

Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

JOHAN FREDERIK HARTLE

ITALIAN INDIFFERENCE

Review of: Lorenzo Chiesa & Alberto Toscano (2009) *The Italian Difference. Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*, Melbourne: re.press, 174 p.

Krisis, 2010, Issue 2
www.krisis.eu

The insistence on national specificity and cultural difference is a major tendency of contemporary political narcissism. Therefore a book entitled *The Italian Difference* seems to disqualify itself from the very beginning. Should philosophy really refer to cultural differences as a starting point for ontological reflection? Could a culturalist meta-philosophy (why *we think* the way *we think*) be anything but reactionary?

Fortunately the plot of the book *The Italian Difference* aims at something else. Sceptical of the ‘clichés of the tourist political imaginary’ (2) its methodological approach, if not its focus, is political and philosophical rather than cultural or national. The double focus on ‘nihilism’ and ‘biopolitics’ underlines this perspective. Rather than in the positively determined body of a specific culture, the *Italian Difference* is interested in its

constitutive indeterminacy. ‘Nihilism’ is about the empty ground of political and cultural formations. And ‘biopolitics’ describes the contingency and constructedness – the politicality – of even of the most basic bodily aspects of contemporary politics.

It is only here that Italy, indirectly, gains its specificity – a politically concrete field for reasoning, a subject matter, but that does not outline any form of thought. The political challenges Italy is confronted with are of a biopolitical nature and mark both a grotesque and an obscene particularity. The political ideology in contemporary Italy is typically about the formation of a national political body, of canonized fears and desires:

‘The biometric census of Romani children, the formation of semi-legal vigilantes squads against phantasmatic foreign rapists, the legislative injunction that doctors report undocumented migrants to the police instead of curing them, a massive turnout for a bigoted and hypocritical celebration of national-Catholic hetero-normativity (called, in English, *Family Day*), the appointment of a former topless model to Minister for Equal Opportunities.’ (1)

Against the backdrop of this political setting Lorenzo Chiesa’s and Alberto Toscano’s book reconstructs a variety of contemporary political ontologies that interfere with this context.

The basic keywords are given by Antonio Negri. His text on the *Italian Difference* defines the whole context of the book and outlines the setting of the discussion too. In a polemic turn against Vattimo and the idea of a *pensiero debole* (weak thought) Negri distinguishes two main lines of tradition within the recent philosophical scene in Italy: (1) a form of defeatism that reflects the weakness of the Italian nation by repeating its lack of a centre and (2) an exceptional threefold tradition of biopolitical resistance in which the idea of counterproduction is central: the philosophies of Gramsci, Tronti and Muraro. This cognitive map of the realm of philosophical possibilities is introduced with a strongly political rhetoric (‘It is resistance that produces philosophy’, 17). And one might wonder how idiosyncratic this outline of the Italian philosophical scene actually is. Internationally, without doubt, Mario Tronti and Luisa Muraro can

hardly claim to be the most inspirational Italian sources of philosophical debates. Only very few texts have been translated and if Tronti is of major interest at all then it is only for political activism and hardly for philosophical debates. Surprising as that might be, Negri's harsh political criticism of Vattimo and the project of *pensiero debole* is just as counterintuitive – especially given Vattimo's recent return to communism.

For the setup of the book, however, this rough strategic sketch is decisive, it contains the leading argument: The Italian philosophical scene is trapped between nihilist anti-foundationalism and biopolitical ontologies. These figures are more or less explicitly related to the political situation of decentralized Italy.

The dramaturgy of the book begins with Negri's polemic, allows for some 'nihilist' interruptions by Rovatti, Vattimo, and Esposito before Muraro and Tronti may have their say (following a reconstructive text about a debate between Cacciari and Negri in the 70s). Two post-workerist perspectives (of Toscano and Virno) follow Tronti's text, before Lorenzo Chiesa critically reconstructs messianic and mysticist (maybe nihilist) aspects of Giorgio Agamben's ontology. If, in other words, Negri's distinctions provide the general scheme of the book, then his side of the imaginary conflict indeed dominates the setup. Both the composition of texts and the reconstructed texts by Mandarinini and the editors strongly advocate an affirmative biopolitical construction that inherits workerist claims to resistance. The editors' sympathy for Negri's project cannot be overlooked.

