THE ITALIAN DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT: This pamphlet 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.

KEYWORDS: Biopolitics; Difference; Gramsci; Muraro; Postmodernity; Singularity; Tronti

When one says 'philosophy', one means that critical activity which allows one to grasp one's time and orientate oneself within it, creating a common destiny and witnessing the world for this purpose. If one defines it in this way, after Giovanni Gentile and perhaps a bit Benedetto Croce, there hasn't been any philosophy in Italy in the twentieth century. With a couple of important exceptions (three, to be more precise).

Before considering the exceptions, let us however look at the development of Italian philosophical thought as it was outlined in the twentieth century, as such and in the European context. The Italian nineteenth century was endowed with great philosophical personalities: Leopardi, Rosmini, De Sanctis, Labriola… However, these were personalities and almost never schools, because 'Italy did not have a centre', because, given its historico-political situation, communication was fragmented, which prevented the formation of a public space. Just as Hegel used to say that 'Germany doesn't have a metaphysics, it doesn't have a temple', so Leopardi's bitter statement denies the existence of an Italian public space—not a hegemonic centre, but simply the public nature of communication. As a consequence, that nineteenth-century flash of philosophical activity did not find any continuity in the twentieth century. Philosophy did not go beyond the Risorgimento. The ballast of universities, the pandemonium of fashions, the frivolity of the new media tools: all this asserted itself in the passage of the

century, creating and spreading dogmatic philosophical visions, sectarian gratifications or literary digressions. However, if Italy does not have a centre, Italian philosophy is not even provincial: it is just weak [*debole*], it has always been a weak philosophy, weak in the face of politics and bosses, dictators and popes.

In the twentieth-century decline of ideas and debates, the vilest point was perhaps reached when some, with a certain pride, proclaimed their thought and their definition of contemporary philosophy as 'weak'. Others named it more properly 'limp thought' [*pensiero molle*]. It looked like an attempt to acclimatize the postmodern beneath the lukewarm Italic sky: actually, it was a plan to flatten the richness of the articulations and surfaces of the real, the *dispositifs* and *agencements* of French poststructualist critique, onto the horizon of Heideggerian ontology. More deceitfully, it was a plan to repudiate the history of the insurgences and resistances that had accompanied the first construction from below of a public space in Italy, the first democratic construction after Fascism. After 1968, the power[1] of the struggles and of the new massification of political discourse needed to be delicately confined in a (far from delicate) renewed ontology of fascism. Weak thought translated into Italian a Foucault and a Deleuze dressed like game-show hostesses; it made them dance on the cultural pages of so-called 'Leftist' newspapers, especially *La Repubblica*… We received a special treatment: the new composition of labour, in its immaterial and intellectual figure, was presented to us as evasive, aleatory. Its creativity was mystified in the illusory figure of an 'end of history', which was supposed to mean the disappearance of wage-labour and the working class. The tragedy that accompanied the mutation of the industrial plan and the metamorphosis of labour-power was thus led back and closed into the inconsistent mess of a supposed defeat of communism and a presumed triumph of the '*Milano da bere*'.[2] Limp thought and the Craxi era go together: however, one should admit that Craxi's Proudhonism was by all means weightier and philosophically more relevant than Vattimo's and Ferrara's light thought.

From the Right, the ineffable cultural pages of conservatorism considered even limp thought too *risqué*: there the Mitteleuropean necrosophy of the Claudio Magris Co. ruled and continues to do so. For a long time, looking through *Il Corriere della Sera*'s cultural pages was like observing the malaise of a club of spinsters from Lower Saxony or, even worse, the unhappiness of a small community of Romanian Jews. In contrast to the uncontaminated flow and lightness of limp thought, the Danube presented itself as a viscid and heavy river. Too bad for the Danube, which really doesn't deserve this! Too bad, really: mourning that intelligence which did not manage to resist Nazism, could not in fact cancel (as the ambiguous mentors of Mitteleuropa so ardently wished) the force of the historical process, collective and not individual, communist and not liberal, which defeated it! Mitteleuropa is also resistance.

