

4.1. *Cattivi guagliuni*: the identity politics of 99 Posse

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Abstract

The career of Neapolitan group 99 Posse has always been permeated by an uncompromising political militancy, mainly associated with the activities and ideologies of the Italian extra-parliamentarian left wing. After reaching the peak of their popularity in the national mainstream music scene in the early 2000s, 99 Posse decided to break up in 2002, on account of growing incompatibilities between their political activism and the commercial obligations attached to their musical activity. After seven years of silence, they reunited in 2009, and have released two new albums since the reunion. In this paper, I argue that the most recent 99 Posse production displays a grown attention for forms of radical politics centred on the condition of the South of Italy, including the participation in a general trend of historical revisionism and even the appropriation of identitarian claims.

Keywords: 99 Posse, identity politics, Southern Italy.

Introduction

Neapolitan group 99 Posse originated in the early 1990s from Officina 99 in Naples, one of the many *centri sociali autogestiti* ("self-managed social centres") that flourished in Italy from the mid-1980s onwards, and that are normally occupied by groups of young left-wing militants.

The music of 99 Posse is renowned for being characterised by an uncompromising political passion, mainly associated with the ideologies of the Italian extra-parliamentarian left wing (Behan 2007). After reaching the peak of their popularity in the Italian music scene in the early 2000s, the band decided to break up in 2002, on account of growing incompatibilities between their political activism and the commercial obligations attached to their musical activity – including the acceptance of a contract with multinational music publishing company BMG, and the frequent appearances on MTV and similar mainstream media. They then reunited in 2009, and have released two albums since their comeback, including *Cattivi Guagliuni* ("Bad lads") in 2011. In this paper, I aim at identifying and assessing the ideological shifts that characterise 99 Posse's production since the 2009 comeback, mostly with reference to this album.

The band is not new to shifts as to their ideological standpoints. Behan, for example, focussing on the first decade of 99 Posse's activity, observes the movement from a substantial "hostility towards communism" (2007, p. 503) towards a coming to terms with their communist identity (2007). I have identified new changes in 99 Posse's ideology, since their 2009 comeback, and especially, but not exclusively, with regards to their album *Cattivi Guagliuni*:

1. On one hand, I perceive an unprecedented interest for the condition of prisoners in Italian jails;
2. on the other hand, and partly in connection with the first point, I argue that the most recent 99 Posse production displays a grown attention for forms of radical politics centred on the condition of the South of Italy, including the participation in a general trend of historical revisionism and even the appropriation of identitarian claims.

As for the first point, here I will only mention:

1. the title track *Cattivi guagliuni* ("Bad lads"), which reads detention as a product of the social ghettoization that affects entire Italian suburbs, and raises the issue of the prisoners' families, who are forced to support economically their convicted relative while s/he is serving her/his conviction (Persico et al., 2011);

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2. the song *Morire tutti i giorni* ("Dying every day") (Musumeci et al., 2011), which features Daniele Sepe and Valerio Jovine, and adapts a poem on the experience of life imprisonment, written by lifelong convict Carmelo Musumeci (Dello Iacovo, 2014, p. 247)².

The important issues raised by these two songs will be analysed in a separate work, also with reference to the recently released biography of the group (Dello Iacovo, 2014), which documents the prison experiences of 99 Posse's lead singer Luca Persico (aka 'O Zulù), and of activist Egidio Giordano.

These work will primarily focus on the identity politics connected to the condition of Southern Italy.

The radical politics of Southern Italy

The issues revolving around Southern Italy have always been of extreme importance for 99 Posse, as it is attested to by the choice of singing in Neapolitan, which has always been a distinctive characteristic of the group, and can well be described as a strong political choice, in line with Ranci re's definition of politics (2004), and with Orlandi's observations about the political use of Sardinian in Fabrizio De Andr e's album *Indiano* (Orlandi, 2015).

