

Living thought and living things On Roberto Esposito's Il pensiero vivente

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ABSTRACT

The essay discusses Roberto Esposito's claim that Italian thought and the Italian tradition offer philosophy a way out of the dire situation it has fallen into as a consequence of the linguistic turn it took at the beginning of the 20th century. According to Esposito, Italian thought is animated by a genealogical vocation generating political, historical, and life paradigms that may revive philosophy's universal ambitions against its current linguistic relativism. The essay discusses this claim in light of the tension between ontology and history that Esposito himself raises. It concludes that the opportunities opened up by Italy's "genealogical vocation" should be supplemented by a philosophy of history that is currently lacking from Esposito's account.

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These are high times for Italian philosophy in the English-language world. Just in the last two years, we have seen the publication of three collections devoted to Italian thinkers: Silvia Benso and Brian Schroeder's *Contemporary Italian Philosophy. Crossing the Borders of Ethics, Politics, and Religion*¹, Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano's *The Italian Difference*², and Alessandro Carrera's *Italian Critical Theory*³, in addition to the inauguration of a new series on Italian philosophy from SUNY Press (with 5 volumes already published). The two previous decades had already seen a collection edited by

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1 S. Benso and B. Schroeder (eds.), *Contemporary Italian Philosophy. Crossing the Borders of Ethics, Politics, and Religion*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2007.

2 L. Chiesa and A. Toscano (eds.), *The Italian Difference Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*, Melbourne, re. press, 2009.

3 A. Carrera (ed.), *Italian Critical Theory*, Special Issue of *Annali d'Italianistica*, 2011.

Virno and Hardt in 1996⁴ and an earlier one by Giovanna Borradori in 1989⁵, plus a yearly journal solely devoted to Italian thought (*Differentia*). And then there are the “big three”: Gianni Vattimo, Antonio Negri, and Giorgio Agamben, three Italian philosophers whose work needs no introduction as it has entered the global intellectual exchange.

While these collections and monographs aim at introducing the variety of Italian theoretical positions to the English-speaking audience or at presenting relevant thematic analyses carried out by Italian philosophers, Roberto Esposito’s latest work has a more ambitious agenda. *Il pensiero vivente* provides, at the same time, an introduction to Italian thought, an explanation of its relevance in the contemporary theoretical landscape, and a chart of possible venues of inquiry opened up by contemporary and classic Italian philosophy. To accomplish this complex set of goals, different arguments and rhetorical strategies are required. The book emerges at the point of intersection of at least three different argumentative planes:

1. The interpretation of Italian’s philosophy recent success requires a global diagnosis of the problems currently afflicting Western philosophy at the beginning of the 21st century and a similarly broad assessment of how the general characteristics of Italian thought may help tackling them.
2. The overall, theoretical interpretation of Italian thought receives empirical support from a wide-ranging although compact interpretation of its main intellectual figures, from the 15th century to the present.
3. Finally, the Italian contribution to contemporary philosophy –first argued for theoretically and then historically demonstrated– is cashed out in a series of specific theoretical proposals and, to a lesser extent, in a number of open questions that were previously beyond the scope of contemporary philosophy.

Il pensiero vivente’s most original contributions lie in its first and third argumentative lines. The middle section –while providing “the best introduction to Italian cultural identity that a graduate student can find today” as Carrera notices⁶– covers six centuries of Italian intellectual history in slightly more than 150 pages. While full of provocative insights and intriguing suggestions, Esposito’s concise analyses of Machiavelli, Vico, Bruno, Cuoco, Leopardi, De Sanctis, Croce, Gentile, and Gramsci appears to be targeted at the lay (and also non-Italian) public and for this reason they are perhaps bound

4 P. Virno and M. Hardt (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minn., 1996.

5 G. Borradori (ed.), *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 1989.

6 A. Carrera (ed.), *Italian Critical Theory*, cit., p. 26.

to leave some specialists begging for more. I will focus on the beginning and the end of Esposito's book as well as on its structure. As it is always the case in genuine philosophical works, form and content are strictly tied.

