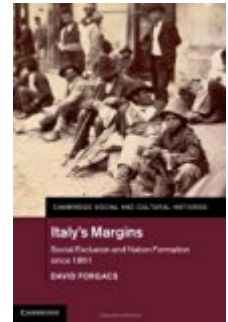


David Forgacs. *Italy's Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861.* Cambridge Social and Cultural Histories Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 340 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-05217-8.



Reviewed by Marina Spunta

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David Forgacs's *Italy's Margins*, an outstanding contribution to Italian studies and to the social and cultural history of Italy since unification, provides a novel perspective on social exclusion and nation formation. The book clearly achieves its stated aims: to explore the construction of Italy's margins in connection with the process of nation building and to unpack the "social and spatial relations between an observer and an observed," that is, the power relations involved in these processes (p. 1). Stemming from the author's long-standing interest in uncovering marginality as a process of social and symbolic construction, *Italy's Margins* provides a compelling argument that is backed up by an in-depth analysis of a wide range of sources, including photography, writing, and film. Drawing on a variety of critical approaches, spanning from history and anthropology to literary, visual, and cultural studies, Forgacs offers a new perspective on Italian culture, which enriches a variety of disciplines, within and outside Italian studies. The book is structured around five discreet case studies, which offer new

perspectives on those at the cultural margins of the Italian state from unification to the present and suggest links and echoes between them: the Roman area of San Lorenzo, a key example of urban peripheries in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century; Italian colonies, especially Ethiopia during the Italian occupation (1935-41); Southern Italy in 1945-60; mental hospitals in the 1960s and 1970s; and Nomad camps mostly in Rome in the 2000s.

The book is extremely well researched and clearly written. It is particularly impressive both for the choice and use of the sources and for their ample contextualization; while focusing mostly on Italy, Forgacs also provides many useful comparisons with the process of nation formation in other European countries. The author offers a detailed analysis of a great variety of texts—both well known and less known—including photography, literary and ethnographic writing, oral testimonies, and, in chapters 3 and 4, documentary film. Each chapter opens with a photograph, engaging the reader immediately with decoding a

visual text, and with unpacking the strategies of representing and constructing identities and marginalities. Forgacs's main purpose is to expose the power relations at work in the chosen texts and discourses, and to explore how a variety of texts and authors either reinforced the construction of social and symbolic margins or sought to challenge this way of looking. Besides providing a seminal contribution to scholarship, the book is also praiseworthy for the clarity and precision of its narrative and for its readability, which engages at one and the same time the nonexpert, the student, and the scholar.

Chapter 1, "Urban Peripheries," deals with the making of a slum, namely, the area of San Lorenzo, situated outside Porta San Lorenzo in the Aurelian walls, the first and most notorious Roman slum, where Italian migrant workers were segregated in poor housing conditions since 1871. Through an interesting selection of photographs and written texts, such as Alfredo Niceforo's and Scipio Sighele's *La mala vita a Roma* (1898), Forgacs demonstrates how this area was constructed as a margin, by focusing on poverty and by positing a connection with disease and crime. The chapter concludes by looking at later texts, such as the parliamentary inquiry *Inchiesta sulla miseria* (1952-53) and Franco Ferrarotti's work on oral testimonies, highlighting in the first text a continuity with earlier social observation, and in the second an attempt "to restore some agency and subjectivity" to the portrayed people (p. 66).

