Introduction: looking at margins

This book is about the way that certain places and groups of people in Italy and its colonies have been viewed as 'marginal' in photographs and written texts produced since unification in 1861. In writing it I have had two main aims. The first has been to show that such views have been closely connected to the process of building the modern nation. The second has been to show how they always involve a distinctive set of social and spatial relations between an observer and an observed. Margins are not simply there, like a fact of nature. They are produced by particular ways of seeing and organizing social space. In the chapters that follow I investigate, in five case studies, the meaning and implications of looking at margins in the Italian context. I also consider how far a critical awareness has emerged in Italy of the power relations involved in this kind of looking.

Let me elaborate these two aims. That the building of modern nations involves the marking out of some groups of people and places as marginal in relation to the nation's core groups and places is already well known to historians and cultural geographers, even if they do not always state it in these terms. The best-known example in modern Italy is the emergence of the South (*Sud*, *Meridione* or *Mezzogiorno*) as a discrete entity and a cultural idea. This could only have happened after the territories south of Rome and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia were incorporated into the new nation-state, when the historic conflict between Naples and Sicily, which had lasted throughout the life of the Bourbon kingdom, was ended, and when national statistics created comparisons between regions.[1] By the early twentieth century the economically and culturally diverse regions of southern Italy had become, together, the subject of a 'southern question' (*questione meridionale*), in which they were seen as the negative pole of a North–South dualism. The South was viewed as an underdeveloped periphery in relation not only to the North of Italy but also

[1] See on this Salvatore Lupo, *L'unificazione italiana. Mezzogiorno, rivoluzione, guerra civile* (Rome: Donzelli, 2011), p. 163, and, on statistics, Silvana Patriarca, *Numbers and nationhood: writing statistics in nineteenth-century Italy* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). I write 'South' with an initial capital to designate the constructed geopolitical entity and 'south' with a lowercase initial for the physical area or compass point.

to Europe north of the Alps. It was regarded, as John Agnew has put it, as 'doubly disadvantaged: geographically marginal to Europe and politically marginal to the "high" Italy of Renaissance city-states from which the new territorial state could be seen as having descended.'[2] And it was not only southern Italy but also the northeast – the rural areas of the Veneto and Friuli – that came to be conceived as economically peripheral in relation to the core industrial growth regions of the northwest, to which they acted, particularly between the 1920s and the 1970s, as reservoirs of low-cost migrant labour.

Another well-known way in which nation formation marked out certain places and people as marginal was through the increased use of the Italian language. The promotion of Italian in schools and its use in public administration and in the press, radio and sound films led to the definitive downgrading not only of the hundreds of other Romance dialects spoken in Italy but also of what would come to be considered the nation's minority languages: Friulian, Sardinian and the 'alloglotic' languages, those belonging to linguistic families other than Romance. All these languages, many of which were spoken in areas considered economically peripheral to the new nation, came to be thought of as marginal in relation to the dominant national language. The alloglotic languages included the archaic forms of Albanian (*arbëresh*) and Greek (*griko*) that continued to be spoken in various small 'linguistic islands' in the south and, after 1918, German, Slovenian, and Croatian, which were spoken in the territories ceded to Italy after the First World War respectively on its northern and eastern land borders. From 1923 the use of German and Slovenian in schools, in placenames and for other official purposes began to be suppressed by the fascist government, which vigorously promoted Italianization within the new border regions. It was sanctioned again after 1945, but those languages received official protection only in 1999 as a result of European Union norms. The development of the mass media also involved processes of concentration within certain cities and regions that made others come to be seen as marginal in relation to a modern industrial culture: the location of much modern book and magazine publishing for over a century in Milan, the increasing concentration of film production from the 1930s and radio production from the 1950s in Rome, and the dominance since the early 1980s of two large national television networks, based in Rome and Milan, over smaller regional and local stations.

The margins I deal with in this book are all products of these or similar processes at work after unification: as some parts of the nation became established as central and important, others came to be treated as peripheral and less important. As the populations of the northern cities grew after unification, largely through internal migration, and after Rome became the capital in 1871,

[2] John A. Agnew, *Place and politics in modern Italy* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 42.

many of the migrants settled on the outer areas of these cities, often in poor-quality housing, which sometimes turned into out-and-out slums, and they were seen as living outside the respectable city, in places that came to be associated with disease and crime. This process was reproduced over generations as new groups of migrants arrived. I examine it, and some of the photographs and written accounts that accompanied it, with particular reference to Rome, in the first chapter, 'Urban peripheries', and the last, 'Nomad camps', which deals with the informal settlements of Romani migrants from eastern Europe created since the 1990s. I show that, despite various philanthropic interventions and new public and private housing, there has been a remarkable degree of continuity in the way the poorest inhabitants of the city have been viewed and in the policies that have been adopted towards them over the past century and a half.

