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Beyond Croce and Gramsci?

Mark S. Roberts

Review-essay on *Critique*, January-February 1985, no. 452-453: *Italian Philosophers by Themselves* (221 pages). Paris, Editions de Minuit.

Robert Maggiori opens his brief preface to this special issue of *Critique* by paraphrasing several questions posed by Eugenio Garin in his *Storia della filosofia italiana*—questions like: Is it correct to speak in terms of national philosophies? If so, is there such a thing as an Italian philosophy? At what point does it begin? etc. Following this, Maggiori goes on to answer some of the questions by invoking various learned opinions about the history, status, impact and relative position of past and present Italian philosophy. But these questions and their answers will not, I suspect, be much help in introducing an English-speaking audience to this sort of philosophy, since they are aimed at a predominantly European readership—a readership with direct geocultural ties to twentieth-century Italian thought. Here—where the subtleties of Italian philosophy and its history are hardly at the center of debate—the questions have to be posed in a more accessible form. Indeed, it seems as though the whole of Maggiori's inquiry can be reduced to two very basic questions: (1) Is there any significant Italian philosophy at all following its two most recognized exponents, Benedetto Croce and Antonio Gramsci? (2) If so, how does it interface with the better known forms of continental philosophy

here in the United States, that is, French and German philosophy? The answers to both questions should become apparent in the course of my summary of the key articles in this special issue, but I will also address them in the brief conclusion following the summary.

In the period 1920 to 1935, Italian philosophy was virtually strangled by its unanimity of purpose. All academic philosophy and most nonacademic philosophy of this era was either directly involved in or an outgrowth of neo-idealism, the official philosophy of Italian Fascism. But in the early 1930s the currents of German philosophy represented by Husserl, Meinong, Heidegger, and the Vienna Circle, as well as the faint stirrings of European existentialism, began to surface on the scene, representing the first stages of idealism's decline in Italian intellectual life in general. These European "imports" staggered about for a while, butting up against some formidable opposition from the "official philosophers," but began to flourish with the fall of Fascism and the death of its philosophical voice, Giovanni Gentile.

The first article in this issue, "Les philosophes professeurs: La philosophie italienne 1940-1960," chronicles this period of recovery and rediscovery in Italian philosophy, following the decline of idealism and Fascism. Its author, Riccardo Pineri, tries to indicate just how the aforementioned strands of German and French thought were assimilated into the Italian scene. He suggests that efforts prior to 1940 were by and large focused on interpretations of and commentaries on philosophers who were in considerable vogue in the rest of Western Europe. This trend was perhaps best exemplified by Franco Lombardi's¹ massive two-volume study of Kierkegaard (1935-36), which Pineri hails as one of the most pivotal and influential works of the era.

Later works by Italian philosophy professors, however, tended to be less interpretive and more original in both subject matter and approach. Nicola Abbagnano, according to Pineri, made some stellar "novel contributions" to existential philosophy in general. These consisted mainly in his categorization of contemporary irrationalism under the rubric of "Romanticism," and, echoing Heidegger, his claim that philosophy's principal task would be to found the possibility of the relation between beings and Being.

Paralleling Abbagnano's work in existential philosophy was a fairly large group of phenomenologically oriented philosophers based at the University of Milan. The group was founded and led by Antonio Banfi, and it produced several relatively important

figures in the phenomenological movement as a whole. Put briefly, Banfi's work involved the interface between scientific and philosophic method guaranteed by a critique of reason which was aimed at eliminating all metaphysical contents (an explicit aim of Husserl's as well).²

Though Banfi's ideas can hardly be considered entirely unique in view of Husserl's much earlier articulation of them, his notion of a philosophy grounded in rationalism and scientific inquiry did influence one of Italy's most original phenomenological thinkers—Enzo Paci. Paci's work assumed its most mature configurations in the introduction of the idea of "the relation," which is the "transcendental possibility" grounded in the encounter with the world insofar as it is a stable given rather than a group of virtual focal points. This would in turn allow us to think of history outside its conventional temporal coordinates, that is, as the past as an inaccessible model and paradigm for the future. Rather, this "transcendental possibility" allows us to take a critical view of history—a view based on the connection and relation between the transcendental ego, the world, and temporality. It is only in this regard, according to Paci, that the eternal realities of the world can be grasped in their originary form.

