden paradise the vision glimpsed of life overseas.<sup>206</sup>

This is a model of migrancy that differs significantly from the sense in which it is often celebrated in postcolonial theory, as a condition of exile or nomadism that creates new sensibilities and perspectives. 'It is sobering', Benita Parry notes, 'to be reminded that [...] "Most people are fundamentally rooted at home, and only the margin of the most energetic, talented and ambitious move – if they can afford the high costs . . . And when they move, they do so specifically to earn money with which they can then return home, not to go into exile"'.<sup>207</sup> Migration in this sense is central to remaining in place. The right to emigrate in search of work, both abroad and internally, is one of the central terrains of struggle in the novel. Ultimately, it is Berardo's inability to emigrate that leads him towards an anti-Fascist position: his new perspective is the result not of a condition of exile in the sense it has most frequently been understood in postcolonial theory, but of his exile from the economic system of subsistence of which migration itself is a key part.

Fontamara is thus located in a cartography of migrant labour that includes America, Argentina, and Brazil, but not necessarily Rome or Piedmont. The migratory routes available to the villagers lead them through economic peripheries *and back again* in the opposite direction to the profits produced from the cultivation of the Fucino basin, which as we saw earlier, 'emigrate towards the metropolis'. At various points in the novel, one of the three narrators, the Father, mentions that he himself had worked abroad in Argentina, alongside migrant workers from all around the world.<sup>208</sup> Similarly, towards the end of the novel, Berardo neatly restates this cartography when he asks *Il*

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<sup>206</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 8.

<sup>207</sup> Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), p. 100.

<sup>208</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 17.

*Solito Sconosciuto*, the communist agitator, if Russia is a real place, or simply a political fiction:

La Russia? ... Dimmi la verità; esiste veramente questa Russia di cui tanto si parla? Tutti ne parlano, ma nessuno c'è mai stato. Eppure i cafoni vanno dappertutto, in America, in Africa, in Francia. Ma nessuno è mai stato in Russia.

Russia? Tell me the truth: does this Russia that people are talking about so much really exist? Everyone talks about it, but no one has ever been. And the cafoni go everywhere, in America, in Africa, in France. But no-one has ever been to Russia.<sup>209</sup>

The term *oltremare* that Silone's narrator uses to describe these places in the passage I quoted earlier is significant in conjunction with Berardo's reference to Africa here: while literally it designates anywhere 'overseas', it was the term used specifically to describe colonial territories, or territories that were seen as possible sites for Italian colonial expansion. As a result, this cartography of migrant labour is ghosted by an imagined geography of colonialism: there is an echo, in these 'glimpses' of *oltremare* life, of the 'mirage of land' Gramsci describes as being central to Giolitti's imperialist propaganda.<sup>210</sup> Indeed, North Africa becomes another point in the cartography of the *fontamaresi*. From the very start of the novel, we are told that there is only one song sung in the village:

O Baldissera,  
Non ti fidar della gente nera...

Oh Baldissera  
Don't trust the Black people...<sup>211</sup>

The song, as we are told, goes back to the unsuccessful Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1895 (the original version of *Fontamara* was of course written before the brutal invasion of 1935, although in a period in which Mussolini was unmistakably gearing up for war). The 'Baldissera' it mentions was an Italian general involved in the catastrophic military defeat at the Battle of Adwa. The elderly cobbler who sings it, presumably

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<sup>209</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 152.

<sup>210</sup> Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q19§24, p. 2019.

<sup>211</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 10.

having brought it back with him from his time in the Italian military in North Africa, repeats it so insistently that he becomes known himself as General Baldissera. This refrain neatly represents the background presence of Italy's expansionist colonial politics in the novel: the first invasion of Ethiopia is referred to often in the novel, and in the 1953 version of the text the family of narrators reveal that they lost a son in Tripoli, the implication being that he may well have died during the assault on Libya.

Fontamara is presented, then, already in the Liberal period before the Fascist rise to power in 1922, as occupying a kind of colonial space, simultaneously inside and outside of the Italian nation-state, subject to the rule of a series of external regimes. The relationship at work between the *fontamaresi* and the State in the text is fundamentally similar to the 'territorial city-country relationship' as theorized by Gramsci. The gulf between *cafone* and *cittadino*, between Southern agricultural labourer and city-dweller, which is also the divide between citizen and non-citizen, is the central structuring logic of the text.

We see this from the very first chapter of the novel, which sees the arrival of Cavaliere Pelino, an outsider [*forestiero*, a citizen [*cittadino*], who arrives conspicuously on a bicycle as a representative of the government with a blank petition to be signed. His arrival coincides with the cutting of the electricity to the village (since no one had ever paid a bill). Initially, the *fontamaresi* believe that he is collecting for a new tax: this seems the only possible reason for a representative of the State to come among them. There seems to be a fundamental communicative gap between them:

- Parliamo ma non ci capiamo, disse scoraggiato. Parliamo la stessa lingua, ma non parliamo la stessa lingua.

Questo era vero. Un cittadino e un cafone difficilmente possono capirsi. Quando lui parlava era cittadino, non cessava di essere un cittadino, non poteva non parlare da cittadino. Ma noi eravamo cafoni. Noi capivamo tutto da cafoni, cioè, a modo nostro. Migliaia di volte, nella mia vita, ho fatto questa osservazione: cittadini e cafoni sono due cose differenti. In gioventù sono stato in Argentina, nella Pampa; parlavo con cafoni di tutte le razze, dagli spagnuoli agl'indii, e ci capivamo come se fossimo stati a Fontamara; parlavo con un italiano che veniva dalla città, ogni domenica, mandato dal consolato, parlavamo e non ci capivamo; anzi, spesso capivamo il contrario di quello che ci dicevamo.

'We talk but we don't understand each other', he said, discouraged. 'We speak the same language, but we don't speak the same language'.

This was true. A citizen and a *cafone* understand each other with difficulty. When he spoke he was a citizen, he could not stop being a citizen, could not not talk like a citizen. But we were *cafoni*. We understood everything as *cafoni*, in our own way. Thousands of times in my life I had observed this: citizens and *cafoni* are two different things. In my youth I was in Argentina, in the Pampas; I spoke with *cafoni* from all races, from the Spanish to the Indians, and we understood each other as though we were back in Fontamara; I spoke with an Italian who came from the city, every Sunday, sent by the consulate. We spoke and we did not understand each other; in fact, often we understood the opposite of what we said to each other.<sup>212</sup>

This is a central moment in which several important strands of the text are woven together. Once again, Fontamara is inserted into a geography of migrant labour, forming part of global community of itinerant agricultural workers, '*cafoni* from all races'. The stretching of the term *cafone* to include workers from Spain and India is significant here. It liberates the term from the confines of the Italian State, implying that a *cafone* culture both exceeds its borders and precedes its formation. This redefinition of *cafone* as a global category anticipates the ways in which Silone will later seek to 'internationalize' the narrative of events at Fontamara, as we will see later when we come to look at the re-worked 1953 edition of the text. Most importantly, these agricultural workers are able to speak to each other across linguistic barriers: they might not speak the same language, but they speak the same language. The question of language, of what language we speak in and how it shapes our world-view, is central to the text and its influence on Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, as I will discuss later.

The disconnect between *cafoni* and *cittadini* that is being elaborated here is essentially a gap between civil and political society, between those who govern and those who are governed, in a sense that closely resembles Partha Chatterjee's recent analysis. Speaking of the contemporary Indian context, Chatterjee distinguishes between a civil society 'peopled largely by the urban middle classes' and a 'more ill-defined and contingently activated domain of *political society*', which includes large sections of the rural population, as well as the urban poor. 'Those in political society', Chatterjee suggests, 'make their claims on government, and in turn are governed, not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary,

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<sup>212</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 17.

contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations'.<sup>213</sup>

This is precisely the relationship between the *fontamaresi* and the state in Silone's novel: a terrain of temporary, uneven, and unstable negotiations. Every aspect of life in Fontamara is determined by these negotiations with the state: from the electric power that gets shut off in the opening pages, plunging the remainder of the novel into a perpetual twilight, to the access rights to grazing pastures and waterways that serve as major plot points. Though the villagers are technically able to vote, they are only able to vote for the corrupt don Circostanza, 'the friend of the people', since Circostanza arranged for the illiterate *fontamaresi* to be taught to write his name, but nothing else.<sup>214</sup> Throughout the novel, we follow the *fontamaresi* in their attempts to negotiate with the State, first within their own village, then with the newly-appointed Fascist *podestà* (mayor), and finally in Avezzano, where they have been summoned to hear the decisions of 'the new government in Rome'.<sup>215</sup> The *cafoni* never enter into these negotiations as equals, however, they are always subject to the 'trick' of the state, and are always the butt of a joke. To recount all of the jokes that had been played on the *cafoni* would take more than a day, we are told by the narrator. For the *fontamaresi*, the archetypal prank had taken place several years before the time of the narrative: the regional capital had advised them that they would be sent a curate to take a fixed post in the village church for the first time, and that they should ready a welcome party. When the appointed day came, the *fontamaresi* came out to welcome their new curate, who turned out to be a donkey dressed in vestments.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'Gramsci in the Twenty-First Century', in *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, ed. by Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 119-36 (p. 127). See also Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>214</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 40. This account of total illiteracy in the village is at odds with later portions of the novel, in which the *fontamaresi* are able to read and dissect Fascist propaganda, and ultimately to write and produce a newspaper of their own. The 1953 edition of the text provides a more compelling version of this electoral fraud, in which don Circostanza appropriates the votes of the deceased, who come to outnumber the living: 'the living betray me', he says, 'but the blessed souls of the dead remain faithful'. Silone *Fontamara* (1953), p. 46.

<sup>215</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 60.

<sup>216</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), pp. 24-5.

Even before the events of the novel, then, Fontamara is presented as existing in a colonial relationship to governing powers, in the 'immobile circle' of Italy's internal colonialism. The village is subject to a series of colonial regimes that from their viewpoint are in reality substantially the same: 'The authority is always the same', one of the villagers observes, 'sometimes it changes its name, but it is always the same'.<sup>217</sup> The *fontamaresi* exist on the very margins of these regimes, uncertain of who is in charge at any moment, tied more closely to Argentina than to Turin, and more able to converse with an Indian day laborer than a government official. Yet their agricultural and economic life-worlds, and the ecosystem on which they rest, are shaped and deformed by these regimes. They are forced to constantly negotiate, on uneven ground, with these regimes, and experience these negotiations as an endless series of tricks.

### **2.2.1 Fascism as the Highest Stage of Internal Colonialism**

When Fascism arrives, it appears simultaneously as continuity and as rupture, as the persistence and intensification of already existing forms of colonial exploitation and oppression, and as complete novelty. As one of the villagers reflects later in the novel:

Si può dire che tutti i guai che ci capitavano, esaminati a uno a uno, non erano nuovi e di essi si potevano trovare molti esempi nelle storie del passato. Ma il modo come ci capitavano era nuovo e assurdo.

You could say that all of the troubles that befell us, examined in their own right, were not new, and one could find many examples of them in the stories of the past. But the way in which they happened to us was new and absurd.<sup>218</sup>

In what follows, I suggest that Silone represents Fascism, from the point of view of the *fontamaresi*, as the logical conclusion of the existing colonial regime, the highest stage of Italy's internal colonialism.

Fascism first makes its presence felt in the village through the figure of the Impresario ('the entrepreneur') who is described as having 'found America' in the Marsica area, which is to say that he has made his fortune. The Impresario, the representative of a

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<sup>217</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 22.

<sup>218</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 110.

bank, arrives in the area three years before, and quickly manages to take control of one sector of local trade after another until he has established a monopoly over the area's commerce, edging out and replacing the old landowners. At the start of the novel, the *fontamaresi* discover that he has cemented his position by being appointed *podestà*, a Fascist title roughly equivalent to mayor.<sup>219</sup>

The scope of the Impresario's newfound influence first becomes apparent to the villagers when the stream that irrigates the sparse lands that most of them own and cultivate is diverted away from their fields and towards his newly acquired territory. Initially the *fontamaresi* believe that this can only be a trick being played upon them by the townsfolk: the stream had always irrigated the same fields 'for as long as land and water existed', the idea that its course might be altered seems absurd and impossible.<sup>220</sup> The idea that this eternal order of things might alter seemed as absurd, one of the narrators explains, as if 'donkeys were about to fly, or Prince Torlonia was about to stop being a prince, or *cafoni* were about to stop dying of hunger'.<sup>221</sup> When it appears that the stream is indeed being diverted, a group of women from Fontamara go to the town to protest to the mayor, not yet knowing that the Impresario is the new *podestà*. When they arrive in the town, having walked a considerable distance in the hot sun, they have immense difficulty in discovering who exactly it is that they need to lodge their complaint with, and are forced to go from one end of town to the other and back again. Overwhelmed by the heat, they stop at a water fountain, only to find that every time one of them attempts to drink from it the water immediately dries up, only to return as soon as they leave and dry up once more when they return. Nearby, the narrator explains, a police officer and a watchmaker look on in laughter, evidently responsible for turning the water on and off.

On their way they encounter a goat herder, who is similarly seeking an explanation for having been turned away from a piece of grazing land which had always been communal, and was now allegedly the property of the Impresario. Once again the idea that the land might no longer be communal is taken as a joke:

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<sup>219</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), pp. 31-32.

<sup>220</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p 25.

<sup>221</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p 25.



Cristo non era ancora nato e si racconta che le cose andavano già in questo modo. Dopo, sono successi tanti avvenimenti, guerre, invasioni, cambiamenti di papi e di re ma i tratturi sono sempre rimasti di tutti.

Even before Christ was born it was said that this is how things went. Since then many things have happened, wars, invasions, changes of pope and king, but the grazing routes have always belonged to everyone.<sup>222</sup>

This sense of the Italian rural South as occupying a pre-Christian time, fundamentally unaltered until Fascism by the rise and fall of Empires, regimes, and governments anticipates the analysis we find in Carlo Levi's later novel, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, as we will see in the following chapter.

When they do finally manage to acquire an audience with the Impresario, they discover that the deviation of the stream is a reality, and was in fact prompted by a petition signed by the *fontamaresi* themselves; they recognize the same petition that they had been tricked into signing, while it was blank, at the beginning of the novel by Pellino, the *forestiero*. Outraged at this trick, the women object, shouting that the Impresario and his associates are 'Cheats! Crooks! Profiteers!'<sup>223</sup> In order to calm the situation, the corrupt don Circostanza, the 'friend of the people', suggests a compromise, initially proposing that the water be divided into halves and then, since the *fontamaresi* object, declares that three-quarters of the water will go to the impresario 'and the three-quarters that remain will go to the *fontamaresi*'.<sup>224</sup> When the time eventually comes for the division to take place, it transpires that in reality the Impresario's 'three-quarters' is the entirety of the stream, and the 'remaining three quarters' is nothing. Once again the villagers protest, knowing that this will leave them to starve, and again don Circostanza intervenes, suggesting that there should be a time limit on the Impresario's control of the waterway. The Impresario's suggestion of fifty years is met with horror, and so don Circostanza instead suggests that ten 'lustrì' would be more reasonable (it is only later that the *fontamaresi* discover that ten 'lustrì' is in fact fifty years).<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 25.

<sup>223</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 42.

<sup>224</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 43.

<sup>225</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 123.

Don Circostanza plays a similar role in settling the other major issue affecting the lives of the *fontamaresi* under the regime of the Impresario: the re-division of the fertile lands produced by the draining of the Fucino lake. The lawyer wins the support of the peasant farmers with the slogan: 'Fucino to those who cultivate it'. It is only after the representatives of the new government have met that they discover that this has been interpreted to mean that the land should be given to whoever is most able to cultivate it, which is to say whoever has the capital to cultivate it, which is to say the Impresario.

The point of this synopsis is to show that Silone constructs the arrival of Fascism in Fontamara as a repetition and intensification of the 'colonial regime' of Prince Torlonia described in the novel's preface. Both Torlonia and the Impresario build their fortunes as finance capitalists, and secure their regional dominance by brokering deals with the governing powers. In both cases this dominance manifests itself as a disruption in the apparently eternal orders of water access and land rights. We see this in the former case in the draining of the Fucino basin, and the creation of fertile land that is rendered unavailable to the peasantry by an immense canal. In the latter we see it in the deviation of the stream, and the re-appropriation of the same fertile lands. Once again, the *fontamaresi*, as *cafone* and not *cittadini*, are forced into desperate negotiations subject to the 'trick' of government, which here intensifies to intolerable levels in the fountain prank, the compromise of 'three-quarters', and the deal of 'ten lustri'. In the anti-colonial reading of the novel that I am seeking to elaborate in this chapter, Silone represents Fascism as the fulfillment of an already existing logic of internal colonialism, another in an endless series of colonial regimes.<sup>226</sup>

Yet Fascism is also presented as a rupture, as a new stage. Silone positions the events on the novel within a specific economic moment, which is precisely the same moment that forms the focus of Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capital*: the formation of monopolies as the driving force behind a new stage of capitalist imperialism. Although Silone was no longer, at the time he wrote *Fontamara*, a member of the Communist Party, much of the novel is Leninist in tone, and the title of the newspaper that the *fontamaresi* found in the closing pages of the novel (*Che dobbiamo fare?* – 'What Must We

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<sup>226</sup> Mia Fuller has argued that this is precisely how Fascism was registered in the Italian colonies in North Africa, particularly in Eritrea where there was a sharp distinction between Liberal and Fascist colonial policy. Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*, p. 32.

Do'?), contains obvious echoes of Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*.<sup>227</sup> The conception of imperialism at work in the novel is clearly influenced by Lenin, whether directly or through a wider culture of political belief.

Central to Lenin's analysis of imperialism as an economic form is the role of the banks:

As banking develops and becomes concentrated in a small number of establishments, the banks grow from modest middlemen into powerful monopolies having at their command almost the whole of the money capital of all the capitalists and small businessmen and also the larger part of the means of production and sources of raw material in any one country and in a number of countries. This transformation of numerous modest middlemen into a handful of monopolists is one of the fundamental processes in the growth of capitalism into capitalist imperialism.<sup>228</sup>

It is precisely within this moment of transition, from capitalism to capitalist imperialism, that Silone locates the events of *Fontamara*. Before the malign nature of the Impresario's influence becomes apparent, Berardo wonders whether it might work in the favour of the *cafoni*:

*Ogni governo, è sempre composto di ladri, ragionava Berardo. Per i cafoni è meglio, naturalmente, che il governo sia composto da un solo ladro piuttosto che da cinquecento... Perché un gran ladro, per quanto grande sia, mangia sempre meno di cinquecento ladri, piccoli e affamati.*

Every government is always composed of thieves, Berardo mused. For the *cafoni* it is better, naturally, that the government is composed of just one thief rather than five hundred... Because one great thief, no matter how grand he might be, will always eat less than fifty small, hungry thieves.<sup>229</sup>

It transpires, of course, that one great thief is able to eat more than fifty hungry ones, but the passage nicely captures the economic transition central to the novel, from, in Lenin's words, 'numerous modest middlemen' to 'a handful of monopolists'. We see this elsewhere in the text when the wife of Don Carlo Magna, the previous feudal landowner whose name is a pun on his eating habits, complains that 'the Impresario will eat us

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<sup>227</sup> V. I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement* (New York: International Publishers, 1969); The title also invokes Tolstoy's 'What then must we do', which itself retains biblical overtones.

<sup>228</sup> V. I. Lenin, 'Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism', p. 210.

<sup>229</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), pp. 61-62.

all'.<sup>230</sup> He is described as having overtaken and dominated the old property owners 'one by one', until 'there was no longer a single affair in which the Impresario did not conquer the competition of the old land owners'.<sup>231</sup> The new form of capitalism that radically disrupts and shatters the agricultural life-world of the *fontamaresi* is, then, imperialist capitalism in the sense that Lenin describes: the coming to power of a handful of monopolists. The figure of the Impresario, as banker and *podestà*, allows Silone to elaborate a critique of capitalist imperialism and simultaneously to wed this moment to the consolidation of Fascist power politically. Fascism thus appears as the political face of capitalist imperialism as it forces its way into the village, displacing the previous colonial regime of feudal landowners.

As the novel progresses, this analysis of Fascism as an economic imposition gives way to a depiction of Fascism as a military imposition. The only possible explanation that the villagers can find for the unprecedented changes that the Impresario has made on their lives is that there must be a war: 'only in times of war', General Baldissera muses, 'are such abuses permitted'.<sup>232</sup>

The very fact that there has been a change of rulers seems itself to be evidence that a war had, or was about to, take place:

*Perché solo una guerra scaccia i vecchi governanti e ne impone dei nuovi: così, dalle nostre parti, i Borboni avevano preso il posto degli Spagnuoli e i Piemontesi il posto dei Borboni. Ma donde provenissero e di chi nazione fossero i nuovi governanti a Fontamara non si sapeva ancora con certezza.*

Because only a war could drive off the old governors and impose new ones: thus, in our parts, the Bourbons had taken the place of the Spanish, and the Piedmontese the place of the Bourbons. But from where and of what nation the new governors at Fontamara might be no one yet knew with certainty.<sup>233</sup>

Here, Fascism appears again as part of a succession of 'governors', of colonial regimes, imposed on the *fontamaresi*. The terminology here again anticipates the language of Chatterjee's 'politics of the governed': this is not a change of government, but a change of

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<sup>230</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 35.

<sup>231</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 31.

<sup>232</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 53.

<sup>233</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 61.

*governors*. Significantly, Fascism is figured as coming from outside: an invasion from a different nation, or at least from an unknown location.

Fascism increasingly makes itself felt in the novel as a form of military aggression. After the protest of the women in the regional capital and the outrage of the *fontamaresi* when they are conducted to Avezzano, Fascist forces arrive in the village on two separate occasions. The first of these begins during the day, when the men of working age are away in the fields. Those who are still at home, largely the women and 'General Baldissera', the ageing cobbler, see a convoy of lorries coming towards them. At first they guess that it might be some new form of pilgrimage by automobile, then that it might be drivers challenging each other to a great race around the country. As the soldiers on board become visible and open fire on the church, both of these theories are abandoned in favour of an obvious alternative: 'it is war'. Significantly, this is announced with certainty ('every war, when it arrives, arrives like this') by General Baldissera, who is the only one who has been involved in combat, and whose whole identity is borrowed from Italy's unsuccessful invasion of Ethiopia. That is to say, not only does the arrival of Fascist forces appear as an act of war, it appears specifically as an act of aggression that emerges straight out of Italy's colonial history (and anticipates its brutal imperialist future).

The immediate reaction is to sound the alarm by ringing the church bell:

*Suoniamo la campane. Quando il paese è in pericolo bisogna suonare le campane. Quando nel '60 arrivarono i Piemontesi tutta la notte suonarono le campane.*

Ring the bell. When the village is in danger the bells must be rung. When the Piedmontese arrived in 1860 the bells rang out all night.<sup>234</sup>

Fascism figures as one of a series of external regimes imposed by acts of war, as something similar to the 'arrival of the Piedmontese', which is to say the unification of Italy in 1861, and before that the Bourbons and the Spanish. Yet the brutality of the Fascist invasion is without precedent, and is directed against them rather than at the

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<sup>234</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 75.

previous set of governors: the scene culminates in the brutal gang rape of one of the young women, Maria Grazia.

The second Fascist invasion of the village comes at the end of the novel. After Berardo has been tortured by Fascist police believing him to be the communist agitator 'il Solito Sconosciuto', the *fontamaresi* decide to write and publish a dissident newspaper entitled 'Che dobbiamo fare' ('What Must We Do?'). While the three narrators of the novel go to a neighboring village to distribute the first issue, they hear distant explosions, and are told 'there is war at Fontamara'. Specifically, this is a 'war against the *cafoni*... against the newspaper'.<sup>235</sup> In this war the vast majority of the novel's characters are killed, and the village itself destroyed. This is the final analysis towards which the novel is directed: the concept of Fascism as 'a war against the *cafoni*', an act of colonial violence.

Fascism is presented in the novel as an extreme form, an intensification, of the logic of internal colonialism already at work under a succession regimes. Describing Fascism from the position of the *fontamaresi* allows Silone to do two things. Firstly, it allows him to advance an economic analysis of Fascism as the political face of capitalist imperialism, in language that would have been immediately familiar to readers on the Left in the inter-war period. Secondly, it allows him, writing largely for a cosmopolitan readership located *outside* of Italy, to figure Fascism as coming from outside, an act of external occupation that is both familiar and unprecedented. To a large extent this is similar to the way in which Gramsci speaks about the 'Fascist invasion', as we saw in the previous chapter: 'The Fascist organization, where it has managed to prevail,' Gramsci wrote, 'has become like the occupying force of an enemy country'.<sup>236</sup> In these two distinct but overlapping ways, Silone, writing in exile for a diverse international audience, elaborates an image of Fascism through the novel as the highest stage of Italy's internal colonialism.

### **2.2.2 Fontamara in the World: 'A Village Like So Many Others'**

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<sup>235</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 163.

<sup>236</sup> Gramsci, 'L'Attacco a Torino', *SF*, p. 153.

When Silone returned to the novel, and to Italy, after the Second World War, he made significant changes to the text. In a reflection on the revisions that he wrote shortly after in 1960, Silone compares the process of rewriting to renovating a painting: 'I retouched the picture here and there'. He recognizes that some characters 'have receded into the background', nevertheless he maintains that 'they are the same characters and it is the same story'.<sup>237</sup> By far the most significant revision is the complete disappearance of a major character (a *cafone* who moved to Rome and accidentally becomes one of the first Fascists) and the deletion of the chapter that tells his story, though he also toned down some of the brutality of the Fascist atrocities depicted in the novel's pages. For the most part the differences between the editions are subtle: small changes of phrasing rather than wholesale alterations to the plot. Some of these minor changes, however, and particular those in the preface to the text, tell us much about the ways in which Silone sought to resituate *Fontamara* with its republication. Paradoxically, he attempts to make it appropriate for a Post-war Italian audience by reaffirming its status as an act of world literature.

In its new incarnation, the text is slightly more ambivalent about the historical veracity of the 'facts' it recounts, and makes a series of contradictory statements. The narrator seems to concede that he has created the name 'Fontamara', but implies that he is applying it to a real, unnamed location. He claims that he has since learned that similar events (and worse ones) did happen in other places, 'although not in the same period or order'.<sup>238</sup> This appears to be an attempt to link the text to later atrocities committed by the Fascists and occupying Nazis in Italy during the war and particularly after 1943, in order to counter criticisms of the historical accuracy of the novel. This possibility, however, is called into question by the fact that the novel is set 'last year' and the preface is still signed off as having been written in 1930. This rewritten preface is the site of multiple equivocations designed to shield the novel from some of the criticisms it had encountered as it met with an Italian readership that had experienced the historical reality of Fascism first hand. We see this particularly in the way he repositions the village:

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<sup>237</sup> Silone, *The Abruzzo Trilogy*, p.4.

<sup>238</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1953), p. 3.

*Fontamara somiglia, dunque, per molti lati, ad ogni villaggio meridionale il quale sia un po' fuori mano, tra il piano e la montagna, fuori delle vie del traffico, quindi un po' arretrato e misero e abbandonato degli altri. Ma Fontamara ha pure aspetti particolari. Allo stesso modo, i contadini poveri, gli uomini che fanno fruttificare la terra e soffrono la fame, i fellahin, i coolies, i peones, i mugic, i cafoni, si somigliano in tutti i paesi del mondo; sono, sulla faccia della terra, nazione a sé, razza a sé, chiesa a sé; eppure non si sono visti due poveri in tutto identici.*

Fontamara resembles, therefore, from many angles, every Southern village that is a bit out of the way, between the plains and the mountains, out of reach of traffic, and so a little backward and wretched and abandoned by others. But Fontamara still has aspects that are particular. At the same time, the poor peasantry, the men who make the earth bear fruit and suffer hunger, fellahin, coolies, peons, muzhiks, cafoni, resemble each other in all the countries<sup>239</sup> of the world; they are, on the face of the Earth, a nation to themselves, a race to themselves, a church to themselves; even if no one has ever seen two poor people who are identical in everything.<sup>240</sup>

This passage is remarkable for its hesitancy (... 'resembles, therefore, from many angles' ...), and above all for the number of contradictions it contains: the sheer volume of 'buts', 'however's' and 'even ifs' it accumulates in a few short lines. Silone repositions Fontamara on the site of these contradictions: simultaneously a symbol of anywhere in the Italian South, and a specific location with 'particular aspects'. In doing so, he positions the village inside *and* outside of the Italian nation, explicitly invoking the cartography of migrant labour that I suggested earlier underpinned the text's original account of the *fontamaresi*. Here Silone goes much further, creating a nation, race and faith that unifies agricultural labourers across the globe.

Equally interesting is Silone's decision to insert a short disclaimer on his use of the word *cafone* into the text of the preface:

*(Io so bene che il nome di cafone, nel linguaggio corrente del mio paese, sia della campagna che della città, è ora termine di offesa e dilleggio; ma io l'adopero in questo libro nella certezza che quando nel mio paese non sarà più vergogna, esso diventerà nome di rispetto, e forse anche di onore).*

(I fully realize that the term *cafone*, in the current language of my country, both in the country and the city, is now a term of abuse and derision, but I

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<sup>239</sup> *Paesi* here could be translated as both 'countries' and 'villages', an ambiguity that is important to our reading of the novel.

<sup>240</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1953), pp. 3-4.



adopt it in this book in the certainty that when there is no more shame in my country, it will become a term of respect, and perhaps even of honour).<sup>241</sup>

Silone's commitment to reclaiming a term of abuse, appropriating and reclaiming it, might be read as similar to the kinds of intellectual efforts taking place in, for example, the Negritude movement. The way that this passage is presented in parentheses makes it appear almost as if this is an idea coming from outside of the text, inserted into it. In this light, it is worth noting that Silone met and became friends with Harlem Renaissance writer Richard Wright in 1948 (precisely the period in which he was reworking the novel) when Wright travelled to Italy for the publication of *Native Son*.

Silone is rewriting the novel in a markedly different world: the revised edition of the novel comes out after just two years before the Bandung conference that would symbolize the immense growth of anti-colonial nationalisms across Africa and Asia, and several years after the formal independence of India in 1947. The changes to the novel reflect the ways in which Silone himself was becoming increasingly interested in anti-colonial politics in the post-war period. In his recent biography of Silone, Stanislao Pugliese convincingly reconstructs a narrative of some of Silone's engagements with anti-colonialism in the decades following his initial exile from Italy, pointing to a variety of occasions in which Silone used his journalistic platform (as a writer and as editor of the journal *Tempo Presente*) to discuss the injustices of colonial oppression and racism. He suggests that in particular 'the independence of India and the French wars in Indochina and Algeria turned his attention to the problems of colonialism, race, and Europe's waning empires'.<sup>242</sup> This was an attention that would bring him into contact and dialogue with writers and thinkers resisting colonialism on a variety of fronts. In 1959, for example, he attended the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome (at which he met Frantz Fanon) and wrote an extended meditation on the discussions that took place there for *Tempo Presente* in which he demonstrates a familiarity with the work of a wide variety of anti-colonial intellectuals.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1953), p. 5

<sup>242</sup> Pugliese, *Bitter Spring*, p. 251.

<sup>243</sup> Ignazio Silone, 'Agenda', *Tempo Presente*, 4:4 (April 1959), pp. 254-261. For an account of the importance of the Rome conference for our understanding of Fanon's work see Neelam Srivastava, 'Frantz Fanon in Italy', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 17:3 (2015), pp. 309-328.

Another, perhaps surprising, connection linking Silone to the politics of anti-colonial struggle that Pugliese reveals is through his wife, Darina Laracy. Darina was an Irish emigrant, and a staunch nationalist. She read *Fontamara* in Ireland as a teenager, and met Silone years later, eventually marrying him in 1944.<sup>244</sup> Darina was keenly interested in the politics of anti-colonialism, and was a friend of both Indira Gandhi and Leopold Senghor. In the interview with Pugliese, Darina claims that ‘Silone’s 1942 call for civil disobedience [in Italy, which caused him to be arrested in Switzerland] was inspired by her introducing Silone to Mahatma Gandhi’s ideas’.<sup>245</sup>

Yet if the anti-colonial dimensions of *Fontamara* come into sharper focus in the post-war period and the Bandung era, they are, as I demonstrated before, already present in the earlier versions of the text. It is a novel that sought to locate Fascism within a broader context of colonial oppression, but also to imagine routes of solidarity between Italy’s laboring classes and the worldwide ‘nation of *cafoni*’ of which he later spoke. This is neatly displayed in a foreword that Silone wrote for a 1936 American English-language translation of the text that was never published, in which he explicitly addresses an audience of Italian Americans, both those who had settled there permanently and those who were passing through as migrant workers:

The sorrow, which is like a deep and bloody wound in the heart of every one of us southern Italians abroad, is not something individual and particular, but a great, universal sorrow. It joins us in fraternity with Negroes, Indians, Romanians, Poles, Portuguese, Slovenes, Jews, and all the others [...] This is the message of *Fontamara*. This is its secret truth. You will be faithfully and truly Abruzzesi, Pugliesi, Calabresi, Siciliani, only if you are courageously rebels and internationalists.<sup>246</sup>

It is perhaps because of this internationalization of Italy’s Southern question, the idea that ‘true cosmopolitanism, in this world, must be based on suffering’, that *Fontamara* has had such a sustained afterlife in the world and was translated into twenty-seven

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<sup>244</sup> Pugliese, *Bitter Spring*, p. 163.

<sup>245</sup> Pugliese, *Bitter Spring*, p. 179.

<sup>246</sup> Ignazio Silone, ‘Notes to the Present Edition’ (1936). Quoted in Pugliese, *Bitter Spring*, pp. 216-17.

different languages.<sup>247</sup> The events the novel described and the way in which it portrayed Fascism as a new form of colonial oppression resonated in all corners of the world. Of all of the text's afterlives, however, none are so interesting as the influence it had upon Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*.

### **2.3 Fontamara and Kanthapura: Influence and Anxieties**

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is one of the most celebrated Indian novels in English, and occupies a position of major importance in the history of the genre. It tells the story of a (fictitious) village, the Kanthapura of the title, in the province of Kara. Like Fontamara, this village does not seem to appear on the map ('I don't think you have ever heard of it', the reader is told in the first line), and sits in an uncertain geographical relationship with the rulers (the 'Red-men' who 'so they say' live the other side of the seven oceans').<sup>248</sup> Kanthapura becomes the seat of unrest after Moorthy, a young Brahmin, begins to spread the political sentiments of the Indian National Congress. The growing political consciousness of the villagers brings them into conflict first with the neighbouring coffee plantation, owned by the Skeffington family, and then with the British colonial police force. The novel ends with the destruction of the village after an attack by the police, and the flight of the surviving villagers, who go on to spread the word of events at Kanthapura.

There is not space here to map in detail the similarities between the two texts, but I would like to offer a brief sketch of some of the ways they resemble each other. Both of these novels create a fictional and eponymous village that functions as a symbol for events in the country as a whole. The collective consciousness of this village is, in a sense, the protagonist of the novel. At the start of the novel this village is cut off from the rest of the country, isolated from recent political developments and from modernity itself, but at the same time is the repository of an authentic and self-sufficient pre-colonial cultural unit, home to a rich and unique (though typical) folklore. Rumina Sethi suggests that *Kanthapura* is part of 'that endeavor to take the reader back to rural roots believed to be believed to be the true repository of Indian culture', and we might say

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<sup>247</sup> Ignazio Silone, 'Le idee che sostengo', in Ignazio Silone, *Ignazio Silone: Romanzi e saggi*, vol. 2, ed. by Bruno Falchetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1999) pp. 1385-91 (p. 1387).

