



Franco Cassano. *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*. Translated by Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. lv + 212 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-3365-6.

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Published on H-SAE (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Michael B. Munnik

Challenges from the South: A Review of Franco Cassano's *Southern Thought*

Franco Cassano's *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, finally available to an English-language audience thanks to this long-overdue translation, represents an important contribution to the cultural and philosophical critique of modernity. Cassano's essay traces a "Southern" agenda to thinking and learning about the world. In doing so, Cassano, professor of sociology at the University of Bari in southern Italy, also seeks to unsettle the orthodox topography of Europe and the latter's position within narratives about modernization and development. The text, which originally appeared in Italian in 1996 and was reprinted with a new preface in 2005, has a "cult book" status within Italian academic and public debates. Italy certainly provides an important vantage point from which to explore the South, given that its own Mezzogiorno has long held a complicated relationship with the modern nation-state. In fact, when it was first published, *Il Pensiero Meridiano* captured an emergent (but ultimately short-lived) optimism within southern Italian politics which, in the wake of the massive anti-corruption trials of the early 1990s, claimed greater autonomy after decades of economic and political dependence on the central state. However, while Italy is referenced in the early stages of the book and occupies the focus for one of the supplementary chapters, Cassano's idea of "the South" is unshackled from this specific national context, embracing the Mediterranean as both a geographically specific place and as a metaphor for other, more far-flung global Souths.

So what is "Southern thought"? It essentially represents an alternative viewpoint to the dominant perspective of the North and West that over the centuries has come to impose its definitions of, *inter alia*, ethics, rationality, time, and space. Cassano insists that Southern thought is neither an appeal to separatism nor a nostalgic retreat to some pristine condition. Rather, it provides

an antidote to the fundamentalisms of the contemporary world, be they cultural, religious, or economic. In the current era of global "turbocapitalism" and "hegemonic liberalism," argues Cassano, the South, although itself beset with major social and cultural conflicts, "offers useful suggestions for the future: it is another point of view on the world, a voice today, that, more than ever, we must learn to hear" (p. xxvii).

Cassano identifies four concepts that constitute the basis of Southern thought: *autonomy*, *slowness*, *Mediterranean*, and *moderation*. *Autonomy* refers to the South's capacity to think for and of itself. Rather than being reduced to a "not-yet-North," the South must reappropriate its "ancient dignity as the subject of thought [and so] interrupt the long sequence whereby it has been thought by others" (pp. 1-2). As a protagonist, the South lays claim to alternative paths to modernity which contribute their own definitions and critiques.

Slowness provides a form of resistance to the acceleration of experience that, Cassano claims, lies at the origins of Northern/Western dominance. Often equated—especially by denigrators of the South—with the pathologies of social and economic backwardness, slowness is instead understood by Cassano as the capacity to savor everyday experience. "Going slow is everyone's ability to be a philosopher, living at a different speed, closer to beginnings and ends, where we experience life at its fullest" (p. 10). Slowness is not about replacing speed with a snail-paced lifestyle but "return[ing] humanity to its mastery over time" (p. xxix) and allowing it to fully contemplate the multitemporal nature of progress.

The *Mediterranean* is the geographical, cultural, and philosophical reference point of Southern thought. By virtue of its multiple cultures, languages, faiths, and temporal rhythms, the Mediterranean is a critical interstitial space where it is impossible to withdraw from the encounter with the Other. It is a "communal sea" because

it “lies *between* lands without belonging exclusively to any of them” (p. 142). Despite attempts by some groups over history to impose a totalizing vision of religion, culture, and economics in the region and irrespective of the power imbalances that persist to this day, the Mediterranean remains, in the eyes of Cassano, a “pluriverse [that] allows us to deconstruct any fundamentalist claim” (p. 147).

Lastly, *moderation* refers to Southern thought’s disposition to enter into dialogue: to acknowledge one’s own excesses and the value that can be gained through the encounter with the Other. Cassano insists that moderation does not imply “a banal middle ground” (p. lv), nor is it the mere defense of pluralism. Rather, it is the reflexive capacity of cultures to privilege “coexistence” (p. xlix) and the means by which it will be possible to construct a “polyphonic” universalism (p. 149).

The English translation of *Southern Thought* is longer than the original Italian version. It includes an informative introduction by the two translators, a preface and prologue by the author, and four supplementary chapters. The main text is divided into four parts, the first three of which correspond to the original 1996 text. Parts 1 and 2 lay the foundations for Southern thought, adding flesh to the key concepts outlined above. Cassano also traces the position of the Mediterranean in the genealogy of ancient Greek culture and thought and explores how the relationship between land and sea is conceived in the work of key European thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

Part 3 identifies elements of Southern thought in the work of two twentieth-century literary heavyweights—Albert Camus and Pier Paolo Pasolini, both of whom, according to Cassano, tried to “think autonomously and against the grain of modernity” (p. 5). The chapter on Pasolini, for example, examines the poet and filmmaker’s engagement with his own sexual diversity and his standpoints on politics, fatherhood, and religion and how these were all characterized by an eagerness to accommodate and confront unresolved contradictions. There is no discussion here of Pasolini’s long-running polemic against Italian modernity during the 1960s and 1970s, nor of his personal relationship with the Italian South and the Mediterranean, which is somewhat surprising given the central theme of the book. Cassano instead appears to suggest that Southern thought is not necessarily a place-bound perspective but a critical view of the world that challenges hegemonic epistemologies and normative paradigms. This said, the chapter (which actually marked

the finale of the original Italian text) represents the most abstruse part of the book and will be particularly taxing for those not familiar with Italian postwar literary history.

