

CompraSud

A Collective Attempt to Overturn the National Italian Consumer Goods Market

CompraSud

Una tentativa colectiva de dar la vuelta al mercado italiano de bienes de consumo

Marcello Messina^{a,®}

^a Universidade Federal da Paraíba

[®] Contacto: marcello@ccta.ufpb.br

Resumen

La iniciativa del Sur de Italia conocida como *CompraSud* (literalmente: “Compra Sur”) es compleja, heterogénea y contradictoria e comprende campañas de medios sociales, movimientos sociales, pequeñas iniciativas de *startup* y peticiones callejeras. El principal objetivo de *CompraSud* es debilitar la hegemonía nacional de los productos fabricados en el norte de Italia. Como parte de sus actividades, las diferentes agendas de *CompraSud* promueven boicots de productos del Norte vendidos en todas las regiones italianas, como el tradicional pastel navideño conocido como *panettone*. Es importante destacar que varios grupos de *CompraSud* se esfuerzan por ofrecer una justificación racional y una autoridad intelectual a sus acciones al citar una serie de trabajos académicos. En este artículo, afronto la intrincada red de trampas discursivas inherentes al complejo corpus textual asociado a las agendas de *CompraSud*, para identificar las visiones geopolíticas y económicas implicadas en la iniciativa. A partir de la teoría de Joseph Pugliese de la “frontera” italiana entre Norte e Sur como un eje geopolítico racializado, trato de descifrar las implicaciones decoloniales de *CompraSud*, considerando también las tensiones producidas dentro de la iniciativa a nivel nacional y regional. Posteriormente, tomo en cuenta la alianza entre Sur de Italia y África propuesta por los activistas mediante la apropiación de los discursos políticos anticoloniales de Patrick Lumumba y Thomas Sankara, resignificando el imaginario tradicional producido sobre la región. A nivel nacional, finalmente, considero las fricciones (y confusiones) entre las agendas de liberación territorial y la promoción de empresas locales privadas incluidas en la iniciativa.

Palabras clave

Sur de Italia | Movimientos Sociales | campañas de boicots | Liberación territorial | Consumidores

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Abstract

The Southern Italian initiative known as *CompraSud* (literally: “Buy South”) is a complex, heterogeneous, and contradictory heading that comprises social media campaigns, activist movements, small-scale start-up initiatives, and street petitions. The principal aim of *CompraSud* is weakening the national hegemony of goods manufactured in the Northern Italy. As part of their activities, the various *CompraSud* agendas promote boycotts of Northern goods that have become widespread in all Italian regions, such as the traditional Christmas loaf known as *panettone*. Importantly, various *CompraSud* groups make an effort to provide rational justification and intellectual authority for their actions by citing a range of academic works. In this article, I work my way through the intricate web of discursive trappings inherent to the complex body of textual materials associated with *CompraSud* agendas, in order to identify the specific geopolitical and economic visions implied in the initiative. Drawing upon Joseph Pugliese’s theory of the Italian North/South “border” as a racialized geopolitical axis, I try to decipher the decolonial implications of *CompraSud*, also considering the tensions produced within the initiative at national and regional levels. Subsequently, I take account of the conflation between Southern Italy and Africa envisaged by the activists using anti-colonial political discourse by the likes of Patrick Lumumba and Thomas Sankara, which has the effect of appropriating and signifying traditional images of the region produced at the national level. Finally, I consider the frictions (and confusions) between territorial liberation agendas and the promotion of private local enterprise embedded in the initiative.

Keywords

Southern Italy | Social movements | Boycott campaigns | Territorial liberation | Consumers

JEL Codes

D01 | D04 | D20 | D91 | D71 | D74

1. Introduction

The Southern Italian initiative known as *CompraSud* (literally: “Buy South”) is a complex, heterogeneous, and at times contradictory heading that comprises social media campaigns, grassroots activist movements, small-scale start-up initiatives and street petitions. The principal aim of this *CompraSud* is weakening the national hegemony of goods manufactured in Northern Italy or manufactured in the South and sold by firms whose headquarters are in the North.

A serious introduction to the issue cannot overlook the harsh polarisation of North-South relations that characterises Italy, at least since national unification in 1860-61. Characterised by the abundant deployment of military violence (Pugliese, 2008; Lupo, 2011), the unification campaign conducted by the Northern Kingdom of Sardinia (Piedmont) also involved the systematic disenfranchisement of Southern financial, industrial and manufacturing industries (Nitti, 1900). The consequential impoverishment of the South has been read in various ways, ranging from the encounter between a “modern”, industrialised region (the North) and a prevalently agrarian society, inherently recalcitrant towards capitalist development, to more radical denunciation of the pillaging of Southern Italian resources, foraged by military violence (Nitti, 1900; Gramsci, 1979; Salvemini, 1963; Zitara, 1971; Pugliese, 2008). Historic-economic readings imbued with the narrative of Southern Italian lack of “modernity”¹ have been supported by pseudoscientific tropes of innate predisposition to criminality (cf. Lombroso, 1900; Lombroso, 1898), cultural backwardness characterised by “amoral familism”, (cf. Banfield, 1958) incompatibility with democracy and horizontal collaboration (cf. Putnam, 1993), etc.

These images have, in turn, been complemented by post-modern tropes of hyper-violent Southern cities, infected by endemic and cancerous crime, as in the film *Gomorra* (cf. Messina, 2015). Alongside these hyper-criminalised narratives, racially charged representations of the South and its inhabitants have thus come to include visions of filth, repugnance and disgust.

Contrasting readings have denounced the immediate post-unification dismantlement of Southern strategic industries such as the Steelworks of Mongiana and the Shipyards of Castellammare (Rossi & Ceccarelli, 2016), instrumental to the relocation of these productive poles to other sites in Northern Italy (Mazza, 2011; Lizza, 2011).

The perception of a progressive weakening of Southern industrial production and commercial leverage caused by Northern hegemony is shared by some important authors along the way from the unification period to the present day. In 1900, Francesco Saverio Nitti famously pointed out the outright impoverishment of Southern Italian finances, operated through monetary imposition to Southern credit institutes (Nitti, 1900, 136-137)

In a 1903 diatribe with his fellow socialist intellectual Filippo Turati, Gaetano Salvemini took the cudgels up for the South, complaining, among other things, about the ways in which customs tariffs accords involving Italy and its neighbouring countries always happened to favour Northern exportations against Southern ones, with the general political backing of Northern socialists such as Turati himself:²

If in these discussions and votes you will start from the idea that the Southern problem is a *historic* problem, and that therefore there’s nothing to do about it, you will see, for example, that Austria-Hungary’s denunciation of the wine clause actually wrecks Apulian viticulture, but this is a... *historic* wreckage: the best we can do, therefore, is make an effort to obtain, as

¹ A serious discussion of modernity as a Eurocentric myth that justifies violent colonial incursions should take account of the work of Dussel (2010).

