

# Crisis and Conflict: on the Genesis of Italian Theory

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peer-reviewed article

The article was written as part of a project funded by the National Science Centre on the basis of decision number DEC-2014/15/N/HS1/02431.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, we have witnessed a profusion of English-language translations, anthologies and studies (and thus hegemonic intellectual circulation) of the works of Italian thought, which has strengthened the position of contemporary Italian philosophers, or more broadly – social theorists – as bold and original commentators on politics and power relations. The reception of contemporary Italian political philosophy, however, began in earnest only at the turn of the millennium. 1998 saw the translation of Giorgio Agamben's famous book *Homo Sacer*; two years

later, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri published their famous *Empire*; over the next two decades, English editions of books by Roberto Esposito, Paolo Virno, Christian Marazzi and Silvia Federici, as well as subsequent volumes written by the American-Italian duo of Hardt and Negri, saw the light of day. The joint work of the latter was especially essential for consolidating the position of contemporary Italian political philosophy in global academia. Both authors introduced the international reader to the problems and topics previously discussed in Italy, and included concepts derived, among others, from Italian post-Operaism in the broader context of critical social theories.

Roberto Esposito has assumed the role of the main promoter of the thesis on the existence of a separate, specific character of contemporary Italian political philosophy over the last several years. He himself most often uses the term “Italian thought” (*pensiero italiano*), and thus distinguishes it from “German philosophy” and “French theory” [*German Philosophy*]. For a long time he also continued his organisational and institutional efforts to ensure that younger Italian philosophers have been able to take advantage of this unique situation of the growing popularity of Italian philosophy in the world, and that foreign researchers and scholars interested in “Italian thought” have the greatest possibility to expand their knowledge on the state of intellectual discussion in Italy.

The turbulent history of post-war Italy, full of conflicts in which philosophical disputes often played an important

role, resulted in many Italian theorists working outside the Apennine Peninsula. On the one hand, this applies to the older generation of political dissidents, many of whom were accused of terrorism and activities against the Italian state in the late 1970s and 1980s as part of the counter-revolution taking place in Italy after the so-called the Years of Lead. This term refers to the period of intense social revolts and acts of red and brown terrorism lasting from the second half of the 1960s until the end of the 1970s, and according to some interpretations even longer. Activists and intellectuals fleeing the peninsula could apply for political asylum in France under the so-called Mitterrand doctrine of 1985, according to which people prosecuted for left-wing terrorism, but who themselves did not actively commit acts of “bloody terrorism”, were not extradited to Italy.

On the other hand, a similar fate of forced emigration was often one experienced by the younger generation. The fact that the concept of “Italian Theory” was created in an extremely short time – obviously modelled on the term “French Theory”, which has existed for some time – shows that the intensive development of contemporary Italian political philosophy in recent years has essentially been a global process involving researchers from both inside and outside the Italian academy from the very beginning. Although derived from the specific experience and historical and social determinants of the philosophical and political culture of the Apennine Peninsula, “Italian theory” was from the very beginning an intellectual current open to its “against” [*Da fuori*], and developed in cooperation with cen-

tres and groups operating outside Italy [Minca]. This was in contrast to “French theory”, which became such only after having been developed very strongly in the French context, and then taken up and digested by the American academy, and subsequently returned to the European continent, stripped not only of many theoretical elements, but separated from various aspects of political radicalism [Cusset].

The term “Italian Theory” is far from uncritically accepted by Italian theorists [cf. for example Pasquinelli]. It has been referred to as purely “temporary” or “makeshift” [Gentili et al. 1-7], and sometimes even rejected by more politically involved people because of placing the discourse of Italian political philosophy in a purely academic horizon. Reacting to the growing popularity of “Italian thought” in international academia, in a short pamphlet *La differenza italiana* (The Italian difference, published in 2005) Antonio Negri claimed that in the case of post-war Italy, we can basically speak of only two figures who developed a philosophy worthy of the name, that is, as a practice that set the direction of thinking and orientation in the common world. According to Negri, these two figures, who in their own ways continued the direction set out in philosophy by Antonio Gramsci were: Mario Tronti, one of the founders of Operaism, and Luisa Murano, one of the most important representatives of radical Italian feminism of difference. Tronti, focused (at least in his operaist period) on the problem of exploitation of men by men, whilst Murano dealt with the issue of the exploitation of women by men. These are the only figures, wrote Negri, who proposed a truly