Strong affirmation of Southern Italian identity, in opposition to a monolithic Italian identity, have also been occasionally suggested in some of the older 99 Posse songs, such as *Napoli* (Persico, Jovine & Messina,³ 1993) or *Pagherete caro* (1998). Joseph Pugliese has used *Napoli* as a case study of those manifestations of Southern Italian resistance that he describes as "a tactical blackening of Italy in the face of a virulent and violent caucascentrism" (Pugliese, 2008, p.2).

More in general, 99 Posse's artistic defence of Southern Italian identity can be understood as a cultural reaction to the ever-present representation of the South as an Other, instrumental to the legitimisation and construction of a shared Italian identity, based on a Northern and "white" ethnocentricity, which is set against an "oriental" and "backward" South (Dickie, 1994; Gribaudo, 1997; Pugliese, 2008).

Arguably, this could be already sufficient to locate 99 Posse's production within a wave of Italian musicians who have taken up the cudgels for the South in various way, to the point of advocating a critical revision of the official narratives on national Italian history or demanding more autonomy, or independence, from the central government (Messina, 2015). In this work, it will be demonstrated that 99 Posse are substantially in favour of historical revisionism. With regards to the claims for independence and autonomy for the South, however, it will be argued that 99 Posse are rather interested in constructing, or claiming, or negotiating a hegemonic role for Naples and the South.

Consequently, while the issues of identity are, in 99 Posse's older songs, always observed and analysed within the wider context of global and national social problems, in the 2011 album *Cattivi Guagliuni* ("Bad lads"), the condition of Naples and Southern Italy appears to be the main prism through which the global social problems are observed.

University of Secondigliano

For example, the song *University of Secondigliano*, which features Neapolitan rapper Clementino, talks about the general issue of Italian suburbs, whereby the Neapolitan suburb of Secondigliano is taken as an allegory of all the other suburbs, "from the Zen up to Quarto Oggiaro" (Maccaro et al., 2011)⁴, that is, from Sicily (the Zen is a suburb of Palermo) up to Milan (Quarto Oggiaro is a degraded district in Milan). This is not done to illustrate an extraordinary example of degradation and underdevelopment, as it is often the case when Naples is mentioned in Italian culture, but to present an admirable model of resistance: "We live here, we don't go away, we resist here" (Maccaro et al., 2011)⁵.

With regards to this, it is useful to mention Francesco Festa's work on Neapolitan organised antagonism, which exists in opposition to the state and to the criminal organisations (Festa, 2011): in *University of Secondigliano* too,

² Musumeci's poem is entitled "La ballata dell'ergastolano" (2007).

³ N.B. Marco Messina, member of 99 Posse, cited in bibliographic references as "Messina, M.", is not related to the author of this article, Marcello Messina, also referenced as "Messina, M.".

⁴ ("Dallo Zen su fino a Quarto Oggiaro")

⁵ ("Guagli  simme nuje ca 'e casa cca stammo nun ce ne jammo cca resistimmo").

this resistance is tightly connected with a proud defence of identity: “we are what we are and we stay here / and even if we go / what we are and the place where we come from will always be written all over our face” (Maccaro et al., 2011)⁶.

Tarantelle pe' campa'

The notion of “what we are”, that is, the idea of a connection between identity and resistance, is further developed in *Tarantelle pe' campa'* (“Tarantellas to survive”). The song uses the tarantella, a traditional dance tightly and exclusively related to Southern identity, as a metaphor of the frenetic activities to which ordinary people in Italy are forced in order to make ends meet. The activities of the ordinary people exist in opposition to the extravagant and dissolute lifestyle of the politicians and the elites: “these people, / with luxury cars and yachts, they go on holiday to the Seychelles, with subterfuges, / frauds, corruption and bribes / (...) while we dance the tarantellas, the tarantellas to survive” (Salvemini et al., 2011)⁷.

The song then touches upon a series of issues that are relevant to various parts of the country, in a section written and performed by Caparezza. In this context the metaphor of the Southern tarantella defines and unifies the resistance of all Italians: this already appears quite unusual in a country where culture, and even antagonistic culture, is normally defined according to Northern models, and where Neapolitan and Southern identities are treated as an Other even by members of radical left-wing movements (Dines, 2014).

