

# The Italian national character seen from the outside and from within

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## Abstract

This paper studies the auto-images of Italians in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and compares them with the images of the Italian national character presented by Finnish travellers in their travelogues of the same period. The approach of the analysis is imagological, that is, images regarding Italians as the ‘self’ and as the ‘Other’ are examined through a study of their literary representations. In these representations, stereotypes are often present – being closely connected to the notion of national character – and influential as they affect the image formation process. This study aims to analyse how Italians’ auto-images, often auto-stereotypes, relate to the images of Italians reported in the Finnish travelogues.

## 1 Introduction

This paper analyses the auto-images of Italians in the period of Risorgimento, that is, during the process of Italian unification, and compares them with the images of the Italian national character presented by Finnish travellers<sup>1</sup> in their travelogues in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the modern era, with the rise of the modern system of states, national unity of different nations was shaped by inventing rituals, symbols, heroic stories and myths – new, ‘authentic’ traditions – that would contribute to the formation of distinctive national histories

<sup>1</sup> Juhani Aho (1861–1921), Jac. Ahrenberg (1847–1914), Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905), Adelaïde Ehrnrooth (1826–1905), Johan Henrik Erkko (1849–1906), Emil Nervander (1840–1914) and Anders Ramsay (1832–1910).

and characters. National self-images were normally established by opposing them to images of foreign and hostile nations.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in the process of national identity formation, foreignness acted as a means of symbolic differentiation, that is, of defining national identity by dissociating one's own nation and people from the foreign counterpart. National identities can, then, be seen as stereotypical constructions of the differences that denote 'us' from 'them' and national characters as forms of positively stereotyping a collective 'we' through an imagined personification of the national identity in its ideal essence.<sup>3</sup> Images regarding Italians as the 'self' as well as the foreign 'Other' will be studied from an imagological point of view in this article, since it is in the field of imagology, a branch of comparative literature, that the literary representations of nationhood and national identities are analysed; moreover, in imagology a central focus is placed on images and representations of foreigners and their national characters.<sup>4</sup> By analysing the images of foreigners not only are the mechanisms of national 'othering' and heterostereotyping of the observer revealed but also his/her self-images and underlying autostereotypes are automatically exposed.<sup>5</sup> Imagology strongly problematizes the very notion of national character as it is highly stereotypical and represents national essentialism. In fact, the imagological perspective indicates that national characters, presented as anthropological givens well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are actually just social, rhetorical, and ideological constructs.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 The stereotypical nature of national characters

As seen in the previous chapter, stereotypes are closely related to the notion of national character and thus require further investigation. People normally perceive the world and make observations about it on the basis of prior knowl-

<sup>2</sup> L. Jensen: 'The Roots of Nationalism: Introduction', in: L. Jensen (ed.): *The Roots of Nationalism: National Identity Formation in Early Modern Europe, 1600–1815*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016: 9–28, pp. 17, 21.

<sup>3</sup> M. Pickering: *Stereotyping. The Politics of Representation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001: 90, 93, 95.

<sup>4</sup> L. Jensen: 'The Roots of Nationalism...', *op.cit.*: 21.

<sup>5</sup> Hoenselaars, T. & J. Leerssen: 'The Rhetoric of National Character: Introduction', *European Journal of English Studies* 13 (3), 2009: 251–255, p. 251.

<sup>6</sup> J. Leerssen: 'Imagology: On using ethnicity to make sense of the world', *Iberic@l : revue d'études ibériques et ibéro-américaines* 10, 2016: 87–105, p. 88.

edge schemas, that is, on what they have perceived, heard or read in the past. As journalist Walter Lippman put it: “For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, national images refer primarily not to the nation in question but to other, previous images about the nation.<sup>8</sup> As it is typical of people to search for, accept and remember information that supports what they already believe and to disregard or reject what is not aligned with their beliefs, national images are often characterized by a simplification of reality and national character suppositions devolve easily into stereotypes.<sup>9</sup> The stereotype is, hence, a key concept of cultural analysis and strongly present in imagological research.<sup>10</sup>

It is completely natural that people tend to seek order in the flood of the numerous stimuli encountered daily, and therefore, all national groups define themselves, at least partly, by reference to those outside the group; this maintains their collective identity by distinguishing themselves from other cultures.<sup>11</sup> Malleable categories are, in fact, needed to organize the information about the world around us, but their significance should not be overemphasized and they should not be allowed to harden into stereotypes which represent a simplifying schemata that, more often than not, is derived from hearsay and are not acquired by individual assessment but learned as cultural practices.<sup>12</sup> Many times, though, the contrary occurs as individuals’ basic cognitive processes lead them to exaggerate real differences between

<sup>7</sup> W. Lippmann: *Public opinion*, New York: NY Free Press, 1997: 54–55 (original work published in 1922).

<sup>8</sup> J. Leerssen: ‘The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey’, *Poetics Today* 21 (2), 2000: 267–292, p. 280.

