

The Shaping of European Modernities:

Neapolitan Hegelianism and the Renaissance (1848-1862)

How deeply rooted in man is the desire
to generalize about individuals or national characteristic
[Friedrich Schlegel, *Critical Fragments*]

The idea of Europe is a product of modernity. As such, it needs to be understood in relation to discourses about and interpretations of modernity. As Gerard Delanty has commented: ‘The history of modern Europe can be written in terms of a conflict between the ideas of modernity.’¹ The main theoretical approach for the analysis of the idea of Europe ought, therefore, to be the general context of modernity. However, from the beginning of the nineteenth century it has made more sense to discuss Europe in terms of multiple models of modernity, to better capture the different interpretations of the European heritage. Delanty has highlighted that the Renaissance was the transitional point to an emerging modernity which has shaped Europe’s cultural identity. This is partially because one of the distinguishing features of modern Europe ‘was the cultivation of a concept of the self that made possible [...] a new emphasis on the human being as an individual and an objective of study and reflection’.²

Under the general name of Renaissance, Delanty subsumes different and diverse cultural experiences such as humanism, republicanism, the Protestant Reformation and the encounter with the

* This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation under Grant Early Post Doc Mobility.

¹ Gerard Delanty, *Formations of European Modernity: A Historical and Political Sociology of Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 164.

² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

non-European world. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the Renaissance was completely excluded from the main narratives about modernity – or rather it was defined as a pre-modern and backward period, while the definition of modernity viewed the Reformation as the main historiographical paradigm. However, in Italy between 1848 and 1862 the main exponents of the philosophical movement known as Neapolitan Hegelianism³ were engaged in the definition of the Renaissance as the idea of modernity.⁴ The current literature has underestimated this interpretation of modernity and the consequent definition of the idea of Europe that the present study intends to analyse. This first discusses the widespread nineteenth-century historiographical thesis that viewed the Protestant Reformation as a key element of modernity, and it considers how this thesis affected

³ On Hegel's reception in Italy, see Lisa Herzog (ed.), *Hegel's Thought in Europe: Currents, Crosscurrents and Undercurrents* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), especially pp. 223-38; Angelica Nuzzo, 'An outline of Italian Hegelianism (1832-1998)', *The Owl of Minerva*, 29 (1998), pp. 165–205; Vincenzo Vitiello, *Hegel in Italia: Dalla Storia alla Logica* (Naples: Guerini e Associati, 2003); Eugenio Garin, 'La "fortuna" nella filosofia italiana', in Gaetano Calabrò (ed.) *L'opera e l'eredità di Hegel* (Bari: Laterza, 1972); Sergio Landucci, 'L'hegelismo in Italia nell'età del Risorgimento', *Studi Storici* 6 (1965), pp. 597-628; Luigi Russo, *Francesco de Sanctis e la cultura napoletana* (Florence: Sansoni, 1959); Fulvio Tessitore, 'La filosofia di De Sanctis', in *Contributi alla storia e alla teoria dello storicismo* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1997), III, pp. 31-70; Guido Oldrini, *Il primo hegelismo italiano* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1969); Guido Oldrini, *La cultura filosofica napoletana dell'Ottocento* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1983), especially chapters 3 to 6, pp. 115-479.

⁴ On this topic, see the recent work of Pierre Girard, 'L'invention de la modernité à Naples', *Archives de Philosophie*, 80 (2017), pp. 405-16. On the topic of European modernity see the recent study by Bo Stråth and Peter Wagner, *European Modernity: A Global Approach (Europe's Legacy in the Modern World)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 79-146

Risorgimento intellectual elites. It then examines the different interpretations of the Renaissance in the same period to demonstrate that, within Neapolitan Hegelianism, the concept of the Renaissance had become an interpretive paradigm of modernity through which a specific idea of Europe was shaped. Finally, it focuses on the main advocates of this philosophical movement, Bertrando Spaventa (1817-1883) and Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883), who tried, in different ways, to define the *Italian path to modernity*, in the process proposing a new theoretical framework for understanding the idea of Europe.

1. Protestant Reformation and European modernity

The Italian historian Federico Chabod in his *Storia dell'idea d'Europa* claimed that: 'The concept of Europe must have first been formed as an antithesis to that which is not Europe [...] the first opposition between Europe and something that is not Europe is [...] Asia – opposed in habits and culture, but, mainly, in political organization: Europe represents the spirit of freedom, against Oriental despotism.'⁵ As Roberto Dainotto has recently pointed out, the Europe-versus-Orient paradigm might be overlooking an alternative genesis of modern Europe.⁶ Between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europe began to conceive a new logic of self-definition that rendered the extra-European 'other' superfluous. This new logic culminated in Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), in which the connection between modern freedom and Protestantism defined the antithesis of Europe as Europe's own south. Accordingly, the discussion over freedom (Europe) and despotism (Asia) was translated into a modern rhetoric of north and south. The defining paradigm of modernity was long influenced by Hegel's interpretation of the Reformation. Many nineteenth-century philosophies of history underlined the decisive role of

⁵ Federico Chabod, *Storia dell'idea d'Europa* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2007), p. 23.

⁶ Roberto M. Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), especially chapters 2 to 4, pp. 52-171.

Protestantism in the origins of modernity, with an implied evaluation of Catholicism as a retrograde factor, and they proposed an interpretative framework that would prove to be long lasting.⁷ Indeed, European historiography was conditioned by a description of Catholic countries as backward on account of their historical development, and the subordinate and peripheral position of the southern regions, which were portrayed as a kind of ‘internal Orient’ of Europe, was assumed.

The fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century marked the origin of the modern world. The Age of Discovery, the Renaissance and the Reformation ‘immediately spring to mind when one thinks of those decisive years’.⁸ However, by the middle of the nineteenth century Hegel’s philosophy of history had firmly established in many intellectual circles the notion that the Protestant Reformation was the main characteristic of modernity. The three driving forces of modernity – discovery, Renaissance and Reformation – ‘changed and the first two terms fade into subordinate positions, while the third is brilliantly elevated to become the central interpretative category’.⁹ The narrative about ‘Protestant supremacy’ would prove to be one of the more enduring cultural legacies of the nineteenth century. Moreover, recent literature has shown that Hegel was simply voicing a

⁷ On the interpretation of the Renaissance in Germany, see the recent work of Martin A. Ruehl, *The Italian Renaissance in the German Historical Imagination (1860-1930)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). On discussions about modernity in Italy see the recent study by Rosario Forlenza and Bjørn Thomassen, *Italian Modernities: Competing Narratives of Nationhood* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), pp. 1-55

⁸ Javier Fernández Sebastián, ‘A distorting mirror: The sixteenth century in the historical imagination of the first Hispanic liberals’, *History of European Ideas*, 41 (2014), p. 167.