<sup>248</sup> Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (Oxford: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1990), p. 1.

something very similar of the way in which Silone locates Fontamara as the location of an authentic and original Italian identity.<sup>249</sup> Despite this, both were written outside of the country in which they are set: Silone was writing in Switzerland, and Rao in France.

Though the village is a single social unit, its inhabitants are divided by social and economic rank (as well as by caste, in the case of *Kanthapura*), and are often locked in bitter feuds with each other. Throughout the course of the novel, this society is penetrated in new ways by the intrusions of capital: in *Fontamara* this intrusion is embodied in the figure of the Impresario, in *Kanthapura* it is the Brahmin businessman Bhatta, both of whom manage to amass unprecedented fortunes at the expense of the rest of the villagers. Both are set against the backdrop of the intensification of colonial power in response to resistance. Both villages develop a political consciousness and a resistance movement independently of a national struggle which nevertheless is already taking place and into which the energies of the village are eventually incorporated. A central role is played in both novels by political newspapers: the 'blue papers' that Rangamma receives in *Kanthapura* are the villagers' main link to political developments going on around them. In both cases the power structures of organized religion militate against the development of this revolutionary consciousness, which is arrived at through an unorthodox re-interpretation of the religion. In both cases this consciousness is centered around a single male protagonist, who is liberated by being exiled from the status quo: Berardo is 'let off his leash' when he is left without land or the hope of a family following Elvira's death, and it is only after Moorthy's excommunication from the Hindu faith and the subsequent death of his mother that he is able to fully immerse himself in the struggle against untouchability and British imperialism. At the end of the novel, both villages are destroyed, and the surviving inhabitants spread word of the events in order to galvanize the struggle more widely. Most significantly, both *Fontamara* and *Kanthapura* are fictionalized histories that position themselves in an ambiguous space between historical testimony and literary work.

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<sup>249</sup> Rumina Sethi *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 178.

These similarities (and some key differences) were immediately apparent to Rao's contemporary Mulk Raj Anand. Reviewing the novel for *The Left Review* in 1938, Anand praises Rao for 'his acute grasp of the problems of contemporary India', but complains that 'his story, unlike *Fontamara*, of which it is reminiscent, does not give us the sense of living a severalfold experience derived from the several layers of perception that Silone gives us'.<sup>250</sup> We can say with certainty that Rao had read *Fontamara* before writing *Kanthapura*: in his 1972 monograph on Rao, Indian critic M. N. Naik claims that 'in a private conversation, Raja Rao told me that *Kanthapura* was inspired by a reading of *Fontamara*'.<sup>251</sup> Rao himself mentions Silone tellingly in an essay entitled 'Books Which Have Influenced Me', in which he praised *Fontamara* for the way it 'combines folklore and politics, raising them to a new level of poetical experience'.<sup>252</sup> Although Rao, as we shall see later, radically downplays the nature of this influence, there is no denying that *Kanthapura* is, among other things, a rewriting of *Fontamara*.

Since the publication of Naik's monograph this line of influence has been registered and explored by a series of critics working in both Indian and Italian contexts. A year later, in his 1973 *Raja Rao*, C. D. Narasimhaiah spends several pages of his study of *Kanthapura* examining the extent to which it was shaped by a reading of *Fontamara*.<sup>253</sup> Interestingly, Narasimhaiah is the only critic to have speculated that this line of influence might have run both ways, and that Silone's postwar rewriting of the novel might have been informed in turn by a reading of *Kanthapura*.<sup>254</sup> Although Narasimhaiah is writing without access to the earlier version of Silone's novel (and as a result does not know the exact nature of the changes that were made), and despite the fact that Silone himself never mentions having read *Kanthapura* (he did not read English, and so would have needed to come to it in translation), it is certainly not impossible that news of Rao's reworking of his novel could have reached his ears by 1953. Some of the additional passages in the revised edition that we examined earlier that seek to internationalize the

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<sup>250</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, 'The Indian Scene', *The Left Review*, 3:15 (1938), 955-57 (p. 955).

<sup>251</sup> M. K. Naik *Raja Rao* (New York: Twayne, 1972), p. 75.

<sup>252</sup> Raja Rao, 'Books Which Have Influenced Me' in M. K. Naik ed. *Aspects of Indian Writing in English: Essays in Honour of Professor K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 45-49 (49).

<sup>253</sup> C.D. Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao* (Bombay: Arnold-Heinemann, 1973), pp. 43-48.

<sup>254</sup> Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao*, p. 49.

events in Fontamara ('the fellahin, the coolies' etc.) make this an intriguing possibility, even if it is one that we cannot substantiate.

Writing in Italian in 1978, Silvia Albertazzi provides a more in depth account of the similarities between the two novels. In addition to the points of comparison I sketched out above, she suggests that 'it is pointless to deny that even the name of the village itself, Kanthapura, strikes the ear with an assonant echo of the Silonian Fontamara'.<sup>255</sup> A similarly detailed contrastive analysis was provided in 1981 by Carlo Coppola, who dedicates an article to comparing and contrasting the novels at the levels of style, characterization, and narrative technique.<sup>256</sup> In 1992, Michael Hanne, building on the work of Naik and Albertazzi, speaks of *Kanthapura* as a 'translation' of *Fontamara*. His work is significant in that it is the only one to depart from a focus on Silone's work, rather than Rao's. Several of the contributors to a collection of essays on *The Fiction of Raja Rao* in 2001 briefly mention the connection in passing.<sup>257</sup> Most recently, Stefano Mercanti, in 2009, spends several pages thinking through the traces that Silone's novel has left upon *Kanthapura*.<sup>258</sup>

All of this is to say that this history of literary influence, even if it has not occupied a central role in critical accounts of either novel, has been known and discussed for over fifty years, and well before that if we count Mulk Raj Anand's perceptive review in 1938. What is simply astonishing, then, is that this line of influence disappears completely from view in the body of literary criticism written on Raja Rao and specifically on *Kanthapura* under the aegis of postcolonial studies. It is not discussed and discounted, but simply ignored or forgotten. This is the case even in extended studies of the novel: Rumina Sethi's 1999 *Myths of the Nation*, which is dedicated entirely to a critical reading of *Kanthapura*, makes no mention of *Fontamara*.

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<sup>255</sup> Silvia Albertazzi, *Il tempio e il villaggio: la narrativa indo-inglese contemporanea e la traduzione britannica* (Bologna: Pàtron, 1978), p. 108.

<sup>256</sup> Carlo Coppola 'Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*: A Contrastive Analysis', *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 16:1 (1981), 93-100.

<sup>257</sup> See Gajendra Kumar, 'Kanthapura: A Stylistic Feat in Indian English Novel Writing', pp. 61-68 (p. 65-66) and Thomas Augustine, 'The Village in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*', pp. 96-106 (p.103) in Rajashwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciucco (eds), *The Fiction of Raja Rao: Critical Studies* (Delhi: Atlantic, 2001).

<sup>258</sup> Stefano Mercanti, *The Rose and the Lotus: Partnership Studies in the Works of Raja Rao* (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2009), pp. 79-81.

Part of the reason for this may have to do with the way in which Rao himself has underplayed the extent of his borrowing from *Fontamara*. Although, as I noted before, he does mention Silone in his 'Books Which Have Influenced Me', he does so only fleetingly. Silone's novel appears towards the end of list of authors that Rao has found significant, and does as seemingly as an addendum:

Also *Fontamara* by Ignazio Silone, which combines folklore and politics, raising them to a new level of poetical experience. But the master in this field is Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* will be read as long as man seeks to praise, with intimacy and awe, the intangible present.<sup>259</sup>

Rao seems unwilling to dwell on his reading of *Fontamara* here: the way that the sentence discussing *Fontamara* is bookended, preceded with an 'also' and followed by a 'but', allows Rao to slide over the possibility that he might owe a specific artistic debt to Silone that goes beyond the kinds of intellectual influence exerted on him by Whitman's poetry. Rao may have confessed 'in a private conversation' to Naik that *Kanthapura* was 'inspired' by reading *Fontamara*, but this is not something that he has ever admitted in his essays or recorded interviews, and certainly not something that he has been keen to foreground. Indeed, in later interviews he has determinedly avoided speaking about 'internationalism and interculture'.<sup>260</sup>

Rao's reservation has been matched by the most of the few critics who have examined the relationship between the two novels. While establishing the overwhelming similarities between them, great emphasis is placed on their fundamental differences. Naik, for example, argues that 'the complete Indianness of *Kanthapura* in spirit and sensibility, form and style becomes manifest [in comparison with *Fontamara*].<sup>261</sup> He concludes that:

*Fontamara* is a story of the exploitation of the poor by the rich, as seen through the eyes of an anti-Fascist and socialist of the 1930s. Its message is

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<sup>259</sup> Raja Rao, 'Books Which Have Influenced Me', p. 49.

<sup>260</sup> Raja Rao and Feroza Jussawalla, 'Raja Rao', in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*, ed. by Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) pp. 140-156 (146).

<sup>261</sup> Naik, *Raja Rao*, p.74.

purely political and social. *Kanthapura* is an account of the renaissance of Indian spiritual life under the impact of the independence movement. Its message is essentially spiritual and cultural.<sup>262</sup>

Narasimhaiah, as we saw earlier, attempts to reverse the direction of this line of influence: speculating that *Kanthapura* may have shaped Silone's rewriting of *Fontamara*. Even if Rao's novel does owe a debt to Silone, 'the debt is not in the nature of an imitation', he is at pains to point out.<sup>263</sup> Strangely, he goes on to suggest that:

It is not hard to imagine how a progressive writer of the thirties would have reacted to *Fontamara* where he would have looked for stimulus and what he could have imparted to his work as art and through it to contemporary life. The answer is very likely to take a negative form.<sup>264</sup>

This is despite the fact that for both Rao and Mulk Raj Anand (who, as we saw earlier, preferred Silone's novel) the answer clearly took a positive form. Coppola similarly seeks to contain the parameters of Rao's admission that he had borrowed from *Fontamara*: 'while Raja Rao, even to his own thinking, may have drawn some initial inspiration from Silone's work, he transmuted and elaborated this idea into a rich, complex literary work which is uniquely his own'.<sup>265</sup> This emphasis seems to be prompted by a desire, as Albertazzi expresses it twice in her piece, to 'exonerate the Indian author of any accusation of plagiarism'.<sup>266</sup> From one perspective, the impulse to insist upon the distinctions between the two novels and to clear a space for the unique aspects of the Indian novel to be celebrated not merely as a 'translation' of an artistic project by a European writer is understandable, and laudable. At the same time, however, this concern has defined an arena of critical debate focussed far more on what separates the texts than what unites them, and leaves little or no space for the discussion of the historical, political and literary conjunctions that brought them into dialogue.

It may well be that postcolonial critics have taken this previous generation of critics at their word, and, on the understanding that the two novels are fundamentally different,

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<sup>262</sup> Naik, *Raja Rao*, p. 76.

<sup>263</sup> Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao*, p. 49.

<sup>264</sup> Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao*, p. 49.

<sup>265</sup> Coppola, 'Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*', p. 93.

<sup>266</sup> Albertazzi, *Il tempio e il villaggio*, p. 108.



have not seen any reason to read the two together. Yet the lack of engagement with this history of literary influence in postcolonial studies is particularly striking since it is in this context that it is most suggestive. *Kanthapura* is one of the novels to which critics have turned to exemplify the trends that typify and define postcolonial writing, and particularly the postcolonial Indian novel in English.<sup>267</sup> The fact that it owes such a significant debt to an Italian anti-Fascist novel has serious ramifications for our understanding of what it means for a novel to be postcolonial. Many of the aspects of the novel that Sethi, for example, focuses on (the way in which the “actual” and the “fictional” coalesce’ and the central role of women in the resistance movement it depicts) are among the dimensions of the novel that have been most profoundly shaped by Silone’s influence.<sup>268</sup> Above all, however, *Kanthapura* has been celebrated in postcolonial literary studies for the way in which it approached the question of language. And it is precisely here that *Kanthapura*’s debt to *Fontamara* is most visible.

### 2.3.1 The Right to Narrate: Orality and Translation

Both *Fontamara* and *Kanthapura* make use of forewords to present themselves as written accounts of oral testimonies. More specifically, they present themselves as written *translations* of oral testimonies. In Silone’s novel, the narrator of the foreword, who, like Silone himself, is living and writing in Switzerland in the summer of 1930, finds a family who have survived the destruction of the village a year earlier on his doorstep. These three, a father, a mother, and their son, then narrate the rest of the novel, the narrative voice passing from one to another as they recount events that befell them individually:

First the old man spoke. Then the wife. Then the old man again. Then the wife again. Then the old man again. Then the son. And finally the old man. When the old man had finished speaking, it was dawn. What they said, is in this book.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> William Walsh, in a formulation that has often been repeated, described Rao, Anand and Nayaran as the ‘founding fathers’ of Indian literature in English. William Walsh, *Indian Literature in English* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1990), p. 62.

<sup>268</sup> Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 4.

<sup>269</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 9.

In *Kanthapura*, the narrator of the foreword resolves to tell ‘a story from the contemporary annals of my village’.<sup>270</sup> As the foreword comes to a close, this narrative voice gives way to the one that will carry the reader through the remainder of the novel:

It may have been told of an evening, when as the dusk falls, and through the sudden quiet, lights leap up in house after house, and stretching her bedding on the veranda, a grandmother might have told you, newcomer, the sad tale of her village.<sup>271</sup>

Both novels stage themselves as acts of oral narrations, evoking both a time and a place of narration. Yet the supposed orality of the text only becomes visible to the reader through the intervention of these forewords. The disjunction between the narrative voice of the foreword and that of the body of the text opens up the space for the question of language to appear.

‘In what language should I tell this story?’ the narrator of Fontamara’s foreword asks. The story, as told by the three speaking narrators, would not have been told in Italian, but rather the Abruzzese dialect:

*Che a nessuno venga in mente che i Fontamaresi parlino l’italiano. [...] La lingua italiana è per noi una lingua straniera, una lingua morta, una lingua il cui dizionario e la cui grammatica si sono elaborati senza alcun rapporto con noi, col nostro modo di vivere, col nostro modo di agire, col nostro modo di pensare, col nostro modo di esprimerci.*

Let no one imagine that the *Fontamaresi* speak Italian. [...] For us the Italian language is a foreign language, a dead language, a language whose vocabulary and grammar elaborated themselves without any relationship with us, with our way of living, with our way of acting, with our way of thinking, with our way of expressing ourselves.<sup>272</sup>

It is important to remember that Standard Italian appears in the novel, as we saw in our earlier reading, as the language of the *cittadini*, the language in which the destructive orders of Fascism are written, which is opposed to a *cafone* language in which labourers from all over the world can communicate. Within the terms established by the novel, the

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<sup>270</sup> Rao, *Kanthapura*, v.

<sup>271</sup> Rao, *Kanthapura*, vi.

<sup>272</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 10.

question that is being considered here is whether, and how, to write in a colonial language.

This is the same dilemma facing the narrator of *Kanthapura's* foreword: the oral narrator speaks in Kannada, and it is Rao's responsibility not simply to translate her tale into English, but to render its specificities faithfully:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an 'alien' language.<sup>273</sup>

The positions arrived at in the two forewords in response to this problem are similar yet subtly different. Silone's narrator complains that standard Italian 'strangles and corrupts' the thoughts of those who do not think in it, giving their ideas 'the appearance of a translation'. 'But to express himself well,' he goes on to say, 'man must not translate'. The fact that such a translation is necessary at all is taken as evidence that 'this Italian culture is for us a foreign culture'.<sup>274</sup> The narrator thus resigns himself to rendering the testimony of the *Fontamarsi* in this foreign language, a language learned only in school, since the news that the text relates is so urgent. Rao's narrator similarly claims that English is 'the language of our intellectual make-up, but not of our emotional make-up'. Where *Kanthapura* differs, however, is on the insistence on not merely translating the narrative into Standard (colonial) English, but creating a new dialect 'which will one day be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American'.<sup>275</sup>

Bound up with the question of language is the question of style, of how to write the story in a way that remains faithful to the rhythm of the 'original' narration. 'If the language is borrowed', *Fontamara's* foreword tells us, 'the way of telling a story is ours'. It is a '*fontamarese* art', one that follows the familiar rhythms of the act of weaving.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Rao, *Kanthapura*, v.

<sup>274</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), pp. 10-11.

<sup>275</sup> Rao, *Kanthapura*, v.

<sup>276</sup> Silone's mother was a weaver. The idea of narration as weaving obviously takes on special meaning when placed in conjunction with Gandhi's India: weaving, of course, is central to the plot of *Kanthapura*.

*Non c'è alcuna differenza tra questa arte del raccontare, tra questa arte di mettere una parola dopo l'altra, una riga dopo l'altra, una frase dopo l'altra, una figura dopo l'altra, e l'antica arte di tessere, l'antica arte di mettere un filo dopo l'altro, un colore dopo l'altro [...]. Per questo i nostri prodotti appaiono ai cittadini cose ingenue e rozze. [...] Che ognuno, dunque, abbia il diritto di raccontare i fatti suoi a modo suo.*

There is no difference between this art of story-telling, between this art of putting one word after another, one line after another, one phrase after another, one image after another, and the ancient art of weaving, the ancient art of putting one thread after another, one colour after another [...]. For this reason our products appear to the *cittadini* as rough and naïve things. [...] Let everybody, therefore, have the right to tell their own story in their own way.<sup>277</sup>

*Kanthapura's* scribe, on the other hand, looks to the rhythms of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* as the inspiration for a style in which:

Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling. I have tried to follow it myself in this story.<sup>278</sup>

The responses these texts generate to these questions are different. Silone resolves to write in a Standard Italian that contains only a few hints of the world of spoken dialect from which it is supposedly a translation. Although it seldom permeates into the body of the novel's prose, we do see brief glimpses of it in the nicknames given to some of the characters: Don Carlo Magna, for example, is so-called because he is always busy eating.<sup>279</sup> There is, the narrator announces at the start of the novel, 'not a single word in dialect' to be found in its pages. To flavour its language with borrowed provincial phrases would be to collude with what he dismissively terms 'folklore' (using the English word), by which he means the perpetuation of 'a picturesque image of Southern Italy [that] one finds frequently in literature'.<sup>280</sup> Rao, on the other hand, responds by creating his own hybrid language. As Sethi puts it, 'Rao conducts a unique experiment

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<sup>277</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 11.

<sup>278</sup> Rao, *Kanthapura*, p. vi.

<sup>279</sup> We might see parallels here with the conventions of naming in *Kanthapura* ('Waterfall Venkama', etc.).

<sup>280</sup> Silone, *Fontamara* (1934), p. 9. Although Silone's use of the term 'folklore' is in many ways the opposite of the way in which it is deployed in the *Notebooks*, we might be reminded of the sensitivity Gramsci displayed to the exoticizing and Orientalizing nature of descriptions of the Italian South. See Gramsci, *SM*, p. 148.

with both Kannada and English sentence structures to produce a kind of syntax that plays up the 'Indian' way of life against the imported and imposed values of the west'.<sup>281</sup> This is a process that she refers to as the 'nativization of English'. Yet if the stylistic responses that they arrive at are directly opposed, the way that the questions of language and narrative style that they emerge as answers to are framed in the forewords in remarkably similar ways. Silone provides Rao with a narrative structure that exposes the gap between the written and the oral, between hegemonic and minor language. Even the way that this disjuncture is signalled typographically in the texts is the same. Silone signs off:

Davos (Svizzera), estate 1930

*Ignazio Silone*

And Rao follows suit:

Menton  
November 1937

Raja Rao

This connection between the forewords is particularly significant in the context of this thesis: it is precisely this moment of the text, the way in which *Kanthapura's* foreword deals with these questions, that has been most frequently identified and celebrated in critical accounts of the novel emerging from postcolonial literary studies. These very lines, in which we see the skeleton of *Fontamara* peeking through the flesh of the novel most clearly, are those that have been most frequently quoted and taken as a sort of manifesto for Indian writing in English. Meenakshi Mukherjee, for example, spends several pages in *The Perishable Empire* quoting from and analysing the foreword. 'I single out Raja Rao for mention', she explains, 'not only because he is the first to articulate the anxieties of the Indian novelist in English in his prefatory remarks, but also because in the text he works out a strategy for negotiating the contesting claims of language and culture.'<sup>282</sup> Since Indian writing in English has occupied a central position in postcolonial studies, it began to be taken as emblematic of postcolonial writing in a broader sense. As Saikat Majumdar observed in 2005: 'Raja Rao's lines in his "Foreword"

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<sup>281</sup> Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 40.

<sup>282</sup> Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.168.

to *Kanthapura* have become much debated buzzwords in Indian English writing, maybe postcolonial Anglophone writing in general'.<sup>283</sup> This is especially true when, as has frequently happened, critics have attempted to position *Kanthapura* as part of a canon that leads up to (and beyond) the work of Salman Rushdie: it is invariably to these lines of the preface that critics gesture.<sup>284</sup> This is despite the fact that Rushdie himself is dismissive of Rao (who he describes as 'a scholarly Sanskritist') and *Kanthapura* (which 'seems dated, its approach grandiloquent and archaic').<sup>285</sup>

G. V. Prasad provides perhaps the best example of the way in which *Kanthapura's* foreword has been used to establish a theory of Indian writing in English that paves the way for Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. If Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands*, had eloquently outlined the challenges facing the Indian English writer ('we can't simply use the language the way the British did'), then Raja Rao had already 'recognized and articulated this fifty-four years before Rushdie'.<sup>286</sup> On the basis of a detailed contrastive analysis of the two novelists' prose, Prasad argues that 'Indian writers are thus not so much translating Indian-language texts into English as using various strategies to make their works read like translations'.<sup>287</sup> What Prasad does not seem to be aware of, it is these very strategies that Rao borrows from Silone: the structure within which *Kanthapura* is staged to appear to its readers as an act of translation is imported wholesale from *Fontamara*.

As postcolonial studies consolidated itself as a field in the late 1990s and early 2000s and in the process tried to offer a definition of postcolonial writing, Raja Rao's foreword

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<sup>283</sup> Saikat Majumdar, 'Aesthetics of Subjectivity, Ethics of "Otherness": The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande', *Postcolonial Text*, 1:2 (2005).

<sup>284</sup> This is a recurring tendency in Rushdie criticism. See, for example: Catherine Cundy, *Salman Rushdie* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 6-8; Andrew Teverson, *Salman Rushdie* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 42-43; Chandrima Chakraborty 'Reading *Anandamath*, Understanding Hindutva: Postcolonial Literatures and the Politics of Canonization', *Postcolonial Text*, 2:1 (2006); David W. Hart 'Making a Mockery of Mimicry: Salman Rushdie's *Shame*', *Postcolonial Text*, 4:4 (2008).

<sup>285</sup> Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West (eds), *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* (London: Vintage, 1997) p. xvii.

<sup>286</sup> G. V. Prasad, 'Writing Translation: The Strange Case of the Indian English Novel' in, *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 55-70 (55-56).

<sup>287</sup> Prasad, 'Writing Translation', p. 67.

to *Kanthapura* came to be a touchstone. The foreword is reprinted in its entirety in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, where it appears alongside the interventions of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiongo'o on the question of language.<sup>288</sup> It is quoted at length in *The Empire Writes Back*, produced by the same scholars.<sup>289</sup> John Marx points to the foreword as 'pivotal' in his contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*.<sup>290</sup> Dennis Walder quotes it at length in his section on language in *Post-Colonial Literatures in English*.<sup>291</sup> Anshuman Mondal quotes a passage from it in an essay for *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*.<sup>292</sup> Most recently, the same large section is reproduced in *Modernist Literature and Postcolonial Studies*.<sup>293</sup> This list is by no means exhaustive, but it gives a sense of the number of critical locations in which *Kanthapura's* foreword has been called upon to define or exemplify not just the Indian novel in English but postcolonial writing and theory in general.

Rao's navigation of the questions of language and style in his foreword has become an established point in the institutional narrative of postcolonial studies; taken as not merely typical, but definitional of postcolonial writing. The relationship that this has to Silone's navigation of the same questions, however, has not: in none of these moments is *Fontamara* mentioned. This critical elision raises some fundamental questions about the limitations of the field.

## 2.4 Postcolonial Blind Spots: Confluences and Convergences

I suggest that the absence of Silone in postcolonial scholarship on *Kanthapura* speaks to a series of critical blind spots that have been produced as the field has sought to

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<sup>288</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006 [1995]), p. 276.

<sup>289</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002 [1989]), pp. 60-61.

<sup>290</sup> John Marx, 'Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon', in Neil Lazarus (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 83-96 (p. 86).

<sup>291</sup> Dennis Walder, *Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), p. 43.

<sup>292</sup> Anshuman Mondal, 'South and East Asia' in John McLeod *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 139-150 (p. 146-147).

<sup>293</sup> Rajeev S. Patke, *Modernist Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 66.

institutionalize and define itself. It tells us much about the imaginative geographies and theoretical biases that have dominated the field, and more importantly shows us what has been excluded. Rao's novel has been critically positioned in a way that places it in dialogue with a specific trajectory of Indian writing in English (leading up to Rushdie) and with a selected canon of postcolonial writers across the world. It has been read in a way that renders it sympathetic to the concerns of a body of postcolonial theory inflected by post-structuralism: what Neil Lazarus has recently referred to as 'pomo-postcolonialist reading'.<sup>294</sup> In the process, it has been taken *out* of dialogue with a broader culture of resistance writing and specifically with a moment of 1930s anti-colonial and anti-Fascist thought.

Rao seems to be aware that his reading of Silone is part of a wider trajectory of influence between Italy and India. Although, as we have seen, he plays down the extent of his borrowing from the Italian writer in 'Books Which Have Influenced Me', the essay speaks interestingly of the ways in which texts can reach across borders.

Overwhelmingly, however, what he describes is a kind of sympathy between Italian and Indian writing. '[I]f you read Leopardi,' he says, 'you might suddenly slip down and find yourself on the *ghats* of Varanasi, Kabir weaving depth into poetry. Leopardi's sorrow seems too reasonable, too human, beside Kabir's magnanimity, his dedication'.<sup>295</sup> This is nicely symbolized in a passage in which he describes experiences of reading next to rivers:

I have read the *Paradiso* in Varanasi and found it familiar. I have read Tzulidas in Tuscany, by Dante's Arno in Florence, and found him surprisingly contemporary. The Arno is a younger river than the Sarayu, and if you looked up and saw the San Miniato, the battlements of Michelangelo running down in young leaps of turreted silences, as if time were a substance once could catch and keep *Fiorenza dentro dalla cerchia antica*, you might see Sri Rama himself coming out with Vasishta, Lakshmana behind them. The sun of Tuscany seemed oft-times the light of Ayodhya.<sup>296</sup>

This passage seems, in the way in which it blends the Italian and Indian physical landscapes and topographies as a way of speaking about different kinds of similarities,

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<sup>294</sup> Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 25.

<sup>295</sup> Rao, 'Books Which Have Influenced Me', p. 45.

<sup>296</sup> Rao, 'Books Which Have Influenced Me', pp. 45-46.



strangely reminiscent of Marx's article on India that we looked at at the start of the chapter ('the Himalayas for the Alps, the Plains of Bengal for the Plains of Lombardy...').

Writing in 2002, Elleke Boehmer and Bart Moore-Gilbert argued that 'transnational resistance has represented till very recently an area of relative empirical and theoretical neglect within postcolonial cultural studies'.<sup>297</sup> To some extent this has to do with questions of departmental scope and linguistic competencies within the university: 'Postcolonial literatures in the various European languages', Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray point out, 'are usually read, studied and discussed in isolation from each other'.<sup>298</sup> More fundamentally, however, it might be seen as the product of a constitutive hostility often present within the field towards the idea of resistant nationalisms as an emancipatory horizon, what Benita Parry has described as the 'postnationalist recoil from nation-based political struggles'.<sup>299</sup> Despite the emergence of these critiques, postcolonial studies still lacks a critical paradigm that allows for the exploration of transnational solidarities operating not only within but also beyond Empires. It lacks a model of comparative reading that allows for the artistic and intellectual dialogue between Italy and India that I sketched out at the opening of this chapter to become legible. It lacks an imaginative geography in which this particular river of influence can be navigated.

Yet if Rao's reading of *Fontamara* is part of a long history of intellectual exchange between Italian and Indian writers (a history that we will continue to explore in the rest of the thesis), it is also the product of a very specific historical moment of 1930s internationalism. This was a moment in which, as we saw here with Silone and in the previous chapter with Gramsci (and as we shall see in the following chapter with Carlo Levi) a certain trajectory of the Italian anti-Fascist Left was engaged in theorizing the internal rifts at the heart of the Italian nation as a form of colonialism. It was a political moment in which these writers were engaged in writing as a form of anti-colonial struggle. Recently, Lazarus has argued that '[t]he identification of the *colonial* state as a

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<sup>297</sup> Elleke Boehmer & Bart Moore-Gilbert, 'Introduction to Special Issue: Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Resistance', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 4:1 (2002), 7-21 (p. 7).

<sup>298</sup> Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray (eds), *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations*, (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>299</sup> Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*, p. 99.

dictatorship, and the corollary celebration (or at least documentation) of the struggle against its repressive violence, lies at the heart of anti-colonial writing.<sup>300</sup> We might usefully reverse this formula to describe this tendency in Italian anti-Fascist writing: what lies at the heart of *Fontamara* is the identification of the (Fascist) dictatorship as a form of colonialism, and the corollary celebration (and 'documentation') of the struggle against its repressive violence. This moment of 1930's internationalism, then, represents a convergence of interests between anti-Fascist writing in Italy and anti-colonial writing in India. It is this convergence that makes the fascinating case of *Fontamara* and *Kanthapura* possible.

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<sup>300</sup> Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, p. 64. Emphasis in the original.

## Chapter 3. Carlo Levi: 'Victims of the Same Destiny'

### 3.1 Introduction: Passive Fraternities

The third author whose work I position within this anti-colonial trajectory of Italian anti-Fascist thought is Carlo Levi (1902-1975). As a Jewish anti-Fascist activist and intellectual exiled to the Italian South during the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, and who later travelled to and wrote about India, Levi embodies many of the connections that this thesis as a whole draws. Like Gramsci and Silone, his analysis of subjugation of the Italian South and his hopes for a sustained anti-Fascism emerge from an engagement with the politics of colonial oppression and the resistance it engendered. In turn, this analysis of Italy's internal colonialism opens the way for dialogues and exchanges with writers wrestling with the problems of colonialism and its aftermath, particularly in India.

Levi's work departs from slightly different political coordinates to the writers considered in the first two chapters: he was not at any time a member of the inter-war Partito Comunista d'Italia (although he would later be elected as an independent candidate on a post-war Communist Party slate in 1963) and was instead part of the *Giustizia e Libertà* movement founded by Carlo Rosselli. He was, however, profoundly influenced by Gramsci in the early years of his political formation: 'for some of us', Levi later wrote in an article on the Resistance and popular art, 'it is impossible to avoid [...] the world of our youth, of the inter-war Turin of which Gramsci was such an important part, crucial and rich in vitality'.<sup>1</sup> In his fiction, Levi speaks most explicitly of Gramsci's influence in his 1950 novel *The Watch (L'Orologio)*, where he comments that 'Gramsci was a Contadino who thought about such things before I did and thought them through better than I have'.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, to be a 'contadino' was for Levi the highest form of praise one could receive. Levi and Gramsci knew each other initially through Piero Gobetti, the charismatic young figurehead of the *Rivoluzione Liberale* movement of

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<sup>1</sup> Carlo Levi, 'Resistenza e arte popolare', *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, ed. by Gigliola De Donato, (Bari: De Donato, 1975), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Carlo Levi, *L'Orologio* (Torino: Einaudi, 1989 [1950]), p. 168.

whom Gramsci speaks movingly at the end of the *Southern Question*, and Levi would later come to write theatre reviews for *L'Ordine Nuovo*.

Silone, too, was an important figure for Levi in that period. In 1939 Levi wrote an article under the pen name 'Pietro Spina', a name he borrowed from the autobiographically inspired protagonist of Silone's *Bread and Wine*.<sup>3</sup> This act of borrowing tells us not only that he was reading Silone's work in English, before it was widely available in Italy, but it gives a sense of the shared ideological space from which they both wrote about the questions of the South.

This chapter starts by looking at Levi's most famous text, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*), written while in hiding from the Nazi and Fascist forces in Florence in 1943-44, and first published by Einaudi in 1945. The novel deals with his experiences in 1935, when he was exiled to the small village of Agliano (which becomes 'Gagliano' in the novel) deep in the Southern region of Lucania as a punishment for his anti-Fascist activism. In this section, I focus on the ways in which Levi uses the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 to frame the Southern Question as a question of colonialism. Above all, I am interested here in the ways in which Levi attempts to imagine solidarities, or what he refers to at one point as a 'passive fraternity' (*fraternità passiva*), between those suffering the various effects of capitalist modernity, Fascism, and imperialism.<sup>4</sup>

Roberto Derobertis, one of the few critics to focus on the representation of colonialism in the novel, maintains that 'although Levi's narrative can scarcely be categorized as "colonial literature", since it is set in Italy rather than in the colonies and does not focus on colonial issues or characters, his perspective is clearly anti-imperialist, as imperialism and war were among the constituent elements of the fascist ideology he sought to oppose'.<sup>5</sup> Derobertis, however, remains critical of what he sees as 'elements of colonial discourse' in the novel: although 'Levi recognized Lucania's capacity to oppose "paternal, prevailing institutions," the region remained essentially shapeless, something

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<sup>3</sup> Gigliola De Donato and Sergio D'Amaro, *Un Torinese del Sud: Carlo Levi* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 2001), p. 140.

<sup>4</sup> Carlo Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1990), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> Roberto Derobertis, 'Southerners, Migrants, Colonized: A Postcolonial Perspective on Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* and Southern Italy Today', in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, pp. 157-74 (p. 160).

that could only be described by borrowing images from the animal world and then relegated to a sort of prehistorical immaturity'.<sup>6</sup> In opposition to this, I suggest that there are more optimistic postcolonial readings of the text available to us. Subjecting the novel to this kind of colonial discourse analysis can cause us to overlook the ways in which the text itself is attempting to elaborate a kind of postcolonial thought, and above all a critique of the kind of 'developmental time' that Derobertis (following Dipesh Chakrabarty), accuses Levi of falling back upon.<sup>7</sup> At the heart of the text, I suggest, is an interrogation of 'History' as a form of colonialism that in some ways resembles and anticipates the logic of *Provincializing Europe* and postcolonial critiques of the 'not yet' historicism.<sup>8</sup>

In the second half of the chapter, I continue to trace the gradual elaboration of the embryonic postcolonial thought that I argue we find in the pages of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* throughout the rest of Levi's literary, journalistic, and political career. The anti-colonial commitments that animate his first novel never disappear from his work, and he continues to seek out avenues for solidarity and resistance in the post-war period. Levi, like Silone in his post-war edition of *Fontamara*, seeks to internationalize his analysis of the Southern Question, to identify a 'Lucania in every corner of the world'. We see this in his travel writing, which takes him, among other places, to India and China. Levi's writing on India, in particular, is characterized by the same drive to search out analogies and similarities that we saw in Gramsci's work earlier.

Yet this internationalization of the Southern Question is accompanied by an internalization of it: Levi is simultaneously interested, as we see in his *Paura della libertà* (*Fear of Freedom*), in transforming his time in Gagliano into the basis of a philosophical project. These two trajectories, both emerging from *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* run alongside each other throughout Levi's career, and come together in what we might think of a constant labouring towards a postcolonial theory, and the creation of a form of postcolonial writing.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>8</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 8.

### 3.1.1 *Christ Stopped at Eboli: Closed Rooms*

Levi wrote *Cristo si è fermato* while in hiding from the Nazis in Florence in 1943.

