

## Deconstructing the Capital Letters. Weak Thought, Italian Theory, and Politics. A Conversation with Pier Aldo Rovatti

Interview by Andrea Muni<sup>1</sup>

Translated by Julia Corsunov

This conversation focuses on the social and political role of the philosopher today. Pier Aldo Rovatti discusses the growing philosophical movement named ‘Italian Theory’ while revisiting his own recent intellectual path. The Italian philosopher retraces the cultural experience of ‘Weak thought’ (*Pensiero debole*), of which he was one of the two promoters, and underlines the intellectual and political fight against all of the so-called universal truths (and ideological violence) inspired by this philosophical trend at the beginning of the Eighties. The interview ends with a discussion about the dawning perspectives of political-philosophical action in the post-modern age.

*Italian theory: an enigmatic subject. Is it the first step of a new, revitalising chapter in Italian philosophy and philosophy worldwide? Is it a fresh ‘philosophical trend’ able to lend philosophy and political commitment a real contact with the primary human and social needs of everyday life? Or is it just a further, dry philosophy-marketing operation based on a strange mixture of old-fashioned Marxist militancy and rhetorical academic exercises?*

Although I kept a certain distance from it, I was interested in this newborn ‘cultural phenomenon’. I particularly share the idea that seems to convey the following message: ‘In Italy we think too, and we do it in a way which is capable of producing effects. In my opinion there is no such thing as a national peculiarity of Italian thought, although it may be true that in Italy there is, and always has been, a unique and independent reaction to some significant French authors, simplistically labelled as ‘Post-structuralists’. Antonio Negri himself draws upon the ideas of two key post-structuralist authors (Foucault and Deleuze), and Roberto Esposito also works on French authors (Bataille, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze himself), recasting their conceptual tools in an original fashion. Moreover, it is no accident that many leading

---

<sup>1</sup> A version of this interview was published in *Lo Sguardo – Rivista di filosofia* 15 (2014) (II) – *La Differenza Italiana* Interviste 2, pp. 25–31 (ISSN 2036-6558). The authors have slightly modified the original text on the occasion of this translation.

French Foucauldian authors consider Italy to be a privileged place for the exchange of views, dialogues, and critical developments. I think this is due to the fact that here, more than elsewhere, we have managed to avoid those easy labels and stereotypes that usually tone down the radical nature of Foucault's approach.

What I do not sympathise with is the historiographical attempt to conceive the whole Italian philosophy as an *essentially* political and conflictual experience, whose noble origins would be rooted even in pre-modern age.

*In his book, Italian theory. Dall'operaismo alla biopolitica [Italian Theory: From Workerism to Biopolitics] Dario Gentili reconstructs the genealogy of this new and developing philosophical trend. He singles out many 'politically committed' [impegnati] Italian intellectuals of the second half of the 20th century and associates them with this enigmatic newborn philosophical entity we call Italian Theory. The (special) focus on politics (and sometimes even on militant struggle) is the key-element which seems to link the diverse positions of these different authors together. What do you think about the way in which the notions of politics and political commitment are used not only in Gentili's book but also in everyday language? Do you find it appropriate?*

This way of posing the question disorients me. Do you allow me to call on some Socratic spirit and confess to you that when I hear the word 'politics' I can't completely figure out what we are talking about? Every moment of our everyday practices contains a peculiar degree of *politics*. Every second and every gesture of our everyday life is political, although not necessarily ideological: there is a significantly *political* way of teaching, educating our children, living, and even of being *friends*.

When we talk about 'politics', we generally refer to its first, 'Grand', and most obvious meaning, and we maybe forget its other, microphysical, everyday sense. I'm not saying that I have no interest in the first, 'grand' meaning of politics; on the contrary. But I fear that the main focus of *Italian Theory* could be limited to Politics with a capital 'P' (*à la* Negri). It seems that the basic 'political' question, which Italian Theory (*à la* Negri) addresses to people is 'so, you, are you a leftist or not?' This reminds me of a film about Enrico Berlinguer, by Walter Veltroni, that perplexed me: it was all focused on the empathic and emotional aspects of being a leftist, whereas a genuinely political analysis should not avoid a more historical-critical approach.

Nowadays, if we desire to think anew the traditional forms of political struggle, we should connect the concept of struggle with the concept of game, in order to face the most unpleasant and ignored aspects of our social reality. This approach ensures a full immersion in the everyday microphysical relations of power that we're involved with. This is the *other side* of politics, its most invisible side, the one we refuse to face. We so often talk about 'conflict'... but, actually, we are totally unprepared for conflicts,

we have never been trained for them, and even when they happen among us and our loved ones, within our walls, we don't know how to deal with them. We should pay more attention to the capillary action of the *politics of truth* in our daily lives, in so far as it is what brings us to reproduce, in the microscopic dimension, that ideological battle of 'Grand' Politics by which we violently prove each other wrong by arguing, 'I'm telling the truth' because 'I know it', 'because I know what is good'.