⁹ Michael Iarocci, *Properties of Modernity: Romantic Spain, Modern Europe and the Legacies of Empire* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), p. 11.

commonly held contemporary idea.¹⁰ Underlying this idea was the exclusion of Catholic countries from the ‘path to modernity’ and minimisation of the decisive role played by Italy, Spain and Portugal, respectively the main agents of the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery. The result was that Italy, as well as Spain and Portugal, became an ‘internal Orient’ and a non-European Europe.¹¹ Mainstream ideas of Europe were defined by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historiography through an ‘internal Orient’ within Europe, which was based mainly on the differences between religious beliefs: ‘Catholics would be condemned to a relatively backward and subordinate position in the race of civilisation. Genuine liberalism and true progress were of a purely Protestant stamp.’¹² Since Montesquieu’s classical definition, the idea of Europe as shaped by different religious beliefs in the

¹⁰ Michael Printy, ‘Protestantism and progress in the year XII: Charles Villers’ essay on the spirit and influence of Luther’s Reformation (1804)’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 9 (2012), pp. 303–29.

¹¹ The influence of this transnational paradigm of ‘Orientalism’ is also clear if we look to the creation of the ‘Southern Question’ within Italy itself. On this topic, see Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), especially section 2, pp. 85-185; Silvana Patriarca, *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jane Schneider (ed.), *Italy’s ‘Southern Question’: Orientalism in One Country* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998); Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg (eds), *Making and Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity Around the Risorgimento* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2001), especially parts 1 and 2, pp. 27-200; Manuel Borutta, ‘Anti-Catholicism and the Culture War in Risorgimento Italy’, in Silvana Patriarca and Lucy Riall (eds), *The Risorgimento Revisited: Nationalism and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Antonino De Francesco, *La palla al piede: Una storia del pregiudizio antimeridionale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2012).

¹² Sebastián, ‘A distorting mirror’, p. 173.

north and the south has often been associated with a sort of climatological assumption connecting a country's positive laws to its physical geography:

In Europe there is a kind of balance between the southern and the northern nations. The first have every riches of life, and few wants: the second have many wants and few riches. To one Nature has given much, and demands little; to the other she has given but little, and demands a lot. The equilibrium is maintained by the laziness of the southern nations and by the industry and activity which Nature has given to those in the north. [...] This has naturalized slavery for the people of the south.¹³

In Montesquieu's works especially, the climatological narrative is intertwined with the notion of the 'Protestant supremacy'. As he argued in *De l'esprit des lois*, 'the people of the north embraced the Protestant [religion]' because of their 'spirit of liberty and independence', something which Catholic southern countries renounced.¹⁴ So, the narratives about the definition of European modernity and the shaping of the idea of European freedom, progress and civilisation both implied an internal 'other', namely southern Europe.

The nineteenth-century reflection upon the roots of modernity presents some peculiarities in the Italian case. In part, it was a consequence of Italy being the centre of the Catholic Church's political power, making the country the target of Protestant criticism. The idea of Italian backwardness and moral weakness became widespread throughout Britain, Germany, France and

¹³ Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, in *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949-51), II, p. 603.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 718.

Switzerland.¹⁵ Interestingly, however, this view was also shared by a significant sector of the Italian intellectual elite, who saw the absence of an Italian Protestant Reformation as the cause of Italy's lack of political liberty and its moral decadence. Modern scholarship is attentive to the ways in which this contributed to the creation of national stereotypes and their influence on the definition of the Italian 'national character'.¹⁶ However, much less attention has been paid to how this view influenced the Italian intellectual elite and – more importantly – their idea of Europe. As Nelson Moe has stated, the Italians realised that 'Italy was a Southern country in a century when the superiority of "the North" was virtually beyond dispute'.¹⁷ The assumption that the Protestant Reformation was the key event of modernity shaping an idea of Europe was based on the opposition to an 'otherness' – that is, the European South. This 'other' was backward – implying a line of progress in the rise of civilisation – lazy, spendthrift and slave to the pleasures of life – implying a reluctance to work hard that was often connected to the warm climate – superstitious, ignorant and inclined to slavery and authoritative power – implying that Catholic morality and education led to an atavistic absence of civic consciousness which prevented Catholic countries from following the path to modernity and, consequently, belonging to the modern Europe.

¹⁵ See, for example, Danilo Raponi, *Religion and Politics in the Risorgimento: Britain and the New Italy (1861-1875)* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Robert Casillo, *The Empire of Stereotypes: Germaine de Staël and the Idea of Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁶ Casillo, *Empire of Stereotypes*; Patriarca, *Italian Vices*, passim; Silvana Patriarca, 'A patriotic emotion: Shame and the Risorgimento', in Patriarca and Riall (eds), *Risorgimento Revisited*.

¹⁷ Moe, *View from Vesuvius*, p. 2.

2. Renaissance in the Risorgimento: a transnational perspective

The idea that modernity coincided with the Protestant Reformation was very appealing to Italian liberals during the Risorgimento, so much so that some of them even converted to Protestantism.¹⁸ On the other hand, conservative intellectuals, such as Vincenzo Gioberti, affirmed the moral superiority of Catholic civilisation and Italy's cultural primacy (*Primato*).¹⁹ However, there was widespread historiographical enthusiasm regarding the Protestant Reformation. Conversely, the Renaissance was considered as a pre-modern cultural movement due to the lack of political liberty in Italy and the absence of the Reformation. To understand the relationship between the definition of Renaissance and the concept of modernity that shaped the idea of Europe during the Risorgimento, it is essential to describe it in a transnational perspective and especially within the framework of Hegel's reception in Italy.²⁰ As Axel Körner has commented: '[W]hat the new cultural and intellectual history of the Risorgimento has shown is that ideas are not passively received but translated into a new

¹⁸ On this topic, see Giorgio Spini, *Risorgimento e protestanti* (Turin: Il Saggiatore, 1989); on the relationships between liberty and religion in the Risorgimento, see Maurizio Viroli, *As If God Existed: Religion and Liberty in the History of Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Vincenzo Gioberti, *Del primato morale e civile degli italiani* (Brussels, 1843); Vincenzo Gioberti, *Del rinnovamento civile d'Italia*, III, 1851.