André Tosel's article in the historical section clearly goes beyond Gramsci—at least chronologically—since it presents an account of Italian Marxism following Gramsci's death in 1937. Tosel begins by stressing the ground-breaking efforts of Palmiro Togliatti. A close friend and follower of Gramsci's, Togliatti tried to expand upon the central Gramscian notions of combining politics with cultural activities and the popularization of certain Marxist themes, particularly that of an expanded role for militarism within Marxist theory. But apparently Togliatti's most enduring contribution was his continuation of the "historicism" begun by Gramsci—an historicism which, according to Tosel, equates history, philosophy and politics. This equation in turn afforded the PCI (Italian Communist Party) a real opportunity to directly effect the working-class movement, to serve as a bridge between theory and practice, turned toward the task of understanding the direction of the entire Italian society.

This more or less classical Gramscian position concerning the PCI's official role in the revolutionary struggle was, however, seriously challenged in the late fifties and sixties. The course of historical events—particularly those in Hungary in 1956—and some "spectacular neo-capitalist transformations" in Italy were the main factors contributing to this crisis. Attempts to recover

the PCI's former effectiveness subsequently shifted from an emphasis on democratic reforms within the party itself to an extensive stress on the centrality of factory labor in the control of capital accumulation and labor conditions. Galvano della Volpe's *Logica come scienza storica* (1956)³ was perhaps the most influential work to come out of this period of reassessment. It features a critique of historicism, but one characterized by its avoidance of a parallel attack on Gramsci's work and the basic standards of the PCI, of which della Volpe was a rather high-ranking member.

Beyond these periods of reevaluation, Italian Marxist theory followed pretty much the same route as the rest of Western Europe. Marx—Althusser's "problematic Marx"—was thoroughly reread in the mid to late sixties. There was also a phase, closely corresponding to the rereading of Marx, in which the Frankfurt School—Adorno, Horkheimer and especially Marcuse—held some sway. And, again, like the rest of Western Europe, the seventies witnessed a powerful debate centered around the place of democracy and pluralism in Marxist theory and practice. Among the major participants in that debate was L. Colletti, who published several important books which challenged the status and value of current Marxist ideology.⁴

The second part of the issue is devoted to the presentation of original philosophic works (as opposed to historical accounts of post-1940 Italian philosophy in the first part) which cover a very broad range of contemporary philosophic styles, areas and issues, including philosophy of law, linguistic philosophy, philosophical psychology and phenomenology. Most of the articles have interesting features, but there are three which, in my opinion, are outstanding.

The first of these is an article by Umberto Eco. Eco's original field—somewhat obscured by his recent success as a best-selling novelist⁵—is semiotics and linguistics, and it is from these two perspectives that he tries to articulate and explain the relationship between general semiotics and the philosophy of language. Eco's main purpose here is to try and establish in what sense general semiotics parallels philosophy of language, practiced in varying forms by philosophers from Aristotle to Husserl. He begins by trying to differentiate the subject matter encompassed by these two disciplines. In doing so, he discovers that both cover a wide range of linguistic phenomena, including communication, truth claims, logical analysis, reference, intentionality, and contextual-ity; and that both endeavor to study these phenomena from the vantage of a relatively precise scientific method. But, in the end,

philosophy of language differs from general semiotics in that linguistic or logical truth varies from one figure to the next ("What is true for Hegel is absolutely different from what is true for Tarski"),⁶ whereas semiotics can base its notions of truth on more stable evidence and rules. Thus the nature of philosophical truth (the *telos* of philosophy of language) differs from the semiotic definition of truth in that it can never be purely objective, factual, but is rather conditioned by "the necessity to present an orderly world."⁷ Philosophy, then, according to Eco, has a concrete power, a power to contribute to changing the world. General semiotics can share in this world-altering role, but must do so by working in complete coordination with specific semiotic systems (i.e., the grammar of a particular system of signs) so as to incorporate the greatest purview of linguistic phenomena. This optimistic proposal forms the basic conclusion of the article, since, in closing, Eco tries to bind the two by suggesting that neither's objects are palpable, in any way real; that both, in their own way, deal with "speculative realities" and are thus never quite sure of being on solid footing.

