Forum: Towards a decolonial history of Italian migration to Australia

Selvaggi or nativi? European and colonial perspectives on the encounter with the other in the experience of a missionary in nineteenth century Western Australia

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Our contribution to this Forum focusses on the words Europeans used to name the Indigenous people they encountered in the lands they occupied during the colonial period. Words have great power: they carry within them worlds of culture and ways of seeing the world. To understand what words mean, we must enter the worlds that language users come from. Some of the words recorded in the early encounters in the contact zone in Australia are still used today, while other words are avoided because of the past they carry. As our understanding of the world has changed over two centuries, we have changed the words we use and adapted the meanings we attach to words. Some words have dropped out of usage or have been branded as «unacceptable» or «inappropriate» because they are unavoidably associated with world views we no longer hold. New words have been coined to replace them, or old words have been brought into service to cover new ranges of semantic content that more accurately and more sensitively communicate how we now understand the world, our place in it and our relations with others.

To study the words used in the earliest encounters between Europeans and Indigenous Australians is to suspend our usual sense of «what those words mean» and to enter a different world view with its own system of semiotic reference. This process is always difficult, sometimes uncomfortable and at every step
challenging. In our case it is even more demanding since we are interested in
the language of non-British persons in colonial Australia. We believe this is a
necessary part of historical reassessments of the colonial period in Australia
(and elsewhere). The colonial presence with which Indigenous people had to
deal was never limited to just the dominant colonial power – in the Australian
case, Great Britain – but was woven from the complex co-presence of other
European cultures and languages.

In this contribution, then, we will look at the language used by Rosendo
Salvado, the Spanish founder of the Benedictine mission of New Norcia,
Western Australia (1846). We will focus here on his letters in Italian to Church
authorities in Rome and also consider his use of English in the same period.

Early encounters in the contact zone were a complex and dynamic experi-
ence. The names used by Europeans to refer to the Indigenous populations
reveal the different layers of experience that are present in these encounters.
As Bruce Buchan (2008, p. 2) puts it:

> the conceptual language spoken by the colonists framed their understanding of the
> policies and techniques of government they adopted. In particular, when colonists used
terms drawn from the traditions of Western political thought, such as «government»,
«property», «sovereignty», «society», «savagery» or «civilisation», they did not only
use them simply as descriptors. Rather, these terms formed part of a wider discourse
in which moral and political claims about themselves and others were advanced.

Rosendo Salvado was Spanish, but completed his monastic formation in Italy
(Russo, 1980; Stannage, 2015). In 1845 he arrived in Western Australia and
established a «mission to the Aborigines» in a location 150 kilometres north of
Perth. At first, he tried to live with the Noongar adopting their nomadic lifestyle
but found it was too difficult physically and unsuited to missionary work. He
therefore changed strategy: to create a self-supporting mission village, which
would include both Benedictine monks and the local Yuat Noongar people,
living by a modified version of the rule of St Benedict. Salvado remained the
leader of the New Norcia mission for an extraordinary 54 years, from 1846 to
his death in 1900. New Norcia has gone through many transformations since
then but survives as Australia’s only monastic town.

For this study we have analysed nearly a hundred letters Salvado wrote in
Italian to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, the Rome-based institution in
charge of Catholic missionary activity all around the world. In his Italian letters,
Salvado used the following terms, in this order of frequency:

1. *selvaggio*
2. *australiano*
2. *nativo*
4. aborigeno
5. indigeno
6. nero

These terms did not get replaced by others over time, but instead multiple terms co-exist in his vocabulary. One word that does not appear in Salvado’s writing is «Noongar». This is the word used by the Indigenous inhabitants of South-Western Australia and covers a territory where fourteen distinct language groups, or clans, are identified (Tindale, 1974; South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, 2018).

What did these terms mean? Or, in the terms of Brian Buchan’s statement quoted above, what moral and political claims was Salvado advancing about himself and the Indigenous people he was describing? These terms are semantically very dense with complex histories. Here we will examine how Salvado used two of these terms: selvaggio and nativo.

