

**“And since the Italians are always one step ahead of us,  
and of everyone...”**  
**Italian Thought Between Ontological Weakness and  
Governmentality**

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ABSTRACT

It is March 8<sup>th</sup> 1978, and Michel Foucault is entering the second half of his lesson on governmentality at the *Collège de France*. The room is packed as usual. And towards the end of the session, Foucault – half-joking – claims: Italians were the first to formalize the difference between law and police, because they are always one step ahead of anyone. In this essay, Lorenzo Fabbri takes at face value Foucault’s remark and shows how it is the discovery of life that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century propelled, and still propels today, Italian thought ahead of its times.

*Key words:* governmentality, Foucault, Esposito, biopolitics, ontology, Italian theory.

It is March 8<sup>th</sup> 1978, and Michel Foucault is entering the second half of his lesson at the *Collège de France*. The room is packed as usual: Foucault’s attempt to create a more intimate environment by changing the time of the course to 8AM proved to be in vain. Two amphitheatres were still needed to accommodate the international audience coming to hear his lessons on biopolitics. After having provided in 1976-77 a genealogy of how war became the analogical model for understanding any power relation, in 1978 Foucault tackles the problem of bio-power and governmentality: *Security, Territory, Population* is devoted to explaining when and why the State assumed the governing of life as its main task. This was not always the case. The March 8<sup>th</sup> lecture makes it clear. One has to wait until the end of the sixteenth century

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for a full-fledged definition of State reason in terms of governmentality rather than sovereignty, of life management rather than abstract ruling. Where does this shift come from? Foucault does not seek to provide one single causal source for it. Nonetheless, it is only against the backdrop of the crisis of the pastoral paradigm – the Catholic Church’s modality of exercising power and understanding the world – that Foucault can explain the spotlight conquered by governmentality in early modern Europe.<sup>1</sup>

The pastoral paradigm, according to Foucault, enters an irreversible crisis due to the two great turmoils which shook-up the sixteenth century: the Protestant Reformation and the scientific revolution. On the one hand, the religious/political “insurrections of conducts” that inflamed Europe in connection with the Protestant Reformation proved that the Church’s pastorate was no longer able to direct a population that was growing both in size and in demands. Moreover, pastoral power itself was responsible for this climate of general insubordination. The Church’s dogma of unconditional obedience was premised on the assumption that it was revealing each member of its flock her inner self. One shall obey the Church, for the Church leads one to the identification of the most precious thing one had: her individuality. The pastoral process of identification, in other words, was grounded on the formidable appetite for individuality it generated. However, according to Foucault, this appetite for individuality was so burning that individuals stopped relying on Church’s truth procedures to access their deepest individuality. Why should the Church be trusted in the search for the self? If the key for becoming an authentic subject consists in discovering the truth about one self, isn’t it more cautious to find it autonomously rather than outsourcing its quest to Rome? The urgency became to establish new protocols of truth production which still allowed human beings to become subjects, without however subjecting them to traditional pastoral power. In this light, *Security, Territory, Population* interprets the counter-conducts emerging around the Protestant Reformation as experimentations with different modalities of fulfilling the desire for selfhood that the Church initially had initiated. As a reaction to this uprising of individualities, in the same temporal constellation, one also witnesses the explosion – outside of ecclesiastic structures – of all sorts of powers-knowledges strategizing on the best ways to conduct the rebellious multitude which the Church’s flock turned out to be. The pastoral power and its preoccupations did not simply disappear: Foucault talks about an intensification of that model once it got translated from the Church to the State. However, once secular authorities took on the problem of conducts

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1 See M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, pp. 227-53.