<sup>9</sup> O. K. Fält: ‘Theoretical roots of the study of historical images’, in: Alenius, K., O. K. Fält & M. Mertanimemi (eds.): *Imagology and cross-cultural encounters in history*, Rovaniemi: Pohjois-Suomen historiallinen yhdistys, 2008: 37–43, pp. 39–40; R. J. Smith: ‘In defense of national character’, *Theory & Psychology* 18 (4), 2008: 465–482, pp. 465–466; J. L. Cundiff: ‘The Cognitive and Motivational Aspects of Stereotypes and Their Impact in the United States’, in: J. T. Nadler & E. C. Voyles (eds.): *Stereotypes. The Incidence and Impacts of Bias*, Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2020: 1–21, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> M. Pickering: *Stereotyping*, *op.cit.*: XII.

<sup>11</sup> R. J. Smith: ‘In defense of...’, *op.cit.*: 465; J. A. Armstrong: ‘National character and national stereotypes’, *Society* 33, 1996: 48–52, p. 48; W. Zacharasiewicz: *Imagology revisited*, Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2010: 16.

<sup>12</sup> M. Pickering: *Stereotyping*, *op.cit.*: 3, 29; J. Leerssen: ‘Imagology: History and method’, in: M. Beller & J. Leerssen (eds.): *Imagology: The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters. A critical survey*, Amsterdam – New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007: 17–32, p. 26.

groups and ignore information that does not confirm the existing stereotype.<sup>13</sup> Stereotypes distort the ways in which social groups or individuals are perceived as they depict a social group as homogeneous and conceal its more complex subjectivities.<sup>14</sup> Hence, stereotypes lead to strong character attribution that has a variety of mechanisms but also includes some structural factors. One of the most invariant elements of character attribution – reminiscent of Montesquieu’s climate theory – is the opposition between the south and the north that can be encountered not only internationally but also intranationally. According to common, fixed stereotypes, people from the north are individualist, colder, cerebral and trustworthy and less pleasing, whereas people from the south are collective, more pleasing, hot-blooded, impulsive and sensual and less trustworthy and responsible. However, the various national characterizations attributed to different nations and countries are variable and occur according to the context, historical moment, or discursive configuration and, as a consequence, they are also greatly contradictory.<sup>15</sup> In fact, emerging viewpoints in social psychology indicate that, for example, pure stereotype-based antipathy is rare and, in reality, stereotypes usually contain ambivalent beliefs, with a combination of mainly negative but also some positive attributes. In addition, it is important to remember that even though the process of stereotyping is a basic human mechanism for perceiving and making sense of the world, it is not inevitable. All human beings can change their categorical beliefs if they receive enough disconfirming information and are sufficiently motivated.<sup>16</sup>

For imagology, it is fundamental to examine the field of literature, as that is where national character stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, and then maintained and diffused.<sup>17</sup> Through a detailed analysis of literary representations, imagology studies in particular the role that national character stereotypes play in sustaining social inequalities and discrimination. The study

<sup>13</sup> R. R. McCrae et al.: ‘The inaccuracy of national character stereotypes’, *Journal of Research in Personality* 47, 2013: 831–842, p. 832.

<sup>14</sup> M. Pickering: *Stereotyping*, *op.cit.*: 4, 10.

<sup>15</sup> J. Leerssen: ‘The Rhetoric of National Character...’, *op.cit.*: 275–279; McCrae, R. R., A. Terracciano, A. Realo & J. Allik: ‘Climatic warmth and national wealth: some culture-level determinants of national character stereotypes’, *European Journal of Personality* 21 (8), 2007: 953–976, p. 956.

<sup>16</sup> Operario, D. & S. T. Fiske: ‘Stereotypes: Content, Structures, Processes, and Context’, in: R. Brown & S. Gaertner (eds.): *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intergroup Processes*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001: 22–44, pp. 24, 31, 34.

<sup>17</sup> J. Leerssen: ‘Imagology: History and method...’, *op.cit.*: 26.

has to be done bearing in mind the complex nature of these stereotypes and without ignoring the historical and literary context in which the stereotypes appear.<sup>18</sup>

### 3 Heterostereotypes and autostereotypes

On the basis of the elements mentioned above, it is well founded to state that stereotypes are like untested cognitive short-cuts that cloud reality distorting actual experience with biased preconceptions.<sup>19</sup> These biased preconceptions easily turn into stereotypical expectations which can make people behave towards others in predictable ways that are inclined to then elicit the expected behaviour; this is a process that has a tendency to become self-fulfilling.<sup>20</sup> In addition, just knowing that the stereotype exists can lead a target group member to confirm it and, consequently, to favour its preservation.<sup>21</sup> Stereotypes are not, however, constant and insurmountable as they can be adapted through personal motivation and effort.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, stereotypes are a part of the reality we live in and they inevitably sustain division between ingroups and outgroups, that is, between “us” and “them”.<sup>23</sup>

Heterostereotypes, i.e., stereotypes regarding the members of an outgroup, help the ingroup members to maintain their sense of belonging and to express their common group membership through taking part in processes of prejudicial othering.<sup>24</sup> Stereotypical images of differences possessed by the outgroup members tend to be unrealistically extreme due to the phenomenon of accentuation; this is common in the process of stereotypization, where groups are often portrayed as being much more different from each other than they really are.<sup>25</sup> This so-called illusory correlation is, then, significant and it is

<sup>18</sup> R. R. McCrae et al.: ‘The inaccuracy of...’, *op.cit.*: 832.