² The emerging detail regarding Salvemini’s difficult relationship with Northern socialists might help answer one of the questions that has been asked to me while drafting this work, and that is about the relationship of the regional left with Southern industries. This question, in turn, arises from the perception that in Catalonia the two groups appear to cooperate. In fact, the participation of Southern left-wing politicians (as much as that of the regional right wing) in agendas connected to *CompraSud* has been scarce and limited to some isolated initiatives.

a compensation from our ally, some more concessions in favour of industrial products... from the North. Germany rejects grapes, almonds, oranges, lemons, dates, cherries, other fresh fruits, vegetables, legumes, almost all Southern produce? Even this is a *historic* issue: at least, though, raw silk was not rejected, and it will be easy to obtain new benefits for Northern industries, thanks to the... *historic* sacrifice of the South (Salvemini, 1963 [1903], 279).³

Salvemini concluded his quite sarcastic rant against Turati by stating that it was fundamental that “Northern democratic parties refrained from helping Northern protectionist industrialists oppress each and every source of Southern wealth” (Salvemini, 1963 [1903], 283).⁴

In 1920, Gramsci declared that “the Northern bourgeoisie had subjugated Southern Italy and the islands and reduced them to colonies of exploitation” (Gramsci, 1966 [1920], 73).

In late WWII Sicily, *La Sicilia ai siciliani*, the antifascist pamphlet surreptitiously distributed by separatist leader Antonio Canepa under the pseudonym of Mario Turri, complained about the oppressive fiscal regime imposed by Mussolini on the island, and noted that, in this way, peasants and shepherds had been stripped “of their wheat and their oil, their wool and even their livestock” (Canepa [Turri], 1998 [1944], 12).⁵

In 1962, another influential Sicilian politician, the then Minister for the Budget Ugo La Malfa, in his well-known *Nota Aggiuntiva* [“Additional Note”], assessed post-war redistribution policies by noting that

in fact, albeit relevant, the series of interventions implemented in the South did not suffice to counterbalance the centralisation in the North of the development process that was already taking place in these already developed regions, neither did they reduce the income gap with the other regions, a gap that [...] in fact has increased (La Malfa, 1962, 63-64).⁶

A partial alleviation of the economic dualism between North and South was in fact attempted between the post-war period up until the early 1990s, when the state implemented an extraordinary intervention for the South, known as *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*, which only consisted of an annual average of 0.70 % of the national GDP, but had undeniable merits in terms of the timid revitalisation of Southern Italian industry (Lepore, 2012, 90-93).

Marco Esposito documents the progressive privatisation of public banks, triggered by the *Legge Amato* in 1990, which led to the concentration of the several credit institutes spread throughout the national territory in the hand of a few banking foundations, controlled by local administrations, which are located predominantly in the North. “The result is that banking foundations distribute grants and fund social services on a ratio of 96 % in the Centre-North against 4 % in the South” (Esposito 2013: 40).⁷

Since 2009, the *legge delega* [enabling act] 42/2009 has started a process of federal decentration that, in the opinion of several economists, easily results in a further economic and infrastructural impoverishment of the South (Scalera & Zazzaro 2010, 12; Bifulco, 2019, 279-280).

This continued situation certainly produced a climate of vehement North-South polarisation that penetrates the Italian Consumer Goods Market, and emerges as a ramification of the unceasing litigiousness, to use a euphemism, that characterises the cultural, social and economic relations between the two regions.

The purpose of this article is situating the *CompraSud* initiative within the torsions and lacerations produced in the context of these continued tensions. In order to accomplish this task, I will draw upon different literature, ranging from critical race studies to decolonial theory, through to critiques of unequal exchange and imperialism of trade.

³“Se in queste discussioni e votazioni voi partirete dall’idea che il problema meridionale è un problema storico, per cui non c’è nulla da fare, troverete, per esempio, che la denuncia della clausola dei vini da parte dell’Austria-Ungheria rovina bensì la viticoltura pugliese, ma è una rovina... storica: il meglio che si possa fare è quindi, sforzarsi di ottenere in compenso, dalla nostra alleata, altre concessioni favorevoli ai prodotti industriali... del Nord. La Germania ci respinge l’uva da tavola, le mandorle, le arance, i limoni, i datteri, le ciliege, le altre frutta fresche, la verdura, i legumi, quasi tutti i prodotti meridionali? E anche questo è un fatto storico: meno male, del resto, che la seta greggia non è toccata e qualche nuova agevolazione alle industrie del Nord sarà facile ottenerla in grazia dei sacrifici... storici del Sud”

⁴“è necessario cioè che i partiti democratici del Nord non aiutino gli industriali protezionisti del Nord ad opprimere tutte le fonti della ricchezza meridionale”

⁵“Dopo essersi visto strappare con gli ammassi il frumento e l’olio, la lana e persino il bestiame...”

⁶“in effetti la serie pur rilevante di interventi svolti nel Mezzogiorno non è stata sufficiente a bilanciare i motivi di accentramento al Nord del processo di sviluppo che si svolgeva nelle regioni già sviluppate e a ridurre i divari di reddito con le altre zone, divari che [...] si sono anzi accresciuti”

⁷“Il risultato è che le fondazioni bancarie erogano fondi e sostengono servizi per il 96 % al Centro-nord e per il 4 % al Sud”

2. The origins and rationales of *CompraSud*

The nomenclature *CompraSud* appears on a number of not necessarily related websites and social media pages owned by several different Southern Italian political parties, activists' movements and cultural associations, such as the *Associazione Culturale Briganti* [also known simply as *Briganti*], *Eleaml*, *Insorgenza Civile*, *Identità Insorgenti*, *Mo! Unione Mediterranea*, *Partito del Sud*, *Associazione Culturale Neoborbonica* (also known as *Movimento Neoborbonico*), *Fondazione Il Giglio*, etc. The last two organisations opened a separate, independent website for *CompraSud*⁸; however, subpages dedicated to the initiative are hosted by almost all the official websites of the abovementioned organisations.