and conducting, there remained the necessity to define the form of rationality which sovereigns must employ in their governing. Why so? Obviously, because the goal that secular government is after is not heavenly blessedness, but the very mundane common good. But this is not the most important factor. It is the dramatic modification that the scientific revolution induced on Europe’s imagining of the universe that turned the activity of government into something mind-boggling and in need of definition. By the time that pastoral power became “politicized” – it is the end of the sixteenth century – the world was changing. The episteme which analogically tied together the temporal and the spiritual, the terrestrial and the divine, had become outdated. Until the scientific revolution, the cosmos looked like a book which God kept rewriting to benefit humanity. The anthropocentric universe of the Middle-Ages and the Renaissance was a world saturated with the encoded messages God sent to humanity in order to pastorally conduct it to the afterlife: It was for men’s salvation that God constantly marked the world with signs, prodigies, marvels, and monstrosities. However, Foucault says, the astronomy of Copernicus and Kepler, Galileo’s physics, the natural history of John Ray, the Port Royal grammar, demonstrated that the cosmos is not governed by an economy of salvation. God rules the world through the enforcement of the same general, immutable laws he applied when founding it. When Saint Thomas’s anthropocentrism left the stage to Newton’s mechanism, a whole finalist world, a world of ciphered messages suddenly disappeared. Instead of looking at the cosmos as an infinite text to decipher in order to understand God’s pastoral indications, it was now a matter of producing ordered tables which would classify simple and complex natures according to the genetic or mathematical principles determining their behavior, motion, and evolution. With the shift to the new episteme, a curious crossover therefore took place: God becomes a sovereign with regards to nature for he reigns over the world through constant general principles; the sovereign becomes a pastor in regards to humanity, for he governs through constant interventions on their lives. The de-governmentalization of the cosmos goes hand in hand with a pastoralization of politics. However, since God does not govern, it is impossible for temporal authorities to assume Him as an example in their attempts to govern living beings toward the common good. Hence, for political theorists from the time of the scientific revolution, the necessity to define the characteristics of the *ratio gubernatoria* as distinct from the *ratio pastoralis*. And since the Italians – Foucault comments referring to Giovanni Botero’s 1589 *Della Ragion di Stato* – are always one step ahead of us, i.e. the French, and of everyone else, they were the first to consciously formalize this difference, and to identify the *raison d’État* as the hands-on control over the subjects geared to the preservation of the State (p. 237).

Perhaps Foucault's witticism on Italian thought's "earliness" was just a *boudate*, a joke built upon the stereotype of Italians being constantly late. Perhaps it was an afterthought unworthy of any further inquiry. Perhaps, all these considerations ring true. And yet I am tempted to take Foucault's amusing statement seriously, and ponder this presumed precocity of Italian political thought. Is there really something that Italians understood before everyone else? And if there is, what is it? What is it that lead Botero to his conclusions?

I am tempted to say, that in Italy – earlier than elsewhere – one become aware of what Foucault in *Security, Territory, Population* calls the "weakness of human nature" (p. 259). It is this discovery that propelled Italian thought ahead of its times. By discovering human beings' ontological weakness already in the fifteenth century, Italian humanists in fact discovered life almost 400 years before the moment its discovery took place elsewhere in Europe according to Foucault.<sup>2</sup> It is enough to read the extraordinary pages Roberto Esposito's dedicates to Pico della Mirandola in his 2010 *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana* to find confirmation for this hypothesis.<sup>3</sup>

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Esposito's book is an impressive *tour de force* through 5 centuries of Italian thought. He focuses on figures as important as Machiavelli, Dante, Vico, Leopardi, Croce, Gentile, Gramsci, Negri, and Agamben to present Italian thought as an alternative to modern rationalistic European philosophy, and as a solution to the *impasse* in which the linguistic turn of the twentieth century has lead contemporary philosophy. This *impasse* in particularly visible in the prominence the island metaphors plays in Jacques Derrida and François Lyotard, and derives respectively from Heidegger's definition of language as the house of Being, and from Wittgenstein's claims regarding the incommensurability of forms-of-life utilizing different language games.<sup>4</sup> Very simplistically. If one starts from the presupposition that language is the determining factor in the transmission of a certain world-view, the problem one is doomed to face is how to establish bridges between peoples belonging to different languages and, therefore, different worlds. Lyotard tried to resolve this issue by resorting to transcendental imagination as the faculty which could

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2 See M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage, 1994, New York, pp. 250-303.

3 See R. Esposito, *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*, Einaudi, Torino, 2010, pp. 34-45.

4 See for instance J.-F. Lyotard, *Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989), and J. Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II* (University Of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011).

bridge the gaps separating these isolated, incommunicative, cultural-linguistic universes. On the other hand, for Derrida the difficulty is even more radical. Since even the speakers of a same language do not actually speak the same language, isolation is not experienced only in a trans-linguistic environment, being also found at the very basic level of interpersonal relations: hence Derrida's interest in William Defoe's description of the self as an island, and his unconvinced recourse to Hussler's empathy in order to save each monad from its desperate solitude. By focusing on the difference and distance between linguistic beings, Lyotard and Derrida betray an unexpected proximity with what Foucault in *The Order of Things* described as the "classical episteme": the universe is an ordered table of separate beings, each functioning on the basis of specific historical-linguistic laws. Obviously, there is nothing regressive in Lyotard and Derrida's insular philosophies, as devoted as they are in protecting local differences against any totalitarian and totalizing logic. There is no doubt that the "popularity" Lyotard and Derrida enjoyed is also due to resonances of their frameworks with the 1960s and 1970s anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic struggles. However, in the post-colonial, post-wall world, is the emphasis on differences still productive? Isn't there the risk of reinforcing the culture clash model and, with it, the borders keeping peoples and cultures apart? It is not a case that the popularity of Italian thought on US campus coincided with that of postcolonial and subaltern studies. My impression is in fact its success since the early 1990s is connected with the waning of essentialism, however strategic, as a viable way to resist globalization, and with the awareness that cultural relativism might reify differences and induce new forms of racisms. As Esposito brilliantly summarizes in his introduction, Italian thought is more interested in the commonality between men as living beings, rather than in the differences between men as linguistic beings; it is more interested in understanding language as a natural faculty common to all humankind, rather than in the different ways communities actualize such a capacity. By highlighting that life is at the foundation of language, that languages stem "liveliness" which all human beings share, Italian thought has been able to highlight the ontological commonality bringing together the men and women dwelling on this planet, instead of isolating them in finite sub-universes. For Italian thought, isolation has never been an issue – this is the position one derives from Esposito's genealogy – because it always started from bodily life as the basis of any linguistic experience, a ground which opens up any finite horizon of sense to its inner limits, to its outside. To other lives and other bodies, that is (pp. 10-13).<sup>5</sup> It is important however

