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CONTEXTS AND DEBATES

A discussion on *Il colore della Repubblica. 'Figli della guerra' e razzismo nell'Italia postfascista*, by Silvana Patriarca, Turin, Einaudi, 2021. With Valeria Deplano, Guri Schwarz and Silvana Patriarca

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Introduction

Over the last 30 years, Silvana Patriarca, a professor of Contemporary History at Fordham University, New York, has deeply and consistently investigated the construction of the Italian national narrative: its 'long term' genealogy, its characteristics, its tensions. Her first book, *Numbers and Nationhood* (Patriarca 1996), focused on the co-production of statistical knowledge and the national image of Italy during the Restoration and the Risorgimento, rereading the interplay of science, culture, and politics in the formation of bourgeois 'public opinion' in the liberal period. In *Italian Vices* (Patriarca 2010), she dissected the rhetoric and tropes of the national character, its ostensible fragility, and the different political uses of the recurring discourse on Italian vices and virtues, from the Risorgimento to the Republic.

In all these major contributions, ranging from political and cultural history to gender and film history, race has always been a crucial issue, albeit never fully developed. In Patriarca's latest monograph, published first in Italian by Einaudi, as *Il colore della Repubblica. 'Figli della guerra' e razzismo nell'Italia postfascista*, and a few months later by Cambridge University Press, with the title *Race in Post-Fascist Italy. 'War Children' and the Color of the Nation*, racism (and antiracism) finally take centre stage.

This engaging and stimulating book analyses how and in what forms racial thinking has persisted, and how race has been reproduced since the creation of the democratic Republic. It does so by reconstructing the experiences and the representations of a cohort of Italians who were born in the immediate postwar period, from encounters between 'non-white' Allied soldiers and Italian women. In that period African Americans referred to these children colloquially as 'brown babies'. In Italy, they were generally called *mulattini*, a term with a clear racial connotation.

The book follows the stories of these children, 'growing up' together with them. Drawing on institutional records, cultural representations, and oral testimonies, Patriarca clearly shows how interracial sex was often cast as a form of moral degradation

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and how the children born from interracial encounters were soon considered as a 'problem'. She then describes the difficulties the children had to face as they entered adolescence in the late 1950s: the social hostility, the problems of adoption, the stigmatisation of the mothers, the efforts to identify the fathers and to re-establish family ties across the Atlantic. Finally, Patriarca considers how ecclesiastical programmes of assistance as well as scientific studies on racial mixing in the 1960s contributed to defining the 'brown babies' as a racialised group, with specific social and biological features. Antiracist sensibilities since the 1960s (and their limitations) are also considered through the analysis of two movies of that decade that recognised or thematised the presence of the (former) mixed-race children in Italian society.

Reviewers have showered praise on the book, describing it as both timely and ground-breaking. But they also raise important questions. Valeria Deplano, author of several contributions on Italian colonial culture and postcolonial migrations, notes that the case of the 'brown babies' is part and parcel of a broader framework, concerning the role of the colour line in the definition of post-1945 European belonging. What is missing in Patriarca's book, in her opinion, is a fully-fledged explanation of the peculiarities of the Italian case. A specialist in memory politics in postwar Europe and a scholar of the reconfiguration of the Italian national narrative after 1945, Guri Schwarz asks what exactly the 'brown babies' made *visible* in postwar Italy: certainly, a form of racial otherness, but also, in his view, a broader conundrum of religious and gendered representations of the nation, which specifically characterised the post-fascist transition, while remaining relevant until the late 1960s. He argues for the intersectional interconnection of the moral, sexual, and racial issues. Furthermore, Schwarz emphasises the need to carefully consider the multifaceted dimension of the national imagination as well as the complex definition of the self (and of the other-s) in the process of nation-building. He argues that the self-perception as a 'Catholic nation' is a key feature, shaping all discourse vis-à-vis the nation, with its sexualised and racialised undertones.

In her substantive response, Patriarca addresses the points touched upon by the reviewers. She agrees with Deplano's suggestions for further exploration of the European 'white problem' in the postwar period, but she underscores the specificity of the 'surplus' of antiblack racism which characterised Fascist Italy as well as the long persistence of racial prejudices and stereotypes after the fall of the regime. Reacting to Schwarz's remarks, Patriarca expands upon the interconnection between race and gender, while considering it appropriate to address blackness, in the case of the 'brown babies', as a separate analytical factor. Patriarca also acknowledges the fundamental role of Catholicism in the construction of the Italian nation, without regarding it in exclusionary terms: Italian identity, she argues, has been constructed as white *and* Catholic. She concludes by stressing her theoretical and political commitment to the inclusion of racialised subjects in the historical reconstruction of Italian antiblack racism.

