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“Brown Babies” in Postwar Europe: The Italian Case

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of the persistence of the idea of race in its close intersection with ideas of national identities in post-1945 Europe, by looking at the racialization of the children of European women and non-white Allied soldiers born on the continent during and right after the war. The case of Italy is closely examined through a variety of sources, some of which have only recently become available. Similarly to what happened in Great Britain and Germany, in Italy these children were considered a “problem” in spite of their small numbers. Because of their origin, but especially because of the color of their skin, they were often portrayed as alien to the (white) nation. Fantasies concerning their disappearance paralleled the elaboration of plans for their transfer to non-European countries. Italy, however, had its own specificity, namely the extensive role of the Catholic Church and more generally of the Catholic world in the “managing” of these children, as well as in shaping the self-representation of post-fascist Italy as a non-racist country. In fact Catholic racial paternalism was pervasive and underwrote the support that prominent Catholic figures gave to Italy’s attempt to hold on to the old colonies in the aftermath of the war.

Keywords

“Brown Babies”, Postwar Europe, Italy, Catholic Church, Fascism, Christian Democracy.

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Children of mixed parentage were born in all European countries where Allied armies were present during and after the Second World War. In the UK, where about three millions GIs were stationed at different times during the war years, it is estimated that about 22,000 children were born from their relations with British women and that about 1,700 of them had African-American fathers.¹ Even though most, if not all, children born out of wedlock (as most “war children” were) suffered some forms of marginalization and stigmatization, those with a darker skin – “brown babies” to use the terminology common among African-Americans at the time – faced an even more difficult existence. They were more often abandoned in children’s homes as their mothers tried to avoid the stigma that attached to “illegitimacy,” which the children’s skin color made it impossible to ignore.² Indeed in all European cases, the dark skin of the children determined also a greater stigmatization of their mostly unwed mothers, “guilty” of having attached themselves to foreigners, whether allies or enemies, and non-white to boot. The British women who had relations with GIs were described as “good time girls” and shunned by their communities. The racism of the American Army compounded their suffering as it disapproved of interracial marriage and thus did not help those black GIs who would have liked to reunite with the women they had encountered in Europe.³

In US-occupied Germany, from 1945 to 1950, about 3,000 “black occupation children” – to use Heide Fehrenbach’s expression – were born (out of a total of about 94,000 occupation children), and their number increased to about 5,000 by 1955.⁴ The public debate that took place in West Germany about these children’s “problem” showed the extent to which postwar German authorities tried to distance themselves from the Nazi past and its racist policies, while at the same time attempting to keep so-called “negro blood” out of Germany. They devised plans to send the children for adoption to the US – although eventually most of the children stayed in Germany. In contrast to England, Germany’s “brown babies” were the children of the war enemy, and not just of a war partner, and thus their presence was also the constant reminder of a crushing military defeat. Along with the issue of the mass rapes suffered by German women at the end of the war, the presence of “colored” children contributed to configuring 1945 in terms of a national-sexual humiliation. Needless to say, the image of women who had intimate relations with GIs was very negative. Consensual relations between German women and African-American or African GIs were seen as symptoms of a “national disorder” that plagued the defeated country.⁵

I am not aware of an analogous study done for France, but Tara Zahra in her study of displaced children in postwar Europe has shown how this country’s immediate postwar policies regarding international adoption exhibited a clear preference for the children of Frenchmen and German women born in the French occupation zone, but excluded those born from the relations between German women and the North African troops who were part of the French army. The French authorities resorted to the old criterion of “assimilability,” which actually masked racial and eugenic concerns.⁶

As part of the growth of a historiography that in the past two decades had tried to make sense of the rise of nativist and neo-nationalist parties all over Europe since the 1970s, all these studies

¹ See Sabine Lee, “A Forgotten Legacy of the Second World War: GI Children in Post-War Britain and Germany,” *Contemporary European History* 20:2 (2011), p. 163.

² On their experiences see Pamela Winfield, *The Story of the Children the GIs Left Behind* (London, Bloomsbury, 1992). See also Lee, “A Forgotten Legacy”.

³ Lee, “A Forgotten Legacy,” pp. 163-164.

⁴ See Heide Fehrenbach, *Race After Hitler. Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 2.

⁵ Fehrenbach, *Race After Hitler*, p. 9.

⁶ See Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe’s Families After World War Two* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 166-167.

provide further evidence of the continuing racial construction of the nation in post-1945 Europe and of attempts to contain what some saw as the “blackening” of the European populations that followed the arrival of the Allied troops.⁷ This was also the case of Italy, a case that only very recently has begun to attract some needed scholarly attention.

II

“Brown babies” were born also in Italy, where Allied troops were present from their landing in Sicily in July 1943 until the end of the war in the spring of 1945 and, in some areas, for much longer. One of the most famous cultural products of the war, the Neapolitan song “Tammuriata Nera,” refers exactly to the birth of one such child. The skin color of the child is described as “very black” and it stands out too on the cover of the score published in 1946.⁸ The song – which is heavily ironical towards those who claimed surprise at the occurrence – became immediately popular and even today is still very familiar to many Italians. It was even featured in the 1948 neorealist masterpiece by Vittorio De Sica *Bicycle Thieves*⁹ as well as in another, less known film that was released in 1950, *Il Mulatto*, to which we will return.

