

Terroni. Tutto quello che è stato fatto perché gli italiani del sud diventassero "meridionali."

By Pino Aprile.

Milan: Piemme, 2010.

305 pages.

Beginning with the title of his book, which has been published in English as *Terroni: All That Has Been Done to Ensure That the Italians of the South Became "Southerners"* (Bordighera Press, 2011), Aprile's aim is to provoke the reader. *Terroni* is a derogatory term used in north and central Italy for southern Italians comparable to the American *redneck*. Its etymology is still rather controversial—either a merging of *terre matte*, i.e., territories subject to frequent earthquakes, and *meridione* to indicate simply someone coming from the south, or a neologism to describe poor farmers entirely dependent on the *terra* (the land) for subsistence. The social and historical use that has been publicly made of the term since the 1950s and 1960s is connected to the waves of internal migration of workers and families from the south of Italy to the industrial districts of the north, in the metropolitan areas of Genoa, Milan, and Turin. From that moment on, *terrone* acquired the meaning of a filthy, work-shy, backward, familistic, and uneducated person originally from the south.

In what amounts to a long pamphlet, Pino Aprile, a journalist and a southern Italian himself, flags the word to draw the reader's attention to disavowing the main stereotypes associated with *terrone* and the south. He does this in reaction to the increasingly pivotal role of the Northern League in Italian politics, but most of all to capitalize on the celebrations marking the 150th anniversary of the Unity of Italy that took place in 2011. In fact, Aprile's main argument is that unification never occurred: The long-standing divide between the north and the south of Italy in economic, social, and cultural terms has its roots in the events of 1861 and the decades immediately thereafter, for which the north should take full responsibility.

According to the author, the northern ruling classes purposely created a "Southern Question." The south under the House of Bourbon, Aprile argues, was richer and even more industrially developed than any of the other small and medium domains then present in the Italian territory. The House of Savoy invaded and conquered the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies principally to solve the financial problems of its own indebted Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont. After the unification of the territorial state was achieved and the Kingdom of Italy created, the House of Savoy systematically deprived the south of its wealth, with the complicity of northern statesmen and the connivance of a few southern politicians. From then on, the south became "il bancomat d'Italia" (the ATM of Italy) (160).

In addition, Aprile contends that not only members of the Bourbon army but also innocent civilians were massacred in the battles leading to the "invasion" of the south by the north. In the first decades of the unified state, any form of resistance to the House of Savoy was labeled as brigandage, leading to mass executions that Aprile does not hesitate to compare to the Shoah. So long to the *fratelli d'Italia*, he bitterly states.

Shocking? Well, no. First of all, the critical reinterpretation of the events that led to the unification of the state and the negative assessment of the role that the House of Savoy played in Italy's history from the Risorgimento to the fascist era are old stories

in both academic circles and in the public discourse, dating back at least to the 1950s. By the same token, the historical research has already largely demonstrated that the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies was no different from the north of Italy in terms of industrial development. There were some proto-industrial districts just as in the rest of the Italian territory, but they were too small and scattered to compete in the marketplace. Second, in order to shock readers, an author should not bore them and should base his or her argument on reliable sources. For the first 170 pages, Aprile keeps telling tales, of how the north massacred the southerners, stole their money, and intentionally neglected their economic development so erratically and in such a repetitive fashion that one often has the impression of having read the same story twenty or thirty pages before. But most of all, he indiscriminately mixes trustworthy references, which are in the minority, with an abundance of disreputable ones.

Aprile's interpretation of the historical events is problematic in many respects. To begin with, any comparison between the massacres of the southerners and the Shoah is simply a historical blasphemy, in the absence of even a single document in which a "final solution" was planned to solve the southern question through the systematic genocide of the southerners. His argument that the House of Bourbon was wealthy, and therefore the south was more developed than the rest of Italy, does not stand, unless we maintain that some of today's oil-producing states in the Middle East ruled by a coterie of undoubtedly rich dynasties are an example of developed countries, despite the fact that almost the total population is uneducated and excluded from wealth. And that is exactly the point that Aprile decides to play down when he quickly mentions that the Bourbon Kingdom had the highest rate of illiteracy in preunified Italy. As any economist would easily explain, this aspect heavily affects the chances of economic and social development of a nation for many generations to come. Lastly, Aprile asserts that the south was not underdeveloped and poor but was made so by the northerners – whom he portrays as conquerors – as demonstrated by the fact that mass emigration from there started only some decades after unification. As everyone who is slightly familiar with the literature on migration knows, mobility does not depend only upon economic factors; but even in that case, it is not the poorest people who migrate, rather those who have modest capital to invest in such an enterprise.

The second part of the book is dedicated to demonstrating that Italian southerners have been progressively educated by a northern-controlled cultural hegemony to think of themselves as underdogs and inferior people. This section is even less convincing than the first part of the book and could be condensed into Jessica Rabbit's memorable quote: "I'm not bad. I'm just drawn that way." It is too simplistic and quite self-justifying to blame just the "others" for your own vices. The book almost never mentions organized crime and the control it has had on the territory and local politics. It never considers the question of why civicness and social capital are unknown concepts particularly in the south. Most of all, Aprile fails to offer an explanation for why the north should be interested in maintaining the south in a subaltern position when he is the first to admit in several passages that this is irrational and against its own interest. On one point, though, Aprile is absolutely right. The Italian state never invested seriously in the south's infrastructure, and the education system, mostly in terms of facilities, was never as good as it was in the rest of Italy.

It is understandable that Aprile reacts to the Northern League's campaigns, which have exploited and excited populist resentment against the corrupt political system and the economic crisis by blaming lazy southerners in the early 1990s and immigrants beginning in the 2000s. It is arguable, though, whether encouraging an equivalent hatred for northerners is an appropriate response. The publisher of *Terroni* puts everything into perspective by issuing another book immediately after this one: *Polentoni* (the derogatory term to describe the people from the north who were so poor that they could eat only *polenta*) by Lorenzo del Boca, which describes all of the damage that the House of Savoy and the unification of the state perpetrated against the north. Both books are mainly a result of a marketing strategy aimed at exploiting the spotlight provided by the 150th anniversary of the Unity of Italy.

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