

"Italian Theory" in the Crisis of Globalization

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1.

Italian Theory, Italian Thought, Italian Difference: in recent years, different formulas have influenced how Italian philosophy has come to the forefront in the current international debate¹. Although definitions may vary, it is a phenomenon that cannot be ascribable only to this or that thinker: from Antonio Gramsci's works² to biopolitics (Agamben, Negri, Esposito), via the "radical thought" of the Seventies (Operaism and Post-Operaism). *Italian Theory* is an umbrella title currently including new or renewed theories and concepts that are supposed to share a common "Italian" matrix: affirmative biopolitics, empire, bare life, commons for instance. So, the preliminary question to be addressed is the following one: can we legitimately speak of an "Italian difference" in the field of international philosophy? Next, is it possible to speak of an "Italian thought", of a common thread that links together thinkers and theories that can radically differ from each other? And, finally, what does "Italian" mean in this case?

There is no doubt that Roberto Esposito's *Living Thought* (2012) promoted and increased the currently debate on Italian Theory. The introduction of an Italian Theory took advantage of an international growing interest in Italian philosophical thought, or at least draw attention to a particularly significant precedent³. However *Living Thought* represents – to use the term that Alain Badiou employs about contemporary French philosophy⁴ – the "operation" that more organically intends, in a *performative* way, to outline the constitutive traits of it. And it is indeed on the operation of "Italian Theory" as is outlined in *Living Thought* that I intend focus, setting aside here the genealogies that Esposito traces within Italian thought and its philosophical outcomes (affirmative biopolitics, thought of community and of impersonal) which he reaches. It is rather for its 'geophilosophical' implications that I call into question Italian Theory.

¹ Over the last decade, a number of collections have offered, especially to an Anglo-American audience, surveys of Italian thought, each time focusing on different aspects and authors; see Borradori (1988); Virno / Hardt (1997); Benso / Schroeder (2007); Chiesa / Toscano (2009); AA.VV. (2010); Carrera (2011); Calcagno (2015). For a discussion on the international reception of contemporary Italian philosophy, and a more general interpretation of the current interest in Italian philosophy, cf. Gentili (2012); Gentili / Stimilli (2015); Contarini / Luglio (2015).

² For an interpretation of Gramsci's thought that also takes into account the most important interpretations in its international reception, see Thomas (2009).

³ See Negri (2009).

⁴ See Badiou (2012).

2.

In *Living Thought*, the philosophical "operation" called "Italian Theory" is not reducible neither to a mere historiographical reconstruction nor to a proof of its own vitality that a "national" thought permeates the debates of English-speaking globalization. It is not of this; it is rather – on the basis of what, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is the object of philosophy – "to create concepts" (Deleuze / Guattari 1994: 5) up to the present historical, economical and political conjuncture, taking and developing them along the genealogical lines of Italian philosophical tradition.

And yet, why does one refer to "Italian" thought as a philosophy that crosses 'national' borders? Is that one aspect of Italian Theory, announced in the first chapter of *Living Thought*, a kind of resistance against the uniformity and homogeneity of English-speaking and postmodern globalization? In short, is Italian Theory a "difference" that seeks to safeguard from extinction other forms of philosophical thought? So, is "national" difference an element of resistance? Not at all.

The second paragraph of the first chapter of *Living Thought*, following that one entitled exactly 'Italian Theory', has the title 'Italian Geophilosophy'. That indicates a conception of globalization in philosophy that considers difference as its constitutive element. Indeed, only those with a naïve and already dated conception of globalization can understand it exclusively as a movement of trespassing and universalization, of reduction of the globe to unity. Rather, starting from the Nineties, globalization asserts itself 'also' as a movement that converts identities into "differences" – gender, religious, cultural differences, and so on – and put them on the same plan⁵. And, furthermore, globalization produces always new differences. So, within the globalization also the national identity becomes a "difference", a difference among the others.

