Introduction

“Uniquely Italian”

When actor Alberto Sordi died in February 2003, all the major Italian newspapers devoted pages and pages of coverage to the popular protagonist of dozens of post-1945 films. Most commentators agreed that in his films the comic actor had represented Italian character better than any other. For the Catholic daily Avvenire he had been the “mirror” of Italy. The centrist Corriere della Sera saluted him as the “hero of all our defects.” The center-left La Repubblica maintained that he had embodied the “art of being Italian” by personifying “a mixture of defects” that were unmistakably Italian. So did too the left-wing L’Unità, while the right-wing Secolo d’Italia called the actor a national symbol who, for fifty years, had given “a face to the vices and the virtues of the Italians.”

Behind this general agreement (in which only Northern League exponents did not participate since they did not like the romanità of the actor) there were no doubt some differences in emphasis reflecting different ideological positions as well as the regional basis of each paper. Yet, the unanimity about the importance of the actor as an expression of the “national character” was virtually complete.


2 Compare the vast (10 pages out of 32) and enthusiastic coverage of the Roman La Repubblica to the slightly less emphatic coverage of the Milanese Corriere della Sera (7 pages out of 32). Avvenire, on the other hand, stressed in particular the humanity and religiosity of the actor, in other words that he was a good Catholic. L’Unità was convinced that he offered a critical portrayal of the Italians, while the editorialist of La Repubblica had some doubts about it. The Secolo d’Italia took issue with the praise coming from the left, claiming that in earlier times they never really liked him.

3 This is true also at a popular level: about 250,000 people attended his funeral in Rome, and 200,000 visited the mortuary chapel (according to Corriere della Sera, February 27,
That an actor should acquire this role is probably not surprising considering the importance of cinema in contemporary culture. In Italy, this phenomenon is strengthened by the nationalizing role that the cinema acquired in the post-1945 period in a context in which nationalism did not have much political currency except among the extreme right. Films became the privileged vehicle for the production of images of Italianness both at home and abroad, and the Italian comedies of the 1950s and 1960s, which often featured Sordi as a protagonist, were the “first genre that was able to pose the problem of national identity with continuity and to the large public.”4 What may be more surprising is that the role of national icon has been bestowed on an actor who consistently played rather negative characters and indeed built his whole career on embodying different versions of the anti-hero: from the indolent youth of a provincial town, to the opportunist who is able to adapt successfully to different political regimes, to the ladies’ man who eventually has to bow, reluctantly, to the order of holy matrimony, and so on. Why is this so? This book will try to make sense of this seeming paradox by tracing the genealogy and history of the discourse of national character, a resilient formation that has been present in the history of modern Italy since its very beginning.

But what is national character? In spite of its loss of legitimacy at a scholarly level,5 the notion of national character still has wide currency in popular culture (it is, among other things, the material for endless ethnic jokes) and in journalism (where it structures a lot of reporting on foreign countries). National character is not the same as national identity even though the two notions are often confused in common parlance. While both notions are rather slippery and lend themselves to multiple definitions and uses, national character tends to refer to the

2 Italian Vices

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Excerpt

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“objective” settled dispositions (a set of distinctive moral and mental traits) of a people, while national identity, a term of more recent coinage, tends to indicate a more subjective dimension of perception and self-images which may include a sense of mission and self-projection in the world. We will have to return to the meanings of these elusive terms, but for now suffice it to say that in practice both ideas operate much like containers which different speakers tend to fill with varied content. Yet, this content is not chosen at random: debates about and definitions of national identity and character occur within discursive moulds that often have a very long history and of which individual speakers are often unaware. The burden of this discursive mould seems to be particularly heavy in post-1989 Italy when – after the fall of the old party system that dominated the Republic since the fall of fascism – the problematic of the nation has come back to dominate public discourse.

First spurred by the increasing visibility of the Northern League on the political scene and by its virulent attacks to national unity, since the early 1990s the Italian interest in the issue of national identity has been remarkable, and it continues to grow. Book titles exhibit in a vivid way anxieties and concerns about the fragility of the national construction and the dangers of disintegration: *If We Cease To Be a Nation, Farewell Italy? Unity and Disunity from 1860 to the Present, Finis Italiae, The Death of Country* (1994), *Italians Without Italy,*7 to name just a few. Others point to preoccupations with the question of the modernity or lack of modernity of the country and with the quality of its civic culture: *Is Italy a Civilized Country?, Parallel Italies: Why Italy is Not Able To Become a Modern Country, The Civic Identity of the Italians.*8 Similarly, newspapers
and journals run titles such as “Italians a People Under a Mask All Fearful and Transformist,” “The Italians? Anarchic Sheep That Do not Make up a Nation,” “Italy is Unmade, but There Are the Italians,” “Are We Ever Going to be a Normal Country?,” “What is the Use of Italy?”