Esposito's starting diagnosis is simple: contemporary Western philosophy, be it of the Continental or analytic variety, is in a state of crisis, because its subject matter is essentially linguistic. We see problems and issues always through the lenses of the concrete linguistic structures enveloping them. We discuss ethical and political issues, for instance, in the context of the concrete, situation-specific concepts proper to concrete historical situations; we argue metaphysical and epistemological issues in the contexts of the specific concepts that concrete disciplines have advanced, and so on. This so-called "linguistic turn" that, in many different ways, has utterly dominated Western philosophy since the beginning of the 20th century has, however, produced an aporetic conclusion: while linguistic structures are always localized and particular to a specific, historically given language, philosophy's vocation is universalistic. Philosophy is after truth, Hegel used to say, and truths that are historically (or linguistically) delimited are no truths at all. The consequence of this state of affairs, Esposito argues, is that philosophical reflection, threatened in its very condition of possibility, turns upon itself and spends most of its efforts trying to decide what philosophy is and what is not, how it can go about addressing its issues, and even whether there is any space for philosophy at all in the contemporary world:

Philosophy's present task seems to be the self-critical refutation of its hegemonic pretenses over a Reality that is always located beyond its reach. Hence, its necessarily negative tonality, both in the general and in the technical sense: philosophy can only affirm itself through its own negation. [...] It is as if philosophical experience—once it has subjected the possibility of thought, and therefore of action itself, to the transcendental nature of language—were to be continuously dragged into the entropic swirl it strives to escape from⁷.

On the contrary, Italian philosophy, according to Esposito, has always seen language in its necessary connection with the extra-linguistic world, first and foremost with "life's biological layer," but also in its connections to "history's mobile horizon" and to politics' conflictual mediations. Hence, it has always remained external to the linguistic turn. Moreover, and perhaps paradoxically,

⁷ R. Esposito, *Il pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*, Einaudi, Torino, p. 9.

Italian philosophy has preceded the Italian state, with the consequence that, forced to think politics in its pre-statal and sometimes anti-statal dimensions –it has remained the bearer of a potentially universal ideal. And finally, Italian philosophy, which never sought either a clean cut with past traditions as the preliminary gesture to a new intellectual and political order, or, conversely, the integral restoration of the past as antidote to change, is external to the most fundamental paradigm of modernity. Italian thought assumes the lack of any originary foundational ground and is therefore animated –Esposito states with one of the most felicitous expressions of the book– by a *genealogical vocation* that tends “to interrogate the present in light of its deep roots.” History’s fundamental lack of an origin makes the origin always potentially contemporary to any given historical moment. Consequently, it makes the origin an always actionable energetic resource, rather than “an oppressing ghost always ready to return”⁸. Within Italian philosophy, the three aforementioned constitutive aspects of the Italian difference give rise to three different developmental paradigms: the *political* paradigm focuses on the “immanentization of conflict”; the *historical* paradigm on the “historicization of the non-historical”; finally, the *life* paradigm concerns the “mondanization of the subject.”

Once this triple paradigm has been set out, Esposito begins to unfold it throughout the course of Italian intellectual history from the epoch of Humanism to the present day. We encounter here a slightly peculiar feature of the book: its insistence on the ternary theme. Every chapter (leaving aside the “Breaches” (or *Varchi*), on which I will say more later) is divided into three sections, and each section is divided into three subsections. Each section (and even each subsection, in the case of the the last chapter) corresponds to an Italian figure, for a total of 18 “main” figures. The rationale behind the association between the three paradigms uncovered in the first chapter and the triplets of authors that follow them is not, however, completely clear. As far as I can see, there are at least two possible interpretations, which I will call, respectively, the mono-dimensional and the bi-dimensional.

According to the mono-dimensional interpretation, the three fundamental paradigms of Italian thought are always present, in varying proportions and with different emphasis, within each Italian thinker. The historical succession, from Machiavelli to Esposito himself, thus represents a unitary development punctuated by historical figures who more or less violently breach the historical continuity thereby propelling the narrative forward (see Table 1).