Confined to a room, Levi finds his thoughts wandering back to his time in exile:

*Ma chiuso in una stanza, e in un mondo chiuso, mi è grato riandare con la memoria a quell'altro mondo, serrato nel dolore e negli usi, negato alla Storia e allo Stato, eternamente paziente; e a quella mia terra senza conforto e dolcezza, dove il contadino vive, nella miseria e nella lontananza, la sua immobile civiltà, su un suolo arido, nella presenza della morte.*

But closed in a room, and in a closed world, I am glad to travel back with my memory to that other world, cut off from History and the State, eternally patient; and to that land of mine without comfort and without pleasure, where the peasant lives out, in misery and distance, his motionless civilization, on arid soil, and in the presence of death.<sup>9</sup>

Levi's analysis of the peasant society of which he speaks is obviously inflected by the fact that he experiences it as a prison: his own confinement, his state of exile, of suspension in time, is clearly projected on to Gagliano. This transference is something that he acknowledges a few pages later when he complains that on first arriving at Eboli 'it seemed wrong to me that the place in which I was forced to live did not have in itself an air of constriction' (though his impression of the village soon changes).<sup>10</sup> Yet it would perhaps be more correct to say that he recognizes his own situation in that of the Lucanian village, that they are forced to inhabit the same position relative to the power of Fascist Rome, and that this commonality forms the basis of his understanding of its inhabitants and their way of life. In a later essay, when Levi would respond to a critic who argued that the novel was not realist enough in the way it 'arbitrarily broke the links between the *Mezzogiorno* and the rest of the world', he responded that political exile itself was not a 'realistic institution', but then neither was 'the centuries-old condition of peasant subjugation, or hunger, or malaria, or misery'. Rather they were 'the fruit of a centuries-old historical relationship which kept the contadini at the margins of national life, which has pushed them out of real history.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Carlo Levi, 'L'uva puttanello', *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, p. 96.

The image of the 'closed room' cut off from History here functions in much the same way as the 'immobile circle, cut off from time' that we saw in the opening lines of *Fontamara*: both are images of totally a-historical separation, yet both contain within themselves an analysis of this separation as a historically constituted condition. That is to say that it is precisely in the ways that these authors 'break the links between the *Mezzogiorno* and the outside world' that they establish new connections and relationalities. As I argued in the previous chapter, the image of the immobile circle in *Fontamara* is opened out, through the circular canal that cuts off the villagers from the conditions of progress, into an analysis of capitalist imperialism. Here, the image of the 'closed room' bridges the 'unrealistic institutions' of political exile and peasant subjugation.

Indeed the very fact of Levi's 'exile', his internment as a political prisoner, in the South allows us to make our first series of historical connections.<sup>12</sup> Nicola Labanca, one of the foremost historians of Italian colonialism, has suggested that '[i]f the principal reasons spurring liberal Italy's first colonial enterprises were diplomatic prestige and commercial advantage, the possibilities of creating penal colonies must also be factored in as incentives for colonial expansion'.<sup>13</sup> It was not just the colonies that were seen as safe repositories for subversive elements from Italian society, but also vice versa: 'by January 1912, at least 3,425 Libyans had already been deported to Italy, 349 to Favignana, 635 to Gaeta, more than 834 to Ustica, and 1,080 to the Tremiti Islands'.<sup>14</sup> The Italian South and the African colonies were thus, in a sense, interchangeable penal colonies from the point of view of the metropolis, and it is to these 'spaces of exception' that subversive individuals, like Levi and the other anti-fascist prisoners in Gagliano, were exiled.<sup>15</sup> We see something very similar in the experience of Gramsci, who for a while was under the impression that he and other communists were to be sent to Jubaland in Somalia (something which made a great impression on him, not least because he didn't expect to survive the journey, a different 'middle-passage', and which he referred to often). Subsequently, his period of exile on the Sicilian island of Ustica in

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<sup>12</sup> This language of 'exile' comes from the text itself: 'the peasants here don't say prisoner [*confinato*], but exile.' Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Nicola Labanca, 'Italian Colonial Internment', *Italian Colonialism*, pp. 19-32 (p. 28).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 30.

<sup>15</sup> It is of course important not to lose sight of historical specificity here, particularly the horrific and brutal reality of the internment camps in Libya, from which only 60,000 of the 100,000 Libyan prisoners returned alive.

1927 brought him into contact with anti-colonial fighters from Libya who were also held there, something which evidently became important for his own political thinking and a frequent reference point in his letters for the next ten years until his death.<sup>16</sup> We also see in Gramsci's reports of his time in Ustica the same distinction between Christian and non-Christian (as citizen and non-citizen<sup>17</sup>) that Levi and Silone explore. The potential solidarities between left-wing (anti-Fascist) activists, Southern peasants, and colonial populations which I argue that Levi's text builds towards are, therefore, made possible by a common oppression which positioned them all as peripheral in relation to the centre of the new imperial Rome. They are, as Levi puts it, 'victims of [the] same destiny'.<sup>18</sup>

Recent postcolonial readings of the novel have tended to overlook this, and have returned to criticizing the text for 'arbitrarily breaking the links between the *Mezzogiorno* and the rest of the world'. Simon During, for example, takes *Cristo* as his paradigmatic example of a 'modern radicalism based on the subaltern division that does not assume shared human qualities'.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he sees Levi as moving in the text to actively 'prevent the emergence of overarching – statist – institutions in which exchanges, distributions and messages across the cultural and economic divide between the metropolitan intellectual and the southern peasant might be possible'.<sup>20</sup> Derobertis, similarly, sees the text as erecting a firm divide between Northern narrator and Southern subject, in which Lucania is relegated to a

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<sup>16</sup> Gramsci becomes particularly friendly with a man called Haussiet. See Gramsci, *Letters from Prison: Volume 1*, ed. by Frank Rosengarten, trans. By Raymond Rosenthal, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 38-40, 47, 66, 90, 95, 104, 264-65; and *Volume 2*, pp. 4-5, 20, 28, 368.

<sup>17</sup> 'Convicts and detainees divide the public into two categories: "Christians" and convicts and detainees'. Gramsci, *Letters from Prison: Volume 1*, pp. 146-47. See also *Letters from Prison: Volume 2*, pg. 115, in which Gramsci explores the position of the slave more broadly, relating it to the condition of slavery: 'I believe that in the case of an incarcerated man one may speak of "justifiable claims" vis-à-vis persons who are free, because the situation of an incarcerated man is historically tied to slavery in the classical period; in Italy the words *galera* and *ergastolo*, which are used for jail, point quite obviously to this derivation'.

<sup>18</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> Simon During, 'Choosing Precarity', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38:1 (2015), pp. 19-38 (p. 24)

<sup>20</sup> Simon During, 'Choosing Precarity', p. 24.



realm of animality and 'prehistorical immaturity'. This divide, he suggests, is integral to the very structure of the text:

[F]rom a structural perspective, the text is divided into episodes that are presented out of chronological order and are independent of each other in terms of form and content. *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* seems to enclose places, facts, and characters in a space deeply marked by borders, that is, in a structure reminiscent of the classical organization of colonial spaces, based on a process of political, social, and cultural separation and reorganization under the watchful eye of the colonizer.<sup>21</sup>

I would suggest that what is overlooked in both of these accounts is that it is precisely in the ways in which Levi insists upon this rupture at the heart of the Italian nation that he builds connections and commonalities between the South, the colony, and the political exile. Levi proceeds not by denying the racist fracture at the core of Italy's modernity, but by attempting to make it tangible in the very form of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*.

### **3.1.2 Christians and Contadini: History or Mythology?**

The life of peasant agriculture and middle-class squabbling that Levi encounters is very different from that of his native Turin, not just different but completely separate. He finds himself immersed in a world dominated by the timeless petty squabbles and minor ambitions of the middle classes on the one hand, and the ceaseless, relentless immiseration and exploitation of the 'contadini' (peasant farmers) on the other. This is a world in which malaria is rampant (Levi later discovers that the villages at a higher altitude, which were relatively free from the disease, were reserved for fascist dissidents held as political prisoners). The two doctors in the village, who he unwillingly comes into competition with (Levi has no desire to practice medicine, but feels obliged to under the weight of the villagers' requests), know little or nothing of medicine, and instead see their trade as 'a feudal right of life and death over the *cafoni*', who, if they fail to pay their dues, 'are killed off, justly, by malaria' (15-16). It is a fantastical world for him, filled with strange superstitions, magic, and rituals, in which life is perpetually lived under melancholy black standards marking deaths and left hanging over the door until

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<sup>21</sup> Roberto Derobertis, 'Southerners, Migrants, Colonized: A Postcolonial Perspective on Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* and Southern Italy Today', p. 162.

they are bleached white by the sun. It is, in short, another Italy, a peasant civilisation that far outdates the industrial civilisation of the North (123).

The contadini are themselves aware of this difference. 'We are not Christians', goes the habitual saying of gaglianesi from which Levi takes the title for his novel, in what he describes as 'a disconsolate inferiority complex':

*Noi non siamo cristiani, non siamo uomini, non siamo considerati come uomini, ma bestie, bestie da soma, e ancora meno che le bestie, i fruschi, i fruschulini, che vivono la loro libera vita diabolica o angelica, perché noi dobbiamo invece subire il mondo dei cristiani.*

We're not Christians, we're not human beings; we're not considered men, but beasts, beasts of burden, and even less than beasts, who live out in freedom their angelic or demonic life, because unlike them we must suffer the world of the Christians.<sup>22</sup>

'Christian' here is not a religious identity, but rather a political or legal one, meaning something closer to citizen. Christ is made to stand in for a set of ideas that might be described as 'Western civilization', or perhaps 'modernity': 'Cristo non è mai arrivato qui, né vi è arrivato il tempo, né l'anima individuale, né la speranza, né il legame tra le cause e gli effetti, la ragione e la Storia' (3). ('Christ never arrived here, nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the connection between cause and effect, reason, or Story'). Levi later reiterates this definition of 'Christian':

*Essi non hanno, né possono avere, quella che si usa chiamare coscienza politica, perché sono, in tutti i sensi del termine, pagani, non cittadini: gli dèi dello Stato e della città non possono aver culto fra queste argille, dove regna il lupo e l'antico, nero cinghiale, né alcun muro separa il mondo degli uomini da quegli animali e degli spiriti, né le fronde degli alberi visibili dalle oscure radici sotterranee.*

They do not have, nor could they have, what is called political consciousness, because they are, in all senses of the term, pagans, not citizens: the gods of the State and the city can have no following on this soil, where the wolf and the ancient, black boar rule, and where no wall separates the world of men from that of the animals and spirits, nor the branches of the visible tress from their obscure subterranean roots.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 68.

The peasant saying ('we are not Christians'), then, is not simply a 'disconsolate inferiority complex', but, as I hope to demonstrate later, a precise political analysis of their position, and the basis for a resistant identity politics.<sup>24</sup>

Despite what the narrator tells us in this opening passage, however, history is not absent from Lucania, and certainly not from the text. If there are relatively few references to the politics of the *Risorgimento*, the First World War, the rise of Fascism, the moment of the Second World War from which Levi is writing, or the horrifying revelations to come about the realities of the Holocaust, the text is nevertheless obsessed with the idea of history. There are, in fact, two juxtaposed historical narratives present in the text: that created and propagated by the Fascist State, and the internal history of the peasant world of Lucania. The first of these makes itself felt with regard to one specific historical event: the invasion of Abyssinia.

The sheer number of references to Africa, and Abyssinia in particular, is striking: there are dozens of passages that make direct or indirect references to the invasion, some passing, some extended engagements lasting several pages, and at times entire chapters are dedicated to it.<sup>25</sup> One of Levi's first concerns on arriving in Lucania, is to gauge the feelings of the villagers about the invasion,<sup>26</sup> and the first extended conversation reported is between him and Lieutenant Decunto, who has volunteered to form part of the invasion due to a fit of nihilistic despair, hoping that it will be some kind of oblivion for him.<sup>27</sup> One of the only songs to appear in the book is *Faccetta Nera, Bella Abissina*, which in fact appears explicitly in the absence of other songs (when Levi asks a tax collector he is sharing a room with to play some local folk songs he can think of none, and plays this song instead).<sup>28</sup> This song echoes like a refrain throughout the novel,<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> See particularly pp. 116-27, the chapter which will be my focus later on. The pages referring in one way or another to the invasion (many of them multiple times) include: 6, 12, 20, 25, 26, 32, 66-67, 72, 114, 116-27, 146, 150, 178-80, 207, 215, and 233.

<sup>26</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, pp. 20-26.

<sup>28</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 32. *Little Black-Face, Beautiful Abyssinian* was an incredibly popular song at the time of the invasion, and pictured a beautiful Abyssinian girl waiting for the liberating forces of Imperial Rome. It was later banned by the Fascist party as it was seen to encourage miscegenation.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 116.

building up to a passage in which the local priest is reading out a letter from a villager who is volunteering in Africa during a Christmas sermon, while the *Podestà* (who believes him to be drunk) and his Fascists attempt to drown him out by singing *Faccetta Nera* repeatedly.<sup>30</sup>

It is not simply that the war is present as a theme, the entire book is in fact framed, bookmarked, by the invasion. Levi does not tell us directly that he was sent to Lucania as a political prisoner in 1935, instead he reveals this to us through a reported conversation with the Fascist *Podestà* (mayor) of Gagliano, who asks him through what kind of misunderstanding he managed to get himself on the wrong side of the State 'and even in this year, in which the Fatherland is becoming so great'. Levi detects a degree of trepidation in Don Luigino's assertion however: 'The African war has only just begun. Here's hoping it all goes well. Here's hoping'.<sup>31</sup> At the end of the novel the war is coming to an end, and when Carlo Levi is informed that he is to be released along with the other 'exiles' (aside from the two communists) he is told that 'it seems to be because of the fall of Addis Ababa'.<sup>32</sup> Thus the time period of the novel does not simply coincide with that of the invasion, but in the absence of other time markers, dates, or events, the time of the war in Abyssinia *is* the time of the novel. Even more than this, the imperial aggression in Africa comes to stand for historical time, for the 'History' which had not yet arrived in the village, itself a creation of the Fascist State which is imposed upon this peasant civilization. Don Luigino shouts about the glory of the empire from his small podium in the village square, and the speeches of the governors in Rome blare out from through the intrusive and alien voice of the radio, explaining that the invasion is being undertaken precisely for their benefit.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, pp. 178-80.

<sup>31</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 12.

Levi's ironic repetition of Don Luigino's 'hoping' makes it clear that they are hoping for rather different outcomes. It is worth noting that despite the immense scale of the resources flung at the invasion, and the criminal use of poison gas, its success would have seemed far from certain, and the humiliating memory of the Italian defeat at the hands of the Abyssinians in the Battle of Adwa in 1896 was in fact one of the motivations for the invasion.

<sup>32</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 233.

<sup>33</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 66-67.

These speeches, however, fall on deaf ears. Aside from the nihilistic Lieutenant Decunto who enlists in search of ‘an escape into a world of destruction’, the only other person to enlist from the either of the villages Levi has been in during his interment is Don Luigino’s brother-in-law Cuscianna, who signs up to escape his wife’s relentless jealousy and suspicion.<sup>34</sup> The peasant farmers remain unmoved by the speeches, precisely because they are delivered in the register of a history (which is to say ‘History’) to which they do not belong. None of them volunteer as part of the military, and those that apply to go as workers are rejected (or rather, their applications are not acknowledged). The only immediate consequence it has for them is to bring Italy into conflict with the other world powers, and thus to jeopardize their opportunities to emigrate to America, and in particular to New York, which in Levi’s account was the natural capital of a world shaped around emigration patterns.<sup>35</sup> None of the contadini are members of the Fascist Party, not because they are anti-Fascist (that is to say, on account of a socialist or liberal ideology), but because they are in a sense *ante*-Fascist:

*perché queste faccende non li riguardavano, appartenevano a un altro mondo, e non avevano senso. Che cosa avevano essi a che fare con il Governo, con il Potere, con lo Stato? Lo Stato, qualunque sia, sono «quelli di Roma», e quelli di Roma, si sa, non vogliono che noi si viva da cristiani. C’è la grandine, le frane, la siccità, la malaria, e c’è lo Stato. Sono dei mali inevitabili, ci sono sempre stati e ci saranno sempre. Ci fanno ammazzare le capre, ci portano via i mobili di casa, e adesso ci manderanno a fare la guerra. Pazienza!*

[. . .] because these things didn’t concern them, they belonged to another world, and made no sense. What did they have to do with the Government, with Power, with the State? The State, whatever it might be, is the property of ‘those in Rome’, and it well-known that those in Rome do not want us to live like Christians. There is hail, landslides, drought, malaria, and there is the State. They are inevitable evils, they have always been and they always will be. They make us kill our goats, they take the furniture from our houses, and now they want to send us to war, for God’s sake! <sup>36</sup>

This other Italy, this ancient peasant civilization from which the gaglianesi are descended and of which they still form a part, has its own distinct history that is completely separate to that of the Italian State. It is Levi’s struggle to make this second,

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<sup>34</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 51.

<sup>35</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p.114. Levi’s Gagliano exists as part of the same ‘cartography of migrant labour’ that I analysed in Silone’s *Fontamara* in Chapter Two.

<sup>36</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 67.

occluded historical narrative visible which made *Cristo si è fermato* such an important intervention in Italian politics in the post-war period. The history of this world, like that of the Italian Empire Mussolini was desperately trying to consolidate, stretches back into antiquity. It is a history of successive invasions and occupations: 'no-one has touched this land', Levi tells us early in the text, 'if not as a conqueror or an enemy or uncomprehending visitor'.<sup>37</sup> The first of these conquerors was Aeneas and the Trojans, followed later by the Roman Empire, Spain, the *Conquista regia* of the Italian *Risorgimento*, and finally (by implication) Fascism.

*Delle due Italie che vivono insieme sulla stessa terra, questa dei contadini è certamente quella più antica, che non si sa da dove sia venuta, che forse c'è stata sempre. Humilemque vidimus Italiam: questa era l'umile Italia, come appariva ai conquistatori asiatici, quando sulle navi di Enea doppiavano il capo di Calabria. E pensavo che si dovrebbe scrivere una storia di questa Italia, se è possibile scrivere una storia di quello che non si svolge nel tempo: la sola storia di quello che è eterno e immutabile, una mitologia. Questa Italia si è svolta nel suo nero silenzio, come la terra, in un susseguirsi di stagioni uguali e di uguali sventure, e quello che di esterno è passato su di lei, non ha lasciato traccia, e non conta. Soltanto alcune volte essa si è levata per difendersi da un pericolo mortale, e queste sole, e naturalmente fallite, sono le sue guerre nazionali. La prima di essi è quella di Enea.*

Of the two Italies that live together on the same soil, this one of the peasants is certainly the older, and no one knows where it might have come from, and perhaps has been here forever. *Humilemque vidimus Italiam*: this was the humble Italy, as it appeared to the Asiatic conquerors when they rounded the cape of Calabria in the ships of Aeneas. And I thought that a history of this Italy should be written, if it is possible to write a history of that which does not take place in time: the only history of that which is eternal and unchanging, a mythology. This Italy has lived out in its black silence, like the earth, in a succession of unchanging seasons and unchanging misfortunes, and the events which came from abroad passed over her without leaving a trace, and do not count. Except that from time to time she has raised herself to defend herself from a mortal peril, and these alone are her national wars, which naturally were failures. The first of these was that of Aeneas.<sup>38</sup>

Despite mounting a hopeless defense, this 'humble Italy was subjugated' by the Trojans.<sup>39</sup> The history of this world thus appears as the shadow cast by the history of the Western civilization that traces itself back to Virgil, a history of the conquered rather

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<sup>37</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato* a Eboli, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato* a Eboli, p. 123.

<sup>39</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato* a Eboli, p. 124.

than the conquerors, whose lives have not been narrated in the epics but have been the surface upon which they are written. It is in fact an anti-history, a mythology in a completely different sense, since narrative history itself has been one of the weapons used consistently against this world. Levi demonstrates this in reference to the brigantaggio, whose struggle against the *Piemontese* during the *Risorgimento*, the 'fourth national war of the contadini', was just one in a series of desperate defenses mounted by this peasant civilization, and still reverberates through the consciousness of the Lucanian contadini.<sup>40</sup> Indeed the village of Gagliano seems to be founded upon it: it hovers above a ravine referred to as the 'Bersagliere's Grave', so-called because an unfortunate Piedmontese soldier who had been taken prisoner by the brigands met his end by being thrown into it.<sup>41</sup> 'Judged from a historical point of view, in the scheme of the Italian *Risorgimento*, *brigantaggio* cannot be defended', Levi admits:

*Da un punto di vista liberale e «progressista», quello appare l'ultimo sussulto del passato, che andava spietatamente stroncato, un movimento funesto e feroce, nemico dell'unità, della libertà e della vita civile. E lo fu realmente, nella sua realtà di guerra formentata e alimentata dai Borboni, dalla Spagna, e dal Papa, per i loro particolari motivi. Ma il brigantaggio dei contadini è un altro: a guardarlo da quel punto di vista non solo non si può giustificarlo, ma non si riesce nemmeno ad intenderlo.*

From a liberal and "progressive" point of view, it appears the last gasp of the past that was being mercilessly crushed, a baleful and ferocious movement, the enemy of unity, of liberty and civil life. And it really was, in its reality as a war fomented and abetted by the Bourbons, by Spain, and by the Pope, for their own particular motives. But the *brigantaggio* of the peasants was something else: looking at it from that point of view not only are we unable to justify it, we are unable even to understand it.<sup>42</sup>

Within the scheme of History, which is the narrative this series of Western civilizations have used to sustain themselves, to justify themselves, *brigantaggio* appears completely incomprehensible: an 'inhuman revolt' without justification, without particular aims, and without hope of success. Yet within the history of this world, which is not a linear narrative but rather a cyclical mythology, it seems rather different: 'with *brigantaggio*, the peasant civilization defended its very nature, against that other civilisation which

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<sup>40</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 125.

<sup>41</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 122.

was always opposed to them and which, without understanding it, eternally subjugated it. For this reason, instinctively, the contadini saw in the brigands their heroes'.<sup>43</sup>

The only history that Gagliano seems to remember is one of colonial subjugation and anti-colonial struggle stretching back millennia, and which for the most part has taken the form of a struggle against Rome; whether it comes in the form of the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church, post-unification liberal Italy, or Fascism. This is why the peasant farmers of Gagliano feel no enthusiasm for the invasion. It appears to them as another colonial imposition upon them - another moment in which they will be forced to die for a State that is not their own - and a waste of funds that could have been used to improve living conditions in the *Mezzogiorno*. Not only this, but their own position as victims of Rome's imperialism, as a colonized people, gives them a sense of solidarity with the Abyssinians. They feel 'instinctively' that it is not right to take land from others, and that 'no good can come of it'.<sup>44</sup>

This 'instinctive' position is perhaps what draws Levi to the contadini: they appear to naturalize his own political position. We can see this, for example, in his insistence that the only flag that the peasant population recognizes is not the heraldry of the nobility or the Tricolore of the new Italy, but black:

*Il loro colore è uno solo, quello stesso dei loro occhi tristi e dei loro vestiti, e non è un colore, ma è l'oscurità della terra e della morte. Neri sono i loro stendardi, come la faccia della Madonna. Le altre bandiere sono i colori variopinti di quell'altra civiltà, spinta al moto e alla conquista, sulle vie della Storia; e di cui essi non fanno parte. Ma poiché essa è più forte, e organizzata, e potente, essi devono subirla: oggi si moriva, non per noi, in Abissinia, come ieri sull'Isonzo o sul Piave, come prima, per secoli e secoli, dietro i più vari colori, in tutte le terre del mondo.*

They have only one colour, the same one as their sad eyes and their clothes, and it is not really a colour, but the darkness of the earth and of death. Their standards are black, like the face of the Madonna. The other flags are the multihued colours of that other civilization, driven into motion and to conquest on the roads of History, of which they form no part. But since it is

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<sup>43</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 123. Angelo Del Boca suggests that Carlo Levi was the first to take the 'civil war' of brigantaggio seriously, and to produce a 'serene and faithful judgement on this most deplorable of the Italian wars'. Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?: Un mito duro a morire* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005), p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, pp. 116-17.



stronger, and more organized, they must suffer it: today you go to die, and not for us, in Abyssinia, as yesterday on the Soča or at the Piave river, like before, for centuries and centuries, behind the most varied colours, in all the lands of the world.<sup>45</sup>

Here we see a complicated blending of various blackness in the novel. This passage refers back to an earlier point in the novel in which Levi describes the custom of hanging a black flag over the doorway in mourning for a lost loved one. These flags are never taken down until they have been bleached white by the sun, and so the villagers carry out their daily lives under a host of black banners, some still fresh and dark, others fading to grey. This black is thus the 'darkness of death', yet in this passage it is also a variety of other things. It is the darkness of the earth, a marker of the struggle of peasant agriculture life which will bear no fruit for them, the colour of what Fanon called wretchedness. It is simultaneously also a blackness located in their slightly exoticised appearance, in their physical difference to Northern Italians, both in terms of their clothing and of physical characteristics, in this case their eyes. In the reference to the Black Madonna (*La Madonna Nera*), the idol worshipped in that region of Lucania, Levi perhaps gestures towards skin colour and physical blackness (recalling perhaps the lyrics of *Faccetta Nera* which has been echoing throughout the novel), but is also pointing us towards religious difference, and this blackness becomes emblematic of the distinct cultural life of the contadini: one of the central chapters of the book is concerned with the description of the procession of *La Madonna Nera* through the village. At the same time, it appears here not as a colour at all but as the absence of colour, the precise inverse of the multicoloured flags of 'that other civilization, driven into motion and to conquest on the roads of History'. These meanings are folded back in on each other as the black of death is revealed to be the reverse side of every standard under which centuries of peasants had been sent into battle. It is this 'black flag' that Levi borrows for his own anarchism, which is presented as being anti-State precisely because it is anti-imperialist.

This political position is made possible, then, by the ways in which the international context of colonialism, and the invasion of Abyssinia in particular, brings into focus the history of the 'internal colonialism' of the Italian South as it is revealed in the minutiae of

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<sup>45</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 119.

daily life in Gagliano as Levi witnesses it from the perspective of political prisoner. It is a position that, as I argued before, is made possible by the coming together of imperialism and Fascism, and which emerges as a response to it. In the final chapter of the novel, Levi's analysis of the 'Southern question' seems once more to be internationalized, and although the focus remains always on the 'Southern question' the relationship between country and city here seems to retain the wider dimensions that we observed in Gramsci's work. Upon his return to Turin Levi is met with a series of different analyses from people who had forgotten the Southern problem after fifteen years of Fascism, and were only then revisiting it. It is seen, according to the politics of his interlocutor, as a technical and economic problem, as internal colonization, as a sad historical legacy of Borbonic slavery, as simply a particular case of capitalist oppression, or as the result of a genuine racial inferiority. What these positions share, in Levi's eyes, is an idolatry of the State - in each case the State is expected to intervene. Against this, Levi asserts that 'it cannot be the State [...] that resolves the Southern problem, for the reason that what we call the Southern problem is nothing other than the problem of the State'.<sup>46</sup> Any appeal to the State to intervene could result in nothing other than an intensification of the 'internal colonization' of the South, which could have material benefits, but would not resolve the problem, instead 'all of Italy, not just the *Mezzogiorno*, would become a colony'. Levi's own position is somewhat different:

*Siamo anzitutto di fronte al coesistere di due civiltà diversissime, nessuna delle quali è in grado di assimilare l'altra. Campagna e città, civiltà precristiana e civiltà non più cristiana, stanno di fronte; e finché la seconda continuerà ad imporre alla prima la sua teocrazia statale, i dissidio continuerà. [...] Finché Roma governerà Matera, Matera sarà anarchica e disperata, e Roma disperata e tirannica.*

We are rather faced by the coexistence of two completely different civilizations, neither of which is able to assimilate the other. Country and city, a pre-Christian civilization and a civilization no longer Christian, face each other; and as long as the second continues to impose on the first its statist theocracy, the rift will continue [...] So long as Rome governs Matera, Matera will be anarchical and desperate, and Rome desperate and tyrannical.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 220.

<sup>47</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 221.

Bearing in mind the specific background from which Levi draws his anarchism (the 'anti-statism of the contadini'), it becomes clear that for him this is a problem of colonialism. Any attempt to usher in a new political order that does not deal with this fundamental schism between these two opposed civilizations can only further entrench it. The only possible answer is political autonomy for the South.

Though both share an analysis of the Southern Question as a problem of colonialism, and both see it not as a problem in isolation but profoundly linked to the Northern Question, Levi's solution might seem completely opposed to Gramsci's: an alliance of the Southern peasantry and Northern proletariat against the historic bloc formed by the forces of industrial capital in the North and the old feudal powers in the South. Yet it is important to note that for Levi this autonomy 'cannot exist without the autonomy of factories, of schools, of cities, of all of the forms of social existence'.<sup>48</sup> The reference to the factory council movement here hints that Levi sees this as a continuation of Gramsci's project, and for him, too, the most immediate political problem was the existence of a parasitic middle-class: 'until this class has been suppressed and replaced it is impossible to think of resolving the Southern problem'.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, the final message of Levi's analysis in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* is the same as Gramsci's: both are working, to use Gramsci's phrase, 'at the margins of history'. What unites their positions is the keynote of Guido Dorso's *La Rivoluzione Meridionale*: 'either the revolution will be Southern, or it will not be' (*la rivoluzione sarà meridionale, o non sarà*).<sup>50</sup>

### **3.2 The Lucania in every corner of the world.**

If Levi's location of the questions of the Italian South against the backdrop of an international struggle for liberation raging in the colonized and formerly colonized territories is achieved largely through implication in *Cristo*, he often made this connection explicit in his essays. When he returned to the novel in 1963 to write a short preface for the new Einaudi edition he spoke of 'all the fraternal peoples [beings] in all of the Lucanias in every corner of the world' (*tutti gli esseri fraterni di tutte le Lucanie di*

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<sup>48</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 223.

<sup>49</sup> Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. 221.

<sup>50</sup> Guido Dorso, *La Rivoluzione Meridionale* (Bari: Palomar, 2005), p. 269.

*ogni angolo dela terra*).<sup>51</sup> The events of the intervening years – the independence of India, the revolution in China, the wave of decolonization sweeping through Africa, the Bandung conference, the Suez crisis, the intensifying Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to name but a few – had evidently strengthened Levi’s sense of the parallels between what he had seen in Lucania and the struggles for independence taking place in other ‘corners of the world’. He is perhaps most explicit about these parallels in a speech he made in 1960 to a conference on ‘Work and Development in the Mezzogiorno’ (*Lavoro e sviluppo nel Mezzogiorno*) in the Sicilian town of Palma di Montechiaro. After acknowledging the gravity of the situation facing the Italian South in the post-war period, he goes on to say that ‘whoever knows other lands ... finds the same problems’:

*Si potrebbe fare una carta del mondo dove siano segnati questi paesi, i paesi arabi, e tutta l’Africa nera, le colonie e le ex colonie; l’India, dove basta un mattino e una notte a Calcutta, con i dormienti che sembrano cadaveri nelle strade; l’antica Cina, dove vigeva, come in un acquario chiuso, la spirale senza fine della misera.*

One could make a map of the world on which these countries are marked, the Arab countries, and all of Black Africa, the colonies and ex-colonies; India, where a morning and night, with the sleepers who seem like cadavers in the street, is enough; the ancient China, where the endless spiral of misery churns, as though in a closed aquarium.<sup>52</sup>

Yet Levi is not merely attempting to make a claim for the victim status of the Italian South by inserting it into this cartography of colonial oppression. Rather, his intervention in this conference, and more broadly, is to argue that the only possible answer to the Southern Question is to see the struggle of the Southern peasantry as intimately connected to the struggles of colonized and formerly colonized peoples. He tells his audience that he has recently returned from a trip to China, where he witnessed an enormous collective force to reshape the country’s political landscape. He then goes on to say that the same problems were being resolved in different ways in India, and that in Africa ‘a continent is on the move’.<sup>53</sup> Levi presents us with a vast panorama of struggle, in which:

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<sup>51</sup> Carlo Levi, ‘Lettera a Giulio Einaudi’, *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, p. 295.

<sup>52</sup> Carlo Levi, ‘Occupazione e sviluppo nel Mezzogiorno’, *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, pp. 139-44 (139-40).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

*Le colonie si liberano, le classi subalterne si fanno autonome: centinaia di milioni di uomini si affacciano all'esistenza e alla libertà. E gli aspetti sordidi dell'alienazione vanno scomparendo insieme alle condizioni politiche e sociali che ne sono all'origine.*

The colonies are liberating themselves, the subaltern classes are making themselves autonomous: hundreds of millions of men are confronting their existence and freedom. And the sordid aspects of alienation are disappearing together with the political and social conditions that are at their root.<sup>54</sup>

Just as for Gramsci, the main point of comparison seems in Levi's to be with China and with India. Levi visited and wrote about both China and India, and wrote extensively about each. Levi was time and time again struck by the similarities between India and Italy, for him India:

is not another world, an exotic civilisation, alien and distant, it is not what we customarily refer to as 'colourful' – as in the colourful Orient, it is not a foreign country or a distant time, enclosed in forms, measures, rituals, in words with different roots and histories, rather it is our world, our history; it is us, ourselves, in all our antiquity and our modernity. Like a giant mirror where, reflected in hundreds of millions of images, we find our own image, and India appears to open to us – not in the form of ideas, fantasies, or feelings, but rather as living realities, faces, figures, and persons – the spectacle of our own centuries-old story [history].<sup>55</sup>

I want to return in detail to Levi's connections with India in the conclusion to this chapter. For the moment I want simply to plot this first point on our constellation: the ongoing internationalization of Lucania, which has its origins in *Cristo si è fermato* and intensifies in the 1950s and 60s. In addition to naming a geographical region and a specific socio-political situation in the Italian South, Lucania becomes the name for a worldwide struggle for independence. There is a Lucania in every corner of the world. Levi ends his speech to the conference with a rousing call:

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>55</sup> Carlo Levi, *Essays on India*, trans. by Antony Shugaar, (London: Hesperus, 2007).

*La forza è dei piccoli, dei piccoli che nascono, e aprono gli occhi, e parlano. Sono i piccoli, oggi, che muovono il mondo e lo modificano, e lo fanno reale. Palma di Montechiaro, dove la miseria è fitta come il nero della notte, dove ogni speranza pare impossibile, dica oggi la sua parola: la parola dei piccoli e dei saggi, che è una grande parola umana di autonomia, di esistenza e di libertà.*

The strength belongs to the small, to the small who are born, and open their eyes, and speak. It is the small, today, who move the world and change it, and who make it real. Palma di Montechiaro, where the misery is as thick as the darkness of the night, where every hope seems impossible, today says its word: the word of the small and of the wise, which is a great human word of autonomy, of existence, and of liberty.<sup>56</sup>

Here, we see this internationalist strand being woven together with other key strands in Levi's thought, which the following pages will examine. For the moment I want simply to highlight some key terms that will inform the rest of our discussion. The first is the idea of these rebellions 'making the world real', echoed in other essays when Levi insists that anti-colonial resistance will constitute the 'new reality of the world'.<sup>57</sup> The second is the seemingly very problematic infantilization of the subaltern classes – the 'piccoli' referred to in this passage. Finally, there is the emphasis on 'speaking' and the (spoken) 'word', which is the word of 'autonomy, of existence, and of liberty', all key terms in Levi's theoretical idiolect. In order to understand more about the way he uses these terms, I want to turn now to the first book that Levi wrote, his philosophical tract, *Paura della libertà (Fear of Freedom)*.

### **3.2.1 The Lucania within us: *Fear of Freedom***

Levi wrote *Paura della Libertà* while in hiding during the Second World War, and although it was written before *Cristo si è fermato* it was published after it, in 1946, when it met with a lukewarm reaction from the Italian literary establishment. It is a strange, densely written, and often self-contradictory work, which nevertheless remains central to any understanding of Levi as a writer and as a thinker. It was here, in the midst of the

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<sup>56</sup> Levi, 'Occupazione e sviluppo nel Mezzogiorno', *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, p. 143-44.