In this context it is, to put it differently, an interesting proof of the politeness of *pensiero debole* that two of its representatives (Pier Aldo Rovatti and Gianni Vattimo) contribute to a book that emphasizes its apparent political deficiency. Additionally it is probably no coincidence that Agamben is only present indirectly – by means of Chiesa's critical reconstruction. If this book were to represent philosophical specificities of the Italian debate, then a strongly vitalist or productivist tone would be significant. This comes as no surprise for Negri, whose ontology is one of the self-unfolding *potentia*, but in *The Italian Difference* it appears to be the dominant strand of contemporary Italian thought in general. If there is, for instance, a critical tone in Lorenzo Chiesa's reconstruction of Agam-

ben, then it certainly is about the 'weak' side of his ontology – its Franciscan passivity (cf, 162). Why should this be a problem? It probably appears as one from the standpoint of a productivist ontology.

Aldo Rovatti therefore convincingly questions the usefulness of Negri's claim that there can only be mastery and productive difference. Rovatti's insistence on the metaphysical violence of philosophy also concerns the productivist versions of foundationalism. *Foucault docet* (as is the title of his text) that any form of foundationalism is just another hegemonic crystallization of power. That concerns the vitalist productivism of Negri too.

Vattimo's argument for an anti-naturalist nihilism ('we must build conditions of equality that, indeed, are not given "naturally"' (35)) proceeds in the same vein. According to Vattimo's *pensiero debole* version of nihilist hermeneutics, *caritas*, dialogue and understanding have to fill the void that the death of god has presented. Language and interpretation will appear as the central tools to avoid naturalism and foundationalism.

Both of Rovatti's and Vattimo's texts are, unfortunately, too short to repeat more than the general motives of their philosophy. But since Vattimo's text is merely the manuscript of a short 2006 lecture, and since Rovatti's text is not much more than a self-defence against Negri's pamphlet, this does in fact seem to be part of the general setup.

Roberto Esposito's text is, dramaturgically speaking, the black sheep of the book. Neither mentioned by Negri, nor contributing to either the project of *pensiero debole* or the creative ontology of resistance (in the spirit of post-workerism), Esposito (a little stubbornly) follows his own agenda. As in his major work *Communitas* Esposito argues for an understanding of community that would not merely be grounded in any positivization of the preconditions of the common, but rather present itself as its own impossibility – through the negation of the thing itself. Against the backdrop of Heidegger and Bataille (and, implicitly, of course, Derrida's deconstruction) community is, as one could paradoxically say, thematized as an impossible necessity. It is, Esposito writes, 'precisely the absence of community [...] that shows us its necessity as what we lack' (52). It will be hard to find subject matter from any country that would not have been decon-

structed in these terms. The specifically Italian part, the *Italian Difference* might be the delay with which deconstruction presents itself as innovative.

In this composition of primary and secondary texts, Matteo Mandarini's text is probably the most informative for a non-Italian audience. Reconstructing the argument of Massimo Cacciari's 1976 *Krisis*-book (*Krisis. Saggio sulla crisi del pensiero negativo da Nietzsche a Wittgenstein*) Mandarini unfolds a panorama of philosophical positions that dealt with the challenge of Heideggerianism from a radically leftist perspective. Cacciari, then another key thinker of the communist left, famously claimed that nothingness may not be positivized and that negativity has to be de-ontologized. Mandarini shows that even Negri remains dependent on figures of the negative, in spite of his affirmative ontology, (although he might try to ontologize it in terms of ontological forces of resistance). By Negri, Mandarini claims, *Krisis* is refused 'as the de-ontologisation of the negative' – 'nothing, negation is instead understood as the potentiality of being' (78).