1. Unless otherwise specified, 'power' always translates '*potenza*'. [*Translator's note*]

2. In the early 1980s, *'Milano da bere'*—literally 'Milan to drink'—was the slogan of an advertising campaign for a popular liquor. Such slogan came to epitomize the mundane dimension of Milan as a city of fashion, media, and glamour. [*Translator's note*]

This was the shape of Italian philosophy between Right and Left until the Nineties, and even until the present day. Occasionally, after 1989, those cultural pages were flooded by the wave of reactionary apologists, of those historians (who do not have anything to do with Droysen or Braudel, despite boasting to be their heirs) who claimed that revisionism had a right to tell how things had really happened. Occasionally, the cultural pages were also criss-crossed by vague neo-transcedentalist tendencies. Habermas and Rawls were welcomed into our intellectual culture, since they showed that one could be a radical when young, but necessarily became a reactionary when old….

So why has Italian philosophical culture—together with the cultural pages that express it and the intellectuality that basks in it—duplicated the glitter of a Raffaella Carrà's variety show?[3] There's something wrong in this story, especially when one considers that this centre (that of limp philosophy, of the televisual and journalistic degeneration of cultural communication) has been the only centre that the *Bel Paese* has had since Fascism.

Stop. Let's move on to the exceptions: three, as we've said. The first one was Gramsci: the hunchback, the betrayer of Stalinism, the one whom the other political prisoners used to pelt with stones in jail. Gramsci re-established philosophy where it should have remained, in the life and struggles of ordinary people. He reinvented Gentile, attempting to turn actualism into the basis of a thinking and praxis of the future (in a rather far-fetched way, one has to admit). This was not an exhilarating adventure: a man of the Left, a communist who puts Gentile's philosophy back on track, partly remains a man of the nineteenth century… Gramsci was just such a man, and therefore represents the true continuity of the Risorgimento in twentieth-century Italy. Unfortunately, the non-philosophy of Togliatti's epigones (which is to say, the horrible cynicism that today has become hegemonic in the Left) and the exterminating voluptuousness of Stalinists (which expressed itself so well against movements in the 1970's and which is still out there, as frenzied as ever) have hidden and mystified even this poor revolutionary voice. Sorry, not just revolutionary, but lively, intelligent, generous; in the philosophy of life that opposes the ontology of death, there is always a certain creative aspect. This is precisely what they (the bosses, the power *élites*) do not want. The Gramscian exception has thus been reduced to an experience rooted in the past and perhaps only able to prefigure a utopian future: on the contrary, it was a break, it was resistance.

From the outset we've said that there are two other exceptions, two other fundamental breaks, not only in the continuity of the history of Italian philosophy between the nineteenth and twentieth century, but, at the same time, in the material texture of the intellectual life of Italian society, in its politico-linguistic structure. What are these two other exceptions? Do they allow us to say that this long period of time which prepared us for the year 2000 had a constructive, creative, and innovative aspect; that it represented

3. Raffaella Carrà is a popular Italian TV hostess. [*Translator's note*]

a power on which we can rely? Let's attempt to answer these questions.