In 1947 Paolo Monelli, a journalist and former supporter of the fascist occupation of Ethiopia and of the racial policies of the regime, published a remarkably racist comment on the Neapolitan song in a major daily, *La Stampa*, reading it as an expression of a “rightful” sentiment of popular revulsion towards race mixing:

In that black creature the Neapolitan people see the fruit of a union against nature, worse than an incest, almost a blind relation with an animal; you can call him *Ciro*, *Pepppe*, *Antonio*, you can baptize him, but he will always remain something foreign to the race, to the faith, to reason itself.¹⁰

The song, in fact, did not go this far in “othering” the mixed-race children, but Monelli also took the opportunity to question the motivations of the Americans for sending the black troops to fight in the Italian peninsula claiming that they did it out of spite and contempt for the Italian people, because they considered the Italians “an inferior and almost colored race.” As in the case of Germany, in Italy the biracial children were certainly a reminder of the shame and humiliation of the “lost war,” at least among the nationalist and anti-anti-fascist public opinion. That much at least appears in the words of this journalist. Even though the war was initiated by the fascists, it was nevertheless an Italian war, with an additional layer of complexity since in September 1943, after the signing of the armistice between the Allies and Italy, those who were enemies ceased to be so.

The comments by Monelli, imbued as they were with an overt racism and the frustrated nationalism of the Italian right, and published in a major mainstream daily, remind us first of all of the lack of any real and effective policy of defascistization of the country. The Italian courts, staffed with a judiciary still largely fascist, soon began to meet out lenient sentences, which in turn were mostly

⁷ The expression was used by a Norman man to refer to the presence of “colored” soldiers after the Allies’ landing in 1944: see Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do. Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 244. Black occupation children were born also in Japan and Korea and they too experienced similar if not worse conditions: see Michael Cullen Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific: American Military Empire after World War II* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell UP, 2010), ch. 5.

⁸ See Nelson Moe, “Naples ’44: ‘Tammuriata Nera’/Ladri di biciclette,” in *Italy and America 1943-44. Italian, American and Italian-American Experiences of the Liberation of the Italian Mezzogiorno* (Naples, Edizioni La Città del Sole, 1997), pp. 433-451. On this song and its reception see also Liliana Ellena, “Geografie della razza nel cinema italiano del primo dopoguerra 1945-1955,” in Gaia Giuliani, ed., *Il colore della nazione* (Florence-Milan, Le Monnier Università-Mondadori Education, 2015), pp. 22-23, and my article “Fear of Small Numbers: ‘Brown Babies’ in Postwar Italy,” *Contemporanea. Rivista di storia dell’800 e del ’900*, 18:4 (2015), pp. 546-547. I will draw on this article also for part IV of the present essay.

⁹ See Moe, “Naples ’44.”

¹⁰ See Paolo Monelli, “Stamburata nera,” *La Stampa*, 21 September 1947.

wiped out by the extensive amnesty introduced by the then Minister of Justice, the Communist Palmiro Togliatti, in 1946.¹¹ No one among those responsible for the racial laws and their implementation was punished: persecution on a racial basis was not considered a specific crime.¹² Thanks to the aborted purge, almost all the signatories of Mussolini’s infamous “Manifesto on Race” of 1938 were to be found at their university posts soon after the end of the war, if they ever had to interrupt their service.¹³ In 1957 one of them, Sabato Visco, even received a gold medal for his work on behalf of art and culture and was honored with one of the orders of merit of the Republic. The former president of the Tribunal on Race from 1938-43, Gaetano Azzariti, ended his career in the 1950s as president of the Constitutional Court of the democratic Republic.¹⁴ Hundreds of producers of ideology more or less ‘organic’ to the fascist regime remained at their posts in the school system, in the universities, in the country’s newspapers.

If antisemitism may have been muted – while certainly not missing – anti-black racism was not even perceived as an issue by the general public and the governing political class, which continued to be supportive of the Italian presence in what were called at the time the “ancient” –namely prefascist – colonies.¹⁵ The war crimes in the colonies were completely ignored.

III

Another very important factor that characterized the political and intellectual environment of postwar Italy was the continuing – and in fact even greater – political and institutional role played by the Catholic Church, especially in the context of the early Cold War. Until his death in 1958, Pius XII was solidly on the side of Italian conservative forces, as obsessed about communism as he was in the 1930s (or perhaps more). In 1948 he himself strongly advocated the anti-communist crusade that preceded the elections of that year, leading to the resounding victory of Christian Democracy, the party that would be in government until its collapse in 1992-93. What were the views of the Pope and more generally of the Catholic Church with regard to race and racism?¹⁶

While trying to claim an antiracist stance as well as alleging an antiracist past, the postwar Church in fact shared the racial prejudice still widespread in postwar Italian society towards people with a darker skin color, a legacy of both colonialism and fascism. Indeed, important clerics and militant right-wing Catholics had a role in actively supporting or reproducing – more or less subtly – these prejudices (I am leaving aside the issue of the continuing antisemitism of the Catholic clergy, which shows the inability of the Church, among others, to grasp the enormity of the Holocaust).¹⁷

As Lucia Ceci and others have argued, the Catholic Church had accommodated itself not only to fascist antisemitism, but also to the racist colonial laws introduced by the regime after the occupation of Ethiopia. It did not oppose the 1937 decree which criminalized those unions between Italian citizens and colonial subjects which were commonly referred to as *madamato* or *madamismo*, namely the practice of concubinage through which colonized women provided the “comfort of home”

¹¹ On the limits of the Italian postwar amnesty see Roy Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial, 1943-1948* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1991).

