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Modernity's Fears of Depopulation and Sterility in Mario Sironi's Urban Landscapes

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Abstract

This article focuses on Fascist artist Mario Sironi's urban landscapes as a site of modernity and its contradictions. With their gloomy buildings and deserted streets, Sironi's landscapes highlight two of modernity's woes: The *periferia* of the "liberal" city and the fear for its inhabitants' degeneration and sterility. In his "Il discorso dell'Ascensione," Mussolini openly accuses industrial urbanism of its sterilizing effect on the Italian race, thus, jeopardizing his imperial ambitions. By giving an aesthetic form to the Regime's fears, Sironi reaches two goals: The aestheticization of fascist politics, as described by Walter Benjamin, and the creation of the Soreal social myth that would ultimately propel Italians toward the resolution of their presumed problems. Moreover, the article suggests a reading of Sironi's murals as an integral part of the urban landscapes' reading and interpretation. The murals' fascist imperial rhetoric would lose its referent should the Italian race succumb to physical degeneration and sterility.

Introduction

Mario Sironi and his art are still controversial in Italy, as he was the official artist of Fascism—which he supported until his death in 1961—representing it as it evolved from revolution to regime. In this article, I take up the groundbreaking work of Emily Braun on Sironi's art to consider an aspect of modernity and Fascism that she did not include in her research: the eugenics and race discourses that were taking shape in Europe at the turn of the 20th century. Although Sironi engaged in many aspects of art—painting, sculpture, architecture, and political/satirical cartoons—my interest lies in his *paesaggi urbani*[1] that he painted throughout his whole career, from 1919 to the early 1950s. Here it is important to underscore the intersectionality between landscape and nationalism, as a nation is constructed also through its landscape. As the lyrics of many national hymns testify, the representation of a nation's geography mediates emotions and discourses of nationalism (Radhika, 1999: 5–6). Similarly, through his urban landscape Sironi depicts a nation while weaving a nationalist discourse ultimately in support of reactionary political forces like Fascism.

Urban landscapes as representations of Italy's degeneration, depopulation, and sterility

Sironi's urban landscapes represent cities as grim spaces filled with modern, anonymous, and somber buildings casting gloomy shadows. Black windows deflect the light, instead of inviting it in, thus rejecting the viewer's gaze. Out of the buildings' dreary and dark shadows come empty and silent streets, occasionally marked by the presence of a trolley or truck, or even more rarely by the presence of human beings. Sironi's images of lifeless cities give a sense of utter alienation in front of one of modernity's creations: the city's *periferia*, where urban masses live in their squalid abodes. Moreover, the almost total absence of those who should inhabit the dejected cities transmits an uncanny feeling that underscores Sironi's uneasiness toward modern capitalism and technology[2] (Figure 1). While Braun (2000: 46) locates the urban landscapes within the historical context of the political tension and violence of the *biennio rosso* (1919–1920), I contend that they are the visual representation of the alarmist discourses on depopulation and sterility, as articulated at the turn of the 20th century. Later, the fascist regime will appropriate these discourses, making the solution to these problems one of its priorities (Horn, 1991: 589). Fascism constructed Italian identity on classical and rural values, leaving the regime in a very ambiguous position toward modern and industrialized cities, especially Milan. On the one hand, Milan was the symbolic birthplace of Fascism and a well-acknowledged European center that greatly contributed to the economic wealth of the nation. On the other hand, it was construed as "sterile" and, thus, in need of corrective pro-natalist policies, due to its declining birth rate. (Horn, 1991: 588).

Figure 1. Mario Sironi, *Paesaggio urbano*, 1922. Oil on canvas.

Soreal social myths and the aestheticization of art

I further contend that by representing the problems of Italy's degeneration, depopulation, and sterility, Sironi is achieving two different, yet connected, goals: the aestheticization of Italy's social/biological concerns—raised by eugenicists and demographers first and later by Benito Mussolini—as well as the creation of a Sorelian social myth of popular action.[3] In his *Reflections on Violence*, writing about class struggle and socialist revolution, George Sorel defines myths as constructions where:

> men who are participating in great social movements always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph … Myths must be judged as means of acting on the present. (Sorel, 1999: 20, 117)

In other words, myths are not a description of reality; rather, they are the expression of a determination to act, and as such, they are necessary to move masses toward a set political goal. Mussolini, one of Sorel's disciples, commented, "men do not move mountains; it is only necessary to create the illusion that mountains move" (Hale, 1971: 109). Sironi's dystopic and deserted urban landscapes create the illusion that Italy may be affected by depopulation and infertility. Thus, the viewer is emotionally involved in the nightmare of the Italian race's decadence and sterility. By working on our emotions, art can engage and instruct our intellect more effectively than mere statistics can. Then the viewers' emotional response works as catharsis, requiring them to reconsider their own personal choices, as well as those of the nation.

