

Exclusion as a Blessing: The Italian Retrieval of Cynicism Roberto Mosciatti

Abstract

Relying on historical considerations and on the reevaluation of Greek Cynicism promoted by authors such as Peter Sloterdijk, Paul Navia, and William Desmond, this paper will explore why contemporary Italian philosophical theories acquire a more valuable significance if examined from a ‘cynic’ perspective. This standpoint provides a better understanding of how Italian philosophers look at their predecessors, while also explaining the uncanny combination of anti-humanistic and cosmopolitical elements embodied in the ‘Italian difference’. Furthermore, a cynic reading makes it easier to justify both the ascetic categories of ‘mysticism’, ‘weakness’, ‘bareness’, etc. that have shaped the Italian Heideggerian Left beginning in the 1980s, and the relevance of the Franciscan message in philosophical debates.

*Non è vero che agli Italiani non piaccia la serietà.
È semmai un popolo cinico.
Il problema è che gli Italiani vedono troppo avanti.
Osservano in anticipo il disfacimento*

(It is not true that Italians do not like seriousness.
If anything, they are a cynical people.
The problem is that Italians see too far ahead.
They observe the decay in advance.)

Emanuele Severino

Solving a Riddle: A New Cynic Enlightenment

1.

In these stressful weeks when the pandemic crisis is destabilising everyone’s life and it is challenging to maintain even a bit of mental lucidity, critical reflection is not only called for, but rises as a moral duty. All the more so when thoughtful analysis can be beneficial both for containing collective panic and anxiety and for providing oneself with some idea of how to cope in a global cataclysm whose end seems nowhere in sight.

In fact, the current ‘state of emergency’ does not represent an entirely abnormal deviation from previous historical flows. It is true that this crisis is dismantling many of our conceptual points of reference, forcing us to rethink some of the parameters we have used to interpret reality up to now. This may be explained by the fact that the crisis, far from being a mere anomaly, is unfolding as a sudden acceleration; it has pushed us with an exponential increase in speed towards ways of existence we would have reached anyway in a few years. It is all too obvious that in Western societies, where individualism and egocentrism have grown relentlessly since the 1960s, people were already predisposed to the grotesque and vicious practice commonly referred to as ‘social distancing’. But it is less obvious to ask why, in this pandemic context, this expression has been adopted and promoted rather than, say, ‘spatial distancing’, ‘physical separation’, etc., which seem more appropriate.

If words matter, as it is reasonable to suppose, the formula ‘social distancing’ implies a disengagement not limited to the material domain, but also involving the spiritual sphere, including affects, emotional connections, and relationships. As if by using this expression, we are confronting the crisis not only with immunity in mind, but also to dissolve well-established interpersonal bonds. Assuming for a moment that this linguistic slip is not merely random, to what extent had Western social dynamics evolved precisely by relying on the intensification of ‘social distance’? What was the level of interpersonal separation we already tolerated before the Covid-19 calamity? Wasn’t a high degree of emotional self-estrangement already part of the human experience and weren’t social opportunism, political scepticism, and a sharp *cynicism* already spreading around the Western world?

As I have amply clarified elsewhere,¹ one should express gratitude for the work of German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who first strove to quantify the cynicism propagating across contemporary Western societies. Sloterdijk’s suggestive *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983) portrays cynicism as a disenchanting state of despair that afflicts the world of business and the media as well as several intellectual environments, unfolding as a sickness he ironically christened *enlightened false consciousness*. This is a pathology that distresses those who no longer trust the great narratives of modernity — i.e., the belief in human progress and knowledge, Christian Providence, Marxian utopia, the Hegelian Spirit, etc. — but are incapable of converting their disillusionment into effective critical activity, pioneering ideals or sociopolitical innovation. Neo-cynics direct their existential uncertainty towards petty-minded ends such as material wealth, greedy profit, or individual success: ‘Cynicism is *enlightened false consciousness*. It is that modernised, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has laboured both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably is not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the

¹ Mosciatti (2019).

same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered'.²

Such a neo-cynical phenomenon is for Sloterdijk a product of contemporary mass society, where materialistic and consumerist values prevail, generating cultural homologation, narcissism, and self-centredness. Neo-cynicism is the outcome of a social milieu that undermines the uniqueness of each human being and boosts behavioural massification as it flattens human thinking. Such a depressive climate is partly explained as an outcome of the high level of urbanisation that has characterised post-WWII Western history. Neo-cynical mentalities and attitudes proliferate across contemporary metropolitan environments, which isolate people and destroy both social bonds and feelings of empathy, while feeding egoistical perceptions of reality. In so doing, urban milieus give rise to forms of 'integrated alienation', whereby the individual's attitude is employed and exploited to reinforce and reproduce the status quo: 'Today the cynic appears as a mass figure [...]. It is a mass figure not only because advanced industrial civilisation produces the bitter loner as a mass phenomenon. Rather the cities themselves have become diffuse clumps whose power to create generally accepted public characters has been lost [...]. Modern cynics are integrated, asocial characters who, on the score of subliminal illusionlessness, are a match for any hippie'.³