¹² See Simon Levis Sullam, *I carnefici italiani. Scene dal genocidio degli ebrei, 1943-1945* (Milan, Feltrinelli, 2015), in particular pp. 111-114.

¹³ See Tommaso Dell’Era, “Destino degli scienziati razzisti nel dopoguerra,” in *Storia della Shoah in Italia. Vicende, memorie, rappresentazioni*, vol 2, *Memorie, rappresentazioni, eredità*, a cura di marcello Flores, Sinmon Levis Sullam, Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, Enzo Traverso, Torino, UTET, 2010, pp.235-247.

¹⁴ Levis Sullam, *I carnefici italiani*, p. 113.

¹⁵ See Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2002), pp. 428-433.

¹⁶ This section and the next one utilize material that appears also in my essay “‘Gli italiani non sono razzisti’: costruzioni dell’italianità tra gli anni Cinquanta e il 1968,” in Gaia Giuliani, ed., *Il colore della nazione* (Milan, Mondadori, 2015), pp. 34-37.

¹⁷ On this continuing antisemitism see Elena Mazzini, *L’antiebraismo cattolico dopo la Shoah. Tradizioni e culture nell’Italia del secondo dopoguerra (1945-1974)* (Roma, Viella, 2012).

to male settlers.¹⁸ In fact it praised the “morality” of the decree because it would repress the “immorality” of these practices. It even offered its support for the policing of the relationships between natives and colonists: missionaries would collaborate to impede “hybrid unions for the sake of the wise hygienic and social motivations of the state.”¹⁹ Some churchmen, to be sure, criticized the use of the term “race” when applied to humans, but their preference for the term “*stirpe*” or stock did not make much of a difference in practice since fascists and nationalists alike commonly used it as a synonym of race.²⁰

Ideas and attitudes on race were slow to change after the fall of fascism in the general population too, and it did not help that the Italian anthropological community did not even bother to translate (or discuss) the critical statements on race issued by Unesco in 1950 and 1951.²¹ Needless to say, nobody bothered to remove racist demographers such as Corrado Gini and his former students from their posts in Italian universities, as was to a large extent the case in the German academic world.

After the war, moreover, the Church was busy rewriting its own history by associating racism primarily with Nazism, and only marginally with Italian fascism. Since Pius XI in the 1930s had mildly criticized the extreme forms that ideologies of race and nation had taken, and since a number of Catholic clergymen and nuns had helped individual Jews to escape persecution, the Church felt exonerated from any possible responsibility. A blanket of silence fell on its lack of any explicit condemnation of antisemitism and on its active collaboration in racist colonial policies. In fact the entry on “racism” in the authoritative *Enciclopedia cattolica*, commissioned by the Vatican after the war and published between 1948 and 1953, stressed the existence of a clear “antithesis” between “the doctrine and political practice of racism and the tenets of Catholic morals, which teaches the equality in Christ of all men.”²² For the Catholic Church self-absolution came easy. Given its role in Italian society, this self-serving narrative supported also the self-absolution of the Italian people.

IV

Yet exactly in 1953, the year in which the volume of the *Enciclopedia cattolica* with the entry on racism was published, various newspapers reported stories on the “little mulattoes” born in Italy during and right after the war. They stressed the hostility which the children met with in Italian society, particularly as they began to attend elementary school and were exposed to the “unconscious cruelty” of the other pupils. At the same time they also reported on the efforts of a Catholic priest from Milan, Don Carlo Gnocchi, to help them by providing assistance and education.

Until that year, the press had reported on the condition of these children only sporadically. But Don Gnocchi was a powerful clergyman in postwar Italy, the most important Catholic “entrepreneur of charity” of that period, and he had important friends in the world of publishing.²³ In the fascist regime he had served first as chaplain of the Opera Nazionale Balilla and then as military chaplain during the war in the Balkans and the Soviet Union. In the postwar period he had established a reputation as a major figure in the field of assistance to severely wounded/ mutilated children by creating a foundation devoted to them in 1948, which three years later extended its functions to include assistance to children with poliomyelitis.

¹⁸ I borrow this definition of *madamismo* from Sandra Ponzanesi, “The Color of Love: *Madamismo* and Interracial Relations in the Italian Colonies,” *Research in African Literatures* 2 (2001), p. 155.

¹⁹ See Lucia Ceci, *L'interesse superiore. Il Vaticano e l'Italia di Mussolini* (Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2013), p. 200.

²⁰ See Pavan Ilaria, “Fascismo, antisemitismo, razzismo. Un dibattito aperto,” in Daniele Menozzi and Andrea Mariuzzo, eds., *A settant'anni dalle leggi razziali. Profili culturali, giuridici e istituzionali dell'antisemitismo* (Rome, carocci, 2010), pp. 31-52.

²¹ See Claudio Pogliano, *L'ossessione della razza. Antropologia e genetica nel XX secolo* (Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2005).

²² See entry on racism in *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, vol. 10 (Città del Vaticano, Ente per l'Enciclopedia cattolica e per il libro cattolico, 1953).

²³ I borrow the expression “entrepreneur of charity” from the biography of Don Gnocchi by Giorgio Rumi and Edoardo Bressan, *Don Carlo Gnocchi. Vita e opera di un grande imprenditore della carità* (Milan, Mondadori, 2002).

The Catholic Church was heavily involved in the business of assistance and intended to maintain its strong grip on it, especially at a time when it was engaged in the anti-communist struggle and determined to contrast all attempts on the part of the Communist Party to influence the youth.²⁴ The Christian Democrats in power very much appreciated the role of the Church, even though some were critical of the inefficiency of welfare provisions and pushed for reform. Don Gnocchi's opinion on matters of assistance for "war children" was even sought by Christian democratic politicians such as Giulio Andreotti, the undersecretary to the office of the prime minister in the early 1950s.