The first exception that the Italian twentieth century witnessed, the first philosophical and political force able to plunge its hands into the real and again grab hold of the Risorgimento and the anti-capitalist powers of the origins—well, this exception was workerism, the work of Mario Tronti. In addition, there was another exception contemporary to workerism, almost hidden and yet which operated profoundly: this is the feminist thought of difference developed by Luisa Muraro. These are the two only elements of theoretical innovation in twentieth-century Italic ontology [*ontologia italica*]. Both move from the consideration of the fundamental forms of the constitution of exploitation, of man over man and of man over woman. Thus, there are two forms of exploitation: capitalist and patriarchal. Philosophical thought can only be born—and sustains itself in both these cases—when it focuses on the biopolitical theme of reproduction. We are thus at the centre of the postmodern figure of philosophical reflection. While Aristotelian being descends from the whole to individualities and then re-ascends from individualities to the One (by means of the modes of causation), the postmodern does not accept the 'upward path' or 'downward path' as genealogical and productive; it does not even accept individuality, but only the singular: it therefore considers *difference* as the creative *quid* that stretches between nature and history. Workerism and the feminism of difference were born in the 1960s from the opportunity opened by the enormous development of struggles; in these struggles, irreducible differences were posed, as new subjectivities were formed both in the workers' battle against waged labour and in the feminine insurrection against patriarchal domination. It was the discovery of these differences that determined the rebirth of philosophy. It is resistance that produces philosophy.

Having defined their shared birthplace, let's look at what these philosophies have in common. In the first place, these two positions fight against dialectics. There is no longer any possible recomposition or *Aufhebung*… 'Let's spit on Hegel', Carla Lonzi used to say. Let's break any narrative connection that doesn't know immediately how to develop class struggle, Alberto Asor Rosa added. While dialectical arrogance claims to lead everything back to the One, here everything is instead fixed upon the two and the multiple, and does not recompose itself.

Here, there is no longer anyone able to walk the absolute spirit like a dog on a leash, strolling along the avenues of history. There is no longer any teleology. There is no longer anything that, apart from ourselves, can straighten out the way things work.

The second common element that these two positions develop is the imposing phenomenology of difference, which they both seek to interpret. Consequently, for both, the practice that subverts the human condition is, in the first instance, pushed towards *separatism*. 'Working class without allies': the workerist slogan declaims. Women rebel against the bourgeois institutions of patriarchal domination: this is how the initial feminine awareness of difference is organized polemically.

It is important to insist on this first common move of the two philosophies that interest us: obviously, this common feature is completely indistinct and formal from the

standpoint of its contents (and it is no coincidence that these positions often clashed, each time patriarchal behaviours, induced by the wage-system itself, forced themselves arrogantly on proletarian families). However, this shared feature is no longer indistinct or formal when one considers that the process of separation, insisting on difference, will produce another deeper passage—a passage, an ontological turn that belongs to both these positions. A creative caesura.

But, some will cry out, these adventures of bodies and minds were well-known all over the world around 1968: why insist on the *Italian* specificity of these experiences?

An answer to this question can be given from two perspectives. A first unfolds from a cultural point of view. In the Italian desert, in this country that lacks a centre, unlike what happened in other NATO countries, the philosophies of difference developed in a purer form and did not need to express themselves through pre-existing paradigms. These movements constituted, so to speak, a real cultural and linguistic *epoché*. There was not much that could oppose them, except for the various modulations of the relationship of domination: the corporatist theories and practices of the industrial order, as well as the Catholic rules of good family life. It is therefore in the desert that these new and extremely strong flowers were born: it is in contrast to the deserted horizon, in the exotic, extremely potent prominence of their expression that the new forms of philosophical resistance and affirmation make themselves felt.

But there is another positive, constructive, and dynamic element that must be emphasized. For the first time, these philosophical 'differences' were unveiled in the biopolitical field (that is to say, they began to reveal the immediate political meaning of life itself). Now, this immediate biopolitical tension caused these differences to proliferate, to produce innovation. Over an exceedingly short period of time, Italy experienced the passage from the *separatist* affirmation of difference to its *constituent* affirmation. In fact, these diverse theories of difference did not simply represent a resistance to oppression and the oppressor; they were not entrenched in defensive positions, but became resistance that is productive; they showed that they were a manifold guerrilla movement. Here, there was no longer simply a theory, but a transformative practice. The practices embedded themselves in the junctures of social communication, threatened in micropolitical forms the major directives of capitalist and patriarchal command, carried out raids into knowledge and the universities, factories and workplaces, families and general social relations. Separation, understood from the standpoint of these two positions (which have never become theoretically blurred but have often been politically hybridized), turns into a *creative difference*. In Italy, this passage precedes those that, in different ways, will take place later elsewhere.