Despite these disconsolate presuppositions, Sloterdijk is convinced that enlightened false consciousness can potentially trigger the reemergence of a more virtuous and beneficial type of cynicism, one that has been forgotten for centuries and which would be able to restore health to the social body. The values and ideals defended in ancient times by the Greek Cynics and the thought of Diogenes of Sinope should serve as a paradigm for this cultural rebirth. Refusing the cerebral abstractions elaborated by classical metaphysicians, the Greek Cynics did not conceive of philosophical activity as limited to the domain of academic ambitions and professional goals but, more importantly, as a practical exercise of virtue that exposed the moral degradation distressing the Hellenistic world.⁴ In disagreement with the degenerate and corrupt lifestyles that characterised Greek urban centres of their epoch, the Cynics rejected the ordinary values of wealth, fame, and power, while promoting frugality, simplicity, and self-sufficiency as a path to ultimate wisdom. Similarly, they mainly dismissed social convention and status, including marriage and political citizenship and, despite their significant democratic inclination, they believed that true knowledge can be attained exclusively by maintaining oneself at the margins of well-established communities.

For the first time in Western history the Cynics evoked a cosmopolitan utopia conjured up by exclusion. Far from advocating the formation of a universal state, the Cynics nonetheless proclaimed themselves 'citizens of the world' and simultaneously 'citizens of themselves', refusing to be fully part of any specific

² Sloterdijk (1987), p.5.

³ *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

⁴ An exhaustive account of ancient Cynicism can be found in Desmond (2008).

demos. They were able to endorse philanthropic values of tolerance, respect, and magnanimousness – not restricted by Diogenes to family and friends but extending to all human beings – while also employing a sharply polemical rhetoric. Although scholars have occasionally interpreted the ‘kynical’⁵ *self-exile* from society as a passive disengagement from politics, in reality Diogenes and his disciples often employed cosmopolitan ideas as tools for uncovering injustices and inequalities perpetrated across the Hellenistic communities.

Importantly, kynical cosmopolitanism was not restricted to the human world, but extended to all living creatures. Partly because Greek language and thought did not possess the Roman concept of ‘*humanitas*’,⁶ signifying humans’ noblest aspects, the kynical cosmos does not coincide with the human world, but ‘*exists beyond human control and even conception*’.⁷ This aspect is not marginal if one considers that *homo* is generally associated with Western civilisation whereas, starting with the modern age and the development of academic anthropology, the Greek term *anthropos* has been identified as an object of knowledge pertaining to non-Western cultures.⁸ Critically, although cosmopolitan ideas are commonly inscribed within human-centred systems of thought such as the philosophies of the Enlightenment and Neo-Kantian discourses, Western cosmopolitanism was born within a pre-humanistic anthropomorphic climate wherein *non-human otherness* played a fundamental role. This pre-humanistic significance reverberates within the very word ‘Cynicism’, deriving from the Greek κύων, dog, which recalls the wild living habits adopted by Diogenes’ adepts. They embraced extremely minimalistic routines, imitating the austerity of natural life and incorporating both ascetic practices and hard physical training among their daily rituals.

Could these kynical ideals be reclaimed in the contemporary Western world to help us deal with the ideological and materialistic shallowness of the consumerism that has taken over society? Could a kynical ethics vigorously resurface and denounce the exploitation and abuses that occur constantly in the globalised climate of the present? Could one employ a kynical type of cosmopolitanism to oppose self-absorbed Westernising perspectives and prevent the human species from sinking into the filth of parochial and bigoted mentalities? Sloterdijk is not the only one who would answer these questions affirmatively. More

⁵ Adopting Sloterdijk’s terminology, I will hereafter use the adjective ‘kynical’ to differentiate the ancient significance of the concept from the way contemporary common sense understands the term ‘cynical’.

⁶ Nybakken reminds us that, ‘[f]rom Homer down through the classical Greek writers the word *anthropos* remained a generic term for individuals. It signified a creature that, although having some characteristics of the lower animals, nevertheless possessed faculties and powers above them [...]. The Greeks were familiar with this two-fold nature of man, and yet their word *anthropos* seldom, if ever, signified the noble or humane aspect of man; it was not used to mean ideal mankind’ (1937), pp. 397–98.

⁷ Desmond (2008), p. 204.

⁸ See the compelling justifications provided by Nishitani Osamu (2006).

recently, Paul Navia also thinks optimistically about a potential rebirth for Cynicism, which he sees as capable of undermining the societal framework leading humanity toward ecological collapse, cultural homologation, and moral downfall.⁹

2.