<sup>57</sup> Carlo Levi, 'L'invenzione della verità', *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, p. 123.

Resistance and under the shadow of Fascism and the Holocaust, that Levi first developed the system of thought that underpins all of the rest of his career.

The text is structured by a series of binary oppositions, of which the first, and perhaps most important, is 'religion' and 'the sacred'. The sacred, for Levi, is a state of pure indeterminacy, the primordial chaos from which all things are born. This state is a mythical origin: '[a]t the beginning of time – so we are told – there was a forest upon the face of the Earth. This same primeval forest – shapeless and full of seeds and terrors, hiding in its blackness the features of every face – we bear within ourselves'.<sup>58</sup> This is what Levi would later begin referring to, following the title of a work by an American philosopher named Freedman, as 'the Lucania that is within us'.<sup>59</sup> It is also a stage of development that all human beings must undergo: 'Everybody is born from chaos, and to chaos may revert; every man leaves the mass in a process of differentiation, and in this shapeless mass may lose himself again'.<sup>60</sup> He would later frame this more explicitly in an essay significantly entitled 'L'invenzione della verità' (the invention of truth):

*Il bambino è ancora totalmente immerso nell'uniformità prenatale, nel totale indifferenziato, nel caotico originario: è tutt'uno con le cose, non si distingue da esse, la sua vita sta tutta immersa nel fluire del tempo.*

The infant is still totally immersed in the prenatal uniformity, in the totally indifferentiated, in the original [primordial] chaos: it is completely on with things, it does not distinguish itself from them, its life is completely immersed in the flow of time.<sup>61</sup>

The 'mass' [*massa*] referred to above is not what we might expect, it is rather 'shapeless matter, heavily with all weight, lacking all quality, and full of every passive potential'.<sup>62</sup> It

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<sup>58</sup> Carlo Levi, *Fear of Freedom*, ed. by Stanislao Pugliese, trans. by Adolphe Gourevitch, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 15. I make use here of Pugliese's excellent translation. The text is available in the Italian in Carlo Levi, *Scritti politici* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001) ed. by David Bidussa, pp. 132-204.

<sup>59</sup> See Carlo Levi, 'Le Poesie di Albino Pierro', *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, p. 306.

<sup>60</sup> Levi, *Fear of Freedom*, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Levi, 'L'invenzione della verità', *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, p. 122.

<sup>62</sup> Levi, *Fear of Freedom*, p.71. Levi gives several examples of how he is using the word here: 'Bakers call "mass" the dough before it is divided into loaves to become bread in the oven; for metalfounders "mass" is the melted metal before it is cast into the mold; for

is the primordial clay from which the human is made, and a state of formlessness to which they will return: 'This twofold endeavour stretches from one death to another: from prenatal chaos to the natural fading away and extinction'.<sup>63</sup> Here we encounter one of the central, and paradoxical, terms of Levi's lexicon: for him a mass politics, a politics of the masses, is fundamentally a politics of the self.

According to Levi, to be human is to be haunted by the sacred, by the dissolution and disintegration of the self. In fact for the human the sacred is itself fear: '[t]he feeling of a transcendent indistinctness and the terror of it, the dread of indetermination which dwells in those who are in the very act of giving birth to themselves, of severing themselves from the mass – this is the sacred'.<sup>64</sup> The opposite of the sacred is 'religion'. Religion, for Levi, is the 'disrespectful heir of things sacred', which aims:

To change the sacred into the *sacrificial*: to deprive it of its main feature – inexpressibility – by transforming it into deeds and words; to create the ritual out of the mythical; to substitute a sacramental bird for a shapeless turgidity, and marriage for desire; to turn sacred suicide into consecrated slaughter. Religion is relation and relegation. Relegation of a god into a web of formulas, conjurations, invocations, prayers, so that he may not, as is his way, elude us.<sup>65</sup>

Religion is thus the opposite of the sacred – complete differentiation, total separation, the transformation of all that is sacred and spontaneous into a ritual. Though in the context of 1930s and 40s Italy this may seem, and to an extent is, directed against the Catholic Church, Levi's real target here is Fascism. In Levi's analysis, this is precisely the root of Italian Fascism: a desire to surrender independence and autonomy, to abdicate in favour of a higher power, and so to lose contact completely with the terrifying realm of the sacred by becoming a sort of automaton. This is what Levi refers to euphemistically (and we should remember that this text was written in hiding, and only very lightly edited for its publication) as 'the black religion of the state'.<sup>66</sup>

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physicists – that which in a body is neither shape, nor size, nor quality, but indeterminate matter'.

<sup>63</sup> Levi, *Fear of Freedom*, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Levi, *Fear of Freedom*, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Levi, *Fear of Freedom*, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Levi, *Fear of Freedom*, p. 7.



This binary opposition between the sacred and religion, between complete indistinction and absolute distinction, is a new dialectics which structures both historical developments and the constant recreation of the individual consciousness. These two levels cannot be separated in Levi's work: the dialectical process that has produced empires and structured societies is the same as that which leads people into Fascism.<sup>67</sup>

Yet this tract is not merely an analysis of Fascism, it is also a manifesto for anti-Fascism. Levi suggests that a truly human life can only be lived between these two poles of indeterminacy and determinacy, both of which represent a kind of death. Life must be a constant facing up to the fear of the sacred in order to reconstitute the individual self in such a way that it does not degenerate into abstract individualism. This then is another aspect of our larger picture of Levi's postcolonial thought. In addition to the internationalization of Lucania, the idea that there is a Lucania in every corner of the world, we also have a Lucania that exists within us, which is the primordial zone of indeterminacy, the basis for all human liberty. As a result we have a dual project which is centered around the idea of autonomy, an autonomy which is simultaneously about political, national, and regional self-determination (as we saw before) and the determination of the self.<sup>68</sup>

The only answer is to live between these two opposing poles: 'the only vivid moments in an individual life, the only periods of higher culture in history are those in which the two contrary processes of differentiation and indifferentiation find a common point of equilibrium and are coexistent in the creative act'.<sup>69</sup> Man's alienation and 'until the day of liberty's return [...] a day when freedom would create new languages, a new ideal

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<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere I have written about the uncanny similarities that Levi's theoretical vocabulary bears to the language of Giorgio Agamben in his *Homo Sacer* project: zones of indistinction, the interrogation of the sacred, the idea of the state being founded on an act of exclusion, these are all concepts at the heart of Agamben's biopolitics. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>68</sup> 'Autonomy' was a hugely important term for Levi, which lay at the very heart of his commitment to the *Giustizia e Libertà* movement. He discusses his understanding of the term and how it relates to the political program of *GL* in two key inter-war essays written in 1932: 'Seconda lettera dall'Italia' and 'Il concetto di autonomia nel programma di «GL»'. Both are reproduced in Carlo Levi, *Scritti Politici*, ed. David Bidussa, (Torino: Einaudi, 2001), pp. 52-62 and 72-81 respectively.

<sup>69</sup> Levi, *Fear of Freedom*, p. 3.

perspective, a new culture and a new poetry'.<sup>70</sup> It is the creation of this new language, perspective, and culture that he sees himself as labouring towards in his second novel.

### 3.2.3 *The Watch*: 'Contadini' and 'Luigini'

Levi's next novel, *L'Orologio (The Watch)*, published by Einaudi in 1950, Levi takes these same ideas in a slightly different direction. The novel is narrated from the point of view of a character who seems to be Levi himself, during the period of his transfer from Florence to Rome immediately after the war to take editorship of *L'Italia Libera*, the national newspaper of the Partito d'Azione. Like *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, *The Watch* is not so much a plot-driven narrative as it is a semi-journalistic and anecdotal account of Levi's exploration of the political and social landscape of post-war Rome. It documents both the city's struggle to come back to life following the devastation visited on it by the war, and the narrowing of the political horizons opened up by the success of the Resistance as Parri's Action Party-backed government is ousted in favour of the Christian Democrats, who would go on to dominate Italian politics until the 1990s. While this novel, written and set at the moment in which Italy was ceasing to be an imperial power, is far less explicitly concerned with the politics of colonialism, Levi is still keen to keep colonial oppression in the frame and to draw parallels between the suffering of the impoverished and war-torn Roman suburbs. In one particularly powerful section of the novel the narrator and a friend visit a suburban area which has been devastated by bombing in search of a prostitute whom his friend is enamoured with. The locals mistake the pair for government officials, and so show them the squalid conditions in which they are living, in massively overcrowded condominiums with no water or sewerage ruled by swarms of rats, and the narrator feels obliged to play along and listen to the testimony that they are giving. The first thing that strikes him when they arrive is the grandiose architecture of the building:

*l'architettura che si usava chiamare imperiale, e che è, piuttosto, coloniale, fatta, con boria e disprezzo, per un popolo considerato inferiore, a cui si vuol dare, perché ci viva dentro tutte le sue povere ore, nel modo più scomodo e doloroso, case ornate dai segni esteriori della potenza e della grandezza.*

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<sup>70</sup> Levi, *Fear of Freedom*, p. 37.

the architecture they used to call 'Empire,' but which was really colonial, made, with arrogance and with scorn, for a people considered inferior, so that they might spend live out all of their poor hours, in the most uncomfortable and painful way, in houses adorned on the outside by the signs of power and grandeur.<sup>71</sup>

This passage is representative of the way in which Levi is interested here in extending his analysis of the Italian South as a form of colonial oppression to accommodate the suffering of the impoverished urban environments of the North. In *The Watch*, the North/South divide (whether Italian or global) is stretched and remolded in new directions. Levi presents an image of the world shaped by a clash of two fundamentally opposed civilizations: 'Contadini' and 'Luigini': '[t]he two true parties, as they would say in the South, that struggle against each other, the two civilizations that face each other, the two Italies [...]two movements, hostile and impenetrable [...] the only two categories of our history. Contadini and Luigini, Luigini and Contadini!'<sup>72</sup>

*Ebbene: chi sono i Contadini? Sono, prima di tutto, i contadini: quelli del Sud, e anche quelli del Nord: quasi tutti; con la loro civiltà fuori del tempo e della storia, con la loro aderenza alle cose, con la loro vicinanza agli animali, alle forze della natura e della terra, con i loro dèi e i loro santi, pagani e pre-pagani, con la loro pazienza e la loro ira; e via, via, queste cose le sapete. È un altro mondo: il mondo della magia e della indistinzione, la civiltà della tradizione orale [...]: è l'oscuro fondo vitale di ciascuno di noi.*

So: who are the Contadini? They are, first of all the peasantry [contadini], those of the South, and also of the North. Almost all of them, with their civilization that lies outside of time and of history, with their harmony with things, their kinship to animals, to the forces of nature and the land, with their pagan and prepagan gods and saints, with all their patience and all their wrath. And so on and so on: you know all this. It is another world: a world of magic and indistinction, the civilization of the oral tradition. It is the dark vital source that lies within all of us.<sup>73</sup>

So far, we seem to be on territory familiar to us from *Cristo si è fermato* and *Paura della Libertà*: the 'Contadini' are the ancient peasant civilization that predates Imperial Rome who inhabit the realm of the sacred, the world of 'magic and indistinctness'. Yet Levi goes on to extend the category to include not only the Northern proletariat, but all 'producers': 'all those who make things, who create things, who love them and are

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<sup>71</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 113.

<sup>72</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 165.

<sup>73</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 165.

content with them'.<sup>74</sup> This includes 'artisans, doctors, mathematicians, painters'. Finally, it includes 'those that used to be called, with a hateful word, "intellectuals"' or at least 'progressive intellectuals'.<sup>75</sup>

Against them are the 'Luigini'. In an explicit intertextual link, Levi takes the name from Don Luigino, who is the fascist podestà in *Cristo si è fermato*, though once again the category is stretched well beyond the boundaries of the village of Gagliano:

*Sono gli altri. La grande maggioranza della sterminata, informe, ameboide piccola borghesia, con tutte le sue specie, sottospecie e varianti, con tutte le sue miserie, i suoi complessi d'inferiorità, i suoi moralismi e immoralismi, e ambizioni sbagliate, e idolatriche paure. Sono quelli che dipendono e comandano; e amano e odiano le gerarchie, e servono e imperano. Sono la folla dei burocrati, degli statali, dei bancari, degli impiegati di concetto, dei militari, dei magistrati, degli avvocati, dei poliziotti, dei laureati, dei procaccianti, degli studenti, dei parassiti. Ecco i Luigini.*

They are the others. The vast majority of the endless, formless, amoeba-like petty bourgeoisie, with all of its species, subspecies and variations, with all their miseries, their inferiority complexes, their morality and immorality, their misdirected ambitions, and their idolatrous fears. They are the ones who submit and command, love and hate hierarchies, and serve and reign. They are the crowd of bureaucrats, employees of the state and the banks, model clerks, the military, the magistrates, lawyers, the police, college graduates, errand boys, students, and parasites. These are the Luigini.<sup>76</sup>

Here we see a synthesis of the worlds of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* and *Paura della Libertà*. The analysis of the problem of the South as being to do with a parasitic class of the bourgeoisie, which Levi shared with Gramsci, is extended to the nation as a whole and reshaped to fit. At the same time, this class-based political analysis is overlaid with a philosophical understanding of this class as 'religious', in the terminology of *Paura della Libertà*. This bringing together of two strands of Levi's thought is intimately tied to the situation of post-war, post-Fascist Italy. Added to the category of 'Luigini' are the politicians, 'the organizers of all tendencies and values':

*[S]ono Luigini magari senza saperlo e senza volerlo: Luigini per posizione, anche se molti personalmente, sarebbero piuttosto Contadini. Ce li metto tutti:*

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<sup>74</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 166.

<sup>75</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 166.

<sup>76</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 166-7.

*comunisti, socialisti, repubblicani, democristiani, azionisti, liberali, qualunquisti, neofascisti, di destra e di sinistra, rivoluzionari o conservatori o reazionari che siano o pretendano di essere.*

[T]hey are perhaps Luigini without realizing it or wanting it: Luigini by circumstance, even if many of them, personally, would be Contadini. I include them all: communists, socialists, republicans, Christian democrats, actionists, liberals, *qualunquisti*, neo-Fascists, from the Right and the Left, revolutionary, conservative or reactionary, whatever they are or claim to be.<sup>77</sup>

Levi spares no-one in this list, not even his own party. He saw post-war Italian politicians as busy resurrecting an 'ancient system', 'still the Bourbon one, but perfected by time, and finally, under Fascism, rendered official and completely juridical'.<sup>78</sup> This system was resilient, and not easily overturned:

*Vincere è difficile: è successo una volta sola in tutta la storia d'Italia, e questa vittoria è finita. L'abbiamo vista, l'abbiamo vissuta: la Resistenza è stata una Rivoluzione contadina, la sola che ci sia stata mai.*

To win is difficult: it has happened only once in the whole history of Italy, and that victory is over. We've seen it, we've lived it: the Resistance was a peasant revolution, the only one there's ever been.<sup>79</sup>

For Levi, this return to business as usual, this rebuilding of bureaucratic structures and political institutions from the time of Fascism, was a betrayal of everything the resistance had been. The Resistance had brought new creative possibilities into the world and opened up new political and cultural horizons that were now being shut down and closed off. The defeat of the Parri government, one of the central events of the novel, is the final 'Luiginian' triumph over the resistance. The anti-Fascist models he put forward in both *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* and *Paura della Libertà* are thus brought together in a new way to defend the legacy of the resistance in the era of what Silone referred to as 'post-Fascism'. For Levi, this was a unique historical moment, which could end either with the resumption of Italy's eternal Fascism, or the creation of a new community:

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<sup>77</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 167.

<sup>78</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 167.

<sup>79</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 170.

*Era uno di quei momenti in cui i destini di ciascuno pendono incerti; in cui gli abilissimi politici meditano sulle forze in campo, e preparano mosse astute in un loro complicato gioco di scacchi, che essi sono destinati, in ogni modo, a perdere – perché il solo modo di vincere sarebbe di trovare quella parola che, suscitando forze nuove, buttasse in aria la scacchiera, e trasformasse il gioco in una cosa viva. Sarebbe stata detta, questa parola?*

It was one of those moments in which the destiny of everyone hangs uncertain; in which skilled politicians study the forces on the field, and prepare astute moves in their complicated game of chess, a game that they are, in any case, destined to lose – because the only way to win would be to find a word that, bringing into being new forces, would throw the chessboard into the air, and transform the game into a living thing. Would it be found, this word?<sup>80</sup>

Once again, as in the Palma di Montechiaro speech and *Paura*, the only answer to the problems of the self and society seems to be the production of a spoken word.

So far, we have seen how Levi consistently positions his analysis of Italian politics against the wider backdrop of struggles for independence in the (formerly) colonized world, the way in which Lucania is both inserted into an international cartography of colonial oppression and comes to stand for it. Elsewhere, we have seen that ‘Lucania’ simultaneously names an internal zone of indistinction, which is at the heart of Levi’s theory of Fascism and anti-Fascism. We have seen that both of these ‘Lucanias’, the Lucania in every corner of the world and the Lucania inside of us, are associated with both a kind of muteness *and* a kind of speech that is ‘real’, with the production of reality. We have seen how Levi uses this intellectual apparatus to map the failure of post-Fascist Italy to maintain the political and cultural space cleared by the Resistance. I now want to look at the way Levi brings these together in the formal qualities of *The Watch*, before going on to contextualize this within the wider frame of Levi’s theory of art.

*The Watch*, unsurprisingly, is a novel that is centered around questions of time. There are two times that operate in tension with each other in the novel. The first of these is a kind of pure time. In the opening pages of the novel, the narrator recalls an experience from his youth, when, while in his mother’s bedroom, he stared at a painting on the ceiling. As he looks absently at a certain point, ‘a feeling of terrible power’ entered him:

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<sup>80</sup> Levi, *L’Orologio*, p. 51.

*Come potrei dunque descriverla? Non era una figura, né un'immagine, né un odore, né nulla che appartenesse a un senso o che avesse un senso: ma forse il senso stesso dei sensi; come un ritmo senza suono, un'ona immateriale oscillante, il pulsare di un sangue invisibile, pieno insieme di una infinita attrazione e di una infinita angoscia. Era come un enorme pendolo senza forma, che si muoveva fuori dello spazio: e quel suo movimento continuo e curvo aveva una irregolarità, una mancanza improvvisa, una sospensione indeterminabile.*

How could I possibly describe it? It was not a figure, nor an image, nor a perfume, nor music, nor anything pertaining to a sense or having a sense, but perhaps the sense of senses itself; like a rhythm without sound, an immaterial, swinging wave, the beat of invisible blood, filled with infinite attraction and infinite anguish. It was like an enormous, shapeless pendulum moving outside of space, and its continuous, curved motion had an irregularity, a sudden missing, an indeterminable suspension.<sup>81</sup>

This sensation 'lasted perhaps a minute that seemed [...] eternal'. When he was a child he could recapture this feeling by looking at that spot, or even by thinking about it, though with adulthood this ability fades. This memory itself seems to exist outside time, to be not locatable within it: 'How can I say when? That moment seems to me the remotest of infancy, the root itself of memory)<sup>82</sup> From its association with infancy, and from its infiniteness and 'indeterminable suspension', it would seem that this is the time of the sacred as Levi describes it in *Paura della Libertà*. As in the other moments of Levi's work that we have looked at, this limitless and formless space and time of pure potential is linked to a kind of true creative expression:

*Questa sensazione ineffabile era, forse, pura potenza, riunita in un punto immateriale, e si è forse sparsa e trasfigurata nelle cose, nascosta nei gesti, nelle frasi, nelle curve interrotte dei quadri. Mi sembra di aver sempre inteso, senza mai poterlo spiegare, che cosa essa fosse: e quello che ne penso e sento ora è ancora quello che ne intuivo, bambino di forse tre anni. Quel ritmo irregolare e infinito era una immagine pura di un fluire eterno, nell'eterna potenza, era il tempo stesso, il tempo vero, prima dei tempi.*

This ineffable sensation was perhaps pure power, gathered in an immaterial point, and perhaps now it has scattered and been transfigured into things hidden in phrases, in gestures, in the interrupted curve of paintings. I feel that I have always understood what it was without being able to explain it, and what I think and feel about it now is still what I felt instinctively as a child of three. That regular and infinite rhythm was a pure image of an

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<sup>81</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 10.

<sup>82</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 10.

eternal flowing of eternal power. It was time itself, the true time before times.<sup>83</sup>

This true time is juxtaposed with another time, that of Levi's pocket-watch, which is the central image of the novel. When he first picks up the watch, immediately after the scene I have just been describing, the narrator thinks that 'the time of a watch is the exact opposite of the real time inside and around [him]', a 'mathematical time' which 'does not flow, but jerks in a series of successive actions, always alike and monotonous'.<sup>84</sup> The pocket-watch had been given to the narrator by his father on his graduation, 'as is the custom' (and the association with custom is a significant one).<sup>85</sup> Levi describes the acquisition of a pocket watch as a significant moment in life: 'They are almost always a gift, from father, grandfather, or uncle on an important occasion at the most decisive moment of life, when a young man enters the world, acquires his autonomy, detaches himself from the past, from the uncertain security of the tepid family clan to start walking through his own personal time'.<sup>86</sup> 'Bound like a servant' by its gold chain, the watch is a pitiless, insect-like heart, 'not pumping warm blood into the veins but still pulsing like an intellectual, bodiless essence, tyrannically trying to drag along our own heart with it':

*Il nostro cuore non se ne accorge, dapprima, e continua svagato; poi resiste e si difende; ma, a poco a poco, si lascia sedurre e corrompe da quel ticchettio sempre uguale: è così difficile non andare al passo! Ecco, i soldati sfilano, dietro una allegra fanfara: Uno! Due! Uno! Due! I nostri piedi pare si muovano da soli, e, senza avvedercene, li abbiamo seguiti. Ma quella cadenza, quella andatura militare, si accelera, il nostro cuore la segue, non sa più staccarne, e il tempo corre e vola, e l'oggi, in un istante, e già fatto ieri, e si unisce, senza più potersi contemplare e conoscere, al tempo che già si perdé. Così, la catena d'oro che teneva legato l'innocente orologio, diventa la catena che ci lega e ci trascina, ed è la piccola macchina del taschino che tiene ormai dal suo capo, come un padrone, la catena ben salda, e ci mena alla cavezza, come buoi da gozzare, sempre più in fretta, sempre più in fretta, chissà dove.*

Our heart does not notice at first and goes on unaware; later it resists and defends itself; then little by little allows itself to be seduced and corrupted by that even ticking. It is not so hard to fall into step! Here are the soldiers marching behind the merry band: One! Two! One! Two! Our feet seem to

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<sup>83</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 10.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.



move by themselves, and before we know it we are following. But the cadence, the military march quickens, and our heart follows it, not knowing how to get away from it anymore. And the time runs and flies, and today in an instant has already become yesterday and joins, without being able to contemplate or know itself anymore, the time that is already lost. Thus the gold chain that once tied down the innocent watch becomes the chain that binds us and drags us. And it is this small pocket machine that by now masterfully holds the end of the firmly tied chain, and faster and faster, leads us by the bit like bulls to be slaughtered, who knows where.<sup>87</sup>

Once again a kind of doubling is at work here; the semi-Freudian personal development narrative simultaneously stands in for wider questions about 'autonomy': personal and national independence intertwine. In *The Watch*, it seems that the success of the Resistance, the 'contadino revolution', has caused a rupture, shattering this mechanical progressive time and making the infinite time of the sacred once again sensible, as it has not been for him since childhood. This has its literal embodiment in the shattering of the pocket-watch. For Levi, the post-war politicians in Italy, the Luigini, are interested only in rewinding the clock and resuming the march of history. He, on the other hand, is interested in exploring this true time, and preserving it against the tick of progress narratives and teleologies.

This rejection of teleological or stagist narrative emerges not only as a thematic concern in the novel, but in its very form. The watch is also the driving force behind what plot there is in this novel; it breaks early on, and it is fruitless quest to find someone who can repair it that sends him out into the streets of Rome. It stands quite literally for the mechanism of the plot, the machine that keeps it moving forward, which is resisted by the expansive, wandering, exploratory, anecdotal style of the novel. We see this tension discussed explicitly slightly later in the novel, when the Levi laments the inadequacy of two of the key characters in the novel, the activists and journalists Casorin and Moneta. Whatever he might say of them is 'only a thousandth part' of what might be said of them. This is not a personal or artistic failure, rather it is something integral to the process of writing, and particularly, it seems, of writing a novel. Literature thus becomes another staging ground for the conflict between the temporalities of 'pure' time and the watch's time, and Levi turns to the same imagery to describe it: 'men live, their eyes shine and dampen with tears, their hearts beat without stopping'. In writing about a person, in

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

creating a character, we are not truly representing this reality, but rather 'cutting a slice of this infinite reality, making a partial image of it, giving it a name [...] forcing it into our lives, our times, our standards of memory':

*Così, senza volere, facciamo, dell'onda sconfinata del reale, di una persona che, come noi stessi, e identica a noi, non ha limiti, un soggetto di novella, una tessera colorata di un mosaico disegnato prima, un elemento di un astratto giuoco.*

And so, without meaning to, we make, from this endless wave of reality, from a human being who, like ourselves, identical to ourselves, has no limitations, the plot of a novel, one coloured tile of a mosaic that has been designed in advance, one function in an abstract game.<sup>88</sup>

The writing of novels, and the production of art more generally, is thus seen to be central to the conflict that Levi sees in post-Fascist Italy. The novel as a form seems implicated in the same process of separation and determination that Levi argues was the root of Fascism, but he also clearly believes in the potential for a literary form that resists this process, that attempts to render sensible the infinite space and time of the sacred, the complex and multiple temporalities that are produced by individual and collective lives. *The Watch* stages a conflict in its narrative structure between these two poles in order to fracture it, just as the *Resistenza* has fractured the previously uninterrupted narrative of Italian politics, and to make something audible between the cracks caused by this rupture. This sound seems to hang in the air in the novel, and is not the true 'word' that Levi says must be found, though it is perhaps the beginnings of it. It is a kind of potential word, an indistinct murmur waiting to be voiced. The novel is bookended by this sound, in its very first and last words, and it is what lingers on after the plot has expired:

*La città si stendeva, e viveva, e respirava, nel vago della luna, con il brusio indistinto di una foresta d'alberi antichi, appena mossi dal fiato leggero del vento. Rimasi a ascoltare, con l'orecchio teso, quel silenzio appena mormorante, e sentii venire di lontano, dalle strade o dal fondo della memoria? l'arcano rumore della notte, il ruggito dei leoni, come l'eco del mare in una conchiglia abbandonata.*

The city was spread below me, and was living, and breathing in the vagueness of the moon with the indistinct murmur of a forest of ancient

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<sup>88</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 48.

trees, barely stirred by the light breath of the wind. I stopped to listen, with my ears strained, to that faintly murmuring silence, and I heard from the distance, from the streets, or from the depths of memory? the mysterious sound of the night, the roaring of lions, like the echo of the sea in an abandoned shell.<sup>89</sup>

The expression of this unformed word is at the very heart not just of Levi's own work but, as we shall see, of his theory of all artistic expression in the modern period which he continued to develop in a series of connected essays in the 1950s.

### 3.2.4 'L'arte luigina e L'arte contadina': Modernism, Poetry, and 'Realismo Contadino'

In an essay entitled 'Luginian Art and Contadinian Art', first given as a speech to the *Associazione culturale italiana* in Turin in 1950, Levi explicitly draws on the cultural division he postulates in *The Watch* to argue that this divide can also be seen to split artistic expression down the middle. For him, the modern world, and the aesthetic projects it had engendered, was marked by a kind of disillusionment, by a loss of faith in the idea of liberty and a sense of the relationship between art and the world. Its point of arrival was an individualism that 'denies the existence of the individual', and in front of which everything becomes incomprehensible transcendence, even the true nature of man:

*Questa squallida solitudine senza speranza ha trovato la sua espressione nell'arte e talvolta anche in modo tragico e gigantesco, come in Kafka e in Picasso e ha trovato anche la sua espressione nella vita individuale o nel rifiuto di vivere, come nel suicidio del nostro amico Cesare Pavese; e, più che nella vita individuale, ha trovato la sua espressione negli avvenimenti della vita del mondo, nella guerra totale, nei campi di concentramento, questa nuova forma di paesaggio del mondo contemporaneo [...] C'è dunque una certa condizione umana mostruosa, che è quella della separazione, del campo di concentramento, della prigione mentale, da cui nascono le vere prigioni, che è il contenuto sentimentale dominante del tempo contemporaneo.*

This squalid solitude without hope has found its expression in art, sometimes even in a tragic and gigantic way, as in Kafka and Picasso, and has also found its expression in the individual life or the refusal to live, as in the suicide of our friend Cesare Pavese. And, more than in the individual life, it has found its expression in the events in the life of the world, in total war, in the

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<sup>89</sup> Levi, *L'Orologio*, p. 312.

concentration camp, that new form of landscape in the contemporary world [...] There is therefore a certain monstrous human condition, which is that of separation,<sup>90</sup> of the concentration camp, of the mental prison, from which are born the real prisons, which is the dominant sentimental content of the contemporary time.<sup>91</sup>

Levi suggests that the reason modern art (from post-impressionism and surrealism, to atonalism, to *The Waste Land*) seems to have lost some of its relevance, its purchase, in the postwar years is that the territory it operates on – that of a sterile separation born of a fear of the sacred – was overtaken by real events: ‘the solitude of the poet became, in reality, the segregation of the incarcerated [...] the nightmarish fantasies of the surrealists found an atrocious realization in the bars of soap made from the bodies of the dead or in the lightshades of Buchenwald’.<sup>92</sup> Yet far from being completely cut off from reality, Levi sees this form of modern art as accurately expressing a world that is ‘incomprehensible, or absurd, or stultifying, or boring, or in some way deprived of vitality’.<sup>93</sup> This world, he suggests, is the world of the ‘Luigini’, and these art forms do not represent all of society, but only the part which we might ‘using Gramscian terminology, refer to as hegemonic’.<sup>94</sup>

Beneath this hegemonic world, Levi argues, lies another, that of the *contadini* (and the term here retains the multiple meanings we have seen it acquire). It is ‘another world: the civilization of oral tradition, of rooted language [...] it is the dark vital spring within each of us’.<sup>95</sup> This world seems to contain the possibilities for a very different literature:

*Poiché la civiltà contadina è posta al limite dell'indistinzione, vive e perdura in quell'ambigua regione nella quale per la prima volta l'individuo si distacca, si forma e prende coscienza di sé, ed attorno a lui è sempre presente e incumbente il senso del sacro, della originaria indistinzione, e ogni azione, ogni*

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<sup>90</sup> It is important to note that Levi would later use the same terminology of separation to talk about not just the concentration camp, but segregation in South Africa and India. See Levi, ‘Occupazione e sviluppo nel Mezzogiorno’, *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, pp. 140-41.

<sup>91</sup> Carlo Levi, ‘L’arte luigina e L’arte contadina’, *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, pp. 61-70, pp. 62-3.

<sup>92</sup> Levi, ‘L’arte luigina e L’arte contadina’, *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, pp. 64-5.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68.

*pensiero, ogni parola, ogni immagine hanno il carattere delle cose per la prima volta pensate, sono una affermazione di libertà nei riguardi della circostante, indeterminata natura. Se la poesia, come io credo, non è che l'invenzione della verità, il mondo contadino è tutto immerso in un'atmosfera di poesia; di una poesia fatta di oggetti, di cose vere, di fatti reali, che sono quelli attraverso i quali ci si può distinguere e liberare dalla magia della notte tribale.*

Since the contadino civilisation is positioned at the limits of indistinction, lives and persists in that ambiguous region in which for the first time the individual separates itself, forms itself, and becomes conscious of itself, and around him is always present and looming the sense of the sacred, of the primordial indistinction, and every action, every word, every image have the character of things thought for the first time, they are an affirmation of liberty towards the encircling, indeterminate nature. If poetry, as I believe, is nothing other than the invention of truth, the contadino world is entirely immersed in an atmosphere of poetry, of a poetry made of objects, of real things, of real facts, those through which one can distinguish and liberate oneself from the magic of the tribal night.<sup>96</sup>

The difference between luiginian and contadinian art is therefore not simply a question of the position of the writer, the intent of the work, or even necessarily its form. Nor is it a distinction between avant-gardist experimentalism and socialist realism, since both, for Levi, were realist forms in the sense that they both express accurately the world from which they emerge (the isolated and ghost-like world of the Luigini, still terrorized by a memory of the sacred indistinction, finds its 'realist' expression in Kafka and Picasso). The difference is instead related to the sacred/religious dialectic, and has something to do with the relationship to things:

*Questo mondo poetico contadino è dunque legato alle cose, poiché consiste proprio nella invenzione delle cose per la prima volta, è un'arte assolutamente realistica proprio in quanto mitologica. In essa è sempre presente il punto di partenza, cioè l'ambiguità di una doppia natura, del doppio senso delle cose, nella incertezza della loro esistenza; ma la direzione in cui essa si svolge è quella della distinzione, della precisazione, della determinazione.*

This poetic contadino world is therefore tied to things, given that it consists really in the invention of things for the first time, it is an absolutely realistic art precisely in so far as it is mythological. The point of departure is always present in it, that is to say the ambiguity of a double nature, of the double

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<sup>96</sup> Levi, 'Il contadino e l'orologio', Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974, p. 58.

sense of things, in the uncertainty of their existence; but the direction in which it unfolds is that of distinction, of specification, of determination.<sup>97</sup>

The description of the contadino world as 'poetic' here, or, in the passage before, 'entirely immersed in an atmosphere of poetry' is central. Poetry refers not to a particular form of writing, but to the act of creation itself, which has its archetype in the biblical naming of things for the first time, individuating them from the limitless indeterminacy of the pre-linguistic world, and thus creating them. The formula Levi would later use to describe this is 'poetry is the invention of truth; invention, that is to say, creation for the first time, not repeatable nor repeated, the moment in which the expression coincides, for the first time, with reality'.<sup>98</sup> The description of the 'contadino world' as poetic, then, has little to do with literary form, and everything to do with the act of creation. It is also, as he explains, a political act:

*Realtà e poesia coincidono nel loro sorgere e nel loro svilupparsi per il mondo contadino; ed è altrettanto vero perciò che l'azione politica e sociale ha per i contadini valore poetico e che l'espressione poetica ha per essi valore politico e sociale, valore di azione e di libertà. Una occupazione di terre, un movimento collettivo sono oggi un grande fatto di cultura, sono, obbiettivamente, poesia: cultura contadina.*

Reality and poetry coincide in their rising and the development for the contadino world, and it is equally true that political and social activism has, for the contadini, a poetic value, and that poetic expression has for them a political and social value, the value of action and liberty. An occupation of land, a collective movement are today a great fact of culture, they are, objectively speaking, poetry: contadino culture.<sup>99</sup>

This 'contadino culture' that Levi would oppose to what he sees as the emptiness of modernist experimentalism is, therefore, a kind of realism, what he would elsewhere refer to as 'realismo contadino'.<sup>100</sup> But by realism he does not intend a literary form that seeks to accurately represent or mimic an already known and given reality; realism is not simply a question of verisimilitude. Rather, it is a form of artistic or political expression which preserves a sense of itself as an act, an event, of creation, as something

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<sup>97</sup> Levi, 'Il contadino e l'orologio', Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974, p. 59.

<sup>98</sup> Levi, 'L'invezione della verità', Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974, p. 121.

