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INTRODUCTION

Italia barbara: Italian primitives from Piero to Pasolini

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Abstract

Historians of discourse formation have demonstrated how, in the decades following the Risorgimento, Italy was fashioned as the internal ‘other’ of a new, industrial civilization that had surpassed the Mediterranean one of old. In the geopolitical map of Western Europe, Italy occupied the most distant and different territory; its proximity to Africa and the Near East, its heterogeneous racial make-up, including ‘Arab blood’, and its predominantly unchanged rural economy confirmed its status as the primitive within. The essays gathered in this special issue of the Journal of Modern Italian Studies enrich the pervasive view of Italy’s subaltern status by examining the ways in which the dichotomies of the progressive and backward, western and the non-western, northern and Mediterranean, were often reinforced, but also interrogated or collapsed by Italian ethnologists, artists, art historians and writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Keywords

Niceforo, Malaparte, avant-garde, modernism, ethnography, orientalism, vernacular.

The term Italia barbara informs the title of two notorious books in the history of Italian nation building: the earnest, if racist, Italia barbara contemporanea, published in 1898 by the criminal anthropologist Alfredo Niceforo; and the xenophobic, if deliberately contentious, Italia barbara of 1926, by the journalist and fascist gadfly Curzio Malaparte. During the quarter century that lies between these two texts, the perception of Italy as the backwater of Western Europe changed little. Instead, what marked the difference between Niceforo and Malaparte was the value judgement they imparted to their respective visions of a barbaric Italy – the first, negative and the second, positive – and with it, their evaluations of modernity and the west.

Niceforo lamented the miserable living conditions and indolence plaguing his native Sicily, Sardinia, and the rest of the Mezzogiorno. Yet he did not fail to call the inhabitants of these regions Italians, for Niceforo’s project was less a condemnation of his brethren than a paternalistic call to civilize them. He placed southern backwardness on a relative scale, noting that the region had
been ‘arrested in its development’ by comparison to the progress of central and northern Italy. In the same way that there were stratifications of class, more or less evolved, and more or less superior, according to Niceforo, so were there varying degrees of ‘savagery’ (Niceforo 1898: 2–3). Italy’s south had to be tamed and its stock improved by the colonizing mission of the more developed settentrione. Niceforo’s relativism, however, added ‘scientific’ weight to an inferiority complex that had burdened Italian national identity since the late seventeenth century and became exacerbated in the years following Unification. A protégé of the criminal anthropologist, Cesare Lombroso, Niceforo favored theories of biological determinism over social and economic factors in explaining the region’s endemic poverty – a racial discourse that, by the 1880s, accounted for the larger issue of ‘Latin decadence’ (Patriarca 2010: 106; Gibson 1998). Shaped by foreign perceptions and internalized by Indians themselves, the ‘southern problem’ became a synecdoche for the atavism of the Italian nation as a whole by comparison to Europe north of the Alps. Italy had not advanced alongside its western counterparts; progress had largely passed it by.

Malaparte imploded this longstanding negative stereotype of Italian backwardness by refuting Enlightenment rationale as the measuring stick of civilization and progress as the goal of Italian nationhood. ‘Speaking of the future repels our incurably antique nature’, asserted the book’s epigraph (Malaparte 1926). To those who contemptuously claimed that Italians had to shed their vestiges of barbarism to become good citizens of Europe, Malaparte irascibly countered that modernity, as defined by bourgeois materialism and secular culture, was an Anglo-Saxon construct and anathema to the authentic – popolaresco and Catholic – Italian. As he saw it, the Reformation had instigated this clash of civilizations, for it ‘overturned the values inherited from the Renaissance’ and ‘shifted the center of power from the south to the North, the East to the West’ (Malaparte 1926: 58, 59). Malaparte indicted the Risorgimento ideal of the modern nation state as a foreign import – a fake patriotism – that had little to do with the polycentrism of Italian politics or its two indigenous cultures – the regional and the classical. Italy’s contemporary social problems were therefore not inherent, but the result of conforming to a western Eurocentric ideology not its own. Were it not for the alliance with fascist demagoguery, illiberalism and reactionary populism, Malaparte’s anti-Enlightenment, anti-teleological posturing would appear precociously post-modern and post-colonial.