Some sources indicate the alleged circumstances of foundation of *CompraSud*: apparently, it was founded in the early 1990s by the *Associazione Culturale Neoborbonica* (De Crescenzo 2018, *Associazione Culturale Neoborbonica*, n.d.). According to Gennaro De Crescenzo:

In my self-funded political speeches on a van I used to tell the story of the “Southerner’s breakfast”, encouraging people to buy Southern products, as almost everything we eat and consume came (and comes) from the North, including milk, biscuits, coffee and everything else. Then with the Neobourbonist association the “*CompraSud*” campaign turned [...] into a brand and then a society founded by our (unemployed) young members, who drafted a catalogue [of Southern products], involving various companies, including some important ones (De Crescenzo, 2018)⁹

Other associations have joined later or formed their own *CompraSud* networks. *Insorgenza Civile* started approaching the campaign in 2005 (Dicè, 2018); *Associazione Culturale Briganti* started dealing with *CompraSud* right after its foundation as a social media page in 2010; *Identità Insorgenti* also started campaigning upon its foundation as a web journal in 2014. Several decades before these activists, socialist theorist Nicola Zitara had framed the issue in terms of the penetration of Northern capitalistic goods into the South. According to Zitara, the North-South commercial relations are classified within the imperialistic mechanism known as “unequal exchange”, (Arghiri, 1972; Dandekar, 1980), whereby the imperial metropolis pillages the colonial peripheries by buying low-cost goods and labour and selling back high-priced goods and services:

Life conditions are not, in the South [of Italy], comparable to those of a Third World country, and yet the South is an underdeveloped country all the same. The socio-economic aspects of Southern underdevelopment have been different, depending on the use that Italy has made of the South. Nowadays, the South has a low production, and, despite consuming much less than any other part of Italy, it needs to import most of the goods it consumes [...]. We need to take this economic dependency as a starting point in order to envisage a structural emancipation model. The productive poverty of the South originates from the socio-economic deconstruction that followed the formation of a unified national market and the development of productive forces (Zitara, 1971)¹⁰

Essentially, *CompraSud* is based precisely on the attempt to revert the Italian model of Southern economic dependency by buying products that are produced and sold by companies based in the South. The rationales for promoting such a behaviour are centred on the idea that in this way money spent in the South stays in the region and is used to foster local employment and investments. In some cases, the argument according

⁸ <<https://www.progettocomprasud.com/>>

⁹ “Nei miei comizi a costo zero su un camion raccontavo “la colazione del meridionale” e suggerivo ai presenti di scegliere prodotti meridionali visto che quasi tutto quello che mangiamo o usiamo veniva (e viene) dal Nord, a partire dal latte, dai biscotti, dal caffè e tutto il resto. Poi con l’associazione neoborbonica la campagna “comprasud” diventò [...] un marchio e poi anche una società fatta dai nostri giovani (disoccupati) che unirono diversi imprenditori anche di un certo peso in un catalogo”.

¹⁰ “Le condizioni di esistenza non sono, nel Meridione, paragonabili a quelle di un paese del terzo Mondo, e tuttavia il Meridione è ugualmente un paese sottosviluppato. I risvolti socio-economici del sottosviluppo meridionale sono stati diversi nel tempo a seconda dell’utilizzazione che l’Italia ha fatto del Meridione. Oggi il Meridione realizza una scarsa produzione e, nonostante consumi molto meno di ogni altra parte d’Italia, è costretto ad importare la maggior parte dei beni che consuma [...]. È da questa dipendenza economica che bisogna partire per prefigurare un modello di struttura emancipante. La povertà produttiva meridionale nasce dalla destrutturazione economico-sociale seguita alla formazione del mercato unico nazionale e al successivo sviluppo delle forze produttive”.

to which buying products from companies with registered offices in the South is connected to VAT and tax revenues being automatically transferred to Southern local administrations is also used.¹¹ Related arguments include the alleviation of emigration, the future of Southern children, zero food miles and higher sustainability, alongside arguments related to the lower prices of Southern products. There is, finally, a general underlying objective regarding the consolidation of a productive industrial network in the South, often validated by the reference to “a study by economist Paolo Savona”¹² on the amounts of consumer resources that is annually transferred from the South to the North: as part of this strategic point, long lists with names of Southern companies are normally provided (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A snapshot of one of the several online lists of Southern products (jam and dairy products). Photo courtesy *Il Lazzaro*.¹³



¹¹ The legislation in charge of these fiscal fluxes is Law No. 42 of 5 May 2009.

¹² “Uno studio dell’economista Paolo Savona”. The study to which the campaigners refer is De Bonis, Rotond & Savona (2010).

¹³ Translation: “**Marmalades and Jams:** Terre D’Amuri, <http://www.terradamuri.it/home.php>, Sicily. Sicilfrutti, <http://www.sicilfrutti.it/>, Sicily. Agrirape, <http://www.agrirape.it/>, Sicily. Nevola, <http://www.aziendanevola.it/azienda.html>, Sicily. Solefrutta, <http://www.solefrutta.it/azienda.asp>, Calabria. Antichi sapori di Sicilia, <http://www.antichisaporidiscilia.it/Scripts/default.asp>, Sicily. **Milk**

Other initiatives related to *CompraSud* include: an eponymous supermarket franchise that has opened shops in various Italian cities; a mobile app named *Check Sud*, that scans product barcodes in order to verify the Southern fiscal origin of each purchased product; finally, various supermarket franchises have started indicating local products in several Southern regions. Several variations to the *CompraSud* rubric have flourished in the last years: *Compro a Sud*, *Io Compro Sud*, *Io compro meridionale*, *Scegli Sud*, etc.

3. Competitive boycott? The North that boycotts the South that boycotts the North

The complex North-South relations that affect Italy are characterised by two apparently divergent and contradictory mechanisms, both regulated by the North as Italy's hegemonic macroregion. The first mechanism has been described as the representation of the South as Italy's Other, its negation, and its racialised anomaly (Dickie, 1994; Pugliese, 2008; Gribaudi, 1997). The second, more subtle mechanism involves the effacement and disavowal of this very same process of Othering, and of the violence it involves. In this way, while Italy, "desperate to purchase and secure its European-white status", mobilises "southern bodies to mark the borders of all that is not Europe" (Pugliese & Messina, 2017: 2), it also constantly confines Southerners in what Pugliese calls "prosthetic white citizenship" (Pugliese, 2009) that is, a conditional intermediate status whereby the belonging to the national community is always on the brink of being suspended, negated or revoked (Messina, 2017).