<sup>99</sup> Levi, 'L'uva putanella', Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974, p. 99.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

which creates a new truth and brings some new reality into the world. 'Poetry and truth coincide for the contadino, and this', Levi tells us, 'is the true meaning of the term realism'.<sup>101</sup> It is in this sense that all of Levi's works, from *Cristo and the The Watch* to his travel writing, are realist works. This is the guiding principle behind both of those novels, which refuse the mechanical chronology of the plot-driven novel in favour of a meandering anecdotal style, which preserves the freshness not only of the voices encountered but also of the encounter itself.

Levi's analysis in these essays is clearly borrowing from Gramsci's idea that Italian literature had failed to be 'national-popular', and that the possibilities for a new literature lie in folklore. As De Donato and D'Amaro point out, Levi begins to develop this opposition between contadinian and luiginian art in 1951, precisely the moment in which he was reading more of Gramsci's work, and in particular *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, which was published by Einaudi in that year and contained Gramsci's meditations on the national-popular.<sup>102</sup> As such, it clearly reflects the nature of debates in Levi's Italy, debates which were to receive their fullest expression in Asor Rosa's *Scrittori e popolo* (in which, significantly, Levi is one of few writers to come off well). Yet perhaps Levi's idea of a world literature riven down the middle perhaps also anticipates, in its language and the nature of the intervention in debates about art and literature which it seeks to make if not necessarily in its detail, Jameson's essay on 'Third World literature' as national allegory. This similarity is most visible, I would suggest, in Jameson's reading of Hegel at the end of the essay, in which he reminds us that 'only the Slave knows what reality and the resistance of matter really are', while the Master is condemned to 'the luxury of a placeless freedom in which any consciousness of his own concrete situation flees like a dream, like a world unremembered on the tip of his tongue, a nagging doubt which the puzzled mind is unable to formulate'. The nightmarish terms Jameson employs to describe the epistemologically crippling view from the top as reducing 'its subjects to the illusion of a host of fragmented subjectivities, to the poverty of the individual experience of isolated monads, to dying individual bodies without collective pasts or futures', seem very close indeed to Levi's

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>102</sup> Gigliola De Donato and Sergio D'Amaro, *Un torinese del Sud: Carlo Levi*, p. 209.

own description of Luiginian art as expressing 'squalid isolation without hope'.<sup>103</sup> Levi's theory of literature, as well as his own literary work, retains and develops the international and anti-colonial dimensions of Gramsci's, and represents a stepping stone towards what we should think of as a postcolonial theory of literature.

### 3.3 A Planet without Borders: Lucania, India, China, Vietnam

In the last section I want to see how this idea of political activism as poetry or invention of truth came increasingly to be associated with the context of anti-colonial struggle and postcolonial nationalism in Levi's mind in the late 1950s and 1960s. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that his formation of the idea of poetry as 'the invention of truth' was informed and nourished by his anti-colonial commitments and contacts in those decades. I want to focus here on three key focal points of this commitment: India, China, and Vietnam.

Of these, India is perhaps the most important for Levi. In January of 1956, shortly after returning from a journey through Russia, Carlo Levi was sent to India by Turinese newspaper *La Stampa*, and the resulting articles were published the following year.<sup>104</sup> They have recently been translated into English under the title *Essays on India*, though they were originally collected and published in Italian under the much more Levian title 'the planet without borders/limits' (*Il Pianeta senza confini*).<sup>105</sup> These essays are both beautiful and dense, and deserve to be the subject of study in their own right. In this section I want merely to give a taste of them, and of the effect that Levi's experience of India had on him.

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<sup>103</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), pp. 65-88 (p. 85).

<sup>104</sup> Desai's otherwise excellent foreword to the recent English translation of these articles erroneously implies that the journey itself took place in 1957. For more on Levi's trip to India, see: De Donato and D'Amaro, *Un torinese del Sud*, pp. 250-55, and Vanna Zaccaro, 'Reportage dai sud del mondo: L'India e la Cina', in De Donato ed., *Verso il Sud del mondo*, (2003: Roma, Donzelli), pp. 129-142.

<sup>105</sup> Carlo Levi, *Il pianeta senza confini: prose di viaggio*, ed. by Vanna Zaccaro (Roma: Donzelli, 2003). Very little has been written about Levi's travel writings from a postcolonial perspective. One excellent exception is Francesca Congiu's 'Contested Places: Carlo Levi's Postcolonial Discourse in *Tutto il miele è finito*', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 16:2 (2012), pp. 163-177.



One of the most interesting things about these essays are the ways in which they constantly seek out analogies between India and Levi's own Italy, not simply in an attempt to orient himself in the face of a confusing alterity, but rather as part of a genuine search for similarity and solidarity. India, as I noted earlier, appears to Levi as a 'giant mirror' that reflects Italy's own history and struggles.<sup>106</sup> We frequently come across Italians in India, for example a hotel director from Longo and a conductor from Bologna, or a group of twelve technicians there on business.<sup>107</sup> Yet it seems in particular to be the Italian South and Sicily that Levi is reminded of, and he is keen to foreground similarities between this work and his earlier Sicilian collection *Words Are Stones*. In one moment, for example, he sees 'sitting at a table, in the fleeting moment when the flowered curtain was tossed by the breeze, a dark blonde girl, identical to the girl that I painted one day, and who appears on the threshold of my book *Words Are Stones*, with the same mouth, the same gaze'.<sup>108</sup> The inter-textual links that Levi makes here within his own work are more broadly representative of the kinds of linkages he is interesting in making between India and the Italian South, and he uses his own corpus to anchor these connections for his Italian readership.

It is the relationship with poetry and words that seems to cement this relationship, however. One of the purposes of Levi's visit to India is to attend the Pan-Asiatic Congress of Writers in New Delhi in 1957. Though the congress featured a vast crowd of writers of all different forms – including short story writers, novelists, essayists, and critics – it is the poetry that Levi is most taken by. Despite his apparent reluctance to attend an evening session dedicated to poets writing in Urdu – both because he had 'always found the recitation or reading of verse in Italy to be particularly boring', and because he did not speak Urdu and had thus expected to be 'left untouched by the spectacle' – it is precisely this session which dominates his account of the congress.<sup>109</sup> Far from being unmoved by the poetry he doesn't understand, he finds himself caught up in a performance which to him seems 'made up entirely of rhythm, duration, intensity, and musical value'.<sup>110</sup> The performance is drawn to a close by two particularly illustrious

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<sup>106</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, p. 5.

<sup>107</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, p. 11, p. 69.

<sup>108</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>109</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>110</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, p. 27.

Urdu poets: Ali Sikandar Jigar Moradabadi, and ‘the great Urdu poet of Pakistan, Fes’, who, as Antony Shugaar points out, is almost certainly Faiz-Ahmed-Faiz.<sup>111</sup> The thing which strikes him most seems to be the collective and shared nature of the Urdu poetry, the way in which it seems to be something created and carried by the audience alongside the reciting poet. The performances varied from more traditional recitations to more ‘modern, free-form style’ pieces, in which, nevertheless:

[there] persisted an air of ancient, folk common chant, collective thought, and ritual participation. They made me think of the *cantastorie* [storytellers] who recite their verses in the piazzas of Sicily, continuing to instill an ancient and heroic rhythm into a language that long ago lost that cadence, transforming the sounds and intonation of modern Italian into a chant of long ago, when swords were drawn and knightly champions stepped onto the field of combat.<sup>112</sup>

If the contadino world of Lucania and the Italian South had appeared to Levi as immersed in a poetic atmosphere, then this seems even truer of India. In all of Levi’s essays it is a country that hums with poetry and the magic of the spoken word, from the very first page of the first essay, which starts with the transliterated but not translated words of the *Bhagavad Gita* which a friend is simultaneously reciting and translating to him.<sup>113</sup>

This sense of India as poetry is not just the reification of his own lack of linguistic qualification, and is not just the result of the antiquity of India. Instead, it seems to be something that is produced by India at that political moment, less than ten years after independence and the horrors of Partition. Another moment in the congress is depicted in a separate essay: Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s address to the congress in English, to which Carlo Levi had been asked to give an improvised response (a clear indication of the significance of his presence at the conference). Levi seems completely blown away by Nehru and his speech, though he is already very familiar with Nehru’s writings (he refers on several occasions to *The Discovery of India*). The way Levi describes Nehru’s political philosophy seems astonishingly similar to the theory he

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<sup>111</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, p. 91.

<sup>112</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, p. 28.

<sup>113</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, p. 3.

himself was writing at the time and would continue to develop over the following decade:

He is a man of action (he says this, he repeats it in his writings: he talks about the irresistible pleasure of action, the marvelous satisfaction that one can attain through action). But what does he seek in action? Something more than mere results, something that is prior to the outcome: the discovery of existence, existence itself: the discovery of truth. (And what is that, if not the definition of poetry?) Nehru attained this complexity, this poetic value of the person, not only through his shared experience and interests with Gandhi, but also through two fundamental experiences: prison (time, solitude), and the world of the farming village. This was the source of the formation of his thinking, and his personality: here action became knowledge, a total human adventure; here it became discovery: 'The Discovery of India'. Political action, then, as a discovery of truth, as a relationship with a reality in its very nascent form, in its primal emergence; as a creation of oneself in others.<sup>114</sup>

The central aspect of Nehru's thought as it is presented here might easily be rephrased as 'the invention of truth', which again retains its relationship with poetry. With relatively few alterations, this could easily be a summary of Levi's own thought. He also seems to recognize himself in Nehru's biography: the two events that he argues most shape Nehru's thought, prison (and in the parentheses following that word we perhaps also hear an echo of Levi's own experience) and the 'world of the farming village', are also those that have most shaped Levi's work and conception of the world – just as we saw earlier in *Cristo*, the oppression he suffered at the hands of Fascism has made him 'victim of the same destiny'. Levi goes on to suggest that:

This way of being, which allows him – which induces him – to write, employing himself and his experiences as component elements of history, finds in him, naturally enough, despite the western secularity of his thought, an Indian colouring, in which there prevails a sense of all centuries being contemporary, and a quest for ties with the ancient Indian tradition, with the meditations of Buddha, with the Vedas, and so forth. But this is not substantially different from the experiences of the new men of our times, of all nations, of the men of the European Resistance, of men who emerged from the movement for peasant liberation, of all those who formed the thought and reality of today, and who understood, or moved, the new multitudes.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>115</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, p. 47.

It is worth noting here that a decade later Italo Calvino would similarly claim that the central feature of Levi's own writing was 'the co-presence of times' (*la compresenza dei tempi*).<sup>116</sup> What this essay makes clear is that Levi sees himself and Nehru as engaged in the same project, and it is precisely his experience of the *Resistenza* which allows him to relate to Nehru's anti-colonial struggle. For Levi, what he had seen begin in Italy during the resistance, and subsequently falter after the fall of the Parri government, had grown and prospered in India.

Before moving on from India I want to note a few more things about these essays. The first is that although it would be easy to see parts of them as orientalist, these essays are also profoundly 'postcolonial' in some of their gestures. In one stunning essay Levi rapturously describes the Rainbow Market of New Delhi in never-ending sentences designed to reflect the astonishing plurality of the scene before him, now beautiful, now horrifying in the suffering of the unending crowd of beggars trodden underfoot. At the end of this essay Levi asks 'what can be done with the poor, with the leper, save to embrace them and lie down alongside them?' There is, however, another possible reaction to the spectacle:

(Or perhaps, like the British, conceal them, and conceal themselves, to keep from being infected or overwhelmed by them. Conceal oneself in a superior caste, behind a wall of customs and manners, evening dress, the tea ceremony, Victorian morality the estates and gardens of an earthly paradise. In this way, the old fiery impetuous England of the common folk and of Shakespeare, to keep itself from dissolving into India and being devoured by it, built for itself a prison of manners and customs, like someone who has brought a tiger into their home, and can find no better form of protection than to lock themselves up in a cage. That is how India created modern England, its personality and its style, its magnificent detachment, its inviolable liberty).<sup>117</sup>

The gesture Levi makes here might seem reminiscent of Gramsci's ironic comment (which Capuzzo and Mezzadra describe as the fruit of 'a kind of postcolonial mood') that Henri Massis, who was himself 'dreadfully afraid that Tagore and Gandhi's Asiatic ideology might destroy French Catholic rationalism, [did] not realise that Paris has

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<sup>116</sup> Italo Calvino, 'La compresenza dei tempi', in Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, p. ix.

<sup>117</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, pp. 22-23.

become a semi-colony of Sengalese intellectualism'.<sup>118</sup> Yet in its insistence upon the ways in which the center has been shaped by the periphery it seems also quintessentially postcolonial. This gesture is underlined by the visual presentation of the passage: where the previous pages have seen ever growing sentences sprawl across them in an eloquent attempt to keep up with a spectacle which '[overwhelms] our capacity for words, this paragraph is isolated from the rest, caged up in parentheses, neatly cut off from the exuberance of the rest of the article.<sup>119</sup>

The key point about these essays that I would like to draw attention to here is the way in which these essays form part and contribute to the future of a longstanding dialogue between Indian and Italian writers and intellectuals, and part of the work this thesis as a whole is attempting to do is to bring several moments of this dialogue to light. In Levi's essays on India, a whole series of these connections crystalize. He refers to a conversation he had with Roberto Rossellini, who himself worked on and in India and whose second wife was Indian, about a trip the film director had once taken in a helicopter with Nehru.<sup>120</sup> Another article, 'Red Hands', is about a trip Levi himself took with his 'Indian friend, the writer Mulk Raj Anand' to the town of Gurgaon.<sup>121</sup> Anand, as we have seen in the previous chapter, also read and knew well the works of Silone, and was a frequent participant in many of the international conferences which both of these writers attended in the 1930s.<sup>122</sup> Yet the essays also open up the future of this dialogue. The recent English translations of both *Essays on India* and his articles on Sicily, *Words are Stones*, are furnished with a preface by the Indian writer Anita Desai, who became interested in Levi while living and working in India. Desai's own work, most notably in her 1995 novel *Journey to Ithaca*, flits between Italy and India, and sees both as marked by visual beauty and the ugliness of death. It is also worth noting Desai's own

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<sup>118</sup> Paolo Capuzzo and Sandro Mezzadra, 'Provincializing the Italian Reading of Gramsci', *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, ed. by Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 34-54 (p. 49).

<sup>119</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, p. 19.

<sup>120</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, p. 46.

<sup>121</sup> Levi, *Essays on India*, p. 31.

<sup>122</sup> As one of the most celebrated Indian writers in English and one of the most prominent members of the Progressive Writers Association, he is also, it bears pointing out, one of the most important writers for postcolonial literary studies today. It would indeed be fascinating to see an examination of how Anand's own work might have been inflected by his readings of Italian anti-Fascist writing.

importance in the Italian literary field: in 2000 she was awarded the prestigious Alberto Moravia prize for literature. In other words, the conversation between Italy and India that these essays form part of is still going on today, and Levi's work is still a part of it.

As I demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, Levi's engagement with the Italian South and the work that stemmed from it was always framed by the exercise of colonial power, represented by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. By the end of the 1960s, in an essay entitled 'The invention of truth', Levi makes it clear that, without abandoning his political commitments in Italy, he sees the new reality as being made by anti-colonial movements. The passage is worth quoting from at length:

*L'esperienza univesrsale è sotto gli occhi di tutti, centinaia di milioni di tutti i paesi vanno attuando nel nostro secolo un processo innumerevole di presa di coscienza, di invenzione della propria esistenza, e quindi della nuova realtà del mondo. Sono popoli interi che escono da un sonno millenario: sono classi sociali subalterne e serve da secoli che affermano la propria autonomia, e la propria libertà. Questi milioni di uomini di ogni razza e colore non facevano parte della civiltà vivente, avevano in sé una cultura, non avevano mai avuto parte nella formazione della realtà, se non come strumenti meccanici: braccia, schiene, mani, maniche di lavoro servile. La loro umanità non era ancora nata, essi erano ancora del tutto immersi nell'indeterminato e nell'informe, erano muti e ciechi come bambini infanti, e perciò una gran parte del mondo era invisibile e ineffabile e inesistente. Ora dappertutto essi, attraverso i grandi movimenti di rivendicazione sociale e nazionale, vanno aprendo gli occhi sulle cose, e le loro lingue si sciolgono a nuovi e antichissimi linguaggi, e la realtà del mondo cresce con li loro nuovo vedere e il nuovo parlare, nasce per essi in tutto il mondo una nuova cultura che è un fatto poetico nel senso etimologico greco del ποιέω, del fare, dell'azione creatrice.*

The universal experience is under the eyes of everyone, hundreds of millions of people in all countries are realizing our century in an innumerable process of the taking of consciousness, of the invention of their own existence, and therefore of the new reality of the world. They are entire peoples that are waking from a millennial sleep: they are subaltern social classes and those who have been servants for centuries who now affirm their own autonomy, and their own liberty. These millions of men of every race and colour did not form part of living culture, they had within themselves a culture, they had never been part of the formation of reality if not as mechanical instruments: arms, backs, hands, groups of servile labour. Their humanity was not yet born, they were still completely immersed in the indeterminate and the unformed, they were blind and mute like infant children, and for this reason a great part of the world was invisible and ineffable and inexistent. Now, everywhere, through the great movements for social justice, they are opening their eyes to things, and their tongues loosen with new and ancient languages, and the reality of the world grows with

their new seeing and their new talking, because of them in all the world a new culture is being born, a culture which is a poetic fact in the etymological sense of the Greek word ποιέω, of doing, of creating, of the creative act.<sup>123</sup>

It would be easy to see Levi's infantilization of those resisting oppression throughout the world as patronizing and paternalistic, and as denying history to the oppressed. It is important, however, to locate this passage in the context of both the theoretical content of his work that we have been attempting to trace throughout this chapter and the very genuine political commitments that he defended inside and outside the Italian parliament. In many ways, we see his work come full circle here, and return to the territory of his novel, *Cristo*. Levi is not denying history to the oppressed peoples in the First and Third (and indeed Second) worlds, rather he recognizes once again that history itself, the right to create the dominant narrative of the world, has been key to this oppression. When he refers to the subaltern classes as 'blind and mute like infant children', he is both talking about the ways in which everyday experience of colonial and capitalist power can be crippling in its effects, but he is also relating them to the pre-linguistic realm of the sacred (the term 'infant' is a significant one) to which the hegemonic part of the globe has itself been blind. Most importantly, Levi is interested in this muteness not for its own sake, but rather only in so far as it provides a frame for the way in which the oppressed classes throughout the world were now speaking. If, after his experience of the *Resistenza*, Levi's theorizing had always awaited the arrival of a true word, for 'a day when freedom would create new languages, a new ideal perspective, a new culture and a new poetry', and if his literary work had attempted to clear a space for this arrival, then it is in India, in Russia, in China, in Vietnam, and in the wave of decolonization that rocked the globe in the 1950s and 60s, that he finally heard it spoken.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Levi, 'L'invenzione della verità', *Coraggio dei miti: Scritti contemporanei, 1922-1974*, pp. 123-24.

<sup>124</sup> Levi, *Paura della libertà*, p. 38.

## Chapter 4. Calvino and Rushdie: 'Make Them Endure, Give Them Space'

### Note on the Texts

In the previous chapters I have chosen to refer to the original Italian edition of the primary texts and provide my own translation. This is partly due to the fact that many of the sources I have been examining are not available in translation, but more importantly the intention has been to preserve and exhume continuities in the critical and creative vocabularies these authors develop, both within and between their oeuvres. In this chapter, however, I am concerned primarily with Salman Rushdie's reading of Italo Calvino. That is to say, I am interested in a history of reading that unfolded in English, and in translation. For this reason I have chosen, wherever possible, to refer to the authoritative English translations of Calvino's work, to the translation that Rushdie himself is likely to have read. I refer to the Italian edition only in those instances in which an authoritative translation is not available.

### 4.1 Introduction: In Search of Rushdie and Calvino

'One of the difficulties with writing about Italo Calvino', Salman Rushdie wrote in 1981 in the *London Review of Books*, 'is that he has already said about himself just about everything there is to be said'.<sup>1</sup> We might equally say the same thing of Rushdie. Certainly no-one has been keener to emphasize and explore the influence Italo Calvino has had on the works of Salman Rushdie than Rushdie himself. Indeed, while Rushdie has written perhaps more about Calvino's place in his writing than any other author, there has been little serious engagement with this line of influence, or what it means for our readings of either writer. This is in marked contrast to the wealth of material considering him alongside, in particular, Gunter Grass and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In fact, in 'The Politics of the Possible', Kumkum Sangari holds up Calvino as embodying the exact opposite of the postcolonial writings of Rushdie and Garcia Marquez, seeing him as

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'Calvino', *London Review of Books*, 3:17, 17 September 1981, p. 1.



a practitioner of a 'Euro-American postmodern fiction, which directs attention to the abstract processes whereby meaning is either generated but never found or lost in the finding'.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I hope to show that Rushdie and Calvino are in fact much closer than this position allows (closer, I think than he is to Garcia Marquez), and that Rushdie's reading of Calvino allows us to locate his work not as in the imaginative geography of 'Euro-American' postmodernism, but as part of the same resistant postcolonial trend Sangari is in search of here.

The two writers met and became friends the same year in which Rushdie, who had only very recently been shot to stardom by the Booker success of *Midnight's Children*, was asked to introduce Calvino during his book tour for *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. It is interesting to see that it was these two books, already intimately linked, that physically brought them together. A year later found them both at a party for Booker prize winners (at which Calvino and his wife Chicita were guests), and shortly after that Rushdie recounts going for dinner with him in London and discussing Gabriel Garcia Marquez's receipt of the Nobel Prize. Calvino returned the favour by writing letters to contacts in Italy to try and find an Italian publisher for *Midnight's Children*.<sup>3</sup> After the novel had eventually found a publisher, Calvino reviewed it favourably in the Italian press.<sup>4</sup> This contact was sustained up until the end of Calvino's life: all of these anecdotes are recounted in a 2000 issue of PEN America, in a section dedicated to Calvino that also featured a section of Calvino's *Why Read the Classics?* Even a decade after his death Calvino has clearly not passed from Rushdie's mind, and in addition to the textual links I will trace later in this chapter and the multitude of mentions in interviews and essays, it is perhaps worth noting in passing that Rushdie recently publicly commemorated what would have been Calvino's birthday on Twitter in 2011.<sup>5</sup> Calvino has been a major

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<sup>2</sup> Kumkum Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', *Cultural Critique*, 7 (1987), pp. 157-186 (p. 164).

<sup>3</sup> See letter to Sergio Pautasso, 1982, in Italo Calvino, *Letters, 1941-1985*, ed. by Michael Wood, trans. by Martin McLaughlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 518-19.

<sup>4</sup> Italo Calvino, 'I figli della mezzanotte di Salman Rushdie', in *Saggi, vol. 1* ed. by Mario Barenghi, (Milano: Modadori, 1995), pp. 1436-42 (p. 1442). Originally published as 'L'India nel lenzuolo', *La Repubblica*, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Salman Rushdie, on Twitter, <<https://twitter.com/salmanrushdie/status/125200617806381057>> [Accessed 24/09/2015].

influence on Rushdie all the way from his very first to his most recent works. The story of this influence remains largely untold, and the wider implications this story might have for the ways in which we think about both authors far from fully explored.

When Calvino is mentioned in conjunction with Rushdie, he tends to appear as part of a large list of canonical authors upon whom Rushdie is seen to draw, a pantheon of writers usually invoked to emphasize the erudition and intertextuality at work in Rushdie's fiction. Ankhi Mukherjee provides us with a fairly typical example of this gesture:

The roll call of Anglo-American classics that constitute the hauntology of a Rushdie novel is long: *The Satanic Verses* alone alludes to Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Hemingway's *Moby Dick* and Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, however, I want to extract Calvino from this kind of list, and instead argue that there is something very specific and unique about the literary relationship between these two authors. This passage from Mukherjee dramatizes some of the pitfalls of these 'roll calls'. Firstly, Calvino appears as part of a canon of 'Anglo-American classics' (as does Bulgakov, surprisingly): the roots that his work has in Italy, and in a particular Italian political landscape, are completely obscured. Secondly, in employing the Derridean language of the 'hauntology' Mukherjee positions their textual relationship as occurring on the terrain of poststructuralism. This is significant because the way in which it appears easiest to collocate these two writers seems to be stylistically, as 'postmodernist' writers who share a playful employment of meta-textuality and irony in their fictions. This, however, is not the only way in which we can connect them, nor is not necessarily the most productive. From this perspective, they belong together in a global and cosmopolitan category that would also include, for example, Borges, Kafka, Pynchon, and Garcia Marquez. Including them both in this category, however, risks obscuring what is specific about their relationship, and obliges

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<sup>6</sup> Ankhi Mukherjee, 'The Rushdie Canon', in *Salman Rushdie: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Robert Eaglestone and Martin McQuillan (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 9-21 (p. 19).

us to ignore both the specificities of their locations and those aspects of their work that do not conform to this pattern.

Along with Primo Levi and Leonardo Sciascia, Italo Calvino is one of the best-known twentieth-century Italian novelists in Anglophone literary circles, and one of the most widely read in translation. He has been best known, however, for his later works (*Invisible Cities* and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*), and perhaps as a result the picture that we have of him is often incomplete. He has tended to be read in ways that seek to emphasize the poststructuralist dimensions of this later work, so as to render him in one way or another consonant with French poststructuralist theory (particularly that of Roland Barthes, of whom he was a friend and admirer).<sup>7</sup> Eugenio Bolongaro, in a recent study of Calvino's earlier works, has noted a 'marked selectivity' in much existing Calvino scholarship conducted in English:

The tendency is to focus on the works Calvino wrote after the mid-1960s and emphasize the playful postmodern moments in his fictional narratives. [...] In the end, these lines of enquiry portray Calvino as the most prominent exponent of a kind of global postmodernism, a writer to be studied and understood alongside Borges, Perec, and Pynchon. While undoubtedly some important insights into Calvino's work can be obtained in this way, this orientation seems ultimately limited and potentially pernicious if it becomes the one canonical reading.<sup>8</sup>

This reading of Calvino to which Bolongaro objects is precisely the same as Sangari's: Calvino as a Euro-American postmodernist. One of the things that is lost in this positioning of Calvino as a 'global postmodernist' is his specific co-ordinates in post-war Italian literature and politics. This is important for this chapter, for while one may imagine that he shares little with the other Italian authors in this thesis, his life is in fact often intimately connected with theirs, and his work is framed by the same Italian post-war landscape, the same debates. Like them, his intellectual formation took place largely in Turin, a city still defined politically by the figures of Gramsci and Piero Gobetti. Like them, Calvino was an anti-Fascist, and fought as a partisan in the mountains of Liguria during the Nazi occupation. He too was a member of the Italian Communist Party, from

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Constance Markey, *Italo Calvino: a Journey toward Postmodernism*, (Florida: University of Florida Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Eugenio Bolongaro, *Italo Calvino and the Compass of Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 3-4.

this time until his resignation from the party in 1957, as a result of the horrifying scenes in Hungary and his frustration at the lack of opposition within the party.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, he did not turn away from the politics of the far left until much later (if indeed he ever really did), and had nothing but scorn for the figure of the 'ex-communist', who, in response to the volume in which Silone's essay 'uscita di sicurezza' appeared, is described as 'one of the dreariest figures of the post-war period'.<sup>10</sup> Many of his earlier works are very much in a neo-realist vein, and are clearly influenced by his close relationship with Pavese and Vittorini. He read and admired the works of Gramsci as a young man, and at that point at least considered himself to be travelling along a road cleared by Gramsci.<sup>11</sup> More importantly, perhaps, he became good friends with Carlo Levi, and wrote frequently and with much enthusiasm about Levi's works.<sup>12</sup> He described him as an author 'rich in intellectual elements',<sup>13</sup> and wrote a moving letter to Linuccia Saba following his funeral in 1975, in which he wrote that 'the world around us has become poorer in a way that really nothing can compensate us for'.<sup>14</sup> By placing Calvino in the company of Borges and Pynchon, we risk losing sight of the specifically Italian co-ordinates of his literary evolution, and the anti-Fascist origins of his work.

There are, perhaps, many ways in which we might think of Calvino as a 'postcolonial' writer. In the introduction to the recent English translation of Calvino's letters, Michael Woods notes the internationalist dimensions of his correspondence: 'He thinks about Brazilian prisons, Palestinian poets, the war in Vietnam. In Cuba he meets Che Guevara'.<sup>15</sup> We might add to this Calvino's engagement with the Civil Rights movement in the United States. During his time in America he attends demonstrations (apparently as the only white face among three thousand black students), which he finds deeply moving in their dignity, and meets Martin Luther King. He wrote movingly of the experience in a letter that forms part of his 'American Diary 1959-1960': 'This is a day that I will never forget as long as I live. I have seen what racism is, mass racism, accepted

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<sup>9</sup> See Calvino's letter of resignation from the party. Calvino, *Letters*, pp. 134-37

<sup>10</sup> Calvino, *Letters*, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Italo Calvino, 'La letteratura italiana sulla resistenza', in *Saggi*, vol. 1, pp. 40-46 (p. 46).

<sup>12</sup> See: Italo Calvino, 'Carlo Levi, *Paura della libertà*', pp. 1114-16; 'La compresenza dei tempi', pp. 1122-25; and 'Carlo Levi, un discorso totale', pp. 1963-64, in Calvino, *Saggi*.

<sup>13</sup> Calvino, *Letters*, p. 399.

<sup>14</sup> Calvino, *Letters*, p.453.

<sup>15</sup> Woods, introduction to Calvino, *Letters*, p. ix.

as one of a society's fundamental rules.<sup>16</sup> An investigation of the anti-colonial and anti-racist dimensions of Calvino's politics and writings might yield some interesting insights into his work. In this chapter, however, I am interested in Calvino as a 'postcolonial writer' in purely in terms of his influence on Salman Rushdie. There are two ways in which this line of influence might allow us to think of a postcolonial Calvino. The first is that, because of Rushdie's centrality to the postcolonial literary canon (Lazarus mischievously suggests that he is the only author in this canon, which is obviously tongue-in-cheek hyperbole but nevertheless does emphasize the way in which the field has been, and continues to be, defined in relation to his work), we might see Calvino as having vicariously shaped the dimensions of what we now think of as postcolonial writing.<sup>17</sup> The second is that I believe that Rushdie's reading of Calvino allows us to foreground what is most 'postcolonial' about Calvino's own works.

What I am in search of in this chapter then, is both a Rushdian Calvino (the version of Calvino that we get through Rushdie's reading of him) and a Calvinian Rushdie (the version of Rushdie which is inspired by this reading), which I believe at times represent the best of both authors. Ultimately, I want to situate this line of influence not within a global river of postmodernism, but rather within the specific tributary of Indian-Italian correspondence that has been the subject of this thesis.

#### **4.1.2 Existing Studies**

There are, to my knowledge, only two studies to have examined the relationship between Calvino and Rushdie in any detail, both published in Italian journals far from the debates of postcolonial studies. The first of these, written by Silvia Albertazzi in 1992, argues that Calvino has been a formative influence on what she refers to as 'new literatures in English', and particularly upon Ondaatje, Ghosh, and Rushdie. Albertazzi is ambitious in her claim that 'actually, it is Calvino who teaches the new writers in English the use of myth and it is he again who provides the model for a new travel literature which deals with journeys taking place more in the traveller's mind than in routes

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<sup>16</sup> Italo Calvino, *A Hermit in Paris*, trans. Martin McLaughlin (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 22.

marked on an atlas'.<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that she makes little reference to Rushdie's writings on Calvino and seems unaware of their real-life friendship, she makes many perceptive observations about the similarities between the two, particularly when she discerns 'a "Calvino-like faith" in the power of myth and in the use of story-telling' in *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>19</sup> She adopts a distance reading approach, and attempts to draw parallels between the entireties of the oeuvres of these writers. Some of these parallels are convincing and highly suggestive – in particular her comments on *The Satanic Verses* and *The Cloven Viscount*, to which I will return later, and the idea of 'the city as invented space' – though others are less so.<sup>20</sup> The equation of *Midnight's Children* with Calvino's first novel seems to me to be somewhat unsustainable:

At the basis of *The pat of spiders' nests* [sic] and *Midnight's Children* is the assumption that all people who have just acquired freedom with great difficulty feel the urge to tell their stories: consequently, not only is it the case that Rushdie's post –Independence [sic] India is a "multicoloured universe of stories", exactly like Calvino's post-war Italy is, but also, when dealing with such matters, both authors adapt the tones and rhythms of their writing to those of popular oral narratives. Moreover, since they adopt the same device of looking at their narrative universe with childish eyes, they succeed in conveying to their readers the picture of a world as if it were seen for the first time and, eventually, they find out that the stories they tell can all be traced back to the scheme of ancient myths and popular fables.<sup>21</sup>

What this comparison does interestingly foreground, however, is the fact that both of these authors come to prominence as post-independence writers whose works engage with nationalism as an idea and a struggle. This reading of *Midnight's Children*, however, seems to miss much of what is different between the two novels, and the fact that Rushdie himself did not like Calvino's first book. In fact, perhaps we should compare the first novels of both writers in that they both rejected them later (*Grimus*, rather than *Midnight's Children* in this case, of course). A more significant link between these two novels would be the common presence of Kipling's *Kim*. Like Gramsci, Calvino was surprisingly enamoured with Kipling, and seemed to think of him as the author who

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<sup>18</sup> Silvia Albertazzi, 'The Influence of Italo Calvino on the New Literatures in English', in *Bologna: la cultura italiana e le letterature straniere moderne*, (Ravenna: Longo, 1992) pp. 289-295 (p. 291).

<sup>19</sup> Albertazzi, 'The Influence of Italo Calvino on the New Literatures in English', p. 293.

<sup>20</sup> Albertazzi, 'The Influence of Italo Calvino on the New Literatures in English', p. 294.

<sup>21</sup> Albertazzi, 'The Influence of Italo Calvino on the New Literatures in English', p. 293.

provided the best tools for describing the landscape of clandestine political organization in the *Resistenza*. As Martin McLaughlin observes, 'there is a clear link in terms of nomenclature between Pin [the child protagonist of Calvino's novel] and Kim'.<sup>22</sup> Another of the characters in the novel, in a clear act of homage, is actually named after Kim.<sup>23</sup>

While Albertazzi's article is useful in the connections it makes, and allows us to think about some of the similarities that can be discerned in the overarching careers of the two writers, it seems to have little sense of the actual relationship between them. More recently, Anna Giuliani used Rushdie's speech about Calvino at PEN America in 2000 as an occasion to revisit some of Rushdie's writings about Calvino. Giuliani similarly makes some interesting observations about the similarities between the two writers. For example, taking Rushdie's essay on influence in *Step Across This Line* as a starting point, she demonstrates how much Rushdie's style might be usefully read alongside the values espoused in Calvino's *Six Memos For the Next Millennium*. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* embodies lightness, while 'other of Rushdie's novels like *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* embody perfectly the literary value of rapidity', and multiplicity might well be thought of as the literary value of postcolonial writing *par excellence*.<sup>24</sup> Yet this short article by no means exhausts all of the essays in which Rushdie speaks of Calvino's influence, nor all of what those articles have to say about this influence. Similarly, Giuliani does not attempt to trace how this influence might manifest itself at the level of close reading, referring to Albertazzi's 1992 article and the supposed parallels between *The Path to the Spider's Nests* and *Midnight's Children* when she speaks of the relationships between fictional texts (rather than non-fiction, which is her focus).