Historians of discourse formation have convincingly demonstrated how Italy was fashioned as the internal ‘other’ of a new, industrial civilization that had surpassed the Mediterranean one of old (Dickie 1999; Moe 2002; Patriarca 2010; Schneider 1998; Wong 2006) In the geopolitical map of Western Europe, Italy occupied the most distant and different territory; its proximity to Africa and the Near East, its heterogeneous racial make-up, including ‘Arab blood’, and its predominantly unchanged rural economy confirmed its status as the primitive within. And, as with all representations of the primitive or
‘imaginative geographies’, to use Edward Said’s canonical term, dichotomies prevailed (Said 1994: 54–5; Torgovnick 1990). The same characteristics of rustic pace, sweet indolence and unbridled sensuality, condemned by apologists for the efficient, centralized state, led those estranged from ‘advanced’ societies to idealize, infantilize and feminize the peninsula south of Rome as an unspoiled, regenerative Eden. Be they threatening or benign, representations of the exotic or primitive buoyed the west and its agenda of self-assertion and assuaging self-critique. Italian politicians, intellectuals and purveyors of popular tourist imagery contributed to the nation’s subaltern image by displacing national self-deprecation (and its compensatory colonizing aspirations) onto the southern regions, creating the ‘other’ within the internal ‘other’ in a process of what Jane Schneider has characterized as ‘nesting Orientalisms’ (Schneider 1998: 7).

While the post-colonial approach briefly summarized above has exposed the imperialist ‘civilizing mission’ that underwrites the western construction of the primitive, it can be argued that the reality on the ground – specifically on Italian terrain – interacted with those same preconceptions and unequal power relations in a productive, creative tension. The essays gathered in this special issue of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* enrich existing studies on Europe’s internal ‘exotic’ by examining the ways in which the dichotomies of the progressive and backward, western and the non-western, Nordic and Mediterranean, were often reinforced, but also interrogated or collapsed by Italian ethnologists, artists, art historians and writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Italian intellectuals self-identified with the figure of Italia barbara in ways compensatory, didactic, parodic and belligerent, analogous to a process that Giorgio Bertellini calls ‘Southernist mimesis’. Bridging the gaps between high and low culture, north and south, they ‘transfigured hostile pronouncements of racial dissonance into political and aesthetic practices of identity’ (Bertellini 2010: 71). Some defiantly cultivated the rural and regional in reaction to urbanization and international avant-gardism. Others combated both negative stereotypes and parochialism by reasserting the international relevance of archaic Mediterranean architecture for the exigencies of modern living and functionalist design. Still others circumvented defensive posturing by engaging in a dialogical interaction with regional peoples to preserve the threatened diversity of the folkloric patrimony or to improve the squalid living conditions of agricultural communities, which still defined the core identity of the Italian popolo.

Clearly, artistic interpretations of the primitive differed from the research of the social sciences, even as they were both informed by western assumptions and influenced each other. The term ‘primitive’ was inflected with a variety of meanings: the primordial, archaic, vernacular, barbaric, naive, rural, artisanal and popolaresco. For the purposes of this study, which adds to the abundant scholarship on western discourses of the primitive, one needs to distinguish between artistic encounters with the ‘internal other’ – notably indigenous
peasant populations in developing industrial nations – and confrontations with the non-western ‘savage’ of African colonial empires. Ethnographic modernism characterizes the ways in which non-European artifacts inspired radical artistic invention in the west: the demolition of traditional perspective achieved by Matisse’s emulation of North African textiles, for example, or the psycho-sexual savagery expressed by Picasso’s grafting of sub-Saharan tribal sculpture onto the faces of Parisian whores (Green 2001; Wright 2004). Not unlike the vicarious pleasures of travel writing, these are forms of aesthetic colonialism: observation and commentaries on a radical cultural alterity as a means of creative inspiration and self-differencing. Ethnographic modernism, complicit or not in imperialist politics, co-opted what was presumed to be authentically ‘backward’ to propel the forward motion of avant-garde innovation – be it the revolt against a decadent academic tradition, in the case of the Fauves, or the Surrealists’ liberation of the subconscious from staid bourgeois mores. Even more threatening than the visual juxtapositions of familiar and strange, was the attack on ‘parochial Western rationality’ enacted by the destabilizing miscegenation with the ‘other’ (Clifford 1996: 129, 146–8). Yet it was this same western rationality that permitted the European avant-garde to bite the white hand that fed it, as it journeyed forth into the heart of darkness.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, European modernists influenced by ethno-anthropology also engaged with artisanal crafts and folklore traditions on the basis of first-hand encounters, not imaginative geographies. Rediscoveries of the ‘primitive within’ emphasized an authentic connection to ancestral origins (fictive or real), even as they inspired anti-naturalist distortions that abetted the development of modernist abstraction. Although Gauguin’s sojourn to depict the Breton peasantry is seen as but a prelude to his search for a ‘purer’ aboriginal state in Tahiti, the difference between internal and external ‘others’ is arguably one of degree as well as of kind. As with Axel Gallen-Kallela’s immersion in Finnish folk epics or Natalia Goncharova’s adaptation of naive Russian woodblock prints, these creative dialogues took on a more self-consciously instrumentalist view (Sharp 2000). Repositories of the ‘folk’ and images of the primeval landscape became effective ideological catalysts for a new romantic nationalism that traversed the political spectrum (Facos and Hirsh 2003; Thiesse 1999: 185–97, 200–20). Belief in the innately spiritual expression of peasant art went hand in hand with the secular religion of the modern state, as both strove to foster a sense of national community and collective heritage. Patronizing and elitist, these modernist, amateur ethnographers also reinscribed the boundaries of high art through traffic with the low, but low as defined by popular traditions, not evolutionary biology. Assimilationist rather than exclusionary, they engaged in a series of negotiations and selective preservation that mitigated the unequal relationship of the appropriating gaze.

