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THE ITALIAN “DIFFERENCE”. PHILOSOPHY BETWEEN OLD AND NEW TENDENCIES IN CONTEMPORARY ITALY

abstract

Back in vogue today is the tendency of Italian philosophy toward reflection on itself that has always characterized an important part of our historiographical tradition. The present essay firstly analyzes the various interpretative positions in respect to the legitimacy, the risks, and the benefits of such a discourse, which intends to distinguish the different traditions of thought by resorting to a criterion of territorial or national kind. Secondly, the essay examines diverse paradigms that identify – in “precursory genius”; in ethical and civil vocation; and in “living thought” – the distinctive hallmark of the Italian philosophical tradition from the Renaissance to today.

keywords

Italian philosophy, Roberto Esposito, living thought, Eugenio Garin, civil engagement

1. Where Is Italian Philosophy Heading?

Thirty years ago, many answers were given to the question at the center of a book edited by Jader Jacobelli: “where – if anywhere at all – is Italian philosophy going?” (Jacobelli, 1986, p. VI, my translation). That was in 1986 and many things have changed since then: the Berlin wall has fallen, and we have to deal with an ever more globalized world in which there are those who have proclaimed the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992), others a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996); those who speak of an “age of sad passions” (Benasayag & Schmit, 2003), or who ask: “what happened to the future?” (Augé, 2008). In this scenario, we should definitely hazard some new answers to Jacobelli’s question, although it would not be strange for some to contest the legitimacy of the question itself. It is necessary not so much to ask where – and indeed if – Italian philosophy “is going” but rather “does it make sense to speak of an Italian philosophy at all?”. In effect, since especially the Second World War, Jacobelli’s question has been central in numerous publications on the current state of Italian philosophy and the character of contemporary philosophy in Italy. However, in recent years, although there are still books asking searching questions on the state of health of, and the most fruitful areas in, Italian philosophical research, there has been, *rightly*, more caution and attention paid to the preliminary question that should always be kept in mind when referring to philosophy in terms of nationality: is it legitimate to talk about an Italian philosophy? Does it make sense? Or, when it comes to philosophy, should you avoid making distinctions on a national basis?¹

2. Roberto Esposito and the Italian Theory

These questions are at the center of a book that must be credited with having revived the discussion on the issue of nationality of philosophy: *Pensiero vivente* (Esposito, 2010). Esposito’s book about the origin and relevance of an Italian philosophy responds positively to the question of the legitimacy of a discourse on that philosophy, where the adjective ‘Italian’ does not refer to the state or the nation, but to the Italian *territory*. In fact, according to Esposito, on the one hand, Italy has not taken part in the constitution process of modern nation states that affected early modern Europe (in particular France, England and Spain) and, second, neither the Italian people nor intellectuals have ever had a national consciousness. The numerous patriotic appeals of authors such as Dante, Petrarch and Machiavelli up to Foscolo, Manzoni, Mazzini and Gioberti have a purely rhetorical and literary character (*ivi*, p. 19). In this light, we might add the fact that Italian intellectuals have been in the main cosmopolitans,

¹ I have also addressed related issues elsewhere (Claverini, 2016).