At the beginning of the 1950s Don Gnocchi became involved also with the "brown babies", as a representative for the Italian government on the board of a quasi-state agency which provided assistance to war victims, the Opera Nazionale Invalidi di Guerra (National Agency for War Invalids, also known by the acronym ONIG) established in 1917. Soon he developed his own ideas on what should be done about what he called the "problem" of the "little mulattoes" and since he did not trust state "bureaucracies"²⁵ and their slowness, he began pursuing a plan of his own. In 1952 he was writing to a prospective benefactor, an Italian who lived in Brazil:

In Italy another severe problem of the postwar has emerged: the problem of the children of the black soldiers who fought with the allies: the problem of the little mulattoes. Until now these little ones were almost kept hidden by their families; but now they are seven/eight years old and they must go to school and learn a trade. At schools the other children throw stones at them; they do not often have the opportunity to learn a job and generally they do not have much of an inclination [to work]. The girls, very precocious, are even more dangerous. If this goes on, they'll all end up living a nomadic existence or join the criminal class.²⁶

The last line of this quotation expresses a widespread fear shared by the middle classes in the postwar period, namely that the large number of children orphaned by the war would turn into a delinquent class, creating a major social problem. But besides that, Don Gnocchi harbored precise stereotypes about the psychological characteristics of what he called the "black or colored race," peppered, so to speak, with the inevitable clerical (and not only) misogyny of those years. Elsewhere he mentioned how their character was "very different than that of our children: they are restless, asocial, primitive, prone to fight" even though they were also "affectionate, generous and irascible" as well as "intelligent and very vital."²⁷ More interestingly, he also mentioned some "experts on the problem of the mixed-race" who had told him that "the black race becomes more dominant" in the adolescent years (we will see later who these "experts" might have been).²⁸ This had led him to conclude that "it would be better to prepare other ways for these children" noting (elsewhere) that "in Italy they would always be excluded and strangers."²⁹

Don Gnocchi thought that the problem should be solved first of all by gathering these children together in special institutions, as he had already done in the case of other "war victims," namely the children severely wounded by the bombing and the military ordnance disseminated on the soil of the peninsula, known as the "*mutilatini*" ("little mutilated ones"), a term that sounds a bit like "*mulattini*"

²⁴ On the Catholic attacks against the Italian Communist Party (accused of trying not only to influence the youth but also of planning to send children assisted by party members to the Soviet Union) see Juri Meda, *È arrivata la bufera. L'infanzia italiana e l'esperienza della Guerra (1940-1950)* (Macerata, Edizioni dell'Università di Macerata, 2007), pp. 275-276.

²⁵ He seemed to have especially disliked what he called the "masonic and secularist orientation" of ONIG and was afraid that "his work would be suffocated by the bureaucracy": see Stefano Zurlo, *L'ardimento. Racconto della vita di Don Carlo Gnocchi* (Milan, Rizzoli, 2006).

²⁶ Letter to Virgilio Isola, 20 maggio 1952, Archivio Storico della Fondazione Don Gnocchi, faldone 15, categoria "Mulattini," fascicolo "Varie."

²⁷ See typed note in Archivio Storico della Fondazione Don Gnocchi, faldone 15, categoria "Mulattini," fascicolo "Varie". The note is not signed, but was most likely written by Don Gnocchi. Almost exactly the same words appeared in an unsigned article entitled "'Quando diventerò bianco? Chiedeva il piccolo mulatto'" published in the Milanese daily *Corriere d'informazione* on 18/19 December 1953.

²⁸ See typed note cited in note 19.

²⁹ See letter cited in note 18.

“little mulattoes”). According to the clergyman as well as the president of ONIG, the two categories had something in common, namely the former had been physically disabled by the war, while the “little mulattoes” were “spiritually disabled.” But once they had been given an education, a country had to be found that would accept them.

Significantly, Don Gnocchi came up with the idea of sending them to Brazil, a country where race mixing was common and where – he thought – they could possibly find work in the coffee plantations. The Italians who lived in Brazil (like the benefactor with whom he corresponded) could help in this respect.³⁰ To this end, Don Gnocchi also established contacts with a Catholic congregation which had missions in South America.

The Catholic press always reported the views of the clergyman almost verbatim. Even though, at times (especially from the second half of the 1950s), newspapers headlines placed the terms “*mulattini*” or “*mulatti*” in quotation marks, possibly because of some uneasiness with the terminology, there was unanimity on the benefits of the projected transfer. The Vatican too agreed. The only voices openly critical of the plan came from the leftist press, especially after it discovered that Don Gnocchi took the children away from the care of other priests, who had fallen into disgrace with the Vatican for allegedly leftist sympathies. These other priests, former members of the Jesuit order, had created a home for all “war children” without distinction of skin color.³¹

V

Let us go back to the language used in the representation of the “brown babies.” We have seen how the presence of these children was always cast in terms of a “problem.” The “problem of the children of the negro soldiers,” “the problem of the mulatto children, one of the most painful of the postwar period”: these were some of the headlines which appeared in the Italian press of the early 1950s. But what kind of problem could a few hundred or even two or three thousands (we do not have any reliable statistics) of slightly dark-skinned children be? It was not all that clear, also because it was never explained explicitly. While their stories of suffering or abuse by other children or by adults would lead us to think that the problem was the racial prejudice of society, the term “problem” was rather ambiguous. Judging from the way in which some Catholic newspapers referred to these children – one calling them the *colpe colorate* (“colored sins”) – they were a problem for their mothers and for society as a whole as they reminded them of events that they would rather forget. As only violence and “vice” were supposed to be at the origins of their conception,³² their presence generated an enduring sense of uneasiness and shame.³³

But the term problem alluded also to their being essentially different, to their intrinsic difference in a white society. As we have seen, there were some other things that these children were thought to have in common besides the color of their skin, namely some psychological traits, and these were not just the product of negative environmental influences, but were linked to their very essence and temperament. Hence, if the children of color were a problem in themselves, it was probably better to send them away, to a country where their color would not be a problem.