This is not to say that the South refrains from constantly deploying means of rebellion against this North-normative state of things. Southern practices of disobedience, on the contrary, have been observed by several scholars: drawing upon deCerteau-ian terminology (de Certeau, 1988), for example, Pugliese describes Southern practices of anti-discipline as "a tactical blackening of Italy in the face of a virulent and violent caucacentrism" (2008: 2); Pardalis, on the other hand, looking at the specific case of Sicily, argues that Sicilians resort to the assertion of their own, separate identity as a means to renegotiate their position within Italian society (2009).

Such mechanisms of defence are deeply intertwined with the demands and the claims incorporated in the *CompraSud* rubric. In 2009, exasperated by some separatist, anti-Southern declarations of the then leader of the Lega Nord¹⁴ Umberto Bossi (Corriere del Mezzogiorno, 2009a), senator Adriana Poli Bortone encouraged Southern consumers to boycott Northern products:

If Bossi insists upon advocating the cancellation of the national anthem and the division of Italy [...] as the president of *Io Sud* I urge all Southerners, those who live in the South, but also those who live in the rest of Italy, to not buy products of the *Padania* (Po Valley) until the moment we get back to a reasonable debate (Corriere del Mezzogiorno, 2009b)

Poli Bortone's provocation clearly appeals to a shared, if commonly dormant, awareness as to the South's contribution in determining the economic success and the hegemony of the North. The resort to these arguments is clearly intended to counter received narratives on the South as Italy's *palla al piede* ("ball and chain"), that is, a parasitic burden that voraciously consumes most of the resources produced by the North (Pugliese & Messina, 2017, 5).

The South of Italy as a preferential market for Northern Italian goods thus becomes a battlefield upon which Southerners reclaim their space within the Italian nation. Sicilian singer-songwriter Carmen Consoli used to verbalise this in various declarations released around 2010:

and Dairy Products: High Quality fresh milk – Centrale del Latte di Salerno, <http://www.centralelatte.sa.it/>, Campania High quality fresh milk SP, <http://www.supermercatipiccolo.it/nostri.html>, Campania. Zappalà milk, <http://www.zappala.it/>, Sicily. Milk Yma, <http://www.yma.it/>, Campania. Sole Milk, <http://www.lattesole.it/>, Sicily. Rugiada Milk, <http://www.latterugiada.it/>, Basilicata. Latte Altis, <http://www.delgiudice.it/>, Molise. Milk Foreste Molisane, <http://www.forestemolisane.it/>, Campania. Latte La Tramontina, <http://www.latramontina.it/>, Campania. Milk Fattorie Donna Giulia, <http://www.fattoriedonnagiulia.it/>, Basilicata"

¹⁴ The Lega Nord (Northern League) is a xenophobic separatist party that has traditionally been known for advocating the supremacy of the North over the South. Cf. Huyssene (2009).

It is the North that needs us, as we buy their products. And right because I wear Benetton clothes, and even Santàl needed Sicily to make orange juice, instead of seeing this virulent racist populism, I wish these gentlefolks said “thanks” to me, rang me for my birthday and gave me flowers. Mind you, I am grateful to the North and recognise all that it has represented for the South and Sicily. However, I don’t want to hear that we are parasites, because that is not true. We are customers, and I would like them to treat us with the respect and the gratitude that even we deserve (Consoli cit. Bonanno, 2010).¹⁵

What is interesting in both the above quotes is the resolute acknowledgement of the South’s unsuspected position of power within the national commercial relationship. The North is rich because the South buys its products, and if the South stopped buying its products it would undermine the North’s economic power. Following this reasoning, and quite contrary to *CompraSud* agendas, Consoli goes to the point of stating that “the resource that Sicily needs is not industrial entrepreneurship” (Consoli cit. Bonanno, 2010).¹⁶

While this tug of war in the South is centred on the power of Southern consumers as those who keep the system functioning, other discursive strategies characterise the corporate discourses of Northern companies. As mentioned above, national images of the South and its economy are filled with racially charged visions of disgust, repugnancy and filth. The conflation of the waste emergency in Naples (Dines, 2013) with the panic triggered by illegal waste disposal in the *Terra dei fuochi*¹⁷ has increasingly led to national diffidence towards Southern gastronomic produce. In 2014, for example, a survey conducted by *Datamedia Ricerche* has found that 74.9 % of Italians was less likely to buy food products from Campania (Il Mattino, 2014). In 2013, cruelly taking advantage of this situation, Northern canned tomato company Pomì had released an eloquent advertisement: a map of Italy, with the Northern regions of the Po Valley highlighted; on top of them, the image of a tomato; the catchphrase read, “Only from here. Only Pomì” (Figure 2, [left-hand side]).¹⁸

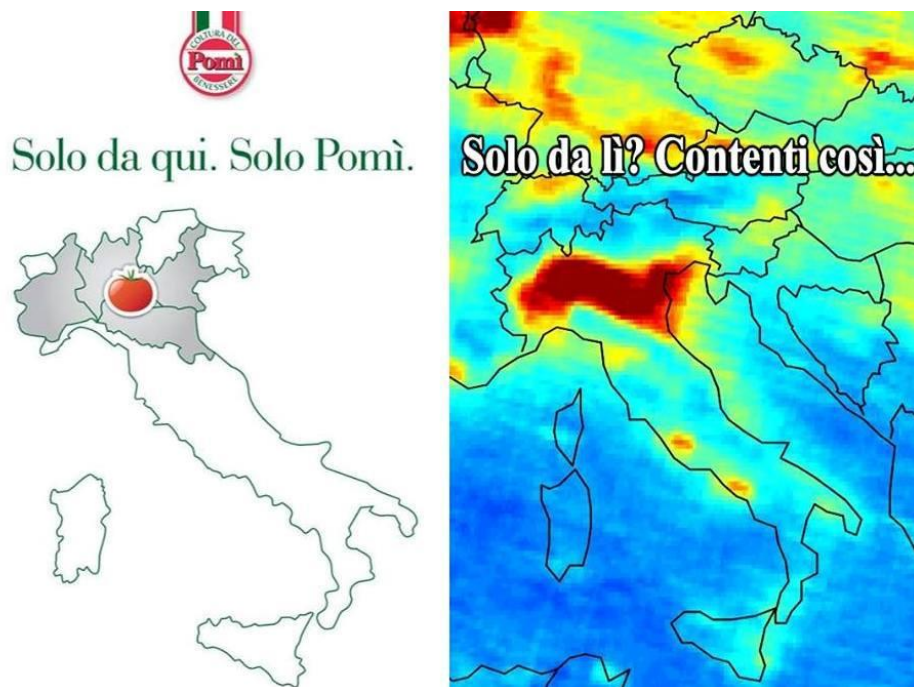
¹⁵“È il Nord che ha bisogno di noi, che compriamo i loro prodotti. E proprio perché io vesto Benetton, e pure la Santàl aveva bisogno della Sicilia per fare i succhi d’arancia, più che vedere questo dilagante populismo razzista vorrei che questi signori mi dicessero “grazie”, mi chiamassero per il mio compleanno e mi mandassero dei fiori. Attenzione, io sono grata al Nord e riconosco tutto quello che ha rappresentato per il Sud e la Sicilia. Ma non voglio detto che noi siamo i parassiti, perché non è così. Noi siamo clienti, e vorrei che fossimo trattati con il rispetto e la riconoscenza che anche noi ci meritiamo”.