Selvaggio

When Salvado left Italy in 1845, Pope Gregory xvi wished him well with these words (Salvado, 1977):

Remember all those Apostles who were your brothers, who converted whole peoples and nations to the Faith, and educated them in the ways of civilised life.
Remember that you are setting out on the same road as was trodden by them.
(Italics added)

Pope Gregory was, like Salvado, a Benedictine monk. They traced the origin of their order to Saint Benedict of Norcia, who lived in the sixth century. Salvado knew the Pope was reminding him of the earliest missionaries who took Christianity to Northern and Eastern Europe, taking with them also the culture that had grown out of Judeo-Christianity. He remembered St. Cyril, who invented the alphabet still used today for Russian. He remembered the missionaries who later moved to all corners of the world. Salvado always described his reason for being in Australia as to «convert and civilise» indigenous Australians.

For someone like Salvado, an educated speaker of Spanish, Italian, Latin as well as English, the word «civilise» was etymologically transparent. The word was recent: it first appeared in English around 1600 (Oxford English Dictionary) and in Italian in 1725 (Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana). It derived from Latin civlis which ultimately derives from civis, a citizen, that is to say a human person who has the rights accruing from belonging to an organised, urban social grouping, a civitas.
The opposite of «civilised» in nineteenth century political discourse was «savage». This term has a long history in European thought, beginning in the ancient world, through medieval theology to greater distinction during the Renaissance and ending up as the main synonym for the Enlightenment’s potent category of «the state of nature». The term lost much of its historical texture in the nineteenth century and came to indicate plain, negative qualities such as cruelty or ferocity (Fullagar, 2012).

The Italian word *selvaggio* (*selvaje* in Spanish) was equally transparent. It is derived from Latin *silvaticus*, from *silva* «forest». First used to describe plants and animals, it was used to describe humans who lived «in a state of nature» from the fifteenth century in English and a little later in Italian. The semantic pairing of «savage» and «civilised» is evident in nineteenth century dictionaries of all the Romance languages. Two examples will suffice to show the dominant modes of definition. The first is etymological, relating the state of the *selvaggio* to the *selva* where they live. The second is negative: *selvaggio* is defined as the opposite, the lack, of *civile*.

*Selvaggio*: Uomo non domestico; che vive in selva; in istato di società imperfetta o discorde (Tommaseo and Bellini, 1861-1879)

*Selvaggio*: contrario di *civile* (Petrocchi, 1884-1890)

These two terms are expressions of Enlightenment theories of progress, developed in France, Scotland and elsewhere (McGregor, 1997). By the late eighteenth century, these theories had settled on a natural developmental sequence, common to all human societies: from «savagery» (hunter-gatherers) to «barbarism» (nomadic pastoralism) to «civilisation» (agriculture and commerce). In colonial Australia, the English were confronted with the dichotomy between two extremes, hunter-gatherer savagery and agricultural, early capitalist civilisation (Buchan, 2008). Salvado, however, understood «savage» and «civilized» as being two end points on a continuum of evolution, progress and civilisation. This view was articulated as late as the early twentieth century by Sigmund Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (1913):

There are men still living who, as we believe, stand very near to primitive man, far nearer than we do, and whom we therefore regard as his direct heirs and representatives. Such is our view of those whom we describe as savages or half-savages.

The universalist claim of the stadial theories of development is clear in Freud’s nuanced claim that savages stand «far nearer than we do» to primitive man.

Salvado became aware of these Enlightenment theories of human development through his friendship with the leading Italian archaeologists of the
day, especially Luigi Pigorini, first professor of paleoethnology at the University of Rome and first director of the National Museum of Paleoethnology. Pigorini integrated earlier philosophical theories with recent theories of cultural evolution developed by archaeologists. In particular he designed his museum around the three-age model he had studied in Scandinavia (Lerario, 2011). This theory supposed (i) that all human cultures developed – through the Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages – along a common track from hunter-gatherer to literate civilisations, and (ii) that various intermediate stages of human development were contemporarily represented on the earth. Living cultures that Pigorini and his colleagues identified as primitive were understood, within this framework, to be «living fossils» of European cultures that had progressed through this developmental phase in prehistoric times (Tarantini, 2012). So Pigorini and other archaeologists received sets of Indigenous tools and weapons from Salvado and published on the similarities between arrowheads from Aboriginal Australia and similar objects they had unearthed in Emilia-Romagna as evidence of prehistoric Italian cultures (Chierici, 1875).

The way Salvado integrated this archaeological view with the prevailing Enlightenment theories explains how Salvado could on the one hand go along with Pigorini describing Australian Aborigines as being on the «lowest rung of civilisation» (Pigorini, 1876) and at the same time work so hard to convince the colonial authorities that the Noongar were capable of everything Europeans could do, given the opportunity. It is interesting in this respect to speculate how the circulation of these ideas in nineteenth and twentieth century Italy might have formed the attitudes that Italian migrants brought with them to Australia.