A final, more personal note at the end of this introduction. All participants in this discussion are members of the Centre for the History of Racism and Antiracism in Modern Italy (CENTRA, www.centrastudies.org), an international network of historians that I had the pleasure of co-founding in 2021, at the University of Genoa. The Centre brings together historians with various methodological approaches and thematic perspectives. Its aim is not only to shed light on the role of racisms – including antisemitism, colonial racism, antiziganism and Islamophobia – in Italian history (19th – 21st centuries) but also to analyse the history of antiracism in Italy, by reconstructing its different ideological and political configurations, its methods and strategies, as well as the processes of its institutionalisation.

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The richness of the discussion we present here illustrates not only the importance of Patriarca's book but also the urgency to further explore a still neglected research field: the interconnected history of racism *and* antiracism in postwar Italy.

Valeria Deplano, University of Cagliari

As the title and subtitle suggest, the book *Il colore della Repubblica. 'Figli della guerra' e razzismo nell'Italia postfascista* is about the children born to Black American servicemen and white Italian women during the Second World War. The media has largely ignored this story; likewise, it has received little historiographical attention to date. The kind of life the mothers of these kids had, how they were viewed by the public, the assistance they got from the state, and the children's relationships with their dads are among the aspects discussed in Silvana Patriarca's work. The story of these children also serves as a prism through which Patriarca addresses a number of questions, such as what it meant to be Italian after the establishment of the Republic, who was regarded as a citizen of the country and who was not, and what part racism played in postwar Italy. Therefore, the book is ultimately a reflection on how Italianness was understood in postwar, antifascist, democratic Italy in the first 20 years following the end of the Second World War.

During the Fascist era, the question of the meaning of Italianness was of utmost importance, as Mussolini's government sought to establish a sense of national identity based on distinct and immutable characteristics. Whiteness gained increased importance within this project, eventually becoming a pillar of the biological conception of Italianness that emerged around the mid-1930s. After the annexation of Ethiopia, a subsequent legislation insisted on blood, specifying, for instance, who could be classified as belonging to a 'Jewish race' separated from the 'Aryan race', and denying Afro-Italians the opportunity to obtain citizenship if they were born to an African mother. Yet, propaganda mostly focused on physical features: the blackness of the skin, which was previously seen merely as a sign of 'otherness', became synonymous with the degeneration and contamination of the 'Italic race'.

With the establishment of the Republic, the debate over what it meant and what was necessary to be considered Italian, despite its significance in the management of some postwar mobility (see Ballinger, 2020), lost its prominence in the public discourse. All conceivable grounds for discrimination, including skin colour, were officially rejected. Thus, the antisemitic laws were abolished in 1944 and the antiblack laws in 1947. The idea that the Republic was born 'free from racism' has, however, been questioned by recent studies. These have shown how the ethnically/racially based concept of Italianness that had emerged during the colonial era and the *ventennio* persisted in the republican environment and exerted its influence at various levels. Examples include pairing blackness with negative values (e.g. Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013), failing to develop new procedures for granting formal citizenship to former colonial subjects, and maintaining educational discourses that referred to 'national identity'. Patriarca's work is an important contribution to this new thread of research.

In addition to being fascinating and filling a vacuum in the literature on modern Italy, the case study of the children born to African American troopers and Italian women provides fresh and insightful perspectives on important issues. It demonstrates, for example, how the racist mentality may exist without any true relationship between the subjects concerned and colonialism, and how it solely depends on skin colour. Biracial children were viewed as a 'problem' in the same manner as 'mixed-race' children born in East Africa. Thus, they underwent a racialisation process akin to that experienced by colonial subjects. Compared to most of the studies that have been published so far on this topic, this is a significant discovery. Patriarca shows how children appeared first and foremost as

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Blacks to the gaze of the government, society, science, and charity organisations (Catholic above all but not exclusively). They were viewed through the categories that, according to the dominant culture, were associated with blackness, such as being naturally problematic or not inclined to speculation and, therefore, being directed exclusively towards manual activities. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the case of the physician Luigi Gedda, we see an approach that reproduced the one previously adopted with regard to the African populations. Even though the decades under consideration witnessed a significant Americanisation of Italian culture, it does not appear that the children benefited from being the offspring of US servicemen.