³⁰ See the letter to Virgilio Isola and also the letter to Lucilio Ancona Lopez, who was also -like Isola- a resident of San Paolo. Both letters are in Archivio Storico della Fondazione Don Gnocchi,

³¹ The two clergymen were Don Giovanni Taddei and Don Giuseppe Valdo Pasello: for more on them and the activities see my article “Fear of Small Numbers,” pp. 552-553.

³² See “‘Siamo figli del sole e della luna,’” *Corriere Lombardo* 30 January, 1954 (signed G.M.C.).

³³ See “Apriamo le braccia ai figli della guerra perduta,” *La patria* (Milan) 14 December, 1953 (unsigned article). The absence of choice on the part of the women is often underlined and this was obviously true in the case of the women who had been raped (a notorious episode of mass rapes took place south of Rome in the spring of 1944 as the French Expeditionary Corps which included many North African troops moved towards the capital). The case of the women who actually fell in love with non-white soldiers was completely excluded from the dominant narrative. One of them is the author of a moving memoir recently published: see Silvana Galli, *Little Blonde. Perché tutti sappiano che mio figlio è stato una scelta e non uno sbaglio* (Lido di Camaiore, Edizioni Cinquemarzo, 2012).

The Milanese priest (but also other Catholics operating in the field of assistance to abandoned children) shared stereotypes on mixed-race and black people which had been circulating for some time. The racist propaganda of fascism in particular had constantly presented mixed-race people as a “problem” from both a biological standpoint and from a political standpoint, a danger to the maintenance of the superiority and prestige of the white race in the colonies.³⁴ In 1940 the regime prohibited Italian men from recognizing the children they had with African women in a law that was abrogated only in 1947 when the Italian democratic government was campaigning to maintain its “ancient” colonies and thus wanted to use the law to advance its cause.³⁵

This explicit racism does not show up in the papers of Don Gnocchi, who in fact publicly distanced himself from it by making a point of renaming the children “children of the sun” because the term “little mulattoes” sounded too “zoological.”³⁶ And yet the fact that he – and many others – saw these children as lacking a nationality (although they were born and raised in Italy and had Italian citizenship unless they had been recognized by their natural fathers),³⁷ and the fact that he grouped them in one category based on phenotypical and psychological traits, is very indicative not only of the persistence of old racial categories, but also of a difficulty to conceive of the non-white as fully Italian.

Don Gnocchi always referred to Latin America as a possible destination for the children, and not to the United States, although many of their biological fathers were presumably African-American soldiers. We know extremely little about the intentions and desires of these men, some of whom actually recognized their child while in Italy only to disappear after they returned to their country.³⁸ Some of them were most likely discouraged from taking responsibility by the US War Department’s refusal to help black GIs reunite with European women, not to mention the anti-miscegenation laws that were still on the books of several American southern states.³⁹ As a matter of fact, quite a few African-American families, fearing for the well-being of the children, were willing to adopt them. Some of them also succeeded in doing so, as has been documented in particular in the case of the German “brown babies,”⁴⁰ a solution much supported by the German government.

It is probable that the Italian government too favored a possible transfer of a number of these children to the US, although at this stage of the research no evidence has been found that could document such an attempt. Be that as it may, the fantasy about the disappearance of the “brown babies” through their transfer to the other side of the Atlantic must have circulated at that time since it showed up in the 1950 film mentioned earlier, *Il Mulatto*. As Shelleen Greene has pointed out, the film’s storyline promoted the acceptance of the child based on a discourse of Christian universalism. Yet, on the other hand, it also racialized the child, and in its ending indulged in the scenario of the actual exit of the “foreign body” from the nation based on a segregationist vision of the relationship between the races.⁴¹ The film was produced under the auspices of the Unione Cinematografica

³⁴ See in particular the official journal *La Difesa della razza*, one of three periodicals funded by the fascist state to propagate the official racial doctrine. On this journal see Francesco Cassata, “*La Difesa della razza*.” *Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista* (Turin, Einaudi, 2009).

³⁵ For the text of the law see Stefania Bariati, *La disciplina giuridica della cittadinanza italiana* (Milan, Giuffrè, 1989), pp. 85-87. On the circumstances of its abrogation see Giulia Barrera, “Wrestling with Race on the Eve of Human Rights: The British Management of the Color Line in Post-Fascist Eritrea,” in Carolyn Brown, Judith Byfield, Timothy Parsons, and Ahmad Sikainga, eds., *Africa and World War II* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 259-275.

³⁶ See Lorenzo Bedeschi, “Don Gnocchi vuole dare una laurea ai ‘negretti,’” *Il popolo nuovo* (Turin), 17 December 1953.