<sup>19</sup> N. Rapport & J. Overing: *Social and cultural anthropology...*, *op.cit.*: 345; Operario, D. & S. T. Fiske: ‘Stereotypes...’, *op.cit.*: 27.

<sup>20</sup> N. Rapport & J. Overing: *Social and cultural anthropology...*, *op.cit.*: 345; J. L. Cundiff: ‘The Cognitive and Motivational Aspects...’, *op.cit.*: 10.

<sup>21</sup> Operario, D. & S. T. Fiske: ‘Stereotypes...’, *op.cit.*: 22, 27.

<sup>22</sup> N. Rapport & J. Overing: *Social and cultural anthropology...*, *op.cit.*: 347; *Ibid.*: 23.

<sup>23</sup> Operario, D. & S. T. Fiske: ‘Stereotypes...’, *op.cit.*: 24.

<sup>24</sup> N. Rapport & J. Overing: *Social and cultural anthropology...*, *op.cit.*: 345–346.

<sup>25</sup> J. L. Cundiff: ‘The Cognitive and Motivational Aspects...’, *op.cit.*: 16; M. Rothbart: ‘Category Dynamics and the Modification of Outgroup Stereotypes’, in: R. Brown & S. Gaertner (eds.):

shown that heterostereotypes can arise even in the absence of any real group difference. The tendency of negatively stereotyping others seems to originate from people's need to strengthen and protect a positive view of the self; thus, thinking more highly of their own group and less highly of people in the outgroups helps to improve their own self-esteem.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, stereotypes can be seen as facing firstly inwards as they meet the needs of the ingroup members and reveal much about their auto-images.<sup>27</sup>

Stereotypes are, in fact, also present in the ingroup members' perceptions of themselves and, in this regard, they are defined as autostereotypes. These autostereotypes are, however, less extreme and more heterogeneous than the heterostereotypes concerning outgroup members.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, people tend to emphasize the positive when they describe themselves and to allocate more rewards to ingroup members than to outgroup members.<sup>29</sup> However, sometimes heterostereotypes can have an influence on autostereotypes. This phenomenon especially concerns members of negatively stereotyped groups which are aware of the stereotypes that others hold of them. This awareness can lead to unwanted outcomes as it may negatively affect the way that the members view themselves and the social world around them.<sup>30</sup> Overall, stereotypes can be seen as the result of the processes of prejudicial othering. However, in nature there is no real 'Other', as the 'Other' exists primarily in language and it is through language that we represent ourselves and others. These representations consist of words and images which are substitutes for various social groups and offer ways of describing and regarding these groups.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, it is logical that imagological research concentrates on studying discourses in order to analyse images of the 'Other'.

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*Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intergroup Processes*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001: 45–64, p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> J. L. Cundiff: 'The Cognitive and Motivational Aspects...', *op.cit.*: 6–8.

<sup>27</sup> N. Rapport & J. Overing: *Social and cultural anthropology...*, *op.cit.*: 346.

<sup>28</sup> M. Rothbart: 'Category Dynamics...', *op.cit.*: 48.

<sup>29</sup> J. Krueger: 'Enhancement bias in descriptions of self and others', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24 (5), 1998: 505–516, p. 505; M. B. Brewer: 'Ingroup bias in the minimal intergroup situation: A cognitive motivational analysis', *Psychological Bulletin* 86 (2), 1979: 307–324, pp. 321–322.

<sup>30</sup> J. L. Cundiff: 'The Cognitive and Motivational Aspects...', *op.cit.*: 12; M. Pickering: *Stereotyping*, *op.cit.*: XIII.

<sup>31</sup> M. Pickering: *Stereotyping*, *op.cit.*: XIII, 72.

#### **4 In search of an Italian national character**

It was not until the formation of the modern Italian state that the theme of a national character became truly relevant in Italy.<sup>32</sup> The discourse on national character in contemporary Italy can, in fact, be considered as the product of the national-patriotic projects that emerged in the peninsula at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and of the aspirations for a national regeneration that accompanied these projects.<sup>33</sup> The reason for this kind of belatedness can be found in the fact that for centuries – from the Roman era until its unification – Italy was *un paese di città*, a fragmented ensemble of city states, the inhabitants of which lacked a sense of unity and who related themselves much more to their city of origin than Italy as a whole.<sup>34</sup> In the centuries preceding unification, Italians were, in fact, considered – by Italian writers and politicians themselves – as not having a strong national character; this was due to being weakened by long political servitude, being unaccustomed to the use of weapons and exiled in the unrealistic polycentrism of the cities.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, for a long time, the Catholic faith represented the only actual common trait of Italians and, thus, the only unifying aspect in the peninsula.<sup>36</sup> During the process of Italian unification, the Risorgimento, it then became clear that apart from establishing a unified state, a unified people with a shared national character was also to be formed and defined.