The book disproves a narrative that has long emphasised the 'colour blindness' of the Republic by showing how important colonial experience was in forging a clear sense of Italian identity and how these ideas survived both the end of the war and the end of colonialism, turning the coincidence of whiteness and Italianness into an axiom from which the Republic derived most of its actions. In this respect, the author's meticulous reconstruction of the aforementioned Gedda episode emphasises the importance of thinking about continuities not only by examining prevalent mentalities but also by reconstructing the life paths of individuals whose work developed without noticeable breaks between Fascism and democracy. At the same time, the case of Gedda shows how antiblack racism manifests itself in discriminatory actions in addition to existing on a cultural and discursive level, which the author has thoroughly explored. Racialisation, which is defined as the inferiorisation, subordination, and marginalisation of Black people, was more than just a passing 'attitude' inherited from the past that was barely noticeable during the Republican era; rather, it strongly manifested and had a significant impact on the lives of the first Black people in postwar Italy. Discriminatory actions first affected women who had relations with African American soldiers, then the children themselves, whose presence was considered even more problematic than that of the white-skinned 'children of war', to the point of planning their segregation or even removal from the national territory. Thus, the emergence of individual stories such as those reconstructed by Patriarca allows for a deeper understanding and knowledge of the history of postwar Italy while, at the same time, calling into question the long-dominant interpretation of Italy as a 'homogeneous nation' and white, at least until the rise of immigration in the last decades of the twentieth century.

But the 'children of war', who were racialised and treated as if they were not part of the national body, were nonetheless Italians. The theme of antiblack prejudice in postfascist Italy has so far been studied with reference to foreign people, or people of colonial origin: people who were in Italy and claimed their formal right to remain there but who were denied access to citizenship by the Italian state. However, the question of access to formal citizenship does not exhaust the question of what was required to be recognised as Italian in the postwar period. In the case of the 'biracial children', their skin appeared to be incompatible with their passports. Thus, Patriarca's work provides a point of reflection on the relationship between formal and informal citizenship. The historical research on the Italian case had only lightly touched on this theme, which had already been studied in relation to other European cases, such as the Windrush generation of Great Britain, where immigrants of colonial origin had citizenship but were discriminated against. Therefore, Patriarca includes the Italian case within a broader framework – which the volume describes – concerning the role of the colour line in the definition of post-1945 European belonging.

However, incorporating the Italian case into a debate that includes both postwar Germany and European liberal democracies calls for further reflection. What is perhaps missing in the interpretation offered by the book is an explanation of what the peculiarities of Italy are within the European and international frameworks – how much the

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postwar events can therefore be interpreted as one of the legacies of Fascism, or how much they instead participate in a wider European culture.

Based on extensive documentation and meticulous research, it is evident that this book intends to influence Italian society and culture. The author herself makes this clear in the conclusion: 'Until white Italians abandon the ethno-racial understanding of national identity, those who do not conform to the somatic norm will continue to suffer some forms of marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion' (p. 186, English edition). Historical study may be useful in fostering constructive change by showing, as Silvana Patriarca's book does, that the conflagration of Italianness and whiteness is not 'natural' or 'traditional', but rather the result of cultural construction that emerged during the Kingdom of Italy and continues to influence the white Italians' sense of self, negatively affecting the lives of Black Italians.

Guri Schwarz, University of Genoa

'And now Italians too, as pious Noah once upon a time, find themselves facing the aftermath of God's punishment.' With these words the writer Dino Terra (the pseudonym chosen by Armando Simonetti) introduced a fascinating anthology, entitled *Dopo il diluvio. Sommario dell'Italia contemporanea* (*After the Flood. A Summary of Contemporary Italy*), published in 1947, in which a varied array of intellectuals – from Ungaretti to Carlo Levi, including, among others, Bacchelli, Bontempelli, Cecchi, Moravia, Noventa, Palazzeschi, Piovene, Soldati, Zavattini – took on the challenge to define the contours of the war-torn community, each of them writing a short essay addressing one key issue. The volume is made up of 30 entries, covering a variety of topics, from the State to love, from the Church to industry, from peasants to the cinema, from language to the family.[1] The metaphor of the deluge is the starting point of this and many other texts that, in the early postwar years, attempted to frame recent events. At the core of this depiction was the idea that the country had been collectively punished for its sins; according to some it had then been able to cleanse and purify itself through the test of fire, through the blood sacrificed in the years of the civil war. In any case the seismic shift that occurred was not perceived, conceived, or represented as concerning merely the political and public sphere – what had been drowned in the flood was not simply the monarchy, or the army, or the State. A system of beliefs and social practices which had been taken for granted was in disarray; the private, personal, domestic, moral sphere had been dragged into the abyss and had to be regenerated in parallel with the economic and institutional system.

Taking this perspective into account appears useful to properly frame the issues raised by Silvana Patriarca's latest monograph, *Il colore della Repubblica. 'Figli della guerra' e razzismo nell'Italia postfascista*. Two contributions of the many published in that volume appear particularly relevant to introduce this discussion. These are the entries authored by Orio Vergani, dedicated to *Love,* and by Arrigo Benedetti, dedicated to *The Foreigners.* Issues of sexuality, affection, and moral corruption – as well as of race – are prominent in both contributions.