By aestheticization of Italy's social/biological concerns, I mean that Sironi gave them an art form through his pictorial representations. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*,

Walter Benjamin (2008: 41) argues that, “The logical outcome of Fascism is the aestheticization of politics … All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war,” and ultimately the point of war is colonization. Before Benjamin, Friedrich Nietzsche had compared politicians to artists, “whose work is an instinctive imposing of forms. They are the most spontaneous, most unconscious artists that exist” (cited in Jay, 1992: 44). Fascists adopted this stance to the point that Mussolini boasted:

> when masses are like wax in my hands, or when I mingle with them and am almost crushed by them. I feel myself to be part of them. All the same there persists in me a certain feeling of aversion, like that which the modeler feels for the clay he is molding. Does not the sculptor sometimes smash his block of marble into fragments because he cannot shape it into the vision he has conceived? (Cited in Jay, 1992: 44–45)

During Fascism, humanity tended to be contemplated as an object of spectacle—for political manipulation—by subordinating it to an aesthetic for the external gaze. At the heart of fascist political manipulation was the creation of Italy’s empire.

Sironi’s art and the national rebirth

Sironi, more than any other artist of his time, devoted his artistic energy and creativity to the goal of cultural interventionism to bring forth a national regeneration (Braun, 1989: 174). His intent to create an art intertwined with politics and the nation is clear in the 1933 *Manifesto della pittura murale*. In this manifesto, co-signed by Carlo Carrà, Achille Funi, and Massimo Campigli, Sironi writes:

> Nello stato fascista l’arte viene ad avere una funzione sociale: una funzione educatrice. Essa deve tradurre l’etica del nostro tempo … L’arte così tornerà ad essere quello che fu nei suoi periodi più alti e in seno alle più alte civiltà: un perfetto strumento di governo spirituale. (Cited in Gentile, 2014: location 360)

Although Sironi was referring to his mural art, I would argue that the same pedagogic intent is present also in his urban landscapes. Braun writes about the seeming duality of Sironi’s art production. On the one hand, his urban landscapes depict “man’s alienation in the modern world, underlining [Sironi’s] pessimistic view which fundamentally opposed the optimistic rhetoric of the regime”; on the other hand, his murals express the regime’s “pictorial demagogy and myth-making power” (Braun, 1989: 174). However, I propose to read them as two sides of the same coin. The pessimistic view of modern cities’ maladies has as referent and interlocutor the murals’ rhetoric of fascist empire, since the latter was premised on the solution of the first: there cannot be an empire without people to fight for it.

Sironi and Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni

Modern cities’ maladies became one of Futurism’s main themes. Futurist artist Umberto Boccioni recorded Milan’s deep urban changes in his paintings already in 1908–1909. His painting *La Mattina* represents Milan’s outskirts, where against the backdrop of the newly industrialized zone—with its smokestacks spewing gases into the air—a road leads some forlorn, isolated workers to their jobs, presumably in the factories, giving a feeling of modern alienation (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Umberto Boccioni, *La mattina*, 1909. Milan, Mazzotta Collection.

Christine Poggi contextualizes Boccioni's painting within the Socialist demand for the workers' right to negotiate their own contracts, as proposed by syndicalist Arturo Labriola who frequented the Futurist circle in Milan. However, she also notices that Boccioni's workers "are seen with empathy, as participants in the social and technological transformation of the periphery, rather than anonymous or potentially frightening masses" (Poggi, 2008: 82). Modern cities' urban alterations and their impact on their inhabitants' living conditions and their mental and physical health became a leitmotif in the works of many Italian painters at the turn of the 20th century. Just like Boccioni, Sironi fully engaged in the depiction of Italy's cityscapes but with a pessimism alien to his Futurist friend.

Boccioni and Sironi studied art together at the Scuola Libera del Nudo in Rome in 1903, under the tutelage of Antonio Discovolo and Giacomo Balla. Having studied in Paris, Balla tutored his friends in the latest neo-Impressionist techniques and was especially influential for his humanitarian socialism, focusing much of his art on the rights of workers and the underprivileged. Balla was also the first artist to paint Milan's squalid *periferia* with its ambiguous promises of urban élan and alienation (Braun, 2000: 20). This Roman artistic milieu had a strong influence on Sironi's ideal of an art with a social purpose and, at first, Marxist ideology seduced him. Yet, as the *Partito Socialista Italiano* was not able to effectively organize the workers and lead them to a revolution, but rather became more enmeshed with Giolitti's liberal government and its *Trasformismo*, Sironi's interest in the Socialist Party waned (Braun, 2000: 21–22).

