

# Antonio Gramsci's South ... or ... Some Aspects of the Disability Question

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**When Antonio Gramsci** gave his maiden speech in Parliament in May of 1925, many of the other deputies left their seats and thronged around him in order to hear the faint voice coming from his compressed chest.

(In the introduction to one of the editions of Gramsci's *Prison Letters* he is described as "having the appearance of being a hunchbacked dwarf." A footnote follows, which alas does not explain the difference between appearing to be a hunchbacked dwarf and actually being a hunchbacked dwarf.)

The next day, one of the Rome newspapers published a picture of Mussolini, who had also been present that day, leaning forward with his hand cupped behind his ear, a smirk on his face, as if to say: here is the left, embodied in this frail goblin, the crippled left, the left so weak it can barely make itself heard, the pitiable left.

**on the evening** of November 8, 1926, at 10:30, Antonio Gramsci was arrested in his lodgings on Rome's via Morgagni. Did he hear jack boots on the stairs, fists pounding on the door, those sounds that had not yet become clichés of anti-fascism? Among the papers he left behind was the unfinished essay, "*Alcuni temi della questione meridionale*," "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," found by Camilla Ravera, one of those women who appear throughout his life, gathering up scattered texts and armloads of laundry, being scolded for purchasing the wrong sorts of undershirts, those women to whom the letters from prison are written (*Carissima mamma*, *Carissima Tania*, *Mi carissima Julia*, *Cara signora*), those women who washed his dishes and put his sons to bed.

This essay—"deformed, unfinish'd, sent before [its] time into this breathing world, scarce half made up" [1]—has long been valued for its granular dissection not only of how the interplay among class, religion, regional, and social differences maintained capitalism's power, but also for offering a sketch of how revolutionary alliances might be formed to contest capitalist hegemony. As Douglas Baynton reminds us, "Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it. . ." [2] and so we should hardly be surprised that when we look for disability in "The Southern Question," it is there, hiding, like the purloined letter in Poe's eponymous story, in plain sight.

Gramsci, of course, hardly coined the phrase "the Southern question"—the gap between the North and the South had long bedeviled Italy. Italy's North was the land of Dante and Petrarch, the Renaissance, of Titian and Leonardo and Michelangelo, while the South was the land of *dolce far niente*, sweet idleness, of strange religiosity, of pre-modern culture, of endemic illnesses that occasionally flared into wild epidemics, of brigandage, of savagery, of idolatry, and of idiocy. The South was said to begin at Naples, or perhaps at Rome, and to include the islands of Sicily and Sardinia—or not. (It is quite in keeping with the nature of the South that the very act of defining its borders should prove impossible.) Sixteenth century Jesuits, assigned to carry their works into the south of Italy, thought of it as laboring into one of the heathen lands, and said they were being sent to *India italiana*. [3] No less a thinker than Walter Benjamin, writing with Asja Lacis about a trip to Naples, took note of a lackadaisical mendicant, too unindustrious to even comport himself like a

proper beggar, lying “in the road propped against the sidewalk, waving his empty hat like a leave-taker at a station” and wrote of a visit to the hospital of San Gennaro dei Poveri, where “cripples display their deformities, and the shock given to daydreaming passers-by is their joy. . . .” [4] This was the Naples that was famous for its inhabitants who were thought of as troglodytes, its fetid smells and filthy water which allowed cholera [5]—dubbed “Asiatic,” since, like all diseases, it must have come from somewhere else—to spread, a disgusting disease, and a fatal one, although its deathbed scenes could have been painted not by a Victorian sentimentalist but by a Goya. The South was also the land of brigandage, a formless rebellion that appeared in the wake of Italian unification, and, like the South itself, was almost impossible to define—one contemporary official described it thus: “The crime of brigandage . . . is a continuous crime which has an indeterminate character which includes all those crimes and felonies committed by those who go about ravaging the countryside for this purpose in numbers of three or more. “It could not be talked about without resorting to metaphors, many of them suggesting sickness: it was “an infestation, a delirium, a cancer, a sore, a plague.” [6] And when all of those images, of debility, disease, ignorance, degradation, contagion, mongrelization, idleness, disability had been invoked, there was one final word that summed it all up: the fearsome trisyllable: “Africa.” [7]

**When Gramsci was in prison**, every page he wrote was reviewed by the prison censor and in order to avoid having his words blacked out, he made use of substitutions and circumlocutions throughout his notebooks: thus, Marx became “the founder of the philosophy of praxis,” Lenin was referred to as “Ilich,” communism became “the philosophy of praxis.”