In support of these expectations, scholars remind us that kynical phenomena have appeared in different forms throughout Western history. They tend to re-emerge in epochs that to some extent display sociohistorical features that had characterised Greek Hellenism. Among these, we might list imperialistic expansion, economic development, cultural blending, a high rate of urbanisation, and sociopolitical instability. As in the Roman imperial age when the Stoics explicitly looked to the Cynics as their predecessors, the aforementioned factors also apply to the contemporary age of globalisation. Above all, Sloterdijk points to the urbanist developments characterising present-day Western communities and reminds us that the authentic kynical spirit

presupposes the city, together with its successes and shadows. Only in the city, as its negative profile, can the figure of the cynic crystallize in its full sharpness, under the pressure of public gossip and universal love-hate. And only the city can assimilate the cynic, who ostentatiously turns his back on it, into the group of its outstanding individuals, on whom its liking for unique, urbane personalities depends.¹⁰

This standpoint acquires crucial importance when comparing the post-Westphalian global scenario, wherein nation-states have lost part of their sovereign autonomy, with the shortfall of independence that the Greek *poleis* suffered under Alexander and subsequent Macedonian rulers.¹¹ The hypothesis runs that these geopolitical similarities might potentially elicit analogous sociocultural practices, thus triggering a possible re-emergence of kynical phenomena. As I have already elucidated¹² the recent diffusion of postmodern and post-human doctrines, from Foucault's 'death of man' to Derrida's deconstruction, from Gianni Vattimo's critique of Western knowledge to some of the most radical transhumanist projects, should be looked at from this perspective. Employing different strategies and conceptual tools, those discourses have all highlighted the narcissistic and harmful essence that distinguishes any purely humanistic standpoint, thus converting the

⁹ 'We have – Navia argues through his scholarship – taken too little thought of the wisdom of the ancient Cynics: live simply, scorn unnecessary desires, do not follow the slavish crowd but speak the truth clearly in righteous war against untruth and, most of all, cultivate the virtue of *philanthropia* and learn to love others now, for it is from this that everything else will follow' (Desmond 2008, p. 236).

¹⁰ Sloterdijk (1987), p.4.

¹¹ See Kennedy (1999), p. 31.

¹² Mosciatti (2019).

philosophical domain into fertile ground for the resurfacing of pre-humanistic kynical values.

It is also important to consider the kynical attributes of the revolutionary origins of the Christian tradition, which Sloterdijk highlights in several parts of his *Critique*. Historians have revealed multiple spiritual values that were inherited by Christianity from ancient Cynicism,¹³ explaining why several Christian fathers expressed sympathy for the Greek Cynics, and Pauline churches in particular were strongly influenced by their legacy. Intuitively, Diogenes' praise of frugality displays similarities with the Christian conception of 'poverty' as a way to gain a heavenly kingdom, while the kynical dismissal of laws chimes with the free-spirited figure of Jesus who 'lived on the edges of official society, like the Greek Cynics',¹⁴ among fishermen, prostitutes, and tax-collectors. Moreover, ascetic practices have been endorsed by both traditions, where the kynical pre-humanistic adoration of the cosmos resounds in Jesus's parables, which praise animals as champions of wisdom and expresses unconditional love for mankind: 'Such possible commonalities are stressed by Downing, Mack, Vaage and others when they conclude emphatically that Cynic influence on Jesus was predominant, and that we should view Jesus not primarily as a Jewish rabbi or prophet, but as an itinerant Cynic'.¹⁵

It is not the intention here to unravel this complex issue, nor to assess in what ways, shapes, or forms kynical elements were transmitted and survived across the centuries through Christian doctrines and institutions. One can nonetheless observe with empirical certainty that those values have a tendency to re-emerge in their revolutionary purity whenever Christianity takes the shape of a power exhibiting worldly greed and authoritarian tones. As Sloterdijk points out, this is what happened across Europe, and particularly in Italy, at the end of the Middle Age, when heretic sects and religious orders mourning the loss of Jesus's original message aggressively questioned the authority of the Church:

As soon as a power state in the robe of Christianity – whether it be as Papacy or as the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation – was established and the brutal world of the masters began to become too impudent, kynical ascetics appeared in the Middle Ages who, with the death skull and the Great Reaper tried to cut the haughty men of the world down to size.¹⁶

¹³ Historians such as F. Gerald Downing, Burton Mack, Leif Vaage, and John Crossan have recently advanced the claim that Cynicism considerably influenced the Christian doctrines, and that Jesus himself should be looked upon mainly as a kynic philosopher. Their arguments chiefly rely on the hypothesis that the Galilee of Jesus's time was not a provincial region but a cosmopolitan area where large towns such as Tiberias and Sepphoris were frequented by many non-Jews and Greek speakers: see Desmond (2008).

¹⁴ Desmond (2008), p. 213.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁶ Sloterdijk (1987), p.281.