Weakening the truth means fighting against the inner theoretical violence of the hegemonic *policy of truth*. This is an ethical-political task we should pursue and experience in our daily habits, which are silently getting more petty-bourgeois before our very eyes day by day...

In my view, the concepts of *game* and *play* are fundamental ethical-political tools. They are strategic operators [*operatori strategici*] which can enable us to reinvent a new struggle and a new ethics capable of representing a real alternative to the capitalist discourse. The concept of game allows us to think about politics in a different perspective, and points us towards a whole range of philosophers who have never compromised with any pre-established ideology: Lacan, Foucault, Bataille, and especially Nietzsche.

Yes, I think that, nowadays, Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as Marx, is the indispensable author for every thought that claims to be *political*. This is because to constantly call into question the historicity and political character [*politicità*] of those truths (apparently a-historical) which dominate our society is a fundamental element of political struggle, and not a marginal one. It is not a matter of replacing *bad* absolute truths with a *good* absolute one: it is a matter of changing the way we play at the game of truth. To do so, a struggle is necessary as well, a struggle which is essentially political, and probably more genuinely political than any other.

The concept of game can open up a space of freedom, both ironic and painful, anything but defeatist or pacified, in which to practise the critical (or self-critical) experience of the historicisation of every truth's value: both those of our 'political enemies' and our own. I would say then that, if this newborn Italian Theory does not want to become part and parcel of the structure it wants to fight, it should constantly, critically (and self-critically) address the question of the subject by examining its historicity and political character [*politicità*]. It is necessary to never stop questioning the sense of subjectivity, especially when the effects of this operation take us far from our fixed theoretical-ideological ideas. Subjectivity, as well as truth and the game, is a political issue.

In this regard, although I don't like to quote myself at all, I have to mention the critical experience of *weak thought*. I think that, despite the disapproval, the misunderstandings, and the impasses it has encountered, this experience is still an important and valuable critical tool available for Italian thought.

*As the co-editor of the famous anthology Weak Thought [Il pensiero debole]<sup>2</sup> and as the director of the established philosophical journal aut aut, you have been accused of having become (since the early eighties) impolitical, disengaged, and of adopting an excessively sceptical and understated style (too much concerned with the problems of everyday life). This is what can be read in Gentili's book and in Negri's pamphlet The Italian Difference.<sup>3</sup> In the latter, weak thought is described as 'the most cowardly moment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's political decline'. Besides these accusations, you have also been called a 'relativist' and a 'nihilist' by a more traditional and moralistic critique. I don't want you to respond to these accusations once again; instead I would like you to explain to us the real stake of your weak thought. Moreover, it would be interesting to understand the evolution, over the last thirty years, of your own way to weak thought, and to discover what are the main differences between your interpretation and Gianni Vattimo's.*

I think that besides important philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben, Umberto Eco or Roberto Esposito, *weak thought* has been the only real, international 'movement of ideas' in Italy *in the last thirty years*. I don't know whether Gianni Vattimo attributes the same importance that I do to the concept of play, thinking rather that *weak thought* should play a key, emancipatory role in society in order to create a new cultural *koinè*. I agree with him as to the fact that weak thought is emancipatory; however we have to carefully analyse what 'emancipatory' means.

Ever since the sixties, I have always considered the notion of subject and subjectivity as a question essentially political. In the seventies, *aut aut* was considered a 'red journal', close to the post-operaist movement. Negri himself wrote on *aut aut*, criticising *Krisis* by Massimo Cacciari and sympathising with my positions on the question of radical needs (a militant issue, proposed by Enzo Paci in the early sixties and which I found it important to keep developing). Toni Negri – this is the first time I am telling this story publicly and with the right dose of humour – after my turn towards *weak thought*, sent me a telegram from the prison of Rebibbia, defining me as a 'traitor to the proletariat'. I don't find it difficult to believe that my old friend Toni has always laughed at 'weak thought', because his philosophical style is completely different: he prefers a 'strong' thought and believes that criticism should never become self-criticism. But in this way, he, perhaps, even ends up indirectly reinforcing that *discourse of the master* against which he imagines himself to be fighting. *Weak thought*, in contrast, denounces the *theoretical* violence, the political and practical repercussions from the micro to the macro, justified by that sharp political weapon

---

<sup>2</sup> Translated as Gianni Vattimo & Pier Aldo Rovatti (eds.), *Weak Thought*. Trans. Peter Carravetta. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012. – ed.

<sup>3</sup> Translated as Antonio Negri, 'The Italian Difference' in Lorenzo Chiesa & Alberto Toscano (eds.), *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*. Melbourne: re.press, 2009. – ed.

which is Truth, it doesn't matter what truth, be it the objective, moral, scientific, utilitarian, revolutionary or counter-revolutionary truth. *Weak thought* is a way to fight against (first of all against oneself) the implicit violence and flattery of all truths that present themselves as absolute. *Weak thought*, as an ethical-political exercise, opposes every ideology. Nowadays everybody claims to be anti-ideological, but a self-certification is not enough: in order to be anti-ideological, in fact, one must question, demolish and criticise the certainties one has. This is the fundamental task, and the ethical-political struggle of *weak thought*: deconstructing the certainties (even our own) and the capital letters (in philosophy as much as in politics).

