

This Is Not a Review

The 2015/16 New Year's Eve Concerts in Italy and the Mortification of the South, of its
Inhabitants and of its Music

Esto no es una reseña

Los conciertos de Año Nuevo 2015/2016 en Italia y la condena del sur, sus habitantes y su música

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In this article I examine some of the debates around the recent New Year's Eve concerts in Bari, Catania, Palermo, Rome and Matera. However, this is not a review of the concerts, as I am neither interested in what happened during the performances nor in the disparate artistic merits of the works involved. I rather want to display how controversies, polemics and criticisms were largely related to the connections between the featuring artists Gigi D'Alessio, Tony Colombo, Eugenio Bennato and Fiorella Mannoia, and the politics of Southern Italian identity. By drawing upon various debates around these musicians, I want to denounce one of the most typical traits of the self-proclaimed Italian nation, namely, the mortification of the South and of its inhabitants.

En este artículo examino algunos de los debates generados alrededor de los recientes conciertos de Año Nuevo en Bari, Catania, Palermo, Roma y Matera. Sin embargo, esto no es una reseña de los conciertos: no estoy interesado en lo que ocurrió durante las interpretaciones, y tampoco en los dispares méritos artísticos de los espectáculos. Más bien quiero mostrar cómo las polémicas y críticas están ampliamente relacionadas con las conexiones entre los artistas que participaron –Gigi D'Alessio, Tony Colombo, Eugenio Bennato y Fiorella Mannoia– y las políticas de identidad del sur de Italia. Haciendo uso de las distintas controversias que afloraron en torno a estos músicos quiero denunciar uno de los rasgos más típicos de la nación autoproclamada: la condena del Sur y sus habitantes.



Keywords: Southern Italy, marginalization, mortification, politics of identity, New Year's Eve concerts, neomelodica, historical revisionism.

Palabras clave: Italia del sur, marginalización, condena, políticas de identidad, conciertos de Año nuevo, neomelódica, revisionismo histórico.



The New Year's Eve concert, featuring one or more nationally recognised artists, has become a tradition in contemporary Italian cities. This year, among other big events, we had Eugenio Bennato in Catania, Tony Colombo in Palermo, and Gigi D'Alessio in Bari. The presence of these three musicians attracted a large amount of criticism within the respective local media,¹ and, as far as D'Alessio is concerned, at national level, since the Bari event was broadcast countrywide.² A fourth artist, Fiorella Mannoia, declared that she had been excluded from the Rome New Year's Eve concert.³

This is not a review of the concerts. I am neither interested in what happened during the shows nor in the disparate artistic merits of the works involved. I rather want to denounce one of the most typical traits of the self-proclaimed Italian nation, namely, the mortification of Southern Italian Identity.⁴ Among the four artists I have

¹ In terms of Bennato's concert in Catania, I mainly refer to CILIBERTI, Luca. "Bennato chi? Ecco tutte le alternative per il concerto di Capodanno a Catania", *lasiciliaweb* (2015.12.24), available at <<http://www.lasiciliaweb.it/articolo/135610/politica/bennato-chi-ecco-quali-erano-le-alternative-per-il-concerto-di-capodanno-a-catania>>. With regards to Tony Colombo's concert in Palermo, see "Capodanno a Palermo e polemiche: Colombo si 'indigna' su Facebook", *BlogSicilia* (2015.12.28), available at <<http://palermo.blogsicilia.it/capodanno-a-palermo-e-polemiche-tony-colombo-si-indigna-su-facebook/320594/>>.

² Some of the criticism against D'Alessio was collected in "Capodanno con D'Alessio, gli sfottò sui social", *Corriere del Mezzogiorno* (2016.01.01), available at <http://corrieredelmezzogiorno.corriere.it/foto-gallery/campania/16_gennaio_01/capodanno-d-alessio-sfotto-social-f160ffd4-b0aa-11e5-a532-6cb06317be62.shtml>.

³ See "Capodanno: Mannoia esclusa da concertone", *Agenzia Giornalistica Italiana* (2015.12.27), available at <http://www.agi.it/cronaca/2015/12/27/news/capodanno_mannoia_esclusa_da_concertone-314465/>.

⁴ See DICKIE, John. "Stereotypes of the Italian South, 1860-1900", in Robert Lumley and Jonathan Morris (eds.). *The New History of the Italian South: The Mezzogiorno Revisited*. Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1997, pp. 114-147. DICKIE, John. "The South as Other: From Liberal Italy to the Lega Nord", *The Italianist*, n° 14 [Special Issue - Culture and Society in Southern Italy: Past and Present] (1994), pp. 124-140. GRIBAUDI, Gabriella. "Images of the South: The Mezzogiorno as Seen by Insiders and Outsider", in Robert Lumley and Jonathan Morris (eds.). *The New History of the Italian South: The Mezzogiorno Revisited*. Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1997, pp. 83-113. PUGLIESE, Joseph. "Whiteness and the blackening of Italy: La guerra cafona, extracomunitari and provisional street justice", *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* vol. 5, n° 2 (2008), available at <<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/view/702/877>>.



mentioned, Bennato, Colombo and D'Alessio are Southern subjects, while Mannoia is from Rome.⁵