In early twentieth century, many Italian artists and writers were predisposed to this more dialogical approach: first, because the objects of interpretation
were seen as being part of a shared cultural patrimony, no matter how seemingly exotic and archaic by comparison to the rest of Europe; and, second, because they were intent on building a national cultural identity after political unification had been achieved, and realized – out of shrewdness or affinity – the draw of regional identities and indigenous traditions. If nothing else, northern and southern Italians were bound together by a weak nationalism formed by centuries of foreign domination and a history of heterogeneous cultures that contained a multiplicity of ‘others’. With the exception of the Futurists, who first experienced African tribal sculpture filtered through the art of the Parisian avant-garde, Italians in revolt against academic neoclassicism turned to their ‘internal primitives’ rather than non-western sources. The relative paucity of contact with non-western art (given Italy’s few colonial possessions) and its inversely rich folkloric heritage (by dint of its late industrial development) also predetermined the artistic points of reference. Duilio Cambellotti’s reed and mud exhibition ‘huts’ based on the peasant dwellings of the Roman countryside, Fortunato Depero’s cubistic riffs on the tarantella dances of the Mezzogiorno, or Arturo Martini’s revitalization of Ligurian popular ceramics, all contributed to the awareness of vernacular traditions that were autochthonic and enduringly popular. One is tempted to see herein Antonio Gramsci’s ideal of a national popular culture formed by the reciprocal transformations of the erudite and folkloric (Gramsci 1985: 188–95, 199–212, 252–5; Urbanati 1998: 142, 147–9). Yet, even as these multifold interpretations worked against negative stereotypes of the internal ‘other’, explorations of archaic, primitive and barbarous were nonetheless loaded politically, and implicated, after 1925, in fascism’s totalitarian reach. How the varying Italian discourses on the internal primitive either accommodated or evaded the regime’s drive for centralization and its populist propaganda is explored by several of the essays included here.

The first three contributors to this volume delve into the role of social scientists and ethnologists in establishing the barbarism and beauty of southern and rural Italians at the turn of the twentieth century. Theories of biological determinism, as well as class prejudice, influenced the research on regional folklore and rural populations from the beginning: the first Società italiana di Antropologia ed Etnologia was founded in 1871, by Paolo Mantegazza, a renowned physician, travel writer and social Darwinist. In the decades following unification, the southern ‘problem’ was ingrained discursively by physical anthropology (one branch of the discipline), which drew on the science of physiognomy to index the traits of indigenous peoples and classify their stage of development relative to ‘advanced’ societies. At the same time, as part of their fieldwork, ethnographers, such as Giuseppe Pitri and Lamberto Loria, founded collections and organized exhibitions dedicated to the documentation and preservation of folklore (Cirese 1974). Loria’s efforts resulted in the 1911 ‘Mostra di etnografia’: mounted in Rome as part of the Esposizione del cinquantenario, it was the first national event to draw attention
to spontaneous, cultural ‘dialects’, or vernacular forms of artistic expression, in contrast to the longstanding emphasis on the classical tradition. The promotion of regional diversity worked both to ingrain and mediate preconceptions of the Meridionale, Sicily and Sardinia; while it typified the ‘difference’ of the southern peasantry, it also created widespread appreciation for the cultural values and economic needs of rural populations across the nation as part of strategic politics of national unity (Sabatino 2010: 28–32).