Sironi's generation held both Socialists and Liberals accountable for the *rivoluzione mancata*, that is for the failure of the *Risorgimento*'s ideals and promises. Italian avant-garde experience was thoroughly immersed in the efforts to create a national identity and to socially emancipate the masses. To that end, the Florentine journal *La Voce* (1908–1911) galvanized many artists and intellectuals—and also Mussolini—to disdain

parliamentary democracy, bourgeois materialism, and reformist Socialism as well as to support a collective cult of the nation that, later, Fascism would expand into a lay religion of the state (Braun, 2000: 22). Sironi, who joined to distance himself from both the Futurist and the *Novecento* artistic groups, was among those artists who rebelled against liberal culture and were in favor of an anti-bourgeois art that would espouse the new political reality of the masses (Braun, 1989: 174).

Sironi's cityscapes, modern cities' "Haussmannization," and the housing problem

About 10 years after Boccioni's *La mattina*, Sironi's depiction of Milan's outskirts lost not only the artist's "empathy toward the participants in the city's transformations" (Poggi, 2008: 82), but also the participants themselves, as his cityscapes show almost deserted streets (Figures 3 and 4). Not only are Sironi's streets deserted, but they lead to nowhere. Whereas in Boccioni's *La mattina*, the workers walk toward what appears to be a sunnier future, constructed through the backdrop's bright light, in Sironi's *Sintesi di un paesaggio urbano* the street leads up a hill, at the end of which there is a dark, gloomy, and ominous sky. The city space is constructed by buildings casting unsettling shadows that impede the view. Similarly, in *Il camion giallo*, the street is enclosed within the buildings' walls, giving a sense of suffocating entrapment: there is no hope to escape modern alienation. Moreover, the stark contrast between the yellow of the foreground and the white of the background creates a visual disharmony that challenges the viewer's gaze. In both pictures, the claustrophobic feeling is reinforced by a dense sky that seems to weigh down on the city's *periferia*.

Figure 3. Mario Sironi, *Sintesi di un paesaggio urbano*, 1919–1920. Oil on canvas, 40 x 43 cm. Private collection.

Figure 4. Mario Sironi, *Il camion giallo*, 1919. Collage, oil, and tempera on paper assembled on canvas, 89 cm.

Sironi's urban landscapes' despondency and alienation need to be read within the context of the creation of the modern and liberal city that took place at the turn of the 20th century. At the end of the 19th century, following the example of Baron Haussmann's works in Paris, whole city centers were gutted, often for fear of revolt and riot, giving the *urbe* a totally different aspect and feeling (Benevolo, 1993: 172, 176). The "Haussmannization" created an economic imbalance between public administration and privately owned land. The inflation of property value and consequent public deficit led to the disfigurement of urban environments (Benevolo, 1993: 164, 176). Ultimately, the city's public administration and landowning interests excluded from their negotiations and decisions not only the eventual users, but also the specialists, technicians, and artists necessary to build the new cities. Artists, who rejected the marginal role they were forced into, worked in a new condition of isolation creating an avant-garde culture to resist dominant interests and to attempt to structure a new urban environment (Benevolo, 1993: 187).

Milan underwent its own "Haussmannization," which took the name of the Beruto Plan, in 1878. The gutting out of old housing quarters, located in the historical center, and the unparalleled property speculation, pushed the lower classes outside the Spanish Walls. Moreover, labor demand required the work of rural immigrants who settled in the burgeoning periphery of Milan, exacerbating the housing problem during the first decade of the 20th century (Braun, 2000: 54). In 1903, Luigi Luzzatti's bill on state-owned and controlled housing projects became law (n. 254), premised on the importance of hygiene and grounding the nation's civil progress in the necessity of sanitary living quarters for its population (D'Amuri, 2015: 11). However, Luzzatti's liberal approach to the creation of the *case popolari* ended up helping mostly the lower middle class, instead of the proletariat for whom the housing project was intended. It was indeed Luzzatti's idea to change the term *case operaie* to *case popolari*, precisely to ensure it was not only factory workers who were included in the program (D'Amuri, 2019: Chap. 3- 2). To alleviate the housing crisis and improve the quality of residential life in the periphery, Socialists created the *Instituto per la Casa Popolare* in 1907, promoting more and better housing projects also inspired by the model of the English "garden cities" (D'Amuri, 2019: Chs. 3–15).

Sironi represents the housing crisis in Milan in one of his early illustrations, *La burocrazia italiana ha finalmente risolto la crisi edilizia* (1920) (Figure 5). In this illustration, an out-of-proportion man is holding a faceless, ugly *casa popolare* with a facade covered with dark, empty windows, which would become one of Sironi's hallmarks. The tall, gloomy, and depersonalized building—a far cry from the English "garden cities" the *Istituto per la Casa Popolare* was advocating for—seems to be sinking in the water from its foundations, while the gigantic man is trying to hold it in its place. The illustration foregrounds the man's disproportionally large hand in a grabbing position, thus disavowing his altruistic intent in saving the housing project. The caustic commentary on the Italian state's inability to solve the housing problem is quite obvious. Writing about this illustration, Braun (2000: 56) remarks:

> A veteran returning to normal life without secure employment and living on the outskirts, Sironi could readily identify with the lower classes and the condition of the *spostato*. The architect Aldo Rossi … confirms that Sironi's particular vision could have developed only inside the very houses whose facades he depicts.