The final stanza of the song takes the metaphor one step further, and evokes some important details, by mentioning:

1. the tarantella giuglianese (from Giugliano, a town near Naples), which is traditionally danced with knives: “The best tarantellas are those that involve confrontation and conflict / like the giuglianese where we dance with knives” (Salvemini et al., 2011)⁸;
2. the revival of the tarantella as an identitarian folk dance: “In the past we used to dance it in private homes causing shame and confusion, / Now we dance it in the village festivals, and proudly, / Because this is what we are” (Salvemini et al., 2011)⁹;
3. and finally, the transformation of the tarantella into a means for liberation, which is triggered, in turn, by its reappropriation: “We only dance tarantellas to survive, / And the more we dance them, the more we become aware of their potential, / And each tarantella turns from a lament into a song of freedom” (Salvemini et al., 2011)¹⁰

Now, while all this can be well understood as the continuation of the internationalist class war metaphor outlined above, I claim that these lines contain also a quite obvious and proud display of Southern identity. In other words, the “song of freedom” into which the tarantellas have turned is not only the product of a general acquisition of class consciousness by the Italian low-income classes, but is also and primarily the product of a new Southern Italian pride, aimed at some form of specifically Southern liberation. Importantly, as shown above, this is achieved by means of the insisted practice of the tarantella: in other words, the tarantella becomes a practice that allows Southerners to reappropriate their identity, and consequently, declare their freedom. This is further reinforced by the idea of using the knives of *the tarantella giuglianese* to defend freedom, “just in case you wanted to come closer” (Salvemini et al., 2011)¹¹. Now, while it is clear that this “you” refers to the elites, there is a great deal of ambivalence as to who is the “we” named in the song, whether “we” refers generally to the working classes, or, more specifically, to Southern Italians.

⁶ (“simmo sempe nuje ca simmo chello che simmo nuje ca cca rimanimmo / e pure si ce ne jammo / c’o purtammo sempe scritto ‘nfaccia addò venimmo chello che simmo”).

⁷ (“chisti cca / machinune e varchetelle vanno in vacanza alle Seichelles sotterfugi e / mattunelle magna magna e bustarelle”).

⁸ (“E tarantelle cchiù belle so’ semp chell di sfida e guerra / come la giuglianese ca s’abballa cu ‘e curtielle”).

⁹ (“e ogni tarantella addiventa da lamiento / canto di libertà”).

¹⁰ (“ne facimmo sulamente tarantelle pe’ campà / e a mano a mano ca facimmo tarantelle ci accorgiamo delle potenzialità / e ogni tarantella addiventa da lamiento / canto di libertà”).

¹¹ (“libertà ca se difende cu ‘e curtielle / tanti vote te vuliv avvicina”).

Italia S.P.A.

This ambivalence seems to lean towards the latter option in Italia S.P.A., a song that focusses on the violence exerted on the South in the process of Italian Unification, relates this violence directly with the situation of geographical inequality that characterises Italy and, by doing so, openly questions the very acceptability of the concept of Italy. Again, the lyrics seem to address a precise interlocutor, marked by the continuous use of the Italian pronoun *voi* (you) and its derivatives; the addressed interlocutor is progressively identifiable with the elites that controlled Italy from the Unification to the present day, responsible, in more recent times, for the political phenomenon of the Lega Nord¹²:

The sort of Italy **you've** made, / **you've** made it the worst possible way, / selling hatred off as brotherhood, / ignoring the consternation / on the face of massacred peasants, / of entire villages annihilated, / of the raped women, / deliberately ignoring / the aspirations of equality, / justice and brotherhood / for which millions of people / were killed, / creating with no remorse / an unjust country, / a shameful deal between the Savoy crown and the landlords... / and still that isn't enough for **you**, / now **you've** joined the Northern League / and while down South, back in our land, they close down the hospitals, / and people with a degree have to pick temporary jobs to make a living, / do we even need to listen to **you** talking / about northern question? (Dello Iacovo et al., 2011)¹³

Against the *voi* (in bold in the above quotation), the song sets a *noi* ("we/us", in bold in the quotation below) that does mainly identify Southern Italian people, although it refers in general the South of the world:

In other words, 99 Posse construct a manifest binary here between their own identity and that of the interlocutor. They identify themselves with the South and, to a limited extent, associate the enemy with the North, or at least identify the enemy as someone who defends Northern interests.