The appreciation of folklore increased after World War I as intellectuals shared the trenches with the ‘popular classes’ and gained new respect for their customs (Cavazza 1987: 109). At the same time, ethnographers began to organize their profession nationwide in a process of centralization and outreach that dovetailed with the regime’s consensus building: patriotic celebrations of folklore, for example, became part of the educational programs of the Dopolavoro with the participation of the Comitato Nazionale per le Arti Popolari (Cavazza 1987). In turn, the fascists supported plans for the first Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari even as they officially banned, in 1933, the foreign term ‘folklore’ in favor of the more native-sounding cultura popolaresca (Simeone 1978: 551). Under the regime, ethnographers read more patriotic content into their analyses, as the previously perceived backwardness of the peasantry became a propagandistic bulwark against the ‘cosmopolitanism’ that threatened the integrity of italianità. Painting and sculpture as well as mass journalism propagated a sanitized or heroic image of the peasantry despite lingering issues of poverty and illiteracy. The identity politics of Italia barbara continued to be a double-edged sword, however, for it contradicted the regime’s policies of modernization (including agricultural production) and centralization and provided dissenters with an equally and undeniably Italian model of non-conformism.

The research by Vivien Greene on the Sicilian Pitrè and by Jonathan Hiller on the Sardinian novelist Grazia Deledda, reveal the complicity of southerners in fashioning their regions as retrograde and racially inferior. Remnants of Sicily’s Arab past produced both pride in difference but also the ‘facts’ of southerners’ endemic indolence, ignorance and brutality. Realizing the threat that modernization posed to Sicily’s regional traditions, Pitrè set out to document its folklore and material culture, and his collections and published volumes became an invaluable creative resource for artists and writers from all over the peninsula. In that regard, Pitrè’s efforts asserted the mutually productive relationship between regionalist and nationalist identities. Yet, as Greene demonstrates, reactions to his Mostra Etnografica Siciliana at Palermo’s 1891 Esposizione Nazionale only reinforced the perceived racial inferiority of the region’s inhabitants. The proximity of his pavilion to the staged Villaggio Abissino and the Mostra Eritrea (a celebration of Italy’s recently acquired colony) led the local and national press to link the ‘barbaric’ conditions of the Sicilian peasantry to African natives. Given their tenuous hold on Eritrea and Somali amidst disastrous and humiliating excursions into the continent, Italians
offset their inadequacies as an imperial power, Greene argues, by intensifying their condescending and possessive attitudes toward Sicily, Italy’s own and ‘other’ Africa.

Grazia Deledda was a child of Nuoro, Sardinia, the designated center of delinquency, according to the statistical evidence of social scientists Niceforo and Paolo Orano, who wrote extensively on the atavism of the south. In her novels, Deledda perpetuated the infamous stereotypes of southern Italians established by criminal anthropology – lawlessness, effeminacy and licentiousness – to the ends of literary acclaim and commercial success. Hiller’s close textual reading counters other scholars who claim that Deledda went on to question or refute the work of Orano and Niceforo. Instead, as Hiller argues, she consistently crafted her character types, their unruly behavior, and their atavistic physiognomies under the pervasive influence of their writings, just as theories of biological determinism underscored the fatalism of her plot lines. Only later, during the 1930s under the rogue policies of a dictator beyond the law, did Deledda valorize the ‘uncivilized’ Sardinian. Acknowledging the historical roots of brigandage as a means of rebellion against unjust oppression, Deledda self-identified as a ‘literary outlaw’ in subtle protest against the backward gender politics of the fascist regime (Briziarelli 1995).