original and specifically “Italian” theoretical perspective. Negri’s theses about the “Italian difference” should, in my opinion, be treated not literally, but as a kind of regulatory warning that Italian political philosophy should always seek active involvement in the problems raised by Tronti and Murano (and earlier by Gramsci) – exploitation, violence, resistance and counterpower.

In this context, it is necessary to emphasise the historical and political genesis of contemporary Italian political philosophy and its roots in the post-war social conflicts that swept across the Apennine Peninsula. Italian Theory tries to express and work through the experiences of social struggles that were a reaction to the crisis of the post-war socio-political order in Italy, and more broadly in most countries belonging to the then capitalist centre. As such, the radical political philosophy developed in Italy today thus represents a re-evaluation, reworking and development of the legacy of the social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, which are often referred to generally as the protest movements of 1968 [Vinen]. The very legacy of the 1968 revolution is particularly ambivalent [Wainwright]. On the one hand, a culture of protest and contestation was formed, which permanently set the stakes and the horizon of thinking about emancipatory or revolutionary politics: from the women’s liberation movement, through radical grassroots workers and student organisations, to political campaigns targeting systemic problems, including radically criticising capitalism as an economic form and the state as a political form (and imperialism as a combination of the two). On

the other hand, however, the same demands for emancipation, freedom and self-determination laid the foundations for a new form of post-Fordist, neoliberal capitalism based on flexible employment, entrepreneurial individualism [Bröckling], a new managerial culture [Boltanski and Chiappello] and the dismantling of workers' organisations, not to mention the controversial history of the sexual revolution.

The philosophical theory most strongly associated with the protests of 1968 continues to be revised today. The validity of a bottom-up policy vision based on self-organisation and horizontal relations has also been questioned. Representatives of various factions of contemporary Italian political philosophy, especially post-Operaism, are in this context attacked by left-wing theorists calling for a return to the party as the most important form of political organisation [Dean]. As I am unable to enter into a discussion with many of these legitimate critics here, I will limit myself to the following remark: recognising the personal guilt of many intellectuals in creating the climate of the 1968 revolution or the final failure of autonomist, grassroots and horizontal political movements, does not take away the legitimacy of their slogans, demands and diagnoses, or the battle they waged, or repeatedly extremely fruitful experiments with forms of political organisation. There is nothing we could do worse with the legacy of the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s today than simply reject them. Grassroots autonomous movements appeared for a reason and were a response to the specific struggle, functionality or decay of existing institutions,

or the transformations which the economies and societies of post-war Europe underwent. Contemporary Italian political philosophy should, in my opinion, be treated as an attempt to formulate a political philosophy not from some abstract, seemingly neutral position, but from a perspective previously formulated by autonomous, radical social movements (both those from the 1960s and 1970s and later). The point is not to treat the theories mentioned here as ready-made solutions, strategies and answers, but rather as attempts to express in the language of the Western philosophical tradition the experiences that have shaped the last half century of class struggles, social conflicts, economic transformations and political crises.

Thanks to this rooting in the experiences of rebellion and social resistance during the crisis of post-war industrial capitalism and the welfare state, Italian theory was able to formulate critical analyses of politics and economics that preceded and prefigured some of the dominant theories of late capitalism today. Among the theories developed on the basis of Italian Theory, which were ahead of their time (or rather, they fitted perfectly, but were ahead of the critical thought of their time), of note are the post-Operaist critique of capitalism in the era of “post-Fordism”, which was one of the first to combine a return to critical reading of Marx’s political economy with recognition of the social and political effects of mass higher education and the new role of knowledge in the capitalist production regime [Virno; Lazzarato], as well as formulating tools useful for contemporary critical analysis of higher education [Szadkowski].