Figure 5. Mario Sironi, *La burocrazia italiana ha finalmente risolto la crisi edilizia*, 1920. Illustration from *Le industrie italiane illustrate*.

Sironi's war experience, Italy's palingenesis, and the first International Conference on Eugenics in London (1912)

Sironi started painting his urban landscapes after the horrific experience of the Great War that, in Italy, claimed 300,000 lives plus the 600,000 claimed by the flu epidemic of the summer of 1918 (Mariani, 1976: 11). Sironi volunteered in the war for the Lombard Battalion of Cyclists and Drivers together with Futurist friends Boccioni, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and Antonio Sant'Elia (Camesasca, 1980: XI). Although some of them died (including Boccioni), Sironi fought to the end, experiencing the humiliation of the battle of Caporetto, where the Italian army was defeated (Braun, 1997: 110). On the one hand, the war made Sironi, and many other veterans, into a "spostato." On the other hand, the experience of the war becomes for Sironi a much sought-after baptism in blood that deepens his belief in Fascism's necessary use of force in order to regenerate Italy after the humiliation of the Great War's *vittoria mutilata* (Gian Ferrari et al., 2004: 13–14).

The Great War's high volume of casualties caused fear, among some, for Italy's possible depopulation. This fear was not new. At the first International Conference on Eugenics, held in London in 1912, Giorgio Mortara presented his paper on "Incubo dello spopolamento e l'Italia." In his essay, Mortara associates the nightmare of

the depopulation in Italy with the infiltration of Socialist propaganda in the country, among other things. He argues that:

> [l']e altazione dei benefizi che derivano dalla mancanza, o scarsezza, di prole, agiscono potentemente sull'incolta folla … impreparata alla comprensione dei doveri più modesti, e facile preda di cupidigie basse e materiali, spinta com'è, per vaga cognizione di teorie socialistiche, ad eccessive o premature rivendicazioni di diritti. (Mortara, 1912: 15)

In the above quotation, Mortara is lamenting that socialism intends to improve the proletariat's material needs, which he negatively defines as "cupidige basse," by exhorting them not to reproduce. Mortara, on the contrary, is asking the proletariat to go beyond their greed to embrace a higher call: their nation's economic expansion. As he writes:

> con la stazionarità della popolazione, è attenuato nelle singole famiglie l'impulso al miglioramento; diminuisce la possibilità d'espansione delle industrie e dei commerci; e sotto l'apparenza di un più diffuso benessere si asconde un graduale ristagno in tutte le manifestazioni della vitalità nazionale. (Mortara, 1912: 17)

Concluding his speech, Mortara moves from the national to the international arena: "la ricostruzione del passato e … la sintesi del presente … insegna che la forza espansiva onde sono dotati i popoli esuberanti di vitalità spesso finisce col farli prevalere nel campo politico e nell'economico, nell'intellettuale e nel morale" (Mortara, 1912: 21). In other words, peoples with exceeding vitality will wield hegemonic power in the new world order characterized, among other things, by the Partition of Africa (1880). It is not coincidental that by 1912—the year of the London Conference on Eugenics—the western part of Libya was under Italian control, giving Italy the status of imperial power that opened "l'epoca di una nuova civiltà italiana, di un nuovo primato italiano" (Gentile, 2014: location 95).

Presenting his paper "Cyclical Theory of Population" at the same conference, Corrado Gini argues for the cyclicity of the vitality of social classes and nations. Interestingly, he argues against Anglo-American eugenicists' concern about the upper classes' declining fertility, concluding that:

> Artificially to stimulate reproduction of the higher classes, and check that of the lower ones, would be equivalent to trying to improve society by increasing the duration of the life of the old and preventing new generations from taking their place. (Gini, 1913: 157)

In the same year, Gini publishes *I fattori democratici dell'evoluzione delle nazioni*, where he contends that, "Avviene nello sviluppo dei popoli come in quelli degli individui: raggiunta la maturità, cessa l'esuberanza delle manifestazioni vitali: si va poco a poco chiudendo il ciclo dell'esistenza; ad esse sta riaprirne un altro. Ciò molte volte avviene" (Gini, 1912: 135). In both his paper and his book, Gini's reflections go from a national concern about the elite class and its future ontology to an international concern about which people will have enough vital élan to dominate the others.