Vergani claims that something radically new had begun to emerge in the twentieth century, and that the shift had become particularly evident as love and violence led to the transformation of gender roles, the emergence of a different female figure: strong, active, who participates in the political sphere, 'who in the Spanish war will for the first time embrace weapons'. At the same time the woman remains, in his eyes, to a large degree a victim: 'forced to flee or subjected to the violent and corrupt embrace of the victors, condemned to prostitution … violated by Siberians and Moroccans'. All this led 'virginity to lose meaning'. Not only that, women had to face something that, in his eyes, is equally terrible, if not even more atrocious. They had to see the virile figure

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crumble, see their husbands covered in shame, admitting 'fear'. In his eyes the whole edifice of gender relations had been shattered. Arrigo Benedetti's piece touches on a different subject, yet he too ends up talking about women and sexuality. He highlights how, as a result of the war, foreigners were not something distant and 'abstract' anymore. They 'penetrate' – as he says – into the 'most intimate folds of our country'. The generic sexual allusion becomes more open and transparent as the article progresses, in a crescendo of indignation and shame, for a nation that has shamed itself. The article quickly moves on, talking about dancing parties, about the cheerfulness of the Allies, and their conquest of Italian women. In such parties Italian men are virtually invisible – they are waiters. Even when they are not serving, they are powerless, voiceless, they have lost both honour and agency. They are cuckolds: 'The intruder who can only watch'. He is preoccupied by the consequences of such encounters: 'We would like to know how much sexual diseases have grown in Italy, how many abortions have been procured, how many girls seduced'. He also does not fail to connect the moral/sexual dimension with a racial one: 'There is, finally, the introduction of non-European blood in some areas. Negroes have had children, and the mothers have not always had the courage to rid themselves of their creatures'. Finally, Benedetti wonders if that moral corruption was the natural result of defeat, or if the opposite was the true: if defeat came as punishment to a corrupt nation.

We cannot underestimate the weight of the topic of moral/sexual depravity as key to the postwar imagination. We find evident traces of this in a variety of cultural products, and from very different voices. The theme is certainly central to Malaparte's *La Pelle*. It is also a key feature in neorealist cinema, which often posits the female role as an allegory of the nation, with a strong connection between sex and punishment (death) (Sorlin 1984, p. 180). In compiling a semi-serious list of necessary tropes of neorealist cinema, Steno argued that a key feature of said films was the blonde woman, alcoholic or drug addict, who gives herself to the Germans and collaborates with the enemy (Steno 1948). The representations of the sexual encounters between Italian women and Allied troops are in fact to be seen as part of a wider phenomenon, and to be read through the moral and apocalyptic lens applied at the time.

This context seems essential to discuss Patriarca's innovative work, which is an attempt to study the history of racism in postwar Italy through a study of the fate of the 'brown babies' born of the unions with 'black' American soldiers. Her analysis is extremely well researched, with the apt use of a variety of sources which range from scientific and psychological debates to memoirs and the press, but also including films and music; thus, ranging from elevated intellectual discussions to popular culture. In eight dense chapters she touches upon a variety of issues: the sexual encounters in the final phase of the war and the early postwar years, and the reactions they produced; the representation of those 'brown babies'; the efforts to care for and assist those children, for the most part by Catholic institutions; the difficulties encountered by the children integrating into society; the way in which the issue was framed by the medical and scientific establishment. But she does not limit herself to the Italian side of the affair: in fact, the book dedicates a chapter to the reactions of segments of the AfroAmerican community on the other side of the Atlantic. Furthermore, she also attempts to study the forms of self-representation of those individuals. Finally, this is not just a book about racism, but it deals with antiracism as well: the seventh chapter addresses the development of an antiracist sensibility since the 1970s.

This impressive research certainly deserves high praise for the wealth and variety of sources and perspectives considered, and – most of all – for the ability to document the pervasive presence of racial ideologies within postwar Italian political and scientific circles. In this regard the pages on Luigi Gedda's racism, and those on the structural

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ambiguities of Don Gnocchi's efforts to care for those children, appear to be among the most original contributions in this book.

Studying racism in the postwar years is particularly complex. Existing historiographic research is still quite limited. One of the reasons for this is connected to the difficulty inherent in approaching the subject of racism in a society that had, officially, renounced and denounced racism: one has to pinpoint a peculiar gateway through which to access the topic, which otherwise might be difficult to identify, circumscribe, and analyse. The case of the 'brown babies' certainly offers an interesting, albeit inevitably partial, access point. At the same time, this element introduces other problems, which raise other issues regarding gender, the evolution of national allegories, perceptions of morality and sin. In fact, as I tried to point out in the opening lines, one cannot address the complex cultural ecosystem with which Italians faced the transition to the postwar era without calling into the arena the issues of sin and a complex sexual imagery connected to the founding tropes of nationalism.