Sloterdijk assigns Franciscanism primacy, claiming that it was able to retrieve and accomplish kynical ideals during the Christian age more faithfully than others: 'Diogenes, however, really was without possessions and he could convincingly shake his contemporaries' consciousness, as later, on Christian soil, the Franciscans first were able to do again'.¹⁷

The assumption defended here is that, starting at the end of the 1970s, kynical elements have resurfaced within Italian philosophy more visibly than in other discursive contexts. This is arguably due not only to the Stoic¹⁸ and Franciscan influences that Italian culture has somehow inherited, but also to the sociopolitical atmosphere that was animating Italy between the 1970s and the 1980s. The historical intersections between Greek Hellenism and contemporary globalised society previously identified took a stark form in Italian society at the end of the 1970s, when economic growth, urban expansion,¹⁹ and immigration exploded all at once. Power was still solidly in the hands of the Christian Democratic Party, which had been founded at the end of War World II on the catholic values of fraternity and equality, but after thirty years had mostly forgotten its origins, becoming a conservative and capitalistic force. Values of frugality and collectiveness were gravitating toward the left side of the political spectrum, whereas the necessity to defeat internal terrorism led the Christian Democrats to carry out the aggressive repression of all forms of dissent and forcefully reassert their authority. Bearing in mind Sloterdijk's analysis, it is appropriate to think that the combination of these factors is part of the reason kynical elements resurfaced in Italian thought more visibly than in other cultural spheres.

Following this line of reasoning, Italian Theory should be considered from a kynical perspective, which is desirable insofar as it resolves a few aporias: a) the incongruity between the anti-humanistic aspects and the cosmopolitan inclination characterising the 'Italian difference'; b) the recurrent employment of ascetic categories including Cacciari's 'negative mysticism', Vattimo's 'weakness', Agamben's 'bareness', etc. which proliferated during the 1980s; c) the importance that Italian theorists have subsequently placed on the Franciscan message, which is

¹⁷ Ibid., p.165.

¹⁸ It was Gramsci's belief that Italian culture and intellectuals inherited cosmopolitan values from Roman Stoicism. One of my intentions here is to show how such a perspective needs to be further challenged and rectified by considering the contemporary globalised climate.

¹⁹ The middle-class urban population in 1971 had represented 38.5 percent of the citizens and reached 46.4 percent in 1983. Such an expansion mostly depended upon the swelling number of public employees, including professional figures, technicians, and intellectuals, but a slight augmentation was also registered in the private sector. Urbanisation processes, developing wildly and uncontrollably, represented one of the most challenging issues that the country had to face. At the end of the 1970s, three important laws were approved with the purpose of normalising construction activities, but their implementation was hindered by the inefficient bureaucratic public apparatuses and by the paralysing alliance between State and private owners. See Ginsborg (1989), p.527.

interpreted in critical and counterhegemonic terms; and d) the evident similarities between Sloterdijk's conception of leftist Heideggerianism as a kynical phenomenon and the evolution of Weak Thought in Italy.

The Italian Retrieval of Cynicism

1.

The kynical element is indispensable for adequately understanding recent anti-humanistic accounts of Italian thought. Three of these studies are particularly interesting because they entangle posthuman factors with cosmopolitan components in a way that requires a kynical type of clarification.

According to *The Italian Difference* (2009), during the last four decades Italian thought has unfolded around the themes of nihilism and biopolitics. For the editors, Chiesa and Toscano, these topics offer a faithful portrait of contemporary Italian society, while also stimulating international philosophical discussion. Even though nihilistic and biopolitical approaches were elaborated first in Germany and France, they needed to be filtered through Italian exegesis before acquiring a global popularity. This is particularly true in the case of Foucault's anti-humanistic ideas, which gained international recognition only after 1990, when the concept of biopolitics became pivotal in the Italian debate.²⁰ Chiesa and Toscano explain this phenomenon as depending upon the Italian philosophical capacity to utilise abstract theoretical schemes for the comprehension of contingent epochal events. Both nihilism and biopolitics are particularly versatile categories in this regard because, thanks to their figurative character, they lend themselves to generating metapolitical concepts that travel readily across geographical borders.²¹ Combining nihilistic and biopolitical arguments, Italian Thought is able to describe historical phenomena through long-term conceptual devices, thus proving a powerful tool for transferring philosophical discourses from the national to the transnational level: 'It is all too easy to imagine a Reading Agamben in Bogotá, a Reading Negri in Teheran, a Reading Vattimo in Beijing, a Reading Esposito in Seoul...'²²

Toscano and Chiesa's view also relies on *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (1996), which a few years earlier had highlighted the relevance of Italian philosophy in the international sphere. In the introduction to this volume, Michael Hardt points out that this international predisposition rests on Italian Thought taking inspiration from the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s, when attacks on the State were more vigorous and persistent in Italy than anywhere else in Europe. Hardt observes that, although between the 1980s and

²⁰ As Esposito also reminds us, see *Dall'impolitico all'impersonale* (2012), chapter 4, *French Theory and Italian Thought*.