²⁰ See, for example, Maurizio Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Maurizio Isabella, 'Nationality before liberty? Risorgimento political thought in transnational context', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 17 (2012), pp. 507–15; Raponi, *Religion and Politics*; Axel Körner, *Politics of Culture in Liberal Italy: From Unification to Fascism* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007); Lucy Riall, 'Travel, migration, exile: Garibaldi's global fame', *Modern Italy* 19 (2014), pp. 41–52; Lucy Riall and Oliver Janz, 'The Italian Risorgimento: Transnational perspectives. Introduction', *Modern Italy* 19 (2014).

context, where the final product often bears little similarity to the original'.²¹ The peculiarity of the interpretation of Italian Renaissance has to be understood within the broader transnational context.

Within the Protestant cultural milieu, there was a notable and widespread negative understanding of the Italian Renaissance. This was partly due to the lack of a Protestant Reformation in Italy. In particular, Hegel argued that the birth of the modern spirit was represented by the Reformation, which was the 'old and continually preserved inwardness of the German people'.²² He maintained that the philosophers of the Italian Renaissance, such as Giordano Bruno and Giulio Cesare Vanini, belonged to the Middle Ages, and he regarded the Renaissance as a period of dissolution and moral weakness. Even French interpreters judged the Italian Renaissance unenthusiastically. For example, the eclectic François Guizot maintained that Italy, like the other Catholic countries, could not have known modernity and progress because of the absence of the Protestant Reformation and its liberating consequences.²³ The Genevan Jean-Charles-Léonard Simon de Sismondi traced the origins of the Renaissance to the life of the Italian *comuni*, the breeding ground of individual virtues. However, he also argued that those virtues did not take root in the Italian nation because of the absence of the Reformation.²⁴

Just as nineteenth-century European culture considered the Renaissance as a pre-modern cultural movement, so most Italian intellectuals of the nineteenth century also had a negative

²¹ Axel Körner, *America in Italy: The United States in the Political Thought and Imagination of the Risorgimento, 1763-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 24.

²² G. W. F. Hegel, 'Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte', in Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: 1949), XI, p. 524.

²³ François Guizot, *Cours d'histoire moderne: histoire générale de la civilisation en Europe depuis la chute de l'empire romain jusqu'à la révolution française* (Paris: Pichon et Didier, 1828).

²⁴ Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde Sismondi, *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge* (Furne et ce, 1840).

understanding of the period due to the lack of political liberty and the absence of unity and independent nationhood. For instance, one of the most important political leaders of the Risorgimento, Cesare Balbo, interpreted the Renaissance negatively because of the absence of political liberty and the continuous foreign invasions.²⁵ The most influential philosopher of the Risorgimento, Gioberti, criticised the Renaissance from the perspective of his Catholic morality and he offered justification of the Church's persecution of promiscuity. Of course, he was persuaded that these problems were aggravated by the absence of national unity and independence. Italian conservatives did not consider the Renaissance as modern, nor as a period of cultural brightness, highlighting the Italian right to participate to the development of modern Europe without renouncing its Catholic roots. It is interesting to note that democratic and progressive groups took a similar view. The patriot and political leader, Giuseppe Mazzini, maintained that from a moral, political and civic perspective the Renaissance had to be considered 'infertile' for Italy because of the absence of political liberty, while the Reformation was contrasted as an 'advantageous renovation'.²⁶ The republican Giuseppe Ferrari also highlighted the issue of political division and foreign invasions, and he criticised an epoch which was focused only on the arts and the aesthetic life.²⁷ These conceptions of modernity reinforced the perception of boundaries between a modern and civilised northern Europe and a backward and barbaric southern Europe, and they contributed to the idea of a fractured Europe that was based on a dichotomy between centre and periphery.

In contrast to the other patriots and intellectuals of the Risorgimento, however, a positive meaning of the Renaissance was elaborated by the Neapolitan Hegelians. The main advocates of this

²⁵ Cesare Balbo, *Della storia d'Italia dalle origini fino ai nostri tempi: Sommario*, edited by Giuseppe Talamo (Milan: Giuffr , 1962).

²⁶ Giuseppe Mazzini, *Scritti editi ed inediti* (Imola: Galeati, 1906).

²⁷ Giuseppe Ferrari, *La mente di Gianbattista Vico* (Milan: Societ  tipografica dei classici italiani, 1854).

cultural movement, despite all their differences, conceived of the Renaissance as embodying the idea of modernity rather than as a cultural epoch, as defined by Burckhardt's milestone *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860).²⁸ The Hegelians insisted on the philosophical meaning of the Renaissance as the affirmation of the immanence of the divine nature in human nature, of the dignity and sanctity of the individual, and of the autonomy of consciousness from any moral and political authority. This specific definition of the Renaissance represented the individual assertion of autonomy from the state and any other political or religious power. It defined a concept of modernity that enabled some of the principles shaping the notion of a modern Europe to be sought in Italian history, and it offered an alternative to the dominant narrative of the 'Protestant supremacy'. The Neapolitan Hegelian presentation of the Renaissance as marking the onset of modernity has to be understood both within the broader transnational debate on the origins of modernity as a reflection on the European heritage and with reference to Hegel's reception in Italy.

3. An alternative to Burckhardt's Renaissance

The political context of the Risorgimento is crucial to understanding the idea both of the Renaissance and of Europe elaborated by Neapolitan Hegelians. Traditional scholarly interpretations of the Renaissance have, however, overlooked the politically oriented passions of Risorgimento intellectuals.²⁹ Scholars have assumed that those passions prevented the intellectuals from

²⁸ Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (Basel, 1860). The first Italian translation, by Domenico Valbusa, was published in 1876.