as shown from the beginnings of Italian philosophy (in particular, during Scholasticism and Renaissance humanism). Therefore, when Esposito uses the adjective 'Italian' in reference to the philosophical culture produced in Italy, he means something different from both the state and the nation, that is, "a set of environmental, linguistic, 'tonal' characteristics connoting a specific mode that is unmistakable when compared to other styles of thought" (*ivi*, p. 12). This set of characteristics is what Esposito calls "territory", a geophilosophical concept that does not so much refer to "a specific geographical area" (*ibidem*), but emphasizes the movement of "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization" that has often characterized philosophy (not only Italian). Twentieth-century European philosophy is a clear demonstration of this movement: see, for example, the "deterritorialization" of German philosophy at the time of Nazism and its "reterritorialization" in the United States. However, if philosophers such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse were forced to emigrate for political reasons, since the sixties there has been another movement of "deterritorialization" (spontaneous, this time). In fact, since 1966, the year of a famous conference organized by the John Hopkins University – *The languages of criticism and the science of man* –, many French philosophers and intellectuals have been called to teach or to participate in conferences in the United States. Similarly, in recent years, again in the United States, Esposito has detected a growing interest for certain Italian philosophies and he substantiates this by quoting three recent anthologies written in English: *Recording Metaphysics. The New Italian Philosophy* (Borradori, 1988), *Radical Thought in Italy. A Potential Politics* (Hardt & Virno, 1996) and *The Italian Difference between Nihilism and Biopolitics* (Chiesa & Toscano, 2009). In particular, Esposito focuses on the anthology by Chiesa and Toscano, in which the "Italian difference" is found in the categories of nihilism and biopolitics. Although the first was born in Germany and the second one in France, it should be noted that the contemporary Italian thought has often reinterpreted the German and French philosophies in an original way, focusing its reflections on the category of secularization (Vattimo and Marramao), on political theology (Tronti and Cacciari) and on the already mentioned biopolitics (Negri, Agamben and Esposito). Therefore, according to Esposito, the Italian, French and German philosophies of the twentieth century have had similar outcomes, namely their common "American destiny", to emphasize which we may speak respectively of *Italian Thought* (or *Italian Theory*),² *French Theory*³ and *German Philosophy*.⁴

Having clarified the way in which Esposito uses the notion of "territory", rather than that of the nation or state, to refer to the philosophical culture produced in Italy, it remains to be explained in what sense it is legitimate to hold a discourse on this kind of philosophy. Does it make sense resorting to a territorial criterion in order to distinguish between the various traditions of thought? Assuming that it is sensible and legitimate, is it not also risky? And, finally, as specifically regards Italian philosophy, where would it start and what would be the specific character of this tradition of thought?

Regarding the first question, it is necessary immediately to emphasize that Esposito was not the first to defend the legitimacy of a discourse of this kind. The issue of the nationality of philosophy was born with Bertrando Spaventa (see Spaventa, 1862) and developed by Giovanni Gentile (see Gentile, 1904-1915 and Gentile, 1918). However, this issue was also addressed outside idealist philosophy, specifically by Eugenio Garin and his school (particularly Michele

3. Is There a Specific Italian Philosophical Tradition?

2 On *Italian Thought* see, other than Esposito (2010), Gentili (2012), Gentili & Stimilli (2015), Maltese & Mariscalco (2016).

3 On *French Theory* see, in particular, Cusset (2003).

4 On the distinction and definition of *German Philosophy*, *French Theory* and *Italian Thought* see, respectively, the second, third and fourth chapters of Esposito (2016).

Ciliberto, 2012). In fact, Garin insists on the admissibility of a specific Italian philosophy in the *Introduzione* to his *Storia della filosofia italiana*. According to Garin, when doing philosophy, you cannot ever fail to keep in mind “its essential connection with a specific period of time” (Garin, 1947, p. liii). In other words, philosophy is historically determined, that is to say, it has “a precise connection with definite historical situations, with conditions and limits actually determined or determinable” (*ibidem*). In short – continues Garin – “if ideas are not, and indeed they are not, born by parthenogenesis, and the philosophical discourse is always, using a Platonic expression, ‘an illegitimate discourse’, the historical reality of philosophizing will always assume an implicit relation to specific situations, within space-time dimensions” (*ibidem*). On this point we could hardly wish for a clearer message from the author of *Filosofia come sapere storico* (Garin, 1959).

4. Historicism and Chauvinism

In stressing the fact that philosophy is always located within specific dimensions of space and time, we must also make a number of clarifications to avoid unfortunate misunderstandings. One thinker who highlights the risks of a discourse that distinguishes the various traditions of thought by a territorial criterion is Alain Badiou (2012), who admits that the term ‘French philosophy’ might appear contradictory (either philosophy is universal, or does not exist), chauvinistic, imperialist and anti-American.