¹⁶“Non è l’economia imprenditoriale la risorsa di cui ha bisogno la Sicilia”

¹⁷ *Terra dei fuochi* (“Land of fires”) is the name by which an intensely polluted area between Naples and Caserta has started being called in the 2000s. Most of the pollution originates from the industrial waste dumped by Northern companies, cf. Massari (2004).

¹⁸“Solo da qui. Solo Pomì”. Cf. De Rosa, (2013).

Figure 2. a response to the Pomì campaign, incorporating the original advert on the left-hand side. Photo courtesy *Associazione Culturale Briganti*¹⁹



Here the discursive strategy employed by Pomì is clearly meant to construe Northern food as the only safe food to eat, in a not-so-implicit contraposition with the suspect, racialised, dubious status of Southern tomatoes. Obviously, here the contingent visibility granted to the environmental emergency in the *Terra dei fuochi* only serves to trigger an arsenal of ready-made images of an always already filthy, unsafe, toxic South. In addition, there is clearly an element of self-righteous sense of revenge in this proud, Northern-exclusive display of tomatoes, a non-autochthonous Southern food that has become a gastro-visual metonym of the South. Here the tomato needs to be read as the centre of a universe of racist slurs and legends that involved Southerners in the North of Italy and abroad: Southern immigrants were in fact called “tomatoes” in various Northern European countries; in Northern Italian cities like Turin, urban legends circulated about Southerners who “would fill their bathtubs with soil and grow tomatoes in them”, thus implying that “tomatoes were more important to these people than hygiene” (Gentilcore, 2010, 190). Once again, but in a completely new and perverse way, the tomato is here used in order to disavow, condemn and racialize Southern territories and people.

The Pomì advertisement is emblematic of the violent North-South polarisation and of how racist stereotypes of Southern Italy are used precisely to sell products to the very same Southerners. Literally crushed by the discursive pressure of ready-made stereotypes about them, many Southerners are likely to take such media manifestations as inevitable reactions to their always unquestionable, always self-evident inferiority.

Southern replies to the Pomì did not take long: the *Associazione Culturale Briganti* published a humoristic vignette (Figure 2) on their social media channels, portraying the same Pomì release on the left hand side of the picture; and a map of the pollution in Italy, displaying a massive red stain in correspondence of the Po Valley, on the right-hand side. The Pomì advert catchphrase, “Only from here. Only Pomì”, was supplemented by *Briganti*’s response: “Only from there? Well, if you’re happy with that...”²⁰ (Figure 2[right hand side]) (Il Meridiano News, 2014). This call and response of reciprocal and competitive depreciation is quite representative of the general climate of mutual tension that characterises North-South relations

¹⁹ Translation. Left-hand side: “Only from here. Only Pomì”. Right-hand side: “Only from there? Well, if you’re happy with that...”

²⁰ “Solo da lì? Contenti così?”

even in a commercial way. Having said that, the response by *Briganti* needs to be read in terms of a spasm of proud disobedience against North-centric narratives that construe the South as the *a priori* container of everything that has to do with deviancy, dirt, disgust and wrongdoing (Griboaudi, 1997). In fact, in the same, aforementioned *Datamedia Ricerche* survey on the confidence to buy Southern products, 62.1 % of the respondents declared that the responsibility for the situation in the *Terra dei fuochi* is to be found in the “illegality of the South” (Il Mattino, 2014). Against this virulent criminalisation of Southerners, aprioristically confined in a limbo of criminality, wrongdoing and clandestinity, something that can be hurriedly and inconsiderately enclosed within the nebulous but nationally self-evident signifier “illegality”, the *Briganti* contrapose the often overlooked fact that the Po Valley is the most polluted region in Italy. Therefore, the *Briganti* counter-illustration seems to ask: *if the “illegality of the South” is responsible for the pollution of the Terra dei fuochi, who is responsible for the pollution of the Po Valley?*

The complex politics of disavowal that characterises North-centric commercial relationship is complemented by a constant urge to conquer and secure Southerners’ approval and to keep them as customers. As Judith Williamson (1986, 112) puts it, “economically, we need the Other, even as politically we seek to eliminate it”. In fact, one of the strategies that *CompraSud* campaigners blame on Northern companies is cultural appropriation, in the form of production and marketing of products inspired by Southern culture. For instance, in 2017 the movement *Insorgenza Civile* urged Southerners to boycott the official *panettone* of the Napoli football club as it was produced and commercialised by Balocco, a confectionery company based in Fossano, North-Western Italy:

The *panettoni* are not produced by a company that is based in Campania, therefore this is one more commercial action of Calcio Napoli that does not create jobs for any of our local people. We fail to understand the choice of a Northern company, given the fact that in recent years, precisely to deter people from buying Northern products, many Southern companies have been producing high quality homemade *panettoni* alongside other Christmas sweets that are surely more local, and narrate our identity much better [than *panettone*]. On top of that, the company that produces [these *panettoni*] has its registered offices in the North, and thus VAT and other tax will be paid to the North, while it is easy to imagine that most of the products will be sold in the South (La Repubblica, 2017).²¹

Here the argument of *Insorgenza Civile* activists, apparently replete of xenophobic sentiments and chauvinistic protectionism, needs to be read against the much higher rates of unemployment²² and to the much lower amount of state investments in the South, compared with both the national average and the figures of the North.²³ The South emerges, again, as an exasperated customer of Northern goods and services, a customer that is more and more uncomfortable with this role. Despite commenting on the opportunity of consuming seasonal cakes that are more related to Southern gastronomic traditions, the declarations by *Insorgenza Civile* are not quite about cultural appropriation, even more so as *panettone* originated in Milan.