Gigi D'Alessio, Tony Colombo and the demonisation of the *neomelodica*

Colombo and D'Alessio are associated with the *neomelodica*, a musical genre that is popular among the Southern Italian lower classes. The *neomelodica* is quite commonly demonised for being allegedly colluded with organised crime,⁶ to the point that, as I have observed elsewhere, its “very existence, in the Italian imagery, constitutes a sort of confirmation of the supposed connection between Southern Italian culture and the mafias”.⁷ Important works by Goffredo Plastino⁸ and Vincenzo Perna⁹ have completely deconstructed the criminalisation (exposing, I would add, the implicit racialisation) of *neomelodica* musicians and audiences, and the latter has argued that:

what seems to worry the critics of NM [i.e., *neomelodica*] most is not its largely undetermined negative social impact, but its relevance, and hence its counter-symbolic role. The representation of NM as bad music, perhaps, should be taken seriously inasmuch as it expresses the perceived threatening nature of that music. For its detractors, then, the most disturbing aspect of NM consists in its challenges to representations of social pacification, national unity, and progress.¹⁰

In other words, *neomelodica* music is not demonised because it is bad music, although its detractors usually use this as an excuse. Rather, *neomelodica* is hated because it represents the negation of Italianness “by articulating the identitarian pride

⁵ I will explain later how and why Mannoia is connected to the South.

⁶ See SAVIANO, Roberto. “Canzone criminale: La musica di Gomorra”, *La Repubblica* (2012.02.12), available at <http://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli-e-cultura/2012/02/12/news/saviano_neomelodici-29737271/>.

⁷ MESSINA, Marcello. “Matteo Garrone’s *Gomorra*: A Politically Incorrect Use of Neapolitan Identities and Queer Masculinities?”, *gender/sexuality/italy*, n° 2 (2015), p. 184, available at <<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/16.-Messina.pdf>>.

⁸ PLASTINO, Goffredo. *Cosa Nostra Social Club: Mafia, malavita e musica in Italia*. Milan, Il Saggiatore, 2013.

⁹ PERNA, Vincenzo, “Killer Melodies: The *Musica Neomelodica* Debate”, in Franco Fabbri and Goffredo Plastino (eds.). *Made in Italy: Studies in Popular Music*. London, Routledge, pp. 194-206.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.



of Southern Italian underclasses".¹¹ This resonates with Gribaudo's claim about the fact that the national image of the South was constructed on the basis of "negation, on what it lacked in relation to the ideal model".¹²

Gigi D'Alessio and his music are in fact among Italy's public enemies, and D'Alessio's participation in the Bari New Year's Eve concert has been targeted by a large amount of sarcastic jokes within social media, which have been in turn collected and proudly reposted online by renowned newspapers, such as the *Corriere del Mezzogiorno*.¹³ I would like to focus on two of these social media entries in order to evaluate the representations of D'Alessio's identity that they promote.¹⁴

The first entry I want to look at reads as follows: "There were 100.000 people in Bari at Gigi D'Alessio's concert. Darwin, forgive us, something has gone wrong".¹⁵ The post evokes Darwin in a clear reference to evolutionary theory: in brief, it says that if all these people went all the way to listen to D'Alessio's "bad" music, they must be unevolved people. Here, disguised as a humorous link between evolution and musical taste, there is instead an obvious reference to the perceived social/regional/racial difference between D'Alessio's audience and an implicit normative group of "evolved Italians". The allusion to different evolutionary stages, combined with the ever-present criminalisation of *neomelodica* practices, cannot but evoke Cesare Lombroso's and Alberto Niceforo's pseudoscientific (but enormously influential) theories about the racial inferiority and the propensity for criminal behaviour of Southern Italian people.¹⁶ In that social media post, encoded in a consideration about musical taste, there is a statement about the perceived inferiority of Southern Italian cultural and racial identities.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² GRIBAUDI, Gabriella. "Images of the South...", p. 85.

¹³ "Capodanno con D'Alessio...".

¹⁴ Although the identities of the users involved are never protected within the respective social networks or by the aforementioned online newspaper, I will keep them anonymous.

¹⁵ "Capodanno con D'Alessio...". ("Erano in 100.000 a Bari per il concerto di Gigi D'Alessio. Darwin perdonaci, c'è qualcosa che è andato storto").

¹⁶ See LOMBROSO, Cesare. "L'ultimo brigante: Giuseppe Musolino", *Nuova Antologia*, n° 181 (1900), pp. 508-516. ID. "Il cervello del brigante Tiburzi", *Nuova Antologia*, n° 150 (1896), pp. 591-600. NICEFORO, Alfredo. *L'Italia barbara contemporanea: Studi e appunti*. Milan Palermo, R. Sandron, 1898.



I am not using the category of race inappropriately here: as shown by Pugliese, the normativity of Northern Italian culture over Southern subjects and community is precisely the result of “the racist North/South divide [that] operates along this racialised geopolitical axis that demarcates the North as Aryan and European, and the South as African and Arab”.¹⁷ On the basis of this violent demarcation, that constantly affects and defines the lives, the thoughts and the aspirations of all Italians (including those in diasporic contexts), Southern practices are automatically disguised as “inferior”.



Figure 1: An image that circulated among social media in the days before New Year's Eve, which shows Mickey Mouse committing suicide in front of a TV broadcast of Gigi D'Alessio's concert.¹⁸

Whiteness and ethnocentrism are relevant also to the second item I want to show, an illustration that “went viral” on social media in the days prior to the Bari concert. The illustration, which is the modification of a work by Eva and Franco Mattes,¹⁹ shows Mickey Mouse hanging himself in front of a TV that displays a performance of D'Alessio [Figure 1], in a clear reference to the fact that D'Alessio's

¹⁷ PUGLIESE, Joseph, “White Historicide and the Returns of the Souths of the South”, *Australian Humanities Review*, n° 42 (2007), available at <<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-August-September-2007/Pugliese.html>>.

