

## BEYOND THE PRINCIPLE OF PROPERTY

REVIEW OF *DIFFERENZE ITALIANE. POLITICA E FILOSOFIA: MAPPE E SCONFINAMENTI*, EDS. DARIO GENTILI, ELETTRA STIMILLI

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**Abstract:** A review of the volume edited by Dario Gentili and Elettra Stimilli *Differenze italiane. Politica e filosofia: mappe e sconfinamenti*. It explores the validity of speaking about “Italian Theory” or “Italian Thought” and reconstructs the main characteristics of contemporary Italian political philosophy based on the reviewed volume and other publications by i.a. Roberto Esposito. In the end the author formulates critical remarks about the role of French philosophy, especially Derrida’s deconstruction, as assumed in works by some Italian philosophers.

**Keywords:** Italian philosophy, Italian difference, living thought, biopolitics, political theology, deconstruction, Roberto Esposito

*Italian Theory, Italian Difference, Radical Thought* (Esposito 2010; Esposito 2015; Hardt and Virno 1996) – regardless of the label which could serve to describe the vast contemporary movement in Italian philosophy, its suppleness and vigour calls not only to re-examine, but even to reject the memorable thesis by Deleuze and Guattari about the supposed lack of a proper “milieu for philosophy” in Italy (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). It’s hard to imagine the contemporary intellectual landscape without references to the notions developed by such thinkers as Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito or Antonio Negri. The recent volume published in Rome – *Differenze italiane. Politica e filosofia: mappe e sconfinamenti* [Italian Differences. Politics and Philosophy: Maps and Border-crossings] – edited by Dario Gentili and Elettra Stimilli shows that the list of names that call for our attention is much longer.

Since the turn of the century, along with the dissipation of the impetus of post-structuralism it’s been Italian philosophy that has provided some of the most important contributions to the debates at the intersection of philosophy, politics and aesthetics. We could consider the vast reception of Agamben’s “homo sacer” project (published since 1995 and translated into English for the first time in 1998) and Hardt’s and Negri’s *Empire* (2000) as the beginning of this stunning career of Italian Thought. The rising flood of monographs issued by many important academic reviews (e.g. *Angelaki*, *SubStance*, two volumes of *Diacritics* in 2009), as well as regularly organized conferences (including the massive one at Cornell University in 2010) have led to the establishment of the theoretical language and concepts of Italian Theory within the English-speaking academic community.

The first question that comes to mind when it comes to consider the phenomenon of Italian political philosophy is whether it is possible to find any characteristics common to the various heterogeneous thinkers, who sometimes appear so disunited and disparate with each other. Or is it a question of the “Italian Theory” filling the gap after the death of the main members of the so-called “French Theory”, thus only confirms our need for an intellectual collective? Can we speak of an attempt to name some existing community of thought, or is it just our will to create one? In other words, is it possible in this case to speak of a community of intellectuals conducting research in similar fields and devoting their attention to the same set of problems?

Whereas the question of “Italianness” could suggest an introduction to the problems of identity and property, “Italian Theory” attempts in reality to break with these notions in order to delineate possible ways for thought to go beyond the horizons and frontiers which place limits on them. This going-beyond (*le fuoriuscita*) and border-crossings, a kind of Deleuzian *lignes de fuite*, constitutes one of the main and privileged operations in domain of the Italian Thought. Such a vital transgression does away with fixed frontiers of identitarian possessiveness and property, putting a positive accent not on the commodity or property, but rather on that which exceeds it and goes always beyond. In any case, Italian

Thought works against stability understood as a form of possible appropriation and possession. It is in some way significant that the impulse that brought this volume to life came from the outside, namely from Paris, where in January of 2014 a conference was held titled “Does Italian Theory Exist?” (*L’Italian Theory esiste-t-elle?*). The book is also supplemented by papers presented at another conference: *Italian Theory. Categorie e problemi della filosofia Italiana contemporanea*, which was held in Naples in the same year. “Beyondness” is confirmed also by the resonance which this mode of thinking generates outside of Italy. The participation of scholars from various parts of the globe (including a member of *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, Mikołaj Ratajczak, together with Mateusz Burzyk from Poland) testify that we are not dealing here with any form of particularity, but rather with such conceptual tools that seem to be one of the most valuable when we attempt to rethink the essential assumptions of modern global economic-political systems.