³⁷ According to the law on citizenship of 1912 which was still in the books in the postwar period: while privileging a paternal *jus sanguinis*, the law relied on maternal *jus sanguinis* if the father was unknown, and on *ius soli* if a child was born of unknown parents. For the text of the law see Bariati, *La disciplina giuridica*, pp. 53-58.

³⁸ This is the case of I.S., who recognized his daughter born in Lido di Camaiore (northern Tuscany) in 1945.

³⁹ On these issues see Brenda Gayle Plummer, “Brown Babies. Race, Gender, and Policy after World War II,” in *Windows on Freedom. Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988*, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 67-91. See also Fehrenbach, *Race After Hitler*, ch. 5.

⁴⁰ Fehrenbach, *Race After Hitler*, ch. 5.

⁴¹ See Shelleen Greene, *Equivocal Subjects Between Italy and Africa. Constructions of Racial and National Identity in the Italian Cinema* (New York-London, Continuum, 2012), pp. 11, 123-131.

Internazionale fra i Cattolici, a newly founded organization to watch over the moral acceptability of new releases. Evidently, it did not see anything wrong in the film ending.

Toxi, a film made in Germany a couple of years later, featuring the story of a biracial girl born during the Allied occupation, also indulged in a similar fantasy of disappearance,⁴² although it was a much more empathetic picture than the Italian one (as well as more successful at the box office). At least the German movie referred to the child protagonist by her name, and not just by a racial category.

VI

Don Gnocchi did not represent the whole Catholic Church – and, to be sure, not all Catholic clergymen agreed with his project of sending the children to Brazil – but he was not an outlier either. He had powerful friends in the governing party, Christian Democracy, as well as in the Vatican, and knew another influential figure of Italian Catholicism very close to Pius XII, namely Luigi Gedda, a physician and a student of genetics who advised the pope in matters of reproduction. The latter was most likely one of the “experts” on the mixed-race children to whom Don Gnocchi referred in his letter to the prospective benefactor that we mentioned earlier.

In the annals of Italian history Gedda is better known for being the right-wing crusader who, under prodding from the Pope, organized the anticommunist propaganda campaign which helped the Christian Democrats to win the elections of 1948 and to establish a solid conservative regime until the early 1960s.⁴³ But he had a long-term interest in issues of heredity and in the subject of interracial mixing. He too, like many of the other characters in this story, had supported fascism and its racial policies. In September 1938 on the pages of the journal of the Catholic University of Milan he voiced his views against unions between “races” that were too “distant” from each other such as the “Aryans,” on the one hand, and the “Semitic and Camitic races,” on the other.⁴⁴ In this article he also expressed his approval of the views of Guido Landra, the anthropologist who wrote, apparently under Mussolini’s dictation, the “Manifesto on race,” which appeared on the pages of major Italian newspapers in July 1938, proclaiming the Italian people to be “Aryan” and not, as a number of anthropologists has claimed, “Mediterranean.” A few months later, in November, the regime introduced its infamous anti-Semitic legislation.

After the fall of fascism, Gedda remained a die-hard racist who continued to claim the validity of a “science of race” even when most of the international scientific community had distanced itself from it. In 1960, in collaboration with a couple of other physicians/geneticists, he published a big tome entitled *Il meticcio di Guerra* (war metissage) in which forty four non-white war children – several of whom had been in the care of Don Gnocchi – were measured and tested in all sorts of invasive and useless ways to determine their physical and mental traits. Head, hair, eyes, noses, lips, ears, limbs, feet, hands: not an inch of their bodies was left unexamined and unmeasured. Various psychological and intellectual tests were performed. Pictures of these children – repeatedly referred to as “materiale meticcio” (metis material) – were included at the end of the volume. They distinctly resembled police shots and some of the children look startled.⁴⁵ The authors also found educational segregation to be preferable for the mixed-race children, even though by the time the volume was published others had rejected the idea.

⁴² See the fine analysis by Fehrenbach, *Race After Hitler*, ch. 4.

⁴³ There are no scholarly biographies of Gedda, who died in 2000, and no reconstructions of his activity as self-made geneticist. For some recent essays on various aspects of his politics see Ernesto Preziosi, ed., *Luigi Gedda nella storia della Chiesa e del Paese* (Roma, Ave, 2013).

⁴⁴ See Luigi Gedda, “A proposito di razza,” *Vita e pensiero. Rassegna italiana di coltura*, 24, vol. 29: 9 (September 1938), pp. 408-416.

⁴⁵ See Luigi Gedda, Angelo Serio e Adriana Mercuri, *Il meticcio di Guerra e altri casi* (Roma, Istituto G. Mendel, 1960).

VII

Let me now go back to the “Brazilian project” of Don Gnocchi (which probably never came to fruition because of the death of the clergyman in 1956). The idea takes us to the culture of what one could call “missionary colonialism,” the breeding ground of Catholic racial stereotypes. The Catholic clergy in general expressed views that, if not explicitly racist, were strongly Eurocentric. In the 1950s missionary periodicals, such as that of the important order of the Missionari della Consolata, based in Turin, still thought in terms of the “conquering Church” and exalted its civilizing mission. The old missionary paternalism towards Africans which represented them as primitives with a big heart, children who needed to be educated (unless they were active in anticolonial movements, in which case the tone changed, especially if these movements embraced communist views) continued to be strongly present.⁴⁶ These views of the “African character” of those whom the missionaries commonly called “*nostri moretti*” (our little Moors) were in turn transferred to the mixed-race children born in Italy.

