Book Review


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Fifteen years after the first Italian edition, *Southern Thought* by Franco Cassano enters the English book market thanks to Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme’s translation. Cassano, who teaches sociology at the University of Bari, is a highly discussed Italian intellectual who has been contributing for decades to the debate on Mediterranean studies. In his book he offers a provocative alternative to a unilateral Northwestern oriented vision of modernity, calling for an autonomous line of thought that should rise up from the peripheral, marginalized areas of the Southern world. He claims that the South, in its search for an archetype of progress imposed by a capitalistic system, does not represent an incomplete or belated version of the North. Instead, relying on a “multiplicity of perspectives” (xxix), the author identifies four concepts that constitute the basis of his theoretical frame—the drive to autonomy, the importance of slowness, the historical and geopolitical context of the Mediterranean, and the notion of moderation—to elaborate a model capable of giving dignity, strength, and growing impulses not just to the Italian *Mezzogiorno* but to the global South.
Cassano lays out his Southern thought by bringing together history and contemporary events, references to literature and philosophy as well as definitions from the social sciences and economics. He aims to deconstruct the current image of the South as subaltern subject of the Northwestern dominant discourse and to empower it with an autonomous voice and self-representation: “Thinking the South thus means that the South is the subject of thought” (1). Analyzing the fallacies of modernity, he highlights how industrialization and consumption have compromised the future of the world, which is now “ruled by the fundamentalism of business” that pushes society towards “obsessive competitive pressure” (xxvii). With a focus on how rampant unrestrained capitalism and acceleration invest every aspect of life, how they transform and mutilate “love, education, thought, and relationship between people as well as relationship with the collectivity and with nature” (xxviii) Cassano argues for a reorientation of “the spatial and temporal coordinates upon which the North-Western vision of the world rests.” (xxx).

This remarkably rich edition of the Southern Thought opens with an introduction written by Bouchard and Ferme, who present Cassano’s career and publications while simultaneously guiding the Anglophone reader through the multiple theoretical and critical frames that informed his approach. The introduction creates the context in which both scholars and the general public will enjoy this “engaging and provocative work” (ix). The book includes “Prologue: Parallels and Meridians”—published in the 2005 Italian edition—where Cassano clarifies his arguments and engages in debate with some of the objections raised by the first edition of Southern Thought in 1996.
The author includes an updated preface to the English edition in which he synthesizes the objectives of his work and highlights his appreciation for the translators’ work. Indeed, Bouchard and Ferme have successfully retained the flow of Cassano’s elegant prose while rendering the nuances of Italian language throughout the work by adding explanatory notes to ensure that nothing stylistic is lost in translation. The etymological importance of the word “frontier” (41), which is central to Cassano’s work, is clarified in details with a specific note (168). However, given the importance of some of these linguistic explanations, it might have been a more cohesive editorial choice to include them as footnotes at the bottom of each page rather than a “Note” section at the end of the book.

Departing from the Italian edition, which includes three parts, the English translation is comprised of four. Part I “Mediterranean” is divided into two chapters dedicated to the “pace” and the “space” of the European sea. In “Going Slow” and “Of Land and Sea” the author first rediscovers the importance of the notion of slowness; then he outlines the theoretical and philosophical foundations of Southern thought. Connecting ancient Greek culture to the works of Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, Cassano illustrates the paradigmatic relation between land and sea to conceptualize the position and relevance of the Mediterranean in his own work. He argues that the Mediterranean cannot be perceived as simulacrum of the past. It cannot be conceived as a space that shortens or rushes contacts between people, upon whose surfaces goods and men move, flow, sink, and perish. Rather, the Mediterranean is a liquid body transporting
ideas, connecting languages and traditions that stretch beyond its coastal lines. Without indulging in romantic and idealistic representations of the Mediterranean, Cassano carefully links his argumentations to historical and current events.