In this chapter, I want to build on this work by attempting first to give a sense, through an examination of Rushdie's non-fiction writings the sheer extent and duration of his engagement with Calvino's works. Secondly, I want to use the clues that these essays

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<sup>22</sup> Martin McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> For an account of Rushdie's relationship with the text, see: Richard Cronin, 'The Indian English Novel: *Kim* and *Midnight's Children*', in *Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings*, ed by Meenakshi Mukherjee (Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999), pp. 134-48.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Giuliani, 'Fiabe vere e città immaginarie: Universi fittizi nella saggistica di Italo Calvino e Salman Rushdie', *Quaderni del '900*, 8 (2007), 107-15 (p. 109).

give us to perform close textual engagements with two of Rushdie's works – *The Satanic Verses* and *The Enchantress of Florence* – in order to try and trace the ways in which Calvino's influence has shaped and informed them. These two texts, I argue, represent different moments in Rushdie's use of Calvino. The former is, I suggest, Rushdie's most Calvinian novel, in the sense that it makes use of certain stylistic devices, narrative motifs, and a *habitus* (the city) in order to make a certain kind of political intervention: to hold open in fiction the possibilities of nationalist struggle that appear to have been foreclosed outside of it. The latter, Rushdie's most recent novel, is the novel that contains the most Calvino, and is almost obsessive in its desire to position itself as a literary heir to Calvino's works. I read this insistence as an attempt to 're-orient' himself (this novel also marks Rushdie's return to India, via Italy), that, while it roots itself as firmly as possible in the terrain of Calvino's texts, no longer retains the activist dimensions of *The Satanic Verses*. At the same time, I want to try to triangulate these instances of textual influence within the co-ordinates I have attempted to map throughout this thesis; in other words, I want to think about what changes if we position Rushdie and Calvino as speaking, not through a cosmopolitan category of postmodern writers, but as part of the wider literary, political, and historical discourse between Italian and Indian intellectuals.

#### 4.1.3 Calvino in Rushdie's Non-Fiction

There are three main non-fiction pieces in which Rushdie makes his debt to Calvino incredibly clear. The first is the 1981 review article that Rushdie published in the *LRB*, 'Calvino', which was later included in a modified form in *Imaginary Homelands*. The second is rather tellingly in his essay 'Influence' in *Step Across This Line*, which was originally given as a talk in Calvino's hometown of Turin when Rushdie was awarded an honorary degree there in 1999. The third is in the 2000 speech to *PEN America*, 'Calvino's Imaginary Real', which occasions Giuliani's article. Calvino, or traces of his thought, also appears in a significant number of other essays written across a broad swathe of time, often in a prominent position. In *Imaginary Homelands* alone we have: 'On Adventure' (1985), which takes *Invisible Cities* as a starting point;<sup>25</sup> 'Julian Barnes' (1989), in which Rushdie reviews Barnes' *History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*

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<sup>25</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Vintage, 2010) pp. 222-225 (p. 223).



according to the Calvinian concept of 'lightness';<sup>26</sup> 'Stephen Hawking' (1988), in which it is Calvino, and not the astrophysicist, who is right about the universe;<sup>27</sup> and 'The Language of the Pack' (1990), which is interested in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*.<sup>28</sup> It is in these three essays, however, that Rushdie investigates most explicitly Calvino's influence on his own work.

One of the main things these essays make clear is simply *how much* Rushdie was reading Calvino. By 1981, and possibly long before, Rushdie had read all of Calvino's works then available in English, and in the article he works through them in chronological order, displaying an impressive familiarity with Calvino's evolution as a writer given that he was at that moment far less famous in the UK. This lack of fame was, Rushdie later tells us, what made him write the article, and it is telling that he *asked* to write it rather than being commissioned to:

In 1981, Italo Calvino's book *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* was published in England to what I remember as a more or less resounding silence. Very few people in England had ever heard of Italo Calvino, even though this was relatively late in his distinguished series of books. I remember ringing the *London Review of Books* and saying, "Are you planning to review *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*?" and they said, "Whose book is that?" I said, "It's by Italo Calvino," and they said, "Who's that?" I was horrified and asked if I could write not just a review of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* but a larger piece introducing the readers of the *London Review of Books* to the work of this writer so little known to them. [...] So I wrote this piece, and somebody sent it to Calvino.<sup>29</sup>

The outrage that Rushdie felt speaks volumes about the value that he placed on Calvino as a writer. The resulting review is a striking document of this passionate regard; Calvino is clearly a very important figure for Rushdie, and of his contemporaries is perhaps one of the authors to whom he felt closest, personally but above all artistically.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp. 241-243 (p. 243).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. pp. 262-264.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp. 321-325.

<sup>29</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'Calvino's Imaginary Real', *PEN America 1: Classics*, <<http://72.10.54.216/viewmedia.php/prmMID/995/prmID/547>> [Accessed 24/09/2105].

The *London Review of Books* essay also helps us to think about *how exactly* Rushdie read Calvino, and what Rushdie's Calvino looks like. The review ends with a rousing claim about Calvino's vital importance for the modern reader:

Why, finally, should we bother with Calvino, a word-juggler, a fantasist, in an age in which our cities burn and our leaders blame our parents? What does it mean to write about non-existent knights, or the formation of the Moon, or how a reader reads, while the neutron bomb gets the go-ahead in Washington, and plans are made to station germ-warfare weaponry in Europe? Not escapism, because although the reader of Italo Calvino will be taken further out of himself than most readers, he will also discover that the experience is not a flight from, but an enrichment of himself. No, the reason Calvino is such an indispensable writer is precisely that he tells us, joyfully, wickedly, that there are things in the world worth loving as well as hating; and that such things exist in people, too. I can think of no finer writer to have beside me while Italy explodes, while Britain burns, while the world ends.<sup>30</sup>

Rushdie's reading of Calvino is this profoundly politicized, not merely the aesthetic appreciation of a fellow writer. Ultimately, the words that seem to lie behind Rushdie's political understanding of Calvino's writing here are in fact the very same words that first made me want to study literature: the final lines of *Invisible Cities*:

He said: "it is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever narrowing circles, the current is drawing us." And Polo said: "The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space".<sup>31</sup>

What Rushdie takes from Calvino, and what we could take from him today I think, is nothing less than a striking manifesto for postcolonial writing and reading. To find things that are worth loving as well as hating, and to give them space.

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<sup>30</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 261.

<sup>31</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (London: Vintage Books, 1997) p. 165.

The second important essay, 'Influence', was originally given as a lecture in March 1999 in Turin, nearly two decades later. It shows that Calvino continued to be a central figure throughout the rest of his career. Rushdie in fact spends the majority of the lecture speaking about Calvino. He reveals that his influence was also at the heart of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*:

Although the form of this novel is that of a child's fantastic adventure, I wanted the work somehow to erase the division between children's literature and adult books. It was in the end a question of finding the right tone of voice, and Apuleius and Calvino were the ones who helped me find it. I re-read Calvino's great trilogy, *The Baron in the Trees*, *The Cloven Viscount*, and *The Nonexistent Knight*, and they gave me the clues I needed. The secret was to use the language of the fable while eschewing the easy moral purpose of, for example, Aesop.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to this, as we shall see later, he hints towards the influence that *Invisible Cities* might have had on *The Satanic Verses*. He also talks a lot about Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, and hints that his next project might in some way stem from his reading of Calvino's unwritten essay on 'consistency'. He stops short of saying precisely what this project might be. 'But now I am coming close to doing what David Malouf warns against - that is, discussing the nature of my own embryonic, and fragile (because as yet uncreated) work. So I must leave it there, and say only that Calvino, whose early support and encouragement I will always remember continues to murmur in my ear'.<sup>33</sup> What this murmur might be we will see at the very end of the chapter, when I discuss *The Enchantress of Florence*.

As we can see then, from the 'Influence' essay there seems to be virtually no corner of Rushdie's extensive body of writing that has not been informed or shaped by Calvino's murmur. For Rushdie, the very idea of influence itself seems to be synonymic with Calvino: to write about one is to write about the other.

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<sup>32</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Step Across This Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992-2002* (New York: Random House, 2008), p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, pp. 67-68.

Finally, in the *PEN* speech in 2000, Rushdie also attributed to Calvino (in a way that he is reluctant to do with Marquez, Calvino's exact contemporary) an idea of realism, magical or otherwise:

One of the things Calvino's writing showed me is that there is a mistake about what we call realism in the novel. That is to say, most people who write about realism in the novel talk as if realism were a set of rules. As if naturalistic conventions had to be obeyed, and as long as you kept to those rules what you were writing was something called realism. It seems to me that those conventions, the tools you use, have more or less nothing to do with whether your work is realistic or not, and this is what Calvino's writing shows us. Pieces ranging from the metaphysical to the fanciful to the concrete to the comical are all realistic, in that they show us more about what it is to be a member of the human race or alive on the earth or going about our day. They are realistic in intent. That is the point about realism which Calvino demonstrates and that almost all literary critics fail to notice. It's got nothing to do with technique, it's got everything to do with intention, with what the writer is trying to do. A naturalistic novel about adultery in the English upper classes seems to me like magical realism, you know, like fantasy, and certainly like escapism. Whereas Calvino's books—fantastic, fabulistic, playful—seem never to lose sight of what is real and what is false. That is the greatest lesson I learned from him.<sup>34</sup>

What an engagement with Rushdie's non-fictional writings about Calvino reveal, then, is an overwhelming story of literary influence spanning three decades, and which we can locate in terms of individual texts, ideas, concepts, and even at the level of the idea of realism that we find in all of Rushdie's works, and which is the cause of much of his postcolonial fame. It is a story of careful readings and re-readings, of the rise and fall of various Calvino texts in different periods of Rushdie life and literary career, of rhythms of reading and periods of gestation. Above all, I suggest, it is a story about what kind of writer Rushdie struggles to be throughout his career, and the ways in which he turns to Calvino for help.

I want now to examine how this influence manifests itself in what is, for me, his most Calvinian work.

#### **4.2 Calvino in *The Satanic Verses***

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<sup>34</sup> Rushdie, 'Calvino's Imaginary Real', *PEN America 1: Classics*.

Even in the few existing pieces of criticism that do address the question of Calvino's influence on Rushdie, and which take as their starting point Rushdie's essay in *Imaginary Homelands*, there has been little attention paid to how this influence might have manifested itself in his literary works, at a textual level. In this chapter I want to focus on two particular texts that seem to foreground this influence and make it visible to the reader, though I do want to keep in mind the wider contours of their textual and extra-textual relationship and what it might tell us about both authors. Rushdie ends his 1981 essay on Calvino by saying that he can think of no finer writer to have beside [him] while Italy explodes, while Britain burns, while the world ends'.<sup>35</sup> Following this cue, I want to start my search for the traces of Calvino in the novel Rushdie set against the burning of Britain and the end of the world: *The Satanic Verses* (1988).

There has been, as far as I am aware, no sustained attempt to look at the impact Calvino has had on *The Satanic Verses*. This is surprising not just because Calvino is such an important intertext here, but also because Rushdie himself seems at pains to flag up his presence in the work. He finishes the acknowledgements at the end of the novel by saying:

The identities of the many authors from whom I've learned will, I hope, be clear from the text; others must remain anonymous, but I thank them too.<sup>36</sup>

Calvino may be one of those who remain anonymous, but his presence, as I hope to demonstrate, is remarkably clear.

#### **4.2.1 Rushdie's Ancestors**

There are two of Calvino's works that surface in *The Satanic Verses*. The first of these is the *Our Ancestors* trilogy. The trilogy is comprised of three works - *The Cloven Viscount* (*Il visconte dimezzato*, 1951), *The Baron in the Trees* (*Il barone rampante*, 1957), and *The Non-Existent Knight*, (1962) – that were later anthologized with a new preface from the author. This volume and its preface have obviously had a significant impact on

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<sup>35</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 261.

<sup>36</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Vintage Books, 1998) p. 549.

Rushdie: this is the same 'great trilogy' that he claimed enabled him to find 'precisely the right tone of voice' in which to write *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.<sup>37</sup> All three of these novellas straddle the border between fairy tale and political allegory, and all three are organized around a theme that unites Calvino and Rushdie: the mirroring of the deformations of the body politic in the body and life-world of the protagonist. *The Cloven Viscount*, for example, centres around the story of Medardo, an Italian count who is quite literally cut into two halves in the course of an unbelievably bloody and apparently interminable battle of the crusades. While it would be reductive to read these complex works as simple political allegory, in which Text A represents World B, Calvino himself points out in the preface (which Rushdie has obviously read closely<sup>38</sup>) that:

References to the intellectual climate in which they were written can be found in them all: in the *Viscount*, dislike of the divisions of the Cold War, which affected the rest of us as well; in the *Baron*, the problem of the intellectual's political commitment at a time of shattered illusions; in the *Knight*, criticism of the 'organisation man' in a mass society.<sup>39</sup>

Though Calvino believes that it is the third of the trilogy that had most relevance after the immediate context of its publication, Rushdie seems to borrow from all three in *The Satanic Verses*. He seems to recognize much of his own project in the collection. At the level of distance reading we might notice that Medardo, who lives a halved existence, Cosimo, who never comes back down to earth, and Agiluf, who does not exist but does not let that stop him, might well be the ancestors of Saleem, who is bound to the nation by birth and whose body cracks under the pressure of too many stories in *Midnight's*

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<sup>37</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across this Line*, p. 67. A full investigation of the relationship between *Our Ancestors* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* would reveal much about the fabulist facet of both of these authors, but due to the limitations of space this falls outside the scope of this chapter.

<sup>38</sup> Rushdie's quotes from this preface at the start of the 1981 essay when describing Calvino's transformation from 'politically-committed Calvino into Captain Italo Marvel' (this phrase is removed from the *Imaginary Homelands* version, presumably because Rushdie by then did not see those two Calvino's as mutually exclusive). (Rushdie, 'Calvino', p. 2.). Rushdie misreads Calvino slightly, believing that he was speaking about *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* when he said that he no longer wanted to write the 'realistic-novel-reflecting-the-problems-of-Italian-society'), when in fact he was referring almost certainly to *I giovani del Po*, which was written at roughly the same time as *The Cloven Viscount*. This is significant in that it shows that Calvino's realisms and irrealisms co-existed simultaneously.

<sup>39</sup> Italo Calvino, *Our Ancestors*, trans. by Archibald Colquhoun (London: Vintage Classics, 1998), p. x.

*Children*, or Sufiya, who burns up with the unfelt shame of the nation in *Shame*,<sup>40</sup> or Saladin Chamcha, who grows horns as he fills the role of the demonized immigrant in *The Satanic Verses*, or Moares the Moor, whose body grows twice as fast and whose life, in a different way to Medardo's, has been cut in half. If it is true, as has become a commonplace in Rushdie criticism, that Saleem was 'fathered by Oskar' (the protagonist of Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*) then perhaps we might think of Medardo and the others as uncles of all of Rushdie's most memorable characters.<sup>41</sup>

In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, however, we can trace this relationship more closely. This is how Rushdie describes the first book of Calvino's trilogy in the *Imaginary Homelands* essay:

*The Cloven Viscount* is about a cloven viscount, vertically bisected by a cannonball in a medieval Bohemia. The two halves continue to live, the one fiendishly evil, the other impossibly good. Both halves are unbearable.<sup>42</sup>

There are two things I want to emphasize there. The first is the joyful repetition in the first line: '*The Cloven Viscount* is about a cloven viscount'. This is clearly an image that Rushdie relishes, and does not want to lose in the narrative gloss or allegorical interpretation, but to give space to. It is an image, it seems, that stuck in his mind. The second is the slightly religious overtone that Rushdie inserts into his synopsis in the word 'fiendishly', which as far as I can tell is not Calvino's word. What is striking here is how closely this summary seems to coincide with the plot of *The Satanic Verses*. The split between the Bad'Un and the Good'Un, and the unsustainably extreme existences which are forced upon them by an accident in a political/military struggle, might well be said to contain more of an echo of the fate of Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta who, after falling from the exploding hijacked Bostan flight, take on impossibly and unsustainably angelic and demonic appearances. Certainly the thrust of the novel is the healing or festering of what he refers to in this summary of Calvino's novella as 'the terrible

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<sup>40</sup> We might also recognize the shared admiration for Stevenson, Calvino's favourite author who abounds in the trilogy, in her monstrous dual identity and her surname (Hyder).

<sup>41</sup> Patricia Merivale, 'Saleem Fathered by Oskar: Intertextual Strategies in *Midnight's Children* and *The Tin Drum*', in *Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings*, ed. by Meenakshi Mukherjee, pp. 116-33.

<sup>42</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 255.

wounds of their bisection'.<sup>43</sup> The similarities between the two become even more striking if we consider Rushdie's own synopsis of *The Satanic Verses* in the retrospective essay 'In Good Faith':

*The Satanic Verses* is the story of two painfully divided selves. In the case of one, Saladin Chamcha, the division is secular and societal: he is torn, to put it plainly, between Bombay and London, between East and West. For the other, Gibreel Farishta, the division is spiritual, a rift in the soul. He has lost his faith and is strung out between his immense need to believe and his new inability to do so. The novel is 'about' their quest for wholeness.<sup>44</sup>

As Silvia Albertazzi observes, '[i]t is not very difficult to realize that the theme of the main story told in *The Satanic Verses* is the same as that of [...] *The Cloven Viscount*'.<sup>45</sup> What I want to add to Albertazzi's assertion is that I believe this resemblance is, at least in part, demonstrably the result of Rushdie's own reading of Calvino, and that we can find evidence for this both in Rushdie's non-fiction and in the fabric of the text itself. There are two moments in *The Satanic Verses* in which Rushdie seems to point directly to *The Cloven Viscount* and to invoke its central motif of a 'vertical bisection' that is both physical and spiritual. The first of these occurs, significantly, in the art gallery of Saladin's father Changez. This is in the context of the argument between Saladin and his father that is the cause of the familial and cultural rupture that drives Saladin's half of the novel's plot, the resolution of which in the final chapter of the novel will result in the stitching back together of two halves of Saladin's life. In the midst of the argument, Changez takes Saladin and his lover Zeenat, who is to act as judge in this dispute (and finds in favour of Changez), to view his famous collection of Indian art, which he claims to be preserving from the pillaging of American art houses. The imagery of these paintings seems to echo Saladin's anguished position:

A giant was trapped in a pit and his human tormentors were spearing him in the forehead. A man sliced vertically from the top of the head to his groin still held his sword as he fell. Everywhere, bubbling spillages of blood. Saladin Chamcha took a grip on himself. 'The savagery', he said loudly in his English voice. 'The sheer barbaric love of pain'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 255.

<sup>44</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 397.

<sup>45</sup> Silvia Albertazzi, 'The Influence of Italo Calvino on the New Literatures in English', p. 294.

<sup>46</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 70.



This is a central moment in the text: the moment in which Saladin is definitively split in two, in which he sustains the psychological and cultural wound that drives his actions through the rest of the novel. This split is not just Oedipal; it is not simply his father he is rejecting here. He has been brought to the gallery in order to appreciate what is apparently one of the most significant collections of an artistic tradition, or set of traditions, which is made in the preceding paragraph to stand in for a typically Rushdian image of a secular and heteroglossic Indian history: 'the pictures also provided eloquent proof of Zeeny Vakil's thesis about the eclectic, hybridized nature of the Indian artistic tradition', a tradition that is Mughal, Persian, Kannada, Keralan, as well as Muslim and Hindu.<sup>47</sup> Faced with this tradition, lovingly evoked by a narrator who seems firmly on Zeeny's side, Saladin forces himself to reject it. This is not an instinctive reaction, but a willed response that requires him to 'get a grip on himself'. And in order to voice this rejection he resorts not only to his 'English voice', which he speaks 'loudly' as to assert a sense of certainty he does not feel, but also to the language and rhetoric of a racist imperialism: savagery and barbarism.

Chamcha's presentation of his wrongs is then answered in turn by his father's. Changez comes to it by way of the art collection, which he explains to Zeeny is being constantly sought by American collectors while being neglected by the Indian government:

'Offers of what-what size! You wouldn't believe. I don't sell. Our heritage, my dear, every day the USA is taking it away. [...] We sell ourselves, isn't it? They drop their wallets on the ground and we kneel at their feet. [...] But you know all this. You know India is a free country today'. He stopped, but Zeeny waited; there was more to come. It came: 'One day I will also take the dollars. Not for the money. For the pleasure of being a whore. Of becoming nothing. Less than nothing.' And now at last the real storm, the words behind the words, *less than nothing*. 'When I die,' Changez Chamchawalla said to Zeeny, 'what will I be? A pair of emptied shoes. That is my fate, that he has made for me. This actor. This pretender. He has made himself into an imitator of non-existing men. I have nobody to follow me, to give what I have made. This is my revenge: he steals from me my posterity.'<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 70.

<sup>48</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, pp. 70-71.

Just as before, things overlap here. There are multiple heritages at stake, not just the personal one represented by a magical lamp and Saladin's place in his father's will. This individual inheritance is placed alongside a larger cultural heritage of a secular nationalist vision in which Changez had invested himself (in both senses of the word). Saladin's rejection of this nationalism is echoed in the government's rejection of this collection and in the wider Americanization of the world: 'India is a free country today', it is up for grabs by a new form of cultural imperialism. Changez's anger is directed not so much at his son's occupation as a voice actor, but at the way he has taken on the role of the imitation Englishman. As we saw in the passage quoted above, Saladin uses his 'English voice', which is just one of his professional repertoire of a thousand voices, to voice his rejection of his father's nationalist heritage.

Here too, however, the image that Rushdie uses seems to be drawn from *Our Ancestors*. If Saladin is cut in half like Medardo, then Changez seems to share the fate of Agiluf, the non-existent knight. When the basis of Agiluf's identity, his knighthood, is called into question at the end of the narrative, he simply disappears, leaving behind only the empty suit of armour. In much the same way, Changez – the 'organization man' of his own national struggle – fears that his son's aggressive Anglophilia will reduce him to 'an empty pair of shoes'. His posthumous impact will be erased by the way Saladin has become an 'imitator of non-existing men'. He fears not only that Saladin's desertion of India for England will hollow out his own posterity, but also that his son is emptying himself out through sheer force of will, becoming a non-existent man. The dilemmas of both father and son, articulated in the same room and within a few pages of each other, are thus presented in the borrowed language of Calvino's fables.<sup>49</sup>

The image of the man cut in half returns, crucially, at the end of the novel, in the chapter entitled 'The Parting of the Arabian Sea'. This is the last of the dream sections, which

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<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to note that this association is repeated in 'In Good Faith'. Immediately before the passage I quoted earlier, Rushdie complains that this novel (the one he wrote) had been replaced in the public imagination by one he did not write (an act of Islamophobic hate speech). He then offers the synopsis of the novel as being about 'two painfully bisected selves', because, 'the only way I can try and replace the *non-existent* novel with the one I actually wrote is to tell you a story'. In non-fiction as in fiction, non-existence and halved existence go together in Rushdie's Calvinian imagination. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 397.

follows the pilgrimage to Mecca led by the butterfly-clad Ayesha. This is also the chapter that immediately precedes and prefigures the novel's resolution in 'A Wonderful Lamp', and although it is Gibreel's dream it is more closely linked to Chamcha's final story of return and the eventual healing of his terrible wounds of bisection than it is to Gibreel's final desperate attempt to free himself from mental illness through suicide.

The chapter follows Mirza Saed as he desperately tries to put an end to the pilgrimage and convince his dying wife to put her faith in medicine rather than Ayesha's visions. The climax of the confrontation between the prophet Ayesha and the secular Mirza comes when the pilgrimage reaches the Arabian Sea, which Ayesha claims will part to let them pass to Mecca. Mirza watches aghast as his wife and others vanish beneath the surface of the water, never to be seen again. He alone, of those left behind, is not granted a vision of the waves parting to let the Haj pass, and the realization leaves him broken, sobbing for a week, and no longer willing to eat to keep himself alive. The chapter ends with his return to his home village of Titlipur (which, as we shall see later, contains other allusions to *Our Ancestors*), which has decayed drastically in his absence. He lives in this now deserted village until the final night of his life, when it suddenly and inexplicably catches fire and explodes (like London has been doing around Gibreel and Chamcha, or Rome and England in the *Imaginary Homelands* essay). At the moment of his death he feels Ayesha's butterflies at this mouth, and then the sea pouring over him. Suddenly he finds himself in the water beside Ayesha, who commands him to 'open'. He struggles against her, and closes:

He was a fortress with clanging gates. – He was drowning. – She was drowning, too. He saw the water fill her mouth, heard it begin to gurgle into her lungs. Then something within him refused that, made a different choice, and at the instant his heart broke, he opened.

His body split apart from his Adam's apple to his groin, so that she could reach deep within him, and now she was open, they all were, and at the moment of their opening the waters parted, and they walked across the bed of the Arabian Sea.<sup>50</sup>

These paragraphs contain many echoes of the earlier scene in Changez's art gallery. Both resound with a fatal fluidity: here it is the gurgling of the water forcing its way into

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<sup>50</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, pp. 506-07.

lungs, in the paintings it was the 'bubbling spillages of blood'. Both are preceded by the appearance of a giant: here Mirza hears 'a noise like a giant crushing a forest' and smells 'a stench like a giant's fart', while before the giant was being speared in the head.<sup>51</sup> More importantly though, Rushdie returns to the motif of the bisected man. Mirza Saed splits along the same lines as the figure in the painting (and Medardo): 'from Adam's apple to groin' and 'from his head to his groin'. Here, however, the valance of the image has changed. We are no longer dealing, despite broken hearts, with a painful bisection which is emblematic of a divided or halved existence, but rather with a condition of openness. At the end of this chapter, being split in two is the only way to be.

As I said before, though this is the final episode in Gibreel's dream sequences, the text links it more concretely with Chamcha's narrative resolution. The novel's very final paragraphs, immediately following Gibreel's suicide, return to the imagery of this episode. Chamcha, gazing out of the window of his childhood room, looks out over the Arabian Sea:

The moon was almost full; moonlight, stretching from the rocks of Scandal Point out to the far horizon, created the illusion of a silver pathway, like a parting in the water's shining hair, like a road to miraculous lands. He shook his head, could no longer believe in fairy-tales. Childhood was over and the view from this window was no more than an old and sentimental echo. To the devil with it! Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born.<sup>52</sup>

It would not be at all surprising if Rushdie felt himself to be in Calvino's company when he wrote of this road to a magical land. In the 2000 PEN speech, he would say that:

All writers build roads from the world in which they live to the world of the imagination and I think Calvino more than anyone else was interested in that road: How is it built? What are its bricks? How do you get there from here? By what journey does one reach Wonderland, or Alphaville, or Oz? What is their relationship to the world we live in, and literally how do you build the road?<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 506.

<sup>52</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, pp. 546-47.

<sup>53</sup> Rushdie, 'Calvino's Imaginary Real', *PEN America 1: Classics*.

I want to return to this question of building pathways to the world of the imagination later, when I look at *Invisible Cities* and examine in more detail what links the political and artistic projects of these two writers. For the moment I want simply to note that Mirza Saed's openness, his new condition of miraculous bisection, is projected here though the image of the Arabian sea parting on to the resolution of Chamcha's personal narrative. The wounds that we saw cut him in two in the gallery have, with his return to Bombay and his reconciliation with both his dying father and Zeeny, not healed, but rather transformed in typical Rushdian fashion into an elevated condition of hybridity and openness.

This is not as far as it might seem from the closing of *The Cloven Viscount*. Although Calvino's text ends with the sewing back together of Medardo's two halves, this is not quite the fairy-tale ending that we might imagine:

Some might expect that with the Viscount entire again a period of marvelous happiness would open: but obviously a whole Viscount is not enough to make all the world whole.<sup>54</sup>

Instead the narrator, Medardo's nephew, feels increasingly alienated 'amid all this fervor of wholeness'. 'Sometimes', he tells us, 'one who considers himself incomplete is merely young'. Calvino's romance, like Rushdie's novel, seems to come down on the side of the possibilities of bisection, and is certainly not a hymn to wholeness. The one thing that the Good and Bad halves of Medardo share is that they both consider bisection to be preferable to wholeness. The final paragraphs resemble Rushdie's in many ways. Increasingly ashamed, as he grows up, of his fairy-tale imagination, the narrator is saddened by the sudden departure of his friend Doctor Trelawney for Australia with the British fleet.

I was deep in the wood telling myself stories and had seen nothing. When I heard later I began running towards the sea-shore crying, 'Doctor! Doctor Trelawney! Take me with you! Doctor, you can't leave me!'

But already the ships were vanishing over the horizon and I was left behind, in this world of ours full of responsibilities and wills-o'-the-wisp.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Calvino, *Our Ancestors*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>55</sup> Calvino, *Our Ancestors*, p. 71.

Both narratives, then, close with the receding of otherworldly, fantastical possibilities offered by the sea. Both close with a loss of faith in fairy-tales. In both cases the receding of these possibilities from the eyes of the narrator/protagonist coincides with the receding of the fairy-tale possibilities of the text from the eyes of the reader. Their return to 'reality' coincides crucially with our own, and both end by leaving us with a sense of nostalgia for the state of openness or 'clovenness' that is made to be symbolic of the very possibility of belief in these otherworldly possibilities.

In conclusion, we might read *The Satanic Verses* as Rushdie's response to the problems of existence raised in *Our Ancestors*. Chamcha's various possible fates –painful bisection, potential non-existence, and eventual openness – might all be read as playful re-readings of Calvino's romances. Above all though, Rushdie, like Calvino, tries to give us a glimpse of how we might build a road to the world of the imagination, and leaves us longing for these potential worlds. It is, however, another of Calvino's works that shows Rushdie the way.

#### **4.2.2 Rushdie's Invisible Cities: The Web of Influence**

It is clear that somewhere between 1981, when Rushdie published his original review of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, and 1991, when he published a revised version of the same essay in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie had re-read and changed his mind about Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. It is of course during this period that he was working on and publishing *The Satanic Verses*.

In the original version of the review essay Rushdie is profoundly ambivalent about this text:

Others (well, Gore Vidal, anyway) have called this Calvino's 'most beautiful work', and perhaps it is. But it is an oppressive and finally cloying beauty, all those jeweled sentences and glittering notions and no story-telling worth a damn. You will notice that I am in two minds about this book: but it's worth keeping it by your bedside and reading it a paragraph at a time, because

even though I wasn't convinced by the whole, I'm bound to admit that the separate parts are pretty dazzling.<sup>56</sup>

There then comes a brief description of three of the cities which have caught Rushdie's eye – Ottavia, Argia, and Thekla – followed by Rushdie's final verdict: 'Magnificent, resonant images. In small doses.'

It seems that Rushdie did indeed keep the book by his bedside, and continued to re-read and re-evaluate it over the years. By 1991 this medical warning label, 'in small doses', has been removed from Rushdie's packaging of *Invisible Cities*, as, in fact, has any reservation whatsoever about the text. Only the description of the three cities remains the same, the rest is amended to the following:

Gore Vidal has called this Calvino's 'most beautiful work', and so it is.<sup>57</sup>

By 1991, then, Rushdie is no longer in two minds about the text; like *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, it too has become a book to praise without buts.

This engagement with *Invisible Cities* was, I think, a highly productive one for Rushdie. In his 1982 essay 'Imaginary homelands', Rushdie explores the genesis and evolution of *Midnight's Children*. Unusually, Calvino does not appear in Rushdie's concluding list of his 'polyglot family tree' (Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis).<sup>58</sup> I suggest that he does, however, occupy a much more central position in the essay than any of those included in that list. This essay has been one of the central reference points in critical understandings of the novel, and the idea of 'imaginary homelands' itself has been a key part of the critical lexicon of postcolonial theory. Rushdie comes up with the term to describe his feelings about Bombay, the lost city of his childhood and the setting for the novel – 'a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time'. This meditation on a lost home lies at the very heart of *Midnight's Children*, as Rushdie himself says: 'It is probably not too romantic to say that that was when my novel *Midnight's Children* was born'.<sup>59</sup> A few lines later, Rushdie first uses the term 'imaginary homelands':

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<sup>56</sup> Rushdie, 'Calvino', p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 258.

<sup>58</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 9.

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short create fictions, not actual *cities* or villages, but *invisible* ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.<sup>60</sup>

Giuliani notes that the concept of an imaginary homeland resembles in many ways that of an invisible city: ‘in different ways, Rushdie’s imaginary homelands and the Calvinian invisible city both transmit the idea of a knowledge of space conveyed exclusively through narrations, dreams, desires’.<sup>61</sup> What she misses is the fact that Rushdie in fact seems to be intentionally riffing on Calvino’s invisible city when he comes up with the concept of the imaginary homeland, as we can see from the extract above. Rushdie, sitting in his flat in North London, imagining a lost past in Bombay, is clearly drawing on Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (an almost inverted series of imaginings of Venice from China, in a conversation between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan). We might compare the extract above with Marco Polo’s reluctance to speak of Venice, which reminds us that *Invisible Cities* is also built around a kind of migrant consciousness of the city:

‘Memory’s images, once they are fixed in words, are erased,’ Polo said.  
‘Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little.’<sup>62</sup>

The very idea of writing an imaginary homeland being something that inevitably involves a loss, which is so central to *Midnight’s Children*, seems to be his reworking of the idea of an ‘invisible city’. We find a much grander version of this re-elaboration, I suggest, in *The Satanic Verses*.

Rushdie himself implies that Calvino is particularly present in this text when he speaks, in a famous essay on ‘Influence’ to which I want to return later, of the impact Calvino had on him. After describing the ways in which he borrowed from *Our Ancestors* for

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<sup>60</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 10. Emphasis mine.

<sup>61</sup> Giuliani, ‘Fiabe vere e città immaginarie’, p. 112.

<sup>62</sup> Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p. 87.



*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, and quoting at length from his own story about the idea of influence, he shifts abruptly to speaking about *The Satanic Verses*:

By using what is old, and adding to it some new thing of our own, we make what is new. In *The Satanic Verses* I tried to answer the question, how does newness enter the world? Influence, the flowing of the old into the new, is one part of the answer.

In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino describes the fabulous city of Octavia, suspended between two mountains in something like a spider's web. If influence is the spider's web in which we hang our work, then the work is like Octavia itself, that glittering jewel of a dream city, hanging in the filaments of the web, for as long as they are able to bear its weight.<sup>63</sup>

This is a slightly odd moment in the text, which jumps between things without clarifying the relationship between the two texts. It seems however, that speaking of *The Satanic Verses* and the question of influence brings *Invisible Cities* to Rushdie's mind. What seems to be implied in the passage is that this work in particular hangs from the web woven by Calvino in his prose poems on the city. I want to spend some time now looking closely at both texts, in order to see if we can discern these strings, and locate the points in which they connect the two texts.

#### 4.2.3 Jahilia and Other Invisible Cities

As Rushdie's close friend Angela Carter once noted, the description of the dream city of Jahilia, the Mecca and not-Mecca of Gibreel's dreams, 'contains a nod to Calvino'. As I will show in this section, there is far more than a nod to Calvino in Rushdie's depictions of the various cities in the novel, but this nod seems an appropriate place to start:

The city of Jahilia is built entirely of sand, its structures formed of the desert from whence it rises. It is a sight to wonder at: walled, four-gated, the whole of it is a miracle worked by its citizens, who have learnt the trick of transforming the fine white dune-sand of those forsaken parts – the very stuff of inconsistency, - the quintessence of unsettlement, shifting, lack-of-form, - and have turned it, by alchemy, into the fabric of their newly invented permanence.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, p. 66.

<sup>64</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, pp. 93-94.

Jahilia, as it is described here, seems to share more with Octavia and Aria and the other fantastical cities that Calvino's Marco Polo describes than it does with the London of Dickens or the Bombay of *Midnight's Children*, and certainly more than it does with the rural space of Garcia Marquez's Macondo.<sup>65</sup> Jahilia, like Calvino's cities, is founded upon an ideal. It is intended not as a realistic or mimetic description of an actually existing socio-economic entity, but rather of what a particular idea might look like in the form of a city. Just like the invisible cities fabricated from improbable substances - like Octavia 'the spider-web city', or Argia which has earth instead of air - Jahilia is made from the moving sand-dunes which seem to have risen of their own accord from the desert. Like those others, however, this improbable substance is representative of an idea, an idea that marks and conditions the lives of its inhabitants. In Octavia, the citizens know that 'the net will only last for so long' before they tumble into the abyss below them; Argia's inhabitants live an unknown and literally underground life. Jahilia is a settlement made of unshelterment, a city built by nomads still unused to the idea of permanency, and this uncertainty manifests itself in the shifting quality of its basic material, which might be dissolved by water at any moment. As well as providing the setting for the dream sequence of Mahound, Jahilia acts as Rushdie's own first invisible city, in which he experiments with the technique invented by Calvino to think through what migrancy itself might look like in city-form.