¹⁸ <https://scontent-syd1-1.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-xpl1/v/l/t1.0-9/995314_10204849308422033_7973332078956360183_n.jpg?oh=b34362d8bd8f2d8759aad4ba9143f699&oe=57443280>

¹⁹ See TOLEDANES, Kayla. “Eva & Franco Mattes Reading”, available at <<http://art110.wikispaces.com/Toledanes-Kayla-P7>>.



show was going to be broadcast on a nationwide channel. What appears to be evident here is the clash between an instance of “legitimate” and “pure” culture, represented by the North American cartoon icon, and the exponent of a “spurious” and “dodgy” non-white culture who dares to appear in front of the nation. The suicide of legitimate, white, US-oriented culture is offered as the extreme solution in order to avoid being submitted to the “horrendous” spectacle of D’Alessio’s performance. There is more, as Mickey Mouse can be understood as a symbol of juvenile innocence, and is set against the exponent of a musical genre that is widely criminalised.²⁰ Therefore, the white, North American cultural icon is also represented as being “innocent” and “vulnerable” (as Mickey Mouse hangs himself), in opposition to a “dangerous”, “violent” and “criminal” Southern identity.

As highlighted by Perna, D’Alessio’s case is noteworthy as it demonstrates how the *neomelodica* “may not always be relegated to slums, but can sometimes ‘trickle up’ [...] to respectable, mainstream society, finally achieving success in the national pop arena”.²¹ Contextualising the above illustration and, in general, the shared denigration of D’Alessio within his undeniable success story, it is possible to evaluate anti-D’Alessio feelings as reactionary backlashes against an artist that is perceived as an impostor, because he dared to abandon his peripheral “slum” and infiltrate mainstream national culture.

Tony Colombo and Eugenio Bennato were also treated as impostors. Despite the lower (i.e. not broadcast on national TV) profiles of the respective concerts they were involved in, they were exposed to a plethora of invectives within Palermitan and Catanian networks. Colombo, whose personal social media pages were inundated by insults after the announcement of his performance, was again criticised on account of his *neomelodica* background, and because, as a Palermitan, he has chosen to live and work in Naples.²² Now, it is quite customary for Sicilian and Southern artists to migrate *to the North*, and still be welcomed every time they return to their native cities.

²⁰ Many thanks to Teresa Di Somma for drawing my attention on this last and important element.

²¹ PERNA, Vincenzo. “Killer Melodies...”, p. 204.

²² “Capodanno a Palermo e polemiche...”.



However, I claim here that Colombo's case is different: he migrated to another city in the South, and, what is more, to Naples, a "rebellious city" that arguably negates the monologism of the Italian state.²³

Very importantly, I am not suggesting here that Palermo or Catania are less rebellious than Naples: I am rather saying that Colombo was attacked on account of the diffused Italian hatred towards Naples. The fact that the insults against Colombo came from people inhabiting another place in the South is irrelevant: as abundantly shown by John Dickie, anti-Southern feelings are not a prerogative of the North, but rather a shared prerogative of a unified Italian identity.²⁴ In other words, those who want to be fully Italian need to mortify the South, regardless of their regional background. Colombo, who has left Palermo for Naples, and who represents such an unbearably Southern genre as the *neomelodica*, was deemed to be unworthy of appearing in the Palermo New Year's Eve concert. Arguably, this shared need to mortify the South also explains the polemics around Eugenio Bennato's concert in Catania, which will be examined in the next section.

Eugenio Bennato in Catania

Bennato is a folk singer-songwriter whose work is centred on the rebellious cultural politics of the South. His songs celebrate Southern histories and identities and advocate an idea of a borderless Mediterranean space. He normally performs with a band composed by instrumentalists and singers from different Mediterranean backgrounds, and his songs are mosaics of different languages, timbres, harmonies and rhythms. Eugenio Bennato is also the brother of Edoardo Bennato, one of the most famous living Italian singer-songwriters.

Eugenio Bennato was selected to play in Catania's New Year's concert following a competitive call for tenders hosted by the local City Council (*Comune di Catania*). The

²³ See FESTA, Francesco Antonio. "L'alchimia ribelle napoletana. Materiali per una storia della città antagonista", in Ottorino Cappelli (ed.). *Potere e società a Napoli a cavallo del secolo. Omaggio a Percy Allum*. Naples, ESI, 2003, pp. 381-423. DINES, Nick. "Naples: A City Centred", *Red Pepper* (2013), available at <<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/naples-a-city-centred/>>.

²⁴ DICKIE, John. "Stereotypes of the Italian South...". ID. "The South as Other...".



costs incurred by the Comune di Catania for the concert, €100.000, set off a huge amount of criticism from the city council's political opposition.²⁵ A breakdown of the costs was eventually disclosed by the concert organisers, which showed that Bennato's band (8 members in total) was eventually paid only 10 % of that figure, and that most of the allocated money was being spent on technical equipment and setup.²⁶

The proposal involving Bennato's music had eventually won over a number of other proposals involving various musicians known at national level, as emerged from an article for the local online newspaper *La Sicilia Web* written by Luca Ciliberti.²⁷ Ciliberti's article combines harsh criticism towards the costs incurred by the Comune di Catania with persistent negative remarks about the choice of Eugenio Bennato. In the present section, I attempt to analyse this article in order to unveil the representation of Bennato's work implied in Ciliberti's critical tone.