²⁹ Benedetto Croce, 'La crisi italiana del Cinquecento e il legame del Rinascimento col Risorgimento', in *Poeti e scrittori del Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1939), I, pp. 1–16; Federico Chabod, 'Gli studi di storia del Rinascimento', in Carlo Antoni and Raffaele Mattioli (eds), *Cinquant'anni di vita intellettuale italiana, 1896-1946* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1950); Carlo Dionisotti, 'Rinascimento e Risorgimento: la questione morale', in Cesare Vasoli and August

understanding their own role in defining modernity. This article argues instead that the political context of the Risorgimento influenced Neapolitan Hegelians' interest in the idea of European modernity and their shaping of a narrative of modernity alternative both to that which asserted the 'Protestant supremacy' and to the well-known thesis of the Swiss historian, Jacob Burckhardt.

The literature, indeed, confirms that it was thanks to Jules Michelet's *Histoire de France* (1855) and, especially, to Burckhardt's book that the Renaissance became a key historiographical category for European historians.³⁰ Burckhardt's work is considered of crucial importance in modern studies on the Renaissance. Wallace Ferguson, in his monumental study *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, has gone as far as to claim that Burckhardt's thesis is the cornerstone of all ensuing historiographical interpretations of the Renaissance. Indeed, Ferguson argues that the Swiss scholar was the first to define the Renaissance as a distinct historical period and as a peculiar Italian experience. Ferguson maintains that Burckhardt's writing is a 'coherent synthesis' which unified the different interpretations that the latter identified as characteristic of 'modern progress': '[T]he growth of individual freedom of thought and expression, the full development of self-conscious personality, and the evolution of moral autonomy founded upon a high conception of the dignity of man'.³¹ Federico Chabod, in his *Gli studi di storia del Rinascimento*, also recognised the role of Burckhardt's book in

Buck (eds), *Il Rinascimento nell'Ottocento in Italia e Germania – Die Renaissance im 19. Jahrhundert in Italien und Deutschland* (Bologna and Berlin: Mulino and Duncker & Humbol, 1989); Delio Cantimori, 'Sulla storia del concetto di Rinascimento', *Gli Annali della R. Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* (1932), 3, pp. 229-68.

³⁰ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France au seizieme siecle: Renaissance* (Paris, 1855). On the history and influence of this book, see Lucien Febvre, 'Come Jules Michelet inventò il Rinascimento', in *Problemi di metodo storico* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976).

³¹ Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1948).

marking the separation between cultural and political history and in confirming the Renaissance as a ‘historical category’, a ‘specific period’ and an ‘organic block’ from the fourteenth century to the beginning of the sixteenth century.³² Chabod’s thesis was that during the nineteenth century the historiographical question of the Renaissance concerned the beginning of modern thought and aspects of modernity, such as the understanding of life and history, and the relationships between human beings, God and nature. The European dimension of the Renaissance went beyond its Italian connotation. The link between cultural and political history restricted the meaning of the Renaissance to the problem of Italy’s national emancipation. The Renaissance, like other historical categories such as Romanticism or the Enlightenment, became one of the crucial historical periods of European intellectual life and one of the concepts of modernity that shaped the idea of Europe. According to Chabod, Burckhardt’s work changed the Risorgimento approach to historiography by separating culture from politics.³³ The new historiography was used to evaluate the moral life of individuals and the patriotic virtues, such as *amor patrii*, and the love for liberty and independence.³⁴

Eugenio Garin has argued that Burckhardt’s study contributed to bestowing on the Renaissance a universal meaning, thereby separating it from previous movements of national regeneration.³⁵ The problem of the prejudice of nineteenth-century Italian historiography was underlined by Delio Cantimori, who highlighted the need to rethink the Renaissance.³⁶ Considering Burckhardt’s work as the linchpin of mainstream analysis of the Renaissance, Cantimori

³² Chabod, ‘Gli studi di storia del Rinascimento’, pp. 10–11.

³³ Federico Chabod, *L’idea di nazione* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2008).

³⁴ Chabod, ‘Gli studi di storia del Rinascimento’, *passim*.

³⁵ Eugenio Garin, *Il Rinascimento italiano* (Milan: ISPI, 1941).

³⁶ Cantimori, ‘Sulla storia del concetto di Rinascimento’, *passim*.

differentiated the approach of the Swiss historian from that of Hegel,³⁷ which was focused, instead, on the description of the development of the Renaissance.³⁸ Furthermore, Cantimori maintained that most nineteenth-century Italian interpretations were influenced by Burckhardt's history.³⁹ The notion that Risorgimento Italian historiography on the Renaissance was too passionate and devoid of historical objectivity was also shared by Croce,⁴⁰ who maintained that Italy's missed Reformation was the most essential cause of its sixteenth-century decadence.⁴¹ Furthermore, Croce stressed the importance of the moral and religious dimensions of the Renaissance and, above all, the fact that 'decadence' was caused by the absence of a moral ideal.⁴² He also noted that those patriots who interpreted the Renaissance as a failed religious and moral reformation had tried to accomplish that reformation through their political action.

The main goal of historians such as Croce, Cantimori, Chabod and Dionisotti was to interpret the Renaissance without the political passions of nineteenth-century patriots. Their approach prevented them from understanding the role that those nineteenth-century interpretations had on Italian political emancipation. Indeed, the Neapolitan Hegelians' interpretation of modernity must be considered not for its historiographical accuracy but for its political meaning. To understand the uses

³⁷ See Michele Biscione, *Neoumanesimo e Rinascimento: L'immagine del Rinascimento nella storia della cultura dell'Ottocento* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1962); Michele Biscione, 'Hegel e il Rinascimento', in Fulvio Tessitore (ed.), *Incidenza di Hegel* (Naples: Morano, 1970), pp. 437–51.