8 Ibidem, p. 25.

Table 1. Mono-dimensional reading of *Il pensiero vivente* (abbreviated)

Chapter 1: The Italian difference <i>Politics, History, Life</i>	Breach I: The Vertigo of Humanism <i>Pico</i>	Chapter 2: Power of the Origin		Breach 2: Maelstrom of Battle <i>Leonardo</i>	Chapter 3: Philosophy/Life (beginning) ...	Chapter 5: The Return of Italian Philosophy (end)
		Machiavelli	Vico			

Table 2. Bi-dimensional reading of *Il pensiero vivente* (complete)

Chapter 1: The Italian difference <i>Politics: immanization of conflict</i>	Breach I: The Vertigo of Humanism	Chapter 2: Power of the Origin Machiavelli	Breach 2: Maelstrom of Battle	Chapter 3: Philosophy/Life Leopardi	Breach 3: Inferno	Chapter 4: Thinking in the act Gentile	Breach IV: The Unsustainable	Chapter 5: The Return of Italian Philosophy Tronti
History: historicization of the non-historical	<i>Pico</i>	Vico	<i>Leonardo</i>	Cuoco	<i>Beccaria / Dante</i>	Gramsci	<i>Pasolini</i>	Vattimo
Life: The non-danization of subjectivity		Bruno		De Sanctis		Croce		

According to the bi-dimensional interpretation, instead, each of the three paradigms corresponds to a particular historical unfolding that transverse the centuries and proceeds along more or less parallel lines (see Table 2 for a possible reconstruction of the bi-dimensional structure of the book). According to this interpretation, we would evince a political line with its origin in Machiavelli and reaching, through Leopardi and Gentile, the final triad of Tronti, Cacciari and Negri; a historical line with its origin in Vico and proceeding, through Cuoco and Gramsci, to Del Noce, Vattimo, and Agamben; and finally the line of “life” that begins with Bruno and continues through De Sanctis and Croce to end up with Esposito himself.

When it comes to ternary structures, readers of Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* –and Esposito is surely among them– cannot fail to pay close attention. Both Hegel and Esposito strive to reconstruct the development of philosophy (in Hegel’s case) or of Italian philosophy (in Esposito’s case) as the historical unfolding of a fundamental insight (or a set thereof). Both developments end –at least provisionally– with the illustration of the philosophical position that the author holds, which represents the most complete or at least the latest and most articulate development of the original insight(s). I am not saying that *Il pensiero vivente* shares Hegel’s conception of the history of philosophy, and even less that Esposito embraces Hegel’s characterization of philosophy as the trajectory of *Geist* coming to full self-awareness. Yet, I think the vast theoretical and historical fresco Esposito portrays still depends on a basic and very Hegelian premise that produces some significant consequences. Esposito argues that a fundamental contradiction exists between philosophy’s universal ideals and its self-reflective stance –its brooding contemporary mode. But this contradiction could, paradoxically, perhaps, be such in the very Hegelian sense of signaling a lack of correspondence between the ideal and the real, or between the ideal form of philosophy and its contemporary historically given form. At the root of this contradiction lies the linguistic turn, because “language,” the inescapable medium of philosophical reflection, its unavoidable boundary, and even its subject-matter, will “inevitably declare its own partiality –given its inescapable [*irrimediabile*] fragmentation in its dialects or in sentence groups [*famiglie di frasi*]”⁹.

A partial ambiguity here begs to be solved. Esposito focuses on “language,” in the singular, to explain the frustration of philosophy’s universal ambitions. Yet, it is actually the plurality of “languages” that prevents philosophy’s goals. No problems would arise if a singular human language existed, as many thinkers have envisioned and sometimes dreamed. It could

9 Ibidem, p. 8.

be a language of thought, a universal, innate and biologically constrained language, or even a hypothetical rational language we could all work toward. But *history*, as it produces a transition to a plurality of languages, shatters the dream of a perfect, singular language. History, or, in Esposito's terms, history channeling and structuring concrete *life*, "inescapably" breaks up any given language into particular, historically given language games or dialects. Why may the distinction between language and historically-produced languages be relevant? Briefly put, it is because the apparent contradiction between truth and history happens to be also the starting point of Hegel's system¹⁰.