The aforementioned economist Marazzi analysed the transition of the US economy under the domination of the global Empire to the modes of “war economy” and the global war on terrorism, and anticipated the financial crisis, which he described a few years later as one of the first Marxist economists [Marazzi]. The theory of cognitive capitalism, which emerged from post-Operaist critique, and which was born in response to the dotcom crisis at the turn of the century, formulated the paradigm of analysing cognitive work and creating value on the internet – significantly before later analyses of digital work or platform capitalism – is in many respects still an interesting, alternative approach to criticism of the political economy of the Internet [Fumagalli]. Hardt and Negri’s loyalty to the autonomist concept of politics allowed them for an original and innovative analysis of the new movements of protest after the 2007-2008 financial crisis [*Declaration*], and later, much more for analysing mass social movements like the Black Lives Matter [*Assembly*]. Finally, it should be noted that both theories derived from Operaist feminism, including those of Silvia Federica and Alisa del Re, which emphasised the role of reproduction in political and economic-political analyses, as well as the Italian philosophy of biopolitics, primarily in the version proposed by Esposito, which emphasises the necessity to place life at the very centre of the interests of philosophy and political theory. In today’s times of political, economic and ecological crisis, life as an object and category of analysis is invoked by an increasing number of theoretical and political positions (for example those related to the theory of social reproduction).



Adopting a concept of autonomy is the common denominator of all the philosophical, political and economic concepts formulated within the framework of the Italian Theory. In Agamben's works, who remains in many respects the most original and radical thinker within Italian Theory (and as such one with the most limitations to his perspective), we encounter a consistent and uncompromising philosophy of the autonomy of life in relation to law and language. Hardt and Negri perceive political, social and economic transformations from the perspective of the autonomy constituting the power of the multiplicity in relation to the state and capital apparatus. The philosophy of Esposito's biopolitics assumes the autonomy of life from various "dispositives" shaping individual and collective forms of subjectivity and thus designs alternative procedures of transindividuation. Post-Operaist feminism continually emphasises the autonomy of women's political power and the autonomy of social reproduction in the face of capitalist exploitation of unpaid labour. But the theory of cognitive capitalism also assumes the autonomy of forms of value in financial markets or in digital information circuits, and researchers working in this paradigm have developed a theory about the crisis of the law of value as it is understood in the labour theory of value, arguing that new forms of immaterial, digital and biopolitical work inevitably lead to a crisis because of the impossibility of their effective and efficient measurement and valorisation.

At the most general theoretical level, contemporary Italian political philosophy therefore begins with the impossibility of fully mediating social relations: no social institu-

tion, be it the market, law or the state, is adequate for the effective management of the richness of social relations and their conflicting nature (especially in late capitalism). Sooner or later they have to fall into a crisis, if they do not already function on the basis of crisis management mechanisms. Political conflicts, forms of immaterial labour, the exploitation of cognitive labour, the state of emergency, the biopolitics of multitude, and so on, are various concepts used in contemporary Italian political philosophy to show the general crisis of the institutional orders of late capitalist societies. Italian Theory does not try to propose a new vision of social, legal, economic organisation, but instead tries to consistently think about the crisis and from within the crisis, as the right place of politics.

This specific attitude of Italian Theory is the result of its working through the post-war political history of Italy from the perspective of radical social movements that date back to the mid-1960s. It was then in Italy that a wave of workers' revolts and strikes slowly began to rise, directed against both the capitalist bosses, as well as trade unions and leftist parties, which were largely involved in the post-war reconstruction of the Italian state. The famous Italian economic miracle, the extraordinary economic growth in the post-war history of the Apennine Peninsula, had its dark side in the form of the enormous exploitation of the working masses, especially those emigrating from the south to the industrialised north, and the involvement of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the largest communist party in the capitalist world, in social development understood