What is at issue here is really a caesura, a break, an ontological event. In this ubiquitous passage from separation to creative difference, from resistance to exodus, the movements and the consciousness of workers and/or women overcome the theme of the mere critique of the existent (a classical theme in the theories of organization of the modern era) and replace it with that of metamorphosis, of an inner and collective modification/

transformation, both singular and ethical, led in the multitudes and by them. It is an exodus from this existence and from all its rules. This event will characterize the twenty years after 1968, and will increasingly deepen the subversive power of movements.

Here we come to a point where we can answer the previous objection: how different and how much more powerful are these Italic theories and practices of the subversive proletariat and feminine difference from the philosophical conceptions and the communal practices that derive from (and establish themselves in) the post-structuralist conceptions of difference—constructed, for instance, in France between Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Deleuze, between *Socialisme ou barbarie* and Luce Irigaray? Certainly, there are numerous kinships, but kinship does not here mean in any way filiation, because even in the rare cases when these positions originated from French theories, they then went on to live and flourish in wild *milieux*. They are products of the jungle… Indeed, from the outset, when the conceptions of difference developed into separatism, they moved from an ontological *irreducible*, which is immediate, forged in struggles, constructed in continuity. On the other hand, French philosophy only arrives at this ontological irreducible (be it the 'body without organs' or the 'production of subjectivity') at the end of its journey. Moreover, when it was a matter of constructing new horizons starting from this newly discovered field, French philosophy, at best, voiced wishes, constructed some hypotheses, rather than producing experiences and laboratories of life, rather than initiating an exodus. In Italy, the biopolitical field of difference has been explored in all its ethico-practical intensity, and the gaze of these practices has been fixed on what is *to-come* [*a-venire*]. In repression and in darkness, in the moments of that absurd Calvary that the Seventies and Eighties represented for the movement, a new light was born.

The thought of creative difference was also asserted against the philosophies of post-modernity. That completed and insignificant world (subsumed by capital) in which post-modern philosophers move is a world that shifts any possible critical space towards the outside, to its margins. On the world's fold, or on its limit, or where *zoé* opposes *bios*: here are the *extramoenia* deserts from where perhaps, or solely, resistance is possible—this is what the philosophers of the postmodern believe. Now, the practices of difference have opposed and refused these constructions of the postmodern, anticipating a longing for reconstruction based on the very affirmation of difference. The fact is that *difference* is *resistance*. The difference that is set out here is then placed as a break at the centre of the system of subsumption of social labour under capital and, in the order of reproduction, against the universal validity of feminine obedience to patriarchy—a resistance that breaks this horizon of domination not from the margins but from the centre, or better, which reconstructs a centre, a point which one can use as a lever in order to transform reality at the very heart of the system. A creative difference, an intense and radical exodus.

While re-valorizing the Italian philosophical scene beyond the cultural pages and academia, these positions of difference have become the seed for a new philosophy at a

global level. As in the times of prophets, the philosopher needs to walk across the desert in order to express his thought. And again the prophet will not be listened to in his own country, but only outside it, yet, globally. In fact proletarian difference developed into intellectual power and opened onto a new social conception of labour and new forms of the production of value. Faced with this new reality, the structures of capitalist power [*potere*] had to be renewed; this is how the cataclysm in the global organization of power [*potere*] that we witness today originated. Beginning always from this proletarian difference, the new subject of the historical project of liberation constructs himself, as that multitude constituted by infinite singularities which will never again be subject to a sovereign command.