As a consequence, the search for the Italian national character occupied a central position in the process of Italian unification, among the Italian intellectuals.<sup>37</sup> The national character of Italians became the subject of entire treatises dedicated to the description and analysis of the topic. Discussing the Italian national character resulted, more often than not, in reporting the various vices of the Italian people. Idleness, *il dolce far niente*, was generally considered the greatest vice of Italians as the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula seemed to lack work ethics.<sup>38</sup> Giuseppe Mazzini, an Italian politician, journalist and

<sup>32</sup> G. Bollati: *L'Italiano. Il carattere nazionale come storia e come invenzione*, Torino: Einaudi, 1996: 43.

<sup>33</sup> S. Patriarca: *Italianità. La costruzione del carattere nazionale*, Roma: Laterza, 2011: 271.

<sup>34</sup> E. Galli della Loggia: *L'identità italiana*, Bologna: il Mulino, 1998: 37.

<sup>35</sup> G. Bollati: *L'Italiano...*, *op.cit.*: 59–60.

<sup>36</sup> E. Galli della Loggia: *L'identità italiana*, *op.cit.*: 44.

<sup>37</sup> G. Bollati: *L'Italiano...*, *op.cit.*: 93.

<sup>38</sup> S. Patriarca: *Italianità...*, *op.cit.*: XV, 42.

revolutionary, subsequently claimed that one of the most severe vices of Italians was individualism, that is, municipalism which manifested itself in Italians' exaggerated attachment to their city of birth. This vice resulted in provincial divisions and in a lack of faith in Italians as a united people.<sup>39</sup> Along with individualism, a deeply rooted familism was commonly considered a typical Italian vice and, consequently, an obstacle to the development of strong political institutions.<sup>40</sup> An Italian physical anthropologist, Giuseppe Sergi listed, instead, classicism as one of the deadly sins of Italians as, according to him, Italians could imagine the future only through the perspective of the past.<sup>41</sup> Italian modernity was unable to erase anti-modernity as it continued to overlap with the past producing incongruity and inefficiencies.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Sergi stated that the extreme Catholicism of Italians suppressed their spirit of initiative and was one of the major causes of the decline of the Italian people.<sup>43</sup> In this context, it is interesting to remark that the negative character traits associated with Italians – such as strong individualism, low willpower and lack of a spirit of collaboration and discipline – were often interchangeable with those attributed especially to the inhabitants of *Meridione*, Southern Italy. In fact, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and especially from the Risorgimento onwards, these traits were attributed, in their purest and most extreme form, to the population of the south; therefore establishing Southern Italy as the 'internal Other' within Italy. Consequently, the Southern inhabitants of the peninsula became the 'Others' who were considered to have little in common with the northern population and its civilization. Gradually, the discourse on the character of the southerners assumed more racist tones and the tendency to regard race as an explanatory factor for certain behavioural differences spread.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> G. Mazzini: 'D'alcune cause che impedirono finora lo sviluppo della libertà in Italia', in F. della Peruta (ed.): *Scritti Politici di Giuseppe Mazzini*, Torino: Einaudi, 1976: 173–249.

<sup>40</sup> E. Galli della Loggia: *L'identità italiana*, *op.cit.*: 87; *Ibid.*: 256.

<sup>41</sup> G. Sergi: *La decadenza delle nazioni latine*, Torino: Fratelli Bocca, 1900: 78–79.

<sup>42</sup> E. Galli della Loggia: *L'identità italiana*, *op.cit.*: 139.

<sup>43</sup> G. Sergi: *La decadenza...*, *op.cit.*: 77–78.

<sup>44</sup> N. Moe: *The View from Vesuvius. Italian Culture and the Southern Question*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 2002: 87, 91, 103, 107–112; S. Patriarca: *Italianità...*, *op.cit.*: 59, 61, 78; P. Turiello: *Governo e governati in Italia*, ed. by Piero Bevilacqua, Torino: Einaudi, 1980: 40–41 (original work published in 1882).