Outright accusations of cultural appropriation, however, appear in other denunciations associated with *CompraSud*. The blog of *Identità Insorgenti*, for example, hosts regular pieces on the *pezzotto* (“fugazy”), i.e. goods that are marketed as being from the South but are in fact produced/packed in the North. Notable examples are the Sicilian wine bottled in Forlì, and the Apulian extra virgin olive oil produced in Bolzano:²⁴

Regardless of whether it is true that around Christmas time everyone is good, surely all those Northern companies that keep counterfeiting, bottling and distributing our typical regional

²¹ “I panettoni non vengono prodotti da una azienda che si trova in Campania, e quindi trattasi dell’ennesima operazione commerciale del Calcio Napoli che non dà lavoro a nessuno dei nostri conterranei. Ci risulta incomprensibile la scelta di un’azienda nordica dal momento che negli ultimi anni, proprio per aggirare l’acquisto di prodotti nordici, molte aziende meridionali producono panettoni artigianali di altissima qualità e dolci natalizi sicuramente più tipici, che raccontano la nostra identità molto meglio. Senza contare che l’azienda produttrice ha sede legale al Nord, e dunque l’iva e le altre imposte verranno versate al Nord, mentre è facile immaginare che la maggior parte dei prodotti verranno venduti nel meridione.”

²² According to the latest ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) reports, the unemployment rate in the North is 6.6 %, against 9.7 % in the Centre and 18.1 % in the South. ISTAT (2017, 17).

²³ Cf. Piera Magnati, Giuseppe Rosa, and Massimo Sabatini, M. “I divari economico-sociali nell’Europa a 15”. In: Enzo Giustino (Ed.) *Le regioni meridionali e l’Europa a 25*. Naples: Alfredo Guida, 2004, pp. 223-244. Also cf. Laura Polverari, “Policy rhetoric versus political reality: Has the Italian state given up on the Mezzogiorno?”. *Regional & Federal Studies* 23, no. 5 (2013), 571-590.

²⁴ Both Bolzano and Forlì are in North-Eastern Italy, while Sicily and Apulia are Southern regions.

products are not that good, as they use Northern factories and registered offices, resulting in a constant subtraction of jobs and tax revenues that would belong to our land (Piccolo, 2014b).²⁵

Here, alongside the arguments regarding employment and taxation, what emerges is the resentment against the practice of marketing and profiting from foods that pertain to Southern cultural traditions, flavours, cultivations, autochthonous plants, etc. The perception is that the gastronomic experiences and the nutritional values associated with the South are somewhat stolen and incorporated to the Northern products and their market value: “Sicilian wine from... Forlì. Exactly, it seems they moved that cosy city from Romagna to the Temple Valley in Sicily. Please note that the name ‘Sicilia’ was written all over the bottle labels, only with a microscopic small printed ‘Forlì’ at the bottom...” (Piccolo, 2014a).²⁶

Overall, what emerges here is the awareness of a doubly articulated strategy, operated by North-driven markets: on the one hand, promising that the product has no biological connection with the filthy, polluted, dubious South; on the other hand, fascinating the consumer with the suggestion that the product incorporates the unique cultural and organoleptic characteristics that characterise Southern produce. In other words, what *CompraSud* activism is blaming here is the traditional orientalist dichotomy “heaven vs. hell”, whereby the colonised space is always *a priori* construed as mesmerising and repulsive, prosperous and desolate, pacific and menacing, delicious and pestilential, humane and brutish, etc.

4. Metaphors of Genocidal Violence and Decolonial Visions

“Colonialism” is in fact the signifier around which *Identità Insorgenti* and other associations articulate their denunciation of the market hegemony of Northern products. Often, these claims are also based on the “double standard” exerted by Italian institutions, based on the protection of Northern products as exclusive regional delicacies (through such nomenclatures as PGI, DPO and TSG)²⁷ and the “nationalisation” or “Italianisation” of Southern products.

There is always this double standard, one for the parasitic North and the other of exploitation for the South: this is the ultimate synthesis of the Italian colonial system, regardless of whether the institutions that implement these disparities are political, administrative, etc. The institutions per se, insofar as they are Italian, harm our land: born from a colonial invasion, they retain its legacy and *raison d’être* even after one and a half century (Piccolo, 2015a).²⁸

In this case, the contentious derives from the PGI status granted to the *Piadina romagnola*, against the lower (i.e., not necessarily linked to local ingredients) TSG status granted to the *Pizza napoletana*. In connection with this, activists complained that the pizza at the 2015 Milan Expo was sold as *Pizza italiana*, resulting in the total neglect of the local Neapolitan origins of the dish:

Shamelessly, Coldiretti trumpets that it is going to be a 100 % Italian pizza, in the sense that it will be produced with ingredients that are 100 % from Italy but, hang on, none of these will be produced in Campania. Colonised Italians from all over the world, fine-tune your eyes, as it has been proven that fine-tuning your brain is impossible. Right in front of you, there is the exact conjugation of the verb “to Italianise”, namely, pillaging the South to enrich the North,

²⁵ “Vero o meno che sia il fatto che a Natale si è tutti più buoni, di certo non lo sono tutte le aziende settentrionali che continuano a taroccare, imbottigliare e distribuire prodotti tipici delle nostre regioni, utilizzando stabilimenti e sedi legali al nord, con la conseguente costante sottrazione di posti di lavoro e tasse che spetterebbero alla nostra terra”.

²⁶ “vino siciliano di...Forlì. Sì, pare abbiano spostato la ridente cittadina romagnola, nella Valle dei Templi. Notate il nome “Sicilia” sparato dappertutto sulle etichette, ed il microscopico “Forlì” in fondo...”

²⁷ Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) [DOP in Italian], Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) [IGP in Italian], and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) [STG in Italian]. While the first two “have a specific link to the region where the product comes from”, the third one only “highlights a traditional production process” cf. *European Commission*, (2017).

²⁸ “Due pesi e due misure sempre, una parasitaria per il nord e una di puro sfruttamento per il sud: è questa l’estrema sintesi del sistema coloniale italiota, e non fa alcuna differenza che le istituzioni che realizzano tale disparità di trattamento siano quelle politiche, amministrative o altro. Sono le istituzioni in sé che, in quanto italiane, fanno male alla nostra terra: nate da un’invasione coloniale, ne conservano viva impronta e ragion d’essere anche ad un secolo e mezzo di distanza”

condemning us and our loved ones to emigrate in search of a job and to be labelled as scroungers and *terroni* by those who rob us and sponge off us (Piccolo, 2015b)²⁹

What is striking in both the above quotes is the outright connection between the commercial hegemony of Northern products, companies and consortiums, and the histories of physical and symbolic colonial violence that inscribe Italy as a nation. The stress is put on the invasion campaign that characterised national unification and on the continued racialisation of Southerners, epitomised by the signifier “*terroni*”. In this sense, the commercial policies of Italian institutions, perceived as favouring the North over the South, become overt metaphors of the genocidal violence that characterised the very formation of the Italian state. Importantly, across both quotes “Italy” is held as a signifier that almost automatically evokes these histories of brutality and invasion.