The Kingdom of Italy's drive, which began in the 1880s, to acquire colonies and dominions overseas meant that the imagined spatial structure of centre and periphery, dominance and dependency, which had been created at home was now reproduced at an international level. In Chapter 2, 'Colonies', I examine photographs and writings from Italy's colonial era and consider the marginalizing views that were produced as the colonizers attempted to assert their fragile control over the indigenous populations. Photographs, I argue, became in the 1930s one of the most important means of underpinning and justifying the fascist regime's new colonial policies of strict racial segregation and outlawing of mixed-race liaisons. The chapter examines in turn five photographic genres in which the colonies and their inhabitants were produced as marginal: photographs of women, family portraits, anthropological photographs, landscapes and records of atrocities. Most of my examples are from Ethiopia during the Italian invasion and occupation (1935–1941). At the end of the chapter I examine a sixth category of photographs – those taken by Ethiopians themselves during their resistance against Italian occupation – and I consider how far they may be seen as a counterweight to the vast production of photographs by the colonizers.

In Chapter 3, 'Souths', I examine mainly written texts, but also some photographs and documentary films, dealing with the popular culture and traditional practices of people, women in particular, living in poor rural areas of the mainland south of Italy in the period 1945–1960. These texts and images were produced at a time of conscious efforts by Italian governments and foreign advisors to tackle anew the *questione meridionale*, in reaction against the official tendency during the fascist period to evade or minimize the problems of the poorest parts of the South. They demonstrate the different kinds of interaction that took place at this time between formally educated Italians from the cities and people living in these rural communities. I focus in particular on the writings about popular culture and beliefs in parts of the rural south by Carlo Levi and by the ethnologist-historian Ernesto De Martino. Levi's *Cristo*

si è fermato a Eboli has long been recognized as a classic work on the south of Italy, but too many new readers today still approach it, as many of its first readers did in 1945, as a truthful reportage about a poor southern community in the mid 1930s. It needs to be seen instead as a contradictory text, which on the one hand reinforces the old idea of a 'great divide' between traditional and modern, primitive and civilized, North and South, and on the other investigates empathetically the beliefs of individual peasants. It can be illuminated from a fresh angle when its modes of writing are placed alongside and in dialogue with those of De Martino, who was both influenced by Levi's text and highly critical of aspects of it. Both men sought to make sense of the popular culture of the communities with which they came into contact, but they did so in very different ways and with different political agendas. They were also both aware that they were observing and writing about cultural practices that were threatened with extinction, as the state, the Church, the modern economy and mass communications extended their reach in these areas of Italy.

In Chapter 4 I look at photographs, films and writings from the movement in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s to bring about the closure of the institutions formerly known as *manicomi* (insane asylums) and by then officially renamed *ospedali psichiatrici* (mental hospitals). These institutions had proliferated in the course of the nineteenth century, in Italy as elsewhere, as sites of the exercise of a particular type of authority, where the power to define some people as having certain kinds of illness or aberrant behaviour was coupled with the power to confine and separate them from the rest of society: to put them, in other words, on the social and geographical margins. The medical and legal languages used to name and categorize mental illness were accompanied by distinctive spatial practices of knowledge, segregation and enclosure, to adopt the terms employed by Michel Foucault in his book on the history of madness, which he originally wrote in the late 1950s as his doctoral thesis. Foucault had claimed that it was the Enlightenment construction of madness as 'unreason' (*déraison*), the negative flipside of reason, that had caused it to be expelled from the centre of a society that increasingly saw itself as ordered by reason. Medical and legal discourse worked together to form what Foucault called a discursive formation that confined certain citizens, sometimes permanently.[3] In my analysis I examine the counter-discourses produced in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s by radical psychiatrists who, influenced by Foucault and others, criticized this logic of segregation and sought to get people out of non-penal psychiatric institutions and reintegrate them into society. I pay particular attention to the way photographers and makers of documentary films both challenged

[3] Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 45–46. The thesis, completed in 1959, first appeared as *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961). Subsequent editions had the shorter title *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*.

and, in some cases, unwittingly confirmed the historically established views of the *manicomi* and their inhabitants as marginal.