The Italian national character then became a fixed point in the political discourse in which the leading figures of Italy all had something to say.<sup>45</sup> One of these was the aforementioned Mazzini who became the (self-appointed) head of the moral regeneration that was considered the keystone of the Italian unification process. Mazzini composed *Dei doveri dell'uomo* (1862), a book in which he made an inventory of the requirements that were necessary for reaching the desired characteristics of Italianness. Three of the most important of these requirements were the renunciation of individual selfishness, the repudiation of materialism, and the absolute readiness to reach national unity and pursue Italy's supranational mission.<sup>46</sup> However, it was not easy to attain the goals listed by Mazzini in a country that was full of divisions and, in fact, the process of 'forming Italians' transpired to be complicated and hard to completely accomplish. Later, with the Fascist regime, a new 'ideal' Italian – disciplined, hypermasculine and militarized – was introduced by Mussolini who declared in 1926 that in ten years the face of the homeland would become unrecognizable both physically and spiritually. However, this never happened, as the Fascist dictatorship and the loss of one battle after another in the Second World War only added further negative connotations to the concept of being Italian. According to anti-fascists, Italy was, in fact, a country with an organically anarchic, corrupt and servile people and the post-war Italians were generally considered as being dominated by mammism and effeminacy. Consequently, after the Second World War it was necessary to promote a positive image of Italians and a hegemonic narrative of the good Italian gained ground.<sup>47</sup> Overall, after the unification, Italian culture has almost always offered an image of Italians as if the nation were split into two incompatible entities of which one is inhabited by positive and benevolent Italians, *italiani brava gente*, and the other by villains, portrayed as the majority.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> S. Patriarca: *Italianità...*, *op.cit.*: 137.

<sup>46</sup> G. Bollati: *L'Italiano...*, *op.cit.*: 61–62.

<sup>47</sup> S. Patriarca: *Italianità...*, *op.cit.*: 153–154, 161, 171, 173, 208, 272. B. Mussolini: 'Al popolo di Reggio Emilia', a speech held in 30.10.1926, in: *Benito Mussolini: Le opere, i discorsi e gli scritti (1914–1942)*, online: <http://www.adamoli.org/benito-mussolini/index.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> E. Galli della Loggia: *L'identità italiana*, *op.cit.*: 159–160.

## 5 The point of view of the Finnish travellers

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Italy has been a popular travel destination for a large number of Europeans and, as such, it has witnessed a notable proliferation of images concerning it and its inhabitants. When discussing the Italian national character in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is, then, fundamental to take into account how Italians were represented by non-Italians in the previous centuries as the discourse on the Italian national character cannot be analysed, nor fully understood, if it is not examined in an international context.<sup>49</sup> In fact, certain stereotypes – of foreign origin – regarding Italians had a strong influence in the process of the auto-image formation of Italians that culminated during the Risorgimento period. While the foreign travellers visiting Italy admired the country's cultural heritage and its breath-taking scenery, they had less consideration for the inhabitants of the peninsula. The vast literature of the *Grand Tour*, especially, did its part in forming a rather negative image of Italians as the country's inhabitants were often described by foreigners as indolent, morally and sexually uninhibited and prone to violence. The intellectuals of the Italian Enlightenment rarely engaged themselves in defending their fellow citizens as regards their image and, at times, even the Italians themselves contributed to the formation of certain negative auto-stereotypes.<sup>50</sup> Considering the impact that the foreigners' hetero-images of Italians had on the auto-images of Italians, it is interesting to compare the most important elements of the Italian national character as seen by Italians themselves – presented in the previous chapter – and the images that Finnish travellers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century introduced in their travelogues concerning Italy.

### 5.1 Idleness

As stated in Chapter 4, idleness was commonly considered a central part of the Italian national character even by Italians themselves in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Curiously, in the studied travelogues, the Finnish travellers do not emphasize Italians' idleness in any particular way. Although some light criticism can be found regarding Italians who spend their time indolently loitering in streets and piazzas, the Finnish travelogues portray Italians mostly as diligent and

<sup>49</sup> S. Patriarca: *Italianità...*, *op.cit.*: XVII–XVIII.

<sup>50</sup> S. Patriarca: *Italianità...*, *op.cit.*: XVIII, 4–5, 12, 274.

active. The Finnish author and art historian, Emil Nervander,<sup>51</sup> for example, describes Neapolitans as brisk, joyful and hard-working people who are resourceful sailors and fishermen. He adds, though, that Neapolitans are so orgulous and freedom-loving that it is impossible to employ them permanently.<sup>52</sup> In addition, Anders Ramsay,<sup>53</sup> a Finnish businessman, and Johan Henrik Erkko,<sup>54</sup> a Finnish poet and playwright, write about the frenetic atmosphere on the sidewalks of Naples as blacksmiths, tailors, shoemakers, painters, barkeepers, saddle and wagon makers and all sorts of grocers work tirelessly from dusk till dawn.<sup>55</sup> To illustrate the Sicilian work-life, Nervander also depicts the streets of Messina that, just like in Naples, are full of noise and craftsmen who work contentedly and with speed; weaving, tinkering, sewing and making fishing nets.<sup>56</sup> Similarly Jac Ahrenberg,<sup>57</sup> a Finnish architect and author, comments – while visiting Tuscany – that Italians are laborious people to whom he feels great respect but whose efforts for example in agriculture do not bear fruit because of the too challenging climatic conditions and, most of all, the bad tax laws and the archaic, authoritarian system that prevails. In fact, Ahrenberg reports that farmers were forced to pay a half or a third of their income to their squires and the region was dominated by extreme poverty.<sup>58</sup>

The diligent nature of the Italians was also obvious to other Europeans especially in conjunction with Italian emigration. In his writings, Nervander states that, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, approximately one hundred thousand Italians annually left Italy to seek a better life but normally, years later, they returned to their homeland. Nervander describes how in different countries of Europe

<sup>51</sup> Nervander made a long study trip to Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France and Italy in autumn–spring 1864–1865 during which he stayed in Italy for four months.