Suppose we perform a similar decoding, but instead of replacing the word “Ilyich” with “Lenin,” we substitute the body of the man for the body of the nation? Not an abstract body of man, not the body of man drawn by Leonardo, his navel the center of a perfect circle, his fingers and toes touching the circumference, but the specific, granular body of this man. Like Italy, Gramsci had a North and a South, a great intellect and a messy, irrational, barbaric, scorned, body.

**The International Congress** of Criminal Anthropology of 1885 also linked the body of the Italian nation with the deviant human body. At the end of the published proceedings of that conference a series of maps plot the frequency of various crimes across the Italian nation, the shadings of the maps growing darker—indicating a higher rate of crime—the further south one goes.

A few pages into “The Southern Question,” Gramsci turns his attention to criminal anthropology’s writing about the south of Italy. It is this passage I want to examine in this essay, one which offers, in “embryonic form” a reading of disability politics, one moreover that offers tantalizing hints about the links between disability and race.

*“It is well known what kind of ideology has been disseminated in myriad ways among the masses in the North, by the propagandists of the bourgeoisie: the South is the ball and chain which prevents the social development of Italy from progressing more rapidly; the Southerners are biologically inferior beings, semi-barbarians or total barbarians, by natural destiny; if the South is backward, the fault does not lie with the capitalist system or with any other historical cause, but with Nature, which has made the Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric—only tempering this harsh fate with the purely individual explosion of a few great geniuses, like isolated palm-trees in an arid and barren desert. The Socialist Party was to a great extent the vehicle for this bourgeois ideology within the Northern proletariat. The Socialist Party gave its blessing to all the “Southernist” literature of the clique of writers who made up the so-called positive school: the Ferri’s, Sergi’s, Niceforo’s, Orano’s and their lesser followers, who in articles, tales, short stories, novels, impressions and memoirs, in a variety of forms, reiterated one single refrain. Once again, “science” was used to crush the wretched and exploited; but this time it was dressed in socialist colours, and claimed to be the science of the proletariat.”*

The authors of whom Gramsci speaks—Enrico Ferri, Guiseppe Sergi, Alfredo Niceforo, and Paolo Orano—were all of the positivist school of criminal anthropology established by Cesare Lombroso. Criminal anthropology sought to replace religious notions of crime as caused by sin and evil; it also countered itself to a discourse on crime which approached it from a rights-oriented and legal point of view. In the place of religion and law, Lombroso put science.

Lombroso had volunteered as a doctor in the revolutionary forces in Calabria—Italy’s southernmost mainland province, the toe of the boot that is the Italian peninsula—during the *risorgimento*, the struggle for Italian unification. There he had been shocked by the population’s poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy. This, along with his exposure to Darwin’s ideas about evolution, was a formative intellectual experience for him. In common with many European intellectuals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he espoused a casual mix of evolutionary beliefs and racism, assuming a racial hierarchy “stretching from African blacks at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder to European whites at the top.” [8]

While Lombroso and other criminal anthropologists believed that some crime could be explained by social and economic factors, there was much crime that seemed rooted in the irrational. To understand such criminality, they looked to what was inherent in the biology of criminals. Physical malformations were labeled as atavisms—signs of reversion to primitive evolutionary states—and were equated with internal moral and psychological weakness. Lombroso labeled any individual manifesting several atavisms as a “born criminal” (*delinquente nato*). [9] Atavisms and physical differences could be measured; the gathering of such data was clear-cut and scientific. Criminologists such as Lombroso prided themselves on proceeding not from philosophical theories but reasoning inductively, from solid, observable evidence, gathered on the ground. His texts, along with those of his followers, are thick with line drawings and muddy, late-19<sup>th</sup> century photographs, that show the lantern jaws, downcast eyes, weak-chins, the stigmata of a portwine birthmark splotched across a face, the asymmetric features, the goggle eyes and jug ears that marked the born criminal.