²¹ Chiesa & Toscano (2009), p.5.

²² Ibid.

1990s Italian Thought could no longer count on the material substrate supplied by those movements, Italy remained an active laboratory generating new forms of political thinking.²³ Due to the rebellious ideation of the 1970s, Italian philosophy is able to provide other traditions with a plethora of innovative paradigms essential to a deeper comprehension of ongoing globalising phenomena. With these observations, Hardt implicitly confirms Gramsci's intuition that in the post-Westphalian political era the cosmopolitan personality that Italian philosophy has always embodied would prove beneficial, and Italian intellectuals would no longer feel self-contradictory.²⁴

This conclusion has been explicitly drawn in the remarkable accounts provided by Roberto Esposito, who also indicates its transnational reach to be the essence of contemporary Italian Thought. Particularly in *Dall'impolitico all'impersonale* (2012) and even more in *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy* (2012), Esposito clarifies the fundamental factors distinguishing Italian Theory from French Post-structuralism and German Postmodernism, specifically its insistence on the anti-humanistic and biopolitical notions of life, for the sake of which Italian philosophy always appears to be on the verge of transcending its own borders:

la differenza con la filosofia francese sta proprio nella centralità della categoria di 'vita', colta dal pensiero italiano fin dal suo inizio. Mentre la filosofia francese, a partire da Descartes, ha privilegiato la dimensione della coscienza o quella, tipica di Pascal, del dialogo interiore, la filosofia italiana dalle sue origini – con Machiavelli, Bruno, Campanella, Vico, fino a Croce e Gramsci – si è concentrata sulla categoria di vita nella sua complessa relazione con quelle di storia e politica.²⁵

(the difference with French Philosophy rests precisely on the centrality of the category of 'life' captured from the beginning by Italian Thought. While French philosophy, starting with Descartes, has favoured the dimension of consciousness or, typical of Pascal, interior dialogue, Italian philosophy from its origins – with Machiavelli, Bruno, Campanella, Vico, up to Croce and Gramsci – has focused on the category of life in complex relation to the categories of history and politics.)

Unlike the French, German, and English traditions that privilege the reflective dimension of philosophy, Italian Thought favours historical and political themes. These lead theoretical activity out of its comfort zone to combine with outer

²³ See Hardt and Virno (1996), Introduction.

²⁴ See Izzo (2009), p.181.

²⁵ Esposito (2012), *Dall'impolitico all'impersonale*, p.161, English translation mine.

influences. It is one of the reasons why Italian philosophy is cosmopolitan in its essence:

Contrariamente all'atteggiamento tipico di altre tradizioni – orientate all'introspezione filosofica, al ripiegamento della filosofia sul proprio movimento interno –, il pensiero italiano ha sempre guardato fuori di sé: alla città politica (con Machiavelli), alla vita infinita dell'universo (con Bruno), alla natura (con Leonardo e Galilei o anche, diversamente, con Leopardi), al mondo della storia (con Vico). Quella italiana non è mai stata una filosofia della persona, del soggetto, della coscienza – ma una filosofia mondana o mondiale, esterna persino ai confini dello stato nazione.²⁶

(As opposed to an attitude typical of other traditions – oriented towards philosophical introspection and to the retreat of philosophy towards its own internal movement – Italian Thought has always looked outside itself: to the political city (with Machiavelli), to the infinite life of the universe (with Bruno), to nature (with Leonardo and Galileo or even, in a different way, with Leopardi), or to the world of history (with Vico). Italian philosophy was never a philosophy of the person, of the subject, of consciousness – but an earthly or worldwide philosophy, external even to the borders of the nation-state.)

The problem now is to understand how all these accounts combine their anti-humanistic aspects with cosmopolitan components. That such a conflation of elements should be interpreted in kynical terms is confirmed by a careful reading of Esposito's *Living Thought* (2010), which analyses the history of Italian philosophy since the Renaissance.

In *Living Thought* (2012), Esposito grounds the cosmopolitan core of Italian philosophy in the pre-national milieu of the Italian Renaissance, when the national did not coincide with the territorial because early Italian intellectuals did not operate within the context of the nation-state. This pre-national milieu was characterised by a number of scattered cities, which fell short of representing a solid political point of reference.²⁷ Esposito portrays the cradle of Italian philosophy as de-territorialised; it was a cosmo-political environment shaped by a diversity of urban centres. At the birth of Italian philosophy we find again the city, which the Renaissance would revalue from both a financial and a cultural viewpoint, and which throughout history has provided Western cultures with kynical elements: 'Since antiquity, the role of the city in the genesis of satirical consciousness is

²⁶ Ibid. pp.166-67.