This unfolding of the ambiguity helps, I think, to explain a peculiar character of *Il pensiero vivente*: while the first part of Esposito's argument hinges upon language as determining the crisis of contemporary philosophy, the second part declares that Italian philosophy escapes the problem because it aims at the "reconstruction of the relationship that [language] entertains with, on the one hand, the biological layer of life and, on the other, with the mobile order of history"¹¹. In my view, though, the linguistic pole of the language/history and language/life relationships is less developed than the opposite historical, biological, and eventually political poles. Surely, if the fundamental problem Esposito addresses –or, rather, the fundamental problem that Italian philosophy escapes– has to do with history rather than with language per se, then the greater roles played by history and non-history, by life and non-life, are easier to understand. Even more importantly, though, the focus on history as the seed of contemporary philosophical frustration reveals that *Il pensiero vivente* shares a fundamental problem with Hegel's *Lectures*, thereby committing it to a structurally similar solution.

The problem is the following: the intimate contradiction between philosophy and history is realized by philosophy's present inability to justify its past –in particular its past errors – and by its past inability to justify its present (i.e., itself). To put it differently: Hegel points out that philosophy, faced with historical partiality, can never have "universal" ambitions (or, in Hegel's language, be able to reach Truth, at least asymptotically), unless it produces an explanation of how past philosophical systems were mistaken and, most importantly, why the present position that sees them as errors is immune from the errors committed in the past. Philosophical critique, in other words, never happens in a vacuum: like the positions it criticizes, a philosophical critique is historically situated as well. It follows that philosophy must take into account the possibility of its own error and produce an adequate criterion

¹⁰ See S. Franchi, "Telos and Terminus: Hegel and the End of Philosophy", in *Idealistic Studies* 28, 1-2, 1998, pp. 35-46; P. Ricoeur, "L'histoire de la philosophie et la vérité", in *Histoire et vérité*, Seuil, Paris, 1955.

¹¹ R. Esposito, *Il pensiero vivente*, cit., p. 11.

of its own truth with respect to the philosophies that preceded and those that will follow it. Otherwise, Hegel notes in a passage of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*: “to philosophy we can apply the words of the Apostle Paul to Ananias: ‘See the feet of those who will carry thee out are already at the door’”¹². In other words, the contemporary philosopher announcing the errors of his predecessors will soon be found mistaken as history moves on. Hegel’s solution to the problem is well-known: his own thought is the last moment of a progressively increasing, yet intrinsically violent, self-manifestation of the spirit to itself that –as it moves toward its ultimate and most transparent form, absolute knowledge– produces the necessary and teleologically oriented development of philosophy. Hegel’s solution is here of interest less than the problem Hegel isolates and the explicit demand that the latter imposes on philosophical reflection. Hegel points our attention to the fact that philosophy can only reconcile itself with history if it provides an account of the *conditions of its own historical possibility*.

In general, a satisfactory treatment of such problem threefold: (a) it needs a diagnosis of the root cause of philosophy’s past errors; (b) it needs an alternative philosophical framework that corrects the errors; and (c) it needs a justification of how the present framework relates to past errors. Notice that this last part of the program provides, at the same time, a blueprint for the general structure of the relationship between philosophy and history and its criterion of validity. Suppose, for instance, that we determine the history of philosophy to be the necessary progression toward more and more inclusive systems. It follows that we can prove or disprove whether a philosophical system is the latest (and possibly the last) in the historical series by determining whether it includes all its predecessors or not. In other words: if increasing *comprehension* is the law of historical progression, then philosophical *comprehensiveness* is the established criterion of validity of a philosophical system. This example, however, relates only to the specific Hegelian solution. The structural point –which is what interests me here– is that the historical justification of a philosophical thesis must include a general statement about the relationship between philosophy and history *and* a validity criterion that is most often obtained through a self-reflective application of that statement to itself.

