Sardinian Lives Matter

Dynamics and Reactions in an Italian Internal Colony

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ABSTRACT

Sardinia had five centuries of independence up until the fifteenth century, and thereafter partial institutional autonomy until 1847. With its inclusion in the Italian state, Sardinia's cultural, economic, institutional and political systems make it uniquely colonial in comparison to other ethnic/national minorities across Europe (Basque, Welsh, Catalan, etc.), leaving limited real choices for development to the locals and constraining what is seen as real and attainable for its future (Escobar 2020). This contribution demonstrates how Sardinia is an internal colony of Italy. We provide examples of decolonisation initiatives and provoke further interrogation on the ways in which the Black Lives Matter movement (and other efforts) are sustaining alternative visions for Sardinians' political, economic, cultural and social future.

KEYWORDS

Decolonising, de-culturation, hegemony, identity, racism

Gutierrez (2004) argues that internal colonialism, a theory of racial domination and subordination, is one, along with liberation theology and subaltern studies, of few theories that is not a product of experiences and thought generated in Europe. Theories such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and postmodernism were created in Europe and then applied in other contexts; they are strong in social, class, and power dynamics but less so in articulating the intersections of gender, ethnicity and race on these dynamics. Internal colonialism, while bearing its own critiques, accommodates some of this complexity. With origins in Latin America, the theory is elaborated in the work of Black and Chicano/a activists in the United States of America in articulating the chasm between their legal citizenship and their second-class standing.

Robert Blauner (1972: 51–81) outlines four key points of internal colonialism, which we present here to justify Sardinia as an internal colony of Italy: 1) forced entry – Italy dominated Sardinia in an

initially non-democratic, involuntary process; 2) cultural impact – Italy carries out policies that constrain, transform or destroy Sardinian values; 3) external administration – Sardinia is managed and manipulated by ethnic outsiders; and 4) racism – Sardinians have been deemed inferior or different based on alleged biological characteristics and exploited and oppressed socially and psychically by the superordinate group of ‘Italian’.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, itself having genealogical ties with the theory of internal colonialism, has represented an opportunity for Sardinians to reflect on the right to have a voice in their future. The aim of this Forum contribution is to outline some of the initiatives revolving around the idea of decolonising Sardinia. It highlights some of the missing areas of activism and theorisation in comparison with other contexts and presents perspectives for the future. The authors’ positionality as both anthropological scholars and Sardinians, respond to what Deborah D’Amico-Samuels (2010) has described as politically informed holism – where we recognise that the ‘field is everywhere’ and intellectual inquiry is embedded in hierarchies of race, class, gender and the nation.

Historical Background

Sardinia is an island central in a Mediterranean perspective, but marginal to Europe. Over its long history it had times of independence with and without long-distance connections – in the Bronze Age, the Byzantine era and the Late Middle Ages for instance. Periods of preferential ties with different mainlands have also occurred – with Tunisia in Roman and Late Antique times, central-northern Italy in the early second millennium AD, and Iberia from the fourteenth through the early eighteenth century – and weaker links with Sicily, southern Italy, and France. This illustrates how its unique culture is the effect of playing alternating roles as both a central hub and a marginal area between systems in the Mediterranean, without any natural preferential connection to the Italian peninsula.

Under the Spanish Empire, institutional autonomy was granted by its status as a kingdom, with its own parliament. In the early 1700s, dynastic turmoil caused Sardinia to be ceded to the Duchy of Savoy. It retained its separate institutions, but the parliament increasingly lost its powers, especially after the failed revolution of 1793–1796, which was quelled with bloody repression, public executions and the

destruction of a town. In 1847, Sardinia was institutionally ‘merged’ with mainland Savoy territories and soon after into the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, without any democratic ratification, and became a minority in a national context.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in line with rising colonialism and racism globally, Sardinians were identified in government documents as inherently prone to crime and violence (Niceforo 1897), and rather than investigating the social and developmental inequalities, frequent defiance was met with military repression. In 1906 a widespread workers’ protest for better conditions, with momentous implications for the whole of Italy, had navy and troops from all over Italy sent to subdue the ‘rebellion’, leaving many casualties. Italian culture and language were increasingly enforced as the official standard; powerful new media such as radio and then television in the following decades replaced the Sardinian language; memory, and identity and self-awareness were largely obliterated by a centralised education system based on celebrating Italianness, which had its peak during the Fascist dictatorship but continues today.

Current Situation

In the late 1800s, a virtually colonial economic system was built by the Italian government, backed by local political elites. It lasts to this day: based on extraction of raw materials and energy (timber, coal from forests, minerals), it polluted vast territories (chemical factories, military bases) and consumed the land (luxury touristic development), without offering long-lasting, sustainable alternatives to the locals. In post-war times, intending to reach the same level of development and lifestyle as the urbanised north, and also for geopolitical considerations (the Cold War was a true threat), local governments accepted investments in economic sectors that are now revealing their deep disconnect with local resources and their lack of both economic and environmental sustainability (Sotgiu 1998). The consequences are evident today: one-fourth of Sardinians are in poverty, unemployment is at 19.8% vs. the 13.1% average for Italy, and in 2021 youth unemployment was 40.9% vs. the national 29.4%; the system has created particular dependence on the government with pensions and public wages accounting for 46.4% of total income, in contrast to the 38.7% Italian average.