Now, even more related to these discourses is one of the illustrations circulated by *Associazione Culturale Briganti* in their social media channels (Figure 3). Here the insistence is again on the *panettone* as hegemonic dessert of Italian Christmas holidays: a *panettone* lies on top of a chalk outline which coincides with the geographical coastline of Southern Italy; a caption at the bottom of the illustration reads, “The *panettone* from the North kills the South”³⁰ (Figure 3). Here the anti-colonial discourse reaches a peak of sharp and uncompromising condemnation: not only is the present Northern hegemony connected to an undeniable past of barbaric violence, as it is in fact associated to what is seen as an ongoing genocidal control over Southern lives and territories, of which *CompraSud* campaigners actively declare to be sufferers.

Figure 3. illustration on the Northern *panettone* that kills the South. Photo courtesy *Associazione Culturale Briganti*.³¹



²⁹“Senza alcun senso della vergogna, la Coldiretti strombazzava ai quattro venti che si tratterà di una pizza 100 % italiana, nel senso che sarà prodotta tutta con ingredienti al 100 % italiani ma, tenetevi forte, non avrà nemmeno un ingrediente prodotto in Campania. Colonizzati italiani di tutto il mondo rifatevi gli occhi, dato che è conclamata l'impossibilità di rifarvi un cervello, ché davanti a voi si palesa l'esatta coniugazione del verbo "italianizzare": depredare il sud per arricchire il nord, condannando noi e i nostri cari ad emigrare per lavoro e ad essere etichettati come straccioni e terroni da chi ci deruba e campa alle nostre spalle”.

³⁰“Il panettone del Nord uccide il Sud”.

Now, against this violent Northern oppression, *CompraSud* activists contrapose their own narratives of passionate subversion, which is not reticent in terms of naming and visualising scenarios of compensatory violence. A notable example is a quote, commonly attributed to Nicola Zitara that circulates on the web, often complemented by a photo of Zitara, as in Figure 4. The quote reads as follow:

Since we live in a world where political domination is incorporated to mass commodities, our liberation will not begin with the arrow of a local William Tell that pierces the arrogant enemy, but with a truck full of Galbani cheeses that falls down the shoulder of the Salerno-Reggio Calabria motorway (Figure 4)³²

Figure 4. An online meme with a quote by Nicola Zitara. Photo courtesy *Insorgenza Civile*.³³

“Giacchè viviamo in un mondo
in cui la dominazione politica è
incorporata nelle merci di massa,
la nostra liberazione non comincerà
con la freccia di un nostrano
Guglielmo Tell che trafugge il
tracotante nemico, ma con un
camion di provolette Galbani
precipitato nella scarpata
dell’autostrada Salerno-Reggio Calabria”.

Nicola Zitara (Siderno, 16 luglio 1927 – Siderno, 1^a ottobre 2010)



The implicit reference to an act of violent sabotage against a truck that carries Northern industrial cheese to be sold in the South is part of a collective desire of revenge, shared at different levels and in different manners by many Southerners. This passage, perpetually passed from website to website, is actually very difficult to find among Zitara’s published works:³⁴ in this sense, the figure of Zitara transcends the physical limits of the Calabrian intellectual³⁵ and assumes quasi-prophetic³⁶ semblances. After his death in 2010

³¹ Translation. “The *panettone* from the North kills the South”

³² “Giacchè viviamo in un mondo in cui la dominazione politica è incorporata nelle merci di massa, la nostra liberazione non comincerà con la freccia di un nostrano Guglielmo Tell che trafugge il tracotante nemico, ma con un camion di provolette Galbani precipitato nella scarpata dell’autostrada Salerno-Reggio Calabria”.

³³ Translation: “Since we live in a world where political domination is incorporated to mass commodities, our liberation will not begin with the arrow of a local William Tell that pierces the arrogant enemy, but with a truck full of Galbani cheeses that falls down the shoulder of the Salerno-Reggio Calabria motorway”.

³⁴ Mino Errico and Angelo D’Ambra finally pointed me to the back cover of Zitara, (1971).

³⁵ This aspect of Zitara’s posthumous success has been harshly criticised by his daughter Lidia Zitara, who argued that she would have preferred her father’s intellectual work to be more followed and respected when he was alive. Lidia Zitara’s remarks, among other things, raise the very important issue of Zitara’s oblivion in Italian academia. Cf. Zitara, “Del senno del poi...”, *La Riviera*, 21 July 2013,

³⁶ On Nicola Zitara’s prophetic role, cf. Francesco Romano, 2015, p.118 e il camion della Galbani precipita dall’autostrada Salerno-Reggio Calabria”.

and the quasi-concomitant rediscovery of his writings, Zitara became the prophet of an awaited, incipient liberation of the South from its Northern oppressor, a figure that sets both a theology and a teleology of Southern aspirations.

5. The decolonial reclamation of the signifier “Africa”

Zitara is not the only decolonial prophet of *CompraSud* campaigns. In fact, various other public figures either sponsor the initiative directly or are used as *a posteriori* champions of the *CompraSud* cause. Alongside contemporary and historical figures like Pino Aprile, Nandu Popu, Massimo Troisi, Sophia Loren, or even emperor Frederick II, for instance, the *Associazione Culturale Briganti* circulates quotes by key political leaders of African decolonisation, such as Thomas Sankara and Patrice Lumumba.

Here the resort to African history needs to be understood in the context of a constant North-driven conflation between the South and Africa, which, from a Northern point of view, is meant to derogate and depreciate the South. In the 150 odd years of Italian unification, Southerners have constantly been compared to Africans. As Joseph Pugliese puts it:

the deployment of the loaded signifier “Africa,” as the lens through which the South was rendered intelligible for Northerners, marks how the question of Italy was, from the very moment of unification, already racialised by a geopolitical fault line that split the peninsula and its islands along a black/white axis (Pugliese, 2008, 3).