With respect to the threefold task mentioned above, I think Esposito’s book presents sustained analyses of (a) and (b), but it is incomplete with respect to (c). On the first point, it is perhaps worth repeating that *Il pensiero vivente*, while sharing Hegel’s conclusions about the contradiction between

12 G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Oxford UP, Oxford, 1985; *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. by Pierre Garniron und Peter, 1994.

philosophy and history rejects his solution to it. For this reason, Esposito's thought is a coherent form of anti-Hegelianism. To the argument that any post-Hegelian philosophy is either more or less Hegelian or anti-Hegelian, we could oppose the counter-argument that Hegel's paradox leaves open some options that would escape the Hegelian/anti-Hegelian paradigm. Hegel's allegiance to the universal (or universalizable, as Esposito adds) character of philosophical propositions is the feature that generates the paradox. Hence, rejecting such a premise would *ipso facto* amount to preventing the paradox from ever arising. The price to pay is high though: philosophy immediately comes to an end and is demoted to an epistemology of scientific knowledge (as the neo-Positivists claimed and much of contemporary analytic philosophy repeats), or to a form of literature that, at best, can provide comforting opinion in times of distress (as Rorty¹³ eventually held). On the contrary, Esposito's anti-Hegelian thought consistently leads him to a focus on history, and more particularly to the relationship between philosophy and history (in all its dimensions such as the origin (history proper) and *praxis* (i.e., politics as the historically situated theoretical organization of life)).

The second part of the needed threefold account (referred above as (b)) needs more careful consideration. One may wonder if there is a general philosophical thesis that –similarly to the Hegelian thesis of *Geist*'s progressive self-manifestation throughout history– may tie together the basic theses the book skillfully and intriguingly weaves together, from the “genealogical vocation” to the “historicization of the non-historical,” and from the “mondanization of the subject” to the “immanentization of antagonism.” The answer is yes. Let me start from a linguistic cue. The most salient word in *Il pensiero vivente* may be the Italian term “sporgenza.” It is not a philosophical term –it comes from the architectural lexicon and it denotes any part of a building that “protrudes” or “juts out” from the main construction body. The Italian term is commonly used as a noun, but Esposito often deploys it in the more pregnant and old-fashioned verbal sense: the “sporgenza” would then be the “condition of being protruded,” or the “being juttet out” as the result of a previous act. See, for instance, the passage at p. 87, where Esposito, speaking of Leonardo's paintings, writes:

questa sovrapposizione di pittura e idea [...] non è mai perfetta, non perviene mai ad un'assoluta integrazione, anzi determina sempre una sorta di *sporgenza* dell'una nei confronti dell'altra [this superposition between painting and idea is never perfect, it never

13 R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1981; “The World Well Lost”, in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, Miss., 1982, pp. 3-18.

comes to an absolute integration. On the contrary, it always determines a sort of mutual protrusion].

As the the text that follows makes clear, we must hear the verb lurking behind the noun in order to really grasp Esposito's meaning. In Italian, "sporgenza" is a noun closely connected to the present participle "sporgente" or "being protruded," which, in turns, calls back to the substantivized infinitive "lo sporgere," "the protruding." We must listen to this last verbal value, because only a verb would make us immediately think of a corresponding act and therefore of the *process* that the act initiates or is a part of. The next sentence makes this clear: "it is as if painting and idea –in their parallel processes– [...] were to come to a point of attrition *that would always push one in front the other*, thus leading the author to interrupt his work or derailing the work itself in a different direction than originally intended" (my emph. throughout)¹⁴. The three paradigms of Italian philosophy are all instances of this "jutting out" that produces an unavoidable remainder: the non-historical, the antagonist, and the non-subjective are all protrusions from the main philosophical body as it unfolds in historical time. At a higher logical and ontological level, the historical progression *itself* encounters its own "sporgenze": this is the role of the "breaches" [*varchi*] that punctuate history and, in Esposito's reconstruction of the development of Italian philosophy, mark the passage from one era to the next. Leonardo's depiction of the uncertain knight/horse boundary in the "Battle of Anghiari," for instance, opens up a breach in Humanist and post-Humanist thought by prefiguring "the formation of a heterodox anthropo-zoological culture at odds with the spiritualistic line that, from the theologizing neo-Platonic Humanism up to the Heidegger's alleged anti-Humanism, seeks humans' divine traits in the ontological distance that separates them from animals"¹⁵. Similarly, Pasolini's work breaks up violently the identification between history and life that both Gentile and Gramsci had postulated. Pasolini's last and truly unendurable movie –*Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*– stages the ultimate meaninglessness of history and its subjects, the absurd and horrific mystery of life's absolute arbitrariness, the disappearance of any difference between victims and torturers and the mutual contamination of their acts. Pasolini's experience of the "unendurable" thus closes off the previous development of the history/life relationship while protruding toward a future that will put at its center the reflection upon the groundlessness of power. Esposito extends the

14 "[...] come se, nel loro procedere parallelo [...] pittura e idea pervenissero ad un punto di attrito tale da spingere l'una sempre più avanti dell'altra, portando l'autore ad interrompere l'opera o a farla deragliare in una direzione diversa dal progetto originario".