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5 Esposito does acknowledge the crucial role that Italian feminism played in this move from the paradigm of language to the paradigm of life. However his genealogy is somehow forgetful of Italian female authors. This is particularly evident in the last chapter "The Return of

to highlight that what ultimately humanity shares, and allows it to overcome local differences, is itself nothing: there is no secret essence to be discovered in the depths of human interiority, because what one finds there is pure potentiality to be. The crucial point here is that at the basis of *mit-sein* – of humanity’s co-being, of its sharing a same world – there is its *mit-Sean*, its having a common ontological background. But this background is empty, is a void. It is ontological indetermination that allows humanity to potentially overcome any historical-linguistic differentiation. Since living beings can be, and say, whatever, they are no essential gaps keeping them apart. This intuition brings Italian thought close to postcolonial authors (*Chatterjee* and *Sakai*), and is particular evident in *Virno’s* thematization of language as a virtuosistic faculty inscribed into human neoteny (*A Grammar of Multitude*); in *Negri’s* emphasis on the creative production of ontological differences (“The Italian Difference”); in *Agamben’s* discussion of the whateverness and the mobility of living beings (*The Coming Community*); and in *Esposito’s* discussion of community as co-sharing and exposure to otherness (*Communitas*). Where does this awareness and interest in commonality and language, rather than in isolation and languages come from?

I would say, by taking up the link between thought and territory highlighted by *Deleuze*, that it comes from twentieth century Italy’s porosity: the porosity of Italian cities vis-à-vis the militarization of the post-Haussmann Paris; and the porosity of Italian 1968, that – lasting at least 10 years – exposed activists to a friction of bodies consisting not only in violence, conflict, and bullets, but also in love, friendship, and unexpected alliances. *Esposito’s* explanation does not differ too much from mine structurally: his notes on the “deterritorialization” of Italian cities and Italian politics are just five hundred years backdated. Life, commonality, and potentiality were in fact discovered in Italian cities already in the fifteenth century. For *Esposito*, Italy’s exceptionality was already emerging on the threshold between the middle ages and early modernity (pp. 13-15).

*Martin Heidegger* in his famous 1947 letter to *Jean Beaufret* dismissed Italian fifteenth century *umanesimo* as a worn-out repetition of a metaphysical subjectivism deriving from Roman philosophy. *Esposito* reads it instead as a revolutionary withdrawal from any essentialization of human nature. For instance – *Esposito* asks – is it really possible to derive an essentialistic definition of man from *Pico’s De hominess dignitate*? In this oration from 1486, *Pico* in fact identified the lack of a predetermined natural essence as God’s most generous gift to humanity. God – *Pico* writes and *Esposito*

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Italian Philosophy” where *Esposito* discusses at length the works of *Massimo Cacciari*, *Giorgio Agamben*, *Gianni Vattimo*, *Toni Negri*, and himself, almost forgetting *Rosi Braidotti*, *Adriana Cavarero*, *Luisa Muraro*, and *Ida Dominijanni*.