Ciliberti questions Bennato's status and the legitimacy of his participation in the concert right from the title, which reads: "Bennato who? Here are all the [rejected] alternatives for the New Year's Eve Concert in Catania" ("Bennato chi? Ecco tutte le

²⁵ See "Concerto di capodanno, è polemica: 'A Catania Bennato costa il quadruplo'". *CataniaToday* (2015.12.21), available at <<http://www.cataniatoday.it/cronaca/concerto-capodanno-polemica-bennato-21-dicembre-2015.html>>. It is important to note that in other cities the costs were also higher: in Florence, for example, the concert cost € 300.000 but it was entirely funded by private sponsors [PALOSCIA, Fulvio. "Firenze, Capodanno metropolitano: gli eventi e le istruzioni per l'uso", *La Repubblica* (2015.12.28), available at <http://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/12/28/news/capodanno_metropolitano_istruzioni_per_l_uso-130277033/>]; in Rome, the majority of the costs was incurred by private sponsors, plus a contribution of €170.000 from the Italian Chamber of Commerce, which is a state body [CASTELLI, Giorgia. "Niente Concertone, la Mannoia grida alla censura. Ma forse è questione di soldi". *Secolo d'Italia* (2015.12.28), available at <<http://www.secoloditalia.it/2015/12/niente-concertone-mannoia-grida-censura-forse-questione-soldi/>>]; whereas in Matera the costs, which were sustained by the local regional administration, amounted to more than half a million ["La trasferta degli sprechi: 130mila euro solo di hotel, in 300 a spese della Regione", *Il Quotidiano della Basilicata* (2016.01.03), available at <<http://www.ilquotidianodellabasilicata.it/news/idee-societa/743882/La-trasferta-degli-sprechi--130mila.html>>]. What strikes me, more than these figures, is that Northern and Central cities (Florence and Rome) tend to benefit from heavy flows of private funding, whereas Southern cities (Matera and Catania) seem to have to rely solely, or mainly, on their local regional/provincial/municipal money to fund similar events – is that, perhaps, symptomatic of the national tendency to isolate the South economically while plundering its internal resources?

²⁶ REALE, Gianluca. "Concerto di Capodanno. Gli organizzatori: 'Ecco tutti i costi'", *Live Sicilia* (2015.12.24), available at <http://catania.livesicilia.it/2015/12/24/concerto-di-capodanno-gli-organizzatori-ecco-tutti-i-costi_364077/>.

²⁷ CILIBERTI, Luca. "Bennato chi?...".



alternative per il concerto di Capodanno a Catania”).²⁸ Some of these alternative artists are named immediately after, in the subtitle:

Mannarino, Gualazzi, Irene Grandi, up to big names of international music. There were numerous and qualified proposals in the hands of Bianco's administration, but preference was given to the “little known” Parthenopean [i.e., Neapolitan] singer.²⁹

The article seeks to establish a manifest binary between Bennato's status as a marginal act, whose name may not be known to the public (“Bennato who?”), and the wealth of artists that were rejected, marked by the adjective “numerous” in a way to underline the abundance of performers that could have been chosen instead of Bennato. Two main distinctive qualities are used here to describe these rejected artists: “international” and “qualified”, which are set against the adjectives used to define Bennato, namely, “little known” and “Parthenopean” (“*partenopeo*”, a synonym of “Neapolitan”). Right from the beginning, Bennato's alleged lack of notoriety and experience at international level is implicitly associated to his Neapolitan identity.

Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that the mere fact that Bennato is from Naples is not the main problem. A number of artists is mentioned both in the subtitle and in the article body as those who were rejected for Bennato. The three artists named in the subtitle (Mannarino, Gualazzi and Grandi) are presumably the most important names in the author's opinion, and are indeed all non-Southern subjects. While Ciliberti traces a border between Bennato and his more “qualified” counterparts, the vast majority of whom are non-Southern artists, I am not convinced that this is voluntarily done solely on the basis of the artists' origins. In fact, among the dozens of names that are mentioned in the article body there are a few notable Southern acts (i.e., Archinuè, Dolcenera, Adriano Pappalardo, Napoli Opera, Orchestra Luna Rossa).

²⁸ “Bennato chi? Ecco tutte le alternative per il concerto di Capodanno a Catania”. *Ibid.*

²⁹ “Mannarino, Gualazzi, Irene Grandi, fino a grandi nomi della musica internazionale. Le proposte in mano all'amministrazione Bianco erano numerose e qualificate, ma la scelta è ricaduta sul ‘poco noto’ cantante partenopeo”. *Ibid.*



The *incipit* of the article seems to confirm my cautiousness in this sense, insofar as it consists of a comparison between the Eugenio Bennato and his brother, Edoardo:

Bennato who? Edoardo? No. Eugenio. The difference is unneglectable. There is an abyss between them. The former is a rock popular musician; the latter is ethnic and folk. The former has sold millions of records; the latter is part of a niche market that can only dream about those figures.³⁰

Edoardo shares exactly the same regional identity as Eugenio, being his brother; therefore, I can confirm that the attack against Eugenio is not only made on the basis of his regional identity: there is more than that.

The argument about Eugenio Bennato not being mainstream does hardly support itself, as there are many other niche artists among those mentioned as preferable alternatives.³¹ In fact, Eugenio Bennato's music has enjoyed growing visibility in the last 10-15 years, and his songs have become widely known in Italy, to the point that "Brigante se more"³² has become a milestone of Southern Italian political music.³³ I claim that some of the songs contained in Edoardo Bennato's 2010 album *Le vie del rock sono infinite*, namely "C'era un re" and "Il capo dei briganti",³⁴ manifestly appropriate some of the themes that have always characterised Eugenio's work, such as the revisionism of the Italian Unification and the radical cultural politics of Southern Italy. In other words, if Eugenio "can only dream" of matching Edoardo's record sales, I argue that the latter does probably aspire to a share of his brother's influence on Southern political thought.

