

INTRODUCTION

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A decade and a half ago, Massimo D'Alema, then leader of the Partito Democratico della Sinistra, the successor to the Italian Communist Party (since dissolved, after a number of acronymic transformations, into the centrist Partito Democratico), wrote a 'manifesto' entitled *Un paese normale*, a normal country. In the present panorama of cultural, economic and political 'desolation,'¹ that melancholy post-communist programme—Italy's secure entrance into the supposedly stable embrace of advanced European liberalism—is a dead letter. Indeed, it is in the mode of what we could call the biopolitically grotesque that Italy seems to make its occasional forays into the global media. The biometric census of Romani children, the formation of semi-legal vigilantes squads against phantasmatic foreign rapists, the legislative injunction that doctors report undocumented migrants to the police instead of curing them, a massive turnout for a bigoted and hypocritical celebration of national-Catholic hetero-normativity (called, in English, *Family Day*), the appointment of a former topless model to Minister for Equal Opportunities. The list could, and does, go on. Perhaps the most egregious instance of this mix of authoritarianism and bad taste was recently found in one of Berlusconi's press conferences apropos the case of Eluana Englaro—a woman who had spent seventeen years in a persistent vegetative state, and whose father had finally managed to legally secure the right to euthanasia only to be stopped by an 'exceptional' use of governmental power, with the connivance of the Catholic church. Commenting on the reasoning behind his 'pro-life' intervention, Berlusconi declared that Englaro was still a beautiful young woman, and that she could still bear children, as she was still menstruating. In passing, we could note that the theme of a biopolitics of exception, dear to Agamben, is here so grossly embodied that its Heideggerian *gravitas* seems to implode. The Italian exception in the epoch of the alleged generalization of the state of

1. See Perry Anderson's recent acerbic two-part survey, 'An Entire Order Converted into What it Was Intended to End', *London Review of Books*, 31, 4, 26 February 2009, and 'An Invertebrate Left', *London Review of Books*, 31, 5, 12 March 2009.

exception comes in the guise of a radical ‘desacralization’ of the very figure of *homo sacer*. Here, the spontaneous generation of mass-mediatic biopolitical pseudo-concepts, such as the recently coined ‘*fine-vita*’ (‘end-of-life’), appears to be inextricable from the vulgar spectacularization of the phenomena they attempt to describe.

But these indices of disaster, more obscene than obscure, are far from the ones that have often accompanied the perception of Italy, and of Italian thought, as somehow exceptional. The internal debate on the peculiarity or difference of Italy has a long history, being in many regards crucial to the theoretical contrasts within Italian Marxism. From abroad, leaving aside the pervasive clichés of a tourist political imaginary—easily impressed by, say, huge crowds of protesters at anti-government rallies—and the earlier awe at the singular cultural and political impact of the Italian Communist Party, this peculiarity has been captured, among others, in the images of a ‘pilot-experience’ and a ‘laboratory’. The first, proposed by Guy Debord in his 1988 *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*, paints the Italy of the ‘years of lead’ of political violence as the cutting-edge in new forms of manipulative repression, covert action and spectacular conformity. The second, outlined by Michael Hardt in an important collection of ‘post-workerist’ radical theory, finds, in the Italy of *operaismo* and *autonomia organizzata* ‘a kind of laboratory for experimentation in new forms of political thinking’, albeit one whose exceptionality comes to a close as Italy ‘converges’ with other countries through the ‘postmodernization of the economic realm and the Americanization of social and cultural fields’, i.e. through what Hardt and Negri would later dub ‘Empire’.² But is this motif, of the baleful or joyful ‘advantages of backwardness’ still available for use? Was it ever truly convincing? Isn’t it simply the other side of what Italian historians and political scientists refer to as the *ritardo storico*, the historical delay of Italy as a modern liberal democracy, which itself supposedly allowed the recently united country to ‘pilot-experience’ Fascism? If a kind of Italian exceptionalism (rather than an unproblematic specificity) can’t be called upon to sanction the idea of an ‘Italian difference’ in political thought, what can?