Border-crossing also constitutes – as is pointed out by Roberto Esposito in the opening essay – the crucial experience for the main currents of post-war European philosophy, which was always undergoing “a sort of dislocation which *threw it out of itself*” (Gentili and Stimilli 2015, 9), as reflected in the forced emigration of the members of the Frankfurt School to the USA and the transplantation of French poststructuralism into American universities. In addition, abandonment of the lingual matrix has had as its effect on transformation of the very conceptual structure of thought. This migration of ideas, this movement of thought beyond the language in which it was elaborated, the loss of proper frames, are all linked with accompanying deformations of original ideas, which makes room for mutations, but which also paradoxically leads to some reactivation of thought which otherwise could simply congeals. It is as if only by losing its own property philosophy could be revitalized. The juxtaposition of German Philosophy, French Theory and Italian Thought allows Esposito to explicate that this (strictly immanent) “beyondness” and “outsideness” are the main values of the latter. Therefore, perhaps the most crucial notion of this *pensiero vivente* would be disuniting, getting outside of the control of stable identity and property. It is not “unity” and “agreement”, but rather “antagonism” and “discordance” which are being positively appraised here. Thus, one is able to describe the plane of “Italianity” not so much by a geographical criterion as by tensions, contrasts, conflicts and, more precisely, differences. Antagonism is vital because it makes a promise of political change, transformation of the implemented order, a *too actual* order. In consequence, Italian Theory claims that where there is difference, there is resistance. It’s a zone of unstable heterogeneity, which paradoxically could be reduced and eliminated by the very label “Italian Theory”. The main aim of “Italians” isn’t, as a matter of fact, a theory which could neutralize antagonisms, but rather a practice which will inflame them in the name of “life”, which seems to be a central category for the contemporary Italian political philosophy. Italian philosophical culture “from its

origins was directed toward historical and political life” (Esposito 2015, 13). It was many centuries ago that Italian Thought had already discovered “life” as a principle of any philosophical reflexion and made a specific turn, an “epochal transition that has at its centre the question of *bios*” (Esposito and Hanafi 2009, 56). There isn’t any separate “philosophy of life” in Italy, because the “whole Italian thought was the thinking about life in its tension with politics and history” (Esposito 2015, 13). And if we wish to search for the problem which is undoubtedly common for the majority of contemporary Italian political philosophers, it would be the question of the relation between life, politics and history. This triad forms a conceptual framework which offers them a language to interpret contemporary political, social and economic relations.

It is this historical feature that sets Italian philosophy outside the transcendental horizon which was shared by a great part of the dominant currents of European thought. Instead Italian thinkers were always focused not so much on epistemology or metaphysics, but rather on political philosophy and the question of the economical-political formation of life. As a result, from the very beginning Italian thought – starting with the works of its classics such as Dante, Machiavelli, Vico and Leopardi – has been concentrated on notions that seem neglected in the non-Italian intellectual traditions. “In this sense we can speak of Italian thought as an impure, or bastard, thought” because of its interest in what “exceeds the philosophical lexicon”. This makes it “a thought of life in its tension with politics and history” (Esposito and Hanafi 2009, 56).

However, the privileged position of the relationship between these three concepts is clearly visible as a mark of Foucault’s legacy, as well as of other traditions that influence and enrich the theoretical language of Italian thought: Deleuze’s materialistic philosophy of immanence, the political readings of Spinoza, different strains of Italian Marxism, etc. Political (and philosophical) antagonism seems here, more than in other philosophical traditions, literally a question of life and death. It was always the political reflection which was compulsively situated beyond the structures of institutions of the nation state and outside national boundaries (unlike many other hegemonic philosophical cultures). Consequently Italian Thought was to become a thought outside the state, without the state, and against the state. In the core of Italian philosophy there is some “immanency of antagonism” expressed in a constantly antagonistic position towards power. Among the most important Italian thinkers, many have created their philosophical concepts in opposition to the centres of power; thereby Italian thought had to become one of a resistance, not one of legitimizing the position of the one who reigns (as Esposito clearly claimed elsewhere: “Italian philosophy is a philosophy of resistance”, see Esposito and Hanafi 2009, 58). Many of the main Italian thinkers have sacrificed their lives for the insubordination of their thought. The roots of that uncompromising stance can be found as far as back as in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Over the ages, in Italian history we find authors condemned to be outcasts (Dante, Machiavelli), burned at the stake (Bruno, Vanini), and risking imprisonment or being imprisoned (Galileo, Campanella). Thus, Italian Thought was born from constraints imposed by political authorities.