as national interest. The PCI not only excluded the possibility of rebelling against capitalist development, but also introduced a conservative vision of the family and role of women in society into its ideology [Righi 45-71]. It was in this climate that dissidents from the PCI and the Italian Socialist Party began to become interested in the forms of organisation and resistance among unskilled workers, whose masses worked in factories in Turin, Padua, Venice, Milan and other northern Italian cities, and who were not satisfied with the vision of subjugating life to the nationwide goal of social and economic development. From the research on the “mass worker”, Italian Operaism [Wright] was born, one of the main slogans of which was the restoration of class struggle as the most important concept in political theory and practice. The famous text by Mario Tronti Lenin in England formulated it in terms of the “Copernican revolution in Marxism”, according to which the activity of the working class, as opposed to any laws of social or economic development, should define the theoretical and political perspective [Tronti]. A similar position was later adopted by Operatist feminism, which emphasised the autonomy and primacy of women’s struggle [Dalla Costa and James].

Crisis and conflict are the concepts that perhaps best characterise the theoretical and political starting point of contemporary Italian political philosophy. Both concepts are rooted in the discussions of the 1970s between theorists previously associated with Operaism on the subject of crisis, dialectics and “negative thought” [*Krisis*; Books 1-50; Mandarini]. The crisis in the discussions of that time meant that dialectical

sublation was impossible. In line with the discussions of the time, no institutional structures of mediation, no attempts to manage the economy, and no mechanisms for stabilising social tensions were able to offer a social order that would not be prone to crisis. The discussions about the crisis marked the way in which post-war philosophy in Italy carried out its critique of dialectics, which did not deviate from either the debates within German critical theory or the conceptual innovations of French philosophy. In the case of the discussions in Italy, the most important conclusion has concerned the centrality of the conflict, which for Italian philosophers, from Machiavelli to Negri, Federici, Agamben and Esposito, is the true reality of social relations and political experience.

The thesis about the centrality of the conflict as a specific feature of Italian Theory can be found in the book by Roberto Esposito *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana* (Living Thought. The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy), which influenced the reception of contemporary Italian political philosophy. Esposito focuses on a number of characteristic features of modern Italian philosophy that also determine the characteristics of its contemporary form. These features were primarily influenced by first the political history of the states of Italy, and then of the unified Italy, but also by an absolutely unique event – the Italian Renaissance and the humanist revolution. These factors meant that Italian philosophy was never closely related to the state apparatus or to any concept of “nation” [*Living Thought* 19-21]. Italian humanism connected thinkers, scientists, artists and engineers from various Italian

states and later radiated throughout Europe. At the same time, Italian political thought tried to situate politics outside the state structures typical of modern Europe, which gave it a unique position vis-à-vis modern political philosophy focused on linking territory and sovereignty. This deterritorialising tendency of the entire tradition of Italian philosophy gained importance with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the advent of a new phase of globalisation. This was not a new experience for Italian philosophy – it always went beyond the modern and contemporary political structures.

In addition to this unique Italian “geophilosophy” [*Living Thought* 12; *Geofilosofia*] a distinctive feature of the philosophy of Italy is its connection with the source, with its roots, which in the case of Italian philosophy signify a constant connection with the Renaissance and with the ideals of humanism. Contrary to most currents in modern European philosophy, Italian philosophy has never tried to *break with its roots*, both historically and ontologically, in order to base thought on an undisputable, non-world and non-historical epistemological foundation. From the metahistorical and philosophical perspective, it can be claimed that Italian philosophy has never undergone any subject-oriented, historical or linguistic turn, because the paradigm of thinking it pursued did not allow to formulate philosophical questions that would lead to these “turns”. It has been a philosophy that has always analysed the interconnection of the world and the subject in their historical dimension, and treated language as one of the elements of this relationship, as an element of the worldly nature of human communities. Per-

haps a *practical turn* should be distinguished, a turn characterising the philosophy of, among others, Labriola, Gentile and Gramsci (and to some extent also Croce), the main category of which was the problem of *praxis*. Nevertheless, this “turn” further immersed the philosophising subject in the world in which the practice was implemented – with one exception, precisely, in the form of Gentile’s idealism. Contemporary Italian philosophy is fully immersed in this tradition, which Remo Bodei summed up with the interesting concept of “impure reason” [Bodei] – a philosophical reason that remains open to the discussions taking place in the world and the power relations that govern it, that does not abstract from them and does not try to take a transcendent position in relation to them.