²⁷ Esposito (2012), *Living Thought*, p. 20.

sociohistorically uncontroversial'.²⁸ The view here acquires even more solidity if one considers again Sloterdijk's analysis. This unsurprisingly tells us that in the beginning of the modern age, kynical 'cheekiness always had a rougher time in Germany than in the Latin countries',²⁹ whereas 'the northern Italian city cultures, which Jakob Burckhardt described, exploded with sarcasm, and Roman and Florentine wit rang shrill in their citizens' ears'.³⁰

Importantly, Esposito's take seems to converge with Hardt and Negri's idea that Renaissance Humanism³¹, an expression of the de-territorialised scenario, should not be seen as in conflict with the anti-humanistic project developed centuries later by Foucault and then inherited by Italian biopolitics. Rather, the Italian Renaissance set up the conditions for a conception of the 'human after the death of man'; that is, a notion of human life that is not ontologically incompatible with nonhuman beings, machines, or even cyborgs:

This antihumanism, however, need not conflict with the revolutionary spirit of Renaissance humanism we outlined earlier from Nicholas of Cusa to Ficino. In fact, this antihumanism follows on directly from Renaissance humanism's secularising project, or more precisely, from its discovery of the plane of immanence. Both projects are founded on an attack on transcendence.³²

Cosmopolitanism and posthumanism find again within kynicism a third ingredient that is pivotal for understanding the way contemporary Italian philosophers look at their predecessors. Let us scrutinise Esposito's text more thoroughly through a kynical lens and see where this leads us.

2.

From a kynical perspective, one immediately sees that the de-territorialising essence Esposito ascribes to Italian philosophy is mostly characterised in negative terms. Italian Thought is not cosmopolitan because it constructs speculative notions that are universally applicable or elaborates comprehensive normative systems, but rather because it was always *excluded* from the philosophical domain. Due to the literary character of Renaissance speculation, Italian Thought was often considered a *non-philosophy*. For Hegel, true philosophical activity only resumed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while more recent philosophical

²⁸ Sloterdijk (1987) p. 115.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 116.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 115.

³¹ Italian Renaissance Humanism – or Umanesimo – was a cultural tendency that took shape in the 14th century, and which was first animated particularly by the work of Francesco Petrarca and Giovanni Boccaccio, who rediscovered and revalued ancient Greek and Roman classical literatures, values, and ideals.

³² Hardt & Negri (2000), p. 91.

inquiries into the problem of humanism – from Maritain’s *Humanisme integral* (1934), to Sartre’s *L’existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946) and Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* (1947) – have completely ignored its Italian origins.³³ In agreement with Deleuze, Esposito believes that Italy was deprived of its own philosophical legacy.³⁴ Because of this denial, Italian philosophy was forced to establish a partnership with non-philosophical genres, thus acquiring a highly versatile argumentative personality: ‘But what if this escape outside itself – its continual de-territorialisation – is the most originally living feature of Italian thought?’³⁵ This means that Italian Thought was born in *exile* and thrived in *exclusion*. Accordingly, the international tenor identified by Esposito should be seen as depending upon the kynical condition of political marginalisation.

The case of Machiavelli who ‘with his cynicism, saw decidedly more clearly than the authorities of the land, empire, and town in the late Middle Ages’³⁶ is exemplary in this regard. Over the centuries, numerous Western thinkers have engaged with Machiavelli’s ideas, which nonetheless have been relegated to the periphery of the philosophical sphere. For Esposito, this was due not only to the literary metaphors Machiavelli’s texts often propose, but also to the practical purposes he pursues. As opposed to philosophical orientations chasing purely abstract targets, Machiavelli’s discourse prioritises praxis over theory. Embracing a kynical conception, Machiavelli does not think of philosophy as an unemotional deliberation, but rather as an activity that is stirred by concrete life experiences, and which requires full personal involvement.

Following Machiavelli, it is due to the same pragmatic essence that Italian political philosophy speaks largely from a critical perspective. Italian thinkers rarely elaborate political concepts with the purpose of resolving social contradictions or conflicts. Unlike social contract theorists such as Hobbes or Locke, whose notions of sovereignty aim at moderating tensions that endanger human coexistence, for Machiavelli, Bruno, and Gramsci the political sphere structurally contains an antagonistic component which cannot be eliminated. This antagonistic spirit rings out in Machiavelli and Bruno’s sarcastic tone, recalling kynical impertinent speeches, and it explains the dissociation Italian philosophers often proclaimed with respect to local and national ruling powers: ‘Not only can Italian philosophy not be reduced to its national role, but its most authentic reason for being lies precisely in the distance it takes from that role’.³⁷

Thanks to its transnational personality, Italian theory captures more accurately than other philosophical orientations the cultural diversity that is proliferating across the European continent and beyond. One should recognise the greater significance of this view in light of growing international interest in the Italian

³³ Esposito (2012) p. 35.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 16.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 15.