The alleged contradiction of terms such as ‘Italian philosophy’ or ‘French philosophy’ must not be insisted on any more than necessary. Far from being contradictory, these expressions show the undeniable link existing between philosophy and history, a connection that does not affect in any way the universal validity of philosophy. In other words, the particular genesis of an idea does not compromise in any way its universal value. Admitting that philosophy is historically determined does not mean being historicist or reducing ideas to their history. There is an endless dialectic between universality and particularity, philosophy and history, internationality and nationality.

As such discourses do not fall into the danger of historicism, so they do not necessarily invoke chauvinism. National sentiment and cosmopolitanism can live together, as demonstrated, for example, by Giuseppe Mazzini. In other words, we can talk about nation without thereby being nationalists. We must not confuse the healthy national sentiment (or patriotism) with nationalism. The language of patriotism is linked to “the common liberty of a people” (Viroli, 1995, p. 1) and not the supremacy of the people over all others. Patriotism implies solidarity of an oppressed people with everyone else in the same situation, as it allows “to recognize a foreigner as a fellow in the common struggle for liberty” (*ivi*, p. 144). On the contrary, the language of nationalism is used “to defend or reinforce the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic oneness and homogeneity of a people” (*ivi*, p. 1). The purpose of nationalism is to impose the domination of one people over the other, while the purpose of patriotism is to extend freedom to all peoples.

5. National Culture and Globalization

Therefore, accepting neither historicism nor chauvinism, imperialism nor ethnocentrism; there is also another point to emphasize: namely, the fact that to insist on national philosophical traditions also means resisting the abstract conception of a universality as a cancellation of all particular differences. If you have to guard well from the perversion of healthy national spirit into nationalism, it is similarly necessary to stem the process of globalization in its most extreme dynamic, in favor of a genuine internationalism. One of the most obvious aspects of globalization, namely the reduction of multiple cultures to a single “world-culture”, is the continued decline in linguistic diversity. According to the twentieth edition of *Ethnologue: languages of the world* (2017), out of a total of 7,099 known languages in the world, many are at risk of extinction: 1,547 (or 22%) are threatened or shifting (levels

6b and 7 of the EGIDS – the *Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale*), while 920 (or 13%) are moribund, nearly extinct or dormant (levels 8a, 8b and 9). Finally, the number of extinct languages (level 10) from 1950 is 360.⁵ This means – concludes the Ethnologue – a rate of loss amounting to 6 languages per year. Thus, for example, in 1992, the Ubykh language was declared extinct following the death of Tefvik Esenç, the only one who was using it. Similarly, in 2008, the death of Marie Smith Jones and her sister Sophie Borodkin meant the disappearance of the Eyak language in Alaska. Just as the risk of extinction of many animal and plant species is a threat to nature, so the linguistic diversity reduction process causes incalculable damage to culture. Another treatise would be needed, in this regard, to explore the serious linguistic and stylistic impoverishment that goes hand in hand with the process just described – the constant decrease in the number of languages spoken in the world.

Following on from the preceding arguments presented, it is clear that addressing the issue of the nationality of philosophy is only one of the pieces that make up a discourse of a more general order in which culture in a broad sense is invested. Distinguishing different national philosophical traditions is not only legitimate and sensible, as has been shown, but it is necessary and vital in today's globalized world. This need manifests itself in numerous publications on the subject, addressed not only by Esposito and by the *Italian Theory*, but also by a number of scholars that, in Garin's wake, reflect on Italian philosophy (prominent among whom is Ciliberto, 2012). But if on the question of the beginning of the Italian philosophical tradition there is substantial agreement among scholars, we cannot say the same with regard to the particular characteristics of this tradition of thought. The Middle Ages is the period of gestation of a specifically Italian philosophy, whose real beginning should be placed in Renaissance humanism. On this point, the idealists Spaventa and Gentile agree, as do Garin and his school. Likewise, *Pensiero vivente* begins its genealogical analysis of Italian philosophy in the chapter *La vertigine dell'Umanesimo*. However, interpretations disagree on identifying the specific characters of the Italian philosophical tradition: is there a common thread that binds the different Italian philosophers from Renaissance humanism to the contemporary world? Are there privileged themes? What are the categories of thought and philosophical attitudes historically popular in Italy?

