
Sergio Zoppi, *Questioni meridionali. Napoli (1934-1943)*, il Mulino, Bologna 2019, 205 pp.

Fascism asserted that the historical problem of the underdevelopment of the Italian South, the “Southern question,” was definitively solved when the Mezzogiorno became an integral part of the new corporate Italy. At least this was what Raffaele Ciasca averred in 1934 in writing the *Enciclopedia Italiana*’s entry on “Meridionalismo” (Southernism). Yet the “official” end of the “Question” didn’t mark the end of the Southernist analysis. Indeed, 1934 also saw the birth of *Questioni meridionali*, a periodical published by the Union of Industrialists of the Naples Province, which, though with the rationale of providing the Head of Government with “concrete elements” for the modernization

of the South, observed that the region was still far from achieving development. The contradiction between these assessments was quite evident despite the “muffled” climate of the regime.

The conditions of the South continued to attract deep interest within the framework of analysis of local structural problems. As Adriano Giannola, president of the Association for the Development of Industry in the South of Italy (Svimez), points out in his introduction to the volume under review, *Questioni meridionali* embodied a “scientific” approach, with technocratic characteristics, harking back in many respects to classical Southernist thought of the early twentieth century. The review published richly documented studies of issues ranging from overcrowded housing to illiteracy, from the backward transport system to widespread poverty, from substandard sanitary conditions to demographic evolution.

Giuseppe Cenzato, president of the Southern Electricity Company and head of the Neapolitan industrialists, was the publication’s promoter and among the protagonists of twentieth-century Southernist thought. Two other important figures worked alongside him in directing the magazine: the chemist Francesco Giordani, hoping to give the project a solid scientific foundation, and the Turin-trained lawyer Gino Olivetti, long-term secretary general of the Confederation of Italian industrialists, who was determined see Southern problems set in the broader national context.

From the outset, the magazine established itself as an authoritative forum for a wide and diversified group of experts, including economists, statisticians, demographers, agronomists, urban planners, doctors, and transport specialists, who despite the oppressive cultural climate of Fascism managed to draw attention to the authenticity of Southern conditions. And indeed, as Zoppi shows with his meticulous analysis of the publication’s issues, the main problems affecting Naples and the South were emphasized. In the book’s fascinating introduction, the author remarks that, though necessarily between the lines, “a poor and aimless Naples desperately seeking broadly-based well-being

emerges from the magazine's studies. ... It is certainly not the usual picture-postcard Naples" (p. 17).

However, *Questioni meridionali* was not intended simply as a megaphone for complaints. This was already evident from the brief introduction to its first issue, which, laying out its programmatic guidelines, stated that the problems to be treated must be framed in a broader social context and that contributions should not merely identify problems but should also propose possible solution.

The numerous lengthy quotations that Zoppi includes in his volume reveal the systematic nature of the articles, which often were authentic monographs open to updating in subsequent contributions on the same topic. They also make it clear that the publication embraced a notion of development focused on solving people's everyday problems and used an accessible style in treating highly complex issues. A strongly social conception of the economy shows through in the search for pragmatic solutions that could be put in place in the Southern context. The publication was indeed a "laboratory" of Southernist thought, a bridge between the special legislation of the early twentieth century and the "new Southernism" of post-war Italy. In this sense, the book that Zoppi has produced offers us a general rule of research: Never confine inquiry to the "official" definitions reflected in the dominant cultural climate of an age; dig deeply, because there are often hidden links that mark the continuity of historical processes.

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