This collection takes its cue, and its title, from a pamphlet by Antonio Negri. In the dismissal of *pensiero debole* (weak thought) and in the retort by Pier Aldo Rovatti, one of the promoters of that current, we can identify the main polemical axis that structures this volume, as well as some of the stakes of thinking the political and theoretical ‘difference’ of the Italian situation.³ Negri’s plea for a muscular political ontology of revolutionary subjectivity and creative difference—which references Antonio Gramsci, Mario Tronti and Luisa Muraro as the three isolated pinnacles of Italian twentieth-century

2. Michael Hardt, ‘Introduction: Laboratory Italy’, in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 1 and 5.

3. It is worth noting that the two main extant English-language collections of Italian philosophy have the deconstructivist and post-Heideggerian area of *pensiero debole* as their principal point of reference, see Giovanna Borradori (ed.), *The New Italian Philosophy*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1989, and Silvia Benso and Brian Schroeder (eds.), *Contemporary Italian Philosophy: Crossing the Borders of Ethics, Politics and Religion*, Albany, State University of New York, 2007. In Italian, the vicissitudes of a philosophical field putatively dominated by a post-Heideggerian questioning of nihilism is dealt with in Giuseppe Cantarano, *Immagini del nulla. La filosofia italiana contemporanea*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 1998.

thought—evinces the short-circuits, so prevalent in much of the Italian debate, between the political, the metaphysical, the cultural, and even the personally anecdotal. The alleged contrast between a ‘weak’ and a ‘strong’ thought manifests some of the paradoxical features of the politico-philosophical debates on the Italian Left, above all the peculiar admixture of the extremely parochial (the combination of debates on first-name terms and idiosyncratic political trajectories) and the intensely universal (the attempt to address Politics, Being, Humanity). It also demonstrates the conflicted influence of other strands of European thought on the Italian scene. Whilst Negri has frequently alluded to washing the linen of Italian (workerist) Marxism in the (Foucauldian and Deleuzian) waters of the Seine, Rovatti objects to Negri the fact that these French references (to which one should certainly add Derrida) are the very ones that accompanied the moment of *pensiero debole*. The significance of Heidegger on the mutations of Italian thought is also at stake: intriguingly, while Negri reproaches *pensiero debole* for its Heideggerianism (a theme explored in genealogical detail in Mandarinini’s contribution to this volume), this is something that determines Vattimo’s position, but not Rovatti’s. On the other hand, Agamben, who does not suffer the attack levied against *pensiero debole* is much more emblematic of a Heideggerianisation of the French ‘post-structuralist’ legacy, and in particular of Foucault’s late 70s thematisation of biopolitics and governmentality, not to mention the fact that he himself aligns his philosophical position with a thought of ‘weakness.’⁴ This does not prevent Negri’s understanding of the biopolitical field as a ‘constituent affirmation’ of creative difference from constructively dialoguing with the *Angelus Novus*’ insistence on the thanatological destiny of modern Western politics.

But behind these struggles over political metaphysics we can also see the acrimony generated by different reactions to the counter-revolution,⁵ ebb or transformation represented by the 1980s, the very period of Negri’s Parisian exile and of the formulation of *pensiero debole*. In this regard, it is worth reflecting on the pertinence, whether despairing or deflationary and ironic, of the notion of nihilism to that moment in Italian thought (the period which not only saw the publication of the collection *Il pensiero debole*, but also of Agamben’s *Il linguaggio e la morte*, Cacciari’s *Icone della legge*, and Negri’s books on Spinoza and Leopardi). As so often with these issues, despite the conceptual and philological rigour brought to bear by the likes of Esposito, it is very difficult indeed to disentangle the ‘local colour’ (the experience of Craxi’s opportunistic socialism, the incarceration and self-destruction of the extra-parliamentary Left, the anthropological transformation—or even, following the prescience of the late Pasolini, the

4. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005, pp. 136–7.