There were analogous processes in other countries to those that I describe in this book, even though they may have happened there at different moments or have taken different forms, and I demonstrate this by introducing a comparative dimension at various points. One might even argue that such processes were part of a normal pattern of development of, on the one hand, a capitalist economy and a modern nation-state and, on the other, movements of reform and opposition within them. While I suggest that Italy produced some distinctive national variations on these wider European and Western patterns, I am not attempting to argue that it represents a unique case with respect to nation formation and marginalization. On the contrary, it is precisely because similar processes are found elsewhere that many of the arguments and examples in this book may be found to apply beyond the Italian case.

As for my second aim, to show how marginality is produced as a set of spatial and power relations, and to illustrate how these work in particular photographs and written texts, it is important to establish from the outset that when one talks, in a social sense, about margins and marginality, despite the widespread contemporary use of these concepts to designate concrete groups and processes, one is always talking about products of discourse and not about reflections in language of a prior objective reality. In discussing the formation of the nation just now I referred not to regions or dialects *becoming* marginal but to them coming to be *seen* as marginal. Back in the 1970s, when 'marginality theory' was gaining currency in the urban sociology of developing countries, the anthropologist Janice Perlman wrote critically about the 'myth of marginality'. She argued, with reference to the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, where she did her fieldwork, that the concept was being used by sociologists and policymakers to suggest causal connections between different things – poor housing, unemployment, the underclass, deviance and crime – that were not necessarily related to one another. Just because certain people lived in a 'marginal' (peripheral) area of the city it did not follow that they were always socially 'marginalized' (excluded) or inevitably developed 'marginal' (substandard, deviant) behaviours. Her point was not only that the term 'marginality' was too indeterminate to have any real heuristic value but also that, by emphasizing people's position or condition it failed to recognize their capacity to act strategically and to interact in multiple ways with the affluent parts of the city.[4] Manuel Castells in the 1980s pointed out similarly, with reference to

[4] Janice E. Perlman, *The myth of marginality: urban poverty and politics in Rio de Janeiro* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), in particular pp. 93–131. For an overview of early work on marginality see Gino Germani, 'Aspetti teorici e radici storiche del concetto di marginalità con particolare riguardo all'America Latina', *Storia Contemporanea*, 3, 2 (1972), 197–237.

a study of peripheral housing areas of Caracas, that marginality in housing did not coincide with occupational marginality, namely irregular low-paid work and unemployment. He stressed, on the contrary, that there was both a great diversity of types of employment and a lower rate of unemployment in the *barrios* of Caracas than in the city as a whole.[5] Even a prominent supporter of marginality theory admitted in the late 1970s that the 'ambiguity of the concept and the vagueness in its application have made its analytical usefulness a real problem'.[6] More recently, Patrick Williams, in his anthropological study of beliefs of the Mānuš (or Manouche) communities in France's Massif Central, has said that his own approach is opposed to that which sees Romani peoples as inexorably 'shunted to the margins' since the latter defines them purely 'in terms of "deviance", "social handicap", etc.'; it makes them into an 'exogenous entity', 'exotic' in relation to the rest of society, and, once again, implicitly deprives them of any strategic agency.[7]

All these critical points about urban marginality theory in the 1970s would apply equally to the writing about peripheral areas of Rome in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that I examine in Chapter 1, where terms other than 'margin' were sometimes used but where the imagined topography and the meaning were always very similar: 'edge of the city' (*lembo di città*), 'places far from the centre' (*località eccentriche*), 'shacks like those in Bedouin towns' (*casette da città beduina*).[8] Similarly, much of the writing in the debates about the *questione meridionale* in the century from the 1870s to the 1970s portrayed the South, as I have noted, as a single macroregion defined by its lack of what the North possessed. It was only with the rise of a new historiography and new social-scientific research on different parts of the south that this macroregion finally came to be disaggregated and the 'myth of the Mezzogiorno' started to be dismantled.[9] We might be tempted to say, emulating what Raymond Williams wrote in the 1950s about the word 'mass', a term still much in vogue then both in social theory and communication studies, that, in social terms, there are no margins, just ways of seeing or observing places and people as marginal.[10]

[5] Manuel Castells, *The city and the grassroots: a cross-cultural theory of urban social movements* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 178–190.
[6] Aníbal Quijano, *Imperialismo y 'marginalidad' en América Latina* (Lima: Mosca Azul, 1977), p. 31. Translations of quotations in this book from texts not in English are mine.
[7] Patrick Williams, *Gypsy world: the silence of the living and the voices of the dead*, translated by Catherine Tihanyi (University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 85.
[8] For these examples see below, pp. 24–25, 29 and 32–33.
[9] The new research was well summarized and exemplified in Jonathan Morris and Robert Lumley (eds.), *The new history of the Italian South: the Mezzogiorno revisited* (University of Exeter Press, 1997).
[10] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 289: 'There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses.'