³⁰ "Bennato chi? Edoardo? No. Eugenio. La differenza non è poca. Tra l'uno e l'altro c'è di mezzo il mare. Il primo è rock popular, il secondo è etnico e folk. Il primo ha venduto milioni di dischi, il secondo fa parte di un mercato di nicchia che certi numeri se li sogna". *Ibid.*

³¹ This point was abundantly made by other commentators of the article. See for instance the comments on the website of Ciliberti's article (*ibid.*).

³² MUSICANOVA. "Brigante se more". In *Brigante se more*. By Eugenio Bennato and Carlo D'Angiò. LP. Philips Records, 1980.

³³ For instance, I have briefly illustrated Bennato's influence on Southern Italian popular music in MESSINA, Marcello. "The Risorgimento Rec(h)anted: Historical Revisionism of the Italian Unification in Songs from Southern Italy", in *Anais do XXVIII Simpósio Nacional de História. "Lugares dos Historiadores: Velhos e Novos Desafios"*. Florianópolis, ANPUH, 2015, available at <http://www.snh2015.anpuh.org/resources/anais/39/1439757848_ARQUIVO_MESSINARisorgimentoandPopularMusic.pdf>.

³⁴ BENNATO, Edoardo. *Le vie del rock sono infinite*. CD, Universal Music, 2010.



The fact that Ciliberti's attack has indeed to do with politics is revealed in the following terms:

The choice of Bennato is one that Catanians will have to accept and submit to in the name of a doubtful transparency that produces general disappointment, especially among the industry specialists. **Bennato is definitely a political choice made by Bianco's administration**, and probably those who were in charge must have thought that the Parthenopean singer-songwriter could represent the culture and the inclinations of centre-left voters and administrators.³⁵

These lines clarify that Ciliberti's main preoccupation is not discrediting Bennato, but criticising his local political adversaries, i.e., the mayor of Catania, Enzo Bianco, and his administrative cabinet. While this is an absolutely legitimate, understandable and reasonable thing to do in local and national politics, the problem is that Ciliberti draws upon the perceived vulnerability of Bennato's figure in order to attack his adversary. Importantly, the author never really qualifies the political nature of Bennato's work, other than flagging its probable coextensivity with the narratives of the Catanian centre-left. What emerges is that Bennato is Neapolitan, "folk", "ethnic", "niche" and therefore welcome to a moderate left-wing audience, while the actual political content of his music is never mentioned in the article. Exactly because of this, I claim that in Ciliberti's views, Eugenio Bennato's perceived anomaly has to do precisely with the political themes he discusses in his work. Therefore, the article's insistence on Bennato's *partenopeo* background does not have much to do with his mere identity, but with the intentional political significance that Bennato associates to it. As Mignolo would put it, Bennato's politics is "politics of identity", which, importantly, "is different from identity politics – the former is open to whoever wants to join, while the latter tends to be bounded by the definition of a given identity".³⁶ The idea that Catanians,

³⁵ "Quella di Bennato è una scelta che i catanesi dovranno accettare e subire in nome di una trasparenza che lascia qualche dubbio e non poche amarezze generalizzate, soprattutto negli operatori del settore. **Bennato è certamente una scelta politica dell'amministrazione Bianco**, probabilmente chi di dovere avrà pensato che il cantautore partenopeo rappresenti meglio di altri artisti la cultura e la vocazione di un'amministrazione e di un elettorato di centrosinistra". CILIBERTI, Luca. "Bennato chi?...". Here and henceforth, the emphasis in bold is not my addition, but a feature of the original article.

³⁶ MIGNOLO, Walter. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom". *Theory*,



as claimed by Ciliberti in the above quote, were subjected to the choice of Bennato and might have preferred one of the rejected artists can only support itself on the basis of the omission of Bennato's politics of identity – in fact, one would think that a Southern audience is normally interested in work that discusses the condition of the South.

Bennato's music is in fact written from a Southern perspective, and challenges the construct of a national Italian identity by disavowing national borders and exposing the premises onto which national unity was violently enforced in Italy. For example, the song "Che il Mediterraneo sia" imagines a free and united Mediterranean, "a gateless fortress, where everyone can live",³⁷ while songs like "Ninco Nanco" dignify the histories and the deeds of the anti-Unification freedom fighters, commonly labelled as "brigands" (*briganti*),³⁸ and thoroughly contest the rhetoric of the Italian Unification by exposing it as an aggressive conquest war that literally annihilated and plundered Southern territories and peoples with their histories and identities:

1859, the old Bourbon king dies
and his son gets to the throne, at 23, still a young boy.
This is the moment to take advantage of this void of power,
in that kingdom surrounded by the sea, and defended only by mermaids.

And the Bank of Naples is ideal to cover the costs,
to fund the financial deficit of the Piedmont.

And Ninco Nanco must die, because history has to go this way
and the South is a land to conquer and Ninco Nanco can't stay there

Culture & Society, vol. 26, n° 7-8 (2009), p. 14.

³⁷ BENNATO, Eugenio. "Che il Mediterraneo sia", in *Che il Mediterraneo sia*, CD, Taranta Power, 2002. ("Che il Mediterraneo sia / la fortezza ca nun tene porte / addo' ognuno po' campare / d'a ricchezza ca ognuno porta").