As Patriarca clarifies from the start, the topic she analyses is of course part of a European phenomenon, which has been studied in the British and German cases, and at the same time fits into a wider framework that involves all sexual unions, for the most part illicit (consummated outside marriage) with foreigners, with Allied or Axis troops. Of course, the children who carried on their bodies an undeniable trace of otherness, which denounced the nature of the union from which they were born, were set apart from those whose skin pigmentation was not immediately telling. While it is true, as clearly documented by Patriarca through a wealth of sources, that such racial diversity caused conflicts and rejection, the issue can hardly be separated from a much broader perspective regarding the interconnection between sex/honour/nation. The 'brown babies' made the invisible visible. But what exactly did they make evident and undeniable? Certainly, a form of racial otherness. But they were also incarnations of sin, of the individual moral frailty of their mothers as well as of the corruption of the nation.

One of the challenging methodological questions that lie at the heart of this work concerns the relationship between those two planes. Do we believe that the racial stigma, which was certainly present, can be somehow separated from a moral (in large part conceived through a religious, Catholic, lens) uneasiness for what was perceived as a shocking sign of decadence, and with the complex framework of cultural codes which lie at the core of national imagination, where the female figure is the bearer of male honour and allegory of the nation (Banti 2005)? The author shows she is perfectly aware of this connection and yet, as I understood the text, tends to emphasise the specificity and separateness of that peculiar situation in order to put the issue of racism under the spotlight. While I understand the need to operate distinctions for analytical purposes, I wonder if, and to what extent, we can operate on that intersection of sex/race/nation, separating a series of cultural systems which seem to be inextricably intertwined. To what degree can we consider the colour line – which here coincides with the issue of race – as prevailing over other, religious and national, sets of representations? Sex and blood (both real and metaphorical, both that of the other and that which was shed during the civil war as in a sacrificial offering to regenerate the collective), sin and redemption, were the ingredients of a dense, at times confused, but powerful jumble which seems to dominate the postfascist transition, and appears, in my view, to gradually fade away – although never completely – starting from the 1960s, as a result of the complex social, cultural, political (and generational) shifts brought about by the so called economic miracle.

Considering that the intersection and interconnection between gender and race (and between both these concepts and the representation of the nation) is relevant to consider the issue of racism, but also to understand the development of an antiracist gaze. Patriarca discusses the shift to an antiracist sentiment, not a fully conscious ideology,

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in the late 1960s. She convincingly illustrates the limits and weaknesses of this attitude. At the origins of that outlook we can certainly recognise the new centrality acquired by anti-imperialist rhetorics and ideologies, and how they intervened in transforming antifascism (Brazzoduro 2021). Patriarca confronts the issue from an interesting, although extremely specific angle, that of the fortunes (and misfortunes) of two films, *Il Nero* directed by Giovanni Vento (1967), and *Faustina*, directed by Luigi Magni (1968). Issues of gender and sexuality are present in both movies, although in different forms. These are highlighted by the author, who insists, not without reason, on how the representation of a union between a white woman and a black man still represented a disturbing, maybe even taboo, element for the culture of the time. At the same time one wonders, what were the specific factors, beyond the political positioning that is most evident, that led some young men and women from the left to watch, discuss and appreciate *Il Nero*? Where does their antiracist, or non-racist, sensibility originate? How much is it connected to a shift that concerns other spheres? To put it more bluntly, if we take the interconnection between race and gender seriously, can't we identify in the emergence of new gender roles, different perceptions of sexuality, a feminist consciousness, all factors which characterise the 1970s, the crucial shifts that not only challenge conventional perceptions of supposedly immoral unions, but which, as has been pointed out, start to mine the foundations of the traditional national code which posits the female as the allegory of the nation? (Ellena 2014).

This is certainly a groundbreaking and essential book for all interested in studying the history of racism and antiracism in postwar Italy. But it is also much more than that. It raises a series of important issues that will need to be addressed and discussed further. In fact, it opens a pathway, or potentially several pathways, to rethink the history of contemporary Italy. First of all, it helps us better frame the consequences, implications and long-term echoes of racial policies and discourses implemented during the Fascist era. It obviously leads us to reread the history of the Republic. Moreover, it raises fundamental issues that concern the forms of national self-representation and their evolution. The story of the 'brown babies' is here employed as an access point to the history of the racial problem in the postwar era. It is, at the same time, an access point for a history of sexual imagination, the representations of the nation, conceptions of sin. It seems to me that, among the many merits of this research, we can also enumerate the fact that it opens new venues for further research on the weight of gendered and religious categories in shaping the discourse on otherness in Italian history.