Reaching for this historical source is seldom conservative in Italian philosophy. The uniqueness of the way in which contemporary Italian political philosophy reaches back to tradition results, firstly, from the specificity of this source, i.e. the deterritorialising and universalistic nature of Renaissance humanism, open from its very beginning to its “against” [*Da fuori*]. Secondly, however, it also comes from the specificity of how the very act of “reaching back” looks in the case of Italian philosophy. As Esposito emphasises, even in the case of the most important example of historicism in the Italian philosophical tradition, namely that of Benedetto Croce, referring to history did not take the form of historicising all aspects of reality, but in creating a figure of the *actuality of the originary* [*Living Thought* 23]. However, what determines the specificity of this figure in the case of Italian philosophy,

including contemporary philosophy, is the *non-historical nature of this originary*. Esposito considers this to be the most important feature of Italian philosophy in general: the “return to principles”, which was taken up by Machiavelli, Vico’s original community, as well as the reflections of Vincenzo Cuoco, the eighteenth-century revolutionist who attempted to explain the cultural and social differences between peoples through the geographical differences of the territories they inhabited. These were philosophical gestures made by thinkers immersed in the element of history, who, in order to explain this history, and above all the *current historical situation*, used different concepts of the non-historical source of historical phenomena [*Living Thought* 25].

What did they do this for? Certainly, conservative revolutionism is not characterised by contemporary Italian political philosophy and has rarely been characterised by the Italian philosophical and political culture at all.

The decisive criterion is whether the non-historical source is used to resolve a conflict, or vice versa, whether the source is used to revive the conflict and give it a productive form. Italian philosophy pursued the latter, what Esposito calls *immanentisation of antagonism*: creating such a concept of society that would not exclude a political conflict, but would assume a conflict that would revive and strengthen this society. And the best way to do this is to refer to the non-historical source of the conflict, to antagonism, which is the principle at the base of social relations. The source of antagonism and conflict is precisely this non-historical source of history.

What vision of subjectivity results from such an approach to the relationship between politics, life and history? It is certainly not subjectivity separated from the world and its conflicts, but neither is it subjectivity completely immersed in history. In the latter case, it would not be able to distance itself from its world and oppose the relations prevailing in it. It does not have any transhistorical identity and is completely immersed in the world – both in the historical one and in the one usually obscured by prevailing social relations, which survives under the surface of history and manifests itself in the form of a conflict.

“Worldliness” or, in other words, “secularization” (*mondanizzazione*) of the subject, according to Esposito, is the last of the key features of Italian philosophy and is the most important effect of the principle of reaching back to the non-historical source. The subject is completely immersed in the world, is solely its being-in-the-world, but that does not mean that it is completely determined by the present form of this world.

Recognising conflict and crisis as the central concepts of political philosophy, and as the irremovable reality of social relations, makes contemporary Italian political philosophy or Italian Theory a potentially valuable perspective for analysing our crisis-ridden reality. Before we start designing a new vision of the future, free from the ills of the present world, let us make sure that we are able to think in a way that does not reduce the forms of political conflicts and often overlooked struggles for a better life to a preconceived vision of politics, economy or even ethics. Thanks to its roots in the fierce and



theoretically prolific social struggles in Italy, contemporary Italian political philosophy is able to offer some conceptual solutions, and even a productive deconstruction of concepts inherited from Western tradition, which allows for conflict and crisis to be viewed as phenomena in themselves, as the proper domain of politics<sup>1</sup>.

Translated from Polish by Aleksandra Sokalska-Bennett  
Article first appeared in: "Czas Kultury" no. 4, 2020, pp. 59-64

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Barbara Brzezicka for the inspiration to write this paper and for comments on earlier versions.

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