

Review: Corrado Claverini, *La tradizione filosofica italiana: Quattro paradigmi interpretativi*

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*How beautiful is sunset, when the glow  
Of Heaven descends upon a land like thee,  
Thou Paradise of exiles, Italy!*  
(Percy Bysshe Shelley)

While the label of “Continental philosophy” supposedly refers to the entire European Continent, it is often implicitly restricted to the combination of German philosophy and French theory. It is rather unusual to find a “Continental philosophy” syllabus that engages in depth with Russian, Spanish, or Scandinavian authors, even if figures like Shestov and Berdyaev, Ortega y Gasset and De Unamuno, Kierkegaard and Naess, have had a tremendous impact on the European philosophical tradition. However, around the year 2000, this Franco-German focus was suddenly expanded with the rise to prominence of Italian Thought. Philosophers like Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, Umberto Eco, Gianni Vattimo, and Paolo Virno took the world by storm. Roberto Esposito’s notion of “Italian Thought” quickly became a commonplace for classifying and distinguishing these authors from the wave of French theory that had dominated the American literary studies department since the 1980s. Esposito’s approach especially, which expanded “Italian Thought” to encompass the entire Italian philosophical tradition, seemed to offer a political practicality and historical depth crucial for the times. While Agamben’s speculations on *homo sacer* and Negri’s musings on the multitude inspired resistance movements against the War on Terror and capitalist globalisation, Eco rejuvenated mediaeval semiotics and Esposito reinterpreted Machiavelli for a new generation of scholars.

However, over the years a backlash has emerged against the term. Some have argued that the promotion of “Italian Thought” is nothing more than ‘a good marketing strategy’.<sup>1</sup> Many are bothered by the label insofar as it looks like a vehicle for academic self-promotion and a thinly disguised variation on the “Made in Italy”-brand that right-wing Italian governments use to sponsor Italian tourism and exports of its goods and services. Under the dark shadow of marketisation, “Italian Thought” looks like a brand name that reduces philosophy to just another export product of the Italian knowledge economy. The critics specifically object to two discursive effects of the framing of “Italian Thought”. On the one hand, the term risks flattening the internal heterogeneity of Italian philosophy into a single, streamlined tradition in which all Italian philosophers are supposed to converge on the fundamentals of their thought. If Italian Thought marks a homogeneous school of thought, then the central attributes of each individual philosophy are flattened to fit the mould. Yet Italian philosophers – even the big names of today – persistently disagree with each other. On the other hand, the emphasis on *Italianità* risks playing into the hands of right-wing nationalism. The term seems to fetishise Italian particularity as an antidote to the philosophical cosmopolitanism of global elites. It might reinforce those political forces that wish to put forward a particularist Italian identity as superior to other cultures.

In this quagmire where genuine criticism and petty resentments almost inextricably mix, Corrado Claverini’s *La tradizione filosofica italiana: Quattro paradigmi interpretativi* offers much-needed clarity. The debate around the specificity of Italian philosophy has an elaborate history, and Esposito is not the first to inquire into its character. Claverini’s book offers a well-researched and astute history of Italian philosophers reflecting on the nature of Italian philosophy itself. He focuses on four paradigmatic thinkers – Bertrando Spaventa, Giovanni

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<sup>1</sup> Sandro Chignola, *Da dentro: Biopolitica, bioeconomia, Italian Theory* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2018), p. 12 [my translation]. See also Augusto Illuminati, “Eatalian Theory”, *DinamoPress*, 30 March 2015 (<https://www.dinamopress.it/news/eatalian-theory/>) or Pier Paolo Portinaro, *Le mani su Machiavelli: Una critica dell’Italian Theory* (Roma: Donzelli, 2018).