Culturally speaking, this led to the uptake – Gramsci *sensu* – of thinking patterns from the hegemonic culture; today, most Sardinians

feel Italian, support Italian football teams, enjoy mainstream Italian foods; and more importantly, since the end of World War II Sardinia has been ruled by local sections of Italian parties. These Italian-based parties outnumber and outsource local Sardinian-centred parties. Since both conservatives and progressives are firmly situated in the Italian system and respond to logics maneuvered from the headquarters of the main Italian parties in Rome and Milan, Sardinian issues are not a political priority. This is especially evident in language and education policies. In comparison to other colonial and post-colonial situations in Africa, Latin America, Pacific Islands and other regions of Europe, the use of Sardinian language was not formally permitted until 1997 and recognised as a minority language only in 2001 (Lai 2021).

Thus, in two generations, Sardinian went from being the principal language to the situation in 2007, where 89% of speakers aged 15–24 had Italian as their first language, only 5.8% had Sardinian (Oppo 2007). The elderly are still fluent, but the lack of prioritisation and funding for language revitalisation implies, as is the case today, younger generations will not learn it and extinction is a threat. Interrelated with political agendas is the lack of teaching of Sardinian history in the public school curriculum, reflecting how peripheral the island is in mainstream perception of Italians, but is also the measure of how psychologically this operates as a progressive abrasion of Sardinians' sense of their alterity. The discussion of Sardinian history is left to the individual initiative of teachers who have to create materials, seek permission within each school, and balance this supplemental activity with meeting the state-mandated curriculum requirements. As a result, most students will graduate having learned nothing of Sardinian history.

There is clearly a progressive 'Italianisation' due to the effect of institutions, education and media. Yet in the last two decades, there has been a revival in the desire to reconnect with tradition and local roots, and a flourishing of movements and political parties that in different ways place Sardinian identity and 'otherness' at the centre of their activism and political discourse as essential for redemption, or rebirth, of the island (Pala 2016).

Decolonising Sardinia *Protests and Public Book Presentations*

The Italian Ministry of Defence has several military bases in Sardinia for training troops and carrying out experiments; furthermore, vast

areas of Sardinian land are rented out, by the government, to private companies and foreign armies to test new weapons and for training. These military bases have been a site of protests, typically unauthorised but largely non-violent, for decades. Activists have had different degrees of requests, from the immediate dismantling of military installations, to better compensations to the local municipalities bearing the onus of the presence of the bases, their pollution, and the locking of large territories, often endowed with great touristic potential. The discourse of Sardinia as a colony of Italy is always pervasive in these kinds of protests and is often linked to ‘independentist’ ideologies.

A significant movement gaining momentum concerns the creation of identity and memory, which aims at changing street names dedicated to members of the former royalty to names more locally relevant. Whereas for most of Italy this is related to the last king Victor Emmanuel III’s pivotal role in the rise of fascism and racist policies, in Sardinia this extends back to the oppressive and reactionary role of several characters during the revolutionary season between the late 1700s and early 1800s, among which is King Charles Felix. A book by Casula (2016) unveils uncomfortable truths about this bloodthirsty king, who happens to have a bronze monument dedicated to him in one of the main squares in Cagliari, the island’s capital. The public presentations of this book – which in five years has already had five reprints and a recent second edition – has become a crucial vector for the idea of removing the statue to a more appropriate location in a museum, as well as for the replacement of street names dedicated to the Savoy dynasty.

The Facebook group dedicated to this popular initiative is approaching three thousand five hundred members. Thus far only eight municipalities have been able to replace street names with characters that have a positive civic connotation for the local communities; in most cases, the local provincial prefects (appointed by the Italian government to oversee public order and head of the police, unlike elective figures) or Soprintendenze (local arm of the Italian ministry for Cultural Resources) have opposed the authorisation of changes.

One case of direct inspiration from the BLM movement is the public event organised on 19 June 2020 in Sassari, which deliberately joined the expressions ‘Black Lives Matter / Sardinian Lives Matter’. This was alleged to be a way to join a global cry by translating into a local interpretive key the worldwide movement against every form of discrimination and subordination. Sardinia, the advertisement reads, ‘suffered and still suffers inequality, fragmentation, exploitation and

marginalization'. The added value to this event was the attention given to a locally based programme that favoured the integration of North African immigrants within the community of Sassari; a virtuous case of unity between protests against discrimination of Africans and Sardinians alike, since the overall perception is that of unacceptable disparity compared to mainland Italy: outdated health and education facilities; inadequate transportation infrastructure; military bases and their by-products. 'Is this not violence?', the organisers claim 'is this not to belittle a people and enslave it? Perhaps, the only way we have to understand our reality and our history is by learning and observing them through our past and our present' (CagliariPad 2020).