Therefore, the centripetal movement of globalization – at the same time complementary and contrary to the centrifugal one of trespassing – is absolutely not intended in the banal sense of reterritorialization and localization, of return to identity and locality – to nationality. On the contrary, to employ Deleuze's term that Esposito uses⁶, such production of difference implicates a "deterritorialization", an extroversion outside national borders. The expression "Italian Theory" should suggest a "difference" that impedes precisely a re-territorialization, a definition of a national philosophical identity.

⁵ With the expression "universalism of difference" Giacomo Marramao characterizes the phenomenon of globalization (Marramao 2012).

⁶ See Deleuze / Guattari (1994: 85-113).

The same geophilosophical disorientation has reverberated in the well-known precedent of "French Theory", that – not without irony – Italian Theory evokes. If one refers to the phenomenon of French Theory in François Cusset's book⁷, it characterizes itself fundamentally for the assimilation of French philosophers and not only (Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, Baudrillard, etc.) in the Departments of North American Universities and for the construction – not without stretches – of a shared horizon: the i.e. post-structuralism. In this sense, French Theory represents, on the one hand, a remarkable reception theory and an analysis of dispositifs within which the North America's academic culture introduces, assumes and re-elaborates thought coming from Europe; on the other hand, it considers the "return effect" with which the passage throughout the North American "outside" has influenced, contaminated and also betrayed the thought of such thinkers. Without diminishing the function of reducing dissimilarities that the construction of a big theoretical container like "French Theory" could conduct, it is however necessary to point out – to avoid any nationalistic misunderstanding – the "impure" and "hybrid" character that the "return effect" of such operations anyway produces.

This dialectic – between universalism and difference, global and local, territorialization and deterritorialization – that characterizes the historizing of philosophy and that globalization radicalized has been thematised also by Badiou, which, within the universal vocation of philosophy, cuts a temporal and spatial "moment", a "completely specific moment", that he calls "French contemporary philosophy":

Let us begin these reflections on contemporary French philosophy with a paradox: that which is the most universal is also, at the same time, the most particular. Hegel calls this the "concrete universal", the synthesis of that which is absolutely universal, which pertains to everything, with that which has a particular time and place. Philosophy is a good example. Absolutely universal, it addresses itself to all, without exception; but within philosophy there exist powerful cultural and national particularities. There are what we might call moments of philosophy, in space and in time. Philosophy is thus both a universal aim of reason and, simultaneously, one that manifests itself in completely specific moments (Badiou 2005: 67).

3.

One could maintain that Italian Theory is a "moment" of philosophy in the age of globalization or, more precisely, in the age of the cultural global market. And yet, even though Esposito contextualizes his thought and Italian Theory in a complex conception of globalization, he traces in Italian thought an 'original' predisposition to deterritorialization, a specific difference that doesn't result exclusively from the logic of globalization and that just today can be

⁷ See Cusset (2008).

paradigmatic: "But what if this escaping outside itself – its continual deterritorialization – is the most originally living feature of Italian thought?" (Esposito 2012: 15). Since its origins, indeed, Italian thought and philosophy did not have a national vocation, rather a 'cosmopolitan' one. It happened also for strictly historical reasons: a philosophical tradition preexisted the tardy creation of a nation-state and therefore many of its peculiar traits were part of a 'geophilosophy' that didn't have as its frame of reference State and nationality:

not only can Italian philosophy not be reduced to its national role, but its most authentic reason for being lies precisely in the distance it takes from that role. As we have already noted with regard to the dialectic between territorialization and deterritorialization, the intensely geophilosophical character of Italian culture comes from a land that did not correspond to a nation and, indeed, during a very long phase, a land that took form in the absence of a nation. [...] Unlike in other European countries – in France, Spain, England, and, with a delay of two centuries, Germany – rather than accompanying or following the formation of the nation-state, the great Italian philosophy of Machiavelli, Bruno, Campanella, Galileo, and Vico preceded it by a long time. Italian philosophy neither influenced nor was influenced by the formation of the national state (Esposito 2012: 18-19).

