

Introduction

The Ferment of Contemporary Italian Political Philosophy

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The past decade has witnessed a resurgence of interest in Italian political philosophy. Undoubtedly, this has been fueled by the worldwide economic crisis of 2008, which was unprecedented not only because of its scope but also because of its form, namely, financial capitalism rooted in negligent speculation. Important philosophers of the Italian Left, including Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and Franco Berardi, emerged as important interlocutors for understanding what had transpired and what to do next. But other important voices began to be drawn on, including those of Roberto Esposito, Giorgio Agamben, Gianni Vattimo, and Massimo Cacciari. One of the outcomes of the financial crisis of 2008 was a refocusing of attention on the broader corpus of contemporary Italian philosophy, which extends over both the twentieth century and our present one.

Important conferences were held on Italian political philosophy, including the Cornell University conference, which resulted in the publication of two volumes of *Diacritics*¹ that included essays by Negri, Esposito, Virno, and other notable philosophers. Timothy Campbell introduced the volumes, remarking that one of the central questions binding all of the contributions concerns the possibility of a concept like Italian political philosophy, especially given the plethora of views and approaches. The British Society for Phenomenology also organized its 2013 annual conference

(Oxford University) around Italian political philosophy, with the intention of mining its legacy and present-day resources in order to help us envision a possible new future. I am certain that essays presented at this conference will be published by the Society in the near future.

In addition to conference proceedings, two recent volumes have appeared that have generated considerable interest. Silvia Benso and Brian Schroeder's edited volume, *Contemporary Italian Philosophy: Crossing the Borders of Ethics, Politics, and Religion*,² was the first comprehensive work in English to highlight the advancements of Italian philosophy, especially from a post-1968 perspective. Whereas Giovanna Borradori's 1989 book, *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*³ focused on metaphysics, Benso and Schroeder's work gave us an important glimpse into the rich and vast terrain that constitutes recent Italian philosophy. Their monograph brings together leading philosophers to discuss relevant ideas that cross various philosophical and societal domains, including ethics, religion, and politics. The contributions included in the volume give us a comprehensive snapshot of figures, ideas, and issues that drive Italian political philosophy. The second important volume to appear, *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*,⁴ is edited by Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano. Unlike the *Diacritics* volumes, which have a broad focus, Chiesa and Toscano concentrate on recent developments in biopolitics, especially in terms of questions surrounding nihilism and the legacy of communism. Leading Italian philosophers' essays are gathered to address questions on sexual difference, the legacy of weak thought, philosophical anthropology, and communism.

The chapters in this volume extend the spirit of the work previously mentioned and can certainly be read as complementing them. But there are also unique features of this work that make it new vis-à-vis the aforementioned books. We have asked scholars to focus on contemporary figures and issues in Italian political philosophy, providing critical analysis of their respective positions. We see this volume as a critical dialogue with contemporary Italian political philosophy rather than a presentation of figures and ideas. The preceding works have done an admirable job presenting and informing us of the richness of the contemporary political landscape. Here, by engaging philosophers on certain important questions, scholars and philosophers extend and give color to important debates. Furthermore, this volume also brings into discussion figures who have been largely ignored by other volumes, including Luce Fabbri, Adriana Cavarero, and Lea Melandri, all important feminist thinkers. Finally, the debate is extended beyond the realm of Italian philosophy as thinkers are brought into dialogue with larger Continental philosophical figures, including Badiou, Marx, Merleau-Ponty,

Deleuze, and Guattari, Adorno, Arendt, Foucault, Wittgenstein, and the Peruvian historian and sociologist Anibal Quijano.

Roberto Esposito's philosophy has garnered much attention from fields as diverse as political science, sociology, literature, economics, history, and geography. His impact has been far-reaching and this certainly is a testament to the force and insight of his ideas. His chapter, "Biological Life and Political Life," continues to explore the claim that runs through most of his work: the idea that politics' central concern for the common life of citizens has slowly been transformed by modern thought, which proposes the sovereign individual and state as the object of politics. Advances in technology and economics concomitant with a shift in the way science views life, all have resulted in the complete separation of politics and life, understood in the Greek sense as *bíos*: Politics now deals with a new conception of biological life that, following Foucault, is increasingly subject to governmentality. Politics has come to control life in all of its forms. Esposito explores the ramifications of this paradigm shift, arguing for radical changes in the way we conceive of the individual, community, life, the environment, economics, science, and politics—new categories have to be developed in light of the new limits introduced by a globalized reality. Esposito's chapter is as provocative as it is forward-looking.