For this reason, Italian Thought takes care to reanimate the idea of “negativity” understood as a way of emancipating life from power, an idea of the practice of exteriority both as a form and a content of thought. If we recognize “negativity” as a mechanism that would shatter the false unity that always expresses a will to manage life, then we’ll apprehend the equal sign placed here between “life” and “differences”. Such form of “negativity” isn’t in fact pure negation, but a factor which leads to the “affirmation” of life through the potential of antagonism. “To live” means “to differ”, to negatively transform oneself into something other (which isn’t the capitalistic praise of heterogeneity as a way of concealing social differences, but rather a plural multitude). The notion of “negativity” is understood here as a main condition of political change, and even as the Political itself. Accordingly, the identity of Italian Theory is a non-identity (if by “identity” we meant “unity”) of “living thought”. As a matter of fact, the very notion of “Italian Theory” may be highly misleading, and it will be so for the sake of both of its components, not only through the problematic nature of “Italianness” (which for this reason, as Esposito emphasises, should remain only “a provisory expression”). Unlike “German Philosophy” and “French Theory”, in case of which the first step was pursued by establishing an academic school or methodology, in the case of “Italian Thought” intellectual movement was preceded by political practice. And if we want to track its “Italianness”, we could discern its label above all in the specificity of the political and class struggles in Italy of the 1960s and 1970s. The central point around which political philosophy in Italy came to constitute itself was the question of the capitalist power, which had started to control the totality of social life. Readings of Marx performed the function of a critique of the nascent neoliberalism and globalism, as well as an aid to the (sometimes violent) political struggle (in the tradition of *operaismo* and *postoperaismo*). The basic level and primal scene was situated here in the “space of essentially conflictive political practice” (Esposito 2015, 12). It should be noted that this necessity of conflict, which is claimed as a *sine qua non* of a thought of the Political, is much older and should be traced back to Machiavelli. Because of this, Italian Thought ties thinking together with practice, with the latter always preceding the former. It’s not the “thought of practice” (and for this reason some kind of “theory”) but rather the “practice of thought” which, for Esposito, plays an essential role in Italian philosophy across history. (I underscore Esposito’s statements so strongly, because it is he, together with Agamben, whose participation in this intellectual movement is so much more complex and whose work seems to constitute the basic reference points for the majority of

authors in the volume). Hence Italian Thought is “neither philosophy nor theory, but an interval, a milieu with shifting boundaries, reciprocities, and allegiances” (Campbell 2009, 3).

One of the most important theoretical achievements of this movement would be the recognition of hidden, theological-political foundations of modern bio-power and economical violence. Precise analyses of the intersections between “politics” and “theology” can provide elaborate conceptual tools which could serve to set the neoliberal economy into a state of inoperativity. As Esposito makes clear elsewhere (Esposito 2013), the invisible jointure which binds together into One category two such extremely contrasted elements, is something more than an archaic term from the dusty dictionaries of juridical thought. At the very bottom it isn't a term at all. It's rather a century-old machine, the effects of which are still at work today and which constitute the very “way of thinking about order in the West” (Esposito 2015, 16). This theological-political machine is aimed at taking control over a subjected life by eliminating its heterogeneity (and thus the possibility of relation and togetherness) and reducing it to Oneness. This theological *reductio ad unum* unifies not only “theology” and “politics”, but above all the various forms of life, turning them into nothing more than passive objects of governance, or rather management. Original conflicts and irreducible differences are extinguished, pacified and replaced by an obedient *stasis*. The unifying apparatus of “political theology” has become, after many modifications and metamorphoses of its classical model, “a sort of machine which works, separating our life from itself [...]. Born at the intersection between Christian theology and Roman law, it was present over ages in diverse forms but all of them were assigned to the apparatus of the exclusive inclusion” (Esposito 2015, 16). For this reason the main aim which stands both before and in the very heart of contemporary philosophy is “to yield to exceed ‘political theology’” (Esposito 2015, 17). To search for the way out of it is to project a new model of the Political, distinct from that which we've inherited from impassive hierarchical machines which seek to arbitrarily dispose of our lives. Obviously, this is a difficult task, especially considering that “political theology” has appropriated from our conceptual language even such seemingly unfettered notions as “secularisation” and “profanation”. Nevertheless, Italian Thought has developed (which is clearly visible also in the volume edited by Gentili and Stimilli) an unmistakable style, absent in the majority of authors who attempt to rethink such questions as global capitalism, neoliberalism, or economic violence. These authors delve into the rich theological vocabulary (especially that of Paul of Tarsus: *eschaton*, *katechon*, *anomia*), seeking there some overlooked premises which constitute the very framework in which the dominant economical-political paradigm of today still functions (and which, in the works of Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, constitute privileged reference points that Italian Thought curiously re-elaborates). Their judgments are extremely far from unity, but many among them one could repeat the already famous claim of Agamben: “I would suggest to