Lombroso is now often regarded as a quaint and amusing figure, an erratic and reactionary pseudoscientist. Much is made of his sloppy methodology, but that rather begs the question: if he had been less slipshod with his charts and tables, more rigorous with his facts, would his work have any more validity? The concept of aberrant physiognomy as destiny formed the core of Nazi racial science, with its need to ferret out the degenerate within society, its cataloguing of the physical signs of the racialized other, its use of anthropomorphic measuring devices in an attempt to determine a subject’s racial background. Of course, Lombroso and his followers could not have known the direction in which their work would lead, any more than we can read these texts without awareness of where they did lead. It is important to note that Lombroso did not identify himself with the right, but saw himself as a socialist. He believed that his methods could be applied to the scientific study of social movements, “distinguishing true revolution, always fruitful and useful, from utopia, from rebellion, which is always sterile.” “[T]rue revolutionaries,” Lombroso wrote, “. . . the initiators of great scientific and political revolutions . . . are almost always genuises or saints, and have all a marvelously harmonious physiognomy.” [10]

Lombroso documented this assertion with cold, hard statistics. For instance, he studied photographs of 50 Paris communards—those who, he believed, had taken part in an uprising both sterile and utopian—and found that 12 percent were the “criminal type” and 10 percent the “insane type.” Karl Marx, on the other hand, had a “very fine physiognomy . . . with his very full forehead, bushy hair and beard, and soft eyes. . .” [11] While these ideas may seem laughable to us now, they were widely accepted during his era. Indeed, in the same issue of *The Monist* which published Lombroso’s “The Physiognomy of the Anarchists,” carried a response by Michael Schwab—writing from Joliet Prison—“A Convicted Anarchist’s Reply to Professor Lombroso.” Schwab did not contest Lombroso’s belief that physical appearance could be equated with moral character: “. . . [V]ice, crime, and

brutality very often find a characteristic expression of face. . .” Rather, he argued that one of those Lombroso had noted as having an “unsymmetric face” was that way not because of “the fault of nature, but of an unskilled surgeon.” August Spies, whose face Lombroso had condemned as “morbid” with “a senile auricle, voluminous jaw bones and a strongly developed frontal sinus” had, on the contrary, according to Schwab, “. . . a most intelligent appearance; his forehead was well-developed.”

Readers from the United States, accustomed to seeing through the prism of our own racial lens, may fail to see how racialized the divisions within Italian society were, with southern Italians, white in the U.S. racial schematic, seen as dark savages and barbarians within Italy. In Lombroso’s *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies*, following a chart where the homicide rate is broken down by province, Lombroso writes: “It is . . . to the African and oriental elements (the Greeks excepted) that Italy owes the frequency of homicide in Calabria, Sicily, and Sardinia . . .” [12] Sergi’s *La Sardegna* devoted itself to examining the physical characteristics of the Sards, their psychology, and their social conditions—all of which were problems. The book is illustrated with photographs showing various Sardinian “types” who are “large-jawed,” “narrow-nosed,” and have “large and protruding lips.” In *Crime in Sardinia* Alfredo Niceforo wrote of criminality as “a vast and acute morbid process, a cancerous erosion that corrupts the moral life of that island.” He went on to say that moral traits were inborn, and this “psychological heredity is quite stable and will not disappear . . . [even] when confronted with other models to imitate or with education; this is the psyche which is transmitted fatally from father to son, with all its accumulation of defects.” Earlier, in his *L’Italia barbara contemporanea (Contemporary Barbarian Italy)* Niceforo had labeled the people of Sardinia, Sicily, and the southern Italian peninsula as “three peoples who are still primitive, not completely evolved, less civilized and refined than the populations of the North and Center of Italy” [13] and in *Crime in Sardinia* he argued that this was due to Sardinians’ clear racial ties with Africa, particularly Somalia and Eritrea. [14]

Southerners weren’t just another race; they were, in the eyes of “the clique of writers who made up the so-called positivist school” a disabled race. Disability as metaphor is rife throughout all their writings— Niceforo spoke of the “delinquent zone” around Nuoro as having “atrophied”; Ferri saw revolts in Sicily which were spontaneous and ill-led as “feverish and convulsive excesses”; in *Psicologia della Sardegna (Psychology of Sardinia)* Orano wrote of places on the island where “the race grows and teems like rotten, purulent gangrene”; in *La Decadenza delle nazioni Latine (The Decline of Latin Nations)* Sergi—the co-founder of the Italian Eugenic Society [15]—said: “. . . I would like to act . . . like the surgeon who amputates a bone affected by necrosis in order to avoid death.” [16]