Undoubtedly, we find ourselves in times of great global change as evidenced by the ever-growing urgency to tackle worldwide problems that threaten our well-being, including the environment, the global economy, and limited resources, all themes that Esposito admirably discusses. One central problem that arises in light of these changes is the question of community, especially when older, more nationalistic forms of community no longer hold sway as they once did. Robert Valgenti's chapter, "Nothing in Common: Esposito and Vattimo on Community" examines both Roberto Esposito's and Gianni Vattimo's proposed rethinking of the question of community or the bonds that form the ground of any political society. Both philosophers critique nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century models of community that privilege race, equality, and economics as grounds for community; rather, given global stress and changes, both philosophers present views of community that are posited on a shared point of departure: that we may have nothing in common. Valgenti's analysis of the nothingness or the nihilism at the basis of community, as developed in the thought of Vattimo and Esposito, shows how the basis of community can move us from self-interest to a duty toward the other and to an understanding of community where no one group or idea is privileged over another. Valgenti explains how the thought of Vattimo and Esposito reveal a new vision of

community that thinks about what it is to be together when we have nothing in common, and what politics would look like, if we redefine its social foundation of community in terms of a shared nothing.

As Roberto Esposito continues to develop and refine his philosophy, one concept he has returned to in his later philosophy is that of the person. Both contemporary analytic and continental philosophy share a deep interest in how we conceive of personhood. Much of modern and contemporary political thought, especially human rights discourses of the twentieth century, rely on the aforementioned concept insofar as it is connected to such discourses as human dignity, violence, justice, and redressing wrongs and crimes against humanity. “Roberto Esposito and the Relation between the Personal and the Impersonal” is Antonio Calcagno’s contribution to this volume. The chapter explores Esposito’s claim that the political notion of the person and personhood has been exhausted by political and scientific developments over the past one hundred years. The person, Esposito argues, limits life in terms of what it is and how it moves. He posits a concept of the impersonal: he calls for a shift in our rights discourse to include “the impersonal,” understood as the space between what is real and what we make of it. Calcagno’s chapter examines Esposito’s claim and argues that his notion of the impersonal ends up committing the same violence that he identifies in modern rights discourses. If we limit, however, the conceptual force of the impersonal by concentrating on Esposito’s practical exigencies stemming from his analyses, the impersonal can be employed to achieve many of the changes called for by Esposito.

Elvira Roncalli’s chapter, “Narrating the Self through the Other: On the Thought of Adriana Cavarero,” examines the work of the philosopher Adriana Cavarero. A central figure in recent Italian philosophy, Cavarero has had a huge impact not only in Italy but also in Europe and North America. Roncalli investigates Cavarero’s claim that the self is a unique and unrepeatable “who” that emerges through relationships between friends. In such intimate and embodied friendships, the self emerges through the desire for her story to be told and to hear it told by another. Roncalli demonstrates how Cavarero’s own account of self-becoming undoes the traditional modern Western liberal paradigm of a sovereign self but also the postmodern critique of the self that maintains that no self is possible except for a series of loose descriptors that are understood as having no essentializing force. Central for Cavarero’s argument is the undoing of the bifurcation of individual and community that is pivotal for social and political philosophy. She maintains that there is an intimate bond that exists between all individuals prior to the distinction of individual and community—a split that is crucial for

modern and contemporary political philosophy. One of the key challenges that confronts Cavarero's work is the overcoming the critique that though she displaces traditional modern and postmodern notions of selfhood, she establishes another category, albeit a narrative one, that ends up universalizing and abstracting the self from its historical, material, and gendered contexts. Roncalli admirably demonstrates how such a critique cannot stand, given Cavarero's views of relationships, being embodied, and gender.

Italian feminism expresses itself in a variety of forms, and we can certainly see two important manifestations of it in the discussions of the works of Adriana Cavarero and Luce Fabbri. Paola Melchiori's chapter, "Psychoanalysis in Early Italian Feminism: The Contributions of the Practice of the Unconscious," examines the political work of thinkers like Lea Melandri. The practice of the unconscious was a philosophical movement that sought to rethink and rework the foundational structure of gender formation, understood in terms of the masculine and feminine. Employing the rich legacy of psychoanalysis, the practice of the unconscious explored how it is that certain social and political roles in society were shaped, both consciously and unconsciously, by important paradigms of masculinity and femininity. Once these paradigms became conscious, the goal of the practice of the unconscious was to reestablish them in ways that no longer created a binary opposition between male and female; rather, more fluid models were established. Melchiori traces the history of psychoanalysis in the early Italian feminism of the 1970s, arguing that the apparent split between psychoanalysis and philosophy must not be read as a parting of ways; rather, both psychoanalysis and philosophy, together, reveal unique and inseparable aspects of women's oppression that need to be overcome.