As the case of Sordi and these examples eloquently show, what it means to be Italian has been very much on Italians’ minds lately. Italians may still be uncertain about being a “true” nation, but many of them are convinced that they have a character all the same, and that it does not make for a pleasant sight. In contrast to other peoples’ often positive self-representation (one might think of the Americans – optimistic, forward-looking, civic minded – and the English – fair, reserved, law-abiding), the self-image of the Italians as a people is far from flattering: Italians from all social groups often describe themselves as a people of cynics, extreme individualists who do not care about the public good, opportunists with clientelistic propensities, untrustworthy if not altogether liars. According to Eugenio Scalfari, longtime director of the prominent daily La Repubblica, these traits are so entrenched that they almost make up an ethnicity. Foreign commentators often concur and talk, with or without irony, about the “Italianate style in politics” and the risk that it could infect the public life of more virtuous nations.

To be sure, recent events would seem to justify this kind of evaluation. In the early 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin wall, the investigation of the Milanese prosecutors known as “Clean Hands” unveiled the corruption of a very large segment of the elite in power. A large number of politicians and businessmen were indicted. Following those events, the country witnessed the collapse of the whole party system that had governed it since the end of the Second World War. Right after the fall of that system, hopes of positive change were soon dashed when the country became the theater of the devastating rise to power of media

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tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, who had acquired an immense dominance in commercial television thanks to his connections to a major political figure (Bettino Craxi) of the party system which had just fallen. And of course, even before the more recent predicaments, Italy was known as a country in which political corruption was widespread and respect for the law rather weak and poorly enforced. All these phenomena raise difficult and legitimate questions about not only the quality of the institutions, but also about the attitudes of the people. Yet, whether these attitudes amount to a “national character” is a quite different matter. The fact that many Italians read them through the lenses of the notion of national character is indeed what needs to be problematized, especially considering that Italy, sadly, is not the only country facing political corruption or behaviors that leave a lot to be desired from a civic point of view. In other words, while nobody could deny the existence of certain traits in Italian society and culture, why they should be named a “national character” (or identity: the terms are often used interchangeably in Italy) is less clear. We thus go back to our original question: what is a national character? And why is it that many Italians are so convinced that they have a national character, that this character is faulty, and that this faultiness even explains much of the social and political problems of their country today? It is the argument of this book that a part of the answer can be found in the study of the history of national character as a discourse, namely as a set of recurrent ideas, themes, arguments, and tropes that have been present in Italian culture for quite some time.

**National character as a discourse**

The presence of a very self-critical attitude in Italian culture – which some call Italian “anti-Italianism” – has not escaped observers, both

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15 The term is commonly employed in journalism to indicate the Italian critics of national character (as opposed to their aggressive assertors who are also known as arcitaliani – on which see chapter 5 below), but it is also used in scholarly works such as G. Aliberti, *La resa di Cavour. Il carattere nazionale italiano tra mito e cronaca* (1820–1976) (Florence: Le Monnier, 2000). I am reluctant to use this term indiscriminately because it carries strong evaluative and polemical connotations.
Italian and foreign. Mario Isnenghi has connected it to the “sense of inferiority” of the Italians, a self-perception rooted in their historical experiences in the modern age and translating into a readiness to look at themselves in a negative manner. John Dickie has talked of a “culture of denunciation” to refer to this tendency in contemporary Italy and has seen it as a kind of “inverted patriotism,” filled with pessimism about the national character and worries about the state of the nation. Franco Cassano has recently referred to it polemically as “an ancient game” of self-denigration present in all social groups and leading to unintended and mostly negative consequences. Noting how negative evaluations of the Italians always imply a comparison, whether implicit or explicit, with other nations, Alessandro Cavalli has observed that this is often an “invidious comparison” not devoid of ambivalences since at times it is accompanied by an emphasis on the “defects” of the more modern or “civilized” countries to which Italy is compared. Cassano has also argued that this trait relates to some peculiar attitudes of Italian intellectuals, in particular their traditional cosmopolitanism (a trait already pointed out by Antonio Gramsci at the beginning of the past century), which implied a feeble connection with their countrymen and a feeling of distance from ordinary Italians. Combined with the relatively recent achievement of national unity, this cosmopolitanism would be at the origins of their negative views of their compatriots.