³⁸ Cantimori, 'Sulla storia del concetto di Rinascimento', *passim*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁴⁰ Croce, 'La crisi italiana', p. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

of the Renaissance in nineteenth-century Italian historical and political debates, it is useful to consider the peculiar connection between philosophy, history and politics that characterises ‘la vie publique de l’histoire’, the main feature of nineteenth-century Italian and European historiography.⁴³ Consideration of the political meaning of the what might be termed the ‘modern Renaissance’ helps to understand the idea of Europe developed by the Neapolitan Hegelians. In his recent study, *The Other Renaissance*, Rocco Rubini has described the importance of the idea of the Renaissance for Italian philosophy. Rubini has pointed out the central role that Neapolitan Hegelianism played in the reaction to the mid-nineteenth-century European perception ‘that Italy presented a twofold inferiority: it could not boast the civic and centralized infrastructure achievements of France or England, nor had it reached the universally acknowledged pinnacle that Germany, a country otherwise still struggling politically, had managed to achieve in the realm of thought’.⁴⁴ However, Rubini does not connect the concept of the modernity of the Renaissance to the shaping of the idea of Europe. On the contrary, re-thinking Neapolitan Hegelianism returns the understanding of the Renaissance to the theoretical framework of European modernity. The Renaissance, conceived as a crucial part of European cultural heritage, shapes one European discourse that aims to re-define the relationship between centre and periphery. Indeed, Italian patriots were not contesting such a dichotomy; rather, they were trying to integrate Italy in the European core.

4. The modern Renaissance of Bertrando Spaventa and Francesco De Sanctis

Despite the growing literature on the Risorgimento, recent studies have failed to recognise the influence that the interpretation of the Protestant Reformation, as the key event of modernity, had on

⁴³ Ernest Renan, ‘M. Augustin Thierry’, in *Essais de morale et de critique: Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1910), II, pp. 117–18.

⁴⁴ Rocco Rubini, *The Other Renaissance: Italian Humanism Between Hegel and Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 62.

the intellectual elite of the Risorgimento.⁴⁵ Such studies also failed to consider the way Neapolitan Hegelians raised the issue of Italy's imperfect modernity as part of their reflection on the idea of Europe and the origin of modern European culture. Indeed, in their writings emerged the transition from a philosophy of history, centred on the concept of 'civilisation' as historical progress – a widely accepted understanding of the notion in the early nineteenth century – to a philosophy of history that investigates the idea of modernity as a contradictory process emerging from the struggle of opposing forces. Recent scholarship on the Risorgimento has neglected Neapolitan Hegelianism, largely because of its essentially historical and political approach. However, there has also been a renewed interest in different European non-Marxist receptions of Hegel's philosophy.⁴⁶ During the nineteenth century, many Italian intellectuals discussed Hegel's ideas in relation to their concern of creating a new 'national' culture and philosophy in a still-divided Italian state.

What the Neapolitan Hegelians found so attractive in Hegel's philosophy of history were the notion of freedom as the liberation of humanity through the struggle between the spirit and the reality, and the idea of progress and the emancipation of nations. These ideas were particularly important for the Risorgimento intellectuals who found in Hegel's philosophy of history a certainty about the future

⁴⁵ See, for example, Alberto Mario Banti, *Risorgimento italiano* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2009); Alberto Mario Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento: Parentela, santità, onore alle origini dell'Italia unita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000); Gilles Pécout, *Il lungo Risorgimento: La nascita dell'Italia contemporanea (1770-1922)* (Milan-Turin: Mondadori, 2011); Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *L'effetto Pinocchio, Italia 1861-1922: La costruzione di una complessa modernità* (Rome: Elliot, 2011); Christopher Duggan, *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy since 1796* (London: Allen Lane, 2007); Lucy Riall, *Il Risorgimento: Storia e interpretazioni* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007); Lucio Villari, *Bella e perduta: l'Italia del Risorgimento* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2009); Derek Beales and Eugenio Biagini, *Il Risorgimento e l'unificazione dell'Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005).

⁴⁶ See Herzog (ed.), *Hegel's Thought*.

of Italian liberation. In its early stage, Neapolitan Hegelianism was open to the revolutionary potential of Hegel's philosophy. The dialectical philosophy of history helped them to imagine (despite Hegel's own caution) a future new age. Responding to Hegel's call for liberation, Italy would again be part of Europe.⁴⁷ Neapolitan Hegelianism played a significant role in shaping a national philosophy. It was a movement of young scholars who read, translated and interpreted Hegel's philosophy in Italy, and it flourished for approximately forty years, from about 1837 to 1876.⁴⁸ The movement's main objective was to use Hegel's philosophy to support the struggle of Italian political emancipation by stressing the importance of the process of self-consciousness that modern freedom required. A key characteristic of the movement was that most of its scholars came from the Kingdom of Two Sicilies and they all studied Hegel's philosophy in Naples during the 1840s. The two most relevant exponents in the development of Neapolitan Hegelianism were Bertrando Spaventa and Francesco De Sanctis.⁴⁹ The cultural context of Hegel's reception in Naples was described by Spaventa:

⁴⁷ See Nuzzo, 'Outline'.

⁴⁸ Landucci, 'L'hegelismo in Italia'.

⁴⁹ On the occasion of the bicentenary of the birth of both authors, several studies were published, including Toni Iermano, *Francesco De Sanctis: Scienza del vivente e politica della prassi* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2017); Paolo Orvieto, *De Sanctis* (Rome: Editore Salerno, 2015); Enza Biagini, Paolo Orvieto and Sandro Piazzese (eds), *Francesco De Sanctis (1817-2017)*, special issue of *Rivista di Letteratura Italiana*, 35 (2017); Francesca Rizzo, 'La costruzione della tradizione idealistica italiana', *Il Pensiero Italiano: Rivista di Studi Filosofici*, 1 (2017); Fernanda Gallo, 'Philosophical revolution and the shaping of European consciousness: Bertrando Spaventa's *La filosofia italiana nelle sue relazioni con la filosofia europea*', *Phenomenology and Mind*, 8 (2015), pp. 213–22.