³⁶ Sloterdijk (1987) p. 239.

³⁷ Esposito (2012) p.18.

school that emerged with the 1989 publication of Giovanna Borradori's *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, just as the European Union was rising and neoliberalism had begun to imperil national identities.

If we remove the kynical lens from our eyes, however, these developments lose a large measure of their significance. It is through a kynical account that one is able to justify both the conflation of cosmopolitan features and posthuman components and the characteristics that Esposito identifies. Besides, how can one not see Diogenes' shadow behind Esposito's genealogical reconstruction? How can one not look at Machiavelli's reflections on the political city as a kynical counterpart to Leonardo's veneration of nature? Is it from the same kynical perspective that one should justify the proliferation of ascetic philosophical categories, including Cacciari's *mysticism*, Vattimo's *weakness*, and Agamben's *bareness*, that materialised in the 1980s? Is it because of this kynical alter-ego that the Franciscan message has become in recent times increasingly vital for Italian theorists coming from divergent theoretical backgrounds?³⁸

3.

If the kynical hypothesis formulated here is correct, it means we should re-conceptualise at least some of the categories recently employed by Italian philosophy, both to grasp their authentic significance and to reassess their potential contributions to ongoing international debates. While it is certainly not possible to pursue this purpose within the space remaining here, these last few pages will nonetheless offer a few theoretical insights that may support future research.

A first imperative is to re-evaluate the concept of 'weakness', which gained currency just when Sloterdijk's *Critique* was published (1983) and has significantly shaped Italian philosophy over the past forty years. While 'Weak Thought' has been fully examined from epistemological and ontological perspectives, on the political plane, its kynical and counterhegemonic significance has yet to be understood.

Vattimo has posed the crisis of humanism as essentially an outcome of Nietzsche's 'death of God', leading humans to roll from the ontological and moral centre to a tangential space 'X' wherein all ordinary values and beliefs need to be reformulated. This loss of centrality becomes even clearer in the de-humanising effects Heidegger detected in twentieth-century technological society and the rationalisation of labour. Following Heidegger's insights, in *The End of Modernity* (1988), Vattimo conceives of contemporary capitalism, technology, and science not as contrasting with humanism, but rather as what reveal humanism's inner essence and ultimately lead to its dissolution:

³⁸ It is enlightening to notice that Hardt & Negri's *Empire* (2000) and Agamben's *Homo Sacer* project, which ultimately flows into *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Forms of life* (2013), both conclude by emphasising the critical importance of the Franciscan message and that Vattimo's *After Christianity* (2002) also insists on the relevance of Franciscanism to the present-day globalised political scenario.

Technology is a threat to metaphysics and to humanism in appearance alone, for it is in the very nature of technology that the defining traits of metaphysics and humanism – which both had previously kept hidden from view – should be brought into the open.³⁹

Like Heidegger, Vattimo indicates nihilism as a way to recover balance once all the metaphysical platforms have collapsed and ‘Being’ reveals its essential historicity. Heidegger’s historical ‘Being in the world’ is also a ‘Being toward death’; that is, a life experience whose authenticity is measured according to the capacity to engage with one’s own potential annihilation. Vattimo sees nihilistic modes of thinking as the key to safely exiting the space of modernity.

Here it is crucial to distinguish *passive nihilism* from *active nihilism*. The former sees the late-modern ‘crisis of reason’ and collapse of ultimate foundations as dramatic events that need to be redirected through acts of metaphysical substitution or re-appropriation. Whether this materialises as a Marxian effort to liberate social relations from exchange-value or discloses itself in the critique of mass culture elaborated by the Frankfurt School, in all circumstances *passive nihilism* presupposes the conviction that Western metaphysical discourses should be replaced with more authentic ‘truths’. Vattimo argues that such an attitude will ultimately degenerate into nostalgic pessimism, political resignation, and occasionally violence.

Active nihilists, on the contrary, can turn the collapse of the ideologies and the de-essentialisation of the world into an opportunity for self-liberation. Achieving this ambitious purpose requires undermining the spirit of modernity by positing a *weak* form of subjectivity, replacing rigid conceptions of knowledge with more flexible and symbolic representations. Accordingly, truth can no longer reside within the domain of metaphysics, but must be relocated to the border which philosophy shares with rhetoric and art. Vattimo believes that knowledge should be grounded on neither transcendental nor logical foundations; its nature is essentially *hermeneutical* and, as such, dependent upon a wide variety of historical and cultural conditions that each life experience presupposes.

In all circumstances, truth comes into view from an impure horizon of meanings, because verifications and evaluations are always formulated within ‘the space of freedom both of interpersonal relations and of the relations between cultures and generations. In this space no one ever starts from scratch but always from a faith, a belonging-to, or a bond’.⁴⁰ Epistemic statements do not materialise out of an objectivity towards which minds spontaneously converge; rather, they can

³⁹ Vattimo (1988), p. 40.