No doubt all these scholars point to some important determinants of the Italians’ preoccupation with their national character. However, they neglect to further probe its manifestation in its rhetorical aspects and as a discourse, namely, as a set of recurrent ideas and narratives that constitutes the “Italian character” and that goes back to what I would call the Italian “passage to nationhood.”

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16 M. Isnenghi, Breve storia dell’Italia unita a uso dei perplessi (Milan: Rizzoli, 1998), 7–8. See also Romano, Finis Itiae, ch. 2. One may note in passing that psychologists no longer recognize the “inferiority complex” as a pathology even in individual cases.


we cannot exclude the influence of an older discursive tradition, whose roots can be traced to Dante, this specific process is what first made the theme salient, as Giulio Bollati pointed out a few years ago in his brilliant and seminal essay on the history and invention of Italian character. So far, however, with few exceptions, the discourse of character itself has not been at the center of a systematic analysis. This is what I intend to do in this book. I hope to show that we will have a better understanding of the characteristics of this discourse, and of Italian national culture and nationalism more generally, if we subject it to a systematic analysis and if we follow its emergence, permutations, and uses over time.

The Italian discourse of national character has a long intellectual and political history to which both Italians and non-Italians have contributed over the centuries. What non-Italians have said about Italian character is probably better known (witness the vast literature on travel writings) than what Italians themselves have said and done with the idea. In its indigenous inflection, the discourse of character first emerged in the late eighteenth century in the context of the Enlightenment and as a component of an incipient national patriotism. Because of this intimate connection with national-patriotic ideology, character discourse did not have any simple or mirror-like relation (admitting that such a simple relation can exist at all) to its apparent referent, the Italians. Its content had much more to do with the preoccupations and the projects of the Italian national/nationalist elites. These preoccupations were at the origins of the presence of a strong element of criticism (if not self-denigration) in discourses about the nation, accompanying the usual claims of cultural uniqueness and even national superiority that generally characterize nationalist discourses all over the world. Indeed since the Risorgimento at least, debating national character in Italy has meant debating a uniqueness fraught with liabilities. It has meant to impute some special virtues to the Italian people (the famous idea of “Italian primacy”), but also, at the same time, to denounce their numerous “vices.”

The idea of Italian character was thus originally part of the intellectual and rhetorical repertory of Italian nationalism and a tool of

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23 Besides Bollati’s “L’italiano,” which, however, focuses primarily on the Risorgimento, see Aliberti, La resa di Cavour, which offers a more comprehensive coverage. Extended references to the theme of character in Italian nationalism can also be found in E. Gentile, La Grande Italia. Ascesa e declino del mito della nazione nel ventesimo secolo (Milan: Mondadori, 1997) and C. Duggan, The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy Since 1796 (London: Allen Lane, 2007).
nation-building, a means of calling the inhabitants of the peninsula not just to life (since few doubted that they existed in spite of their regional differences), but to a more demanding kind of collective life, namely to existence as a modern nation. This new life required a work of moral regeneration. Since the Risorgimento, a significant number of Italian intellectuals, politicians, and statesmen aspired to reform the Italians so that they would conform to their ideas of what a nation should be like. The phrase allegedly uttered by Massimo d’Azeglio “Now that Italy is made, we must make the Italians” is often cited to refer to the need on the part of Italian national elites to forge into unity an internally diverse people with a weak consciousness of itself. In fact, as we will see, these were not exactly his words and they are often misconstrued. Yet the popularity of the phrase attests to its capacity to speak to a widespread understanding of what the task of nation-making entailed. The fact that generations of Italians continued to use d’Azeglio’s phrase has of course much to do with the difficulties of establishing a unified nation in a territory which had known a quite diverse history and with the complexity of nation-building in a country where a powerful Church was adamantly opposed to the national state for a long time after its creation. Regional and religious issues were only two of many divisive factors that made liberal hegemony rather weak in Italy from the beginning and generated anxieties and discontent, later accrued by industrialization and modernization.