Gentile, Eugenio Garin, and Roberto Esposito – who have contemplated the status of Italian philosophy as an individually identifiable tradition. Central in Claverini's exposition is the complex dialectic between the universal aspiration of philosophy and its historico-geographical particularity. Philosophy aspires to articulate eternal truths yet can only be conducted within concrete socio-historical circumstances by finite human beings. Move too much in the direction of universality and you end up with an ahistorical simulation of philosophical conversation where all arguments are stripped of their context until nothing but the bare bones of formal logic remain; but move too much in the direction of historical particularity and you fall into absolute historicism, which reduces philosophical texts to museum pieces at which we can marvel but which will inevitably get buried under the dust of desuetude. According to Claverini, all four paradigmatic thinkers have actively resisted this drifting apart of philosophy and its history. For them, the history of Italian philosophy is not a mere museum of outmoded curiosities but a resource for revitalising the present. From the depths of the past, a clamour emerges that insists on what Machiavelli termed a '*ritorno ai principi*'. At critical moments in time, the static actuality of social life returns to the primordial chaos from which it came and in which the new can arise. For Machiavelli, "changes which bring such bodies back to their principles are healthy. The ones that have the best organisation and live the longest are, however, those that can renew themselves often through their own institutions, or that come to such renewal through some circumstance outside these institutions. [...] The method of renewing them is, as was stated, to bring them back to their principles".<sup>2</sup> What counts for politics here also applies to philosophy: at critical junctures, a return to the living principles of thought embedded in history pushes philosophical thought forward into new and unexplored terrain.

The Hegelian thinker Bertrando Spaventa enacts such a *ritorno ai principi* during the Italian *Risorgimento*. His 19<sup>th</sup>-century

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<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. by Julia Conaway Bondanella & Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 246.

reconstructive history of Italian philosophy gives a clear lineage and role for Italian philosophy in the development of European modernity. He reads the progression of European history and philosophy as a series of stages from the authority of divine transcendence in the Middle Ages to the claims of this-worldly immanence in modernity. The Universal, in this story, manifests itself in a dialectical progression of particular national moments building toward fully modern immanence. Italy plays a fascinating role in this self-objectification of the World Spirit. In the Renaissance, Italian philosophy marks the beginning of the rupture between mediaeval transcendence and modern immanence. Spaventa reads thinkers like Bruno and Campanella as initial rejections of mediaeval obedience to otherworldly authority in favour of modern self-determination. Italian Renaissance thinkers thereby appear as early precursors to the giants of modern philosophy, like Descartes and Kant. In Renaissance Italy, a circulation of ideas is set in motion that expresses the self-actualisation of the World Spirit and that will come to fruition in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Idealist philosophy. However, Spaventa argues that Italy itself largely disappears from this Odyssey after the Renaissance. The power of the Church proved too oppressive for the flourishing of modern philosophy, so the World Spirit moved elsewhere to perfect its self-objectification. Only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was it able to return to Italy.

Giovanni Gentile redoubles the stress laid on the speculative and teleological elements in Spaventa's historiography. He also reads the history of Italian philosophy as a progressive immanentisation of Spirit towards late-modern Idealist philosophy. Whereas his former mentor and philosophical opponent Benedetto Croce stresses the dialectic between the universal rationality of philosophy and the particularity of the human individual, while dismissing anything else as senseless nationalist rhetoric, Gentile champions the Italian national tradition of philosophy as the particular carrier of the Universal Spirit of modernity. Building on Spaventa's work, he constructs a more detailed and convincing history of Italian philosophy from the court of Federico II of Sicily up to his own school of *attualismo*. Compared to Spaventa, the story is richer and contains fewer

gaps, but the dialectic between universality and particularity also shifts slightly in a more nationalist direction. For Spaventa, the motor of history is the Universal Spirit of modernity, which acquires embodied existence in a progression of European nations; for Gentile, the nation is itself directly spiritual and articulates its own universality through the objectification of its spiritual contents in concrete history.

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eugenio Garin explicitly rejects this speculative approach to the history of Italian philosophy. His *Cronache di filosofia italiana* and *Storia della filosofia italiana* are still standard references in the historiography of Italian philosophy. They leave more room for the heterogeneities and discontinuities in the history of Italian thought insofar as Garin refuses to fit the Italian tradition into a singular narrative running from transcendence to immanence. Italian philosophers are, moreover, not interpreted as precursors to other, better (?) non-Italian philosophers. If Garin accepts a common lineage or characteristic of Italian philosophy at all, it is not on the level of its philosophical content. According to Claverini, Garin's links to the Gramscian project of constructing a national-popular culture under Togliatti's *Partito Comunista d'Italia* puts him on a different track. Garin stresses the political pragmatics of Italian philosophy, emphasising the shared ethico-civil proclivity of many Italian thinkers. Italian philosophy is marked by an involvement in the turbulent political history of Italy, in which many philosophers have paid a heavy price for their public involvement. From Campanella and Bruno to Gentile and Gramsci, Italian philosophy has been deeply enmeshed in the *tumulti intra i nobili e la plebe* (tumult among the nobles and the plebeian).