Yet what Perlman and others who denounced the 'myth' of marginality did not say, since the thrust of their argument lay elsewhere, was that its very instability as a term, its status as a relatively loose or floating signifier, was the source of its extraordinary efficacy as a concept for those who adopted it. For, just like the term 'mass', 'margin' derives a great deal of its rhetorical force from the elasticity and indeterminacy that its critics deplored. More than a generation before it was being applied to places and social groups in a development context the term had been used by North American sociologists to refer to individuals. Robert Park and Everett Stonequist had written in the 1920s and 1930s about 'marginal man' and the 'marginal personality', with particular reference to migrants and those living in 'bi-cultural' communities who found themselves adrift between two cultures.[11] In these cases, too, it was rarely clear what actually constituted a margin, exactly where it began and where it ended, who belonged in it and who did not. What was clear was that it was always located somewhere else, somewhere other and at a distance from the point from which it was observed by the sociologist or anthropologist, and the people who were identified with it were defined in the negative by what they lacked – in this case a secure anchorage in one 'culture' – rather than by what they possessed or what they did. For the acts of seeing and constructing a place as marginal always involve, in their most elementary form, the act of positioning it in relation to a place elsewhere that is seen as central. Other symbolic associations or connotations then follow and they become easily attached to the place and its inhabitants. This means that a binarism of subject and object, self and other, us and them, in here and out there, is built into the very concept of marginality as a distinctive form of spatial representation. And it is this binarism that has made it such a seductive and durable idea.

The word 'margin', in both English and Italian (*margine*), derives from the Latin noun *margo*, *margĭnis*, meaning a boundary, border or edge, including that of a river or lake (water margin), a piece of land or a written page. It became related to a cluster of words in the Romance and Germanic languages that all had to do with the creation of territorial divisions and boundaries, including 'mark', 'demarcation' and 'march', in the sense of a borderland. In Italy the region called Marche takes its name from a group of small states – the marches of Fermo, Ancona and Camerino – that once made up the southern boundary of the Holy Roman Empire. The Julian March is the English name (after the Julian Alps, in turn from Julius Caesar) for the region known in Italian as Venezia Giulia, where Italy borders onto Slovenia. Incorporated into Italy in

[11] Robert E. Park, 'Human migration and the marginal man', *American Journal of Sociology*, 33, 6 (1928), 881–893; Everett V. Stonequist, 'The problem of marginal man', *American Journal of Sociology*, 41, 1 (1935), 1–12; Everett V. Stonequist, *The marginal man: a study in personality and culture* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1937).

1918, the area was contested between Italy and Yugoslavia in 1945–1947 in one of the great military and diplomatic standoffs of the Cold War. As spatial representations, margins have for a long time been part of a way of talking and thinking about places and indeed about whole societies as having centres and edges, inner and outer regions, boundaries between here and there, and about people as being grouped into collectivities identified with particular places and seen as sharing recognizable physical or behavioural characteristics. No place is ever intrinsically marginal, peripheral or remote. It and its inhabitants are always marginal, peripheral or remote in relation to some centre somewhere else. When one draws attention to their marginality, what they lack in relation to that centre elsewhere, one risks, often unwittingly, deflecting attention from their internal functioning as communities, from the individuals who constitute them and from the way they see themselves and the world – in a word, from their subjectivity.

This does not mean, however, that margins are *only* symbolic categories, or that representations of them are *only* metaphorical and therefore can be either ignored or modified however one likes. Bronisław Geremek, reviewing the debates of the 1970s, called marginality an 'image-concept' that had originated as a metaphor but had then acquired 'a very concrete content of references', which made it usable in the social sciences.[12] To put it another way, the concept may be slippery but it is not arbitrary. Margins are indeed products of discourse, yet that discourse both presupposes and produces reality in a number of ways. First, the places designated as margins do often correspond to an established physical and social geography. Poor housing areas, including shantytowns and low-rent apartment blocks, were and are often situated in the outlying parts of cities, as were the asylums where people defined as mad or mentally ill were confined. The most economically depressed areas of the south, whether they lay 'out' on plains or 'up' on hills, were for many years disconnected from the main transport networks and sometimes also cut off from other infrastructure such as a clean water supply or electricity. Colonies were thought of as part of a global periphery both because they were physically distant from the metropolitan centres from which they were politically controlled and because they too lacked the wealth and amenities that were available in the centres. The naming of a place as a margin is in this way often accompanied by a real spatial practice of segregation or expulsion to a physical periphery. The place goes together with the name. It is the literal spatial realization of an idea of social exclusion.