The ecclesiastical world also continued for the most part to support colonialism. It is well known that in spite of having lost the war, Italy tried hard to cling to its colonies, but perhaps less known is the extent to which some churchmen also lent a hand. In January 1948 one of the most prolific contributors of the *Civiltà cattolica*, the Jesuit Antonio Messineo, who specialized in issues of international politics and law, published a piece denouncing the “national and imperialistic egoisms” of the victorious powers that wanted to rob Italy of its “ancient” colonies, and pleaded for the continuing presence of Italy in Africa with arguments which recalled the national-fascist exaltation of the fertility of the Italian people, which would allegedly demonstrate “the health of the Italian family,” and which needed to expand because the Italian soil has limited resources. If this did not happen, a “very severe domestic problem” would emerge whose consequences ought to be feared, the Jesuit warned, recalling how the pope had already invited stronger nations not to exclude the weaker ones in the partition of economic resources.⁴⁷

If fears connected to the Cold War possibly pushed the Jesuit to voice these dire warnings, it is troubling to notice the extent to which Messineo deployed the old arguments used by fascism and imperialist nationalism, intertwining them with the narrative of “*italiani brava gente*” (Italians good-hearted people) which became hegemonic in the aftermath of the war. In the Jesuit’s narrative the nationalist language of the “superior civilization” pioneered by Italy was combined with the idea of their “thousand-year old” culture infused with “universalist ideas full of deep humaneness” which would make the Italian “organically unable to look with contempt at the populations of a different civilization, color or race.” And, obviously, the Italians would be better than other peoples in the task of educating these “backward” populations. Messineo also adopted the rhetoric of the virtues of Italian work: in Tripolitania, he claimed, “the squalid and arid desert was boldly assaulted by Italian colonists and converted into a flourishing and fertile garden.” He concluded with a rather threatening warning: one cannot oblige “without impunity” “peoples conscious of their own past and culture and abilities... to give up the prospect of a better future.” In fact sooner or later these peoples “will try to reach it [anyway], willing, if necessary, to overcome any obstacle.”

One perhaps should not be surprised if ten years earlier, again on the pages of the *Civiltà Cattolica*, this same Jesuit father had authored a piece full of loud praise for the head of Italian East Africa Marshal Rodolfo Graziani and the “marvelous speed of [his] military successes” to which the nation supposedly owed its gratitude.⁴⁸ Only a few months earlier Graziani had massacred thousands of Ethiopian civilians as retaliation for a failed attempt on his life organized by Ethiopian partisans.

⁴⁶ For an example of this representation see Father Luigi Brisio, “Cuore di neri,” *Missioni Consolata* 46: 9-10 (1944), p. 97. On the encounter between this attitude and the new preoccupations with the spread of leftist anticolonial movements see the unsigned article “Il pericolo del comunismo nell’Africa,” *Missioni Consolata* 59: 17 (1957), pp. 5-7.

⁴⁷ See Antonio Messineo, SJ, “Sulla sorte futura delle colonie italiane,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 99: 1 (January 1948), pp. 127-138.

⁴⁸ See Antonio Messineo, “Rassegna coloniale,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 89: 1 (1938), pp.57-66.

VIII

The study of what happened to the “brown babies” in postwar Italy shows the extent to which the childhood experiences of many of them were shaped by the presence of the Catholic Church and its vast network of homes for abandoned and orphan children. Religious personnel, and nuns in particular, were in charge of the children, and even though some were undoubtedly trying to help the children, they lived in a white world and had formed ideas about the “black character” that limited the options they offered them. The weight of these stereotypes surfaced also in the testimonies of the men and women who grew up in these structures. *Nero di Puglia*, the only memoir-denunciation published by a member of this cohort, points exactly to this strong presence. The author of this powerful text, Antonio Campobasso, narrates his vicissitudes after he was placed at age nine in an institution run by nuns and he recalls how one of them told him once that the color of his skin mirrored the “dirt of his soul.” He also recalls how on another occasion he was pushed to the end of a procession so that “his color would not offend the little blond ones who opened the procession.”⁴⁹ The association between whiteness and purity that for centuries Christianity has spread in Western culture shaped even these rather mundane practices.⁵⁰

A reportage on the Italian “war children” published by *Ebony* in 1970 spoke of their “identity crisis” as they grew up in a white society which strongly stigmatized illegitimacy. A young woman, Marilú, whom the Little Sisters of the Redemption found abandoned as an infant in northern Tuscany, noticed that in spite of the order’s name, she did not find much redemption. She and the other children were taken to a lot of funerals of benefactors and did not receive more than a basic education. She had hoped to be adopted, but nobody adopted her as Italian families preferred white girls. At age 18 she left the orphanage to work as a maid in a middle-class family in Milan and she recalls how black maids were “in fashion” at the time in those milieus.⁵¹

Catholic institutions figured prominently also in the experiences of biracial boys and girls born in the Italian colonies and post-colonies – not to mention that schools run by religious personnel always played an important role as agents of “colonial acculturation.” The fascist decree of 1937, which prohibited interracial unions, led to the abandonment of many biracial children in these institutions. Later, after the Italians had lost the colonies, but were still present in Somalia as administrators under the UN trust, many mixed-race children were forced to enter children’s homes run by religious orders.⁵² Priests and especially nuns also functioned as intermediaries between middle-class Italian families and the young women from Eritrea who migrated to Italy in the 1960s and 1970s and ended up finding jobs almost exclusively as domestic workers.⁵³

IX

Let us now move to a conclusion. The vicissitudes of the Italian “brown babies” show that in the post-war democratic republic formal declarations of equality before the law coexisted with a culture still profoundly imbued with racist stereotypes, combining the legacy of colonial and fascist racisms with the racial paternalism of Catholic and especially of missionary culture. To be sure, as the civil rights movement in the US and the anticolonial movements all over the world would radically challenge the

⁴⁹ Antonio Campobasso, *Nero di Puglia* (Milan, Feltrinelli, 1980), p. 36.