In Naples, starting in 1843, the Hegelian idea penetrated the mind of the young cultivators of science, who, united fraternally, took to advocating it in speech and in writing as if moved by saintly love. Neither the early suspicions of the police, stirred by ignorance and religious hypocrisy, nor their threats and persecutions could dampen the faith of these daring defenders of intellectual independence. The numerous students that deserted the old universities gathered in the great capital city from all the corners of the kingdom; they rushed in throngs to heed the new word. It was an irresistible and universal urge driving towards a new and wonderful future, toward an organic unity of the different branches of human knowledge [...] it was a cult, an ideal religion, in which those young people demonstrated themselves worthy descendants of the miserable Bruno.⁵⁰

Spaventa was the first philosopher to challenge the Hegelian idea that Catholic countries were excluded from the process of European modernity. During the 1850s, while he was in exile in Turin for taking part in the revolution of 1848 in Naples, Spaventa began his study of the philosophers of the Renaissance.⁵¹ He maintained that the new idea of freedom emerging from the works of Giordano Bruno had deeper consequences in Italy than had the Reformation in northern Europe, since Bruno's thought was not only a religious but also a philosophical and political reformation. Indeed, Spaventa contended that Bruno's idea of Christianity, as the union of infinite divine nature and finite human nature, implied that every human being had an inestimable value and dignity and that no authority

⁵⁰ Silvio Spaventa, *Dal 1848 al 1861: Lettere, scritti, documenti*, ed. by Benedetto Croce (Bari: Laterza, 1923), p. 322.

⁵¹ For the last reconstruction of Spaventa's work on the Renaissance, see Bertrando Spaventa, *Scritti sul Rinascimento (1852-1872)*, ed. by Giuseppe Landolfi Petrone (Rome: Fabrizio Serra, 2011). For an overview of Spaventa's thought, see Fernanda Gallo, *Dalla patria allo Stato: Bertrando Spaventa, una biografia intellettuale* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2012).

could coerce the human conscience. Spaventa's objective was to demonstrate that what Luther achieved in Germany thanks to the Protestant Reformation was nothing less than what Bruno achieved in Italy with his idea of moral liberty. For Spaventa, Bruno's idea of freedom was even more radical than the Reformation's idea of moral freedom, and the Renaissance was to be regarded as the 'Italian version of the Protestant Reformation'. He also maintained that Italy's philosophical revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries affirmed the principles of God's immanence and of freedom of thought. In Spaventa's estimation, Bruno was the main architect of this revolution. Bruno's idea of moral freedom was based on the belief that human beings have a boundless value:

According to Bruno, the intimate consciousness is a sanctuary that no human authority can penetrate nor violate. In their consciousness, human beings can freely develop their nature, having as unique law their own certainty and as judgment their own approval. The human beings, in their interior life, have an infinite and absolute value.⁵²

The principle of modernity expressed by Bruno is the divine command: do not persecute people for their thoughts and their works, their ideas and their words; let people be the owners of their consciousness. Spaventa recognised the two principles of Bruno's philosophy – the autonomy of consciousness and the infinite value of human dignity – and made them the pillars of his understanding of modernity. These principles had been embodied by the Protestant Reformation and the Italian Renaissance, but whereas the former revolutionised the religious field alone, the latter, based on Bruno's idea of the autonomy of consciousness and free from religious and secular authorities, had other effects in the fields of politics and philosophy – such, at least, was Spaventa's reading.

⁵² Bertrando Spaventa, 'Principii della filosofia pratica di G. Bruno', in *Saggi di critica filosofica, politica e religiosa* (Naples: Scuola di Pitagora, 2008), p. 152.

Spaventa's study of Bruno were part of his broader study of the Renaissance. He considered the Renaissance to be not only the core of Italian modernity but also the key event of what Spaventa called 'the circulation of Italian and European thought'.⁵³ His view of the relationship between Italian and European philosophy was deeply transnational:

Italy opens the doors to modern civilization with a phalanx of heroes of thought. Pomponazzi, Telesio, Bruno, Vanini, Campanella, Cesalpino: all seem to be the sons of many nations. They serve more or less a prelude to all of the following courses of thought that constitute the period of philosophy from Descartes to Kant. If Bacon and Locke have their precursor in Telesio and Campanella, Descartes in Campanella, as well; Spinoza in Bruno, and in Bruno himself one finds a bit of the monadism of Leibniz. [...] Finally, Vico discovers the new science; he anticipates the problem of *knowledge*, calling for a *new metaphysics that proceeds on the basis of human idea* [...]. Vico is the true precursor of all Germany.⁵⁴

After Giambattista Vico, Italian thinkers were no longer the vanguard of European philosophy. The seeds of their thought would flourish in freer lands, such as Germany and Britain, and would exert an enormous influence on German idealism. Spaventa's theory of 'circulation' was based on the belief that the modern world might be understood and interpreted only by a truly European philosophy, that is a philosophy detached from national traditions. Spaventa traces the development of modern

⁵³ Bertrando Spaventa, *La filosofia italiana nelle sue relazioni con la filosofia europea* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003; first published in 1862). Parts of Spaventa's work were translated into English by Brian P. Copenhaver and Rebecca Copenhaver, *From Kant to Croce: Modern Philosophy in Italy 1800-1950* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2011).

⁵⁴ Spaventa, *La filosofia italiana*, p. 70.

philosophy through different caesurae (*stazioni*) that marked changes of direction. In his view, modern thought began in Italy during the Renaissance and continued with Vico's philosophy. Spaventa's theory stood in stark contrast to the neo-Guelfist idea of Italian primacy in its emphasis on the tight connection between Italian and European philosophy and its denunciation of contemporary Italian cultural marginality.⁵⁵ On the one hand, Spaventa claimed the specificities of Italian thought and its 'national character'; but, on the other hand, he highlighted how ideas and values belonging to the Italian Renaissance had taken root in other countries. According to Spaventa, the lack of freedom, political and religious repression, and cultural isolation were among the reasons why the history of Italian philosophy was marked by caesurae. In particular, he believed that, despite its isolation and marginality, Italian culture was inherently modern. The two pillars of thought that supported the Italian Renaissance and shaped the modern conscience were the same as those of modern European philosophy: God's immanence and the autonomy of human thought.

