

Book Review

Andreu Xavier & Mónica Bolufer (eds.), *European Modernity and the Passionate South. Gender and Nation in Spain and Italy in the Long Nineteenth Century* (= *Studia Imagologica*, vol. 32), Leiden/Boston: Brill: 2023, X+271 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-52721-8 (hardback).

In all recent European crises, be they related to questions of the economy, immigration, or disease control, an ingrained North-South polarity exacerbates political tensions. Government policies, public information and opinion-making often activate stereotypes – about a wise, industrious, modern and masculine North, against a frivolous, lazy, backward and feminine South – that are so rooted as to have become common currency everywhere.

Consider, for example, the significant crisis that was triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic four years ago. In an article published in *Opendemocracy.net* about the debate on the Coronavirus Recovery Fund that had animated the European Council of 17 July 2020, Luiza Bialasiewicz denounced ‘the pernicious persistence of national stereotypes that continue to afflict political positioning and decision-making within the Union’. The debate in question had, in fact, seen the ‘frugal four’ (that is, Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden) blame the ‘irresponsible’ and ‘excessive’ spending of the proposed EU-wide Recovery Fund, notably by southern European countries. By way of example, Bialasiewicz recalled the then Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s attack on the ‘spendthrift’ Italians as well as an article in the same vein published in the Dutch weekly, *Elsevier Weekblad*, including its cover depicting ‘at the top, two industrious Dutch workers, below, two supposed Mediterranean types, lounging in the sun’. But she also

recalled other European crises (e.g. the 2008 financial crisis) in order to show how certain ingrained national stereotypes, generally directed from Northern Europe to the South (typically depicted as childish and irresponsible), have played a key role in various EU decision-making.¹

It is precisely by alluding to these recent European crises that Xavier Andreu and Mónica Bolufer introduce the volume *European Modernity and the Passionate South. Gender and Nation in Spain and Italy in the Long Nineteenth Century*. The book offers a reflection on the imagined geographical, climatological, and cultural divide between North and South Europe, as well as on the gender and ethnic stereotypes that characterise them, from a historical and imagological perspective. More specifically, the thirteen essays gathered in the volume aim to 'reveal how discourses on nation and modernity, gender and other categories were mixed in the construction of national imaginaries on and from the European South' (p. 9). In doing so, they address the close interconnection between ethnic, social and gender stereotyping.

The volume has been developed in the framework of two research projects, in which the two editors are involved: the ERC Advanced Grant Project CIRGEN. *Circulating Gender in the Global Enlightenment. Ideas, Networks, Agencies*, whose principal investigator is Mónica Bolufer Peruga, and *Narrar el gènere i la nació: Espanya, 1843–1898*, funded by the Generalitat Valenciana, in which Xavier Andreu participates. It collects some of the papers presented at the conference 'Southern passions. Narrating nation and gender (18th–19th centuries)', originally planned at the University of Valencia on 7 October 2020, but held online – precisely because of the prevention measures taken in the context of the second wave of COVID-19.

As the editors explain in the introduction, the focus on the 'long nineteenth century' is due to the fact that at the end of the eighteenth century, the dichotomy between a 'modern North' and a 'backward South' had not yet been decided (p. 6). Actually, until well into the sixteenth century, the European South was held in high regard, due to its

considerable contribution to the building of European civilisation. However, in the nineteenth century, both Spain and Italy ‘ended up becoming paradigmatic examples of great European civilisations in decline’ (p. 9–10), which helps to explain the volume’s focus on these two countries. In the course of the century, the temperamental European North-South dichotomy, which emerged as a powerful trope in political nationalism during the resistance to Napoleon, was enshrined in academic science (history, philology, ethnography) and became a universally accepted principle guiding political doctrine, diplomacy and foreign policy. Moreover, it received ‘scientific’ support from the spread of a ‘science of national characters’ (namely, *Völkerpsychologie*, or folk psychology), which was based on the conviction that it was scientifically possible to identify the tendencies of national mentalities through their cultural, economic, social and political objectification.²

In their introduction, Andreu and Bolufer, while presenting the essays, outline the main themes that recur across them: the construction of the very idea of Europe in terms of oppositions (North/South, West/East); the progressive identification of Northern Europe with modernity and, as a result, the ‘orientalisation’ of the backward European South, increasingly viewed as the ‘internal Other’; the debate, very heated since the end of the eighteenth century, on ‘national characters’ and the influence of climate on them; and the condition of women and relations between sexes as indicators of civilisation and power relations.

All these themes are developed and illustrated, to varying degrees, by the volume’s contributors by means of different cultural materials, such as travel writings, novels, biographies, philosophical writings, historiographical texts, journal articles, and paintings – although literary texts are the most popular choice.

The thirteen essays are arranged chronologically and are consistent with the intended objectives, providing literary and historical examples of the ongoing processes of definition and ethnic and gender stereotypisation of the European South.