Part 4 consists of three articles written between 1998 and 2000 plus an essay specially penned by Cassano for the English translation. They tie together the range of themes raised over the course of the book and thus provide a more succinct and accessible discussion of Southern thought. “Europe and Southern Thought” examines the often forgotten bond between Europe and the Mediterranean Sea and argues how the latter presents a counterweight to the boundless individualism and uprootedness of the (North) Atlantic. “Cardinal Knowledge” playfully conjures up stereotypes about the four compass points so as to affirm the need for an unresolved dialectic that can prevent one viewpoint from prevailing over the others. “Against All Fundamentalisms: The New Mediterranean” traces Italy’s shifting relationship with the Mediterranean since national unification in 1861, from the imperialist pretensions of the Fascist regime to the negative images of underdevelopment during the postwar period, before sketching the ways in which artists and intellectuals have recently recovered the same sea as a pivotal resource for Italian culture and politics. The final chapter, “Thinking the Mediterranean,” reiterates the power of the Mediterranean to confound the clash-of-civilizations thesis. The brief discussion here of Arab and Muslim authors like Fatima Mernissi, Tariq Ramadan, and Mohamed Arkoun answers criticisms leveled by postcolonial theorists such as Iain Chambers, who contended that Cassano, despite all his good intentions, was bound to the defense of a Eurocentric humanism.[1] It is true that for most of the book Cassano meditates upon the Mediterranean in order to rethink Europe. The fact that this “communal sea” is seen to reveal the limits of an “imperious ... Atlantic modernity” (p. xlv) but is not also understood as the northern or western border of *other* places ultimately highlights the author’s positioned gaze. Moreover, one could object that the vision of a “communal sea” is wishful idealism given that this same body of water is simultaneously the mass cemetery for thousands of drowned migrants who have always belonged to just one and the same part of Cassano’s “pluriverse.”

Southern Thought is nevertheless extremely suggestive in the way it positions the idea of the South at the center of geopolitical and cultural debates. Cassano’s desire to provincialize the claims of the West (and North) will sound familiar to those well versed in postcolonial literature. At the same time, *Southern Thought* inter-

rupts the parochial slant within much of Anglophone critical theory that, with the exception of area specialists, tends to overlook the Mediterranean. It is a book that poses far-reaching questions and encourages serious reflection. As Cassano himself insists, its goal is to “to blaze a trail, to point out a working direction” that can move beyond “one-dimensional” accounts of modernity and the “fetishism of development” (pp. 5, 4).

Cassano’s discussion essentially operates at a meta-analytical level rather than from an ethnographic or historical perspective. As a consequence, anthropologists will find his use of key concepts such as “culture” and “identity” at times problematic. It is not that Cassano harbors romanticized ideas about the South, as some critics have argued: he is always careful to repudiate such approaches. He is also rightly critical of celebrations of Mediterranean hybridity that underplay the asymmetric power relations between cultures. As he argues in his last chapter, “those who aim at deconstructing fundamentalisms cannot get around the suffering of the culture that occupies the subaltern position” (p. 147). Herein lies the problem. Cassano tends to envisage “cultures” as the accumulated patrimony of territorially delimited groups which face each other from different sides of the Mediterranean. There is little sense that these cultures are themselves unfinished processes, constituted by continual negotiation and conflict. At one point, for example, we are told that “Naples is, as always, the site of cultural experimentation” (p. 135). This is a familiar commonplace for anyone who—like this reviewer—has conducted research in the southern Italian city. Why is Naples “always” such a site? Does “Naples” possess some peculiar disposition? Is experimentation not intrinsic to any culture, be it northern or southern? Who precisely are the experimenters? What is their class position, gender, age, etc.? Who is to say that the selected cultural products are not also contested and repudiated from within? To a certain extent, Cassano echoes the way in which Pasolini in the 1970s praised the capacity of Neapolitans (all one million of them!) to hold out against the consumerist ideology of modern Italian society. In sum, this example—and

there are others throughout the book—suggests an essentializing logic that detracts from Cassano’s goal of deconstructing crude Northern/Western representations of the South.

Having said this, Cassano is to be commended for his commitment to contemplating the cultural, political, and economic implications of a (literal) sea change in perspective. The author of *Southern Thought* stands in contrast to those theorists who have similarly explored the aporia of the Mediterranean but from the safe haven of a politically disengaged critique. Certainly, no guidelines are provided about how Southern thought might translate into collective action. There are no references here to the Arab Spring or to the uprisings on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, most probably because these events are too recent; but neither is there any mention of a key Southern thinker and strategist like Antonio Gramsci.

As I write this review, Italy is in the middle of parliamentary elections and Franco Cassano is standing as the main candidate for the lower house for the center-left Democratic Party (PD) in the southern region of Apulia. If Cassano is elected (and he probably will be) and the PD, as polls suggest, returns as the largest party and is able to form the next Italian government, then who is to tell what direction Southern thought might take? One could contend that the PD is not a particularly conducive vehicle for putting Southern thought into practice, given that it has long been compliant to the fundamentalism of market economics and has often pledged support for neoliberal megaprojects (such as the high-speed train link between Turin and Lyon) that override grassroots claims to “slowness” and “moderation.” But, ultimately, what makes the project of Southern thought interesting is that its contours and substance, as Cassano asserts, are not prefixed, but are always, I would add, shaped and reshaped through situations of conflict.

Note

[1]. Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of Interrupted Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

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Citation: Nick Dines. Review of Cassano, Franco, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

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