Part II, “Homo Currens,” is also divided into two sections that are dedicated to the literary and figurative meaning of national borders and the analysis of relations between cultures, respectively. In “Thinking the Frontier” Cassano unfolds the etymological origins and the derivatives of the word *frontier* while emphasizing the nuances of its abstract meaning. Restlessness and the ambivalent nature of constructed national borders—he explains—create territories of conflict and contrast as well as space of contiguity and contact among cultures that influence each other through its trespassing. In “The Fundamentalism of the Rat Race” Cassano unhinges the mechanism that dominates the impaired dialogue between cultures. He raises three fundamental questions to foster the discussion of the future of cultural representations: “Can one reflect on the relationship between cultures while neglecting the negative conditioning that the stronger culture exercises on the weaker one? Is the cultural model of the West [...] capable of tolerating societies governed [...] by cultural models not founded on constant dynamics and on unlimited production? Conversely, can [that] cultural model [...] resist nowadays the cultural (but also economic and political) attacks of the West?” (53). Relying on Serge Latouche’s notion of *deculturation* and Arnold J. Toynbee definitions of *zelotism* and *herodianism*, the author debates his questions and concludes that Western cultures need to deconstruct first their own fundamentalism which does not kill, but
“outmodes, dismisses, and banishes from the market. It has other temples, breviaries, punishments, and hells” (60).

“Friction of Thought” is part III of Cassano’s book in which he finds correspondences between the theoretical frame of Southern thought and the works of two Mediterranean artists: the Algerian-born French writer Albert Camus and the Italian journalist, poet, writer, and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. He argues that their autonomous thinking “against the grain of modernity” (p. 5), their writing and life experiences as well as their understanding of the world, are permeated by a Southern view. Natural elements such as light, sun, warmth, and sea, along with ancient forgotten values that were part of Mediterranean civilization, are intrinsically infused in Camus’ work. Pasolini’s relation and contribution to the Southern thought is evident in the title alone: “Pier Paolo Pasolini: Life as an Oxymoron.” The filmmaker’s contradictory life, his artistic experience and his sexual orientation, according to the author, challenge every monolithic and unilateral vision of the world while encouraging a polarized approach on political, ethical, moral, and religious matters. Despite the quotations and references to other literary critics, Cassano’s analysis of Pasolini’s relation with Meridian thought is not as accessible and clear as in his treatment of Camus’. Whereas the author smoothly guides the reader through the Algerian-French writer’s life and literary works, pinning down concepts that show his affinity with the Mediterranean tradition—moderation, tolerance, honor, slowness, and fraternity—Pasolini’s section is more complex. Cassano engages in a dialogue with other critics and stresses the paradoxical aspect of Pasolini’s works,
thoughts, and actions. Yet, the connection between the artist and the concepts previously outlined in this book remain opaque. In fact, without a prior knowledge of the Italian filmmaker’s line of reasoning and intellectual struggles against the system, the reader may find this section a bit fragmented and out of focus.

The final part “Other Essays on the Mediterranean” is what makes the English edition the most comprehensive contribution by Cassano to the field of Mediterranean studies. This part includes three essays published in Italy in different journals between 1998 and 2000—“Europe and the Southern Thought,” “Cardinal Knowledge,” “Against all the Fundamentalisms: the New Mediterranean.” The author critically explores the interrelations between Italian nationalism, history, and current events, suggesting new lenses through which to examine the global changes happening in the Mediterranean region. A forth essay, “Thinking the Mediterranean,” was written specifically for this edition. The author starts a conversation with other writers—Fatima Mernissi, Tariq Ramadam, Leila Ahmed—from the southern Mediterranean shore and actualizes a new form of dialogue that he has been promoting in Southern Thought: “the exchange of meaning between two cultures must take place in both directions, aimed both at teaching and learning.” (149). The final section in its entirety is an extraordinary resource for those who wish to get a closer look at the field of Mediterranean studies from an Italian perspective.

Although Franco Cassano’s argumentations are as provocative as they are fascinating, Southern thought still remains an abstract project. The captivating flow of his prose makes his book a challenging and pleasant read for a variegated audience.
with an interest on the influence and role of the Mediterranean in contemporary Western thought. However, the reader may have to wait until the last essay “Thinking the Mediterranean” to actually grapple with suggestions, practices, and strategies on how to empower the Global South and reverse its paradigmatic position. Another encouraging sign that may lead to actualization of this project is Cassano’s election as a member of the Italian Parliament for the center-left Democratic Party (PD) in Apulia in Spring 2013. His public role may now represent the first tangible opportunity to apply the concepts and theories outlined in *Southern Thought* on a real political context and to test the hold of Southern thought, at least in Italy. *Vedremo*...