recalls – gave Adam neither a stable place, a proper semblance, nor one singular function, so that he could acquire whatever space, form, or role he might have desired (p. 43). It is surely true that the humanistic tradition was partly motivated by the pedagogical necessity to define and propagate, in a critical moment of European history, the proper *homo humanus* as the total other in regards to the *homo barbarus*. Edmund Husserl in 1935 hoped to save the West from the looming catastrophe repeating the same move, and coloring it with some Orientalistic assumptions about the East. However, in contrast to Heidegger, Esposito downplays the pedagogical features of humanism, and suggests that the very antithesis between human and inhuman is rendered inoperative by Pico. Once one discovers that the essence of man coincides with his impropriety – the lack of a proper place, a proper form, and a proper destiny – then one must also give up any humanistic definition of man’s mission on earth, together with the late medieval and early Renaissance rhetoric around “*de dignitate, excellentia et nobilitate hominis*” which only Pico’s oration seems to repeat. At stake in Pico is not a Neoplatonic determination of man’s median place in a hierarchic scale of living beings which has the beast at its lowest level and the angel on the top; and not even a Neoaristotelian image of man as a *minor mundus*, the gate of access to the whole cosmos. The wager of the *Oratio de dignitate humanis* is a shift from the description of man’s essence, to the interest in what he can be, since – Esposito suggests – Pico realized that man “is nothing other than what he becomes, or, better said, of what he wants to ‘do’ of himself” (p. 43). This movement from an ontology centered on being to one centered on potentiality is crucial in Esposito’s genealogy of the Italian difference. The discovery of man as a potential being, a being without content, a site for the overcoming of the *dispositif* of personhood, production of differences, and innovative virtuosism, in fact launched Pico and the humanistic tradition beyond European modern philosophy, and actually made Italy’s pre-modern thought an alternative to modern metaphysical rationalism. In the latter case, one deals with a subject understood as a being with a distinct, permanent essence; a being with a stable collocation in the ordered table the world appeared to be; a being that can be easily defined and identified, and therefore can serve – let us think of Descartes – as the foundation for a whole systematic philosophy. In the former, one has to do with a subject which cannot be the foundation of any system, for she herself is marked by an intrinsic ontological weakness; a disposition for change and becoming that makes her all too elusive, precarious, and mobile. It is on the basis of Esposito’s Deleuze-driven interpretation of *umanesimo* (and the return of Italian thought at the end of the twentieth century is connected with Foucault’s prophecy about this century being Deleuzian) that I ventured to say that Italian humanists

discovered *life* well before such a concept was introduced in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. In fact, according to Foucault's history of knowledge, the paradigmatic crisis of the classical episteme with its fever for synchronic and diachronic maps of beings, was provoked by the discovery of forces which broke open the possibility of encapsulating the world and its history into an ordered table. With the emerging knowledge of production, life, and language, the tabulated space of the classic world began to topple: "European culture is inventing for itself a depth in which what matters is no longer identities, distinctive characters, permanent tables with all their possible paths and routes, but great hidden forces developed on the basis of their primitive and inaccessible nucleus, origin, causality, and history."<sup>6</sup> What was revealed is that the order visible everywhere was only a superficial glitter above an abyss. In Esposito's genealogy, this outlook on the abyss characterized the Italian episteme since the fifteenth century ("Humanism's Vertigo" is the title of the section Esposito dedicates to Pico) and can be detected as the crucial intuition also in Machiavelli, Bruno, and Vico. The realization that the becoming rather than the order is the rule of the world, according to Esposito, took place in Italy before anywhere else because of the lack both of a central state and of stable political spaces within the Peninsula. It is Italy's intrinsic "deterritorialization" that put Italian thinkers ahead of their time, and consequently also outside of Foucault's epistemic history. Moreover, it is precisely the awareness of the nothingness (and therefore "whateverness") of the human being that inaugurated the immunitarian and the communitarian traditions Foucault and Esposito respectively discuss in their works. On the one hand, we have the theorists of the *raison d'État* who tried to secure a permanent identity for the citizens at the expense of their potentiality of becoming, but for the benefit of the political space's stability. On the other hand, we have the authors Esposito studies in *Pensiero vivente*, who instead thematized becoming as the necessary prerequisite for the liveliness of all political assemblages. The common trait of these two traditions is the awareness of man's natural indocility, his ungovernability, that is. In fact, it is only within an anti-classical epistemic world, a space where life was perceived as ontologically disordered, neither pastorally kept on track by God nor governed by immutable laws, that the problem of governmentality and anti-governmentality could have arisen. It is while commenting on Giovanni Antonio Palazzo, another Italian theorist of State reason from the end of the sixteenth century that Foucault in *Security, Territory, Population* in fact concludes: "The weakness of human nature and men's wickedness mean that nothing could be maintained in the republic if there were not at every

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6 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, cit., p. 250.



point, at every moment, and in every place a specific action of *raison d'État* assuring a concerted and reflected government" (p. 259).

In order to maintain the republic, because of humanity's weakness, governmentality is necessary and will always be necessary. The point is whether or not the maintenance of the republic in its present-tense is what politics should all be about. The greatest merit of both Esposito's *Il pensiero vivente* and of Italian theory more broadly is their unequivocal "No" to this question.

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