³⁸ The freedom fighters of the decades 1860-1880 were normally called *briganti*, while the whole phenomenon of anti-Unification insurgency was called *brigantaggio* ("brigandage"). This terminology was deployed by the Italian army and then extended to the official historical narratives of the Italian state as a means of depoliticisation of the anti-Unitarian factions, as it "effectively criminalised the insurgents, reducing them to lawless bands of petty criminals" (Pugliese, "Whiteness and the Blackening of Italy...", p. 4).



and Ninco Nanco must die, as if he lives he could talk,
and if he talks he could say something Southern.³⁹

These lines possess a radical potential that can hardly coexist with the official narratives of Italianness. Bennato's embracement of historical counter-narratives delegitimise the "sacred" foundation of the Italian state and renegotiate the position of "cursed" historical characters, such as the *briganti* and the Bourbon dynasty, and he imagines a future that counters the contemporary hysteria about the militarisation of European borders. These both elements make him politically controversial.

It could then be argued that Bennato's work intentionally embodies a similar "counter-symbolic role"⁴⁰ to that played by the *neomelodica*, and potentially attracts criticism from the same intellectual circles that detract *neomelodica* artists and audiences. Eventually, Ciliberti makes reference to a concert by Gigi D'Alessio, hosted in Catania by the previous administration: "Not to mention Gigi D'Alessio[']s concert] under Scapagnini".⁴¹ This brief allusion is likely to suggest a comparison between D'Alessio and Bennato, whereby the reader is probably inclined to draw on the vast range of existing anti-D'Alessio imagery I illustrated above, only to transfer it to Bennato – after all, they are both *partenopei*. The fact that the comparison between these two artists overlooks the enormous aesthetic difference between them can only confirm what is argued by Perna on the fact that the usual criticism of the *neomelodica* is not based on mere aesthetic evaluations, but is in fact the product of a nationalistic discourse. Both Bennato and D'Alessio are negations of Italianness, therefore Italian society is inclined to be suspicious as to their right to perform in official events.

Ciliberti is therefore doubtful as to whether Bennato is the right artist for the Catania concert: "We wonder, **is it right to take a punt on Eugenio Bennato for the**

³⁹ "1859, muore il vecchio re Borbone / e sul trono va suo figlio, 23 anni, ancora guaglione. / E' il momento di approfittare di questo vuoto di potere, / di quel regno in mezzo al mare difeso solo dalle sirene. / E o Banco 'e Napule è l'ideale per rifarsi delle spese, / per coprire il disavanzo della finanza piemontese. / E Ninco Nanco deve morire perché la storia così deve andare / e il Sud è terra di conquista e Ninco Nanco nun ce pò stare, / e Ninco Nanco deve morire perché si campa putesse parlare / e si parlasse putesse dire qualcosa di meridionale". BENNATO, Eugenio. "Ninco Nanco", in *Questione Meridionale*, CD, Taranta Power, 2011.

⁴⁰ PERNA, Vincenzo. "Killer Melodies...", p. 204.

⁴¹ "senza scomodare i Gigi D'Alessio di scapagniniana memoria". CILIBERTI, Luca. "Bennato chi?...".



New Year's Eve big concert in Catania? Is he the right artist?"⁴² The article continues clarifying that this doubt is about the possibility to promote an artist such as Bennato in a way to attract a sufficiently large audience and to absorb the incurred costs.⁴³ But I would like to argue that the acts from the national mainstream scene mentioned in the article serve actually to suggest a distinction between the rejected artistic proposals, which are coextensive with the narrative of Italianness, and Bennato's politically suspicious work. I suggest that it is the very fact that this suspicious work is selected by an official institution that appears problematic to Ciliberti. As argued by Pugliese with reference to visual art:

Italianness can only ever be represented within these official institutions of culture through the visual iconography of northern Italian high culture. More specifically, through representations that always underscore Italianness in terms of Aryan iconography: white, European, caucascentric.⁴⁴

This can be easily transposed to music, and especially to the representations of mainstream musicians and the way they implicitly or explicitly perpetrate a precise idea of the Italian nation. In this sense,

- (a) the three alternative acts highlighted in the subtitle, namely Gualazzi, Mannarino and Grandi;
- (b) Bennato's own brother, Edoardo; and
- (c) the many Southern and non-Southern artists that ran as alternatives to Bennato,

are all treated in the article as representatives of a non-problematic, harmoniously national, Italian musical identity, to which Bennato and D'Alessio are the implicit antagonists, because of their (very different) ways of signifying and re-signifying the South. For this same reason, Bennato and D'Alessio, alongside Tony Colombo, are perceived as impostors by the Italian media and audiences.

⁴² "Ci chiediamo, è giusto puntare tutto su Eugenio Bennato per il concertone della notte di San Silvestro a Catania? E' l'artista giusto?". *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ PUGLIESE, Joseph. "Noi Altri: Italy's Other Geopolitical Identities, Racialised Genealogies and Inter-Cultural Histories", in Gerry Turcotte and Gaetano Rando (eds.). *Literary and Social Diasporas: An Italian Australian Perspective*. Bruxelles, Peter Lang, 2007, p. 185.



Mannoia's exclusion from the Rome concert

Fiorella Mannoia is the only woman and the only non-Southern subject among the four musicians I have considered in this paper.⁴⁵ She started engaging with the politics of Southern Italian identity in 2012, when her studio album *Sud* was released.⁴⁶ While promoting and touring this album, she used to make abundant references to the fact that the work had been inspired by Pino Aprile's book *Terroni*,⁴⁷ one of the most influential works in the context of the recent wave of Southern historical revisionism of the Italian Unification.⁴⁸

The whole idea about this album, and about this southward journey started from Naples, began with an idea, and with a book by Pino Aprile which I read, and that was called *Terroni*, in which I discovered that the history of our... of the Italian Unification wasn't exactly like that we had been told by history textbooks. Our South wasn't a South of poor people, of beggars who were waiting to be liberated; it was a rich, opulent South, it was at the vanguard in Europe, and got raided and plundered, like the whole global South. All the global Souths share the same destiny: our South, like Latin America, and especially like Africa.⁴⁹

It is important to underscore that Mannoia, who is originally from Rome, is a remarkable example of a non-Southern musician that voluntarily embraces Southern radical politics, regardless of the implications of this choice on her reputation at

⁴⁵ Just to clarify, the fact that Fiorella Mannoia is the only woman among the musicians I examined in this particular work does by no means imply that the politics of Southern Italian identity is prevalently an activity of male musicians. In fact, many female musicians across different genres, including folk, pop/rock and *neomelodica*, engage with these issues in their work.