Luce Fabbri's work is little known in Anglo-American circles and she is included here because she represents an important moment in Italian anarchism. Forced to leave Italy with her family, Fabbri took up residence in Uruguay and began to develop her own anarchic thought, which was highly critical of capitalism and Marxism. She saw education and restructuring economics as ways of bringing about an anarchic politics. Magareth Rago's chapter, "Luce Fabbri: Anarchism as an Art of Living," explores the work of Fabbri, highlighting two important aspects of her political philosophy: the critique of power and educational reform. Rago demonstrates how Fabbri anticipated key ideas of contemporary thinkers like Foucault and Deleuze but also how she used literature and the arts to create liberating spaces and ideas for the amelioration of life. Fabbri embodied the philosophical ideal of the political thinker: a person who, motivated by the desire to eliminate unjust and violent circumstances, thought about ways of changing the

situation but who also worked tirelessly to bring about her own reforming ideas. Rago passionately shows us that Fabbri lived this ideal with great success.

“The Transcendental Limits of Politics: On Massimo Cacciari’s Political Philosophy” presents a detailed account of the development of Massimo Cacciari’s political thinking. Alessandro Carrera chronicles Cacciari’s early work on dialectics through to his work on capitalism and his later works, which discuss well-known Cacciarian concepts, including the unpolitical, the aporias of decisions, and the genealogy of Europe. The chapter ends with a timely meditation on the future of Europe and nihilism in which Carrera, through Cacciari, asks the question concerning the nature of the relationship between political philosophy and practical exigencies: the mistake, according to Cacciari and Carrera, is to think that political theory must translate into practice, if theory is to be considered viable. Rejecting this claim, Carrera explores Cacciari’s claim that theory is separate from praxis, and its function is to act as a kind of transcendental structure, conditioning practice by showing forth the limits of politics: where politics no longer can go, where it fails. The limits of politics come to light in what Cacciari calls the unpolitical. Carrera clearly elucidates what Cacciari means by the unpolitical and its connection to the notion of aporias of decisions.

Remo Bodei is a well-known figure in literary circles and philosophers outside of the Italian-speaking world are slowly but surely recognizing his work. Alexander U. Bertland’s “Trauma and Political Existence: Remo Bodei on Not Confronting Delusion” looks at key concepts within Bodei’s thinking, including delusion, history, and rationality. Bodei argues that the passions have their own logic, and while not necessarily antithetical to reason, they also admit their own value and structuring force. Bertland examines Bodei’s claim that our Western society has become more delusional: it struggles to cope with the delusion of a strong, liberal system secured by a highly individuated subject that no longer exists. Rather than try to correct or eliminate the delusion with hyper-rationalization, Bodei argues that delusions, like the passions, have their own logic, which may have value for our psychic life. Bertland argues that Bodei’s account of delusion leads us to two important conclusions: “First, the argument will demonstrate the importance of psychological growth in confronting the problems of contemporary political life. Second, it will defend the need to engage the history of philosophy as part of philosophical therapy.” Bertland’s argument extends Bodei’s thought in relevant and provocative ways, forcing us to confront the history of our own times as well as orientating us toward future possibilities of new political ideas.

Paolo Virno is known equally for his work in the philosophy of language as well as political philosophy. Franco Berardi's chapter, "Paolo Virno: Exodus and Language," brings these two domains into dialogue by examining Virno's work on exile. Berardi claims that though the *Autonomia* movements of the 1970s suffered a defeat at the hands of capital, they nonetheless helped bring to fruition an understanding of the emancipatory and transformative power of the general intellect, of the intellectual work of the masses. Furthermore, the legacy of the movement continues to inspire us to think about politics and action in new and exciting ways. He shows how Virno's reading of Wittgenstein reveals not only a limit in language but also how reality can exceed language, opening up new possibilities for political thought and action. We can locate Virno's thought between those who understand the working of language and those who analyze the essential linguistic character of postindustrial capitalism. Virno sees beyond the virtuistic character of language, beyond a notion of action that is reduced to a mere execution of a task.

"After Lives: On Giorgio Agamben and the Coloniality of the Sovereign Exception (from a Latin American Perspective)" is Alejandro A. Vallega's contribution. He examines the work of Giorgio Agamben on the question of life by bringing it into critical dialogue with the Peruvian sociologist and thinker Anibal Quijano. Quijano is known for his work on postcolonialism and his liberation philosophy of life. At stake is a political notion of life. Whereas Agamben argues that life resists sovereign power and its state of exception, characterizing life as an impotentiality and as a "not yet," Quijano maintains that the excluded can and must take shape in political discourse, especially if one wishes to resist oppressive powers. Vallega navigates us through the extreme poles of power and its effects, ultimately demonstrating "the internal limits of Agamben's thought with respect to life and how Quijano indicates a distinct way of understanding life outside the economy of power and knowledge figured by Agamben's analysis."