Second, margins and peripheries are metaphorical and symbolic representations that are often backed up by social prestige, political power, armed force and the law. They carry implicit associations of vertical hierarchy, up/down,

[12] 'Marginalità', *Enciclopedia*, 16 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1977–1984), vol. 8 (1979), p. 750.

more important/less important, overlaid onto their overt horizontal topography of in/out. Marginal groups of people are not just 'outgroups'. They are also 'subaltern' groups, lower in class and status than those at the centre, in some cases also excluded from political representation or equal treatment before the law. The use in postcolonial studies of the term 'subaltern' to refer to such groups derives from the prison writings of Antonio Gramsci, who first extended the term from its military context to the social 'lower ranks' and explicitly associated subalternity with marginality. He gave one of his notebooks, written in 1934, the title 'On the margins of history (history of the subaltern social groups)'.[13] People in 'low' social positions may not always think of themselves as marginal or subaltern but if they do it is usually because they have borrowed or internalized the dominant definitions circulating in society. Such is the power of these definitions that it is almost impossible to reverse them, for those defined as being on the margins to think of themselves as being at the centre and of those at the centre as being on the margins. This book is concerned, among other things, to understand and explain this lack of reciprocity and these strong intertwinings of language, space and power.

Since the book is to a large extent about ways of seeing, photographs play an important part in it. Each chapter takes its lead from a photograph, which I have chosen because it encapsulates some of the problems involved in looking at these different places or people as marginal. Other photographs follow and these allow us to go deeper into the inquiry and open up other dimensions of it. The photographs and texts that I examine are in some cases themselves performative acts of segregation and exclusion and in others sympathetic attempts to 'move' people off the edges of society by making them visible at the centre. Sometimes the same depiction – like some of the photographs of patients in mental hospitals that I examine in Chapter 4 – seems to hover ambiguously or uncertainly between the two kinds, or it can be appropriated in different ways in different contexts.

Power relations are embedded within these processes of visual depiction and verbal description. Who owns and points the camera that photographs these people? Who looks at the photograph when it is printed and for what purpose? Who travels 'out' to the peripheries to write a report or make a documentary film and for what audience 'back home' is that report or film intended? In many cases the different representations share similar characteristics because they work in one direction only. The observer from the centre of society possesses powerful means and technologies to describe, define and contain the people on the periphery, as well as having access to networks of distribution

[13] The notebook is numbered 25 in the critical edition, Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerratana, 4 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), vol. 3, pp. 2277–2307. On the term 'subaltern' see Guido Liguori, 'Tre accezioni di "subalterno" in Gramsci', *Critica marxista*, 6 (2011), 33–41.

through which to disseminate those descriptions. The people on the periphery cannot easily take possession of these means and technologies, or find equally powerful ones, to describe the observer, and they do not have access to the same distribution networks.

The urban poor of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, often could not read or write and they did not own cameras, yet they were extensively written about and sometimes photographed, and some of the texts and photographs circulated far beyond the immediate areas in which those who produced them lived. The same applies to the inhabitants of poor areas of the rural south and many of those in Italy's colonies, who were also sometimes recorded on film. Literacy, including the ability to write as well as to read, spread within Italy during the twentieth century but few of those who learned to write were able to produce culturally influential texts, since this required not only literacy skills but also, to use Pierre Bourdieu's terms, possession of the necessary cultural 'competences' (such as the ability to write effective prose to an acceptable standard) and 'dispositions' (such as the confident belief that one may appropriately write for others whom one has never met), not to mention access to publishing outlets.[14] As for the production of photographs, these remained socially restricted for many years for similar reasons. Cheap cameras became more widely available in the course of the twentieth century but few people used them to take pictures of others apart from their own family, friends or places they had visited on a personal journey, and fewer still could get their photographs seen by large numbers of people, for example in illustrated magazines. Film and video cameras took even longer than still cameras to become widely accessible, in the form of relatively cheap consumer models, and here too an inequality in their use and in access to distribution outlets persisted.

In certain cases, however, some of the people 'on the margins' did gain access to the means of communication and distribution. But usually this access was not decided or controlled by them. It was determined and mediated by an 'intellectual', someone from a more culturally and socially powerful position, who encountered them, listened to their stories, and then reproduced them in some form, such as a written transcription or a filmed interview. In each chapter, I consider also texts or images that were produced to challenge the standard marginalizing representations or to enable those on the margins to 'speak for themselves'. Although these counter-representations were often of considerable importance in providing a critical perspective on the standard ways of producing marginality, I conclude that they were rarely sufficient in themselves to overturn the unequal power relations that define places and people as margins. Indeed, in some cases they did little more than confirm the existence of those

[14] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, translated by Richard Nice (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 2–3 and passim.