I wish to conclude by touching upon another central and sensitive problem raised by Patriarca in the very first pages of her book. The Introduction raises a series of complex and delicate questions concerning the hierarchy and interconnections between diverse forms of racism and the construction of national identity. After having reminded her readers that 'Italians continued to make distinctions in their midst according to racial and quasi-racial criteria', alluding to anti-Southern sentiment and practices, Patriarca states: 'Yet, an overall Italian identity, incorporating also the South, did not cease being constructed in contrast with an Other that, if no longer colonial, was situated outside of Europe and variously exoticised and consumed in the mass culture of the post-fascist period' (p. 12, English edition). This seems an important and, potentially, controversial point. The separation between internal 'distinctions' and the external one would merit a lengthy discussion. Of course, various representations of otherness coexisted, and the author is perfectly aware of this. In the Introduction Patriarca mentions antisemitism, anti-Southern racism, hostility towards Roma and Sinti (which were never identified as a distinct racial group by Fascist legislation). One might add antislavism, which – as Collotti argued – has been among the most potent racist narratives within Italian (and Fascist) national discourse (Collotti 1999; Catalan and Mezzoli 2018; Chiarandini 2022),

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and antiprotestantism, which gave way to a particularly virulent campaign in the 1950s in connection with conversions that took place as one of the after-effects of the American occupation (Zanini 2019). It seems extremely difficult to assess which one could be represented as dominant, if any, and which gives shape to an 'overall Italian identity'. I would be inclined to see this last concept, national identity, as fundamentally revolving – at least for the twentieth century – around the series of cultural formations giving shape to the image of the 'Catholic nation' (Gentile 1997; Moro 2020). In relation to this powerful cultural construction, and idealisation of the self, we can possibly interpret and reconnect various forms of representation of otherness, as well as the intersections between race and gender.

Silvana Patriarca, Fordham University

I am grateful to Valeria Deplano and Guri Schwarz for their thoughtful comments on my book. Deplano raises an issue that certainly needed some more discussion in the book, namely the specificity of the Italian case in the context of what was a Europe-wide phenomenon: the Europeans' 'white problem' in the aftermath of a war fought against the Fascist regimes and their murderous racism. Deplano asks to what extent we should interpret the 'colour problem' of postwar Italy as a legacy of Fascism and to what extent it was an example of a 'wider European culture'. This is an important question, which requires, on the one hand, some considerations about the specificity and legacy of Italian colonialism in its trajectory from the liberal period to Fascism, and, on the other hand, about the afterlife of Fascism.

Over the centuries since the conquest of America, a large number of Europeans participated in the slave trade and in colonialism and developed a white racial identity by contrasting themselves to the people they enslaved and colonised. Discourses about races and racial hierarchies developed in that context as well as in the context of the rise of nationalist ideologies. Already during the Risorgimento patriotic writers, ethnographers, and linguists elaborated the idea of Italianness not only in cultural and historical terms, but also in ethnic and racial terms, in their effort to give the Italian people some unique and distinctive characteristics. Italy joined the race to the colonies only in the second half of the nineteenth century (although the inhabitants of the Peninsula were not foreign to the slave trade and slavery), but after the setback of 1896, it pursued the colonial project with a vengeance, first with the occupation of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1911, followed by the bloody process of reconquest and 'pacification' of Libya in the 1920s and the attack and occupation of Ethiopia in the second half of the 1930s. After the proclamation of the Empire in 1936, Mussolini's dictatorship criminalised interracial unions in the colonies in 1937, effectively established an apartheid regime in its colonial possessions, and imposed the status of natives to mixed-race children in 1940, while at the same time introducing a set of antisemitic laws which stripped Jewish Italians of all their rights, a prelude to the assault on their lives which began soon after the signing of the armistice with the Allies and was led by the Germans and their willing Italian collaborators (Sarfatti 2006).

The Fascist turn to state racism and against interracial 'promiscuity' may not seem unique. After all, at the turn of the twentieth century anxieties about interracial sexual relations in the colonies of various imperial states had led colonial authorities to introduce measures to discourage officials from concubinage with local women and to prohibit relations between Black men and white women (MacMaster 2001). But the Fascist legislation went further, and it occurred when some of the previous bans were being abrogated (Ray 2015) and various imperial states had to contend with a new international climate in which colonial regimes faced legitimacy challenges and had to justify their existence in new ways (Pergher 2018). In contrast, in a blatant manifestation of an antihistorical

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countertrend, Mussolini's notorious 'Manifesto on race' of 1938 declared that Italians should 'proclaim themselves to be openly racist': thus, the Fascist state took over the task of indoctrinating the population about the uniqueness and superiority of the Italians, now classified as Aryan, and the inferiority of all 'non-Aryan'. As Gianluca Gabrielli has well documented, in the 1930s the few Africans who resided in Italy were counted by the regime and most of them were expelled, while some of the Italians who had sexual relations with them were punished by being sent to *confino* (Gabrielli 1999).