Combing the tourist view, the picturesque, and ethnographic documentation, photography of the Italian ‘primitive’ became a key tool in the fashioning of a mythic national identity in the decades following the Risorgimento. Like statistics, photography embodied the truth-value of the ‘irrefutable’ empirical evidence, but as a visual medium, its emotional and persuasive power was far greater. In many ways, ethnographers and dedicated amateur photographers perpetuated a Janus-faced perception of the Italian primitive established by foreigners: on the one hand, a model of innate goodness pictured through the nostalgic blur of the pictorialist idiom; and, on the other, the epitome of squalor captured by the unsentimental sharp-focus lens. Yet, as Lindsay Harris argues, these photographic self-representations served specific nationalist agendas on the part of romantics, social scientists and social activists alike: to establish a common ethnicity rooted in the soil; to preserve indigenous structures and ways of life; and to improve the living conditions for the majority of Italy’s inhabitants. In the years before World War I, photographs of the Italian primitive were distributed through specialized books, journals and the exhibitions of photographic societies. With the growth of the mass media and fascist censorship between the wars, photographs of the peasantry proliferated in mass propaganda campaigns for the battaglia del grano and land-reclamation projects. Magazines such as La rivista illustrata del Popolo d’Italia or cinematic newsreels proffered uplifting images of collective industriousness and kitschy sentimentality, replacing the scrutinized ‘primitive’ of liberal-era photography.

Italy’s status as the savage – noble or delinquent – of Europe was complicated by a number of historical contingencies, not the least of which was
its venerable past as the cradle of western civilization and of the same humanistic values brought to bear on judging it barbaric. The self-representation of the Italian primitive on the part of Italian intellectuals brings to mind Gianni Vattimo’s distinction between a ‘classical’ hermeneutics and an ‘ethnographic’ hermeneutics, that is, between the interpretation of a text that, ‘however remote and alien’, is nonetheless bound to a certain familiar tradition; and that which requires ‘radical translation’ (even fanciful invention) for which the interlocutor presumes no basis of sameness (Vattimo 1988: 152). In the case of Italy, the object of ethnographic interpretation coincided with the classical one: artifacts that form the history of western civilization in its preindustrial stages and at the crossroads of the Mediterranean; and representations of ancient myth and belief systems, whether in high art forms or in the residual paganism of certain ritualistic and folkloric practices.

In the Italian context, ‘primitive’ became a relative and nuanced term applied to both high art and material culture. Owing to its earlier etymology, primitive could mean originary as much as uncivilized, the font versus the foe of civilization. It referred to the simplified, but sophisticated, forms of archaic and pre-Renaissance art of undisputed prestige, as well as to everyday vernacular objects whose functionalist forms presaged the spare utilitarianism of the machine age (Sabatino 2010). Many Italian artists and architects deemed the unpretentious style of vernacular design to be eminently rational: purity and timelessness were valued qualities whose cultural currency only increased in modernist economy of means. Thus too, Italy’s archeological prehistory, as evidenced in Italy’s Etruscan ‘civilization’ was seen as archaic, not primitive, displaying the roots of reasoned symmetry and a ‘superior’ western naturalism. With faces smiling, pleasant and calm, Etruscan funerary sculpture of almost three millennia earlier had little in common with the scarified and gaping visages associated with fearsome, non-western tribal art. In addition, artists, critics and archeologists claimed the humbleness of the Etruscan primitive and vernacular terracotta materials presented a more authentically popular and humane style than the idealizing forms and materials of imported Hellenism or Roman Imperial art (Braun 2010). Italian self-representation of the internal primitive also resulted, therefore, in a series of compensatory ‘nesting classicisms’ that could offset the negativity of ‘nesting Orientalisms’.

The tension between Italy’s historical primacy in the arts and the deracination of much of its prestigious cultural patrimony is the subject of André Hayum’s essay on the historiography of the Italian trecento and quattrocento painters. The écoles primitives, whose French appellation betrays the fact that foreigners first shaped their appreciation, became a lightning rod for Italian art historians in the fascist period, most tellingly the two preeminent scholars Lionello Venturi and Roberto Longhi. Often fragments of larger religious works, the panel painting of the primitives were removed from their original sites and sold to foreign collectors, in a process of decontextualization, as Hayum has surmised, not unlike the fate of non-western artifacts. Whereas
Venturi (who became an anti-fascist exile) perceived the primitives as embodying ‘universal categories of experience’ that transcended national borders (implicitly arguing for Italy’s spiritual legacy without chauvinistic overtones). Longhi invoked their innately Italian character through the regional specificity of depicted people and landscapes. In particular, Hayum demonstrates, Longhi vaunted the work of Piero della Francesca for its connectedness to a primeval place and, in his words, the ‘sublimely rustic race’ of central Italy. His exaltation of this ‘primitive’ realm dovetailed with the more pugnacious parochialism of Malaparte and the Strapaese circle of intellectuals, revealing how erudite art criticism found common ground with fascist pandering to common, homespun folk.