⁴⁰ Gianni Vattimo, ‘Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought’, in Vattimo and Rovatti (eds.) (2012) p.50.

be constructed exclusively as outcomes of successful dialogic interactions: ‘truth is born in agreement and from agreement, and not vice versa, that we will reach agreement only when we have all discovered the same objective truth’.⁴¹ Vattimo deconstructs Euro-humanism by positing a *weak truth* that unfolds by contamination and hybridisation, leading the Heideggerian ‘Being’ to its ultimate twilight.

One should note that the dichotomy *passive-active nihilism* posited by Vattimo exhibits analogies with Sloterdijk’s cynicism-kynicism discourse, and more specifically his characterisation of a ‘cynicism of means’ as opposed to a ‘kynicism of ends’. The former is disclosed as passive nihilism, insofar as it denotes the attitude of those who use their ‘instrumental reason’ and ‘dirty realism’ to pursue materialistic goals, including ‘plundering of the earth, devastation of land and sea, and the decimation of fauna’,⁴² and to reinforce the tele-techno society of consumerism that Vattimo criticises. On the other hand, Sloterdijk’s ‘kynicism of ends’ displays active nihilistic features, since it relies on the ‘purposelessness’ that structurally animates human life and challenges social privilege, inequality, greed, and totalitarian attitudes of all sorts: ‘This means taking leave of the spirit of long-term goals, insight into the original purposelessness of life, limiting the wish for power and the power of wishing – in a word, comprehending the legacy of Diogenes’.⁴³

The analogy with Vattimo’s viewpoint emerges forcefully in consideration of how *weak thought* undermines the cultural primacy that science has progressively acquired in Western societies since the Enlightenment. Where science strives to penetrate and manipulate reality in different ways, Vattimo re-evaluates art and rhetoric as more creative and less controlling approaches to the construction of knowledge. Here *weak thought* provides disciplines normally pushed out of the domain of truth with an opportunity to speak. Simultaneously, it wages war against all sorts of ‘totalitarian’ philosophical discourse and comprehensive theories, thus ‘pissing against the idealist wind’,⁴⁴ as Sloterdijk would tastelessly put it. By way of the impurities Vattimo defends, philosophy takes off its rationalist attire and shamelessly exhibits its contaminated body, allowing emotions and instincts to infiltrate theoretical discourse and providing social outsiders with a voice.

It is no accident that Sloterdijk looks upon Heidegger as a contemporary personification of this ‘kynicism of ends’, and emphasises the necessity of endorsing a leftist interpretation of Heidegger’s ontology, which Vattimo has strenuously promoted in Italy:

However, it should be noted that Heidegger, with respect to his central philosophical achievement, would still not be a man of the

⁴¹ Vattimo (2009), *Nihilism as Emancipation*, in Chiesa and Toscano (2009), p.32.

⁴² Sloterdijk (1987) p. 193.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 103.

Right even if he had said still more politically muddled things than he actually did. For, with his, as I call it, kynicism of ends, he is the first to burst through the Utopian-moralistic grand theories of the nineteenth century. With this achievement he remains one of the first in the genealogy of a new and alternative left [...] the new Left is an existential Left, a neokynical Left – I risk the expression: a *Heideggerian Left*.⁴⁵

Considering the pivotal role leftist Heideggerianism has played in Italy from the early 1980s, and also the enthusiasm, scepticism, and occasional criticism that it still elicits within the philosophical community, it is arguable that we should reconsider this phenomenon, as well as Vattimo's subsequent re-evaluation of Christianity and the Franciscan message, from a kynical standpoint. I hope that the considerations here expressed will encourage others to pursue their philosophical inquiries in a new direction.

Conclusion

Contemporary Italian Thought offers a variety of perspectives that become more significant when considered from a kynical standpoint. Without the support of kynical interpretation, the uncanny combination of post-human factors and cosmopolitan elements that characterises the *Italian Difference* is challenging to explain. With a kynical explanation, however, it is possible to elaborate a realistic account of the pragmatic and critical essence that animates Italian Theory, while also understanding how contemporary Italian philosophers look at their predecessors. Furthermore, the ascetic philosophical categories formulated and employed from the end of the 1970s onwards, when historical events in Italy facilitated the re-emergence of sociopolitical challenges from the margins, find a more meaningful explanation in light of the kynical hypothesis. A basic analysis of the birth and evolution of *weak thought* reveals significant connections linking Sloterdijk's satirical discourse to Vattimo's critique of humanism. The exegetical framework illustrated here, it is hoped, will support future scholarship both as a model and as an inspiration, and that the *Italian Difference* will be re-evaluated from alternative and more authentic standpoints.

⁴⁵ Sloterdijk (1987) p.209.

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