Now you may ask what gives me the right to take such an *outsider's* position. Although I have never belonged to any party, I have sympathised with the *Manifesto* group and with other leftist movements. Yet I didn't tolerate either the Gramscian position of an intellectual in some way committed to the party, nor the pseudo-Husserlian image of the philosopher seen as the 'servant of mankind'. If *mankind* is conceived as a universalistic category, if it is written with one of those capital letters which entails a peculiar ideological value, then I have no problem telling you that it is not something I would like to 'serve', but rather to face critically. Nor do I see the intellectual as a moral hero or heroine, who speaks out against society, nor as a servant (or counsellor) offering their knowledge to mighty politicians. On the contrary, when I think about the philosopher, I see an individual who is humbly committed to an everyday self-transformation that is intended as an exercise on themselves that exposes them to others. An exercise whose political and philosophical repercussions should be – if I am allowed to use such a word – *incidental*.

In my own modest way, I identify my political commitment with the experience of *aut aut*, of which I have been the editor-in-chief since 1976: *aut aut* proposes a precise 'politics of philosophy' [*politica della filosofia*], critical and plural, 'of contestation' [*di battaglia*], which has never sheltered behind or been beholden to any ideology.

What has *aut aut* been? Was it a post-workerist journal? Maybe, maybe not, certainly it has changed...Why should things never change? Of course, it takes a long time and a great effort to analyse forty years of the political and cultural work proposed by *aut aut*; it is easier to dumb down an entire life-long critical activity, labelling it as 'impolitical' [*impolitico*]. I don't make a big fuss about it.

*There is another point somehow related to this: the delicate issue of the public and media exposure of the so called 'intellectual'. Toni Negri, from the more militant side of Italian Theory, mostly rejects media exposure, but is at the same time still engaged with political demonstrations that could create a new political subject. Roberto Esposito, by contrast, from the deconstructivist side, is more open to media exposure, although he clearly states, for instance in his introduction to Bios, that he doesn't want*

*his 'affirmative biopolitics' to become a political manifesto. Is there an alternative or a mediation between these two positions? What 'subject', collective or individual, should be addressed? How can a so-called 'philosopher' be critical, not only towards society, but also towards himself, nowadays? Isn't it true, as Marx pointed out, that the intellectual himself is in some way nothing but a superstructural effect of that society he would like to judge and criticise? Should we include the 'I' for 'Intellectual', along with the 'P' for 'Politics' and 'T' for 'Truth', in the list of capital letters we should deconstruct?*

Along with Esposito and contrary to Negri, during the eighties, I realised that media exposure was crucial. I am aware of the fact that we don't anymore live in the age of messages in bottles, so it's no good keeping on directing our political/cultural commitment solely towards 'comrades'. I therefore agreed to expose myself to the media, although the media exposure has swallowed many intellectuals and friends of mine, such as Umberto Galimberti (in the past) and could do the same even to my good friend Massimo Recalcati (in the present). The great trap consists in flattering the intellectuals, attributing to them the role of moral compasses in our society. Honestly, I think the exposure is important and we have to put up with the theatricality of philosophy.

My *daimon* sometimes tells me: 'stop it, you are only talking like that because, you know, you didn't pass muster, you just haven't been successful enough, you didn't achieve the intellectual authority to be the host of a chat show'... It may be, I don't know. The issue of visibility shouldn't be trivialised or even demonised *a priori*, especially in Italy since Berlusconi and private television channels have spread to the pseudo-intellectual world. Italian television has been an important political propaganda tool for a long time. But today Italy is also the country of big festivals dedicated to philosophy... this visibility thing is really complicated. It is not the time of the 'double society' [*doppia società*] any more (the society of which Alberto Asor Rosa used to speak).<sup>4</sup> Our society is the *crafted* society of the *anthropological mutation* that Pasolini denounced. We have to reinvent new battles and strategies of thought starting from here. For example, my semi-journalistic work at the little, local press association *Il Piccolo* has been very important for me for the last few years, more than

---

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to the book *Le due società. Ipotesi sulla crisi italiana* (Einaudi, 1977) by the renowned Italianist (and then *Workerist*) Alberto Asor Rosa. In this collection of essays, the author identified in the fracture and tension between *two societies* one of the main reasons for the crisis affecting Italy in the late Seventies. The intellectual placed, on the one hand, the 'guaranteed', "*i garantiti*", namely all of those people with a permanent job, and on the other, the social workers "*operai sociali*", the new proletariat produced by the collapse of a Keynesian industrial model and the rise of more precarious forms of work.

my long relationship with the cultural section of *La Repubblica*. In this work, on which in addition my latest books are based, I found a tolerable dimension of visibility. I have been living this experience as a precious exercise, through which I could practise the critical (and self-critical) activity I dedicated my intellectual life to, far away from any moral stance and the desire to be a prophet (or a failed politician).