15 R. Esposito, *Il pensiero vivente*, cit., p. 95.

importance of such historical breaches to all linguistic break-through events that punctuate philosophical and scientific development, by advancing the thesis that “all languages cannot progress beyond a determinate threshold –thus solving otherwise unsolvable problems– unless they proceeds through a breach [*varco*] produced by the graft of a different lexicon upon them”¹⁶. The historical *varchi* whereby epochs transition and disciplines morph are, in fact, trans-historical “sporgenze”: they constitute the excess of the historical process itself. This proposition about the generalized necessity of historical breaches suggests that the thesis about the necessary “sporgenze” has an almost transcendental status, They are the true cipher of the overall historical process, as Esposito appears to confirm when he states, at the very end of *Il pensiero vivente*:

The *essential issue* can be recognized in the tangent between ontology and history and in the *tension between them*. Our life does not lend itself to an absolute historicization or to an absolute naturalization [while being partially historicizable and partially naturalizable]¹⁷.

The protrusions dotting the relationships between philosophy and life, history and non history and so on, as well as the breaches that punctuate the book are all results of the constant tension between ontology and history meeting each other on a tangential line.

I come to the final issue, which I referred above as point (c). Where should we locate that “tangential line” and from which vantage point are we able to observe it? We need to determine the status of this thesis from the point of view of its own justification. Is it a Kantian transcendental that we infer as the condition of possibility of the present situation? That option would require a position external to history, a statement in direct contradiction with the content of the thesis itself (which asserts a certain relationship between ontology and history). In other words, the question is: does the general thesis about the relationship between ontology and history enjoy, in itself, a historical or a non-historical status? *Il pensiero vivente*'s assessment of the condition of *historical* possibility of its overall thesis seems less than forthcoming. Obviously, any justification even remotely similar to Hegel's necessary-teleological option (such as, for instance, the logically weaker versions provided by the different varieties of Gadamerian hermeneutics)

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 253.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 257: “La questione essenziale [è] identificabile proprio nella linea di tangenza, e di tensione, tra ontologia e storia. La vita non si presta nè ad un' assoluta naturalizzazione, nè ad un' assoluta storicizzazione”.

is foreclosed. Unlike Esposito's, each step of the Hegelian dialectic must always recover what it leaves behind. There are no protrusions, leftovers, or subterranean faults ready to reemerge and destabilize the present with a Vico-like "historical recurrence" of forms past. If, on the other hand, the thesis itself is plunged *in* history while at the same time positing the structure of a relationship between history and ontology, what are the conditions of its validity? On this issue, I think *Il pensiero vivente* is less clear than we may wish, a lack that throws the originality of the Italian difference—which Esposito so persuasively argues—into a peculiar vacuum.

Let me advance a suggestion to integrate and supplement Esposito's discussion. If, as mentioned, the necessity of historical progression is incompatible with the ever-recurrent "protrusions" and "breaches" that, as Vico shows, mark philosophical development, perhaps we may find the justification of the thesis in the modal opposite of necessity. In other words, we could supplement the discussion of *Il pensiero vivente*'s conditions of historical possibility by appealing to the essential contingency of both history and philosophy, along the lines explored by Deleuze and Guattari, when they state:

il y a bien une raison en philosophie, mais c'est un raison synthétique, et contingente –un rencontre, une conjonction. [...] Même dans le concept, la raison dépend d'une connexion des composantes, qui aurait pu être autre, avec d'autres voisinages. Le principe de raison tel qu'il apparaît en philosophie est un principe de raison contingente et s'énonce: il n'y a de bonne raison que contingente, il n'y a d'histoire universelle que de la contingence¹⁸.