Mussolini's "Discorso dell'Ascensione," ISTAT, and Cesare Corruzzi

With the intent to make their reports objective, and thus unconfutable, both Mortara and Gini supported their respective arguments with a plethora of numerical data. Modernity relied on data and numbers, which were used to measure a nation's health or, inversely, its presumed risks of social and biological ailments such as racial decadence. The latter will lead, in its turn, to economic and cultural decay and, thus, to historic defeat. When Mussolini took dictatorial power in 1924, he was particularly worried about Italy's numerical decline and progressive aging and their negative impact on his imperial ambitions. Thus, he committed to finding a solution. To this end, in 1926 Mussolini founded ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica), nominating Gini as director. The

institute's aim and realm were the control and administration of Italy's reproductive power (Horn, 1994: 47, 53). Hence, Italy's presumed fertility problems moved from the medical to the political field and the regime took upon itself not only the control of the problem but also its solution.

The regime's move needs to be read withing the paradigm of what Michel Foucault defines as "biopolitics." From the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th, the state came to control not just the individual but the whole population, by construing and articulating it as both a political and scientific problem (Foucault, 2003: 245). Biopolitics was premised on evolutionism and was not just a means to voice political discourse in a biological language; rather, biopolitics was a real mindset to understand and express the relations of power between colonizers and colonized, between social classes, the necessity for wars, and social phenomena like criminality and mental illnesses (Foucault, 2003: 257). State control over the biological processes of the whole population was deemed necessary for improving the nation's economic and political stability at home, while supporting its imperial ambitions abroad (Foucault, 2003: 243, 247).

We can see the biopolitics paradigm working through Mussolini's s address to the Chamber of Deputies on May 26, 1927 ("Il discorso dell'Ascensione"). During his speech, Mussolini first states that any state "deve preoccuparsi della salute fisica del popolo" (Mussolini, 1963: 361). Then from "popolo," Mussolini transitions to "race" as a physical— that is biological— expression of the Italian people: "Come stiamo a questo proposito? Quale è il quadro? La razza italiana, cioè il popolo italiano nella sua espressione fisica, è in periodo di splendore o di decadenza?" (Mussolini, 1963: 362). A long list of social ailments — from tuberculosis to alcoholism and insanity—follows with the logical remedy, "Bisogna quindi vigilare seriamente sul destino della razza, bisogna curare la razza, a cominciare dalla maternità e dall'infanzia" (Mussolini, 1963: 363–364). Although there are 5600 institutions supporting maternity and infancy, as Mussolini reports, there is not enough money to finance them adequately. Hence, the need for "la tassa sui celibi alla quale forse in un lontano domani potrebbe fare seguito la tassa sui matrimoni infecondi" (Mussolini, 1963: 364). Mussolini explains the necessity of his pro-natality efforts by comparing Italian people's numbers with those of other nations:

> Siamo in pochi … Cosa sono quaranta milioni di italiani di fronte a novanta milioni di tedeschi e duecento milioni di slavi? Volgiamoci ad occidente: cosa sono quaranta milioni di italiani di fronte a quaranta milioni di francesi, più i novanta milioni di abitanti delle colonie, o di fronte ai quarantasei milioni di inglesi, più quattrocentocinquanta milioni che stanno nelle colonie? (Mussolini, 1963: 364)

Here, Mussolini's ambitions for an empire come fully to the fore, as he continues: "Tutte le nazioni e tutti gli imperi hanno sentito il morso della loro decadenza, quando hanno visto diminuire il numero delle loro nascite" (Mussolini, 1963: 365). As Mussolini reports, Italy's natality rate peaked in 1886, "da allora stiamo discendendo … C'è un tipo di urbanesimo che è distruttivo che isterilisce il popolo, ed è l'urbanesimo industrial … se si diminuisce, signori, non si fa l'impero e si diventa una colonia" (Mussolini, 1963: 366–367). Thus, Mussolini constructs industrial urbanism as the main culprit of Italy's low natality rate.

Data collected by ISTAT confirmed the regime's fear about modern cities' sterility: in 1927, Turin, Florence, Bologna, and Milan recorded more deaths than births. Milan's crude birthrate fell from 17.41 per 1000 in 1921 to 14.46 in 1927. Moreover, Milan's fertility rate was consistently lower than that of southern urban centers and northern rural towns (Horn, 1994: 102–103). Mussolini's concerns were echoed into the 1930s by Cesare Corruzzi, a physician specializing in social medicine. In his article "Urban Attraction and Sterility" (originally published in 1933), Corruzzi identified the organic causes of urban infertility: venereal diseases, tuberculosis, alcoholism, and industrial accidents, all aggravated by the poor hygienic conditions of the city housing and factory work (Horn, 1994: 97). In the following two decades, the Second World War, which claimed almost a million Italian lives, and its disastrous aftermath certainly did not improve the perception of Italy's declining vitality.