A second article of merit in this section is "Strategies of Individuation" by Remo Bodei. Its strongest features are a coherent thesis and an erudite, almost encyclopedic, grasp of the history of philosophical psychology. The thesis is simply that the dialectic is not only a theory of knowledge or a hermeneutic, but also "a strategy of individuation, a procedure of the constitution, enrichment and socialization of the individual."⁸ Consequently, the principal questions posed in the work center around the role played by the dialectic in the constitution of personal and social identity.

In pursuing these questions, Bodei examines the historical configurations of dialectical thought, from Plato onward, giving, as might be expected, considerable space to Hegel's conception. The emphasis in this historical excursus is mainly placed on the personal and interpersonal aspects of the dialectic, and it is thus not surprising that Hegel's claims that the dialectic is "a voyage of discovery" and that it is "a science of the *experience* of consciousness" are exhaustively scrutinized. Bodei goes on to bolster his arguments by citing the work of numerous other modern thinkers who have stressed the procedural facet of the dialectic, and the search for supportive evidence covers some territory—especially the work of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bergson—which would not ordinarily be associated with dialectic philosophy. All this is, of course, in support of his claim, which I consider basically correct, that what is important about the dialectic is not so much its

epistemological value, but its function as a means of personal development, psychological insight and individuation.

"Nihilisme et mutation: Les frontières du nouveau" is remarkable for its attempt to find in certain literary themes—especially those introduced by Goethe and developed by Mann, Dostoyevsky, Rilke and Kafka—the basis for the transformation of modern nihilism. Its author, Franco Rella, tries to distinguish in these themes a kind of "tragic narrative" which has had profound effects on modern literary and social theory and philosophy. This "tragic narrative" is first broached by Goethe in *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, and then further developed in his *Elective Affinities*. In effect, the narrative centers around the claim that all intuition of reality is constituted by a continual oscillation between the abnormal and the normal, between health and disease.

According to Rella, the principal modern exponents of such an oscillation are Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka and Dostoyevsky, all of whom propose, in some way or other, that the "modern predicament" stems from the degeneration of human communication, nobility, ethics, trust—in a word, from a "tragic nihilism." Moreover, Rella also credits the realization of this fluctuation between the poles of health and sickness, positivity and negativity to Jean-François Lyotard, who, in his *The Postmodern Condition*, characterizes it in terms of the two great postmodern narratives, those of progress and pure belief.⁹

This "negative thought," according to Rella, has also dominated Italian philosophy in the seventies. It has provoked a number of contemporary thinkers to reevaluate and exhaustively interpret the entire concept of "tragic nihilism," and to eventually turn it into a powerful positivity, a kind of certitude. Here one finds thinkers like Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti who propose, on a metaphysical level, a postdialectical thought, which is clearly not to be confused with either Heidegger's hermeneutic or the dialectics of Adorno or Benjamin. Rather, they propose a "weak thought" which does not attempt to rigidly categorize things, but instead to indicate the trajectories, directions, paths and possibilities of certain ideas. This is ultimately aimed at channeling nihilism (negativity) into a thought process which recognizes the integrity of the individual and human subjectivity. All this, however, can only be accomplished by the emergence of an idea of metamorphosis and of transformation which allows us to grasp and understand the mutations inherent in modern culture, outside the horizon of decadence.

Taking the above brief sampling of this issue into account,

there seems little doubt that postwar Italian philosophy has once again entered the mainstream of European thought. Thinkers like Banfi, Paci, Abbagnano and Luigi Pareyson, among many others, have made significant contributions to continental philosophy's two richest veins of thought, phenomenology and existentialism. Similarly, Umberto Eco, Massimo Cacciari ("*Interieur et experience*"), Giorgio Agamben ("*L'idee du langage*"), etc. have made serious and fruitful attempts to confront and, in certain cases, alter the work begun in the Vienna Circle and augmented by the efforts of Russell, Austen, Searle, etc. The same could be said for political philosophy, a field in which Italian Marxism continues to produce a corpus of fascinating and influential literature. And, perhaps most significantly, Italian philosophy of the late seventies and eighties has begun to grapple with questions of postmodernism, postdialectical thought, and nonteleological desire—questions that are on the very frontier of ultracontemporary theory. All this quite obviously points to the fact that there is a substantial, original body of Italian philosophy following Croce and Gramsci, and one that appears to have fully roused itself from the sleep induced by its earlier "unanimity of purpose," by neo-idealism and Fascism.