A large amount of research has illustrated the widespread presence of antiblack racism in democratic states such as France and Britain in the interwar period. But in that period generally neither the French not the British state policed the much larger Black and Arab populations living in the metropole to the extent that the Fascists did. In Paris, where the North African population amounted to about 60,000 people before the Second World War, interracial unions and marriages were more than several thousand (MacMaster 1997). In Britain people from Caribbean, African, and Asian colonies were able to organise autonomously and voice their criticisms of colonialism and demands for reform (Fryer 2018). To be sure, Black intellectuals and activists who lived in the British empire and discussed the nature of fascism did not see much difference with colonialism – a fascism in disguise – but those who saw some differences referred to the 'institutionalisation of racism in the law, which varied under different forms of colonial rule' and the fact that the British empire offered at least some hope of a future '*possibility* of freedom' (James 2022). In other words, even in colonial states there was a space, however limited, for some debate and political advancement that Fascism precluded completely. So, as much as Italy participated in the wider colonial culture of Europe, Fascism impeded the developments that had occurred in other countries in the sphere of race relations, and wrote into law an idea of Italianness which denied its centuries-old multiethnic history.

We thus cannot ignore the 'surplus' of antiblack racism that Fascism introduced and how that constituted an Italian specificity in the interwar period (I am not considering Nazi Germany here since it did not have colonies in that period). And then there was the afterlife of Fascism. Due to the substantial failure of the purge against the Fascists, postwar Italy saw the continuing presence in the world of academia, journalism, and more generally publishing, of many scholars and intellectuals who had supported the racial policies of the regime. As Claudio Pogliano and Francesco Cassata have shown in their studies on eugenics and ideas of race in the twentieth century (Pogliano 2005; Cassata 2011) there was no real questioning of the idea of race in the scientific community in postwar Italy, and many individuals who had supported the racist policies of the regime continued to enjoy a respected position in academia. While the persecution of the Jews was not considered a specific crime (Levis Sullam 2018), state and local administrations, the teaching profession, the judiciary and so on were still full of functionaries, teachers, and judges who had absorbed years of ultranationalist and racist propaganda and had participated in the enforcement of the racial laws. The postwar career of Gaetano Azzariti, the president of the *Tribunale della razza* from 1938 to 1943, who became the president of the Constitutional Court in the 1950s, is possibly the most troubling testimony of the continuity in the state bureaucracy (Boni 2022). Thus, even though a 'white problem' existed in all European countries – not to mention those whose origins go back to European settler colonialism, from the United States to Australia – Fascism and its afterlife were bound to make some (negative) difference in shaping postwar culture and mentalities in Italy. Along with the self-absolving narrative of the 'good Italian' promoted in different quarters, including the antifascist ones, the afterlife of Fascism made it more difficult for the country to confront its racisms as well as its Fascist past.

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In his stimulating remarks, Guri Schwarz points out the complexity of studying postwar racism through the lens of the story of the 'brown babies', a story in which 'race' was strictly intermingled with the gender dimension and with Catholic sexual morality. In the immediate postwar many saw the 'brown babies' as a sign not just of a racial 'contamination', but also of moral corruption: they were 'coloured sins' to use the expression of a contemporary that conveys very well the connection with Catholic morality. I believe that my account does show my awareness of this complexity. The experience of the children – and of their unwed mothers – was the result of several intersecting factors and diverse prejudices and this reality comes out quite clearly from the stories I have collected. But Schwarz also questions the possibility or, more precisely, the legitimacy of separating analytically these various categories in order to highlight the racial aspects in the brown babies' story. I think mine is a legitimate analytical move since several of the very social actors involved in this story pointed out the important role that inferiorising ideas about blackness *in themselves* had on the biracial children, aside from other factors.

On the issue of the emergence of antiracist sensibilities in the 1960s, it is possible that paying more attention to changing gender dynamics might have helped to understand the origins of those sensibilities. It is certainly true that women in the films of the 1960s that I examine in the book are endowed with an agency which signals at least a new attention towards them on the part of the male directors. On the other hand, the director of *Faustina*, Luigi Magni, focuses the film so much on the conflict between the female protagonist and her violence-prone husband that 'race' disappears altogether. Of course, one cannot generalise on the basis of two films, but I have my doubts about the impact of these new attitudes towards gender relations on the rise of an antiracist sensibility in the 1960s. They may in fact have worked to hide the existence of a 'white problem'. Rather, both films clearly indicate the influence that the American antiracist movements (from the civil rights movement to Black Power) and the youth culture of the 1960s had on the emergence of antiracism among the Italians. I explore this influence in an essay that I recently published in a special issue that *Italia contemporanea* has dedicated to the history of antiracism (Patriarca 2021). This is a very novel and important area of investigation in Italian historiography and one that is necessary to pursue further for understanding some of the characteristics and limitations of antiracism in Italy today.