Politics and ideology, and the different projects concocted by the various “engineers of Italianness,” to use Bollati’s expression, go a long way towards explaining what was being said about national character at any given time. Yet there was more than ideology in this preoccupation with national character. Several other elements must be taken into consideration in order to understand the specificity of the Italian discourse of national character. Studies on the representation of the Other can help us greatly in this enterprise. In particular, recent studies of the image of the Italian south as the “internal Other” of unified Italy, which the nationalist imaginary could not recognize as part of itself, provide a basis for approaching the Italian discourse of national character in a fresh way. It is significant and symptomatic

24 See the introduction to S. Soldani and G. Turi, eds., Fare gli italiani. Scuola e cultura nell’Italia contemporanea, vol. I, La nascita dello stato nazionale (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), 17. See also chapter 2 below.
25 On Italy’s difficult nation-building see Duggan, The Force of Destiny.
26 See especially N. Moe, The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002); on more specific aspects see also J. Schneider, ed., Italy’s “Southern Question”: Orientalism in
that the negative traits of Italian character are often interchangeable with the traits that are attributed to its south. In fact, as Nelson Moe has argued, for the most part these traits were first attributed to Italy as a whole when it became the “south” of Europe in the eighteenth century, and then they were applied to its south as this began to be distinguished from the rest of the country in the Risorgimento.\(^{27}\) But, as we will see, they did not cease being applied to Italy as a whole when necessary, with the Italian south reverting to being an exaggerated version of Italy, that is, possessing all its defects in accentuated fashion. Either the south as the internal Other or the southernness of Italy in general was thus often the main scapegoat for the country’s problems.

As the mechanisms of the discursive construction of the south in modern times have become clearer, we are in a position to better understand also the formation of the Italian discourse of national character more generally. The shaping of this discourse was an eminently relational phenomenon and thus cannot be fully understood without being placed in a context of international relations and of representations of the Italians by non-Italians with whom the Italians were in dialogue or in confrontation. This representational activity began quite early and it bestowed on Italy and its inhabitants a peculiar position in the imagination of other Europeans. Admired for their culture but also resented for their economic power in the late Middle Ages, Italians were often the object of ambivalent if not wholly negative representations, particularly in England and France.\(^{28}\) Subsequently, as the peninsula fell behind in economic and political terms, generations of northern travelers and Enlightenment thinkers contributed to these representations by portraying the Italians as indolent and effeminate southerners. As we will see, Italians themselves joined in, participating in an activity of self-stereotyping that was highly symptomatic of the loss of power and of the marginality which the inhabitants of

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\(^{27}\) Moe, *The View from Vesuvius*, chs. 1–3. According to J. P. Colella, after the publication of Roger Aschram’s influential *Schoolmaster* (1570) “Italian” became a term of abuse and the famous expression “Paradise inhabited by devils,” often used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to refer to the Italian south, had already appeared in 1592 in reference to the whole of Italy (“Anti-Italian Attitudes in Medieval and Renaissance England,” Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1989, 246).

the peninsula experienced in Europe after the fifteenth century. By having to construct themselves in relation to several more positive and more successful Others, Italian nationalists oscillated between arrogantly exalting their “superior” culture and despondently deprecating their state of inferiority.

Discourses of national character, however, are not and have not been just an instance of what can be called the “traffic” in stereotypes, in which European peoples have been involved at least since the late Middle Ages in the context of the rise of modern ideas of the nation and patriotism. They are also part of the history of European political theory, which was intimately entangled with the process by which Europeans defined themselves in contrast to external and internal Others. Historically, albeit more ancient, ideas of national character first consolidated into a discourse about the settled dispositions and proclivities of peoples – in the sense of the “manners” and “spirit” of a people – in the period of the Enlightenment and then were further developed – in an ethnic-cultural sense – by Herder and the Romantics. It was at that time that the discourse of national character became part of the repertory of nationalism as well as of a developing body of political theory, becoming an important component of European political and social thought. As Roberto Romani has recently shown, from Montesquieu to Tocqueville to John Stuart Mill, the construct was extensively theorized and put to use in a variety of different contexts, performing various argumentative and political tasks and experiencing different inflections at different times and in various countries. It was also common currency in more ordinary political language and exchanges. Imperial powers such as Britain regularly justified their military victories and colonial successes by referring to their superior national character. At the end of the nineteenth century even academics took an interest in its analysis and

29 This is a point recently made by Moe, *The View from Vesuvius*, ch. 1. I do not intend to imply that all negative representations were stereotypes, nor that stereotypes were all negative. For a useful analysis of the notion of stereotype especially in terms of its relation to the concept of the other see M. Pickering, *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). Other students of Italian culture have noticed the ease with which Italians internalize stereotypes: see for example J.-P. Dernis, “La question identitaire dans l’Italie contemporaine. Entre relectures historiques et mutations supranationales,” in M. Colin, ed., *Transalpine 2 (Etudes italiennes). Identités italiennes* (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 1998), 71.

30 The coexistence of these two attitudes was already noted by Bollati, “L’italiano,” 41.


32 See J. Moskal, “Mary Shelley’s Rambles in Germany and Italy and the Discourse of Race and National Manners,” *La questione Romantica. Rivista interdisciplinare di studi...*