anyone who really wants to understand what is happening today not to neglect theology” (Agamben and Sacco 2005). It suffices to compare the complementary and opposing statements (as well as the passionate discussion) of Massimo Cacciari and Mario Tronti with the stance of Esposito (of course there are also other debates present in Italian Thought: Negri with Agamben, Virno with Negri, Cavarero with Esposito, etc.). Notwithstanding, the multitude of “Italian” conceptualisations of the “theological” frames of modern capitalism, we can see here also some undisputed community of language. Whether we accept Tronti’s conviction that “political theology” is “a power of governing the crisis”; or that of Cacciari that managing is at the edge of “political theology” since there’s no more any *katechon*; or Esposito’s postulate that “economic theology” is an internal apparatus of “political theology”, only incarnated in another form in which it governs today; in every case we find ourselves in the midst of fascinating debates devoted to rethinking the conditions of the very possibility of possibility or, to put it differently, of potentiality. From this point of view “negativity” can be seen as a tool which “possibilizes” the very possibility of transformation of every too solid political-economic organism. Thus, for some authors (Virno or Esposito) it is considered to be a “condition *sine qua non* of politics” (Ratajczak and Burzyk 2015, 205).

In addition to “life” (as well as “conflict”, “proper”, “affirmation”, “immanence”, and “biopolitics”) we can also point out some other notions strictly tied to Italian political philosophy: 1) “community” (*communitas/communità*) and “the common”, confronted with “immunity” (*immunitas/immunità*) and “the immune”; 2) “potentiality” (*potenza*) confronted with “power” (*potere*); 3) potentiality of *potenza* confronted with actuality/necessity of *potere*.

While the notion of “the common” – which has been appropriated by right-wing movements and was absent (forgotten or ignored) elsewhere – since the works of Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy has been regaining its significance in contemporary philosophy, it was Italian Theory that has made it the central point of its reflections. The task for contemporary philosophy should be, to rethink “the common” and make it one of the cores of the modern Political. In order to make this possible, one has to re-appropriate practice and break the paralysis of political action, disabled within the ideological frames of neoliberalism. Another task would thus be to enable the very creativity, to “potentialize” the very potentiality. But if the traditional model is based on a direct passage from potentiality to act, what is at stake here is a “potentiality non-activated, not destined to activation and not resolved in itself” (Esposito 2015, 18), the potentiality of not-being in the act: “creative ability to constitute something which could never jam definitively, without a loss of its vital energy” (Esposito 2015, 19), and thus the “potentiality of life” (*potenza della vita*) is confronted with the “power over life” (*potere sulla vita*) (Chignola 2015, 35). Subjectivity as a form of *potenza* breaks through the order of necessary properties which belong to the lexicon of the immunological regime of biopolitics as economic theology. The latter has become one of

the intrusive “symptoms of our time” (Esposito 2015, 18), attempting to strip life of its very possibility: “potentiality is situated in the zone opposite to that of necessity. The possible (*il possibile*) means that something can exist in another way. Or can also not exist. And because of that it isn’t necessary” (Esposito 2015, 19). In this view, “the common” needs to be understood as a form of political resistance against the essential value of “immunity”: the necessity of property.

Such statements are obviously rooted in Foucault’s analyses from *On the Government of the Living*, where the philosopher claims that contemporary power has the biopolitical nature of an overseer who keeps guard over the forms of subjectivization and the constitution of the social, but only since the key works of Italian Theory have been published has this thread been tied with an attempt to deconstruct the metaphysical frames of the Political (expressed in the division: actuality-potentiality).