The entrenched colonial imagery that produces this doubly racist comparison is actually subverted and reconfigured by *CompraSud* activists in terms of decolonial cooperation. This decolonial cooperation link constitutes what, drawing again on Pugliese, has been described above as “tactical blackening”. The *Briganti* meme that best exemplifies this spirit of collaboration displays a quote from Burkina Faso’s historical leader Thomas Sankara, on the issue of food dependency and imperialism of trade:

Our country produces enough to feed us all, we can even produce more than we need, unfortunately, for lack of organization, we still need to beg for food aid, this type of assistance is counterproductive and has kept us thinking that we can only be beggars who need aid. [...] There are people who ask: “Where is imperialism?” Look at your plates when you eat. These imported grains of rice, corn, and millet - that is imperialism. Look no further (Sankara, 1986, 153).³⁷

³⁷ Original French «Notre pays produit suffisamment de quoi nous nourrir. Nous pouvons dépasser même notre production. Malheureusement, par manque d'organisation, nous sommes encore obligés de tendre la main pour demander des aides alimentaires. [...] Il y en a qui demandent: «Mais où se trouve l'impérialisme ?» Regardez dans vos assiettes quand vous mangez : les grains de riz, de maïs, de mil importés, c'est ça l'impérialisme. N'allez pas plus loin.» Italian : «Il nostro paese produce cibo sufficiente per nutrire tutti i burkinabè. Ma, a causa della nostra disorganizzazione, siamo obbligati a tendere la mano per ricevere aiuti alimentari che sono un ostacolo e che introducono nelle nostre menti le abitudini del mendicante. Molta gente chiede dove sia l'imperialismo: guardate nei piatti in cui mangiate. I chicchi di riso importato, il mais, ecco l'imperialismo. Non c'è bisogno di guardare oltre».

Figure 5. online meme on Thomas Sankara. Photo courtesy *Associazione Culturale Briganti*.³⁸



Here *Briganti*'s co-option of Sankara's political discourse indicates a precise political agenda that is strongly interlaced with decolonial visions of liberation, which in turn disavow the violent Eurocentric premises on which the Italian state is based. The Northern recourse to the signifier "Africa" is meant to pinpoint the South as anomaly within the Italian nation and thus to secure Italy's status as a white European nation, in the sense that the deviant, corrupted, racially dubious state of the South confirms the whiteness of the North. On the contrary, *CompraSud*'s alliances with African liberation politics foreshadow transnational Southern axes of alliance that constitute an authentic act of "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, 2009) against the very project of Italy as a white European nation. By drawing upon Burkina Faso's recent decolonial history in order to guide and inspire the Italian South's economic rebellion against the North, *CompraSud* campaigners explore geopolitical configurations that are silenced, hindered and impaired by common conceptions of Italy as a white European nation, naturally and ontologically separated from Africa.

Having said that, it is important to flag the inevitable problems that are associated with the appropriation of struggles and histories that are characterised by very different degrees of collective suffering and oppression. In other words, while it is evident that *Briganti* suggest that the imported grains of rice of Burkina Faso are virtually the same thing as the Northern cheeses sold and consumed in Southern Italy, there are undeniable differences in terms of the criticality of the two situations. In this sense, to what extent are *CompraSud* campaigners actually renouncing their whiteness and Europeanness? And to what extent are they, on the contrary, perpetrating a form of cultural appropriation while continuing to secure their statuses as white European subjects? These important interrogatives always need to be at the forefront of any evaluation of Southern Italian liberation politics.

³⁸ Translation. "Our country produces enough to feed us all, we can even produce more than we need, unfortunately, for lack of organization, we still need to beg for food aid, this type of assistance is counterproductive and has kept us thinking that we can only be beggars who need aid. [...] There are people who ask: "Where is imperialism?" Look at your plates when you eat. These imported grains of rice, corn, and millet - that is imperialism. Look no further"

6. Conclusions

The last considerations can help initiate a broader discussion of the problems and limits of the *CompraSud* campaign, a discussion that is fundamental in order to introduce these conclusive remarks. Importantly, by no means is here suggested that activists and movements involved in *CompraSud* are not aware of these problems. As proposed above, the first point to be questioned is the genuineness and effectiveness of the disavowal of the Italian nation heralded by some *CompraSud* narratives. If Zitara's critique of Northern Italian imperialism of trade (1971) was rooted in a socialist project of national liberation of the South, the analyses proposed in the volume edited by De Bonis, Rotondi and Savona (2010) are aimed at the corroboration of Southern Italian capitalism, intended in turn to reinforce national unity by bridging the gap between the North and the South: the evident friction between these two positions, both used as theoretical authorities in *CompraSud* releases, is a fundamental issue to be taken into consideration.

Another important issue regards the extent to which the fostering and protection of the Southern Italian economy is a relevant and meaningful concept to all the companies that *CompraSud* lists such as the one in Figure 1 promote as valid alternatives to Northern companies. For instance, in 2014 *Identità Insorgenti* has pointed the attention on the fact that Sicilian dairy company Zappalà was outsourcing the production of its mozzarellas to Germany (Piccolo, 2014a). On that occasion, the justification offered on behalf of Zappalà by their communications agency Sharit Agency reportedly stressed on the necessity of sourcing milk that was cheaper than the Sicilian one, allegedly due to “the considerable inefficiency of Sicilian supply chain” (Sharit Agency cit. Piccolo, 2014b). Here the contradiction between a marketing strategy that stresses abundantly on Sicilianness (Piccolo, 2014b) and the deployment of the trite cliché of “inefficiency” as a discursive mechanism of domination over Sicilians may exemplify the ambivalence of some Southern industrialists towards the agendas proposed by *CompraSud*: on one hand, seeking local sales by playing the regional card; on the other hand, outsourcing the production in order to be competitive on the national and international markets.

Finally, it is important to reiterate on the fundamental heterogeneity of the campaign, that explains the various denominations that participate independently, and at times with contrasting agendas, to the activism.

Despite all these fundamental problems, *CompraSud* remains an important attempt to address the issue of the North-South gap in Italy, taken not only as a marker of economic imbalance, but also as the consequence of violent colonial relations that have been legitimated, from time to time, by discourses about race, criminal atavism, cultural backwardness, incompatibility to horizontal democratic collaboration, etc.

These discourses have been complemented by a substantial invisibilisation of the entrenched colonial relationship that continues to inscribe Italy and its North/South divide in terms of social, political and economic relationship. Regardless of the effectiveness of its project of reversion of the Northern dominance that characterises the national consumer goods market, *CompraSud*, in its multiple and contradictory manifestations, has also the undeniable merit of bringing this colonial relationship to the very surface of the national debate.³⁹

³⁹ To answer another question that arose during the writing and revision of this paper, it is important to note that, while the periodic reemergence of these issues might animate part of the national debate, the possibility of implementation of more effective measures in terms of negotiating forms of autonomy or independence appears extremely remote, at least as far as the South is concerned.

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