

Joseph Francese. The Unpopular Realism of Vincenzo Padula. Il Bruzio and Mariuzza Sbriffiti

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Joseph Francese. *The Unpopular Realism of Vincenzo Padula. Il Bruzio and Mariuzza Sbriffiti*. Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Lanham, Maryland: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2021. Pp. 206. ISBN 9781683933328.

Joseph Francese has added an important new monograph to his works that have given impetus to Italian Studies in recent decades. Indeed, *The Unpopular Realism of Vincenzo Padula* (2021) continues the trajectory of militant and committed criticism personified by Francese, who had so far expressed itself especially in the two monographs *Narrating Postmodern Time and Space* (1997) and *Socially Symbolic Acts. The Historicizing Fictions of Umberto Eco, Vincenzo Consolo, and Antonio Tabucchi* (2006). In these monographs, he studied contemporary literary works as aesthetic and imaginary manifestations of the tensions of our time and the contradictions of history. Notably, in the latter, he developed a critical approach that updated Frederic Jameson's theory of the political unconscious. Another direction of Francese's criticism—which can be considered an important background of his most recent work—is the Gramscian one. In this regard, it is worthwhile mentioning that in 2009 he edited the collection of essays on *Perspectives on Gramsci: Politics, Culture and Social Theory*.

In the new book, Francese conveys his intellectual commitment to confront the issues of social and political criticism relating to the formation of the unitary national state in Italy. These themes are now studied not starting from contemporary writers such as Vincenzo Consolo but focusing on a Calabrian intellectual like Vincenzo Padula (1819–1893), a direct participant in the post-unification debate. Padula's most important work was the pro-government journal *Il Bruzio* (1864–1865) that he wrote almost single-handedly and published in Cosenza. He is “a secondary but significant Italian writer and patriot” (1), little-studied so far. One of the merits of Francese's book is precisely that of making him known to a broader audience, especially in the Anglophone world.

The Unpopular Realism of Vincenzo Padula starts with an Introduction that contextualizes Padula and his work within the nation-building immediately following the birth of the Italian national state. From the title that reminds of the Bruttians who inhabited Calabria in antiquity, Padula's journal intends to participate in the social project that wants to forge the Unification with an independent spirit, mindful of the cultural and political diversities of the southern regions compared to that of the north. In Francese's words, “*Il Bruzio* provides us with realistic depiction of everyday life in a Southern province in the years immediately

following the Unification. It furnishes penetrating insights into Italy's *Southern Question* as lived and suffered by a protagonist" (7).

The second chapter of the book focuses on the biography of Padula, who was not a revolutionary but a centrist—aligned with the positions of De Sanctis and Settembrini, leaders of the "National Unitary Association". However, in some regards, his stance differs from the conservative political context when he advocates for the social rights of the lower economic classes. On the pages of his journal, Padula asks for human working conditions, the right to education, and the possibility of improving the living conditions for the marginalized people without history and a voice. In this sense, he can be considered a reformist as his goal was to reinforce the government by integrating those excluded. He knew that the exclusion of the masses could create enormous problems for the newborn state. It is worth mentioning that in the years in which Padula published the *Bruzio* a civil war was taking place in the South where the Piedmontese army was fighting the brigandry. In this perspective, Francese reads Padula's contradictory positions as an expression of the otherwise repressed political unconscious of the Italian Risorgimento.

Nonetheless, Padula's attempt to advocate for the subaltern was "sincere." His attitude also contributed to his marginalization in the intellectual life of his time. For this reason, his search for a national and popular realism became in the end, "unpopular". In this light, Francese read through Gramsci the contradictions of the Italian Risorgimento, which Gramsci saw as a failed union of the homeland and as a passive revolution, especially in the South where intellectuals remained organic members of the economic elite. Northern intellectuals of Padula's time combined economic conservatism based on the power of the proprietary and wealthy classes with an idea of the Risorgimento as a struggle against foreign invasions. Padula appears original because he sees all the problems of a national unity that seemed to be imposed on the southern populations and based on Piedmontese "foreign" models to the Calabrians. Indeed, Padula's *Bruzio* tried to make both the ruling classes of the North and the marginalized masses of the South aware of the problems inherent in the Unification.

These social and political themes find an analytical center in the seventh chapter of the book dedicated to *Il Bruzio*. Chapters nine and ten, where Francese analyzes the women's correspondence with *Il Bruzio*, are fascinating. These chapters open a window on the customs and problems of daily life of Calabrese society in the first years of the unitary state, primarily through the correspondence of literary creation, Mariuzza Sbriffiti. The representation of women is another

significant aspect of Padula's work which is considered original and innovative, to the point of being considered in some respects a "proto-feminist" even if, in other matters, he maintains a paternalistic and patriarchal attitude. Francese sees the "proto-feminist" aspects above all in the representation of working-class women that Padula describes on a par with their men.

In conclusion, this new book by Joseph Francese represents a critical addition to the bibliography on the post-unitary debate, drawing our attention to a protagonist who had not received the attention he deserves until now.

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