A photograph of a bare-breasted Eritrean woman held by Italian men, taken by Mario Fiore in Massawa (1935), is used by the author to open the second chapter, "Colonies," and to ask how power, gaze, and racism were embedded in the Italian colonial enterprise and how this was recorded in a variety of texts, including family, anthropological, landscape, and war photographs, as well as written texts (such as the popular song "Faccetta nera"). Forgacs argues that the main function of these texts is to "perform or enact that

very [colonial] power" and demonstrates how the colonies are constructed both as an extension of the nation and as "others" (p. 137). This process of margin formation is carried out by typifying their inhabitants, for example, in various anthropological texts of the time or in the *Manifesto della razza* (1938), by displaying mutilated bodies of many Ethiopians who fought the Italian occupation (a practice that Forgacs compares to portraying the bodies of Southern Italian brigands in the late nineteenth century), and in the "imagined Italian appropriation of the colony" through the male fantasies of possessing its women (p. 79). This chapter, which is the most substantial in the book, brings to light new visual documents, including two photographs taken by Ethiopians, in an attempt to reverse the gaze.

The third chapter, "Souths," discusses the creation of the South as a margin in the 1940s and 1950s by focusing mostly on Carlo Levi's novel *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945) and Ernesto De Martino's anthropological work on ritual mourning and on the *taranto* dance. Through an analysis of the use of free indirect speech in Levi's novel, which is here considered for its ethnographic aspects, Forgacs argues that Levi fails to "bracket off" the informants' accounts, and that this reveals both his empathy with the people of Aliano and his inability to take a critical distance. The author ultimately criticizes Levi's position for perpetuating the assumption of the "great divide" between the North and South of Italy, in line with much literature on the "southern question," which essentially removes the South from the present and labels it as "backward" by looking at it only for what it lacks. On the other hand, Forgacs puts forward the novelty of De Martino's work in offering a critical reading of the above rituals, highlighting both their historical and socioeconomic context and their inextricable links with the dominant culture, starting from the Catholic Church; Forgacs deems this the main contribution of De Martino's work toward breaching the division be-

tween "urban/Northern" and "peasant/Southern" cultures.

Building on the question of the relationship between mental illness and social constraints raised in the previous chapter, chapter 4, "Asylums," exposes the inhuman conditions of Italian mental asylums in the 1960s and 1970s and explores the history of their dismantling by focusing on the work of psychiatrists Franco Basaglia and Franca Ongaro Basaglia, who were central to this process. Juxtaposing Giuliana Morandini's book of oral testimonies by women (*E allora mi hanno rinchiusa* [1977]) and Carla Cerati and Gianni Berengo Gardin's photobook *Morire di classe* (1969), Forgacs exposes what he finds to be the intrinsic limitations of photography in its silence, stillness, and one-way direction, and ultimately its ambivalence. He goes on to posit (documentary) film as a richer record, for it includes the patients' voices, and a more effective political tool, as in Raymond Depardon's film set in San Clemente Hospital in Venice in 1980 and in Silvano Agosti and others' *Matti da slegare* (1976).

The final chapter offers a brief history of the *campi nomadi*, the informal settlements of migrant Roma in Italian peripheries, and analyzes a few recent examples of the Italian press construction of Romani people as "others" (mostly from the 2000s). By examining a number of photographs by different artists (including Alessandro Imbriaco, Maria Stefanek, and Marco Delogu), Forgacs raises questions of ethics and voyeurism, and finds these photographs wanting when compared to "thicker" narrations such as oral narratives. Although not directly tackled, the question of nation formation is here central and exposed in the chosen texts. This shorter chapter, which is defined as a "contemporary Coda to chapter 1," also serves to bring the book full circle as we return to Rome and to peripheries, the topic of the opening chapter, albeit a century earlier (p. 293).

In a concise conclusion, Forgacs summarizes the different types of margins discussed in the

book and celebrates De Martino's as the most sensitive approach and best example of "critical ethnocentrism," that is, an approach conscious of the contradictions inherent to the ethnographic practice. It is in this tradition that Forgacs places himself with this book, with his longstanding commitment to understanding and exposing power relations and the construction of marginality, and to voicing the unvoiced. *Italy's Margins* offers an extremely original, well-researched, and detailed analysis that raises key questions on the construction of national identity and of marginality, and sheds new light on a number of different fields, engaging the reader through a compelling argument and highly readable prose.

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