The second question posed in my introductory remarks is, at least in quantitative terms, a little more difficult to answer positively. Italian philosophy simply does not enjoy the popularity or influence of either its French or German counterparts in the English-speaking world. This can be attributed to a cluster of factors, of which two are perhaps most significant. First, Italian works in general, with the possible exception of literary ones, lag way behind French and German works in translation. This is most likely due to a hardened resistance to Italian as a serious scientific and intellectual language. This, moreover, leads to a closely related phenomenon which has also contributed to Italian philosophy's relative obscurity. Many major figures in Italian philosophy, sensing the neglect of Italian-language works on the world market, "expatriate" their ideas by writing in one or more of the dominant European languages (i.e., French, German or English), thereby splitting their reputations among several cultures and national philosophies. A number of figures—though not all philosophers—come to mind in this regard, including Umberto Eco, Gianni Vattimo, Félix Guattari, Armando Verdiglione, Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue, Ernesto Grassi. The second factor¹⁰ may be more difficult to remedy than the first, since it is rooted in the sort of economic relations established by the "writing-publishing" interests control-

ing the flow of material from Europe into the United States and elsewhere. Clearly, there has been a much stronger emphasis on producing a market for French and German thought, both in Europe itself and here. The production of this market, in turn, entails all those investments (financial, promotional, ideological, etc.) which characterize any multinational enterprise. Thus we, in the English-speaking world, are very much conditioned to consume a certain type of "intellectual product," which happens to be, at this point in time, the entirely "Eurocentric" productions of French and German thought. It is naturally very difficult to propose a remedy for this sort of condition, other than pointing it out. But it would appear that, as with any "product," the demand for Italian philosophy and cultural works in general would increase with its exposure, that is, with the translation of a large body of Italian philosophy into English, rather than the anemic trickle, the occasional interesting "tract," which is indicative of the situation nowadays. With a few more issues like this to stimulate interest in those who specialize in French and German thought, with a few more translations of neglected philosophical works, this, like the "sleep" induced by neo-idealism and Fascism, may also disappear from the scene of Italian philosophy.

1. Franco Lombardi's role in Italian philosophy should by no means be construed as a merely scholarly or interpretive one. He was, most assuredly, a force in the movement against Italian "official philosophy." For more information on Lombardi's thought, see Henry S. Harris, "The Modernity of Franco Lombardi," in *European Philosophy Today*, ed. George L. Kline (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1965), pp. 61-92.

2. Here I refer, among other things, to Husserl's stress on the "new science of transcendental subjectivity," which appears repeatedly in virtually all of his early phenomenological works, particularly in his *Ideen I*.

3. Della Volpe's *Logica come scienza storica* is now available in English; see also his *Rousseau and Marx and Other Writings* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Humanities, 1979).

4. See L. Colletti, *Intervista filosofica politica* (Laterza: Bari, 1974); *Tra Marxismo e no* (Laterza: Bari, 1979); *Tramonto dell' ideologia* (Laterza: Bari, 1980).

5. Here I refer to Eco's international best-seller *The Name of the Rose*.

6. *Critique: Italian Philosophers by Themselves*, Nos. 452-453, Jan.-Feb. 1985, p. 53.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

9. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

10. The idea for this second factor is largely the result of a criticism made by Peter Carravetta, the editor of *Differentia*. In an early version of the review, I had fallen into precisely the same trap that I have tried to indicate here, by claiming that French and German philosophy had, as by some inherent mechanism greater than that of Italian philosophy, produced "stars" of an unparalleled quality, and was therefore, justifiably, more popular than its Italian counterpart. I am grateful to Professor Carravetta for pointing out that no such mechanism indeed exists, but only appears as a result of the "dialectic of the self-regenerating process of (surplus-) value."

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