Gary Genosko's chapter "Happy Depression: Franco Berardi and the Unpaid Bills of Desire" examines an important aspect within the history of a certain stream of Italian political philosophy, namely, "defeat" and the depression that follows defeat. Genosko focuses on the work of the Italian philosopher Franco "Bifo" Berardi and his relation with Félix Guattari. Berardi, along with Antonio Negri, was an important figure in the *Autonomia* and *Potere Operaio* movements of the 1960s and '70s. When neo-conservative leaders like Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher took power in the 1980s, it became obvious that the desires and hopes of an earlier generation of political activists and thinkers had come to an end: they were

defeated. After such a defeat and with the triumph of semicapitalism and finance capitalism, it is clear that thinkers and activists like Guattari would become depressed. Berardi's book on Guattari focuses on this aspect of depression, but it investigates Guattari's biography in order to understand what depression as a political concept means: it results in a kind of obsessive compulsive behavior as well as a busyness that has grave consequences on the psychic and material lives of those afflicted by depression. Genosko argues that Berardi shows how depression is an important aspect of political life and thinking, not only because it brings to the fore failed projects and desires but because it opens up a space of possibilities—possibilities that can create genuine openings for us.

We conclude our volume with three chapters on one of the best-known figures of contemporary political thought, Antonio Negri. In his chapter, "Marx *contra* Negri: Value, Abstract Labor, and Money," Christian Lotz explores Antonio Negri's attempt to break out of central aspects of the Marxian legacy, in particular Marx's concept of value. Lotz demonstrates how Marx's theory of value cannot be reduced to the problem of labor time and issues related to measurement, as these terms in Marx's mature theory indicate a specific mode of how society is constituted as a totality, which includes exchange and money. As such, we need to make distinctions between value and value form, money and money form, capital and capital form, and so on. As a theory of the form of capitalist social relations, Marx's philosophy can help us not only critically engage with Negri's theory of (immaterial) labor but also correct certain reductions in Negri's thought, including the reduction of capital to power and control, as well as his over-idealized notion of the general intellect.

Timothy S. Murphy's chapter looks at the philosophical methodology of Antonio Negri by bringing into conversation the thought of Theodor Adorno. Undoubtedly, one can see a deep connection between Adorno's philosophy and Italian Marxist-inspired philosophy of the 1960s and '70s. Although both philosophers agree that one must not naively begin with what is empirically given, but with what is not present or absent, they also differ in terms of what follows their important negative starting point. Murphy remarks, "My claim is that Adorno and Negri agree on the initial moments of critique, but that Adorno refuses to take the necessary final step into the affirmative constitution or production of subjectivity that Negri, following Marx, does take, and instead is trapped within the purely negative critique of the given and of the positivist social science that abets it."

The final chapter in this volume and on Negri gives us a comprehensive view of his philosophical and political project. Negri's thought and

tireless work on behalf of workers, the oppressed and marginalized of society has been internationally recognized. Pierre Lamarche's chapter, "Antonio Negri—On the Trail of New Social Subjects" serves readers in two significant ways. First, Lamarche reminds us that, though Toni Negri acquired international fame along with Michael Hardt for their work *Empire*, which can be read as an important critique of capitalism, one must not forget Negri's earlier Marxist work. His later work is seen, and correctly so, as drawing from his work on Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault and Spinoza, but one also finds operating in his work an interpretation of Marxism that is invaluable for philosophy and political praxis. Lamarche chronicles the development of Negri's Marxism, mining not only its theoretical sources but also its experiential components drawn from Negri's work with factory workers. Second, the author intervenes on the debate between Agamben and Negri on the question of the essence of life. He takes up Negri's critique of Agamben as depicting life as *nuda vita* and as incredibly "passive." We see Lamarche's chapter laying the fundamental ground in which one can begin to see the full trajectory of Negri's incredibly productive life and thinking.

Bringing together various scholars and philosophers to discuss and critique, understood in the most robust and creative sense of the word, ideas, figures, and events within contemporary Italian political philosophy allows readers to enter more profoundly into the philosophical and political realms that touch on issues of importance today. The work of the chapters contained in this volume will certainly raise more questions that not only speak to the complexity of the problems we face but also to the depths of human experience and thinking. My hope is that the chapters will help us navigate the path that lies ahead.

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Notes

1. See *Diacritics*, 39, no. 3 (Fall 2009) and no. 4 (Winter 2009).
2. Silvia Benso and Brian Schroeder, eds., *Contemporary Italian Philosophy: Crossing the Borders of Ethics, Politics, and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
3. Giovanna Borradori, *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989).
4. Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, eds., *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics* (Melbourne: Re-press, 2009).