<sup>52</sup> E. Nervander: *Maantieteellisiä kuvaelmia: Italia III*, Helsinki: Kansanvalistus-seura, 1896b: 12.

<sup>53</sup> Ramsay visited Italy in spring 1865.

<sup>54</sup> Erkko sojourned in Italy in February and March 1885.

<sup>55</sup> J. H. Erkko: *Matkakuvauksia ja muistiinpanoja Italiasta 20.1.–28.3.1885* (Representations of journey and notes from Italy 20.1.–28.3.1885), Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, J. H. Erkon arkisto, kotelo 3 (The Finnish Literature Society, archive of J. H. Erkko, box 3); A. Ramsay: *Muistoja lapsen ja hopeahapsen, III: 1865–1871*, Porvoo: WSOY, 1966: 42.

<sup>56</sup> E. Nervander: *Maantieteellisiä kuvaelmia: Italia III*, *op.cit.*: 25.

<sup>57</sup> Ahrenberg sojourned in Italy in autumn–spring 1875–1876.

<sup>58</sup> J. Ahrenberg: *Människör som jag känt: Personliga minnen, utdrag ur bref och anteckningar af Jac. Ahrenberg. Femte delen*, Helsingfors: Söderström & C:o, 1910: 55–56. Ahrenberg refers to the well-known system of mezzadria (metayage) in which the cultivator uses land without owning it and pays rent to the owner (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/metayage>).

one could come across serious and silent, clean-cut Italian men who wandered from house to house playing the barrel organ. They were diligent and active and thanks to their work, they were able to provide for themselves and send money to their loved ones in Italy.<sup>59</sup> The image of the indolent Italian began, in fact, to decline when Italians emigrated to other countries to work.<sup>60</sup>

## 5.2 Individualism and familism

Individualism and familism – two central elements of the Italian national character, as mentioned previously – are discussed together in this chapter since they both were considered obstacles for the development of strong political institutions and, consequently, for the progress of the Italian state during and after the Risorgimento period. Furthermore, these elements manifested themselves in Italians inability – or more often than not in their unwillingness – to act for the common good and to promote the interests of the community. In the analysed travelogues, the Finnish travellers do not explicitly mention the Italians' inclination to exaggerated individualism or familism. The reason for this can be found in the fact that the travellers spent only a limited time in Italy – usually some months – and rarely, if ever, became personally acquainted with Italians or took part in different activities of the Italian society, let alone in the political life of the country. Therefore, the self-interest of Italians only emerged for the Finnish travellers in certain everyday encounters that mainly involved prices. In fact, in the Finnish travelogues, swindling is a theme that is raised on different occasions. Ramsay, for example, describes the high prices of a modest hotel accommodation in Bologna as a more modern but less romantic way to steal from travellers. While, in Ferrara, he has a showdown with a hotel owner who treats him mainly like a welcomed object to rob, as depicted by Ramsay.<sup>61</sup> The Finnish author, Juhani Aho,<sup>62</sup> reports, in turn, some negative characteristics of Italians and refers to the lack of altruism of the Italian people by stating that Italians cheat as much as they can.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> E. Nervander: *Maantieteellisiä kuvaelmia: Italia I*, Helsinki: Kansanvalistus-seura, 1894: 6.

<sup>60</sup> S. Patriarca: *Italianità...*, *op.cit.*: 108.

<sup>61</sup> A. Ramsay: *Muistoja lapsen...*, *op.cit.*: 166–168.

<sup>62</sup> Aho sojourned in Italy in spring 1893 and in autumn–spring 1903–1904.

<sup>63</sup> J. Aho: A letter to Lyydi Brofeldt, March 1893, in: J. Niemi (ed.): *Juhani Ahon kirjeitä*, Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1986: 168.

However, despite the occasional references to Italians' less honest or altruistic nature, the Finnish travellers portray the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula mainly as kind, open and hospitable – all characteristics that speak against the Italians' alleged overemphasized attachment to their usual, rather limited, environment or to their own interests. Nervander, for example, remarks that the numerous encounters Italians have with tourists make them familiarize themselves with foreign people and their customs and thus erase the marks of vulgarity from the Italian people leading them to behave, for the most part, decently, politely and kindly towards each other and also towards foreigners.<sup>64</sup> Ahrenberg also makes similar observations and states that thanks to their long history, Italians have an intuition for how to interact with people and, consequently, even those who have not attended school can outsmart the educated people from north as regards human encounters.<sup>65</sup> The geniality and openness of Italians towards foreigners is, in fact, mentioned several times in the analysed Finnish travelogues, in which Italians are often described as people who are openhearted, generous and always ready for a cordial conversation.<sup>66</sup>

### 5.3 Classicism

Interestingly, the classicism, or the sort of anti-modernity of Italians – defined as a deadly sin by Sergi – was not remarked on by the Finnish travellers in any particular way while they visited Italy and interacted with Italians, at least not in a negative manner. On the contrary, in the analysed texts, the Finnish travellers praise on various occasions the glorious past of Italy and wish that Italians would show more appreciation for their past glories and what they have accomplished.<sup>67</sup> In fact, Italians' exaggerated attachment to the past, that Sergi so strongly criticizes and views as an obstacle for the progress, does not emerge in the Finnish travelogues. Instead they contain clear signs of admiration and longing for the ancient times on the part of the travellers. Conversely, the inhabitants of modern Italy are often considered rather morally degraded in the

<sup>64</sup> E. Nervander: *Maantieteellisiä kuvaelmia: Italia I*, *op.cit.*: 5–6.