Max Nordau and the fear of European degeneration

The notion of an incumbent decadence, which was putting at risk the great European civilization and stock, had already been circulating at the end of the 19th century. In his book *Degeneration* (1891), Max Nordau argues that Europeans' mental abilities have been degenerating, after reaching the highest pinnacle in history. Modern life's overstimulation was thought to be the culprit, causing a range of mental abnormalities and hysterias. In Italy, Nordau's writings were so influential that Gustavo Macchi continued to translate these texts until 1917. Thus, progress and modernization were thought to have the power to both advance the country's economy and disrupt the Italian people and nation. After all, it was argued, the evidence of modernization's ailments was plain to see: poverty, crime, prostitution, madness, neurasthenia, and the violent behavior of the crowd (Greene, 2007: 23–24, 33). Hence, modern cities' spaces became constructed as sites of social and biological diseases.

Sironi's illustration *English Saturday* portrays human degeneration through alcoholism (Figure 6). The cartoon depicts a drunk man leaning against a lamppost holding a bottle. Although the title reads *English Saturday*, there are signs in the illustration that disavow the *Englishness* of the scene. First, the bottle probably contains wine, which is not what English men typically drink to get inebriated—indeed, from the 16th to the 20th century, wine was consistently the least consumed alcoholic beverage in the UK (UK Parliament, 2020). Second, there is the sign "bar" on the wall of the building on the right-hand side, instead of the English word "pub." Then, in the background, we can see a tram, which is a leitmotif in Sironi's urban landscapes. All these referents point to Milan much more than to any English city. Consequently, the title is particularly interesting because of its ambiguity. Is Sironi representing the Britons' degeneration, maybe supporting Gini's theory espoused in his "Cyclical Theory of Population"? After all, the British nation was the first to reach modernity and, thus, it would seem plausible to think that it would be the first to degenerate. Or is Sironi criticizing Italians for following the mores and behavior of the Anglo-Saxon race, not realizing that it is tainted by degeneration?

Figure 6. Mario Sironi, *English Saturday*.

Modernity's creation of individuals without subjectivity

I contend that just like *English Saturday*, Sironi's urban landscapes portray precisely the nightmare of Italy's risk of degeneration, depopulation, and sterility as described by Nordau, Mortara, and Gini and echoed by Mussolini and Corruzzi. Arguably, the disappearance of the cities' inhabitants refers to the loss of individuals both as biological beings and as self-determining subjects of the Western liberal tradition, rooted in the Renaissance (Baldwin, 2001: 341). It is, thus, not surprising that Sironi depicts urban inhabitants like tailor's dummies (Braun, 2000: 50)—a degenerated humanity—underscoring modernity's creation of individuals without a clear identity or subjectivity (Figure 7). This humanity seems trapped in "the inescapable prison of the present, a present void of humanistic values" (Braun, 2000: 53). "The void of humanistic values" is the void of the values of antiquity, the values of the classical civilizations that Sironi represents in his murals, in the same years that he paints some of his urban landscapes. In Sironi's mural *L'Italia fra le arti e le scienze*, for instance, Italy, represented by the woman in the middle, moves forward from a background constructed by the ruins and insignias of the Roman Empire, while Victory, represented as an angel according to the Greek tradition, flies over the scene. Consequently, Italy is represented as the epitome and effect of classical civilizations and their values (Figure 8).

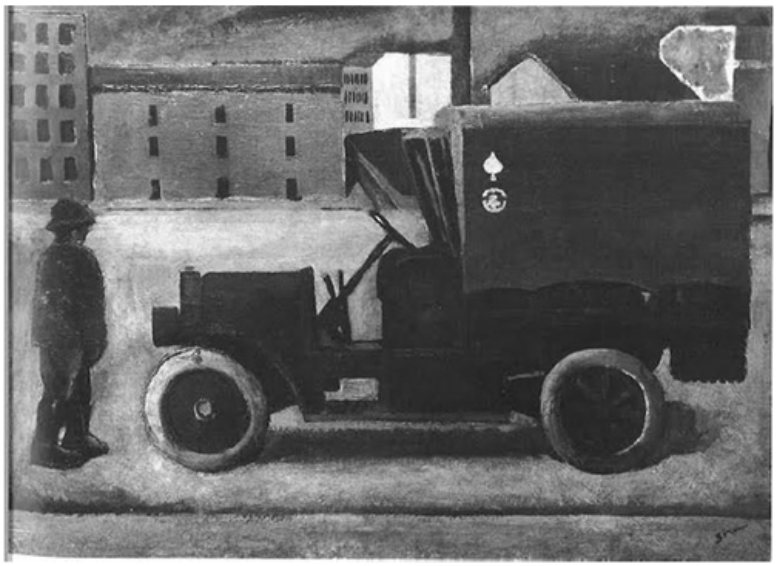

Figure 7. Mario Sironi, *Il camion*, 1919–1920. Private collection.