In contrast to the primitive, which had certain positive associations, the term ‘barbarian’ in the Italian context added insult to the injurious labeling of the backward ‘internal other’. Occupying an intermediary position between the primitive and the civilized, barbarism lacks the qualities of either innocence or constraint, and is, instead, irredeemable and untamable. It signifies neither the origins nor apogees of human development but dangerous reversals and degeneration (Nielson 1999: 79–80). Given Italy’s former glory under the Roman Empire (which had ruled and shaped the uncouth, north of the Alps) and the Renaissance, the negative stereotypes and associations with ‘decadent’ Orient and ‘bestial’ Africa were particularly wounding. It was precisely the pride in former greatness, side by side with the shame of modern atavism, that prompted Italian intellectuals of both revolutionary and reactionary bent to parlay the image of an Italia barbara – with appropriately aggressive and irrational hyperbole – into a strategy of cultural revanche. On the eve of fascism and beyond, some viewed an infusion of barbarism as the antidote to a civilization in decline, that is, to a liberal state that had failed to make Italians anew.

Hence, F. T. Marinetti coined the exquisitely oxymoronic phrase ‘the most civilized barbarians’ with reference to the Futurists’ embrace of destructive violence as a means of rejuvenating and making modern, by force, the Italian nation. Already in the years before World War I, the Futurists gamely encouraged symbiosis with the irrational and uncivilized to improve the potency of the Italian race, a race unabashedly hybrid and honed through millennia of conflict, as they saw it. Futurist barbarism, as Lucia Re writes, was an iconoclastic eradication of the past: Marinetti and his followers savagely proclaimed that the excess of its civilized heritage had kept Italy in chains. They idolized modern technology in a new religion of Moloch, ready to sacrifice humanism on the altar of the machine age. Re also argues that Marinetti’s roots in Alessandra and his experience of African cultures led him to value, if subversively employ, what western culture disparaged as inferior, and to overcome the usual binary oppositions of colonialist discourse. The pervasive polyphony of Marinetti’s politics and culture represented a dialogical, rather than an exploitative approach to the European other. Key literary works celebrate black African protagonists, machine–animal offspring and tribal
motifs, while his free-word poetry reveled in the ‘linguistic barbarism’ of cacophonous, brutal sounds.

Moreover, Marinetti was too civilized, Re maintains, to harbor a racist agenda, even as he paradoxically supported Italian imperialist excursions into Africa. Instead, he envisioned a process of colonial hybridization that mutually energized African and Italian identities and prepared them both for the brutal onslaught of modernizing forces. Marinetti’s refusal to accept that black Africans were biologically inferior had parallels in the political debates within contemporary Italian anthropology (De Donno 2012: 12–16). Giuseppe Sergi’s influential ‘Hamite theory’, in fact, proposed that that the African, Mediterranean and Aryan peoples all came from the same species, and that the Horn of Africa was the cradle of the superior western civilization. His theories were excised from the field during the fascist period (Sòrgoni 2003: 66–8).

With due respect to Marinetti’s African fantasies, Italy showed its authentically racist and barbaric side with its colonial enterprises, beginning in the late nineteenth century and culminating with the use of chemical warfare in the Ethiopian campaign of 1935–36 (Re 2010). The atrocities of the fascist regime arguably did more to confirm an image of Italia barbara in the eyes of the west than the southern problem. Yet, by the end of World War II, Europe was no longer in a position to cast aspersions on its internal other: fascism stood for whole of western civilization and its descent into barbarism. The Enlightenment project of ‘universal standards of moral behavior’ and ‘the rational progress of humanity’ (Hobsbawm 1994: 46), lost its bearings in the middle of the twentieth century in ways that forced even the facetious Malaparte (1944), to make an about-face, in his war volume Kaputt.

The immediate postwar years witnessed the return of the impoverished and backward Italy – albeit in the nationally redemptive vision of neorealist film – that Mussolini’s totalitarian image machine had worked so hard to repress. The demographics of Italia barbara eventually changed, as the centers of population moved from country to city and consumer capitalism and mass culture led to an increasingly homogeneous society. With the economic boom, beginning in the late 1950s, the Italian primitive developed new resonance as a symbol of social resistance – in the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini or the cultural anthropology of Ernesto de Martino – even as disparities between north and south persisted. Only with the postmodern reversal of values, when industrial progress no longer seemed beneficial but an unsustainable liability, did Italian backwardness, witnessed in the global success of arte povera and the ‘slow food’ movement, finally take the lead.

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