⁵⁰ See Richard Dyer, *White* (London, Routledge, 1997).

⁵¹ See Mario Senese, “Identity Crisis Italian Style: Country’s 20,000 ‘Brown Babies’ Reach Adulthood,” *Ebony*, August 1970. This very high estimate may refer in fact to the number of war children in general, and not just the “brown babies,” but at this stage we have no reliable estimates for either group.

⁵² Their stories have not been fully reconstructed, but see Francesca Caferri, “I bimbi italiani strappati alla Somalia,” *la Repubblica* 17 giugno 2008. See also Barbara Faedda, “Italo-Somali: una minoranza che l’Italia vuole ignorare. Le tristi conseguenze della politica italiana coloniale e postcoloniale,” *Diritto&Diritti* (December 2001) (available online at <http://www.diritto.it/materiali/antropologia/faedda16.html>)

⁵³ See Sabrina Marchetti, *Le ragazze di Asmara. Lavoro domestico e migrazione postcoloniale* (Roma, Ediesse, 2011).

status quo, the Catholic Church too began to revise its language and became more eager to present itself as the bearer of a universalist message. In 1956 while Gedda was subjecting the biracial children to all sort of invasive measurements, Pius XII received some of them in an audience and the Vatican newspaper made a point of underlining how happy they were to see “seminarians and priests of color.”⁵⁴

Italy’s experience had much in common with that of the other European countries which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, and parallels can be easily traced. Transnational connections could also be mentioned, and in fact several studies in recent years have emphasized how the postwar idiom of race was a transnational and particular transatlantic construction.⁵⁵ This was certainly also true in the case of postwar Italy: Gedda for example closely collaborated with die-hard racial geneticists in England and the US.⁵⁶ The kind of research he promoted was not unique to Italy. In other countries too after 1945 anthropometry was still alive and well and mixed-race people were subjected to tests and measurements of all kinds: it happened with the anthropological studies of *Mischlingskinder* in Germany in the 1950s. It was still happening in France a decade later: an ethnographic/anthropometric study on the mixed-race children brought to the metropole from the former colonies in East Asia was published as late as 1967.⁵⁷ Studies on the assistance and education of biracial children born in the colonies have revealed the limits of the separation between church and state even in societies where this separation was more thorough than in Italy.⁵⁸

But even if the role of the Catholic Church in the field of public assistance was not an Italian peculiarity, in this country the Church was uniquely powerful and its institutional reach much broader than in any other country. Its presence profoundly shaped the self-understanding of the “character” of the Italian people and helped to propagate the view that racism was not really part of its mentality because of the supposedly beneficial influence of Catholic universalism. Moreover, as an institution the Church had an interest in suppressing the memory of the past collaboration with a regime hardly distinguishable from that of the Nazis in terms of the legal formulation and reach of its racist legislation.

It may be arguable that this suppression fostered contemporary Italian historiography’s neglect of post-1945 racism in contrast to the historiography of other European countries where histories of the continuing racial understanding of national identity have been appearing at least since the early 1990s. Other factors no doubt have been at play. It is, however, a fact that ecclesiastical archives are often very inaccessible, and when they are accessible, they are poorly inventoried.⁵⁹ This has not helped the production of historical knowledge in a society where the Church has been playing – and continues to play – a vastly important role in political and social life in spite of a decreasing number of practicing Catholics.

But the Catholic Church was not (and is not) just an Italian institution, it is a transnational and global actor. As we have seen, as he developed his plans for the relocation of the biracial children, Don Carlo Gnocchi relied on his connections with the Italian diaspora and the Catholic missions in

⁵⁴ See “Storie di mulattini della guerra,” *L’osservatore della domenica*, 24 June 1956. The article also mentions that the children were being studied in order to favor their integration in the white society in which they were destined to live. The piece shows seems clearly anxious to underline the interracial perspective of the Church perhaps in contrast to the articles published just three years later which favored Don Gnocchi’s plan.

⁵⁵ See for example Manfred Berg and Simon Wendt, eds., *Racism in the Modern World. Historical Perspectives on Cultural Transfer and Adaptation* (Berghahn Books, 2013). Fehrenbach’s *Race After Hitler* is also a successful example of transnational history of racial ideology.

⁵⁶ See Cassata, *Building the New Man*, chs. 6 and 7.

⁵⁷ See Emmanuelle Saada, *Empire’s Children. Race, Filiation, and Citizenship in the French Colonies* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 219.

⁵⁸ See for example the case of France as documented in Saada, *Empire’s Children* and the case of the Dutch colonies studied by Anne Laura Stoler in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 2002).

⁵⁹ This applies, unfortunately, also to many state archives. The Catholic Church is under no obligation to open its archives to the public, even though state authorities have encouraged it to do so.

South America. These connections still need further investigation. The global reach of the Catholic Church as a global player is one other reason why historians should pay more attention to the institutional and cultural role of organized religion in contemporary European societies, to which Max Weber forcefully called attention more than a hundred years ago.