Figure 8**.** Mario Sironi, *L'Italia tra le arti e le scienze*, 1935. In a lecture hall at the Sapienza University of Rome.

The network of humans and nonhumans and the unification of object and subject

In the urban landscapes, the lack of classical values both transforms humans into dummies and robs vehicles of any vitality. For instance, in *Il camion* (Figure 7), the dummy nature of the man on the left is stressed also by his immobility, underlined by his out-of-proportion boots that seem too heavy and bulky to allow any kind of movement. Moreover, the man is disproportionally small in comparison to the car, which takes center stage in the painting, underlining its superior status vis-a-vis humanity in modern society. However, the lack of the car's driver foregrounds its motionlessness since a driver is the *conditio sine qua non* of its motion. While Futurist artists glorified machines and cars as a sign of progress, representing their dynamism in their works of art (Gian Ferrari, 1998: 9), Sironi's depictions of listless vehicles underscore his ideological position toward modernization and technology (Figure 9). Sironi's urban landscapes construct a social space through the unsettling interactions between humans and nonhumans, that is machines. In this space, the nonhumans are the cause of a new economic and social order, namely industrial capitalism, which Sironi vehemently opposed (Braun, 2000: 188). At the same time, though, the nonhumans seem to suffer the effects of what they have caused—what Mussolini

defined as “urbanesimo industrial … che isterilisce il popolo”—ultimately partaking in the life “void of humanistic values,” to use Braun’s (2000: 53) words. I contend that the network of relations between humans and nonhumans—the subject and the object—structures the claustrophobic and degenerated physical and social space of Sironi’s urban landscapes. Writing about the complex relations between humans and nonhumans, Bruno Latour states “the impossibility of an artifact that does not incorporate social relations and makes conceivable the impossibility of defining social structures without accounting for the large role of nonhumans in them … [humans] are never limited to social ties” (Latour, 1994: 62, 64). Latour defines as “quasi-object” what constitutes humanity through a history of exchanges between subjects and objects. Through the “quasi-object” category, Latour wants to overcome the division between society and nature in the phenomenal world, by defining the human not as essence, but rather as “the focus of a historical succession of networks, the product of particular ways of ‘passing’ the quasi-object. The human is the nexus of relations, the site where properties are exchanged … Humanity is made by the objects it makes” (Harris, 2005: 172–173).

Figure 10. Mario Sironi, *Paesaggio urbano*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 26 × 39 cm. Private collection.

Figure 9. Mario Sironi, *Paesaggio urbano*, 1921–1922. Oil on canvas, 60 x 77 cm. Private collection.

Hence, Sironi's trams, trucks, and cranes acquire the same dummy-like nature of the people: there is no demarcation between the subject and the object (the human and the nonhuman). As Latour (1994: 64) observes, "Objectivity and subjectivity are not opposed, they grow together, they grow irreversibly together." Idealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile, one of the most prominent fascist ideologues, argued that the act of thought—what he defined as 'self-consciousness'—is an identity of opposites, "the unification of subject and object in a priori synthesis. This unification comes about through the self-alienation of the subject in the object which is other than it, and its return to itself from thence" (Gentile, 1966: 76). As George de Santillana (1938: 369) observes, "Idealism is that peculiar creed that takes relations seriously, rather than beings." It is the eerie relation between the humans with the nonhumans—the subject within the object—that reinforces the uncanny feeling of Sironi's urban landscapes, which, then, assume a mythical atmosphere.

Modernity and its creation of myths

The reappearance of myths in early 20th-century European culture was determined by late modernity's annihilation of the self-determining subject. Terry Eagleton argues that myths, which were suppressed during the epoch of Victorian rationalism and liberal capitalism, reemerged during "capitalism's gradual mutation into 'higher' corporate forms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Eagleton, 1990: 316). Myths become imaginative means to decipher the new social experience rooted in the new economic order, which transitioned from a market to a monopoly capitalism. Just like the mythological subject, the modern human being cannot be the master of his/her own thinking and actions, which are, instead, determined by deep and alien controlling mechanisms. As Eagleton (1990: 316–317) writes:

> this period witnesses a turning away on all sides from the traditional philosophy of the subject of Kant, Hegel and the young Marx, troubledly conscious as it is of the individual as constituted to its roots by forces and processes utterly opaque to everyday consciousness.

Late modernity deeply changed humanity, as the ego ceased to feel in control of its own conscious and unconscious life.