Yet again, it is feminine difference that is ultimately located at the centre of this radical modification of the philosophical horizon, because it has become a representation of biopolitical power and constitutes a real production of the social bond. There is, as it were, a second degree of creativity, what Spinoza identified in the advancing of the affective powers towards the creative condition of being, of corporeal *cupiditas* towards ontological *amor*, which is represented by feminine difference: we are dealing with a second degree of creativity that integrates and accomplishes the first difference, that of labour, expressing it as the original and general capacity for transformation possessed by bodies and the social whole. Genealogy includes and sublimates social labour.

Note that it is no longer Mario Tronti or Luisa Muraro who lead this revolution. Like all great authors, they have not bequeathed schools but rather lineages that operate on larger stages. The forms, modes, contents, and perspectives of difference left the world of seminars and workshops: they are in operation today and are developed and reinvented in the movements and the new social networks of productive cooperation. Difference has really stopped being separation: it has become creative and is beginning to produce the future. The exodus is hegemonic.

We can be proud that this happened in the Italian desert. Maybe now new resistance and new generations have their temple.

I am rereading my text. I have the impression of having given in, naïvely, to a certain *hubris*, of not wanting to take into account (as the *Angelus Novus* does) the horizon of destruction and death that still smolders behind us—perhaps, of not having thus accepted the sorrow that accompanies us no matter what. But is it really only a storm-wind that propels us? Conversely, doesn't the tragedy of our existence consist instead in subjective uncertainty and the risk of what is *to-come*? Doesn't the indubitable tragedy of our existing come somehow down to short-sightedness and unbearable fatigue in looking ahead, rather than to the feeling of defeat and the fierce incompletion that precedes us? Can't we oppose *cupiditas* to *hubris*? Deleuze once said: 'I hope to be the last thinker castrated by the history of philosophy'. I would like to paraphrase this: I want to be the last man castrated by the past, whose historical teleology I am incessantly the product of. But can the sense of difference and the event, together with the perception of the singularity that is constituting what is *to-come*, free me from the nightmare? This

doubt is no less strong than the classical, Cartesian, metaphysical one, whose violent rationalistic *dispositif* of modernity we have had to endure. The doubt of non-truth is in fact a nightmare, but nightmare is a variation of dream. Where are we when we dwell between nightmare and dream? Between past and future? How can we, against all pessimism of reason, oblige the *Angelus Novus* to look forward, to settle the debt that it has contracted with history, and to overcome the constriction of the past?

Let's return to our point. The difference that shows itself as creative is the passage that leads the nightmare back to the dream, and the dream to a project (which is fully aware of the difficulty and limitation) of life. If difference is resistance, the dream can live its historical projection in a fully aware and conscious manner. If difference is a mode of life, it identifies the mode of life as productive. No one here is putting critical and transcendental action into question: but we should pity it, comprehend it in the radical aporia that gives rise to it, and which does not allow it to take root in the only natural and temporal difference that counts: that of power. As a matter of fact, in the theory of creative difference there is something like an extremely strong return to an origin that is not burdened with nightmares and repressive violences. This is not an illusion but the very thing which is here at stake. Difference does not become creative when it identifies itself with an origin (burdened by the past), but when it confounds itself with a power that is always new, open onto what is *to-come*. Difference destroys every determinate ontological foundation because it is the creative determination of an ontology of freedom.

No, neither Husserl nor Gentile nor Bergson support us here. Rather, we are aided by that strange, hard positivity of the only existing thought that is consistently immanentist and materialist, the one that we have revisited here. In the Italian twentieth century, this took the names we mentioned above. We thus have a paradoxical difference that is capable of positively producing the whole, bit by bit. A difference that knows how to develop into a network and to move from inside to outside, from the singular to the common, without solution of continuity, and vice versa. That knows how to be *res gesta* (after having destroyed the damned *historia*). It is with great respect for the story of the *Angelus Novus* that we ask it—following the rhythm of the practice of difference—to look forward. 'Another' world is possible, just as another place (that of difference) was possible in our Italian province.

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