The proposal of Italian Theory promoted in *Living Thought* finds its actuality exactly in the present phase of globalization – a globalization that has already behind its *belle époque*, celebrated in the Nineties the 'end of history' – that is as end of identitarian conflicts – and that since some time is revealing its contradictions. But it is an actuality that, at the same time, has roots that date back to an original 'cosmopolitan' vocation, and therefore not one that arose from the 'crisis of the nation-state' that globalization itself has produced. It is not only this 'cosmopolitanism' of Italian intellectuals – that Gramsci dates back to the universalism of the Catholic Middle Ages and of Humanisms and that for him is one of reasons for the delay in the creation of an Italian nation-state – to represent a criticism of nation-state. Not only are Empire and Church historically political models more than the State – but also the Party. In the second half of the twentieth century, in Italy politics meant belonging to one of the two main parties, the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party (Christianity and Communism: two not national dimensions), that was felt as a priority compared to the sense of belonging granted to the State or the fatherland. However one can trace still deeper roots here: the political primacy and the very historical primacy of the party over the nation-state could find a legitimization as early as Machiavelli, if not already in Dante Alighieri.

Therefore, this is my interpretative key: the actuality of Italian Theory has of course to do with the crisis of nation-state, but above all and more strongly it has to do with the 'crisis of globalization' as one has known it during the Nineties and the Noughties – that is as the neutralization of political conflict through the dissemination of differences that can co-exist on the same non-conflictual plan.

4.

After 1989 – when the world had to confront and elaborate upon the loss of the 'outside', of the big difference, beyond the Wall – the wide and varied works of postmodern thought represent – an attempt to translate the outside into an articulation of differences that form globalization. The most effective – though unwanted result of this attempt – has been the translation – to paraphrase Sloterdijk – of the "world within the capital"⁸. On the other hand, the philosophical criticism has transposed the crisis – that "divides", "separates", "counterposes" – from a no longer bipolar world within the philosophical reason itself: "For this reason philosophical criticism regarding the outside world can only be expressed in the form of its own internal crisis" (Esposito 2012: 7). The crisis didn't concern anymore society and politics, giving the illusion of a finally reconciled world of differences, but it was constitutive of philosophy itself. This kind of introspection on itself, this self-referentiality, became the specific 'difference' of philosophy during the *belle époque* of globalization, paradoxically the only condition to be not national, to be 'globalized'. Today, when the geopolitics of globalization has changed and the world is becoming multipolar, the differences are becoming always more conflictual to coexistence and always more resistant to neutralization by globalization. But it could be a mistake to bring back 'difference' to 'identity', for example to 'national'. The same argument has to be applied to philosophy. The 'Italian difference' in philosophy has to represent the attempt to think a geophilosophy for the geopolitics of the globalization in crisis.

How does the 'Italian difference' a moment – not at all the only one – of a cultural counter-hegemony and not one of varied differences that the unified global market periodically supports and quickly consumes: this is the question that, in *Living Thought*, the difference of Italian Theory faces and returns to the international debate. As said, it is not a way to recover in philosophy the 'national difference', but rather a way to consider the difference in philosophy (and not only) after the nation-state, in the crisis of a globalization where today the differences resemble the old identities. This is the real challenge today – an alternative both to the capitalist market of differences and to the renewal of previous identities⁹.

⁸ See Sloterdijk (2013).

⁹ In this sense, Italian Theory could present several points of intersection with the post-colonial thought and with any thought that poses its difference, even though in a specific temporal and spatial moment, not in nationality. For a discussion of Italian Theory in particular from the point of view of Latin American Philosophy, see the special issue 'La 'vida' y la 'política': Una genealogía del pensamiento político italiano contemporáneo' of *Revista Pléyade* (Serratore 2013).

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