But disability is not just metaphor: according to the positivist school, it is not just that the South of Italy is disabled—“the ball and chain which prevents the social development of Italy,” but that the cause of this is the innate disability of Southerners themselves, those whom “Nature . . . has made lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric.” Reading the works of these criminal anthropologists, one finds a dizzying number of examples of the fusion of disability, race, and criminality. A few extracts from a chapter titled “Atavism and Epilepsy in Crime and Punishment,” in Lombroso’s *Crime, Its Causes and Remedies*: “The born criminal shows in a proportion reaching 33 percent numerous specific characteristics that are almost always atavistic. . . . Many of the characteristics presented by savage races are very often found among born criminals. . . . low cranial capacity; retreating forehead; highly developed frontal sinuses; great frequency of Wormian bones. . . .” After detailing the strange behaviors of “inferior” races—including cannibalism and tattooing—and pointing out their prevalence among criminals, he goes on: “The same phenomena which we observe in the case of born criminals. . . may be studied . . . in epileptics, criminal or not . . . not one of the atavistic phenomena shown by criminals is lacking in epilepsy.” He follows with one of those tables he so

loves, listing nearly forty traits (everything from left-handedness to strabismus to prehensile foot to lemurine appendix) which are shared between born criminals and epileptics. "Epilepsy, moreover, is extremely frequent among anarchists, and one might say that it was the basis of action among the bomb-throwing anarchists. In this class of individuals whose minds are in disequilibrium, and inflammable as powder, facile to the discovery of internal social evils, the ideas are easily turned into criminal action." [17]

This science, which based itself in Darwin's thought with its revolutionary implications, and seemed to explain much that seemed irrational and mystifying, must have seemed enlightening to many of those who encountered it. My copy of the English translation of Enrico Ferri's *Socialismo e Scienza Positiva* (*Socialism and Positive Science*) (Darwin-Spencer-Marx) is a tattered copy from 1909, published by Great Britain's Independent Labour Party, and I sometimes imagine its original owner as a spotty-faced young man with a prominent Adam's apple, who had saved up, tuppence a week for six weeks, in order to pay the shilling this paper edition cost, reading it as he rode the underground from his lodgings in Kentish Town to Southwark's Elephant and Castle, where he boarded an omnibus to take him to the warehouse on Clink Street where he worked as a common laborer. He hadn't learned to read until he was an adult and sometimes still moved his lips, especially when he was engrossed in what he was reading, and when he realized he had been doing so on the tube he'd flush bright red. As he read "Darwinism is not only not in intellectual opposition to socialism, but is its scientific foundation" the world must have seemed elegant in its simplicity, with socialism not just inevitable but its tenets empirically verifiable.

Gramsci's "The Southern Question" hardly offers a fully fleshed-out and well-developed politics of disability. What it does offer is a critique of a strand of thinking within leftist thought that saw those with physical differences as evolutionary throwbacks, and which saw certain ethnic groups as "biologically inferior beings" and a cogent critique of the dangers of such thinking. In his understanding of how science can be used as a force which "crush[es]" the exploited, he prefigured current suspicion of the disinterestedness of science and indeed, of the medical model of disability.

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**P.S.**

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## Footnotes

[1] William Shakespeare, Richard III.

[2] Douglas C. Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 52.

[3] George R. Saunders, "The Magic of the South: Popular Religion and Elite Catholicism in Italian Ethnology," in *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country*, ed. Jane Schneider (Oxford: Berg, 1998).



- [4] Naples, "in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913-1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).
- [5] Frank M. Snowden, Naples in the Time of Cholera, 1884-1911 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11.
- [6] John Dickie, Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900 (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1999).
- [7] Cesare Lombroso, Criminal Man, tr. by Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- [8] Mary Gibson, "Biology or Environment? Race and Southern 'Deviancy' in the Writings of Italian Criminologists, 1880-1920," in Italy's 'Southern Question', op. cit.
- [9] Cesare Lombroso, "The Physiognomy of the Anarchists," in The Monist, vol. 1, Chicago, 1890-1891, p. 336.
- [10] Cesare Lombroso, "Illustrative Cases in Criminal Anthropology: The Physiognomy of the Anarchists," Monist, vol. 1 (1890), reprinted in The Criminal Anthropological Writings of Cesare Lombroso Published in the English Language Periodical Literature During the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, ed. David M. Horton and Katherine E. Rich (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 2004).
- [11] Cesare Lombroso, Crime: Its Causes and Remedies, tr. by Henry P. Horton (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1911).
- [12] Alfredo Niceforo, L'Italia barbara contemporanea (Studi ed appunti) (Milan-Palermo: Sandron, 1898), p. 3.
- [13] Alfredo Niceforo, Crime in Sardinia, 31-35, 90, 96.
- [14] Maria Sophia Quine, Population Politics in Twentieth-Century Europe (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 29.
- [15] Quoted in Aaron Gillette, Racial Theories in Fascist Italy (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 28-29.
- [16] Cesare Lombroso, "Anarchistic Crimes and Their Causes," The Independent, vol. 50 (1898) pp. 1671.