Deleuze and Guattari go on to argue that philosophy's unique task is the creation of concepts which "always possess the truth that comes to them from the conditions of their creation". Once contingency is posited as the general framework of the history/philosophy relationship and concept-creation is identified as philosophy's only concern, Deleuze and Guattari find the conditions of historical validity of any particular philosophical instance in the series of (contingent) events that the newly proposed concept may unveil:

18 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1991, p. 90. "Philosophy does have a principle, but it is a synthetic and contingent principle—an encounter, a conjunction. [...] Even in the concept, the principle depends upon a connection of components that could have been different, with different neighborhoods. The principle of reason such as it appears in philosophy is a principle of contingent reason and is put like this: there is no good reason but contingent reasons, there is no universal history except of contingency." (G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is philosophy?*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p. 93).

“La grandeur d’une philosophie s’évalue à la nature des événements auxquels ses concepts nous appellent, ou qu’elle nous rend capable de dégager dans le concepts”¹⁹. In other words, the contingent validity of a philosophical concept (its “greatness”) lies in its disclosive power with respect to the equally contingent events it faces. This last formulation may provide us with a handle toward an assessment of the thesis of the necessary “*sporgenza*” between philosophy and history advanced by Esposito. Assuming, as I do here, that contingency provides the ultimate anchor for the philosophical concept of “*sporgenza*,” then its “greatness” must be found in the events it may disclose under the banner of contingency itself. Philosophy’s self-reflexivity (in the mathematical, not in the idealist sense) as a criterion of historical validity requires that the contingent event must be disclosed in its full vigor. I could provide a simple, and perhaps simplistic, characterization of this point on the basis of Bertolt Brecht’s well-known dictum: a valid yet essentially contingent philosophical concept (a *Begriff* such as *sporgenza*) must provide a handle (*Griffe*) on contingent events.²⁰ Yet, this formulation is still too vague. What are contingent events? and how do we know if “*Il pensiero vivente*” as such—not the book Esposito wrote, but the thought he advocates in its last sentence as a *breach* capable of renewing contemporary philosophy as a whole—is capable to uncover those events in unprecedented ways?

At this point, the Italian philosopher in me looks for a genealogical move out of the impasse. Let me recall the old Aristotelian distinction²¹ between necessary and contingent beings, or between those beings that are and cannot be otherwise and those that are and could have been otherwise. Aristotle links this distinction, in turn, to three different forms of life (*theoría*, *práxis*, and *poíesis*) and to their related forms of knowledge (*epist me*, *phron sis*, and *tékhne*, respectively). The sphere of contingency is tied to the last two conceptual pairs—*poíesis* being the modality through which beings come into existence according to an external (*technical*) plan; and *práxis* being the modality through we coordinate actions (through *practical wisdom*) and engender socio-political events. We can use Aristotle’s distinction as a rough guide to the realm of contingent being (taking this term in a meaning broad enough to include events as well as things) and to their forms of life with their corresponding cognitive activities. More particularly, we can

19 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?*, cit., pp. 32 and 37, my emph. “The greatness of a philosophy is measured by the nature of the events to which its concepts summon us or that it enables us to release in concepts” (Deleuze and Guattari, *What is philosophy?*, cit., pp. 27 and 34).

20 Brecht’s statement was: “Begriffe sind die Griffe, mit denen man die Dinge bewegen kann [Concepts are the handles we move things with]”.

21 *Met. E*, 1025b25.