They all successfully convey the dynamic and open nature that characterised the process of defining (geographically, culturally, ethnically, socially) Southern Europe and how this was traversed by a gender dimension. This relentless dynamic was marked by the formation of modern European nation-states, the making of national identities, the overlapping of ethnotypes and sociotypes, the gendering of ethnotypes, and the 'Othering' of Southern Europe, which was considered an 'exotic and picturesque territory situated on the edge of Western modernity' (p. 5). Particularly intriguing, in this regard, are the chapters by Joep Leerssen and Xavier Andreu. In his essay on Mediterranean exoticism and masculinity, Leerssen shows, through the analysis of some literary tropes and novels (e.g. by Prosper Mérimée and Alexandre Dumas), how, in the romantic century, the Mediterranean became an overlap of Southern and Eastern stereotyping, but also how the 'Orientalist aspects of the Mediterranean intersect with an ethnotype (hot temperament in a hot climate) and a sociotype (outlaws in a lawless country)' (p. 94). On the same wavelength, by analysing the figures of the Spanish bandit and Italian brigand in nineteenth-century literature, Andreu explains that the Mediterranean South was believed to have a unique relationship with banditry due to factors such as climate and perceived lack of civilisation in Spain and Italy. He explores how this identification came about, what reactions it generated in Spain and Italy, and the 'different ways in which the image of the Romantic bandit was appropriated – and nationalized – by revolutionary liberalism in both countries' (p. 127).

Another theme that recurs in many chapters, albeit not always explicitly, is the one that accompanies – and, in a sense, defines – the geographical and conceptual instability of Europe, namely the fact, as rightly emphasised by Andreu and Bolufer, that the meanings attributed to the South are derived from its place in a discourse articulated in terms of opposition. In short, there is no South without a North, and likewise, there is no North without the South (p. 2). In this regard, and also to demonstrate that the concepts of North and South (and the ideas associated with them, such as those of modernity and backwardness), are subjective and depend on the observer's perspective, I would like to

refer to the chapters written by Nuria Soriano and Coro Rubio Pobes. Soriano's chapter on 'More than one modernity', examines the role of travel literature in the eighteenth century, which portrayed South America as savage and immature from the viewpoint of a modern and civilised Europe. She explains how this portrayal of 'otherness' was used to justify Spain's actions in its colonies, enabling the creation of a specifically Hispanic modernity within the European context. In her essay on 'Northerness in the South', Rubio Pores explores how travel literature contributed to creating a conflicting image of the Basque country in Spain, which was culturally constructed as the North. By focusing on the role of the female stereotype, she analyses how Basques were attributed with qualities that set them apart from the rest of the Spaniards. According to Rubio Pores, the Basque ethnotype – 'given that the Basques were conceptualised as a distinct people, even race' – was reinforced with a clichéd portrayal of the landscape. Mountains were seen as a symbol of 'strong and indomitable people', while the sea was associated with 'brave, intrepid and enterprising people' (p. 189).

Due to the preference given to literary texts, such as travel writings and novels, interdisciplinarity unfortunately fades a little into the background. While this confirms Joep Leerssen's statement that 'national stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated, and disseminated' through literary narratives,³ it also highlights a minor limitation of the volume. Considering the complexity of the issues it addresses and the growing application of imagological methods to other disciplinary fields, the volume could benefit from a broader interdisciplinary approach. A greater diversification of the documentary sources presented would perhaps have contributed to a better understanding of how stereotypes function not only as literary topoi but also how, precisely in a pivotal epoch such as the 'long nineteenth century', they were at the very heart of knowledge production, which provided fertile ground for their dissemination outside the literary and artistic field. Moreover, precisely because of the extremely hot topics presented by the two editors at the beginning of the volume, it would have been helpful to draw some initial conclusions on how these

gendered and ethnicised stereotypes about Southern Europe, first formulated in the literary field, were transposed to the European political realm.

Overall, *European Modernity and the Passionate South* is a stimulating and highly enjoyable reading, and a much-needed book. It deconstructs ethnic and gender stereotypes about southern Europe (more specifically Spain and Italy), contextualising their blossoming and circulation and showing how they are intrinsic to the very idea (geographical and cultural) of Europe. It represents an important encouragement to continue in this direction, both by applying imagology methods to other research fields, such as knowledge production and political ideology, and by flushing out those deep-rooted and die-hard intra-European national stereotypes that, in times of crisis, exacerbate political tensions between the states of 'Northern' and 'Southern' Europe.

Endnotes

¹ Luiza Bialasiewicz, 'National stereotypes in times of COVID-19: the 'frugal four' and the 'irresponsible South' (July 2020), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/national-stereotypes-in-times-of-covid-19-the-frugal-four-and-the-irresponsible-south/>

² Gonthier-Louis Fink, 'Réflexions sur l'imagologie. Stéréotypes et réalités nationales dans une perspective franco-allemande', *Recherches germaniques*, 23 (1993), 3–31.

³ Joep Leerssen, 'Imagology: History and Method', in: *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*, ed. by Manfred Beller & Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam: Brill, 2007), 17–32.