5. See Paolo Virno, ‘Do You Remember Counter-Revolution?’, in Virno and Hardt (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy*. Virno’s essay uses the axiom of the ‘primacy of resistance’, so crucial to workerism and post-workerism (see Toscano’s contribution to this volume) to argue in detail for the fact that Berlusconi’s rise can only be understood as a perverse hijacking of the collective tendencies that marked the ‘Red Decade’ of ‘68–’77. What we are to make of the perpetuation of this counter-revolution in the apparent absence of the antagonistic forces it perverted is not clear.

‘anthropological genocide’—effected by Berlusconi’s TV culture...) from philosophical writings steeped in an erudite and inquisitive philosophical culture, where a long-term allegiance to German philosophy was complemented or perverted by the new waves of thought from France. Ontological and political nihilism, like ontological and political affirmationism, often seem indiscernible. Consider also the increasing significance of Christian and Catholic thematics—in the guise of Agamben’s and Negri’s divergent Franciscanisms (see Chiesa’s contribution to this volume), Vattimo’s full assumption of his *catto-comunismo* (Catholic-Communism), or Muraro’s feminist fondness for Benedict XVI’s views on sexual difference, though we could also add, in a more attenuated guise, Virno’s reliance on the theme of revelation, Tronti’s arguments on prophecy and the *katechon*, or Esposito’s reflections on birth. Whether we are considering biopolitics, nihilism or the vicissitudes of post-Christian subjectivity, recent radical Italian thought confronts us with a parallax view or disjunctive synthesis of national and conjunctural idiosyncrasies, on the one hand, and a series of potent theoretical abstractions that have a remarkable capacity for ‘travelling’, on the other. At the level of its international impact, the combination of a strong tendency to epochal periodisation (as applied to the notions of biopolitics, nihilism or Empire) and a proliferation of meta-political subjects or figures (*Muselmann*, refugee, multitude, exodus, up to the tourist),⁶ mainly forged in a period of political retreat or defeat, have allowed the theoretical ‘laboratory Italy’ a remarkable capacity to speak—frequently through the medium of radical misunderstanding—to a bafflingly disparate set of situations. It is all too easy to imagine a Reading Agamben in Bogotá, a Reading Negri in Tehran, a Reading Vattimo in Beijing, a Reading Esposito in Seoul Though such a sociology of philosophy is beyond our remit, it would be worth considering the difference between this phenomenon of diffusion and that of French, or German philosophy. At the national level, it is an open question whether theoretical interventions—such as, in this volume, Muraro’s feminist interrogation of power, Virno’s sensitivity to the ambivalence of political anthropology, or Tronti’s sober estimation of Italy’s democratic *embourgeoisement*—can serve to counter the ‘desert’ evoked by both Negri and Esposito in their essays, the desolation with which we began—a conjuncture that brings the themes of nihilism, biopolitics and Christianity into a particular appalling configuration.

This volume brings together a number of texts by different generations of Italian thinkers which address, whether in assertive, problematising or genealogical registers, the entanglement of philosophical speculation and political proposition within recent Italian thought. It is not by any means comprehensive, nor does it define and determine a specific debate, but it will hopefully allow the reader to discern a constellation of themes and problems—biopolitics, nihilism, militant subjectivity, political anthropol-

6. In his recent *Il Regno e la Gloria: Per una genealogia teologica dell’economia e del governo* (Milano, Neri Pozza, 2007, p. 158), Agamben speaks of the tourist as ‘a figure whose “political” meaning is consubstantial with the prevailing governmental paradigm’ on the basis of his ‘irreducible extraneousness with regard to the world’.

ogy—which, whilst stamped by their origins in a determinate political situation, continue, through the power of their abstractions, to influence an international theoretical debate (albeit one which, it must be noted, is itself marked by its Atlantic mediations; the global success of books such as Negri's *Empire* is often, correctly or incorrectly, perceived in Italy as yet another by-product of US cultural hegemony).