take the *poiesis/praxis* distinction as pointing toward the set of contingent yet complex relationships that tie human beings to the world through the labor-produced creation of artifacts and the modification of their physical environment; and, respectively, to the similarly contingent relationships that bind human beings together in the always already antagonistic yet ultimately social endeavor. *Praxis* and *poiesis*, *phronēsis* and *tékhnē* are but the abstract poles of a complex relation that never ceases to bind them together. The praxical interaction that *phronēsis* rules never happens outside of the world within which it is situated and which provides it with the resources, value objects, and material base. Poietic production cannot avoid –even in the most alienated instances of servile subjectivation– to produce things that are always already inserted within the praxical circuit of social interaction. Nonetheless, we can still use the distinction as a heuristic device to map out the possible confines of contingent being and its production and cognition. We need to ask how *Il pensiero vivente* comes to terms with wisdom-directed contingent praxical interaction as well as with technically driven production. Or, to recall Deleuze and Guattari’s previously stated criterion of adequacy for philosophical concepts: does *Il pensiero vivente* produce a disclosure of the contingent poietic act as well as of the praxical one? It seems to me that the answer is negative, because Esposito’s attention in this book is almost always focused on *praxis* at the expenses of *poiesis* and, relatedly, on *phronēsis* at the expenses of *tékhnē*.²² Esposito’s Italian thought, so attentive to life and to its inexhaustible connections to history, seems nonetheless to have left aside the “life of things,” to use the expression recently adopted by Remo Bodei (another contemporary Italian philosopher), including their mode of existence and production and the praxical dimension within which they are located²³. I would like to recall the words of Gilbert Simondon, a philosopher whose work lies explicitly behind Bodei’s book:

Cette réalité de fond qui sous-tend le geste technique est le dynamisme de choses, ce par quoi elle sont productrices, ce qui leur donne une fécondité, une efficacité, une énergie utilisable. C’est la chose comme pouvoir et non comme structure que la technique recherche, la matière comme réservoir de tendances, de qualités, de vertus propres. C’est la nature comme support et comme auxiliaire de l’action, comme adjuvant dont on attend l’efficacité pour puisse

22 A partial exception is represented by the last part of the section on Bruno in Chapter II (pp. 67-71), where Esposito calls our attention to the mechanical/corporeal aspect –the hand– of Bruno’s characterization of the human/animal divide.

23 R. Bodei, “Italien. Langue italienne: une philosophie, assuasi, pour les non-philosophes”, in *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*, ed. by Barbara Cassin, Le Seuil, Paris, 2004, pp. 625-643.

se montrer efficace. C'est la nature comme réserve de potentiels, la φύσις qui révèle sa nature quand elle fait défaut²⁴.

Simondon is not just calling our attention to the multifarious forms of connection that “technical gestures” and “technical thought” build between human beings and their surroundings. His use of the Greek term φύσις signifies that *tékhnē* and *poiesis* bring us back to the source of the continuous coming-forth that is life itself. Therefore, I think that the relationship between life and non-life and especially between life and thought that Esposito nicely unravels in his book and summarizes in its title should be complemented by a sustained interrogation of the “technical” in addition to the “historical.” Arguably, the history of Italian thought provides some resources to that end. Even though the Italian philosophical tradition has traditionally paid scant attention to science and technology –and particularly so in the 20th century, as a consequence of Croce’s demotion of science to a collection of pseudo-concepts– Remo Bodei has recently remarked how Galileo’s reflection upon the foundation of mechanics provided a crucial reorientation of mechanical thinking. Galileo was the first thinker to see mechanics no longer as a ruse and a trick—as it still was the case in the old Greek tradition that identified the *mekhanē* with the artificial contraptions used in the theater –but rather as the development of a technical knowledge that may exert control over nature not by violating it or by subduing it, but by bending itself to its rules, as Bodei remarks²⁵. If Galileo was the first to set the technical thought on the path later extolled by Simondon, Bodei stresses how the thought of the former is consonant with the general effort that the Italian tradition put forth: to provide guidelines allowing us “to exert a conscious control over partially spontaneous natural or historical processes”²⁶. In other words, the re-foundation of mechanics inaugurated by Galileo is yet another instance of the struggle with the contingency of natural and non-natural processes that, from Machiavelli on, have always been at the center of the Italian tradition. In my view, the excellent analysis of the Italian difference Esposito so convincingly articulates could be expanded in the direction of a more sustained attention to the technical and scientific components of human’s contingent relationship to nature, thereby gaining even more depth and providing added validity to the “pensiero della sporgenza”.

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24 G. Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, Aubier, Paris, 1989, p. 203.

25 R. Bodei, “Italian. Langue italienne: une philosophie, aussi, pour les non-philosophes”, in *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*, cit., p. 642.

26 Ibidem.