With this background information excellently explained in Claverini's book, Esposito's notion of Italian Thought appears as more than mere marketing. It builds on the historiographical tradition of Spaventa, Gentile, and Garin, reconfiguring elements from each thinker into an original reinterpretation of Italian philosophy. In *Pensiero vivente* and *Da fuori*, Esposito rearticulates elements such as the emphasis on this-worldly immanence and the political impetus of philosophical reflection, but he also respects Garin's appeal for

a non-nationalistic historiography of Italian philosophy. Esposito presents Italian Thought not as a national(ist) tradition rooted in the ethnic identity of the Italian peninsula but as a trajectory of territorialisations and deterritorialisations of concepts and ideas circulating through the Italian territory. This explains, for example, Esposito's repeated references to non-Italian authors like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Benedictus de/Baruch Spinoza in his presentation of Italian Thought.<sup>3</sup> "Italian Thought" does not name a tradition expressive of the Italian national Spirit but a network of interactions that finds its paradigmatic exponents today in a circle of philosophers like Agamben, Negri, and Esposito himself, who come from the Italian territory. The *Italianità* of Italian Thought does not reside in the nationality of its representatives but in their participation in a network of conversations, criticisms, and influences passing through the Italian territory. In this network, the major ideas and attitudes of Italian Thought are communicated. To give a simple example, there is nothing inherently "Italian" about the (post-)workerist reading of Marx's 'Fragment on Machines' in the *Grundrisse* with its key signatures like the general intellect, the real subsumption of labour under capital, and the virtuosic? potentialities of living labour. Yet, this text has become a classic of Marxist thought through its translation and dissemination in Italian Marxism. Ever since its publication in the *Quaderni rossi* by Renato Solmi, the text has travelled through the Italian network until it became one of the central texts of contemporary Marxian scholarship and activism. Esposito presents Italian Thought as a close-knit network through which the dissemination of philosophical ideas takes place. Through their continuous interactions with each other and the outside world, the philosophers of Italian Thought diffuse a unique set of approaches that influence philosophy and politics far beyond the Italian peninsula. The Universality of philosophy is, in this optic, not a spiritual substance that animates particular occurrences of philosophical thought, but the product of a

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Roberto Esposito, *Da fuori: Una filosofia per l'Europa* (Torino: Einaudi, 2016), pp. 157-195.

network of particular individuals spreading their philosophies until they reach the level of universality.

At this conclusion, Claverini's defence of Italian Thought shines at its brightest. He not only describes but also shows a method of doing philosophy that resists today's one-dimensional globalisation of academic philosophy without fetishising nationalist identities or particularities. Contemporary philosophy suffers from a kind of globalisation that confuses the global dissemination of ideas with the unilateral imposition of American customs across the globe. Under the hegemony of American Ivy League universities, academic philosophy is often reduced to a single language (English), a single tradition (the standard overview of philosophy from Plato to Wittgenstein from American textbooks), a single practice (publishing in American peer-reviewed journals) and a single framework (analytic philosophy). Pursuing a career in philosophy today often equates with conforming to these expectations. Even initiatives for diversifying or decolonising philosophy often boil down to adding feminist or post-colonial papers by American Ivy League professors to the reading lists. That might diversify the philosophical curriculum in terms of gender or race, but it has a deleterious effect on the institutional pluralism of philosophy. Whoever is not closely "in the loop" on developments at US college campuses, is mercilessly cast aside.

Claverini shows that another form of globalisation is possible. There is value in a more horizontal network of universalisations, where more ideas than just those from a handful of American universities have the power to spread across the globe. Such an approach to globalisation stresses the need for diversity in linguistic and philosophical traditions without moving to the opposite extreme of atavistic philosophical nationalism. Rather than submitting to American hegemony or hopelessly protecting one's national heritage, an open network of philosophical influences can spread ideas in a more horizontal and even manner. By confronting his readers with the tradition of Italian Thought, Claverini already shows the potential of such a *ritorno ai principi* for resituating the impact of contemporary Italian philosophers. Esposito's notion of "Italian Thought" is not just a marketing brand for American

universities, but a rearticulation of a rich tradition of Italian self-reflection. And now, we readers are called upon to ensure that this return to first principles gives birth to new beginnings for the philosophical republic of ideas.