Use of *selvaggio*

Salvado’s use of *selvaggio* did evolve over time and there seems to have been semantic slippage towards the word becoming almost a neutral technical term. In 1871 we see Salvado referring to *i nativi o Selvaggi del bosco*, «natives or savages of the wood/bush». Leaving aside the fact that *bosco* may be a nod to the Australian «bush», the phrase is strictly speaking tautological, which suggests that some of the etymological meaning may be leaching out of *selvaggio*. Furthermore, from the 1870s we find curious uses of «savage» and «civilisation» in the same phrase: *i Selvaggi civilizati* «civilised savages», *i selvaggi già civilizati* «savages already civilised», *convertiti e civilizati selvaggi Australiani* «converted and civilised savages». What these phrases might mean becomes clearer if we look at a lithograph of the settlement of New Norcia from around 1880 (see figure 1).

This shows the realisation of Salvado’s dream of creating a self-supporting Indigenous village. The image shows two ways of indigenous life. In the top
left, a village of houses for Indigenous persons and families; in the bottom left, a group of Noongar living in pre-European style. The transition from savagery to civilisation was beyond anything else a physical transition from the bush, the *silva*, to the town, the *civitas*. It meant rejecting a nomadic life and adopting a settled one. From this would flow the moral benefits of «civilization» in its deeper sense. When Salvado was writing to the highly educated officials of Propaganda Fide, he used their shared vocabulary which included *selvaggio*, whereas *nativo* was very rare, and over time *selvaggio* came to be used almost neutrally, in other words leaving aside all the cultural stratifications contained in the word and simply adopting it to refer to indigenous people.

*Figure 1. William Ewing, «Nuova Norcia: Missione Benedettina nell’Australia occidentale», Rome, 1864*

Source: NNA 73671P. Permission of the archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia

**Nativo**

While Britain during the eighteenth century debated the propriety and morality of territorial expansion in the so-called *New World*, the notion of *savagery* was a useful metaphor, the key and essence of an alternate society. This metaphor held up a mirror to a British society, throwing into sharp relief the value of the expansionist project – the fiscal-military culture, the lessening role of the
church and traditional morality. By the last two decades of the century, British resolve had hardened and the matters for debate now were how to achieve global expansion and territorial conquest and much less attention was paid to whether it ought to be done in the first place. Consequently, the inhabitants of distant lands were less and less interesting in moral or cultural terms. They became a legal and political problem. They were no longer «savages», they became «natives», a term that replaced «savage» in English colonial discourse at the end of the eighteenth century (Fullagar, 2012).

Native is the term of territoriality: the inhabitants of Australia are relevant in so far as they had, or might have, property rights by virtue of having been born there, being «native». When James Cook in 1770 and Arthur Phillip in 1787 sailed to the south, they brought secret instructions from the King (National Archives of Australia, 2011). These ordered the two Captains «with the Consent of the Natives to take possession of Convenient Situations in the Country in the Name of the King of Great Britain» and to «endeavour, by every possible means, to open an intercourse with the natives».

Salvado did not see himself as part of the colonial project in the same way as missionaries of the Anglican or Evangelical churches did. So nativo is not immediately part of his intellectual lexicon. However, in 1864, Salvado presented a report to the Colonial Secretary on the habits and customs of indigenous Australians (Salvado and Garrido, 1871). He wrote in English and the only words he uses to refer to Indigenous people are «natives», «aboriginal natives» and «aborigines». The English equivalent of selvaggi – «savages» – never appears. At the same time the Italian equivalent nativo begins to appear in his correspondence with Rome, presumably under the influence of his English writing.

We may explain this in part through the concept of accommodation, whereby a speaker or writer adjusts their language according to the identity of their listener or reader.

We hope that even this brief overview can open up the complexities in the language choices made by the participants in inter-cultural encounters. Getting inside their words is a privileged way to get inside their worlds of meaning. As we use words to understand the past better and as we face the challenge of making the present better, we should always remember that words have power because they can make the world: the words we use or the words we choose build the frame of our window on the world. They also give shape and substance to our relationships with the others we encounter. This seems very important to us in order to try to understand the past. In our work it is absolutely essential to build a better present and future.
Bibliography


Chierici, G., «Le selci romboidali», *Bollettino di Paletnologia Italiana*, 1, 1, 1875, pp. 2-6.