Myths, which had Nietzsche as one of their prophetic precursors, were embraced by modernist intellectuals such as Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, and James Joyce, just to mention a few, to negotiate the gulf between the ego and the real determinants of its identity, which remain obscure to the rational mind (Eagleton, 1990: 316–337). Claude Lévi-Strauss's explanation of the structure of the myth can be particularly helpful for understanding Sironi's almost obsessive repetitions of some elements in his urban landscapes. These repetitions were already highlighted by Agnoldomenico Pica, who observed:

> The horizon, kept high so that the sky is little more than a strip weighing down heavily on the earth, *is not unusual* in Sironi … It is not at all surprising to see that *the same* orthogonal composition built up on rectangles … The dynamism of Sironi's compositions is, *almost constantly*, arranged on a concealed orthogonal framework made up of rectangles *more often* placed horizontally. (Pica, 1955: 28; emphases mine)

Later, Claudia Gian Ferrari echoed Pica's words on Sironi's repetitive elements: "Le forme dei caseggiati, i buchi neri delle finestre, le strade percorse da camion e segnate dai lampioni, le gru che tagliano il cielo sono *motivi ricorrenti*" (Gian Ferrari, 1998: 11; emphasis mine). We can see some of the repetitions described by both Pica and Gian Ferrrari in the painting in Figure 9, to which I would add that there are also streets void of human presence. Explaining the meaning of repetition in myths, Lévi-Strauss (1978: 40) writes: "Mythology is static, we find the same mythical elements combined over and over again, but they are in a closed system." The myth's closed system is based on a binary: if A happens, then B happens too. It is precisely this binary that ultimately gives order and meaning to the myth (Lévi-Strauss, 1978: 12, 23). If we look at Mussolini's "Discorso

dell'Ascensione," we can observe that he also uses a binary: if natality rate increases, then Italy will have an empire; if natality rate decreases, then Italy will be a colony. Mussolini does not present other possibilities such as, for instance: no matter the natality rate, Italy will be a sovereign country without being a colony or having an empire.

The mythological nature of Mussolini's speech is reflected in the images in Sironi's urban landscapes. Because of the lack of subjects in the paintings, the viewer experiences a claustrophobic feeling of alienation not only from the world of the humanities—and its values—but from history itself. Unlike the static plasticity of the urban landscapes, history is dynamic, or, as Lévi-Strauss (1978: 40) argues, history is an open system where elements can be arranged and rearranged with infinite possibilities, unlike myths. History, though, needs people to actualize its infinite possibilities. Sironi's murals have precisely the function of representing people's actualization of history from ancient to present time. Writing about Sironi's murals, Emilio Gentile (2014: location 375) observes:

> La pittura di Sironi inneggia sempre al duce, ma nello stesso tempo guarda anche agli umili, ai contadini, agli operai, alla famiglia, situati in un tempo primordiale e arcaico, nella loro essenza di umanità laboriosa … la creazione di una società fascista in cui ognuno abbia il suo compito e tutti partecipino alla creazione di una nuova civiltà.

Here, we can see how Sironi's urban landscapes and mural paintings integrate with each other. The rhetoric of the murals aims at constructing the myth of Fascism as the appropriate conclusion of the Italian *Risorgimento* and, thus, the zenith of Italian history. However, history cannot be actualized—and a fascist civilization and empire cannot be built—unless Italian modern cities' sterility problem is successfully addressed. Hence the need for the dystopic urban landscapes to represent the problem and move the viewers to act upon it, as suggested by Sorel.

Conclusion

With this article, I propose to read Sironi's urban landscapes within the context of race and eugenics discourses that were circulating in Europe at the turn of the 20th century. During this time, nations' peoples came to be regarded more and more as biological entities, instead of social ones; thus, the connotation "a nation's race" substituted that of "a nation's people." Moreover, rather pessimistic views regarding the European stock and its future were taking shape. Consequently, fears of human degeneration, depopulation, and sterility started informing much of the social concerns and political actions in fascist Italy; hence the importance of collecting and analyzing data to check on the nation's rates of births, deaths, and fertility to ensure the Italian race was strong and vital enough to have an empire. My contention is that Sironi's urban landscapes, with their deserted streets and rare doll-like inhabitants, are the artistic representation of the fears for Italy's depopulation and infertility. By giving artistic shape to these fears, Sironi is invoking Sorel's theory of social myth, which asserts that images, rather than facts, move people to action on their own account and on the account of their nation.

Notes

1 Enrico Somarè was the first art critic to adopt the French expression *paysage urbain* to describe the cityscapes painted by Sironi, who liked the expression so much that he made it "wholly Italian in the substance" as well as in the caption (Pica, 1955: 27).

2 Braun (2000: 46) detects that the ideology of his urban landscapes "lies in the ambivalence toward technological progress, with its potential of alienation, and toward its political corollary, the new society of masses."

3 Braun has highlighted the influence of George Sorel's social myths on Sironi in his dissatisfaction both with Marxism and Liberalism. At the turn of the 20th century, Sorel's social myths acquired notoriety

precisely for their power to transform “real politik into cultural praxis and mass psychology” (Braun, 1997: 1001).

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