While the solidarity between Africans and Sardinians is commendable it would be naïve to ignore how Sardinians are both targets and agents of oppression. The influence of mainstream Italian views is visible in intolerance and anti-immigrant protests, the fruit of the media and the disconnect from the local reality (which has relatively few immigrants). In recent years, we have witnessed different racist acts on immigrants as they wait for the bus (2018), young people dressing up as the Ku Klux Klan for carnival (2017) and one of the authors being approached for sex work (9 a.m., main street, Cagliari, 2011), because that is what black women are thought to do. Immigrants blocked from formal sectors of the economy are relegated to niches that often overlap with perceptions of race (e.g. North African males: street vendors; Eastern European females: elder care). As neofascism and xenophobia rise on the island, there is an increasing need to address the mechanisms of subordination Sardinians are subjected to and those in which they are perpetrators.

Partially along these lines is an initiative with origins before the 2020 demonstrations, the *Filosofia de Logu* movement. In their own words, this is a 'study plan, an epistemological and heuristic proposal, a collective project, theory and practice of liberation' (*Filosofia de Logu*, 2021). It attempts to favour the coalescence of scholars who have a common goal: promoting an understanding of the dynamics of subordination and marginalisation of Sardinia. This is quite revolutionary considering the traditional lack of involvement of academics on the subject, stemming from an overall pattern of alignment to the state-sponsored ideology of those holding public positions traced back to the failure of the 'Sardinian Revolution' of 1793–1796 (Onnis 2021).

Through the deliberate rejection of thought models that the majority takes for granted, the movement aims to unveil the processes that the Italian state – as any colonial state – has deployed and still deploys

in constructing subordinate culture, economy and society. Proponents try to reconnect with figures that went against the mainstream canonical thought, from Antonio Gramsci, a Sardinian himself, to Michelangelo Pira, and Bachisio Bandinu and others, sociologists and thinkers who in different ways denounced the uneven power relations and deep deculturation that economic inferiority and political and cultural control have been causing, and attempt to open a future where intellectual elaboration can acquire the role it has lost in political and institutional discourse. This initiative promisingly appears to be open and inclusive, uniting both academics and scholars unaffiliated to state education institutions.

The first phase of these attempts has resulted in an edited volume, *Filosofia de Logu* (Ghisu and Mongili 2021), where different aspects of such hegemony are explored and deconstructed historically. One of them concerns dispelling the many myths that have served the Italian government to justify policies directed from overseas; the representation of Sardinian history as merely made of a sequence of external dominations, or the myth of the savage, fierce and generous Sardinians who sacrificed themselves during World War I – sacrifice celebrated as the only way to gain the right to Italianness, a reward for the lives lost for the Italian ‘homeland’. Public presentations of the volume are becoming, much like Casula’s on the Savoy rulers, an opportunity to raise critical consciousness and mobilise.

Archaeological and Human Remains

The demand for meaning and ultimately for the decolonisation of memory and history can be exemplified in the popular archaeological realm, by a group of prehistoric statues known as the Mont’e Prama ‘giants’. Discovered in 1974, they have repeatedly represented an acute point of contention, with suspicions towards the state agency for cultural resources (Soprintendenza), accused of neglecting and even concealing the statues. Setting aside the excess of many such criticisms, public attachment to these remains is part of an overall widespread, latent desire to cling to any piece of history demonstrating that Sardinia has not always been a subordinate, savage, unchanging land as current narratives portray it. The restoration and exhibition of the statues, among the earliest life-sized statues in the Mediterranean, spurred an intense phenomenon of collective appropriation and controversies concerning the plans as to where they are to be exhibited (Sardiniapost.it 2021).

On the other hand, if we consider how controversial the treatment of human remains has become in several countries, it is surprising that no public complaints have been generated by the questionable choice to exhibit portions of bodies of fairly recent characters, whose preservation is related to the racist deterministic criminology mindset that can be traced back to Lombroso: at the Anatomical Museum of the Scientific Campus of the University of Cagliari, on shelves, inside preservatives, are a finger and a face of ‘bandits’ from the 1900s. Nothing like the repatriation movements of many post-colonial settings has surfaced in Sardinia, which is the product of full identification with the scientific viewpoint of human remains as archaeological finds, as lithics or pottery, and therefore state property under national Italian legislation.

Conclusions

This summary of decolonising initiatives can be briefly evaluated, pointing out the specific position of Sardinia, as one of the areas within Europe that shows typical internal colonial traits. The degree of deculturation and Italianisation, in language, politics, and productive dependency, is deep and pervasive, and the control of the media by the state or by groups aligned with state-derived paradigms is almost complete. However, there is also an increase in activism and initiatives that aim to contrast the status quo and operate to actively decolonise Sardinian thought. The connection with the BLM movement, and the theory of internal colonialism, has not been fully developed. Nevertheless, there is some level of awareness that much in common exists in decolonising endeavours across the globe and through time, as well as in finding new ways of openly critiquing the power structures in more organised ways. This may therefore represent an opportunity for future developments.

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