In a different way to Spaventa, the Hegelian Francesco De Sanctis also highlighted, as did many other intellectuals at the time, the 'splendid moral decadence', arising from Italian corruption (*corruzione*), that characterised the Renaissance. This was regarded as the cause of the fall of the Italian free republics, and it persisted in preventing the Italian people from gaining political liberty. In his concern to reform the Italian character, De Sanctis was strongly influenced by a sort of 'Luther-centric approach'. This concern was tied to the attempt to understand why there had been no Reformation in Italy. Intellectuals gave an almost unanimous answer. As Cantimori has noted, they

⁵⁵ The idea of 'primacy', strongly supported by Vincenzo Gioberti (see Gioberti, *Del primato morale e civile degli italiani*), was the idea of an Italian philosophy which derives from a native antiquity, autonomous from foreign 'deviations'. On the debate on Italian primacy during the Risorgimento, see Antonino De Francesco, *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation: The Cultural Origins of a Political Myth in Modern Italy, 1796-1943* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Paolo Casini, *L'antica sapienza italica: cronistoria di un mito* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998).

believed that Italy was weak, corrupt, and enslaved to the cult of the form; consequently, a moral and intellectual reformation could not take root.⁵⁶ In his *L'uomo di Guicciardini*, De Sanctis explained the uniformity of judgment among intellectuals, who argued that the cause of Italian decadence during the Renaissance was connected to religious factors.⁵⁷ Much like Spaventa, De Sanctis had in mind Hegel's interpretation that the origins of modernity lay in the Protestant Reformation. He also tried to re-evaluate the Italian role in modern history by casting Machiavelli as the Italian Luther: 'Italy couldn't have the Reformation, but with regard to freedom of consciousness and the participation in the foundation of the modern age, it had Machiavelli'.⁵⁸ For De Sanctis, Machiavelli had been the source of a moral and intellectual renewal. Unlike Spaventa, he did not identify the philosophical principle of moral liberty with the main characteristics of Italian sixteenth-century philosophy. Although he rescued some of the characters of the Renaissance, including Machiavelli and Ludovico Ariosto, he considered that period as a moment of 'splendid moral decadence'. This was because of the absence of religious and moral reformation. In this respect, De Sanctis was closer than Spaventa to the Hegelian scheme and to the European historiography of his day.

The crucial element shared by De Sanctis and Spaventa in their interpretation of the Renaissance is their definition of modernity. This was shaped, on the one hand, by Hegel's philosophy of history, and, on the other, by its 'Italian version'. In their definition of modernity, De Sanctis and Spaventa sought in Italian political and scientific thought the same philosophical principle, that is, the unity of divine and human nature, infinite and finite, spirit and form. Both philosophers made

⁵⁶ Delio Cantimori, 'De Sanctis e il "Rinascimento"', in *Studi di storia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1959), p. 323.

On De Sanctis' interpretation of the Renaissance, see Emma Giammattei, 'Idea e figura del Rinascimento fra De Sanctis e Carducci', *Intersezioni*, 35 (2015), pp. 35–61; Orvieto, *De Sanctis*.

⁵⁷ Francesco De Sanctis, *L'uomo di Guicciardini*, in *Opere: L'arte, la scienza e la vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972), pp. 93–117.

⁵⁸ Cantimori, 'De Sanctis', p. 325

Hegel's philosophy of history the linchpin of their own theories. However, while Spaventa focused on Bruno as the central character of modernity, De Sanctis conferred that role on Machiavelli, the most representative figure of the Italian republican tradition. This important difference between the two Hegelians partly depended on De Sanctis' Swiss exile and the republican ethos he imbibed while in Zurich (1856-1860). It was during this transnational experience that De Sanctis focused on Machiavelli's republican thought and defined his concept of the modern Renaissance on the basis of republican values.⁵⁹ More importantly, De Sanctis saw in the Renaissance a sort of reformation that was scientific and philosophical rather than moral. He was adamant that, when corruption is ubiquitous, reformation can prepare a resurrection through science, thanks to individual and isolated thinkers who are usually persecuted but who firmly trust in their own thoughts. According to De Sanctis, Bruno, Campanella, Galileo, Giannone and Machiavelli are exemplars.⁶⁰ Whereas Spaventa maintained that the philosophical reformation was deeper and more important than the religious one, De Sanctis considered the latter to be more important. He also regarded the scientific and philosophical reformation of the sixteenth century as the beginning of a moral reformation which was still in the process of completion.

De Sanctis and Spaventa shared the same urge to rediscover the Italian character in order to reshape the Italian people and revive Italian thought by highlighting its originality and importance. Furthermore, they considered it their duty to reconnect Italy to its glorious past and to defeat Italian moral weariness. De Sanctis' analysis of the Renaissance was more complex and cannot be reduced to the idea of moral decadence. He considered some figures of that period, in particular Machiavelli,

⁵⁹ On De Sanctis' exile in Zurich, see Fernanda Gallo, 'Francesco De Sanctis interprete del Rinascimento', in Enza Biagini, Paolo Orvieto and Sandro Piazzese (eds), *Francesco De Sanctis (1817-2017)*, pp. 59-74.

⁶⁰ Francesco De Sanctis, 'Conferenze su Niccolò Machiavelli', in *Opere: L'arte, la scienza e la vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972), p. 48.

as the Italian source of modernity and as the instrument for defeating moral weariness. De Sanctis searched in the Italian Renaissance for both the source and the cure of moral weakness, which had been the main obstacle to Italy's political and moral freedom in the modern age up to the Risorgimento. Considering this ambivalence in De Sanctis' interpretation, one might note more similarities with Spaventa's understanding of the Renaissance. In fact, both insisted on the importance of rediscovering the concept of moral liberty in the Italian thinking of the Renaissance as a way of including Italy in the process of European modernity. The Hegelians aimed at asserting Italy's belonging to the European core, which involved challenging the widely accepted geographies of civilisation and intellectual borders that had shaped the idea of Europe.

Other Italian interpreters of Hegel's thought shared the notion of the Renaissance as the path to European modernity. Francesco Fiorentino (1834-1884) and Pasquale Villari (1827-1917) were also engaged in defining the modern nature of the Renaissance. Although Villari, like De Sanctis, saw the Renaissance as a period of splendid decadence, he was particularly fascinated by Girolamo Savonarola. Distinguishing Savonarola's ideas from those of Luther, Villari sought to highlight the importance of the reformation movements taking place within the Catholic world and to understand Italian visions of and discourses about modernity.⁶¹ Fiorentino's studies on the Renaissance are especially interesting for understanding the Neapolitan Hegelians' contribution to the definition of the 'Italian path to modernity'. Fiorentino's works were informed, like those of his mentor Spaventa, by a strong civic interest, whereby historiographical, political and philosophical concerns were intertwined.⁶² Significantly influenced by Spaventa's association of Renaissance philosophy with modern philosophy, Fiorentino regarded the study of the Renaissance as an exhortation to draw a 'path to modernity'. In Fiorentino's work on the Renaissance, a theoretical structure arose that

⁶¹ Pasquale Villari, *La storia di Girolamo Savonarola e de' suoi tempi* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1910).