Luisa Muraro's text on politics as the *Symbolic Independence From Power* plays with figures of an active political passion that yet remain remote from political power. Partly reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's conception of the political as an end in itself, Muraro alludes to figures of the 'unthought' (82) and to the Pauline idea of a messianic distance from power and the law. De-absolutizing reality from within, maintaining distance to the realm of power without restraining from politics – this is the compromise between negativity, absence, and activism to be found in Muraro's text. One might feel attracted by these motifs, though it is a bit harder to see any argumentative necessity for it.

Not only with Muraro's text, but maybe even more strongly so in Tronti's *Critique of Political Democracy*, one has to accept a large amount of rhetoric and counter-intuitive self-created terminology to gain access. Packed with slogans which are sometimes beautiful, sometimes powerful, Tronti's nonchalant remarks on the persistence of bourgeois society are not backed up with any kind of sociological analysis at all. Tronti represents (in spite of the to and fro of his political biography) the legendary

spirit of classical workerism. He depicts contemporary societies as identitarian democracies and as the homogeneous 'power of all', a system of mutual control (103). As mentioned, Tronti is not reserved with respect to revolutionary statements. It is hard to say what else there is to his text. However, if I have overlooked any proper argument he provides with which to make his claims, I would be happy to admit it.

Tronti is quite literally already a post-workerist – a political legend rather than a philosopher, benefiting from the fact that his political reputation goes before him. The following two texts of the volume explicitly deal with constructions of productive political subjectivity under Post-Fordist conditions. Alberto Toscano reconstructs figures of 'exodus' and of the 'refusal of work' from Tronti to Negri. His main interest is to situate Negri's and Hardt's successful philosophical project in the Italian context, to understand its emergence from the workerist and post-workerist situation.

'The question of workerism – and then of autonomism and post-workerism broadly construed – was that of how to perpetuate, at the level of political strategy and organization, the idea of communism as the suppression of work.' (113)

In Toscano's text Negri's perspective appears, again, as the dominant one. It appears as a thinking of the self-constitution of being, though now in terms of social production. And as Toscano concludes with the post-workerist figure of 'immaterial labor', i.e. a figure of social production that potentially resists capitalist production, he already introduces the next text: Paolo Virno's considerations on the *Biological Invariant*.

Virno, one of Negri's most sympathetic companions, argues wholeheartedly against the backdrop of immaterial labor, a capacity that is rooted in the very human capacity of language. Virno argues that, because of their capacity to speak and because of language, human beings are 'potential animals'. And it is precisely this *conditio humana* that is at stake in 'biolinguistic capitalism'. Post-Fordism 'puts to work *life* as such' (146).

Obviously Lorenzo Chiesa's text on Agamben is meant to close the dramaturgy of the book rather than to provide a conclusion. After the vitalist and productivist argument of a Negrian post-workerism the book, interestingly, closes with exhaustion. After a few articles on biopolitical productivism Agamben's messianism seems to be just another name for it. Chiesa points out the Franciscan figures of passivity as the hidden 'normative' ground of Agamben's project. And, after lots of biopolitical passion this appears like the muted final aria of the book.

The *Italian Difference* mainly presents motifs and rhetoric, not arguments, polemics or interpretations. It presents figures and constellations of thoughts rather than systematic contributions. With respect to the promising subtitle and the systematic question of how to conceive of biopolitics without falling back into nihilism, this could seem disappointing. However if, after all, one would like to learn something about the *Italian Difference* in philosophising, this might be very telling. Against its better intentions, it does indeed remain trapped within the 'clichés of the tourist political imaginary'. Such clichés consist precisely in the wasteful richness of metaphors and the avoidance of systematic argumentation that come together with a certain portion of nepotism. And that certainly signifies the failure to present and maintain any fruitful kind of *Italian Difference* in international philosophical debates.

Johan Frederik Hartle teaches philosophy of art and culture at the University of Amsterdam. His current research deals with the heritage of Marxism, undead Modernism, the aesthetico-political and constructions of universalism.

© This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License (Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0). See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl/deed.en> for more information.