As seen above, the *noi* menaces an imminent revolt by using rubbish, the infamous *munnezza* that upsets Naples, and that is associated with the subordination of the South to Northern companies, due to the well-known involvement of the latter in the disposal of industrial waste in the Southern region of Campania (Massari, 2004; Sebaste, 2010). Rubbish is to be used to make barricades and being thrown at the *voi*. "Here we have got 30,000 tonnes / of piled rubbish / ready to be made into barricades / and another 30,000 tonnes, / we'll throw them at you, / in the villas where you live" (Dello Iacovo et al, 2011)¹⁴. The idea of making barricades and projectiles with the rubbish illegally disposed in the South by Northern companies seems to be coherent with Festa's aforementioned understanding of Naples and the whole Italian South as intrinsically antagonistic places, precisely in virtue of an active political use of a forced condition of subalternity (2011).

The song contains an example of what Pugliese defines Provisional Street Justice, namely a recording of a racist speech by a Lega Nord politician, Mario Borghezio, which is interrupted and ridiculed by a blown raspberry: "[Borghezio] We are Celts and Longobards, we are not Mediterranean and Eastern shit, we are the Padania¹⁵, white and Christian, white and Christian! [99 Posse] (raspberry)" (Dello Iacovo et al, 2011)¹⁶. This is exactly what Pugliese describes as the political reorientation of a violently North-centric and caucacentric discourse towards more inclusive narratives, obtained through the disfiguration of an object – in this case the speech - which, though outrageously racist, comes from a member of governmental institutions¹⁷.

¹² The Lega Nord is a racist separatist party based in the North of Italy (Huysen, 2006)

¹³ ("L'italia che avete fatto voi / l'avete fatta nel modo peggiore / spacciando fratellanza e seminando rancore / ignorando lo stupore / sul volto dei contadini fucilati / dei paesi rasi al suolo delle donne violentate / ignorando con dolo le aspirazioni di uguaglianza / giustizia e fratellanza / per le quali a milioni sono stati ammazzati / creando senza pentimento un paese a misura d'ingiustizia / un patto scellerato tra Savoia e latifondisti / e ancora nun v'abbasta mò facite 'e leghiste / e mentre abbascio addu nuje chiudono 'e 'spitale / e i laureati s'abbusciano 'a jurnata cu 'na vita interinale / v'amma senti 'e parlà di questione settentrionale?").

¹⁴ ("nui ccà tenimm' trentamila tonnellate di munnezz' ammontunat' / e pront' pe ne fà tutte quante barricate / e n'ate trentamila v'è buttamm' a catapulta rint'e ville addò campate").

¹⁵ The Padania is an imaginary macro-region which coincides with the North of Italy, whose independence from Italy is claimed by the members of the Lega Nord.

¹⁶ ([Borghezio] "Noi, che siamo celti e longobardi, non siamo merdaccia mediterranea e levantina, noi, la Padania, bianca e cristiana, bianca e cristiana!" [99 Posse] pernacchia)

¹⁷ Borghezio is Member of the European Parliament since 1999 and has held various roles within the Italian Government and the Italian Parliament (European Parliament, n.d.).