We begin with Antonio Negri's pamphlet, 'The Italian Difference', which casts a polemical eye on the panorama of twentieth-century Italian philosophical culture and declares that only three figures stand as exceptions to a pervasive political and intellectual capitulation: Antonio Gramsci, Mario Tronti and Luisa Muraro. Negri argues that the two key post-war contributions to an Italian political ontology, the workerism of Tronti and the feminism of Muraro, start from the identification of the principal forms of exploitation, capitalism and patriarchy, to develop a potent thinking of singularity and creative difference. He concludes that they provide the basis for a political philosophy of the multitude that can at last move beyond postmodernity.

In a wry response to Negri's article, Pier Aldo Rovatti—one of the key figures behind the *pensiero debole* movement attacked by Negri in 'The Italian Difference'—defends the Foucauldian inspiration behind his own understanding of philosophy. He points to the anachronism of the national image of thought put forward by Negri in his article and questions his interpretation of the problem of difference. Rovatti disputes the idea that philosophy can synthesize by *fiat* different expressions of subjectivity into a unitary political subject, and calls for a reflexive clarification of the tasks of the philosopher, one that would not end up recreating a logic of mastery.

Is the philosophical idea of nihilism compatible with a project of emancipation based on concepts such as autonomy, equality and freedom? This is the question to which Vattimo's contribution seeks to provide a response. For Vattimo, the notion of nihilism is inseparable from that of hermeneutics, understood as the historically situated character of universal claims. Rather than undermining emancipation, for Vattimo, a nihilistic hermeneutics is precisely what frees us from foundations, and should thus be understood as an emancipatory force. The article tries to counter a purely tragic understanding of nihilism with the constructive political horizons opened up by a nihilistic hermeneutics, which allows us to think anew the ideas of freedom and equality.

Developing the arguments put forward in books such as *Communitas*, in 'Community and Nihilism' the political philosopher Roberto Esposito tries to overcome the customary opposition between the notions of community and nihilism. His aim is to rethink what community might mean in an age of 'completed nihilism'. In a subtle genealogical and etymological analysis of the concept of community, he demonstrates how, rather than establishing a substantial and positive bond, community is constituted by nothingness, by a shared lack—which communal, communitarian and totalitarian politics seek to deny. The excavation of the meaning of *communitas* allows Esposito to critically examine the manner in which the thinking of community has been expunged by modern political philosophy.

Matteo Mandarini's article, 'Beyond Nihilism: Notes Towards a Critique of Left-

Heideggerianism in Italian Philosophy of the 1970s', provides a much-needed introduction to the philosophical debates around nihilism and negative thought which preoccupied many Italian Left intellectuals in the seventies, and which still have important repercussions today. In order to present the principal stakes of the 'Left Heideggerian' current, the article undertakes a close reading of Massimo Cacciari's 1976 book *Krisis*, and of Antonio Negri's critical response to it—first in a review of the book, and then in a number of texts from the seventies and eighties, closely analysed by Mandarini, in which Negri develops a positive political metaphysics. This contrast between Cacciari and Negri allows Mandarini to investigate the significance of seemingly recondite philosophical issues to the development of Italian radical political thought, and to identify some of the key stakes of this debate: the status of politics and the political, the role of ontology, the place of dialectics and, crucially, the opposition between Cacciari's formalistic understanding of negativity and Negri's link between negativity and antagonism.

In her essay 'The Symbolic Independence from Power', Luisa Muraro begins from the philosophical question of the 'unthought', and asks how our very image of thought is transformed when the thinking subject is a woman, and her thought is specifically linked to the experience of a body. On the basis of a feminist interrogation of sexual difference which reveals the forms of violence inherent in certain claims to universality, Muraro tries to develop a thinking of politics which would rest on its symbolic distance or independence from power. Through readings of Freud, *Macbeth*, Saint Paul and women's narratives, Muraro investigates the dangers borne by the fusion of power and politics and explores the ways in which they could be disjoined.