⁶² See Francesco Fiorentino, 'Dedica al Cav. A. C. De Meis', in *Bernardino Telesio ossia studi storici sull'idea della natura nel Risorgimento italiano* (Naples: La Scuola di Pitagora, 2008), pp. 1–6.

combined Hegel's philosophy of history and Spaventa's thesis on the connection between the Renaissance and modern thought. Like Spaventa, Fiorentino identified Bruno as the central figure for the interpretation of the Renaissance.⁶³ Again like Spaventa, he maintained that the philosophical revolution of the Italian Renaissance was deeper than the Protestant Reformation, since the latter did not portray the liberating elements so crucial to sixteenth-century Italian thought.⁶⁴ In contrast to Spaventa, however, Fiorentino extended the chronological period of his analysis to the centuries before the sixteenth. He focused, with greater philological accuracy than Spaventa, on the authors of the Renaissance. Fiorentino's interest in Renaissance philosophy was a constant feature on his intellectual path, and in his most important works one might note that the common thread was the accurate and precise rediscovery of the Renaissance's philosophy.⁶⁵

5. Neapolitan Hegelianism and the idea of Europe

The appreciation of Renaissance thinking by the Neapolitan Hegelians was a cultural activity with an explicit political and patriotic purpose to define Italy's cultural identity and the construction of the Italian path to modernity. On the one hand, Spaventa and Fiorentino considered the Counter-Reformation as the main cause of Italy's moral decadence and the Catholic Church as the first enemy of Italian political and moral freedom. This meant that the Renaissance had been a triumphal moment in Italian history, marked by the philosophical rediscovery of the value of individual and of human dignity that was the sign of Italy's modernity. Indeed, for these authors, the Renaissance was Italian modernity – but it was a modernity that had been viciously arrested by force, fire and prison. The

⁶³ Francesco Fiorentino, *Il panteismo di Giordano Bruno* (Naples: La Scuola di Pitagora, 2008).

⁶⁴ On this topic, see Delio Cantimori, *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento-Prospettive di storia ereticale italiana del Cinquecento*, ed. by Adriano Prosperi (Turin: Einaudi, 2009).

⁶⁵ Francesco Fiorentino, *Pietro Pomponazzi: Studi storici sulla scuola bolognese e padovana del secolo XVI* (Naples: La Scuola di Pitagora, 2008).

hero of that age had been, without doubt, Giordano Bruno. On the other hand, De Sanctis and Villari proposed a different understanding of the Renaissance as the locus of Italy's moral decadence. De Sanctis saw in the Renaissance the beginning of modernity, defining it as a renewal (*Rinnovamento*). This meant that some aspects of the Italian modern spirit were manifest in the theories of some of its greatest minds. These ignited that process of moral autonomy and modernisation which, according to De Sanctis, should have been accomplished by the Italian unification. However, De Sanctis also considered the Renaissance to have been an age of decadence, the result of Italy's constitutive moral weakness, and he believed this decadence had been amplified by the absence of a Protestant Reformation in Italy. For De Sanctis, the brightness of artistic and cultural form in the Renaissance contrasted with the period's emptiness and obscurity of the inner life. Villari also viewed the Renaissance as a period of decadence because of the absence of a religious reformation, even though he praised the efforts and works of a handful of cultural and intellectual innovators from the period. From his perspective, the main problem of the Renaissance was the unstable balance between the 'emptiness of the heart' and the 'activity of the mind'. For both De Sanctis and Villari, the figure who most represented the complexity of the age was Niccolò Machiavelli.

As a whole, the Neapolitan Hegelians tried to challenge the widespread thesis of the 'Protestant supremacy', which implied a common anti-Catholicism and an 'intra-European Orientalism'. Their aim was to build a path to modernity for the Catholic countries.⁶⁶ When, in the nineteenth century, the European cultural model was consolidated, it did not consist of one coherent set of ideas. On the contrary, it comprised different orientations that shaped the European cultural imagination. The idea of modernity defined by the Neapolitan Hegelians was based on the main cultural achievement of the modern Renaissance. Here, when transcendence became immanent, the idea of human freedom and dignity finally emerged. The result was a new relationship with authority

⁶⁶ Yvonne Marie Werner and Jonas Harvard (eds), 'European anti-Catholicism in comparative and transnational perspective', *European Studies*, 31 (2013).

in the sciences and in politics. However, no specific religion could claim ownership of such a principle. Nor could the principle be tied to specific climatic conditions or institutional and political traditions. On the contrary, it belonged to the philosophical revolution of modernity, and to the ‘realm of the spirit’ – to use a Hegelian expression – that shaped the modern idea of Europe.

This remains a crucial question in current political debates, which repeatedly refer to the contrast between northern and southern European countries, a contrast that entails persisting ideas of northern economic development versus southern backwardness, and of northern political progress and civilisation versus southern inefficiency and corruption. This might be seen as a legacy of the ‘Protestant supremacy’ narrative, according to which the sixteenth century witnessed two diverging paths: one path led, in the Protestant north, to three centuries of progress and expanding liberty; the other path, in the Catholic south, led to three centuries of decline and despotism. The contrast could not be more glaring. The claim that the Reformation paved the way for modern notions of progress and freedom was for long a common assumption in nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiographical debates. This has occluded the fact that the dichotomy between the Catholic south and the Protestant north itself has a history. Revisiting and understanding the beginnings of that history and shedding light on the Neapolitan Hegelians’ alternative narrative is a step towards challenging the historiographical *topos* of the ‘Protestant supremacy’. The solution offered by the Neapolitan Hegelians to Italy’s moral, philosophical and political decadence was a European cultural and philosophical revolution. The role they assigned to philosophy, or, rather, to the ‘realm of the spirit’, indicates a possible path today: the reconsideration of the role of philosophy in the building of a European civic consciousness.