One of the most problematic issues of the Italian Thought, and also of the volume *Differenze italiane*, is however its attitude towards the French legacy. The widespread conviction that French poststructuralism was oppressively enclosed within an impassable “textual” horizon, which in consequence disabled any political activity, one should find as a dangerous and poorly reasoned prejudice. This ritual gesture of various incarnations of “new politics” neglects the fact that also many members of the so-called “French Theory” attempted to tie the notion of language with that of life, history and politics into their complex relationship. One could say that it prefigured what “Italian Thought” is doing today. When Esposito claims that the constitutive category of our time is life and no longer language, that we should stop analysing the linguistic order – which could only cloud political issues and doesn’t permit one to reach conceptually the life itself – then he uses a too naive distinction between the (supposedly theoretical) lingual sphere and (supposedly practical) life. Moreover, the notion of life is not only not absent, but stands in the very heart of the works of many French intellectuals, especially in the late phase of their thinking. It was a central category for such various thinkers (the variety of which is totally erased in their violent hyperbolization as “French Theory”) as Deleuze, Foucault or Derrida. In each case we can deal with the category of “life”, although perhaps in each case one could point towards *another* “life”. But if this is so, then it’s hard to accept the supposed exclusivity of the affirmative and vital nature of Italian Thought. Repetitive incantations which attribute to French poststructuralism a disability to take a stand, the absence of both negation and affirmation, neither “yes”, nor “no” – are founded on a reconstruction which is unfair and extremely far from being acceptable. Attributing to those thinkers the category of “neutralization” and extending Blanchot’s “neutrum” to the whole of that intellectual current is also a very doubtful strategy. One could easily point out that some of them, e.g. Derrida, visibly neglected in *Differenze italiane*, have analysed conflicts without any form of

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neutralization. The claim that deconstruction is unable to be politically active is a poorly established, if not entirely unjustified, conviction, motivated only by an obsessive will to separate French thinkers from the Italians, and in consequence it leads to some serious misunderstandings. It's hard to accept claims about the absence, in "French deconstruction" (sic!), of analyses of "biopolitics" and "life". The late works of Derrida contain not only discussion about political theology and strategies of a political framing of life (see for example *Force de loi*, *Spectres de Marx* or *La bête et le souverain*) but also many other supposedly "Italian" themes, including deconstruction of the proper, or deactivated potentiality. Also in deconstruction we can easily find some attempt to establish another thinking about the very notion of "the Political" (rooted here in quasi-ethical politics and "infinite demand of justice", identified by Derrida with the deconstruction as such). When we take those affinities into consideration, it then perhaps becomes possible to create a specific chiasmus where "becoming of Italian Theory the French one is linked with [...] becoming of French Theory the Italian one" (Baldissone 2015, 107).

Despite these objections, we should treat the volume *Differenze italiane* as a genuine opening up of a space for discussion and an outlining of a map of keynotes and landmarks. It enables us to become acquainted with diversity of contemporary Italian political philosophy, which begins to resonate far beyond its original context and appears to be one of the most intriguing places of debates on possible acts of resistance against modern apparatuses of biopolitics. Without a doubt, today Deleuze wouldn't be able to talk about an absence of a "milieu for philosophy" in Italy, and would be content of these attempts to think the restoration of the very possibility of a non-appropriated life, of the possibility of life.

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**Piotr Sadzik** – doktorant w Zakładzie Literatury XX i XXI wieku na Wydziale Polonistyki UW oraz wykładowca w Kollegium “Artes Liberales” UW. Jego zainteresowania badawcze obejmują historię i filozofię literatury (dekonstrukcję), teorię literatury (poststrukturalizm), *visual studies* (teorie reprezentacji) i filozofię (postsekularyzm, filozofię polityczną i posthumanizm). Obecnie pracuje nad rozprawą poświęconą Witoldowi Gombrowiczowi.

**TYTUŁ:** Poza zasadą własności. Recenzja tomu *Differenze italiane. Politica e filosofia: mappe e sconfinamenti* pod redakcją Dario Gentilego i Elettry Stimilli.

**ABSTRAKT:** Tekst ten jest recenzją tomu pod redakcją Dario Gentilego i Elettry Stimilli pt. *Różnice włoskie. Polityka i filozofia: mapy i przekroczenia granic*. Dyskutuje on zasadność mówienia o “Italian Theory” lub “myśli włoskiej” oraz rekonstruuje najważniejsze cechy charakterystyczny współczesnej włoskiej filozofii politycznej w oparciu o recenzowany tom oraz inne publikacje m.in. Roberta Esposito. Pod koniec recenzji autor formułuje także krytyczne uwagi pod adresem roli, jaką w pismach wielu włoskich filozofów odgrywa filozofia francuska, zwłaszcza dekonstrukcja Jacques’a Derridy.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** filozofia włoska, włoska różnica, myśl żywa, biopolityka, teologia polityczna, dekonstrukcja, Roberto Esposito