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Review of “An Ugly Word: Rethinking Race in Italy and the United States”

By Ann Morning and Marcello Maneri

New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2022, 284 pages. Price: \$37.50 (paper) <https://www.russellsage.org/publications/ugly-word>

Reviewer: Jean Beaman, *University of California-Santa Barbara*

I thought of two incidents while reading Morning and Maneri’s provocative and meticulously researched *An Ugly Word: Rethinking Race in Italy and the United States*.

First, in 1996, Danny Méndez was named Miss Italia. Mendez was born in the Dominican Republic and moved to Italy as a young child. This was the first time a woman of “non-Italian descent” was named to represent the nation. But of course, this was not without controversy as many debated whether or not Méndez was really Italian, or Italian enough to represent Italy on the world stage.¹ But what was the basis for this controversy? What does being Italian mean? Who gets to be Italian? What do blackness and race even mean in a society that does not mark ethnoracial distinctions?

Second, in my undergraduate lecture courses on Race and Ethnicity, I have regularly screened the excellent 2003 PBS documentary, *RACE: The Power of an Illusion*. In one part of this three-part documentary, various white and Black American high school students are asked their thoughts on the predominance of African Americans in sports. For the most part, students—of both races—gave biological or “scientific” explanations (rather than social ones). For example, one white student explained that African-Americans have an extra muscle, facilitating their ability to be strong in sports. But how are such views so pervasive? Why do Americans still believe this?

An Ugly Word addresses both points, in this sharp and thorough qualitative examination of conceptualizations of, what Morning and Maneri refer to as, “descent-based difference” in both societies. Morning and Maneri address two questions: First, how do culture and biology factor into conceptualizations of descent-based difference in both societies? Second, what other factors distinguish Italian versus American concepts of difference?

To address these questions, Morning and Maneri compare American students’ ideas of race from Morning’s first book, *The Nature of Race: How Scientists Think and Teach about Human Difference* (2011) with original interviews with 75 college-age students across Italy. Such a comparative approach clarifies taken-for-granted assumptions about race and difference in both societies. They begin by providing an overview of discourses about descent in the U.S. and Italy, including linguistic norms and practices. In Italy, anti-Black epithets are applied to all non-white populations, but race is invoked without explicitly doing so and colorblind racial ideology is present in both the U.S. and Italy. Challenging the notion that genetic or biological explanations for racism are more prevalent in the U.S. and cultural explanations are more prevalent in Europe, Morning and Maneri conclude that the underlying beliefs about human difference are more similar between the two than different.

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Of particular note is their focus on descent-based difference rather than race as a way to avoid the “weight” and power of race as a word (what Italians commonly referred to as “*una brutta parola*,” or an ugly word) to get at how individuals both societies understand and make sense of human difference. They unpack the nuances of what it really means to say that race is “taboo” in Italy. The word itself invokes the Holocaust and Hitler, and evokes outrage or embarrassment when heard. Italians display a semantic and affective distancing. Yet race is in fact only selectively silenced, as ethnicity was used to convey similar notions. This is similar to racial thinking in France, which also sees itself as colorblind and actively disavows the word race (as indicated, for example, in a 2018 proposal in the Assemblée Nationale to remove the word “race” from the French Constitution).² Relatedly, the word “foreign” is also used an ethnoracial signifier for non-white populations. This explains, for example, the 1996 controversy over a Black Miss Italia. Italian respondents could ostensibly distance themselves from defining race as biological—and the word race itself –, yet they did not avoid espousing that biological races exist. Relatedly, both American and Italian respondents made an exception and invoked biological explanations when explaining the presence of Black athletes.

What I also found particularly fascinating is the hypervisibility of blackness in Italy and the ubiquitous use of “African American,” or “afro-americano” for all Black populations in Italy. Blackness and Black are acceptable racial terms in a society of “*brava gente*” that sees itself as colorblind. This illustrates how “African American” or US conceptions of blackness travel globally.

Another major contribution of this book comes towards the end when the authors propose a new framework for concepts of descent-based difference which has six components. These include a defining or constitutive basis of group membership, a scope and reference group, a hierarchy, an origin or mechanism of difference (such as essential inheritance or social assignment), a permanence of constitutive traits, and a determinism of constitutive traits. The methodological rigor of this book is an exemplar for comparative qualitative analysis of different societies. Morning and Manieri stress that scholars should use multiple measures of descent-based difference, reckon with the gap between discourse and belief, and look beyond conceptual vocabulary in conducting comparative research.

Such a book as *Race as An Ugly Word* also leaves and opens up several questions. First, how analytically useful or meaningful is the distinction between biological and cultural racism. As one of the findings of this book speaks to the similarities between conceptualizations of racism in both the U.S. and Italy, it makes me wonder if we should see biological and cultural notions of racism as more intertwined and interwoven than distinct. Secondly, is the question of the “boundness” of racial thinking to particular nation-state boundaries. In other words, how is racial thinking in Italy in conversation with racial thinking elsewhere? What geographical and spatial distinctions are analytically useful in our conceptualizations of race and racism? I also appreciate the focus on blackness but was also curious about the role of anti-blackness in these conceptions of descent-based difference. Finally, what I laud the use of “descent” as a comparative frame versus race, to what extent are descent and origins also social constructions?

Despite these questions, *An Ugly Word* provides a thoughtful and smart analysis of how people actually conceptualize and make sense of race, and offer useful tools for comparative cultural analysis.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/15/weekinreview/que-pasa-miss-italy.html>
2. More information can be found here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/07/13/frances-dangerous-move-to-remove-race-from-its-constitution/> and <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/12/propositions/pion1918.asp>