<sup>65</sup> J. Ahrenberg: *Människör som jag känt...*, *op.cit.*: 72.

<sup>66</sup> Cfr. for example A. Ehrnrooth (A-ï-a): *Två finskors lustvandringar i Europa och Afrika åren 1876–77 och 1884*, Helsinki: G. W. Edlund's förlag, 1886: 76, 88–89.

<sup>67</sup> Cfr. for example, A. Edelfelt in A. Kortelainen: *Niin kutsuttu sydämeni: Albert Edelfeltin kirjeet äidilleen 1873–1901*, Helsinki: Otava, 2001: 195.

Finnish travelogues in which the travellers write about the swindlers, beggars, thieves and bandits that they encountered when they visited the country.<sup>68</sup>

The Finnish travellers' admiration for the past also emerges in their comments about Italian architecture as they sometimes criticize the modern constructions in Italy. Ramsay, for example, makes a critical observation by stating that the buildings and other sights in Florence do not make as good an impression in real life as in pictures because they are situated in places where they do not fit well. The elegance of the Ponte Vecchio, for example, is disturbed by a modern iron bridge that is built close to it. In Rome, in turn, Ramsay describes how railways pass close to the precious antique ruins in the city so that the past and the present have to coexist. In fact, according to Ramsay, it takes time to become accustomed to seeing antique and modern creations next to each other as they often are in Italy, which is a wondrous mix of the classical past and the decadent present.<sup>69</sup>

#### 5.4 Extreme Catholicism

The strong presence of Catholicism in the everyday life of Italians – adduced by Sergi – is often also described by the Finnish travellers who, in general, note in their writings that religion is an essential part of Italians' lives and its practice has become rather perfunctory and superficial in Italy. Aho, for example, describes how churches are quotidian resting places for Catholic people who simply and out of habit enter a church as they pass by while running some of their everyday errands. In fact, Italians seem to have a more homely perception of churches than Finns who consider churches the Lord's rooms and regard them with great respect. The extremity of religion can be perceived in Aho's writings when he depicts the Catholic faith as childlike and affirms that the Catholic Church has remained strong in the face of the Reformation thanks to the sensitive and naive southern populations who are characterized by exaggerated sentimentality.<sup>70</sup> Adelaïde Ehrnrooth,<sup>71</sup> a Finnish author and

<sup>68</sup> Cfr. for example, A. Ramsay: *Muistoja lapsen...*, *op.cit.*: 14–16, 36, 38, 40–41, 55, 58–59, 66–67, 73–75, 77, 79–80, 98–104, 115–28, 162, 166–7 and A. Ehrnrooth (A-i-a): *Två finskors...*, *op.cit.*: 76, 79–80.

<sup>69</sup> A. Ramsay: *Muistoja lapsen...*, *op.cit.*: 17, 86.

<sup>70</sup> J. Aho: *Matkakuvia: Minkä mitäkin Italiasta, minkä mitäkin Tyrolista, matkoilta omassa maassa*, Porvoo: WSOY, 1922: 63, 68, 70.

<sup>71</sup> Ehrnrooth (1826–1905) traveled to Italy in spring 1877.

feminist, also describes Italians as emotional and ingenuous like children even though she admires Italians' passionate ways of celebrating their faith.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the central role of religion in the everyday life of Italians, superstitions are very deeply rooted in the people too, according to the Finnish travellers. Nervander mentions superstitions and their prevalence several times in his writings and states that it is actually the clergy that maintains them. This affirmation raises again the extreme side of religion and the decisive role of the representatives of the Catholic Church in Italians' lives. In fact, as reported by Nervander, superstitions help the Church to control the people who are deceived and mislead into believing in the most absurd things by using the images of saints. Nervander describes Italians as particularly gullible as he writes how they, for example, believe blindly that the coagulated blood of St. Januarius, conserved in a Neapolitan church, has miraculous power when it liquefies one or two times a year or that hair can grow out of the head of the statue of a saint made of ivory.<sup>73</sup> Nervander asserts that he has not encountered as much superstition in any other place he has visited as in Southern Italy.<sup>74</sup>