Jahilia, however, is far from the only invisible city in the text. Later in the novel we encounter another city closely linked to this one, which lies in the shadow of Mount Cone, when Alleluia Cone (Gibreel's partner) climbs her own mountain: Everest. Against all advice, Alleluia finishes the ascent without oxygen, and while on the way back down is granted a miraculous vision:

Alleluia Cone, coming down from Everest, saw a city of ice to the west of Camp Six, across the Rock Band glittering in the sunlight below the massif of Cho Oyu. *Shangri-La*, she momentarily thought; however, this was no green vale of immortality but a metropolis of ice needles, thin, sharp, and cold. Her

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<sup>65</sup> It is interesting to note that Dickensian London was important to both writers. In countless interviews Rushdie has claimed Dickens as a literary ancestor, and in a letter to Pietro Citati in 1970, Calvino reveals that he has been reading Dickens as he struggles with what would ultimately become *Invisible Cities*. Calvino, *Letters*, pp. 388-89.

attention was distracted by Sherpa Pemba warning her to maintain her concentration, and the city was gone when she looked back.<sup>66</sup>

This city of not-Shangri-La seems to share much with Jahilia, though in some ways it is its opposite. Where Jahilia was lifted from the shifting sands, this city has crystalized from the icicles of Ali Cone's altitude inspired imagination; both, however, seem equally improbable, fragile, and ephemeral in their construction. Both are dream cities, and perhaps what unites Alleluia and Gibreel is that they are both haunted by these visions of impossible cities. This city, too, glimpsed from a hillside by an explorer, could be one of Marco Polo's, but as a 'metropolis of ice needles' it also has much in common with science fiction renderings of a crystalline New York that we find in Calvino's *Cosmicomics* (another of Rushdie's favourites, which we can be almost certain he re-read around 1988).<sup>67</sup> Like Jahilia, this is less a city than the physical manifestation of an idea:

She was still at twenty-seven thousand feet, but the apparition of the impossible city threw her back across space and time to the Bayswater study of old dark wooden furniture and heavy velvet curtains in which her father Otto Cone, the art historian and biographer of Picabia, had spoken to her in her fourteenth and his final year of 'the most dangerous of all the lies we are fed in our lives', which was, in his opinion, the idea of the continuum. 'Anybody ever tries to tell you how this most beautiful and most evil of planets is somehow homogenous, that it all *adds up*, you get on the phone to the straitjacket tailor,' he advised her, managing to give the impression of having visited more than one before coming to his conclusions. 'The world is incompatible, just never forget it: gaga. Ghosts, Nazis, saints, all alive at the same time; in one spot, blissful happiness, while down the road, the inferno'. [...] Ice cities on the roof of the world wouldn't have phased Otto.<sup>68</sup>

If Jahilia is impermanence and unsettlement, then this ice city is contradiction and impossibility. What is different about this city, however, is that the idea it is constructed around seems to be the very idea of *Invisible Cities*: that the world is great and terrible,

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<sup>66</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 295.

<sup>67</sup> In addition to the 1981 review, Rushdie speaks enthusiastically of the *Cosmicomics* in an essay on Steven Hawking, and in fact ends the essay by suggesting that Calvino is perhaps of more use to us than Hawking, whose faith in a unified field theory he finds hard to swallow: 'And, anyway, to all of us who aren't scientists – who are lay readers, or even writers – the real value of the ideas of the new physics and of quantum mechanics is precisely the same as that of Calvino's stories: namely, that they make it possible for us to dream new dreams, of ourselves as well as the universe.' (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 264.).

<sup>68</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 295.

infinitely various, and that there are things to be conserved from the inferno. Even the use of the word 'inferno' (which is retained in the English translation of *Invisible Cities*) might be read as a nod to Calvino's 'inferno of the living'. While Otto's impassioned anti-communism is remote from the purposes for which Calvino put this idea to use, there is perhaps a little of Rushdie's vision of Calvino in his character. If Otto Cone manages to give the impression of 'having visited more planets than one', then Calvino is, to Rushdie, no less extraterrestrial: 'It is entirely possible that Calvino is not a human being at all, but a planet [...] planet Calvino'.<sup>69</sup>

We later hear more of Otto Cone's thoughts on incompatibility, and learn exactly how it relates to the city, so that Alleluia's journey through space and time is more readily understandable:

('The modern city,' Otto Cone on his hobbyhorse had lectured his bored family at table, 'is the locus classicus of incompatible realities. Lives that have no business mingling with one another sit side by side on the omnibus. One universe, on a zebra crossing, is caught for an instant, blinking like a rabbit, in the headlamps of a motor-vehicle in which an entirely alien and contradictory continuum is to be found. And as long as that's all, they pass in the night, jostling in Tube stations, raising their hats in some hotel corridor, it's not so bad. But if they meet! It's uranium and plutonium, each makes the other decompose, boom.' [...]).<sup>70</sup>

The ice city hanging above Everest is thus the physical manifestation of the incompatibility that lies at the heart of all cities but, it seems, particularly of London, the home of distinctive omnibuses, and the Tube.

The third fantastical city I want to dwell on is in fact a village: Titlipur, the home town of Ayesha and Mirza Saed (whose story, as we have already seen, contains other Calvinian echoes). Like Jahilia and the ice metropolis, Titlipur is constructed from an unusual material:

The village of Titlipur had grown up in the shade of an immense banyan-tree, a single monarch that ruled, with its multiple roots, over an area more than half a mile in diameter. By now the growth of tree into village and

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<sup>69</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 254-55.

<sup>70</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 314.

village into tree had become so intricate that it was impossible to differentiate between the two. Certain districts of the tree had become well known lovers' nooks; others were chicken runs. Some of the poorer labourers had constructed rough-and-ready shelters in the angles of stout branches, and actually lived inside the dense foliage. There were branches that were used as pathways across the village, and children's swings made out of the old tree's beards, and in places where the tree stooped low down towards the earth its leaves formed roofs for many a hutment which seemed to hang from the greenery like the nest of a weaver bird.<sup>71</sup>

Titlipur is not just constructed from the branches of the banyan tree, it is also, at a more fundamental level, woven from the fabric of Calvino's fiction, and in particular from *The Baron in the Trees*. In *The Baron*, the young Cosimo leaves his dinner table at frustration at being made to eat snails, climbs a tree, and refuses to come back down for the rest of his life. Rushdie describes this as 'one of the most haunting images of rebellion, of determined nay-saying, that exists in the literature of this rebellious century'.<sup>72</sup> Cosimo trains the growth of the branches to form an intricate network of pathways via which he can navigate his arboreal realm. He sleeps among the leaves, suspended from the branches in a fur lined sleeping bag, but also takes up mattresses to provide lovers' nooks for amorous encounters, and ultimately with his childhood sweetheart Viola, who he first meets while she is playing on a tree-swing. At one point, whilst travelling his pathways to their farthest extent, he comes across a group of Spanish nobility in exile who are not permitted on the soil, and so must remain in the trees where they continue to hold court. Similarly, when at home he participates in town meetings of Ombrosa from the branches of 'the big nut tree in the square', which is the central feature of the town. Not just the arboreal nature of Titlipur, then, but all of the aspects that make up its peculiar and unique forms of life – its 'meticulous strategies for making a successful life in the trees' – are borrowed and adapted from the pages of *The Baron in the Trees*.<sup>73</sup> As well as hanging from the branches of the great banyan-tree, Titlipur exists in 'the thick forests of marvelous ideas' that Rushdie discovers in Calvino's works.<sup>74</sup>

#### 4.2.4 A City Visible but Unseen

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<sup>71</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 222.

<sup>72</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 256.

<sup>73</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 256.

<sup>74</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 256.

These invisible cities – Jahilia, the ‘imaginary and fabulous city made of sand’;<sup>75</sup> the ‘impossible city’ of Everest, a ‘metropolis of gigantic ice needles’; and the arboreal miracle of Titlipur – orbit around another city. They are really designed to bring to the surface various aspects of urban space, and to make us think of the city itself as the locus of impossibilities. In *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo at a certain point claims to have run out of cities. Kublai Khan responds by saying there is one city that has gone unmentioned: Polo’s home city of Venice.

Marco smiled. ‘What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?’

The emperor did not turn a hair. ‘And yet I have never heard you mention that name’.

And Polo said: ‘Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice.’<sup>76</sup>

In much the same way, when Rushdie describes all of his imaginary cities in *The Satanic Verses*, he is saying something about the London in which Gibreel and Chamcha find themselves. In fact, all of these dream cities occur in sequences arranged around the novel’s central chapter, in which Rushdie is most engaged with the politics of life in Thatcher’s London, and which to my mind is the real meat of the book: ‘A City Visible but Unseen’. If the description of Jahilia contained, in Carter’s words, a ‘nod’ to Calvino, then we can see this only as a bow, as a clear act of homage. Indeed, it is surprising that this has not been more widely commented upon, given that the title of the chapter is nearly incomprehensible unless we see it as Rushdie’s reworking of the concept of an ‘invisible city’.

London itself is a heavily imagined city in the text. It appears as the ‘Elloven Deeowen’ of the young Saladin Chamcha’s desires, when he repeatedly spells it out, ‘like a spell, the six letters of his dream city’.<sup>77</sup> It becomes the ‘Proper London’ towards which he and Gibreel plummet impossibly at the start of the novel, and later the ‘Geographer’s London’ represented by the A to Z in Gibreel’s evangelical and angelical quest.<sup>78</sup> It is a

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<sup>75</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 272.

<sup>76</sup> Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p. 86.

<sup>77</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 37.

<sup>78</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 3.

'demon city in which anything can happen', and which later, under Gibreel's angelic influence, will become bizarrely tropical.<sup>79</sup> It is clear from the city's very first appearance in the novel that this is the city of which all other invisible cities are a reflection:

... high above the great, rotting, beautiful, snow-white, illuminated city, Mahagonny, Babylon, Alphaville. But Gibreel has already named it, I mustn't interfere: Proper London, capital of Vilayet, winked blinked nodded in the night. While at Himalayan height a brief and premature sun burst into the powdery January air, a blip vanished from radar screens, and the thin air was full of bodies, descending from the Everest of the catastrophe to the milky paleness of the sea.<sup>80</sup>

London, like the ice city of incompatibility, is first glimpsed from a Himalayan height. As the city behind all invisible cities it contains not only the incompatibility of 'not-Shangri-La', but also the unsettlement and impermanence of Jahilia, and the ingenuous ways in which people carve out lives for themselves that we later see reflected in Titlipur. Rushdie's intervention here is in the rephrasing of the 'invisible city' into the city that is 'visible but unseen', in other words to shift the focus onto the question of how and why certain aspects of cities remain unseen, hidden from view. '[W]hat you believe depends on what you've seen, - not only what is visible, but what you are prepared to look in the face'.<sup>81</sup> The London that is unseen here includes stories that have been excluded through the politics of race and class: the stories of migrant communities in Thatcher's Britain, struggling against the echoes on Enoch Powell on the streets; the stories of the victims of heavily racialized and brutal policing; the stories of far left struggles in London and Bombay; and perhaps most importantly an oblique representation of the stories of those people obliged to live in the horrific and perilous condition of tenement slums and 'temporary' accommodation. This last was the subject of Rushdie's furious essay 'An Unimportant Fire' in 1984, and this article undoubtedly provides the inspiration for the story of those who perish in the fire in *The Satanic Verses*. The essay is important in that it foregrounds the activist dimensions of the text, and the way it seeks to make an active intervention in the life of the city it occupies.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 250.

<sup>80</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 252.

<sup>82</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 139-142.

Yet even here he is far closer to the spirit of Calvino's writing than we might assume. Even in *Invisible Cities* – his most abstract text in which he might be seen to come closest to the 'Euro-American' postmodernism that Sangari sees as directly opposite to forms of postcolonial irrealism grounded in communal experience rather than stylistic play – Calvino is in fact intensely interested in the specific difficulties and hardships of urban life, as well as the transformative possibilities that urban space might offer. We see this perhaps in one of Rushdie's favourite invisible cities, Argia, which has earth instead of air. The idea that lies behind the city, that of a subterranean, unseen existence, is precisely the same as that which lies behind Rushdie's unseen London of slums and racism, and both are narrated in the same oblique way: 'At night, putting your ear to the ground, you can sometimes hear a door slam'.<sup>83</sup> Though *Invisible Cities* is perhaps more commonly remembered for its discussions of cities to come – the infernal or perfect city – Calvino is no less interested in the realities of urban living today. We might recognize some of Rushdie's 'unimportant fire' in Calvino's description of Eudoxia: 'a stain that spreads out shapelessly, with crooked streets, houses that crumble one upon the other amid clouds of dust, fires, screams in the darkness'.<sup>84</sup> Immediately after this, Marco Polo gazes at the smoke emerging from his and Kublai Khan's lips, which at first appears to obscure and facilitate the magical apparitions of distant cities, but suddenly seems to represent something far less romantic:

Or else the cloud hovered, having barely left the lips, dense and slow, and suggested another vision: the exhalations that hang over the roofs of the metropolises, the opaque smoke that is not scattered, the hood of miasmata that weighs over the bitumous streets. Not the labile mists of memory nor the dry transparence, but the charring of burned lives that forms a scab on the city, the sponge swollen with vital matter that no longer flows, the jam of past, present, future that blocks existences calcified in the illusion of movement: this is what you would find at the end of your journey.<sup>85</sup>

This vision of the city that we get here shares much with London in *The Satanic Verses*, with its metamorphosed rivers of blood, fires and clouds of smoke, calcified existences and the blocked existences ('the new cannot be born...'), in which 'the arteries of the

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<sup>83</sup> Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p. 126.

<sup>84</sup> Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p. 97.

<sup>85</sup> Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p. 99.



possible had begun to harden'.<sup>86</sup> It also, however, reminds us how strongly this interest in the city, in all of its unlivable realities, is grounded in the rest of Calvino's work. The most obvious intertext here is his celebrated short story 'Smog' (1958), but we might also think, for example, of *Marcovaldo*, subtitled 'the seasons in the city', and his earlier (and far less well-known) neo-realist works *A Plunge into Real Estate* and *Youth in Turin*.<sup>87</sup>

One of the things that bringing these two writers together foregrounds, then, is the fundamentally urban nature of their imagination. This is in marked contrast to Gabriel Garcia Marquez who, as Rushdie said in his review of Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 'decided to elevate the village world-view above the urban one; this is the source of his fabulism'.<sup>88</sup> When asked about his description of *Midnight's Children* as 'a big city novel', Rushdie takes the opportunity to distance himself from Garcia Marquez:

I think the kind of sensibility of the book is basically urban. For instance, an endless number of people ask me about Garcia Marquez. And the answer to that is that: yes, the two books are in the same area of fiction, there is no doubt. But it seems to me that Garcia Marquez's fiction is essentially not urban, it's essentially a village perspective. And what he is doing is to take what seems normal and natural in a village, and very strange and wonderful outside the village, and he writes that. And my point of departure is almost exactly opposite to that. [For instance], although half of the novel [*Midnight's Children*], roughly, takes place in Bombay, the other half doesn't. But it seems to me, in a sort of way, it all takes place in Bombay, Bombay is the spirit of the book. Bombay is an idea as well as a place, and it seems to me that it follows, it fits in that idea.<sup>89</sup>

In *The Satanic Verses* it is London, 'that most protean and chameleon of cities', rather than Bombay that is the city at the heart of the novel, but the principle remains the

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<sup>86</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 63.

<sup>87</sup> *Marcovaldo* is particularly interesting here in that it presents the city from the perspective of an impoverished migrant, Marcovaldo'. It is also interesting that the text has its own links to India: one night, leaving the cinema, Marcovaldo misses his tram in the fog and accidentally finds himself on board an aircraft to Delhi.

<sup>88</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 301.

<sup>89</sup> T. Vijay Kumar, 'An Interview with Salman Rushdie', in *Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings*, ed. by Meenakshi Mukherjee, pp. 212-27 (p. 214).

same.<sup>90</sup> This particularly urban brand of magical realism, which does not base itself around what seems magical or credible in one context and fantastic in another, but rather roots itself in the city as an *idea* as well as a place, might well be seen to borrow more from Calvino than it does from Garcia Marquez. This urban disposition in Rushdie's writings is something that has only recently been given in depth critical consideration, and Calvino has remained surprisingly peripheral to this criticism despite his obvious relevance.<sup>91</sup> It is significant in that this introduces an important distinction into the sometimes flatteningly cosmopolitan or universally 'postcolonial' category of 'magical realism'. The difference between Garcia Marquez and Calvino is not, from this perspective, European/non-European or postmodern/postcolonial, but rather another version of the city/country dialectic. It is clear on which side of this divide we should position Rushdie's work, and from this perspective he looks far closer to Calvino than he does to Garcia Marquez.

If Rushdie and Calvino are normally ever mentioned in the same sentence, it is as 'postmodernists' whose work is similarly marked by a taste for narrative innovation and play that can be in some way aligned with a certain moment of continental 'Theory', even if its origins lie elsewhere. It is interesting to note, however, that in their respective reviews of each other's work they were often dismissive of this innovation, preferring other aspects of the work. We have, for example, seen that in the 1981 review Rushdie finds *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* to be a kind of 'mystical structuralism' that is too clever to like. Although he is obviously more taken with the narrative innovations of *If on a Winter's Night*, it is worth noting that he describes the book as 'Calvino's city of words'.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, in his 1984 review of *Midnight's Children*, Calvino remains unconvinced by the elements that we might expect him to most appreciate, the narrative play. In fact it almost seems that he finds this aspect of Rushdie's work 'too clever to like':

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<sup>90</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 201.

<sup>91</sup> See Vassilena Pareshekeva, *Salman Rushdie's Cities: Reconfigurational Politics and the Contemporary Urban Imagination*, (London: Continuum international, 2012). Although Calvino appears in a list of relevant names in the introduction, the authors seem unaware of the connections between the two authors, and there is no sustained engagement with the intertextual relationship between them.

<sup>92</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 259.

There are many narrative innovations, perhaps too many, each pre-announced in advance, remembered and commented on after the fact; this excessive abundance is the defect of the book. The result is an impression of overload, or the verbose, of congestion, accentuated by the fact that the grotesque stylization tends to fix the obscene and the repellent as stable and uniform qualities of the human universe. One feels the need for an orchestration that would also include movements like an *andante*, an *adagio*, a *largo*, moments of pause, spaces of writing and imagination that a less dense, more thin. These do exist, though in a reduced proportion relative to the length of the text, and they are the pages dedicated to the description of cities: Delhi, Bombay, Karachi. The cities of India, their image and the characterization of their spirit, are what I prefer in *Midnight's Children*, the true characters of the book teeming with people.<sup>93</sup>

What these two authors recognize in each other's work is precisely this point of departure: they situate their 'magical realisms' in the city, and not just the city as a place but as an idea, an image, a spirit. They share a sense of the city as the locus of political possibilities and impossibilities, of loving and ingenuous inhabitations, and of unlivable quotidian realities. It is also a particular urban moment that captures their imagination in these works: burning Rome, exploding London, Octavia, all hanging from a thread above the abyss.

### 4.3 Labyrinths, Lions, and Whales

*The Satanic Verses* is Rushdie's most Calvinian book. This is true not just because of the traces of Calvino's influence in the text, the direct allusions or acts of homage it contains, nor even for the specifically urban brand of magical realism which they employ. Instead, it is his most Calvinian book because it is the one in which his sense of what literature is *for*, what it does, and what it might do. Rushdie's Calvino is an explicitly political one. As I showed earlier, he finishes his *Imaginary Homelands* essay on Calvino by claiming that:

[T]he reason why Calvino is such an indispensable writer is precisely that he tells us, joyfully, wickedly, that there are things in the world worth loving as well as hating; and that such things exist in people too.<sup>94</sup>

The passage that Rushdie almost certainly has in mind here is the conclusion to *Invisible Cities*, in which Kublai Khan is haunted by the idea that 'it is all useless, if the last landing

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<sup>93</sup> Calvino, *I figli della mezzanotte* di Salman Rushdie', p. 1442.

<sup>94</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 261.

place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us'. Marco Polo responds by saying, in the text's most celebrated lines:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seeks and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.<sup>95</sup>

What is perhaps less well known to Anglophone audiences is that Calvino had been offering us versions of this choice throughout his career. Polo's sentiments echo Calvino's own in two earlier essays: *Il Midollo del Leone* ('The Lion's Marrow', 1955) and *La sfida al labirinto* ('The Challenge to the Labyrinth', 1962). In the first of these, Calvino draws on Gramsci's famous adage 'pessimism of the intellect optimism of the will', to call for a literature which does not give in to the sense of intellectual exhaustion that he finds in many contemporary works. 'And so, we would want to find through all of the mountain of literature of the negative that looms above us, that literature of trials, of strangers, of nausea, of waste lands and deaths in the afternoon, the back bone that would sustain us, a lesson of strength, not of resignation to the sentence'.<sup>96</sup> This nugget of strength that would help us fight is what Calvino refers to as 'the marrow of the lion'. In the later essay, he distinguishes between a literature that challenges the labyrinth (which is to say, capitalist Modernity), and one that gives in to it and tries to lose itself inside it. 'It is the *challenge to the labyrinth* that we want to save, it is a literature of a *challenge to the labyrinth* that we want to clarify and distinguish from the literature of *yielding to the labyrinth*'.<sup>97</sup>

These essays might remind us of Carlo Levi's theories of 'contadinian' and 'luiginian' literature, which we saw in the last chapter, that were written in a similar period and were also inspired by a postwar rediscovery of Gramsci's work. Many elements of the

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<sup>95</sup> Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p. 165.

<sup>96</sup> Italo Calvino, *Una pietra sopra: discorsi di letteratura e società*, (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 1995), p.21.

<sup>97</sup> Italo Calvino, 'La sfida al labirinto', in Calvino, *Saggi*, p. 116. Emphasis in the original.

question might have changed by the time of *Invisible Cities* – Calvino is, for example, much more hostile to the idea of the national popular by that stage - but the fundamental choice that we are offered as a reader, whether to give in or to preserve something that helps us struggle against, is essentially the same. This is the only way in which we might fight against the atmosphere of intellectual defeat, of yielding to the labyrinth, or of what Kublai Khan calls the ‘ever-narrowing circles’ (or what Rushdie calls ‘futures of narrowing horizons, diminishing prospects’) pulling us towards the infernal and inevitable city.<sup>98</sup>

Rushdie’s work, or at least his work in the 1980s, is marked by a similar struggle against an atmosphere of defeat. In an essay originally published in 1993, concerning his experience compiling a list of the most promising British novelists for the *Sunday Times*, Rushdie observed that the Thatcher years had had a devastating effect on the literary imaginations of the generation that had been formed in them.

So many of these writers wrote without hope. They had lost all ambition, all desire to wrestle with the world. [...] Very few writers had the courage or even the energy to bite of a big chunk of the universe and chew it over. Very few showed any linguistic or formal innovation. Many were dulled, and therefore dull.<sup>99</sup>

It was a similar sense of exhaustion and defeat that Rushdie took aim against in perhaps his most famous piece of non-fiction, ‘Outside the Whale’. In the essay, Rushdie argues against Orwell’s concept of writing inside the whale, which is to say in total isolation from the real world and all of its messiness. In Rushdie’s eyes this was ‘a philosophy built upon intellectual defeat’, which must be combatted’.<sup>100</sup> ‘The truth is’, Rushdie asserts, ‘there is no whale’:

So we are left with a fairly straight forward choice. Either we agree to delude ourselves, to lose ourselves in the fantasy of the great fish, for which a second metaphor is that of Pangloss’s garden; or we can do what all human beings do instinctively when they realize that the womb has been lost for ever – that is, we can make the very devil of a racket.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 389.

<sup>99</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, p. 35.

<sup>100</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 97.

<sup>101</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 99.

The choice we are offered here by Rushdie, in 1984, is of course the same one that Calvino offered us throughout his career: give in or challenge; get lost in the labyrinth (or whale, or garden) or stand up; become part of the inferno so that you don't see it, or try to remember that there are things that are not infernal. To my mind, there are none of Rushdie's fictional works that are so closely linked to this project as *The Satanic Verses*.

Throughout *The Satanic Verses*, one of the most consistent motifs is the idea that the universe is shrinking. Early in the novel Saladin feels that he has arrived in a moment in his life in which 'the arteries of the possible had begun to harden'. This idea is most poignantly expressed in the story of the elderly and dying Rosa Diamond, who finds herself in her old age 'constantly bumping into things, - knocking over coffee-tables, bruising herself on doorknobs - bursting into tears, and crying out: *Everything shrinks*.'<sup>102</sup> Against this shrinkage, she tries to oppose '*the only bright time [she] can remember*'.<sup>103</sup> This narrowing of possibilities is an agony to her:

'To diminish into this, after being in such vastness. It isn't to be borne.' And after a further silence: 'Everything shrinks'.<sup>104</sup>

There are echoes of this later on when Hal Valence sacks Chamcha from his job as a voice actor with the words 'Your universe is shrinking'.<sup>105</sup> Even the dimensions of the word 'universe' seem to have shrunk to banal proportions in this passage: 'In marketing parlance, a *universe* was the total potential market for a given product or service: the chocolate universe, the slimming universe'.<sup>106</sup> It comes back most powerfully, however, at the very end of the book, when Gibreel confronts Chamcha with a gun in his father's study, and commits suicide:

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<sup>102</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 145. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>103</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 145. Emphasis in the original. The story that she tells, of a poncho-wrapped knife fight in Latin America, is very reminiscent of one of the fragments of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*.

<sup>104</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 155.

<sup>105</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 264.

<sup>106</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 264.

[...] how few choices the choices were, now that Gibreel was the *armed man* and he, the *unarmed*, how the universe had shrunk! The true djinns of old had the power to open the gates of the Infinite, to make all things possible, to render all wonders capable of being attained; how banal, in comparison, was this modern spook, this degraded descendant of mighty ancestors, this feeble slave of a twentieth-century lamp.<sup>107</sup>

This, ultimately, is what I suggest Rushdie at his best borrows from Calvino: a sense of the contraction of the world, and a struggle to preserve and create alternative possibilities in the very form of his fiction. This is what he takes from 'wizard' Calvino, the 'word-juggler', who might not have looked out of place in the magicians' ghetto of *Midnight's Children*. Eugenio Bolongaro argues that Calvino is crucially shaped by his emergence as a writer in the first fifteen years of post-war Italy. 'The more one reads about it,' he argues:

The more one comes to feel that this was one of those unique historical and cultural moments when the possibility for real and positive change existed, and when the actions of the political and cultural leadership of the country made a difference to the course of history. It was a time alive with opportunities, and a time whose fascination also lies in the fact that most of these opportunities were squandered and lost.<sup>108</sup>

Timothy Brennan has described Rushdie of being part of a 'nationalism of mourning'.<sup>109</sup> We might say much the same thing of Calvino. Yet at its best this nationalism of mourning is not morose, but loving, preserving the memory and feeling of lost possibilities within the fabric of the text to remind us that it only feels as though the universe has shrunk. Both of them labour in their works to find who and what is not inferno, and to make them endure, give them space.

#### **4.3.1 Gramsci, Turin, and the Birth of the New**

Calvino is not the only Italian writer who is central to Rushdie's depiction of the city in *The Satanic Verses* as the locus of political possibilities and impossibilities. There is one phrase that echoes throughout the text and seems to capture Rushdie's representation

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<sup>107</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 546.

<sup>108</sup> Bolongaro, *Italo Calvino and the Compass of Literature*, p. 7.

<sup>109</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 100.

of Thatcherite London not just as a space but as a moment, continually reworked and re-elaborated in the mouths of a variety of characters from first to last page, a phrase which has to do with the death of the old and birth of the new.

We first hear it in the very first line of the text, as Gibreel Farishta, plummeting through the air, deliriously shouts ‘To be born again [...] first you have to die.’<sup>110</sup> It recurs a few pages later, intruding as an unfinished and italicized fragment into the narrative of Rekha Merchant’s suicide, and it reoccurs at regular intervals after that.<sup>111</sup> This is the same phrase, we later learn, that Farishta had been repeating over and over during the hijacked Bostan flight, much to the irritation of Chamcha. In response to his interruptions, Gibreel repeats the idea in a different register, no longer the sing-song refrain of the first pages, but now a half-remembered political mantra: ‘The old must die, you get my message, or the new cannot be whatnot’.<sup>112</sup> This apparently goes on for some time, until eventually Chamcha snaps:

The seventh time that Farishta quoted the old Gramsci chestnut, Saladin shouted out in frustration, maybe that’s what’s happening to you, loudmouth, your old self is dying and that dream-angel of yours is trying to be born into your flesh.<sup>113</sup>

Rushdie reveals, then, that this phrase is in fact drawn from Gramsci, and is a version of Gramsci’s famous dictum:

The old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.

What is particularly interesting about this exchange is that Farishta does not explicitly give the origin of the saying, instead Chamcha seems already to be familiar with it. Rushdie depicts Chamcha and Farishta as mutually conversant in a Gramscian language, as communicating through the medium of *The Prison Notebooks*. This familiarity with Gramsci’s phrase seems to be a wider cultural phenomenon; the implication seems to be

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<sup>110</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 3.

<sup>111</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 15, p. 33, p. 182, p. 222, p. 403.

<sup>112</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 84.

<sup>113</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 85.



that this is an 'old Gramsci chestnut' that would be familiar to anyone, or perhaps only to any Indian travelling to London.

It returns, finally, in its Gramscian form, at the very end of the novel, as Saladin Chamcha leaves his childhood home for the last time knowing that it is to be destroyed. 'To the devil with it! Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born'.<sup>114</sup> This Gramscian phrase is thus absolutely central to the novel and what it promises: it bookends the text, appearing in its first and last line, and fills the mouth of practically every major character along the way.

It also seems to be offered as a kind of answer to the question which lies at the very heart of the novel: 'How does newness come into the world? How is it born?'<sup>115</sup> While in the next lines Rushdie points us towards some of the classic tropes of postmodern postcolonial theory ('of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?'), the omnipresence of the 'old Gramsci chestnut' in the text points us perhaps in a slightly different direction. It encourages us to think of postcoloniality as a temporal rather than a geographical or ontological quality, something that has less to do with identity politics than it does with existing in the interregnum, on the cusp of a new world which cannot yet be born and in the shadows of an old world that refuses to die. In his recent *La condizione postcoloniale*, Sandro Mezzadra defines what he refers to as the postcolonial condition in just such temporal terms:

Decisive, from this point of view, is precisely 'the meaning of 'post' in postcolonial'. It is best to announce immediately and clearly our thesis: postcolonial time is that in which *contemporaneously*, the colonial experience appears consigned to the past and, precisely because of the way in which it is overcome, installs itself at the center of contemporary social experience.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 547.

<sup>115</sup> Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 8.

<sup>116</sup> Sandro Mezzadra, *La condizione postcoloniale* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2008), p. 25. Emphasis in the original.

What is striking is that in order to position his migrant London in this liminal temporality that we might describe as ‘postcolonial time’, Rushdie turns to Gramsci.<sup>117</sup> He is not alone in doing so either. South African novelist Nadine Gordimer uses precisely the same Gramscian phrase as an epigraph to her 1981 *July’s People*, and would later comment on it in a lecture in 1983 in New York, saying that ‘[i]n this interregnum, I and all my countrymen and women are living’.<sup>118</sup> ‘The interregnum’ has since become an important trope in studies of Gordimer’s works and in South African literary criticism more generally, in what is perhaps one of the less well-known moments of Gramsci’s postcolonial afterlife. Rushdie was more than aware of this: in 1990 he reviewed another of Gordimer’s works, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics, Places*, in an essay that would later be included in *Imaginary Homelands*, and commented on her use of this line in her 1983 lecture.<sup>119</sup> It is not just Indian actors on hijacked planes that share this language of Gramscian chestnuts then, but also, it seems, postcolonial writers of novels in English.

The central point, however, is that both of these authors, so different in many ways, define their respective postcolonial moments in relation to Gramsci’s description of the way his own Turin teetered between revolutionary potentialities and Fascist reaction in the early 1920s. The Italian city at the most intense moment of the Factory Council Movement thus becomes, in a sense, a model for the postcolonial moment. It is not Marco Polo’s Venice that stands behind Rushdie’s cities in *The Satanic Verses*, but Gramsci’s (and Calvino’s) Turin.

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<sup>117</sup> A decade later, in 1999, he would have recourse to the same phrase again in a different context in a column included in *Step Across This Line*: ‘The relationship between the Islamic world and the West seems to be living through one of the famous “interregnums” defined by Antonio Gramsci, in which the old refuses to die, so that the new cannot be born, and all manner of “morbid symptoms” arise. Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, p. 286.

<sup>118</sup> Nadine Gordimer, ‘Living in the Interregnum’, *The New York Review of Books*, 20 January 1983. <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1983/jan/20/living-in-the-interregnum/>> [Accessed 24/09/2015].

<sup>119</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 193. For Rushdie, one of the ‘morbid symptoms’ of the interregnum is ‘the fact that white experiences of the South African reality, as evoked by white novelists, playwrights and film-makers, continue to command a degree of international attention that black descriptions of black experience only rarely receive.’

### 4.3.2 Oceans, Trees, and Streams of Influence: Italy and India

The presence of Gramsci in the text allows us to locate Calvino's murmur as part of a broader chorus of specifically Italian voices and cultural influences that appear in his works. In turn, I suggest that this might help us to triangulate Rushdie's interest in Calvino in relation to the other textual and extra-textual relationships between Italy and India that have been the subject of this thesis. In order to do both of these things, I want to return to his essay 'Influence' in *Step Across This Line*, which I discussed briefly at the start of this chapter.

This essay has been celebrated in postcolonial criticism for its conception of influence as 'something fluid, something "flowing in"', and the image it presents of the 'transcultural, translingual capacity of influence'. Andrew Teverson, for example, compares Rushdie's idea of 'influence' to Barthes' 'intertextuality', but argues that while they are similar Rushdie's is preferable because it allows for postcolonial agency, and because it is 'intimately bound up with the concept of hybridity'.<sup>120</sup> This seems indeed to be borne out by the most overtly theoretical expression in the essay.

From this transcultural, translingual capacity of influence we can deduce something about the nature of literature: that (if I may briefly abandon my watery metaphor) books can grow as easily from spores borne on the air as from their makers' particular and local roots. That there are international families of words as well as the more familiar clans of earth and blood.<sup>121</sup>

Yet there is a tension at the heart of this essay. What has perhaps less commonly been noticed that this was originally a lecture given in Torino (Turin), indeed Teverson not only overlooks this, but actually misreads it, claiming that the lecture took place in Toronto rather than Torino.<sup>122</sup> This might be a small and incidental mistake, but it speaks volumes about the way in which Teverson positions Rushdie (seemingly at Rushdie's own cue) in a cosmopolitan context that has little interest in place or institutions, and still less in the idea of national literatures. As a result what is read as a speech about how national borders are no longer relevant in literature is actually its

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<sup>120</sup> Andrew Teverson, *Salman Rushdie: Contemporary World Writers*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), P. 58.

<sup>121</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, p. 64.