⁴⁶ MANNOIA, Fiorella. *Sud*, CD, Sony Music/Oyà, 2012.

⁴⁷ APRILE, Pino. *Terroni: Tutto quello che è stato fatto perché gli italiani del sud diventassero meridionali*. Milan, Piemme, 2010.

⁴⁸ See PATRUNO, Lino. *Fuoco del Sud: La ribollente galassia dei Movimenti meridionali*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2011.

⁴⁹ "Tutta l'idea di questo disco e di questo viaggio verso sud è partita da Napoli, è partita da un'idea, e da un libro che ho letto di Pino Aprile che si chiamava *Terroni*, in cui si scopre che la storia della nostra... dell'Unità d'Italia non era proprio quella che ci hanno raccontato sui libri di storia. Questo nostro Sud non era un Sud di poveri, di straccioni che aspettavano di essere liberati, ma era un Sud opulento, ricco, all'avanguardia rispetto all'Europa, e che è stato depredato, è stato derubato, come tutto il Sud del mondo. Tutto il Sud del mondo divide lo stesso destino: il nostro, come quello dell'America Latina, e soprattutto come quello dell'Africa". MANNOIA, Fiorella. "Concert Talk", Naples (2012.03.26), available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKiAWT6eyro>>.



national level. Other non-Southern artists, before and after Mannoia, have followed this same path, such as Milan-based rock band Stormy Six, who released the album *L'Unità* in the 1970s,⁵⁰ and Modena City Ramblers, a band based in the Northern region of Emilia-Romagna who wrote the song "La guèra d'l barot in 2013"⁵¹ – both these works engage in a pro-South critical revision of the Italian Unification. The engagement of non-Southern artists with these issues confirms how Southern radical politics, as claimed above, is "politics of identity" in the sense illustrated by Mignolo, i.e., politics of inclusion rather than of exclusion.

On 24 December 2015, Mannoia revealed that she had been excluded from the imminent New Year's Eve concert in Rome. She added that she was not aware of the reasons of the exclusion, although she could guess why that had happened.⁵² This statement was widely understood as implying that the exclusion had been decided on account of Mannoia's controversial political ideas.

Mannoia is widely criticised for having sustained a number of other causes beyond the issues relative to the Italian South;⁵³ moreover, two Southern acts, namely Eugenio Bennato's aforementioned brother Edoardo and rock band Negramaro, replaced Mannoia at the Rome concert: perhaps these facts make it harder to claim that Mannoia's exclusion was specifically or uniquely related to her views on the South. However, Southern Italian novelist Raffaele Vescera has argued that:

the exclusion of Fiorella Mannoia from the New Year's Eve concert says a lot about the fact that the power is afraid of her "revolutionary" and rebellious words on the moral misery of the Italian system and on the calculated marginalisation of the South.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ STORMY SIX. *L'unità*. LP. First, 1972.

⁵¹ Modena City Ramblers. "La guèra d'l baròt". In *Niente di nuovo sul fronte occidentale*. Mescal-MCRecords, 2013.

⁵² "Capodanno: Mannoia esclusa...".

⁵³ Among other things, Mannoia was attacked by prominent journalist Aldo Grasso because of her views on recent terrorism episodes. See GRASSO, Aldo. "Fiorella Mannoia, il copione usurato della cantante radical", *Corriere della Sera* (2015.11.22), available at <http://www.corriere.it/cronache/15_novembre_22/fiorella-mannoia-stragi-parigi-copione-usurato-cantante-radical-724496fc-90e8-11e5-bbc6-e0fb630b6ac3.shtml>.

⁵⁴ "Escludere Fiorella Mannoia dal concertone di capodanno la dice lunga sulla paura che il potere ha delle



In every case, trying to ascertain whether Mannoia was rejected solely because of her Southern politics of identity would be pointless. Rather, it is reasonable and sufficient to argue that her pro-South claims are among the various causes that concurred in making her politically undesirable to parts of the Italian society and establishment – this undesirability, in turn, has probably determined the exclusion, as claimed by Mannoia herself.⁵⁵ Moreover, I do not exclude that part of the criticism and the ostracism that Mannoia normally attracts might also be connected to her gender – while male musicians are normally allowed to display radical ideas and behaviours, it often happens that their female colleagues are harshly censured for voicing very similar positions.⁵⁶

Final Remarks

To summarise, I have examined various controversies connected to the 2015/16 New Year's Eve concerts in four different Italian cities (Bari, Palermo, Catania and Rome), arguing that, in all four cases, these controversies were largely related to the connections between the featuring artists and the politics of Southern Italian identity. Gigi D'Alessio and Tony Colombo are mainly associated with the “counter-symbolic role”⁵⁷ of *neomelodica* music-making and hence to a nationally untolerated “identitarian pride of Southern Italian underclasses”,⁵⁸ while Eugenio Bennato and

sue parole ‘rivoluzionarie’ e fuori dal coro, sulla miseria morale del sistema Italia e sulla premeditata emarginazione del Sud”. VESCERA, Raffaele. “Fiorella Mannoia esclusa dal concertone di Capodanno a Roma. Il sospetto: ‘Perchè ha parlato bene del Sud...’”, *Il SudOnline* (2015.12.28), available at <<http://www.ilsudonline.it/fiorella-mannoia-esclusa-dal-concertone-di-capodanno-a-roma-il-sospetto-perche-ha-parlato-bene-del-sud/>>.