One other aspect of the extremity of Italians' faith concerns the figure of the pope who is regarded by Italians as the most magnificent emperor in the world and a sort of demigod. Nervander writes about the authority of the pope by stating that, although the pope's power is only a shadow of what it used to be in the past and he no longer has any governmental power, the pope still has limitless authority in the Catholic Church and his words are considered – without any criticism – unerringly the word of God. Nervander also mentions that the pope has several properties for his use, he does not have to pay taxes and the state guarantees him three million marks per year.<sup>75</sup> In addition, Ramsay writes about the economic power of the pope and states that Pope Pius IX is as interested in financial affairs as in politics and religion.<sup>76</sup> Ramsay mentions the inappropriate worship of a man that the Catholics practice towards the pope and defines the pope, in fact, as a false god. He describes an audience with the pope during which the pilgrims kneel down and kiss the pope's slipper, the

<sup>72</sup> A. Ehrnrooth (A-ï-a): *Två finskors...*, *op.cit.*: 59.

<sup>73</sup> E. Nervander: *Maantieteellisiä kuvaelmia: Italia III*, *op.cit.*: 5–6, 10.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*: 17.

<sup>75</sup> E. Nervander: *Maantieteellisiä kuvaelmia: Italia II*, Helsinki: Kansanvalistus-seura, 1896a: 5, 11. Nervander refers most probably to *Legge delle guarentigie (Law of guarantees)* that guarantees an annual endowment of 3 225 000 liras to the Pope (<https://www.sba.unifi.it/p566.html>).

<sup>76</sup> A. Ramsay: *Muistoja lapsen...*, *op.cit.*: 107.

place is overcrowded and women faint in the throng. The pope also receives gifts from the visitors often in the form of money, wallets and jewellery, among other things. After seeing all this, Ramsay feels himself completely drained by the unbelievable service rendered to a false god.<sup>77</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

The discourse on the Italian national character became relevant during the Risorgimento period, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the need to define and strengthen the essence of being Italian arose as Italy had to become unified in order to achieve national progress and success. However, the process of forming Italians was not easy as the nation was extremely fragmented at the time. Building up a positive image of the Italian national character transpired to also be rather complicated because of the fact that Italians' auto-images were based largely on less positive elements that were often generated by travellers on the *Grand Tour*. The Italian national character was, in fact, typically considered – both by Italians themselves and by foreigners – as marked by indolence, anti-modernity, and exaggerated individualism, familism, and Catholicism.

Interestingly, the analysis of the Finnish travelogues of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century rarely confirms this conception. The Finnish travellers, do, occasionally mention the Italians' habit of spending time indolently but they write much more frequently about the diligent nature of Italians and show appreciation for their active and laborious lifestyle. In point of fact, unlike the Italians themselves, the Finnish travellers express almost no criticism towards Italians' work ethics – actually quite the contrary. With regard to anti-modernity, the Finnish travellers do not mention it when they write about Italians, but they do often point out elements of the Italian national character that reflect the unfortunate degradation – mainly a moral one – of the modern Italian people. With this kind of remarks, the Finns seem to imply that Italians have drifted too far from their classical roots and traditional values. As for Italians' overemphasized individualism and familism, in their writings the Finnish travellers do not confirm these characteristics either. This can be explained by the fact that the Finns only spent a limited time in Italy and, consequently, they did not have real access to Italians' lives, nor did they subsequently have occasion

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*: 146–149.



to perceive Italians' alleged individualism or familism in their purest forms. In fact, the encounters that the Finnish travellers had with Italians, brought more into relief the openness and the hospitality of the Italian people rather than their self-interest. Of the aforesaid central elements of the Italian national character – seen from the Italian point of view – the strong Catholicism is the only one that is also highlighted in the Finnish travelogues. The intensive, albeit conflictual relationship that Italians have with the Catholic faith is often connected to the naivety of the Italian people by the Finnish travellers. Italians are seen as easily manoeuvred, or even manipulated – both characteristics that make it possible for the Church to dominate the people.

To summarise, based on the analysed travelogue texts, the Finnish travellers' images of the Italian national character do not correspond with the Italians' auto-images of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in many respects. This can be considered a positive result since the Italians' auto-images consisted largely of less favourable and highly stereotypical elements introduced, at least partly, by foreigners who had visited Italy. It is possible that these stereotypical conceptions regarding Italians had not reached Finland as effectively as other parts of Europe due to Finland's more distant geographical position. Consequently, the Finnish travellers were less influenced by the negative stereotypes concerning Italians and were able to observe their surroundings and the people they met during their journeys in a more objective manner. Naturally, there are also other factors that can explain the absence of certain negative elements in the Finnish travelogues, such as the limited time spent in Italy by the Finnish travellers and the superficiality of their encounters with Italians. It is also true that the Finnish travelogues do not completely lack references to the negative sides of the Italian national character and, in fact, they confirm certain pre-existing unflattering stereotypes. However, the images that Finnish travellers' writings transmit of the Italian people are mainly positive. It is therefore a pity that the Finnish travellers' perceptions were rarely, if ever, known outside of the borders of Finland and therefore had little hope of reaching Italy where they could have positively affected the Italians' image of themselves.

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