<sup>122</sup> Teverson, *Salman Rushdie*, p. 55.

opposite, a speech that is profoundly interested in a national literary tradition (the Italian one). This is something that is made clear in the opening lines, in which Rushdie frames the lecture by outlining his intention:

[t]o speak not of my writing but rather of my reading. And in particular of the many ways in which my experience of Italian literature (and, I must add, Italian cinema) has shaped my thoughts about how and what to write. This is, I want to talk about influence.<sup>123</sup>

What Rushdie means by this, it transpires, is that he will talk about how Calvino has shaped his thoughts about 'how and what to write', for this is really an essay about Calvino. It's important to note, however, that this personal relationship ('I first met Calvino...') is phrased as part of an explicitly national literary relationship with Italy. A number of other Italian writers and directors are mentioned here: Fellini, Pasolini, Visconti, Antonioni, De Sica. This relationship with Calvino takes place, then, in the context of neither the 'more familiar clans of earth and blood' (the national), nor the 'international families of words' (international here in the sense of cosmopolitan, defined by its lack of interest in the merely national), but rather in the context of a *transnational* literary dialogue. In other words, we might see it as taking place not in a kind of cosmopolitan space defined by hybridity (as Teverson does) in which Torino and Toronto are interchangeable, but in precisely the across the same transnational space as the other interactions mapped in this thesis: Kipling, Gramsci, Guha, Silone, Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Levi, and Desai.

I suggest that unpacking these tensions in Rushdie's essay might be of considerable use to us theoretically, since this transnational space is surprisingly difficult to conceptualize within the available imaginative geographies of postcolonial studies and 'world literature' studies. Rushdie's essay, as we have seen, flits between a 'water metaphor' – that of the ocean ('I have always envisaged the world of the imagination not so much as a continent as an ocean'<sup>124</sup>) – and an arboreal one, in the language of growing, of airborne spores, and of local 'roots'. This opposition and the choice of metaphors seems to anticipate the language used a year later by Franco Moretti in his 'Conjectures on World Literature', which has recently become a central reference point

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<sup>123</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, p. 62. Emphasis mine.

<sup>124</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, p. 62.

in debates about how (and if) we should ‘map’ the production and diffusion of literary forms and works on a global scale:

Now, trees and waves are both metaphors—but except for this, they have absolutely nothing in common. The tree describes the passage from unity to diversity: one tree, with many branches: from Indo-European, to dozens of different languages. The wave is the opposite: it observes uniformity engulfing an initial diversity: Hollywood films conquering one market after another (or English swallowing language after language). Trees need geographical *discontinuity* (in order to branch off from each other, languages must first be separated in space, just like animal species); waves dislike barriers, and thrive on geographical *continuity* (from the viewpoint of a wave, the ideal world is a pond). Trees and branches are what nation-states cling to; waves are what markets do.<sup>125</sup>

The transnational line across which Calvino’s murmurings are transmitted to Rushdie is difficult to locate in this language. It is neither a process that tends towards ever-increasing specificity and *discontinuity*, nor the kind of abstract universalism or *continuity*, predicated upon the dissolution of these specificities, insisted upon by the marketplace of global capitalism. Rather, it’s something between the two: a tree that grows into others; an ocean ruled by currents and tides.

The literary imaginations of both Calvino and Rushdie give us the means of reformulating the metaphorical language of Moretti’s ‘Conjectures’, and help us to conceptualize this transnational space of literary influence. Calvino gives us the trees of Cosimo Rondo, trained together to make pathways through the branches. In this image, the tree is no longer the visual metaphor for a stationary rootedness, but a space for agility and exploration that leads to unexpected places. Rushdie offers us the ‘streams of story’ in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, an image that he clearly has in mind in the ‘Influence’ essay:

The young writer, perhaps uncertain, perhaps ambitious, probably both at once, casts around for help; and sees, within the flow of the ocean, certain sinuous thicknesses, like ropes, the work of earlier weavers, of sorcerers who swan this way before him.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Franco Moretti, ‘Some Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), 54-68 (p. 67).

<sup>126</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, p. 63.

Rushdie's ocean of imagination is not, then, Moretti's world as pond which offers the minimum resistance to the global waves of capital: it is a strangely viscous sea crossed by the 'sinuous thicknesses' of lines of influence, perhaps more like a network of streams, with currents and valences, than an ocean. What is important in both of these metaphors is that we are not choosing between the absolute immobility of a parochially defended national canon of writing, nor the unrestricted mobility of a cosmopolitan 'international families of words' that takes no notice of national boundaries (in which Toronto and Torino might easily be interchangeable). What we get is something that carries ideas and writers from one place to another precisely because the terrain makes it possible to do so. We might recognize the same basic idea in the language I have drawn upon elsewhere in the thesis to describe transnational resemblances and solidarities: V.G. Kiernan's 'bridges' between Italy and India, and Peter Gran's political 'roads' that run between (for example) Italy, India, and Mexico. Both are interested in the way ideas move, but both retain a fundamental sense of the importance of specific locations that makes this movement meaningful. Ultimately, this is how, I argue, we should locate the relationship between Rushdie and Calvino, as part of a wider stream of influence flowing between Italy and India, made possible by the contours of their social, historical, artistic, and political topography. The same topographical similarities, perhaps, that Marx once alluded to ('Hindustan is the Italy of the Asiatic...').

Indeed, this Rushdian image of a river of influence running between Italy and India might help us to situate this story in relation to the others told in this thesis, and to locate Rushdie's writing in a new way. This image, of an Indian writer in English who sits down to think about influence and ends up being carried by rivers between Italy and India, is uncannily reminiscent of an essay I looked at in the second chapter of this thesis: Raja Rao's 'Some Books Which Have Influenced Me'.

I have read the *Paradiso* in Varanasi and found it familiar. I have read Tsulidas in Tuscany, by Dante's Arno in Florence, and found him surprisingly contemporary. The Arno is a younger river than the Sarayu, and if you looked up and saw the San Miniato, the battlements of Michaelangelo running down in young leaps of turretted silences, as if time were a substance once could catch and keep *Fiorenza dentro dalla cerchia antica*,

you might see Sri Rama himself coming out with Vasishta, Lakshmana behind them. The sun of Tuscanny seemed oft-times the light of Ayodhya.<sup>127</sup>

Though this particular connection between Rushdie and Rao has, to my knowledge, never been noted, there have been plenty of other attempts to place the two alongside each other in a canon of Indian writing in English, something to which Rushdie has often been very resistant. Teverson, for example, argues that it is important to read Rushdie's works alongside Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (both of which, as we have seen in other chapters, have their own links with Italian anti-Fascist writing):

The foreword to this latter work [*Kanthapura*] is of particular interest to students of Rushdie's fiction since it includes one of the first prominent formulations of the demand for Indian writers to develop an Indian English 'dialect' [...] Rao's commitment to the transformation of English, as well as his desire to revolutionize the novel in English by importing into it the rhythms of the Indian storyteller, clearly anticipate Rushdie's later experiments with the form.<sup>128</sup>

The preface to which Teverson is referring here is of course the one I discussed in Chapter 2, which is borrowed and adapted from Silone's *Fontamara*. Any attempt to locate Rushdie in a tradition on Indian Anglophone writing, then, seems to involve the insistent recurrence of exchanges with Italy, which lie just below the surface of this canon. Uma Parameswaran argues that although 'Rushdie may not believe there exists an Indo-English stream of literature or that he is part of it [...] literary historians would have to disagree'.<sup>129</sup> Perhaps, surprisingly, Rushdie does indeed belong to this Indo-English stream of literature in a way that neither he nor Parameswaran and other literary historians might expect, in that, like his work, much of this Indo-English stream of writing has run through Italy.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Raja Rao, 'Books Which Have Influenced Me', in *Aspects of Indian Writing in English: Essays in Honour of Professor K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar*, ed. by M. N. Naik (Dehli: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 45-49, (pp. 45-46).

<sup>128</sup> Teverson, *Salman Rushdie*, p. 42.

<sup>129</sup> Uma Parameswaran, *The Perforated Sheet: Essays on Salman Rushdie's Art* (New Delhi: Affiliated East-West Press, 1988), p. 20.

<sup>130</sup> It is fascinating to note that Rushdie seemed to think of Mulk Raj Anand as a kind of Italian writer, and to be sensitive to the fact that he too might be interested in this Italian stream. In another essay, on the 'oriental scene', he writes of Anand: 'He is best known for his social-realist works like the novel *Coolie*, a study of working class life reminiscent

In the final section of this chapter, I want to look at how Rushdie, in his most recent book, attempts to enter this river of Indo-English literature once more, after a period of distancing himself from it, precisely at the point in which it flows through Italy, in the form of the Arno. And, once again, it is Calvino's streams of stories that he grasps on to.

#### 4.4 Coda: Rushdie's Re-orientation in *The Enchantress of Florence*.

'I am conscious of shifts in my writing', Rushdie wrote in an article entitled 'Ten Years of the Fatwa' in 1999:

There was always a tug-of-war in me between "there" and "here", the pull of roots and of the road. In that struggle of insiders and outsiders, I used to feel simultaneously on both sides. Now I've come down on the side of those who by preference, nature, or circumstance simply do not belong. This unbelonging – I think of it as *disorientation*, loss of the East – is my artistic country now.<sup>131</sup>

The major shift in Rushdie's writing came, as might be expected, after the 'Rushdie affair' following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, and took the form of a drift towards the West and the Right. This geographical shift is easily visible not only in his own physical relocation to New York, but also in the locations of his novels: from *Midnight's Children* in India and *Shame* in Pakistan (his 'goodbye to the East'), and migrant London in *The Satanic Verses*, to New York in his more recent works. At the same time he drifted away from the resistant, socialist politics he seemed to be embracing in *The Satanic Verses* and certainly was embracing in *The Jaguar Smile*, his memoir of his time with the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. In the last decade Rushdie seems to have aligned himself politically and rhetorically with the Bush administration and new forms of American-led imperialism, which we see particularly in his writings in support of military intervention in Iraq.

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of post-war Italian neo-realist cinema (De Sica's *Bicycle Theives*, Rossellini's *Open City*'. Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, p. 152. He goes on to describe Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* as 'a Calvino-esque fable of a misfit boy who climbs a tree and becomes a sort of petty guru' (p. 158). Rushdie's canon of Indian writing in English, then, is one that he describes in relation to Italy.

<sup>131</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, p. 266. Emphasis in the original.



In his most recent novel, 2008's *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie returns to India. He does so, however, via Italy. The novel has a strangely repetitive structure that stages a series of journeys and returns between Italy and India. It opens with the story of the self-styled Morgor dell'amore or 'Mughal of love' to the court of Akbar the Great in Sikri. Morgor, who has travelled from Florence, claims to have an incredible secret to tell to the emperor. This secret, it transpires, is that he is related to the emperor by blood - 'Your relative by blood. In point of fact: your uncle' - due to an incredible sequence of events that have been a buried part of the emperor's family history.<sup>132</sup> The story that he has to tell takes him back to Medici Florence, and involves a re-imagining of the life of Niccolò Machiavelli and two of his friends, Argalia and Ago Vespucci. Argalia leaves Florence as a boy, determined to seek fame and fortune, and as the result of a series of mishaps finds himself a prisoner of the Turks. Argalia, however, quickly rises through the ranks of the Turkish army to become their most important general, and it is in this capacity that he first meets and is seduced by Qara Koz, the forgotten princess and relative of the Mughal emperor, who had been married to the Shah of Persia before his defeat by Argalia. Later, as the result of political intrigue, the couple are obliged to flee to Florence, where Argalia dies and Qara Koz flees once again this time with Vespucci, who is the supposed father of Mogore, who is telling this story back in Sikri, which is where the novel ends. The narrative flits between East and West, between the story and its telling, which is its own story. One of the interesting things about this insistently repeated East-West journey is that it both rehearses and reverses the doomed flight to the Mediterranean (in that case Portugal) that the narrator of Rushdie's 1995 novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* makes. This novel seems to be the opposite of that both that novel and of *Shame*, in that it is not a good-bye to or flight from the East, but rather a 'dream of triumphant return' repeated over and over again. This novel is, I would argue, Rushdie's attempt at 're-orientation', which is to say, his attempt to regain the East.

This return, this reorientation, however, is only possible via Italy. The line which is perhaps intended to be the keynote of the book, and which is repeated again towards the end in case we miss it, seems to want to position the book in opposition to the rhetoric of a 'clash of civilizations' that has become so central to the rhetoric of Islamophobia in America and Europe - the idea that Christian (or capitalist) West and

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<sup>132</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence* (London: Vintage, 2008), p. 125.

Muslim East are so totally different that conflict is inevitable. At a certain moment, Akbar interrupts Mogore's tale, struck by the fact that what is happening in the story seems to be identical to what has just happened in his own court (a painter has painted himself out of existence in an attempt to represent an impossibly beautiful woman):

'The same as Dashwanth' the emperor marvelled.  
'This may be the curse of the human race,' responded Mogor. 'Not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike.'<sup>133</sup>

Akbar remembers these words at the end of the novel, and they appear again in italics: '*The curse of the human race is not that we are different from one another, but that we are so alike*'.<sup>134</sup> The message that this line seems to want to convey, to make the book about, is that the world is not so divided as it might seem, that East and West are in fact exactly the same. This sentiment echoes throughout other moments of the novel, for example when Qara Koz finds herself irritated by people in Florence speaking of the 'wisdom of the East' and replies tersely: 'There is no particular wisdom in the East[...] All human beings are foolish to the same degree'.<sup>135</sup>

While appearing to make a claim about things being the same the world over, what Rushdie is actually doing is mapping similarities between Italy and India. This is true not only on a cultural level, but once again on a topographical one:

When the emperor showed her the pictures they [Europeans] brought with them of their mountains and valleys she thought of the Himalayas and Kashmir and laughed at the foreigners' paltry approximations of natural beauty, their *vaals* and *aalps*, half-words to describe half-things.<sup>136</sup>

Jodha, the Emperor's imaginary wife (another borrowing from Calvino, to whom we will return) might be unconvinced by a comparison between the Himalayas and the Alps, but the point is that the text makes it. This is, of course, the same comparison that Marx made in his 'Essay on India'. Just as in the 'Influence' essay, then, the image of an absolutely mobile and fluid international community is actually facilitated by the on-

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<sup>133</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 171.

<sup>134</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 392.

<sup>135</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 360.

<sup>136</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 59.

going exchange and latent similarities between Italy and India that have been the subject of this thesis. The new Rushdie's empty and homogenous cosmopolitanism is sustained in this novel by the ghosts of a now forgotten transnational exchange and solidarity.

Yet the novel is not just a return to India, it is a return to Calvino, who had been, I think, unusually absent from the novels published earlier in the decade: *Fury* and *Shalimar the Clown*. In marked contrast, *The Enchantress of Florence* is absolutely packed with references, allusions, and homages to Calvino, and it would be easy to spend another chapter mapping these acts of homage. From the very first lines of the text, we feel ourselves to be in the company of Calvino:

In the day's last light the glowing lake below the palace-city looked like a sea of molten gold. A traveller coming this way at sunset – this traveller, coming this way, now, along the lakeshore road – might believe himself to be approaching the throne of a monarch so fabulously wealthy that he could allow a portion of his treasure to be poured into a giant hollow in the earth to dazzle and awe his guests.<sup>137</sup>

There are two of Calvino's texts that Rushdie seems to be borrowing from here. The first is *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, which Rushdie echoes not just in the 'traveller', but also in the way he locates the narration in time and space: 'in the day's last light the glowing lake'. Rushdie seems keen for us not to miss this allusion to Calvino in the opening paragraphs, and so he repeats and reverses it halfway through the novel, when Argalia (now Argalia the Turk) returns to Florence: 'A traveller coming this way at sunset – this traveller, coming this way now, along the road from the sea, his narrow eyes, white skin and long black hair giving him the look not of a returning native but of some Far Eastern legend'.<sup>138</sup>

These words are also the name of the chapter, and indeed all of the chapter names in this novel are taken from a fragment of the first line of that chapter, truncated before the main verb: 'In the day's last light the glowing lake'; 'At dawn the haunting sandstone palaces'; 'And here again with bright silks flying'; etc. This practice could easily be read

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<sup>137</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 5.

<sup>138</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 297.

as a nod to identical way in which the chapters of *If* are formed from their first lines: 'If on a winter's night a traveller'; 'Outside the town of Malbork'; 'Without fear of wind or vertigo' ... (though in Calvino's work, it transpires that these first lines come together at the end to form their own story). The other Calvinian echo we see in these opening lines is again *Invisible Cities: The Enchantress* is a novel that revels in its descriptions of fantastical and imagined cities no less than *The Satanic Verses*, and we see this from the very first page. In fact all of the cities in the text are initially described in a way that seems to borrow heavily from *Invisible Cities*. This is true of Aknar's Sikri:

Most cities start giving the impression of being eternal almost as soon as they are born, but Sikri would always look like a mirage. As the sun rose to its zenith, the great bludgeon of the day's heat pounded the flagstones, deafening human ears to all sounds, making the air quiver like a frightened blackbuck, and weakening the border between sanity and delirium, between what was fanciful and real.<sup>139</sup>

It is true of Qara Koz's Herat, lost in the mists of time but brought back to life through the skills of the painter:

Herat, the so-called 'Florence of the East' [...] 'Yes, it was a wonderful place, no doubt, the emperor thought, but the Herat which Dashwanth was painting, irradiated by the beauty of the hidden princess, was a Herat no actually existing Herat could match, a dream-Herat for a dream woman.<sup>140</sup>

And it is true of Florence:

He was no longer looking at Mogor, and had fallen into a reverie. Peacocks danced on the morning stones of Sikri and in the distance the great lake shimmered like a ghost. The emperor's gaze travelled past the peacocks and the lake, past the court of Herat and the lands of the fierce Turk, and rested on the spires and domes of an Italian city far away. 'Imagine a pair of woman's lips,' Mogor whispered, 'puckering for a kiss. That is the city of Florence, narrow at the edges, swelling at the centre, with the Arno flowing through between, parting the two lips, the upper and the lower. The city is an enchantress. When it kisses you, you are lost, whether you be commoner or king.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 33.

<sup>140</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 157.

<sup>141</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 176.

The passage above shows us another of Rushdie's insistent attempts to pay homage to Calvino in this text. This description of Florence, and indeed all of the narration of the events in Florence, takes place as part of a conversation between the Italian traveller Mogore and the Mughal emperor Akbar, and this conversation frequently interrupts the narrative with its own meditations, like this one. This is of course an exact replica of the framing narrative of Marco Polo's conversation with Kublai Khan, and Rushdie mimics it even typographically by setting these exchanges in Italics, just like in *Invisible Cities*. In other words, by positioning his own tale as a conversation between characters who are (in a very literal sense in Akbar's case) the *ancestors* of Polo and Kublai Khan, Rushdie seems to be desperately claiming literary kinship with Calvino, to be claiming him as a blood relation. This is, I think, particularly significant in a novel that centers around Mogore's attempt to claim to be a blood relation of the emperor. In both content and form, then, this is a novel all about claiming rights to belong to a lineage, whether it is royal or literary.

Whilst we are thinking about literary ancestry, it is worth noting this novel is also filled with echoes of the *Our Ancestors* trilogy, and particularly *The Non-Existent Knight*. This time, however, Rushdie seems to see the condition of non-existence as a gendered experience, one uniquely capable of registering the condition of being subject to the libidinous imagination of a patriarchal society, or totally erased by it. Akbar's favourite wife, Jodha, does not actually exist:

She was an imaginary wife, dreamed up by Akbar in the way that lonely children dream up imaginary friends, and in spite of the presence of many living, if floating, consorts, the emperor was of the opinion that it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the *non existent* beloved who was real.<sup>142</sup>

Jodha is the repository of all of Akbar's desires, all of his (very specific) ideas about what a woman should be. Later in the novel, Machiavelli's long-suffering wife fears the opposite fate: that when Qara Koz and her beautiful servant stay under her roof she will be completely erased from her husband's mind. 'Only the two ladies would exist. She

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<sup>142</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 33. Emphasis mine.

would be her husband's *non-existent* wife.'<sup>143</sup> This is, perhaps, the novel in which Rushdie most explicitly engages with questions of gender, but he does so, as we can see, by adapting a condition of existence already described and explored in Calvino's novella.

*The Enchantress* also features a new Calvinian intertext that we do not find in *The Satanic Verses* or any of his earlier work, because it had not at that time been translated and made available to an Anglophone audience: Calvino's rich and beautiful 1956 anthology *Italian Folktales*, Italy's belated answer to the Brothers Grimm, which was translated into English in 2000. Unlike the other texts I have mentioned, this volume actually appears in the bibliography at the back of *The Enchantress of Florence*, and so Rushdie seems to have approached it as a kind of primary material as much as a source of inspiration. In fact a reasonable chunk of the novel, around ten pages, is adapted directly from the *Italian Folktales*.

When Argalia first leaves Florence, he heads to Genoa in order to stow away on the flagship of the notorious Genoese *condottiere* Andrea Doria. Argalia tells a fantastical story that he claims happened along the way when he stopped in an inn. This inn was haunted by the presence of a Partly-dead Giant, who had been devouring guests at night. Argalia stays in the room and outwits the Giant, convincing him to tear himself to pieces in order to fit up the chimney and claim the outlandish riches that Argalia claims are hidden up there. This story, we are told, is completely untrue:

but the untruth of two other stories could sometimes be of service in the real world, and it was tales of this sort – improvised versions of *the endless stream of stories* he had learned from his friend Ago Vespucci – that saved little Nino Argalia's own neck after he was found hiding under a bunk in the forecabin of the flagship of Andrea Doria's fleet.<sup>144</sup>

Argalia keeps himself alive by telling a series of outlandish tales, starting with the one about his slaying of the Partly-dead giant. He goes on to claim the ability to turn himself into a lion, and eagle, a dog, or an ant at will. A few pages later he advises Doria to stock his triremes with 'cheese on one deck, breadcrumbs on another, and rotting flesh on the

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<sup>143</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 312. Emphasis mine.

<sup>144</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 211.

third', so that they would be able to win the favour of the Island of Rats, Ants, and Vultures respectively, and reach the spring of eternal life.<sup>145</sup> These tales are enough to secure the good-humoured tolerance of Doria, and thus Argalia's survival. Calvino is the source of all of these tales. The first, the story of the giant, is a reworking of the very first tale in Calvino's anthology: 'Dauntless Little John'.<sup>146</sup> The claims about being able to transform into a lion, eagle, dog, or ant are borrowed directly from the sixth: 'Body-without-Soul'.<sup>147</sup> The final story, about the cheese, breadcrumbs and carrion, is taken from the third: 'The Ship with Three Decks'.<sup>148</sup>

What is interesting is not just the fact that Rushdie is borrowing from Calvino here, and that this borrowing is carefully documented and made visible in the paratextual apparatus of the book, but the way in which Rushdie represents this influence in the text. These stories are allegedly drawn from the 'endless stream of stories' told by his childhood friend. The parallel to the 'streams of story' we find in Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is clear. In other words, in this moment, Rushdie seems to be positioning Calvino not as a literary forebear, but as his Italian counterpart, his opposite number.

*The Enchantress of Florence* then, is the novel that contains the most Calvino: far more references, echoes, and nods than *The Satanic Verses*, often made in a far more blatant and less nuanced way. In the 'Influence' essay, Rushdie insists that 'if influence is omnipresent in literature, it is also, one should emphasize, always secondary in any work of quality. When it is too crude, too obvious, the results can be risible'. He then goes on to write disparagingly of a short story sent to him that began:

'One morning Mrs. K awoke to find herself metamorphosed into a front-loading washing machine.' One can only imagine how Kafka would have reacted to so inept – so detergent – an act of homage.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, p. 215. Emphasis mine.

<sup>146</sup> Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales*, trans. by George Martin (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 3-5.

<sup>147</sup> Calvino, *Italian Folktales*, pp. 18-21.

<sup>148</sup> Calvino, *Italian Folktales*, pp. 7-12.

<sup>149</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*, p. 65.

Similarly, it is difficult to know what Calvino, an incredibly circumspect writer, would have made of Rushdie's insistent and obvious acts of homage in this most recent novel of his. I said earlier in this chapter that *The Satanic Verses* is Rushdie's most Calvinian novel, by which I mean to say it is the novel in which Rushdie seems to be a fellow traveller of Calvino, that their literary and political projects intersect in that moment. In this text we get huge quantities of Calvino, but never, I think, that same Calvinian spirit, that same sense of what literature might do in the world.

If we view this novel as an attempt to regain not just the East but also Calvino, then perhaps it falls short. Nevertheless, it stands as perhaps the most recent and certainly the clearest monument to the similarities between Italy and India, and the literary, political, and cultural dialogues and exchanges running between them, that I have been engaged in recovering in this thesis.



## Conclusion

This thesis has pursued three connected and inextricably linked lines of critical enquiry. Firstly, it has recovered an anti-colonial trajectory in the work of a series of anti-Fascist writers: Antonio Gramsci, Ignazio Silone, Carlo Levi, and Italo Calvino. Secondly, by tracing neglected lines of literary influence and networks of intellectual and political dialogue between these writers and Indian writers in the inter-war and post-war periods, it has explored the ways in which this trajectory has contributed to the formation of modes of postcolonial writing and thought. In the process it has produced entirely new readings of Raja Rao and Salman Rushdie, both major figures in the postcolonial canon. Thirdly, this thesis has questioned why both this trajectory and the history of its influence have been overlooked by postcolonial studies, and what this tells us about the blind spots and limitations of the field. Ultimately, this thesis has been dedicated to creating a mode of comparative reading and a critical space in which we can read this narrative of influence and exchange between Italy and India.

This thesis has traced an anti-colonial or postcolonial trajectory in Italian anti-Fascist writing. The authors examined here consistently and insistently draw on the language and symbolism of colonial oppression and imperial exploitation to depict the subjugation of the Italian South and the ruthless militarism of Italian Fascism. This is not simply a rhetorical gesture, but an idea that functioned as a cornerstone of an analysis of Italy's internal colonialisms that was underpinned by a genuine anti-colonial solidarity, and formed part of a dialogue with those resisting imperialism on other fronts.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that these texts speak from an anti-colonial position, by which I mean not simply that they adopt a position against colonialism, but that they also seek to position themselves relative to broader networks of imperial and colonial power and the resistance that it engenders.

The starting point of this trajectory is Antonio Gramsci. Chapter One explores various and often surprising ways in which Gramsci's writing is inflected by an engagement with colonialism, dwelling in particular on the largely un-translated pre-prison journalism. This chapter argues that it is in Gramsci's work that we find the most rigorous and consistent attempts to elaborate an anti-colonial position. Across decades of his articles,

letters, and entries in the *Notebooks*, Gramsci extensively documents and analyses the ways in which the Italian State had developed according to an imperialistic logic that subordinated the South economically, politically, discursively and ecologically. He seeks to imaginatively locate Italy along what I describe as the vertical and horizontal axes of colonialism: both within the space designated by the hierarchical unification of marketplaces and labour forces according to the logic of imperialist capital, and across and beyond this space in search of solidarities and comparisons that spill over and exceed the boundaries defined by imperialisms. It is this act of imaginative positioning that lies at the very heart of his work; for him, the Southern Question and the rise of Fascism were only explicable when placed along this grid.

In Chapters Two and Three of this thesis, I have demonstrated that a similar act of anti-colonial positioning lies at the heart of works of fiction by anti-Fascist writers Ignazio Silone and Carlo Levi. In his first novel, Silone constructs the village of Fontamara as a colonized space, and figures the rise of Fascism as the continuation and intensification of a seemingly endless sequence of internal colonialisms imposed from outside of this authentic Italian heartland. Carlo Levi, writing after the Second World War but looking back to 1935, positions his experience as a political exile in the remote Lucanian village of Gagliano against the backdrop of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. He uses this confluence to highlight the ways in which Italy's internal colonialism functions, and to explore possibilities for solidarities with those resisting imperialism on other fronts. It is this same search for transnational solidarity that animates Gramsci's work until his death, and continues to shape the post-war political commitments of both Silone and Levi.

The second strand of this project has been an exploration of how this trajectory of anti-Fascist writing has influenced generations of anti-colonial and postcolonial thought and writing, in ways that have often been unacknowledged, forgotten, or marginalized. This marginalization has functioned in different ways. Postcolonial theory has openly borrowed a large portion of its critical vocabulary from Gramsci's work, and has tended to celebrate this borrowing. Nevertheless, it has rarely been acknowledged that Gramsci himself might be read as an anti-colonial writer or a theorist of empire. As a result, the direct line between Gramsci's own anti-colonialism and the postcolonial thought that he has inspired has been broken, and it is this line that this project seeks to restore. As I

argued in Chapter One, if Gramsci's work has been so fruitful for the contemporary investigation of colonialism and postcoloniality, the terms and concepts he elaborated so readily adaptable for these purposes, then it is at least in part because these questions were never far from his own mind.

As explored in Chapter Two, Rao reworks Silone's novel *Fontamara*, borrowing its narrative structure, and redeploying its narrative of an isolated village becoming the unexpected hotbed of anti-colonial dissent before being destroyed. Specifically this chapter has uncovered how Rao draws upon the way in which Silone frames the novel as an event of oral narration in order to create a rupture at the heart of the text in which the gap between the languages of the colonizer and the colonized becomes visible. The preface to Rao's novel, which borrows substantially from Silone, has frequently been called upon to serve as a manifesto not only for Indian writing in English, but also for postcolonial writing in a broader context. Despite this, the influence of Silone's *Fontamara* on Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* has been elided in postcolonial studies, and the confluences that brought writers like Silone and Levi into dialogue with Indian writers like Rao and Mulk Raj Anand have been forgotten or overlooked.

Chapter Four documented the extensive influence of Italo Calvino on the work of Salman Rushdie, an influence that flows through decades of Rushdie's work. Rushdie's dedicated readings, re-readings, and re-workings of Calvino stand as a testament to a striking literary relationship, but also serve as the latest moment in a literary dialogue between Italy and India that this thesis has uncovered. As this chapter noted, it is perhaps even more surprising that the nature of this influence has been critically neglected in postcolonial studies, given the centrality of Rushdie to the field, and the pains at which Rushdie himself has been to pay tribute to Calvino in his own non-fiction.

The third aspect of this thesis, then, has been an interrogation of what the absence of these histories of literary influence and exchange from the narrative of postcolonial studies tell us about the field's conceptual blind spots and limitations. This thesis has argued that these absences speak to the ways in which the field of postcolonial studies has been constrained by a series of imaginative geographies. These geographies do not easily allow us to see the ways in which Italy, and Europe itself, is criss-crossed and riven by lines of imperial power. Nor do they allow for an easy dialogue to be

established across continents and outside of the spaces designated by imperial boundaries. At the heart of this project is the excavation of a long-running and on-going literary dialogue between radical and progressive writers in Italy and India, a dialogue that is based on a sense of having things in common. Much of the thesis has been concerned with fostering a space in which the parallels that these writers draw between these two countries can appear on their own terms. That is not to say that I am interested here in claiming that Italy and India are or have been in any concrete sense 'the same'. Rather, I think it is invaluable to recognise that this act of comparing Italy and India, of drawing analogies and searching for similarities, has been an enabling political and creative gesture for these authors, and one that is worth learning from.

Ultimately, this thesis is dedicated to crafting a critical space in which both the anti-colonial energies of this body of anti-Fascist texts *and* the story of their postcolonial afterlives become legible. In part, this has been achieved simply by placing these authors alongside and in dialogue with each other. Each of the case studies that make up the chapters of this thesis is suggestive and warrants further critical exploration, but individually it is easy for them to seem exceptional or anomalous. Taken together in this way, however, they acquire a cumulative weight, and form a clear and compelling narrative of the anti-colonial commitments of a generation of Italian anti-Fascists who imaginatively positioned themselves and their political struggles in direct relation to questions of colonialism and imperialism. It is only when connected in this way that the influence that this moment of inter-war Italian thought has had on contemporary postcolonial studies becomes visible.

Central to the creation of this critical space is the elaboration of a model of comparative reading that allows us to read across Italy and India. This model of comparative reading is drawn directly from the reading practices of the authors themselves: this is, fundamentally, a thesis about the ways in which authors read and re-read each other, often against the grain or in unexpected ways. Gramsci's readings of Balzac and Kipling, Guha's reading of Gramsci, Silone's interest in Gandhi, Rao's re-interpretation of *Fontamara*, Levi's friendship with Mulk Raj Anand, and of course Rushdie and Calvino's readings of each other, collectively plot a course that I have endeavoured to follow. They encourage us to adopt a strategy of reading that is willing to cross borders (both geographical and institutional), willing to read across languages and national literary

canons. While the stories of how each of these texts circulated remind us of the importance of translation, it is only by returning to the material in Italian, and by placing it back into dialogue with texts that have yet to be translated into English, that we are able to truly understand the true content of this vast literary conversation.

The work done in this thesis, the model of postcolonial comparativism it elaborates, opens up a series of avenues for further research. It initiates new opportunities for postcolonial readings of each of the Italian authors explored in its pages. In doing so, it produces entirely new readings of major postcolonial authors, Rao and Rushdie. By no means, however, does it exhaust these possibilities. What I have presented here is not intended as definitional or exhaustive, rather my aim is that it will create a space for the discussion of the ways in which Italian anti-Fascist literature is inflected and shaped by anti-colonial commitments and solidarities, and the ways in which this writing has been drawn upon by postcolonial writers and thinkers. There is far more to be said about Gramsci's anti-colonialism and the implications that it might have for the many ways in which his words have been put to work in postcolonial theory. I do not explore here, for example, Gramsci's fascinating writings on his experience of prison, and the way in which this brought him into a new relationship with the Italian state. Nor do I explore the arguments that he had in his correspondence with his sister-in-law concerning ideas of race and the 'two worlds' controversy, in the course of which he determinedly asserts 'I myself have no race'.<sup>1</sup> The anti-colonial reading of *Fontamara* that I develop in Chapter Two could equally be applied to other moments of Silone's fiction. The second and third novels of his *Abruzzo* trilogy (*Bread and Wine* and *The Seed under the Snow*) are both set in the wake of the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, and the anti-Fascism we find in their pages can be read as shaped and informed by an anti-colonial solidarity. There is more to be said about the ways in which Carlo Levi's parliamentary career in the 1960s is shaped by his earlier anti-colonial commitments.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, I do not explore the

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Letters From Prison, Volume 2*, ed. by Frank Rosengarten, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> During his time in the Italian parliament Levi spoke frequently about questions of decolonization, post-colonial nationalism, and emigration, and returned often to the ideas that I traced in Chapter Three. Particularly interesting is his insistence that the failure to understand emigration as anything other than a national problem amounted to 'a shameful form of internal colonialism, a racism of class'. Carlo Levi, *Discorsi parlamentari* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003), p. 230.

fascinating ways in which Giorgio Agamben seems to borrow from Levi's philosophical project, and the ways in which this might help us to rethink his biopolitics.<sup>3</sup> Finally, while I offer the most comprehensive account to date of Calvino's influence on Rushdie, I do not explore, for example, the presence of Calvino in Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). Nor do I offer a postcolonial reading of Calvino's work in its own right, though there are clearly possibilities to do so. It would certainly be fascinating to think of his Kublai Kahn, in *Invisible Cities*, as attempting to imaginatively sustain a fragmenting empire. My hope is that this project will open up new ways of understanding what a 'postcolonial' reading of these authors and texts might look like, and new a space for the exploration of these kinds of literary and political dialogues between Italy and India.

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<sup>3</sup> As I noted in Chapter Three, the theoretical vocabulary that Carlo Levi builds up in his philosophical writings bears an uncanny resemblance to the language the *Homo Sacer* project. Agamben quotes a substantial passage from *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* in *Homo Sacer*, from a moment in Levi seems to be thinking through very similar ideas. Fascinatingly, Agamben does not mention Levi's name in the body of the text, referring to the passage only as an example of 'contemporary folklore', and the paratextual apparatus of the text in the English translation attributes the passage to *Primo* Levi. As a result, this moment of contact between these two bodies of thought has been rendered nearly invisible. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, pp. 108-08.

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