Napulitan

This North-centric discourse is further subverted in *Napulitan*, a song released in 2012, not by 99 Posse, but by Jovine. The band Jovine is composed by Valerio and Massimo Jovine, both members of 99 Posse; in this song, they feature also 'O Zulù, 99 Posse's lead vocalist, so that it is almost possible to consider this as a 99 Posse song. The last stanza, sung by 'O Zulù, proposes that Italians should learn Neapolitan, and, by doing so, suggests the existence of a binary between Italians and Neapolitans: "One thing Italians could do, / is learning to speak Neapolitan, / The most widely spoken language from Rome to Milan, / The main Italian export". (Jovine & Persico, 2012)¹⁸.

Further on, with a mixture of irony and exasperation, the stanzas tries to renegotiate the elements that characterise the condition of subalternity suffered by Naples into aspects of proud domination: in this way, the massive emigration that has characterised the history of the city becomes a massive colonisation operated by the Neapolitans; in a similar way, mass unemployment becomes redeployment: "We Neapolitans do not emigrate, / For more than 150 years we've been colonising [other places]. / We Neapolitans do not emigrate, / For more than 150 years we've been in redeployment." (Jovine & Persico, 2012)¹⁹.

The insistence on the 150 years is, again, a reference to the Italian Unification, whose 150th anniversary was celebrated in 2011. This appears to be coherent with the strong resolution to revise national history identified in the previous example: in other words, the song suggests that Italian unification has triggered mass emigration from Naples and the South of Italy. The stanza closes with the image of the entire planet turned "into a massive Naples" (Jovine & Persico, 2012)²⁰, a further confirmation of the strong identitarian feelings of the members of 99 Posse, which well reflects Pugliese's aforementioned idea of "tactical blackening" (2008).

Conclusion

It is not difficult to see this last song, strategically kept outside 99 Posse's main musical project, as a manifesto of 99 Posse's identity politics. Namely, a vigorous and tenacious affirmation of Southern Italian identity that exists in opposition to a violent Northern ethnocentrism.

As anticipated above, this affirmation takes the form of an attempt to negotiate an active, central and hegemonic role for Naples in the context of national and international antagonistic culture. This attempt is condensed in the above-mentioned image of the entire world transformed into a gigantic Naples, which sardonically subverts the North-normative power relations that characterise Italy and the entire world.

I would like to conclude this work by quoting a very recent interview by 99 Posse's lead singer Luca Persico (aka 'O Zulù), which further reaffirms all the elements of this tenacious, vigorous and sardonic Southern antagonism:

It's been about 150 years that we, the Southerners, survive in close contact with crises and poverty, fighting hard in order to obtain a meagre version of things that elsewhere are taken for granted. This is not because we are not conscious of the wealth of our land and of our talent, nor because we like suffering. This is the result of 150 years of economic, political and cultural subalternity. Mind you, this is not because the state has abandoned the South, but because the state, the big companies and the mafia have made a precise choice. Renzi²¹ makes me smile when he says: 'We have a plan for the South'. If only he knew what plans has the South got for him... (Valenti & Persico, 2015)²².

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¹⁸ ("Na cosa ca putesse fa l'italiano, / fosse 'e se 'mparà a parlà napulitano / la lingua più diffusa da Roma a Milano / il principale prodotto d'esportazione italiano").

¹⁹ ("Noi non emigriamo, napulitan / sò più di 150 anni che colonizziamo / non emigriamo napulitano / da più di 150 anni ci ricollochiamo").

²⁰ ("Trasformare tutto il mondo in una grande Napoli").

²¹ Matteo Renzi is the Italian First Minister at the moment of this writing and of Persico's interview.

²² ("sono circa 150 anni che noi meridionali sopravviviamo a stretto contatto con crisi e povertà, lottando duramente per ottenere la brutta copia di cose che altrove sono garantite. E non certo perché non siamo consapevoli della ricchezza della nostra terra e del nostro ingegno, e nemmeno perché ci piace soffrire. È il risultato di 150 anni di subalternità economica, politica e culturale e non di abbandono da parte dello stato, attenzione, ma di una scelta precisa da parte dello Stato, delle grandi aziende e della mafia. Mi fa sorridere Renzi quando pontifica: «Abbiamo un piano per il sud» Sapesse il piano che ha il Sud per lui...").

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