⁵⁵ Importantly, it has also been argued that Mannoia's exclusion might have been due to money matters: see CASTELLI, Giorgia. “Niente Concertone...”.

⁵⁶ A very recent article by Kat George makes the same identical point about Courtney Love, whose public image is compared to that of Kurt Cobain: “The perceived difference between the two – who, ostensibly, seem to possess very similar personalities and character traits – boils down to one thing, which is gender. Cobain and Love were both grunge music icons, both drug addicts, both controversial in front of the media and in public, yet the former was a hero while the latter was, and still is, vilified”. GEORGE, Kat. “Why does Courtney Love make people so uncomfortable?”, *Dazed*, (2016.01.07), available at <<http://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/29036/1/why-does-courtney-love-make-people-so-uncomfortable>>.

⁵⁷ PERNA, Vincenzo, “Killer Melodies...”, p. 204.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*



Fiorella Mannoia are known for attempting to re-signify Southern histories and identities taking the critical revision of the Italian Unification as a starting point.

Alongside this simplified schematisation, it is important to add that both D'Alessio and Colombo have written and performed political songs about Southern histories and identities,⁵⁹ despite the shared tendency to depoliticise the *neomelodica*. It is also important to reiterate that, while the very fact of being Neapolitan was not the only element used to discredit Bennato in the article I have examined above, it still played an extremely important, if implicit, role in the construction of Ciliberti's argument. Finally, as far as Mannoia is concerned, I have argued that various circumstances, not all necessarily connected to her Southern politics of identity, might have contributed to her exclusion from the Rome concert.

Nevertheless, the demonisation of Southern identity and the ostracism towards its radical emancipatory politics undeniably link these four episodes. Among other things, the continuous neglect and mortification of the South are instrumental to the legitimisation of a regime of economic and infrastructural isolation that has been determining a situation of substantial underdevelopment since the Italian Unification.⁶⁰ To illustrate this concept and conclude this paper, I will briefly mention a fifth show, which was broadcast by the RAI, the national state TV, and therefore was probably the main Italian 2015/16 New Year's Eve concert. It was hosted by the Southern city of Matera,⁶¹ one of the few capitals of Italian provinces⁶² that are excluded from the national railway network.⁶³ Traditionally isolated within the national

⁵⁹ Cf. for example D'ALESSIO Gigi; SASTRI, Lina; BARRA, Peppe, "Sole cielo e mare", in *Quando la mia vita cambierà*, CD, RCA, 2000. COLOMBO, Tony. "Sud", in *Quello che vorrei*, CD, Don't Worry Records, 2015.

⁶⁰ See NITTI, Francesco Saverio. *Nord e Sud: Prime linee di una inchiesta sulla ripartizione territoriale delle entrate e delle spese dello Stato in Italia*. Turin, Roux e Viarengo, 1900. ZITARA, Nicola. *L'Unità d'Italia: Nascita di una colonia*. Milan, Jaca Book, 1971. CARLO, Antonio, & CAPECELATRO, Edmondo Maria. "Against the 'Southern Question'". *International Journal of Sociology*, vol. 4, n° 2/3 (1974), pp. 31-84. ESPOSITO, Marco. *Seppiamoci*. Milan, Magenes, 2013.

⁶¹ I would like to thank Teresa Di Somma for suggesting me to use Matera as a possible case study for this paper.

⁶² "Capoluogo di provincia" in Italian. Provinces are local administrative divisions in Italy.

⁶³ See "I treni perduti di Matera capitale della cultura senza la stazione", *La Repubblica* (2014.10.21), available at <<http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2014/10/21/i-treni-perduti-di-matera-capitale-della-cultura-senza-la-stazione25.html>>. Matera is served only by a narrow-gauge rail link



infrastructural plan, Matera enjoys worldly recognition for possessing a unique urban landscape, and was recently selected to be European Capital of Culture in 2019.⁶⁴ It is not difficult to imagine that this important achievement might have determined the choice of this city, otherwise considered marginal in national culture, for the main 2015/16 New Year's Concert in Italy. The main problem was that, because of the infrastructural abandonment to which Matera is unjustly relegated, many people who wanted to be at the concert were simply not able to reach the city by public transport.⁶⁵

Italy is traditionally very good at marginalising, neglecting and criminalising the South, only to celebrate it occasionally, when it manages to achieve something despite its forced colonial condition. In these cases, Italy may allow a “suspicious” Southern musician to lead a major concert, or concede to a marginalised Southern city the “bliss” of hosting a nationally broadcast event. Often, these hypocritical celebrations end up highlighting the blatant contradictions upon which the Italian nation was, and is, constructed. Punctually, the South is subjected to vehement hatred and/or brutal neglect. This hatred and this neglect may well be revealed by a racist joke against *neomelodica* musicians and audiences, or by an article that claims that a prominent Neapolitan artist is basically nobody, or even by a rail link that has been missing for the last 150-odd years.

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that connects it to Bari and is not part of the national rail network.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ See “Capodanno a Matera, la beffa del treno che non c'è”, *Il SudOnline* (2016.01.07), available at <<http://www.ilsudonline.it/capodanno-matera-la-beffa-del-treno-non-ce/>>.



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**This Is Not a Review
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of its Inhabitants and of its Music
Marcello Messina**

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