In answering these questions, we can look, for example, at Spaventa who states that the Italian philosophical genius is distinguished by being a “precursory genius” since Telesio foreruns the reflections of Bacon and Locke, Campanella precedes Descartes in the conceptualization of the *cogito*, Bruno's pantheism anticipates that of Spinoza and, finally, Vico begins the “Copernican Revolution” completed by Kant and thinks historically long before German idealism. Modern philosophy, born in Italy and developed abroad, sublates (in the sense of Hegel's *aufheben*) with the thought of Galuppi, Rosmini and Gioberti. The Spaventian circle made up of forerunners and sublations (*Aufhebung*) is taken up by Gentile, while it is abandoned anti-idealistically by Garin. The latter, precisely in reference to the particular characteristics of the Italian philosophical tradition, writes that: “instead of the great systematic constructions, a science of the human being and of its activities, a secular and earthly philosophy [...] was preferred” (Garin, 1947, p. lviii). In other words, the Italian philosophy was essentially “philology in Vichian sense as the science of human communication; [...] politics and morality as the urgency of the problem of the State and of the Church-State” (*ibidem*) and “religion understood especially as the need for clarification of the earthly function of the Church” (*ibidem*). To use Remo Bodei's words, the Italian philosophical tradition has always preferred “impure reason”

6. The Italian “Difference”

⁵ <https://www.ethnologue.com/endangered-languages> (accessed June 22nd, 2017).

(Bodei, 1998, p. 75) to pure reason. Later, not only the already mentioned Ciliberto (2012), but many are those who, in Garin’s wake, have stressed particularly the ethical and civil vocation of Italian philosophy. According to Carlo Augusto Viano, in the Italian philosophical tradition, “civil engagement has always prevailed over conceptual accumulation” (Viano, 1982, p. 55, my translation). Similarly, Mario Perniola (1984) indicates civil activism as one of the four main features of Italian thought together with philology, eclecticism and militancy. For his part, the aforementioned Bodei saw in Italian philosophy “a constant civil vocation” (Bodei, 1998, p. 74). Recently, the same interpretative thesis was supported by Martirano & Cacciatore (2008). The latter, in particular, reviewing *Pensiero vivente* by Esposito, has highlighted how “the constant pursuit of the relationship between history and philosophy and its ethical and civil dimension” (Cacciatore, 2012, p. 141, my translation) constitutes the very essence of the Italian philosophical tradition in a manner surely greater than the category of life. In fact, according to Esposito, contrary to Garin and to all scholars mentioned up to now, life would be the privileged object of investigation of Italian thought.

From “precursory genius” to “living thought”, up to “impure reason” and ethical and civil vocation, there are many interpretive paradigms. In their difference, and greater or lesser plausibility, the self-reflection of Italian philosophy has always played an important part of our historiographical tradition. The motto “know thyself” addressed to the essence of Italian philosophy has been programmatic since the unification of Italy up to today. The persistence of the question on the existence of a specific Italian philosophical tradition perhaps says a lot more about this tradition than do the various responses provided by Spaventa up to those by the *Italian theory*. This question, among other things, has never been only “who are we?” but has always implied another query: “who do we want to be?”. If our past can provide some clues, then the undeniable ethical and civil vocation of our philosophy as well as its interest in concrete life must be a warning: our essence should not be forgotten, but reaffirmed as an endless task. In conclusion, the past of Italian philosophy can provide useful guidance on what should be the future of philosophy, not just abstract theory, but its actual practice; not only theoretical inspiration, but ethical and civil vocation.

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