Starting from the idea that democracy always binds together practice of domination and project of liberation, Tronti formulates the conditions for a critique of democracy that would permit a rebirth of political thought in the current conjuncture. Bringing the heterodox Marxist traditions of 'workerism' and the 'autonomy of the political' together with the feminist thinking of difference, Tronti underscores the identitarian tendencies of democracy and the difficulties of combining democracy with a genuine notion of freedom. For Tronti, democracy is increasingly synonymous with the pervasiveness of capitalism understood as 'bourgeois society', and the victory of 'real democracy' (as one might speak of 'real socialism') is the sociological victory of the bourgeoisie. The *homo oeconomicus* and the *homo democraticus* are fused into the dominant figure of democracy, the 'mass bourgeois'. Against the depoliticizing consequences of 'democratic Empire', Tronti proposes a profound rethinking of our notion of politics, one which should not shy from reconsidering the elitist critiques of democracy.

Alberto Toscano's contribution seeks to trace the origins of contemporary 'post-workerism' in the formulation of concepts of political subjectivity, antagonism and insurrection in Tronti and Negri. In particular, it tries to excavate the seemingly paradoxical position which postulates the increasing immanence of struggles, as based on the Marxian thesis of real subsumption, together with the intensification of the political autonomy or separation of the working class. In order to grasp the political and theoretical proposals of Italian workerism and autonomism, Toscano concentrates on the thesis of a his-

torical transformation of capitalism into an increasingly parasitical and politically violent social relation, a thesis which is grounded in an interpretation of Marx's notion of 'tendency' and which serves as the background to the exploration, especially in Negri, of increasingly uncompromising forms of antagonism. The article focuses especially on Tronti's so-called 'Copernican revolution'—giving workers' struggles primacy in the understanding of capitalism—and critically inquires into the effect of this workerist axiom on Negri's writings on proletarian sabotage and insurrection in the 1970s. By way of a conclusion, it notes the difficulties in prolonging the workerist gambit in light of capital's continued effort, as Tronti would put it, to emancipate itself from the working class.

In 'Natural-Historical Diagrams: The "New Global" Movement and the Biological Invariant', Paolo Virno puts forward the thesis that the contemporary global movement against capitalism, and the post-Fordist regime it is responding to, is best understood in terms of the emergence of 'human nature' as the crux of political struggle. According to Virno, the biological invariant has become the raw material of social praxis because the capitalist relation of production mobilizes to its advantage, in a historically unprecedented way, the species-specific prerogatives of *homo sapiens*. Through the concept of 'natural-historical diagrams', the article explores the significance of socio-political states of affairs which directly display key aspects of anthropogenesis, and, making use of Ernesto De Martino's concept of 'cultural apocalypses', considers the different relations that a biological 'background' and a socio-political 'foreground' entertain in traditional and contemporary societies. The attempt to develop a 'natural history' of such diagrams leads Virno to reflecting on the importance of the language faculty, neoteny, non-specialization and the absence of a predetermined natural environment for political action. This reflection on the contemporary importance of political anthropology leads Virno to a set of concluding remarks on the role of ethics and the idea of the 'good life' in the practice of the 'new global' movement.

The final paper, by Lorenzo Chiesa, analyses Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*, showing how it should not be confined to the field of a negative critique of biopolitics. In his work, Agamben cautiously delineates a positive figure of *homo sacer*, whom, according to him, we all virtually are. Such a figure would be able to subvert the *form* in which the relation between bare life and political existence has so far been both thought and lived in the West. How and when is this passage from negative to positive sacredness historically accomplished for Agamben? Is such transit after all thinkable? These are the two basic questions he both unintentionally formulates and leaves undecided in his book *Homo Sacer*. Agamben further elaborates his investigation of biopolitics in the book he dedicates to Saint Paul, *The Time That Remains*. Chiesa suggests that, in the latter volume, the figure of *homo sacer* as earthly hero is tacitly transposed onto that of the messianic man. This can only be achieved by means of a detailed Christian—and more specifically Franciscan—development of the ontological notion of 'form of life'. Problematically enough, Agamben is able to carry out a transvaluation of biopolitics only in the guise of a bio-*theo*-politics.