Schwarz also expresses doubts about the centrality that I have given to the 'color line' in my account vis-à-vis other elements that in his view more powerfully defined the national identity of postfascist Italy, one of them being Catholicism, which had received a great impulse under the Fascist dictatorship, and which continued to be central in the post-1945 period, dominated for decades by a party that had a reference to Christianity in its name. The story of the *mulattini* shows quite well the influence of the Catholic Church in Italy in the 1950s and the extent to which Catholic clergymen had the power to shape the fate of these children. There was very little sensitivity in postwar Italy for people who were not Catholic, and children of Jewish or Protestant background – to give just an example from the field of education – suffered some forms of exclusion and marginalisation in a school system in which the teaching of 'religion' always meant by default a weekly encounter with a Catholic priest. But I do not think that highlighting the somatic norm defining Italianness means discounting other elements that Italian nationalists (and not only them) used (and still use) to define Italian identity. Indeed, I do not dispute that at least since Fascism, and in many ways also earlier, Italian identity has been constructed as white *and* Catholic.

The issue of Catholicism is linked to the other point made by Schwarz concerning the groups to which Italians contrasted themselves in order to define their identity. To be sure, postwar Italians contrasted themselves to many different 'others' and in the construction of a sense of national identity various groups were 'otherised', including,

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arguably, some Europeans (besides the Slavs, we could even include the Germans, whose character after 1945 was commonly stereotyped as the 'opposite of the Italians'). The 'internal others' par excellence in the history of post-unification Italy, namely the southerners, suffered a great deal of stigmatisation as well as discrimination after 1945, when they moved to the northern regions in particular, and when the Lombard League began to rail against southerners and the *meridionalizzazione* of the state in the 1980s. As Carl Levy has observed, that was a rhetoric that could 'easily slide' into xenophobic reactions of various kind (Levy 2015). But ethnic stereotypes differ and do not affect all in the same ways, not to mention that they are not necessarily accompanied by actual discrimination. We must also consider that certain people have more than others the possibility of 'passing' as Italians, and thus are less affected by a perceived 'difference'. If Italianness is implicitly associated to a certain look and skin colour, and white is the default colour, darker skin becomes in itself a sign of non-belonging. Suffice it here to recall how Italians of non-European descent are constantly asked about their origins, ancestry, and identity in today's Italy, even if they speak perfect Italian and are integrated into the majority culture (Kuruvilla, Mubiayi, Scego and Wadia 2005; Kouma 2010; Uyangoda 2021).

In sum, Schwarz offers many stimulating points for discussion with regard to the writing of a fully-fledged history of racisms and national identity in post-1945 Italy. I need to stress, however, that my goal was primarily that of placing the experiences of the racialised children at the centre of the book. I intended to write a history centered around them, give them a face, recover, if possible, a bit of their voices and the full humanity that was denied to them in many circumstances. Academic studies of racism focused on legislation, ideas, and representations are indispensable, but they can turn out to be rather abstract, failing to convey the actual impact of racism on the people who are racialised, and the indignities that they experience. That can translate into a failure to fully convey the legacy that racist ideologies and practices of the past can have in the present. I would like the readers to see my book as a contribution to the history of the present, addressing what I believe is one of the most urgent issues of today's Italian society. Other Italian and non-Italian scholars have been addressing Italian antiblack racism by placing the stories of non-white Italians at the centre of their work. There is one in particular to whom I would like to pay tribute to here, namely the late Mauro Valeri, the author of several studies on Afrophobia and Black Italians that focused on the stories of individuals, from the Roman mixed-race boxer, Leone Jacovacci, to the Eritrean-born officer Domenico Mondelli, to the soccer player Mario Balotelli (Valeri 2008, 2014, 2015). I could not have written my book without the example and the active engagement of scholars like Valeri who never tired of looking for hidden and untold stories and unused archives. Unfortunately, his untimely death in the autumn of 2019 interrupted the work he had undertaken to complete a history of Black Italy, which still needs to be written.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Note

1. The volume appeared originally as D. Terra, *Dopo il diluvio. Sommario dell'Italia contemporanea*, Milan: Garzanti, 1947. I have made reference to the new edition, edited by Salvatore Silvano Nigro, published by Sellerio in 2014. All translations of the texts taken from this anthology are mine.

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Italian summary

La discussione è dedicata all'ultimo libro di Silvana Patriarca, *Il colore della Repubblica. 'Figli della guerra' e razzismo nell'Italia postfascista* (Torino: Einaudi, 2021). Al centro del volume vi sono le vicende dei cosiddetti 'figli della guerra' (o 'mulattini'), i bambini nati da relazioni fra soldati non bianchi e donne italiane alla fine della Seconda guerra mondiale. Il dialogo fra l'autrice e gli interlocutori, gli storici Valeria Deplano e Guri Schwarz, affronta alcuni nuclei tematici cruciali del volume: la specificità del caso italiano nel più ampio contesto del dopoguerra europea; l'intersezione tra razza, sessualità e genere nella costruzione dell'immaginario nazionale; il ruolo del Cattolicesimo; la connessione tra razzismo e antirazzismo nell'Italia del dopoguerra.

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